

# Inside one of the few places where dancers still perform, founded by a glamorous disco impresario

By Sarah L. Kaufman

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Each morning, after sweeping leaves and snakes out of the open-air dance studios, after chasing monkeys from the mango trees, dodging the peacocks, and feeding growing numbers of stray dogs and cats, the remaining residents of Nrityagram can finally dance together.

As the coronavirus pandemic has sent the globe into quarantine, this rural compound in India's southern tip is one of the few places where professional dancers can still do what the rest of the performing arts world can only dream about. At Nrityagram (pronounced na-RIT-ya-gram), dancers experience neither loneliness nor confinement. They gather in the same dance hall for hours at a stretch, every day, to train, rehearse and perform — if only for one another — because they are quarantined together.

“We are so separate from the world, the virus doesn't make a difference for us,” says Nrityagram artistic director Surupa Sen, 50, a trim, handsome woman with a bright smile and firm voice. She winds her long dark hair into a bun as she speaks from her home on a recent Zoom video call one evening.

“We're almost always on self-quarantine because we live so far away.”

Even before India imposed a lockdown on its 1.3 billion citizens in late March, living in isolation was simply the Nrityagram lifestyle. Set on 10 acres of once-barren land about an hour's drive from Bangalore, Nrityagram is a residential dance commune, established in 1990. It is devoted to the study and practice of Odissi, a fluid and intricate temple dance more than 2,000 years old, one of the world's oldest dance traditions.

Nrityagram is set up as a *gurukul*, following an ancient tradition in which students apprentice to a guru, living together as a family and studying intensively. It operates as a self-contained little village: cottages, dance and yoga studios, a communal kitchen and dining space, garden plots. There's a temple honoring past dance gurus and an outdoor amphitheater that seats 3,000. Each year, about 200 students train there, some in residence and others commuting. About 5,000 visitors take in weekend workshops and performances.

At the heart of the operations is the Nrityagram Ensemble, a resident performing group known throughout India, Europe and the United States, where it tours annually, most recently last fall.

The visitors and the ensemble's touring and performance fees help fund the commune, but with recent cancellations

March 9 and sent most of the staff home, with pay. Otherwise, she says, nothing has changed much for the 10 residents who remain — six dancers, including Sen and a lone male dancer, and four staff members.

“We spend most of our lives in the dance hall,” Sen says, “always meeting together, working together.” Four dancers, wearing colorful tunics and shy smiles, crowd around her, including the youngest, 11-year-old Aishani Dash, a student living at the compound with her mother, who helps cook.

This unusual dance oasis was dreamed up by a rebellious former socialite named Protima Gauri. She was glamorous and scandalous. In her early life she'd modeled, streaked famously across Mumbai's beaches and founded that city's first disco. She was briefly married to Indian actor Kabir Bedi, best known in the West as the villain in the 1983 James Bond film “Octopussy.”

All that dropped away when Gauri chanced upon an Odissi rehearsal in her late 20s, and she threw herself into studies with a guru. Eventually, the onetime go-go dancer became an Odissi icon.

Mindful that her late start had hampered her, Gauri built Nrityagram as a year-round training ground primarily for young women, who often had to buck traditional cultural norms to dance. Within a few years, Gauri was touring the world with her dancers, including Sen, one of Nrityagram's first students.

“I dream of building a community of dancers in a forsaken place amid nature,” Gauri wrote. “A place where nothing exists, except dance.”

Gauri died in 1998 at age 49, trapped in a Himalayan mudslide while making a pilgrimage to Tibet. What she left behind had grown into a mecca for artists of all stripes, drawn to its holistic approach. This is a place where running, yoga and meditation exist alongside lessons in dance technique, Sanskrit and Indian literature.

“It is actually a paradise. It works,” says choreographer Mark Morris, who for the past 20 years has been a frequent Nrityagram guest. He was last there in January, staying in the dance village and also venturing to Chennai for a performance by Sen and fellow dancer Pavithra Reddy.

“It's nowhere, it's a wonderful climate, and they're doing exactly what they want all the time,” he says.

“They've studied the old texts, and they know what they're doing,” Morris continues, “and it's very, very serious and traditional, but there's also a lot of nontraditional and interesting, modern thinking and behavior there. It's serious and a lot of fun.”

It turns out that what Gauri seeded is an artistic lifestyle to withstand some of the destruction of the coronavirus, which has paralyzed the performing arts.

Dancers have been especially hard hit by the widespread social distancing requirements. At a minimum, their art demands constant conditioning and practice, expansive floor space, and physical contact with others.

YouTube and Instagram are full of videos of dancers demonstrating limited workouts in their kitchens and living rooms. Adapting to less than favorable conditions is part of the dancers' life. But staying in shape these days isn't the chief problem.

As difficult as it may be to replicate elsewhere, Nrityagram has an answer.

Abhinaya Rohan, 30, left her husband temporarily to quarantine at Nrityagram. “I have undivided attention from my guru, and I’m developing more as an artist,” says Rohan, glancing at Sen and beaming.

“It has been phenomenal, being in this space continuously with focused effort,” she adds. “There’s a little bit of energy lost in the process of coming and going. When you’re living here, your efficiency level goes up.”

The practical virtues of Nrityagram are clear. But some speak of metaphorical, even metaphysical strengths as well.

“The virus can’t touch us in the sacred space of the dance floor,” says dancer Dhruvatara Sharma, 23, whom Sen describes as the group’s philosopher.

“The virus enters our mind; we’re afraid of it in our heads,” Sharma continues. “But we get to live in our bodies, so when we go to the dance floor, we can remove that completely and never worry about corona, for hours and hours.”

They worry about it only when they leave. Each week, Nrityagram’s executive director, Fernandez, drives with some of the others to a nearby village for supplies. There’s a 15-minute time limit in the stores, so the dancers race through, grabbing what they need. Back at home, they set up an assembly line of soap buckets to scrub everything clean.

Sen says she was shocked by the general lack of concern about the pandemic she saw before the lockdown, and she knew Nrityagram needed to be extra careful.

“People were completely oblivious to the situation. Everyone was behaving like, ‘Oh, it’s not going to happen to me.’ But because we live in a community, each one of us has to be triply careful. I put the fear of God into their life to understand how important it is to take measures. You have to think about something more than yourself.”

This, she emphasizes, is the core belief at Nrityagram.

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“I feel extremely grateful and lucky to share my life,” Sen says, turning back to her laptop. “And for not being scared. Worried yes, but I am worried for everybody.”

Among her most pressing worries is Nrityagram’s future. The commune is celebrating its 30th anniversary this week under the cloud of financial losses. It receives no government funding, and Sen continues to pay the staff she sent home.

“The first couple of weeks we were all depressed,” Sen says, rubbing her eyes in evident fatigue.

Electric fans whirl behind her. With daily temperatures near 100 degrees, the burden of keeping snakes off the dance floors, maintaining the vegetable gardens, olive trees and stone structures, and doing dishes and laundry by hand has fallen to the small group that remains.

“But now we’ve all found our own pace,” Sen says. “Our day is much the same as it always is. We wake up at 5:30, and then it’s nonstop. We exercise, we clean, we dance. We have art all day.”

They’re also making up dances to entertain one another. Sen has tasked the dancers to create solos and organize their own performances; they have to drop off personal invitations at everyone’s door. She’s started teaching on Zoom. The dancers have been performing one by one on the teleconferencing app, with duets and ensembles coming next.

In the end, Sen says, their land, their dance practice and their way of life, with its emphasis on quiet devotion and care, have taught them just about everything they need to survive the global crisis.

“I feel that Indian classical dance and the sacred arts offer you solace, of a kind that allows you to find yourself in any space, at any time,” Sen says. “There is a certain stillness to it, a belief that it is not just about the contemporary world and your immediate environment. You are not just looking after your body, but looking after your heart.

“We have lived on belief all our lives. What’s going to happen next? If you let that take you over, it’s hard to live.”

She shares what Gauri, her guru, told her: “This land has its own destiny and will find the people to fulfill it.’

“I do believe this is a sacred space,” Sen says, “and it does what it needs to do to keep the dance going.”

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