

Project Title: **Dance as Devotion - Learning Kathak from Pandit Rajendra Gangani**

Dates: 16 Dec 2019 - 12 Jan 2020

Place: New Delhi, India

Timescale: 4 weeks

## 1. How far the purpose of your project was achieved



I set out to increase my knowledge and improve my technique in Kathak dance. Some could say that Kathak is now a global art form and just as someone from India can learn English, a British Asian (or 'NRI: non-resident Indian') can learn Kathak, in Britain. This is true to some extent. But the unmistakable twang in an Indian person's accent will always trace them back to their homeland. So I guess you could say that I travelled all the way to India to learn a language in the context it's used in, in the accent it's spoken in and from someone who has mastered it so fluently, that he can conjure captivating couplets, complex poetry and epic stories with it.

You really learn to speak a language, when you're forced to use it. When there is no alternative option. That was my experience in Delhi. In class, I had to utilise, follow, comprehend and remember as much as I could, as fast as I could. This meant that I learned a huge amount through acute observation and swift analysis. Watching others learn and perform, taking part in daily rituals and being surrounded by the iconography, stories and music of the tradition, meant that I absorbed an incredible amount of context too.

Coming back to the UK feeling like a heavy, wet sponge, ready to squeeze out (and capture!) all that I've soaked up is a great feeling. It's also reassurance that the purpose of my project was certainly achieved.

## 2. Notes about any particular highlights in your travels

As I reflect on my trip, the main memory that comes to mind is being in a relatively small, worn-out room used as a dance studio, surrounded by buzzing bodies that were as obsessed and dedicated to Kathak as I was, if not more so. Seeing Guru ji's smiling face everyday was a major highlight. No matter how tired or busy he was, he remained level-headed, light-hearted and able to focus on his students as well as everyone's needs. Perhaps it is the nature of the art

form that prepares us for this. Kathak involves extreme multi-tasking as we must be absolutely calm and present while focusing on our movements, footwork, the time-cycle, expression, melody, the audience, musicians and the space all at once. Other highlights include:

- Observing other students during classes and performances - noticing their unique style and strengths made me fall in love with Kathak again and again as an endlessly idiosyncratic art form.
- Experiencing a range of Guru ji's compositional work - seeing his complex compositions on senior students and how they had made them their own was equally interesting and inspiring.
- Getting blessings from Guru ji through a puja (offering of prayers) on my new ghungroo (ankle bells) - I'd managed to get a new set of ghungroo from one of Delhi's oldest (and busiest!) markets and it was truly special to have a sacred thread tied around my wrist that now serves as a constant reminder of my responsibility to do justice to his teachings and the art.
- Feeling more comfortable as an 'NRI' (non-resident Indian) - This was the first time in all my visits to India that I felt that I didn't have to pretend to be Indian or ashamed that I couldn't speak Hindi or Punjabi very well!
- Feeling welcomed by other students - Although India is incredibly competitive, it was heart-warming to feel camaraderie from the other students in the class whether that was a smile, a reassuring arm-squeeze or help with a composition or situation when I was feeling lost or confused (which occurred frequently!).
- Visiting Guru ji's senior student, Swati Sinha ji in Gurgaon and discussing many topics with her. She also suggested to ask Guru ji for advice on a project I am involved in and he ended up sharing his special composition on Draupadi (from the Indian epic, the Mahabharata) with me to use.



### 3. Suggestions which could help future Awardees

- Keep notes on reflections at the end of each day/week - even though you will be mentally and physically exhausted, just a few notes can capture feelings and details that can fade over time.

- Connect with people that you trust to help you navigate the area - this is important, particularly in a busy city like Delhi as cultural differences and language barriers can be confusing and places aren't as organised as you may be used to!
- Give yourself time for rest and reflection/digestion - it is tempting to fill up your schedule as much as possible in order to make the most of your trip and the time there but our immune systems can wear down easily while travelling so if you don't pace yourself, you could risk burning out and losing even more time than you would if you took small breaks!

#### **4. Plans to share information about your project with others**

- Share report on Facebook and Twitter and quotes/excerpts on Instagram with #ThrowbackThursday reflective posts.
- Utilise the new compositions that I've learned in an upcoming performance project in March 2020 with South Asian Arts UK (SAA-uk) called 'SHAKTI'.
- Practice and execute improved Kathak techniques in a performance at New York Kathak Festival in April 2020.
- Impart knowledge learned to students in one to one classes and new group classes this year with Centre for Indian Classical Dance and Desi Masti Leicester/Aakash Odedra Company.

#### **5. Description of the project, reflection on the impact on your journey both personally and professionally - any outcomes, conclusions or recommendations (which you are able to indicate)**

My time in India has had a profound impact on my journey both personally and professionally.

Every day would look a little something like this...

8.30am - I would wake up, unravel my blanket-cocoon and pray that the hot water geyser would be working that day (Delhi is almost as cold as the UK in winter!).

9.00am - Time to persuade my cousin that I don't want a paratha (fried, stuffed chapati) for breakfast but was happy with toast or porridge and fruit instead.

9.30am - Get ready and gobble down my breakfast while fiddling with my phone to order an Uber.

9.45am - Hope the Uber driver is playing the radio or that it isn't too awkward to sit in silence while he dodges constant collisions in the morning traffic.

10am - Climb three flights of stairs, hope that Guru ji is teaching today (not whizzed off for a performance) and arrive at class a little flustered and out of breath.

11am - Give my pranaam (greetings) to Guru ji and the mandir (sacred area) in the class and either observe or take part in the senior batches class depending on what was being taught that day.

12am to 2pm (sometimes 3pm) - Follow the compositions being taught and remember as much as I could to revise later. Listen to Guru ji's corrections, guidance and advice and learn any new compositions he felt inspired to teach that day. Sometimes Guru ji would conduct a combined class where all the students from different batches would learn the same exercises together to strengthen and develop their technique as well as build stamina and speed. Every class was different and Guru ji liked to keep everyone on their toes!

3pm onwards - Either go back to my family's home or stay at Kathak Kendra to have a simple lunch, revise and watch a performance in the evening. Sometimes I'd do material/clothes shopping and visit the tailor and on the occasional day when there was no class, I spent time with family, practiced in a local studio space and attended yoga class.



The knowledge that I gained, both specific and contextual, is as precious as gold to me as I was aware that the compositions I was learning were either created by Guru ji himself or handed down from generations of Kathak dancers following a lineage. The first-hand encounters I had are now a part of my life experience that no-one can take away, dispute or deny. In other words, they are my truth. I gained inspiration, confidence and an understanding of the 'bigger picture' of Kathak. This includes the diversity of the form and how it relates to religious, cultural and philosophical concepts such as the Guru-shishya parampara (Guru-student relationship tradition). I also had a glimpse of what is possible to achieve within the Kathak form through senior students' performances and choreographies.

I learned the true meaning of 'resilience' in practice. To keep on dancing for years on end in a city like Delhi, which is very tough on the body and mind, is truly commendable. Competition is immensely fierce and monetary income to make a career out of dance is scarce. This made me not only respect the dancers that I came across but also have a newfound appreciation for the opportunities, infrastructure and systems that we have in the UK to support the arts.

Through this project and development period, I took a significant step forward in strengthening my life-long relationship with India and Guru ji as I work to promote Indian classical music and dance in the UK and try to do justice to this wonderful art through my practice.

