

## [Nriyagram, Part 2](#)

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Nriyagram may well be India's most unique residential dance school, the still-materializing vision of Odissi dancer Protima Gauri Bedi. This verdant cultural oasis 30 kilometers outside Bangalore began six years ago. Protima Bedi saw India's dance traditions becoming the exclusive privilege of wealthy girls as dance gurus moved to the cities, demanded high fees, and made arangetrams, not greatness, the goal. "Protima wants to take dance back from the drawing rooms of the rich to the villages," notes journalist V. Ramanathan. "She believes that India lives in her villages with their tribal art forms, the original dance forms of India." So Protima decided to do something radical-create a dance gurukula where students live and train with total dedication, for free. Everyone told her she was crazy. But finally the Karnataka government surrendered to her forceful pleas and leased her 10 arid acres for 30 years. Protima pitched a tent, slept with scorpions and snakes, and by day begged for funds. Today, 22 students live and train at Nriyagram, grow their own food, relate as brother and sister, and teach dance to 300 local children. Here are their words.

Tuku Mukherjee: When I was in 12th standard, I read about Nriyagram in a Bengali magazine. I took an ad from there and wrote to Gaurima. From childhood I wanted to learn classical dance, but I didn't get any chance. I am from a conservative family. After my studies, I would have to get married. But I want to do something myself.

Anyway, when I got my acceptance letter from Gaurima, my father didn't allow me to go. So I left my studies and everything and I came here. When I reached here after few days, I felt it is a very tough life. But also, I realized that this is the time to do hard work. And when I get lots of love and affection from Gaurima, I forget all my pain. I am enjoying my life with everybody. I want to be a professional dancer, good performer and good teacher.

Aditi Banerjee: I am a Bengali girl from Calcutta. My father is a Sanskrit scholar, and we are not very well-off financially. All my life, I yearned to learn classical Indian dance. But a paucity of gurus, plus the phenomenal amount of money required to pay them for a minimum of 12 to 15 years, was not within our family's capacity. Nrityagram was, and is, the answer to dreams of girls like me who have deep dedication and love dance, but are unable to realize it. The space, the sky, the earth here all contribute greatly to the sensitivity of the grooming of the senses, which is the vehicle for our art. We have also learned how to really respect Mother Earth-not by just touching the ground, as all dancers do at the beginning of their performances, but by tending to her and nurturing her so that she could give to us all her bounties-fruits, flowers, shade, vegetables. We have now real respect for her. Before this, I never imagined I could grow anything in the city. Of course, we came to learn dance. But by being here, I have learned to become a dancer, a thinker, a farmer, a conversationalist, a philosopher, and above all, I have relearned the basics of being a good human being. Honesty, truth and compassion and most of all strength, conviction and belief in myself is the biggest gift I have taken from Nrityagram.

Gaurima emphasizes the traditions of India, but also makes us think and decide for ourselves. Seeing her work all day and into the late night inspires us to do better, as she is working only for us all the time. Free food, stay and training is a miracle gift. I can concentrate 100% on learning this great art, and passing it down to the next generation if God permits. I would like to start my own school like Gaurima. I have promised to concentrate in rural Indian villages. Nrityagram gives us the courage to dream impossible dreams, because we can see that they are possible.

Swarupa Sen: Rhythm has always tickled my soul, and using my body to be one with music, an absolute dream. Call it my personal yearning for moksha! So when Gaurima chose me as one of the first batch of Odissi students in Nrityagram, I felt I'd made the first step toward realizing my dream.

I have lived in this dance village for four years. This experience has been so removed from my life in standard academic institutions. Never had I met, let alone lived with, people from such varied backgrounds. After the initial adjustment, language becomes irrelevant and gesticulation through hand gestures of dance, mudras, becomes the workable means of communication.

The training here has been hard and sometimes takes its toll. But today, there are no two minds about what I want in life—a fulfilling career as an artiste and a definitive contribution to the field of dance choreography.

Anitha Nair: Before Nrityagram started, I was living close by. I heard they are going to build a dance school. I was very keen to learn dance, but I never got any opportunity. So I came and asked Gaurima and joined Nrityagram. Here the atmosphere and training is so good that all who are dedicated to dance will be good dancers. Life is so wonderful here. We do lec/dems and go out for stage performances. We have great gurus coming and teaching. My hope is to become a professional artiste and teach.

Swapna Garg: When I heard about Nrityagram, I left my studies and came here. Before I came, I only spoke Malayalam. It was very difficult for me to adjust with lots of different people. I was having lots of bad habits and ideas before I came because I grew up in a situation where a person is never allowed to come up in their life. Then, all of a sudden, at Nrityagram I really surprised myself that I changed a lot in everything. I learned to talk in English and Hindi. Nrityagram taught me how I should behave with others as a good dancer. When I was with my family, somebody was there to look after me. But here I have to choose my own ideas and decide my own future.

Sindhu Suguman: I came here to learn dance but I learned from Nrityagram so many other things. I learned English. Only after coming did I come to realize that I wanted to become a great dancer.

Sindhu P.K.: I was unable to find a teacher in my home place and kept searching for one since the very first day when I saw classical dance and wanted to do it. Then an article on Nrityagram in a magazine opened the way for me to reach here. At first, everything was uncomfortable, especially being away from my parents' protection. Sometimes I was in an utter confusion.

All the students were, and are, so dedicated and get training from morning to night. To make a better dancer, lots of things contribute. The workshop on mime, sculpture, abhinaya (facial expressions), martial arts, creative dance—everything is a lesson.

Bijayini: It was in early 1993 when I decided to leave Orissa, the land of Odissi dance and great dance gurus, and come to Nrityagram. I would have had a very bright future as a university topper in studies but the addiction to Nrityagram pulled me away.

Physically, Nrityagram is rustic-cottages with thatched roofs, granite stones, red mud walls and greenery all over. Even deeper, it is an inspiring atmosphere for students to grow into an integral human being with maximum self-confidence, free from thinking about paying for lodging and boarding. In addition, they are provided freedom for experimentation, innovation, creativity, employing audiovisual aids, having workshop intensives by great maestros periodically. All Nrityagram asks in return is the dedication of the students towards their dance.

For information about the residence program for Indian students or summer dance workshops for foreign students write: Nrityagram, Hesaraghatta, Bangalore Rural Dist. 560 088 INDIA

## Gaurima

"A lot of people ask me how and when I got the idea to build such a unique village for the preservation of the great Indian classical dance traditions. I have no answer. I truly do not know. I do not know why I have to build this place. This idea has possessed me and I have given up everything to make this place happen. No one believed I could do it. They said there was no dedication or conviction left in the world, no students who would give up the security of their homes and parents for 6 to 8 years. Girls were still too sheltered. No one would come to this wilderness. The gurus had become too commercialized and used to city life and plenty of money to dedicate themselves to a handful of serious students. Yes, all this was true. But in a country of 900 million there happened to be a handful of girls whose futures were linked to this place.

"The gurus who come here for short terms were, and still are, a problem. They demand huge salaries to come stay here in a forest setting as gurus did in the golden days. But they don't mind coming for short workshops.

"I have great aspirations for the brave young girls who left homes to become great dancers and teachers. I ask for support from all those wealthy enough to

share their gift from the Gods.

"I am spending 90% of my time just trying to raise money, forcing me to give up my own career as a performing artist. This has been my biggest sacrifice.

"I meditate on Lord Shiva.

"If dance remains in the cities, rather than the villages, as it has for the past 30 years, it will stay commercialized and will be discarded like any other product in the market.

"Today, there is not one parent objecting. It takes a phenomenal amount of willpower to do what my students are doing, so dedicated, they are real Devadasis. If it wasn't for the high-calibre students, this place wouldn't be what is it. They make the place.

"Another concern of mine is ecology. This land was barren when I came six years ago. I planted hundreds of trees. Today this place is wooded and green. I gave a sapling to village kids and told them the best looked after tree would get a fantastic present. Two years later I checked on the progress of each of the trees and in front of 20,000 people at our annual festival the best 'tree-mother' was awarded by the Chief Minister of the State."

## Daily Schedule

The day begins at 5:30am. Students congregate in the yoga hall to meditate. Some jog then. An hour later strains of music float across the village-Guruvayoor music from the Mohiniattam Gurukul and Shiva Shlokas in the Odissi Gurukul. The next hour is body movement and basic dance exercises. Then the students clean the gurukuls, bathe and do their pujas and eat breakfast at 9am. From 10-2pm is the main dance training/practice. Lunch, then rest. At 4:30 they care for their vegetable and fruit gardens. Sandhya time, 6pm, means bath, change and puja. If special workshops like creative dance, abhinaya or pottery are not scheduled, the evening is free. Some dance, others study for MA or BA degrees, paint, play veena or read in the library. At 9pm all gather in the dining place to socialize, laugh at the

days events and sup together. Mondays are holidays and students may go to Bangalore and return Tuesday morning.