

# Maryam Shakiba LUTSF Report

**Project Title:** Studying choreographic and pedagogical processes in odissi Indian classical dance

**Dates of travel:** 13/01/2025 – 11/05/2025

**Locations visited:** Bhubaneswar, Bangalore, Pushkar, Bhagsu Nag - India

## **Summary of project (50 words):**

Studying choreographic and pedagogical processes under current leading odissi artists in India, to inform my choreographic development and facilitation skills grounded in the odissi form. I will share my findings with other professional South Asian dance artists in the UK to upskill the sector.

## **Goals:**

- Learn about choreographic processes from some of the leading odissi choreographers in India today, who are creating both ensemble and solo work
- Learn pedagogical approaches for teaching odissi as a devotional and cultural practice
- Share my findings with the South Asian dance community in the UK.

## **1. Did you achieve what you set out to do with your project?**

My main goals for this trip were to develop my odissi choreographic skills, and ability to facilitate students as they learn the odissi dance form. Overall I feel very happy that I achieved what I set out to do.

The first two destinations in my project aimed to address my goals of learning more about choreographic processes in odissi from leading choreographers in India.

During my period in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, I was fortunate enough to be able to shadow Guru Aruna Mohanty at Orissa Dance Academy while she was preparing a large-scale piece for an upcoming event. While I am quite a way from choreographing performances for 60+ dancers(!), it was extremely valuable to understand her process behind choosing the topic of the piece, how she incorporated the various themes into a coherent narrative, and brought odissi to life in many different ways. I also understood how she worked with the strengths of her dancers to create high impact pieces of work.



As I also wanted to understand her choreographic tools and approaches for developing solo works, I also studied one of her choreographies from one of her senior disciples, Madhusmita Mohanty, who has worked with Aruna very closely during the development of many of her choreographies. During this process she was able to share the reasoning and goals behind specific elements of the choreography. Once I had learnt the choreography, I was also able to spend an hour one-one with Aruna Mohanty, where I recorded a conversation we had on both her specific approach to the choreography I had learnt, and more generally. This included her approaches when working with musicians. This conversation provided me with valuable insights that I will be taking forward in my choreographic work.

My period in Bangalore with Madhulita Mohapatra at Nrityantar was also incredibly precious. As I was staying with her in her home, we were able to spend a lot of time talking about her approach to choreography. We watched videos of her work and talked through her process when making them, as well as the way she would work with musicians, and also with ensembles of dancers. Where possible, I recorded our conversations, so I can refer back to them in the future. We also spent a day visiting the internationally acclaimed Nrityagram, who are based just outside of Bangalore, where we watched a rehearsal and shared lunch with the ensemble.



*Image description: At Nrityagram, with Madhulita Mohapatra in dark green at top centre, Surupua Sen – artistic director of Nrityagram - to the right and myself far right in the photo. Two of Madhulita's students are also standing with us. The rest of the Nrityagram ensemble are kneeling in pink saris.*

I then spent a month in Pushkar, Rajasthan, where I studied under Colleena Shakti at Shakti School of Dance, whose school was having its 20 year anniversary. I was able to discuss and see in action the syllabus she has developed over the years for students, many of whom start their odissi journeys at her school. She was also able to share with me resources she had developed for students, including a handbook where she sets out some background and history around the dance form, the values her school sets out to embody, and codes of conduct. These resources will be incredibly valuable as I develop my own teaching practices of odissi in London.



*Image description: Myself, with Bhoomika Sharma, a local resident of Pushkar and a student at Shakti School of Dance, with other students in the background. Bhoomika is a sincerely devoted student and always speaks so highly of the rigour of teaching she has received at the school, with its very full and holistic approach to studying the dance form.*

## 2. Has your LUTSF-supported trip impacted you personally/professionally?

As well as the huge impact this trip has had on my professional development, it also had a big impact on me personally. When I began my dance journey in Odissi, it was very much a spiritual path, with the devotional aspect of the dance being my main inspiration. While my path over the last few years has focused on my professional development within the UK dance sector as a maker, this trip also brought home why I dedicated myself to this dance in the first place. I am looking forward to reconnecting with this element of my practice and seeing where it takes me.

Being able to be immersed in dance for my project, and rebuilding a strong personal practice also meant I was able to bring my dance o

## 3. Please tell us about any particular highlights in your travels.

As well as my time with Aruna Mohanty at Orissa Dance Academy, I also visited Rudrakshya Foundation in Bhubaneswar, which is another dance school led by Guru Bitchitranda Swain. Here I was able to watch a rehearsal of a new composition based on an iconic piece of Odissi music, by highly accomplished dancer Lipsa Satpathy. I was absolutely mesmerised, both by her skill and technique, and also the composition which breathed with so much life and sublime beauty. It reminded me of what is possible in this beautiful dance form. I was then able to watch the final performance of the piece at the Odissi Research Centre, as part of a wider evening of performances.





*Image description: Lipsa Satpathy performing at Rudrakshya Foundation's annual festival.*

Having the opportunity to watch a lot of odissi performances while in Bhubaneswar was an incredibly enriching experience, and inspired me to also work on my own dance training and technique development during my time in India.

My whole time in Pushkar as a whole was also a huge highlight. The school there is in the grounds of a beautiful temple, and to be in that sacred space every day, connecting with other people who were inspired by the potential for dance to be a profound and sacred practice had a huge impact on me. It reminded me that there are many reasons people from all walks of life are drawn to dance, and that as well as communicating the technique and history underpinning a dance form, communicating the philosophical framework a dance is held in also holds huge value when teaching.

#### 4. How do you plan to share information about your project with others?

I will be organising two collaborative sessions in September for the South Asian Dance community in the UK, where myself and other artists will share choreographic and pedagogical practices. I will use these sessions to share the things that I learnt during my time in India.

I will also transcribe the conversations I recorded with Aruna Mohanty and Madhulita Mohapatra, and make them available for others to read on my website. I will signpost people to these through my social media channels.

#### 5. Do you have any suggestions which could help future Awardees?

As well as identifying the specific things or people you would like to study when you travel, do not underestimate the value of being immersed in a new culture, and consider how that will add to and feed into the development of your work.

You will also hopefully have the opportunity to watch performances or visit different schools while completing your project. Make the most of these opportunities, and absorb what you can from them.