

Covering Letter

Dear LUTSF,

'Dance Project SKCV, 2013'

Please find enclosed a copy of my report for my stay at SKCV Amodini Girls Centre, near Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India from January 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 to February 7<sup>th</sup> 2013.

My stay with the SKCV children's' trust was a fantastically fulfilling experience. Being immersed in a completely Indian culture gave me an incredible insight into their strong culture of dance. I fulfilled both my teaching and learning aims. I had many opportunities to perform, something I had not anticipated. The dance project that I undertook with the children was a huge success.

My original agenda included a 3 day trip to Orissa and a few days at the end of the trip in Mumbai. However as is the way in India my plans changed. I had not allowed time for the physical adjustment to being in India. At the end of the trip an opportunity came up to spend a few days exchanging dance classes with a folk dancer. This felt like an opportunity I couldn't let go, especially as the school of Bollywood I had booked with in Mumbai suddenly cancelled the classes there.

The time I spent in India has given me a huge amount of confidence with my dance work, and I have learned many new dance skills. In addition it was a lesson in trust and flexibility, as India does not by any means run in the same way as Europe, and I have brought home with me a more relaxed yet inspired attitude which is having instant positive effects on both my work and my life in general.

My advice to fellow travelers is that with dance language is never a big barrier, embrace new cultures as we can learn so much, and be prepared to allow your plans to change as you go.

Many thanks to LUTSF for making this trip possible, as well as benefitting me in so many ways the staff of SKCV are also very grateful as I was able to have a very positive impact on the lives of the children. This has been a life changing experience for me, and I intend to return to India to further my dance work at SKCV once my funds allow.

Yours Sincerely,

Karina Gracia

## **REPORT**

### **Dance Project -SKCV Amodini Girls Village, Near Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India**

#### **The first few days**

As I entered the passport checking area at Hyderabad airport the first sight that hit me was the large line paintings of Indian dancers on the glass wall behind the desks. I had that lovely feeling of being in exactly the right place and time. Here in India dance is an integral part of the culture and the two plaques I have chance to briefly read whilst walking out into the airport are for Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, the two forms I was particularly interested in studying.

During the six hour wait for my connecting flight I start making notes with new ideas for teaching, already feeling inspired by the journey.

After a short internal flight, during which Bollywood music was playing, I arrived to the tiny airport of Vijayawada. When I stepped out into the blazing sun I was greeted by several women and girls from the charity. The journey to what would be my home for the next few weeks took an hour or so, and my companions talked with me about the charity and about the dance group.

The first few days at SKCV were like I had entered another world. Although I had travelled in India 5 years previously, that was as a back packer with friends, now I was the only Westerner for many miles and it took a while to adjust to the culture, language, food and extreme heat. After a day of sleep I felt ready to start with the girls. After discussion with Devasena, the project leader at the girls village, I found out there were several performances coming up for the girls dance group, all of which I was asked to attend. One of these clashed with my plans for Orissa, and after a week at SKCV I felt I had a lot more to gain by staying in one place and developing relationships around dance rather than travelling further afield to be a spectator. It was a difficult decision to make so I arranged a trip to Kuchipudi village for later in my stay to see the village where Kuchipudi dance originated and to watch the dance groups there.

## Dance Project

I was surprised to discover that of the 72 girls living at the charity centre, only 20 girls danced regularly, and only 9 of these had weekly lessons with the Kuchipudi dance master. Kuchipudi is the classical dance form for the state of Andhra Pradesh in which I was staying. It is a very close relative to Bharatanatyam, the main differences being that, unlike Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi is danced as a group, and the dancers may also sing whilst dancing.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January the entire girl's population was to go to the other skcv village where the boys live, for a celebration of the birthday of the founder, Manihara (Mathew) Norton. The girls main dance group (9 girls) performed 2 dances of Kuchipudi. However what really struck me was that the boys danced much more than the girls, dancing track after track of Bollywood. They danced with excellent style and most of all they were very confident, both within the dance and at being on stage. At that point I decided that my main aim with teaching would be to inspire as many girls as possible to become involved and to feel confident to dance.



< Amodini dance performance group

Past volunteers had recommended that I find my own lodgings as being at the school 24/7 would be intense and I wouldn't have any personal space. However I felt very comfortable staying there and I knew it would mean I would have more opportunity to include the older girls in the project, as many were at college or outside school. As my main school work in the UK was based around key stages 1 and 2 I wanted to expand my experience with the older children. This proved to be a good decision as many of the older girls loved the classes, and the opportunity to dance as the main focus for girls with their less fortunate back grounds is to study hard and achieve on an academic level.

Also, days of teaching would often be interrupted by important visits from local donors, at which point all children would assemble in the hall. Whilst being a disruption to classes this then became an opportunity for the girls to demonstrate the dances they were learning and become more familiar with performing. By my lodging there the chance to continue in the evening also meant slightly lower temperatures, though the mosquito invasion meant long sleeves.

I also worked directly with the existing dance group at increasing their confidence and performance skills.

In many ways teaching the children was just the same as teaching in the UK, and language barriers were not a great problem as dance has of course a universal language and most teaching could be explained with demos and movement gestures. Sometimes I requested an English speaking girl to help with the younger age groups,

particularly when explain partner changes etc with a rock and roll dance. I did find that the Indian children picked up whichever dance form I taught very quickly.



< teaching Bollywood

In the second week of my stay I began teaching at the boy's village. Although very close in distance the journey took over an hour each way and I was only able to teach in the mornings there, so these visits were limited to four in total. I worked with the younger boys teaching street dance and flamenco. The older boys all dance a lot in their free time and teach one another, but the younger ones tended to be excluded from this. They loved the chance to learn routines. My afternoons were spent with Bhakti, the co-founder of skcv and wife of late Manihara. Bhakti was a dancer in her younger years and taught dance to many children at skcv in the past. We had long discussions on dance as therapy and how this had helped some of the more troubled children she had encountered.

### **My Studies**

In my plan I had envisaged daily practice of my main dance form, flamenco, along with several days a week taking lessons from local artists. What I had not accounted for was that the enthusiasm of the children would mean that I was drawn to spending more time teaching than in direct study of dance myself. The number of hours I was able to dance in India was also a shock, having lived and studied in Spain I didn't think that the climate difference would be relevant, but at a minimum of 35 degrees everyday it had a big effect on my energy levels. After a few days of fighting this and pushing myself too hard, I accepted that I had to re assess my plans. I lessened my flamenco practice and focused on learning from the girls, in particular from 17 year old Mary who had been dancing Kuchipudi for 10 years and was a fantastic natural teacher. Other children were desperate to share their Bollywood dances with me and I learned several routines with them.

Each Sunday the Kuchipudi dance master, B.Venkata Rama Sharma, gave a class to the dance group. I was able to participate in this and also undertook several classes with him and his daughter, Sowmaya, at the studio in his home in Vijayawada. This gave me the opportunity to discuss the similarities with flamenco, to exchange ideas and experiences, and to ask in-depth questions about the hand movements (hastas) which had always intrigued me.

The similarities between the classical Indian dance forms Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi with flamenco were astounding. Some footwork steps are identical in movement, for example 'flat heel toe heel'. Even some complex steps were the same. The main difference being that in flamenco the feet are for the majority placed parallel with toes facing forward, whereas in classical Indian they are turned out and with the legs more plie. Body movements and postures were also very similar, and some travelling steps also. It was very easy to see how the dance had over time and travel, arrived in Spain and become flamenco. This was very exciting for me to experience, as I had always had an affinity with the ancient roots of India, and of course with Spain the country of my father.

In the costumes and make up I also found strong resemblances between the dance forms. On the first outing with the performance group I noted the tightly combed back hair, the bright red lip, the strong black eyeliner, flowers in the hair and brightly coloured costumes....so similar to flamenco. When at one public function I was delighted to

hear a Kuchipudi traditional singer, the singing was very similar in form to flamenco song, with the long extending of words going up and down in tone.

Through discussion with B.Venkata and Sowmaya I found that Indian dance also had similar music format to flamenco. Indian music is in patterns of 3,4,5,7 and 9, and we looked at the similarities of accents within bars of different rhythm and how this related to flamenco music compás (bar and rhythm) in 4, 12 and 5 count.

I took video and photos of the dances. I was given notes in English on the classical hand gestures, of which there are 28 single hastas and 24 double hastas. I studied these and their meanings most days, often with the aid of Mary. Whilst the single hastas are stationary gestures it was easy to see how these have been taken by flamenco into moving gestures, often referred to in Spanish as 'flores' (flowers). Several hastas can be seen in the movement of the flores, in particular the influences of Alapadma (lotus) and Katakamukha (opening in a bracelet) can be seen. Also in general, the stretching apart of the fingers seen in many hastas is akin to the stretching of fingers for flores. During my first Kuchipudi lesson I realized that without the technique of the gestures I would struggle to get beyond the first few steps of any dance, as the dances required an ability to flow easily from one hand position to the next.

The main struggle I had with dancing classical Indian myself was the plie position for footwork, it felt so alien. I was surprised to find all the dance studios I visited had a hard solid stone floor, no lovely sprung dance floors in site, and I was amazed at the ability of the dancers to achieve such strong sounding footwork in bare feet on these floors. My feet didn't seem able to do the same mainly due to finding the floor very hard on my knees...and I missed my flamenco shoes.



< Kuchipudi Dance lesson with Sowmaya, B.Venkata's daughter. Awards all around the room won by Sowmaya and her father.

I was able to take a trip to Kuchipudi village, the home of Kuchipudi dance form as it is today. I was honored to spend the day with Vedanta Radheshyam, a dance master at the ancient school. Radheysham is a 58 year old dancer born into a family of dancers going back many generations. I was able to observe his private classes and the classes for children in the evening. We spent several hours in discussion, with the aid of my new friend Naga Lakshmi translating. He told me of the ancient stories of which Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dances describe. He explained that although Kuchipudi was given this name in the village at around 14<sup>th</sup> century AD, in the Natya Sastra (writings from 1st century BC), the authority of authorities on dance and drama, there is mention of the dance drama form (Kuchi) rather than solo dance form.(Bharata).



< with dance master & SKCV dance girls at

Kuchipudi Dance School.

A few days before I was due to leave Andhra to go to Mumbai several changes happened. Firstly, I met an old student of the boy's village, Damoda, who is now a freelance dance teacher working in schools, very similar to me. He was enthusiastic to work together and share skills, but I was due to leave. Next I received an email from the Bollywood teacher in Mumbai saying they would have to cancel my scheduled lessons. This was a great disappointment, as I was only going to be there for 3 nights I had pre-arranged this so as to know it would happen. That evening I received a text from the airline saying my first flight had changed, which meant I would miss my connection to Mumbai. Whilst trying to rearrange the flights over a very crackly phone line I suddenly questioned why I was leaving this amazing project to go to Mumbai alone and rush about trying to find a teacher, when one had presented himself where I already was.

After an evening deliberating I decided I had a lot more to gain by staying, and arranged to spend my last few days in India focusing on learning more dance, mainly studying folk dance with Damoda and also more work with Mary. I found working with Damoda was very rewarding, our teaching styles are similar and we were able to explore further the similarities between Indian dance and flamenco.

During my stay I watched many Bollywood and Tollywood (the Andhra state equivalent film) DVDs and we would frequently stop the film to go over new dance steps which we then integrated into new dances. One of the first questions anyone would ask me, adults and children alike, was 'who are your favourite hero and heroine'. Once I realized this referred to Bollywood dance stars it struck me how big the Bollywood culture is in the whole of India.

## Performances

I had not expected to be asked to perform as often as I was, whenever a donor/guest visited I would give a flamenco demo, and I also danced at public functions. In order to respect the culture within which I was staying the costumes for dance had to be adjusted. Although danced in an ankle length skirt, during flamenco footwork this is raised to show the lower legs and knees. To get around this I wore leggings under my skirt, and also of course a very modest top with covered shoulders.

I found myself performing Bollywood to a wholly Indian audience at several fundraising events, which at first slightly nerve racking then became a very enjoyable experience and has given my Bollywood dancing a lot more confidence. One Sunday I took several girls with me to the opening of a new complex nearby, and unexpectedly found myself thrown into a dance competition with the locals. Having never been keen on being asked to perform on the spot I shocked myself by having a fantastic time, largely due to the enthusiasm of the locals that I was dancing Bollywood. When I won the girls shrieked their happiness.

I was also asked at first to take part in the huge Republic Day performance on 26<sup>th</sup> January at the police ground in Vijayawada, as the flag holder. However this was rethought as the day is a celebration of India's freedom from the British rule and it was not felt appropriate that I hold the flag. This worked very well for me as it meant I was instead invited to sit at the very front of the performance area with the press, and was able to get excellent footage (along with sari shaped sunburn!). The performances were astounding, and included many classical, folk, contemporary and acrobatic dances. All were performed by young people from Andhra Pradesh.



< Republic Day- Rajasthani Drum

Dancers



< Republic day- Classical Dance



< Republic day, the SKCV performance girls and I.

Other performances I was able to see during my stay included regional folk, and students of the Vijayawada dance school (classical).

However for me the highlight was always seeing the girls I had come to know dancing. Being aware of their extremely difficult backgrounds enhanced my experience of their dances, knowing that they had worked through their fears to get to a point of confidence.

### Communications

Before leaving for India I set up a blog. Please see <http://www.karinagraciadance.co.uk/>

On arriving at the girls village I soon realized this wasn't to be a daily blog as I'd hoped...with no working computers (I had been told not to bring mine as plenty there!) and no internet access it wasn't looking favourable on the communications front. Another lesson in flexibility, I travelled every few days to the local village, Mangalageri, sometimes to successfully have an hour or so of net, sometimes to discover the power had gone off and may return in a couple of hours, or the next day! I was able to add a few posts but then after a couple of weeks the frustration of

these village trips made me realise I was having to put a lot of effort into writing about what I was doing, which was precious time I could be using to do what I was doing!

I had hoped that the girls at Amodini would be able to stay in touch after I had left; especially as part of my aim was to forge links between their school and those I work in here. I approached the trustees and was granted permission to use funds I had raised in UK to buy a laptop (November 2012 Dance cabaret event where both adult and child students of mine performed, raising £730). We also purchased a desperately needed CD player system (current one was broken) for the dance group, and a DVD player for the school (current one gave electric shocks) for all the girls to watch the beloved Bollywood films.

To date there is still no internet at the centre, despite promises from the trustees, so this is something I am fundraising for very soon.

### Final showcases

As I had planned to leave the charity on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> February, we arranged a final showcase of the dance project for Friday 1<sup>st</sup> February. By this time every girl at Amodini was involved in at least one dance, and I had achieved my goal of inspiring them all. They performed Bollywood, Street, Flamenco, Rock n roll and Contemporary choreographies. My aim after arriving at SKCV was to have the girls dancing as much as the boys. At the showcase the girls danced superbly. I was still aware of the difficulty they have staying confident when performing in front of boys; it is a cultural difference that is hard to comprehend as a Westerner. However they danced very well and most importantly enjoyed themselves. At the end of the showcase I felt inspired to get everyone dancing and we had a spontaneous Bollywood style 'dance off' with the boys and male staff on one side of the hall, and the girls/ female staff on the other. The atmosphere was fantastic and the dancing went on for twenty minutes!



< class 1 and 2 performing 'Rock n Roll'

Having then said tearful goodbyes to all at the boy's village, I was to return on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> to repeat the whole performance as the UK trustees had arrived. As I hadn't left for Mumbai it had been requested that we do the show again. This time we danced outside by the river Krishna, under the shade of the trees. This is an experience I will always remember as one of the most beautiful days I ever had, seeing the children from both villages dancing, and also performing a short folk dance with Damoda. I had barely learned it, and he forgot where he was half way through, but of course the children were thrilled to see us dancing and it was another reminder to me that dance is not about getting it right; it's about the love of movement and music, and the joy shared with the audience. It was the perfect finale to a wonderful five weeks immersed in Indian dance and culture.

Link to key stage 3 equivalent age group, Bollywood. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1m0oj19jSM>

## **Integrating the experience**

The benefits of this trip became apparent as soon as I came home and began working again. Some are obvious- direct increase in my knowledge and experience if Indian dance has had a positive effect on teaching my Bollywood classes; increased confidence performing; ability to talk first hand about Indian dance and children/ culture in the six primary schools in which I teach on a weekly basis.

On a further reaching scale a primary school teacher had used the video I took in India to help teach her Key stage 1 children both in Bollywood performance and costumes as part of the curriculum in a Herefordshire school. Other friends and colleagues are also planning to use my footage in schools. The blog will become a page of my new website which is under construction ([karinagraciadance.co.uk](http://karinagraciadance.co.uk)) and additional footage will be added. At future fundraising events for SKCV my report and video/ photos will be used. I am currently writing an article for the UK based flamenco publication, Flamenco News.

I am continuing my study of the hand gestures and perfecting the dances taught to me by Damoda, Mary and Master B.Venkata. I am in touch with Naga Lakshmi, a twenty year old MBA student who became my guide, sometimes translator, and close friend during my stay. I am also in touch with the UK trustees, and many members of staff in India.

I had set off intending to study aspects of Indian dance; the study was much broader than that. I feel I have come home with a real sense of how dance is such an important factor in Indian culture. At every gathering, public event, celebration, there is dance. On the streets children are dancing, in the old persons care home they were watching dance on TV, everywhere people were thrilled to see anyone dance.

On a personal level this opportunity has given me so much. I found that on a physical level that dancing in such heat in lots of clothing everyday and eating a basic vegetarian diet for 5 weeks gave me a thorough detox and I came home feeling renewed, physically stronger, and glowing with health. I now feel I have strong connections with a community in India where my input was massively appreciated and I feel fulfilled that I have, and will continue to, give something to children who really do not have the resources we have over in the UK. I feel more flexible and relaxed in my life in general; the Indian philosophy of relaxing and allowing life to unfold has had a deeply positive effect on me.