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In India, a Dance Haven Shuts Out the World

With the pandemic, Nrityagram, dear Bangalore, has become a more self-contained version of itself: a refuge, with a single-minded focus on classical Indian dance.



The grounds of Nrityagram include studios, a small temple and living quarters. Credit: Abhinaya Rohan

By Marina Harss | Oct. 7, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

The other day, I took a tour around Nrityagram. This [small community near Bangalore, in southern India](#), is an oasis of calm and utter devotion to an ancient art: classical Indian dance. Birds were calling, and around the low, earth-colored buildings containing dance studios, living quarters and a small temple, stood hundreds of vibrantly green trees, dripping with moisture. (It is the end of the wet season.)

As I rounded a bend in the path, I saw a little girl wearing bright orange and yellow, daydreaming in a banyan tree. She slid down from her perch and joined the walkabout.

This early morning scene — the trees, the gray sky threatening rain, people sitting at breakfast — unfolded as I peered into a screen on my phone late at night in my New York apartment. The tour was virtual, conducted on WhatsApp. That is more or less the only way you can visit Nrityagram these days, since it closed its doors to the outside world at the beginning of the pandemic.



“We have been living our lives exactly as if nothing has happened,” Surupa Sen, Nrityagram’s artistic director of 23 years, said later in an interview on Zoom. Under her leadership, Nrityagram continues to be what it always has been, but more so: a dance haven, self-contained and single-minded in its focus, at a remove from a chaotic and sometimes frightening world.

The virus has spread widely in India. As I write this, it is second only to the United States in total number of cases, [its official death toll surpassing 100,000](#). But within the 10 acres that make up Nrityagram, life has remained remarkably unchanged.

Even before a general lockdown was declared in India, Nrityagram limited access. The dance students — nearly 150 from nearby villages and as far as Bangalore attend classes — have been asked to stay away, for fear of introducing Covid-19 into this small, intimately entwined community.

Because there is so little communication with the outside world, the people who live within this self-contained hamlet don’t wear masks, and training continues unperturbed, in studios that are open on the sides to the elements, allowing the breeze to blow through year-round.

The only people who come and go are a small group of women from the nearby village, who help with daily chores. Upon arrival, they are asked to change into clothes that have been washed on-site and to don masks.

The form practiced by Ms. Sen and her dancers is Odissi, which originated in the eastern state of Odisha. It is one of India’s eight official classical dance forms, with movements and shapes that evoke the sculptures and bas-reliefs on medieval temples. In its origins, it is a devotional form, dedicated to the deity Jagannath, whose name means lord of the universe.

“The idea is that you submit yourself to a universal something,” Ms. Sen said. Her works have extended the form, while remaining true to its underlying drive, the search for transcendence.

Ms. Sen and her dancers devote most of their waking hours to perfecting this art, refining and strengthening their bodies through exercise, and perfecting their dancing through technique classes and rehearsals in which they learn traditional Odissi choreography as well as new works by Ms. Sen. For now, the group is all women; the sole male dancer returned to Mumbai to visit his family early on in the pandemic and has not yet returned.

Life here has continued to follow a routine. For this piece, we asked the dancers to document their day, from dawn to dusk, capturing moments and places with disposable cameras.

At 6 a.m., they rise for a morning run. Then, each woman is responsible for cleaning some part of the hamlet and for placing flowers on the small altars in the dance studios.

These rituals are “part of the practice, part of giving back to the guru,” or teacher, “and to the school.” And “it’s part of their training,” said Lynne Fernandez, Nrityagram’s executive director. Next, they warm up by doing yoga or practicing the Indian martial art form [Kalaripayattu](#).



At 10:30 a.m., dance class begins, starting with exercises that target one kind of movement and then another — sharp and fast, slow and supple, low to the ground, up in the air, and more. In its gradual, almost scientific progression from one part of the body to the next, it is not dissimilar to a ballet class.



After lunch — “our favorite moment of the day!” one of the dancers, Abhinaya Rohan, said during our WhatsApp tour — they return to the studio for another three or four hours, more if Ms. Sen is creating a new dance.

In the evenings, they teach. These days, that happens over Zoom, though everyone agrees that it’s not good for conveying the nuances of dance. “It’s not the same kind of energy,” said Pavithra Reddy, who has been at Nrityagram for 30 years. “And we have to slow down a lot, so that the dancers can understand what we’re looking for.” Still, it’s something.

That makes for at least six hours of dancing each day (except Mondays, their day off), plus

conditioning. It sounds exhausting, but Ms. Rohan said: “The strange thing about dance is that it energizes you. I never feel tired.”

Besides the dancers and Aishani Dash, the little girl in the tree, there are six other members of the community, whose work allows the dancers to devote themselves to their art: Two office workers and two volunteers who are helping to set up a [Food Forest](#), a haphazard-looking but productive and low-maintenance agricultural system that produces most of the community’s food; And there are Ms. Fernandez and her mother, whom everyone refers to as nani, or grandmother. Nani makes meal plans and prepares pickles to last them through the year.

Usually, Nrityagram survives almost exclusively on performance fees brought in by its dance ensemble, which tours the world for several months each year and has been a not-infrequent visitor to New York. (The dance classes are priced too low to bring in significant income.) With all performances canceled for the foreseeable future, that income has disappeared completely. Recently, they were forced to hold an emergency fund-raiser online.

Aishani, 11, is the only child living among adults, as well as a devoted student of dance who takes daily class and rehearses with the members of the ensemble. In a rehearsal I watched remotely, she considered every correction Ms. Sen gave her with diligence and gravity.



“We discovered her dancing by herself when she was 4 or 5,” Ms. Sen said after the class. “She was making up her own dances to the music coming from the studio. So we had her join the weekend class with the other kids.” In their absence, she has graduated to working with the adults. One day, she said, she hopes to become a professional dancer.

No longer able to tour or hold performances for locals, the dancers have taken to performing for one another. “It helps us keep that performance drive,” said Dhruvatarra Sharma, a member of the ensemble.

“Actually, there is even more pressure. You have to be perfect, because you’re performing for a really well-educated audience.”

Afterward, they talk into the night, offering minute critiques and observations. It’s something they would normally have neither the time, nor the occasion, to do.

Ms. Sen performs, too, and the intimate, informal setting allows her to try things she would hesitate to in a conventional performance. “Last time,” she said, “I danced four pieces I would never normally do together. They were all on the sad side, about longing. Normally this would just be too much, too much intensity.”



After two decades of teaching, choreographing and touring, Ms. Sen has been able to slow down and rediscover her own dancing. “I feel like I’m looking at myself as a dancer for the first time in my life,” she said. “And I’m discovering that this color is also there, and that color.” All this, she says, will be reflected in whatever she chooses to create next.



This has been true for the other dancers as well. For one, they’ve had much more uninterrupted, concentrated time to work with their guru — but also to think about their dancing outside of the pressure of preparing for a performance. “The fact that you are able to do it in an environment of sheer focus and consistency, it brings a certain purity to it,” Ms. Sen said. “There is the sense of extending yourself beyond just yourself.”

What the dancers of Nrityagram have gained, most of all, is time. Even here, the dimension of time has changed in the pandemic, opening up spaces in the dancers’ schedule and their minds.

“Odissi comes from an era when people had more time, when you could live in a moment much longer,” Ms. Sen explained. “Finding that sense of longing, of yearning for something, takes time. You have to stay with it for a while, sit in it and experience all the colors of it.” Now, protected from the storm that surrounds them, that time has come for the dancers of Nrityagram.





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