

Dear LUTSF

Re: Seeta Patel – Chennai, India trip to study Bharata Natyam and music – October 2005 to March 2006

First and foremost please can I thank you for the wonderful opportunity I was given. The initial purpose of the project was not only met, it exceeded my expectations more than I could have ever hoped. The highlights of my time in India have most accurately been captured in the email diary I kept. I have submitted the entire diary as part of the report as I feel, more than any photograph, the diary was my camera and confidante.

The only advice I have to future awardees is that they take the opportunity given to them and live it as fully as they can. There are always hidden surprises, and as exciting as the project in mind may be, it can also be frightening. I would say take every challenge as a blessing and seize chance to improve themselves.

I have been very fortunate to have been able to put into practice much of what I have learnt in India as soon as I arrived back to the UK. Due to an unfortunate accident Nina Rajarani, artistic director and principal dancer of Srishti Dance Company, broke her collarbone and I was asked to replace her for the end of the company's UK tour. This gave me the chance to use the skill I acquired in India and work along side other professional Bharata Natyam Dancers and musicians. I have also taught some workshops and a two-week dance residency in North Devon where I have been able to utilise my teaching techniques and new vocabulary. I have much work lined up over the next few months where I will be able to develop and use my skills even more.

May I thank you again for the great opportunity.

Yours sincerely
Seeta Patel

Report to LUTSF

The aim of this project was to travel to and live in Chennai for a period of three months. Tamil Nadu is the state from which Bharata Natyam originated. I sought this place to be immersed in the art form and related aspects, as well as to be surrounded by some of the greatest artists in the field. I planned the trip to so that it coincided with the annual dance and music festival, and thus was not only able to practise the art form, but also appreciate, evaluate and critique work being presented in the indigenous place of the dance style. I realised by the first month that I absolutely had to extend the duration of my stay and extended my trip to five months. Being in Chennai after the end of the festival allowed me to conclude my period of study with a length of solid time with my teachers after the excitement and upheaval during the performance season.

I arrived in Chennai on October 12th 2005 and was introduced to all of my tutors for my various subject of study that same day. As it was an auspicious day for new classes and lessons to begin (Vijayadashami), each teacher taught me something small to begin what turned out to be five months of pure learning and inspiration. I had separate teachers for singing, vocal percussion, Tamil and dance. As my classes progressed I was able to work out what I needed to do to fine tune my learning process with the advice of my teacher in London. I decided after a month that it made more sense to study singing with the same teacher as vocal percussion as the two subjects were converging. My vocal percussion teacher is also an extremely talented carnatic musician. He has sung, conducted and composed for many great artists during his illustrious career and I felt very privileged to be studying with him. Both he and I were very pleased with the rapid progress I was making with my vocal percussion. I was able to understand and do things that really opened my eyes to this wonderful skill. I feel I have been giving a very strong grounding in rhythm which is a priceless commodity for this dance form, with respect to dance, choreography and teaching. My singing classes have not only helped in terms of being able to sing the compositions I dance, but also music appreciation. The classes, along with attending numerous performances, provided the perfect combination for me to understand and savour the very integral musical aspect of classical Indian dance.

My Tamil teacher is a professor of ancient Tamil literature and highly knowledgeable with regards to dance literature. He is a valued resource person in the Indian dance and drama community, as well as composing the libretto for many dance dramas. In addition he teaches Tamil as a foreign language to select individuals. I was extremely fortunate to have been accepted to study with him. I learned the entire alphabet over night and was reading newspapers (though not understanding all the words) by my third class. My progress was good, however, since my priority was my dance and music training, Tamil was occasionally re-scheduled to accommodate to those classes. By the time I left India I was able to read the script fluently, and write and converse using basic vocabulary. In addition I spent many hours discussing the history of dance and dance literature and socio-political aspects of Indian classical dance on a world platform. This time was extremely unexpected and valuable.

The main part of my studying was dance. I began learning with the ex-principal of Kalakshetra, Professor A. Janardhanan. I learned many pieces of repertoire from him over the five months, as well as refining my technique. I was also studying with another teacher, Meena Raman, whose classes greatly complimented Professor Janardhanan's. I had more time to discuss the finer points of the compositions and get a deeper meaning of the pieces with Meena Raman. She also gave me different ways of showing the choreography in terms of expression. This encouraged and honed my creative skills and thought process within the dance form as well as giving me choices. I was very inspired by the teaching and feel I have picked up many points which I would employ in my own teaching.

As I was in Chennai during its annual dance and music season, I was able to watch many dance performances by many great artists, up and coming as well as old time greats. I very much enjoyed discussing these with my teachers and feel I have developed an even more discerning eye for dance. It was very interesting to observe which direction dance is going in India, and the thought processes involved in the making of dance work. Contemporary work has a very different approach than in the west, though it is very clear that the departure point, like western Contemporary dance, is from the classical. Having been involved in both classical and cross-cultural work in the UK, it was useful to see the working process of artists in India. The narrative context is still very much a rooted aspect of all work produced, and compared to narrative derived work in the UK, the end products are very different, aesthetically and in terms of movement vocabulary. It was interesting with regards to my own creative process and appreciation of new work. I neither felt work from India was better or worse than its western counterpart, but I did notice that being from Britain, my personal preferences did lean more towards western contemporary work, aesthetically and intellectually. However, classical work from India was a very different story. I felt the more I learned the less I knew of the vast subject of Bharata Natyam. Not only was I able to dip my toe into the pool of the form whilst studying it with such great teachers, but I also learned through talking with many people more than I could have dreamed. The impact of the form across the world is an awe-inspiring thing. So many people from all corners of the globe are drawn to India to study as I did, and have crossed many barriers; geographical, language, cultural and many more to get there. This really fascinated and excited me.

I feel I have not only improved myself, but that I have imbibed so much that I am well equipped to work and teach within the field of Bharata Natyam in the UK. My personal and professional development as a dancer is on a different level now, with a sturdy unshakeable base beneath my feet. I feel not only able to give to dancers of less experience than myself, but also collaborate with other artists and be a part of the professional British dance scene with a deep understanding of the form. I have established strong relationships in India and feel I have not only life long friends, but also a great support network and resource base for future work.