

A Day in the Life of Nrityagram

Karen Greenspan

Like a tribal council of ancients sitting around a fire, the artists of Nrityagram encircle the empty space in the studio to reenact the allegorical tale *Dasavataar* – The Ten Incarnations of Vishnu. The resident statues of Hindu deities, adorned with offerings of fresh flowers and candles, oversee this assembly as artistic director Surupa Sen sits on the floor gesturing the story with arms and upper torso as she narrates from her iPad:

The story of human evolution
Strewn with myth and illusion
Comes from the start
Of the very old part where
There was neither you nor me,
Not even the Big Bang Theory!

The other two dance soloists, Bijayini Satpathy and Pavithra Reddy, leap into the space with superhuman energy to dance the account of how Lord Vishnu manifests ten different forms to urge human development forward on its evolutionary trajectory. The three musicians sit against a wall rapidly making notes while playing intricate rhythms and singing the devotional reprise, *Jaya Jagadisha Hare!* (Oh Lord of the universe, all glories to You!), as this ages-old Hindu narrative, filled with the fire and brimstone of destruction and the hope and promise of new beginnings, is recreated flush with vivid, new expression.

I have arrived at the small, terra cotta-colored settlement of Nrityagram, just an hour's drive from Bangalore, during preparations for their Annual Day performance that will be held two weeks hence. Nrityagram, which translates as "dance village," is a place where the Hindu gods are conjured forth with rhythmsslapped onto the floor by dancing bare feet, intricate gestural designs formed by speaking hands, nuanced expressions of the

face and eyes, and the graceful, sinuous, triple-sideward curve of the dancing torso. Nrityagram dancers sustain a fierce dedication to excellence in the practice of their art – odissi dance, a classical Indian dance form derived from the sculpted friezes, depicting dance as worship, that adorn the ancient Hindu temples of Odisha (an eastern coastal state in India).

The ensemble of musicians from Mumbai has just arrived for a four-day concentrated working period. They are much-in-demand performers who will not return again until a few days before the performance, so the dancers and gurus (teachers/soloists) are rehearsing with them all day and into the night. The days in this creative community of sweaty saris are lengthy and filled with a rigorous schedule of classes, rehearsals, and daily chores that generate ravenous appetites, demand multiple daily showers, and beg for much-needed sleep.

Surupa Sen recalls that when she came to Nrityagram as its first student, they did not have a single day of the week (or year) off. She had to negotiate with her guru, Protima Bedi, for that to happen. Bedi couldn't understand why one needed a day off from something you loved.

Founded in 1990 by Protima Gauri Bedi, a wealthy Mumbai socialite turned odissi dancer, the village was designed by the acclaimed Indian architect Gerard da Cunha on a land lease granted by the Karnataka state government. Bedi described the concept, "It is a community of dancers in a forsaken place amidst nature. A place where nothing exists, except dance. A place where you breathe, eat, sleep, dream, talk, imagine – dance."

The rustic structures – studios, amphitheater, temple, dining pavilion, writers' compound, office, and cottages – are situated amidst ten acres of farmland planted with orchards of a variety of fruit trees and vegetable gardens that sustain the kitchen's preparations. The grounds, landscaped with colorful flowers and graceful trees, create a simple perfection exemplified by the fallen petals from

a spray of bougainvillea that, by chance, form a fuchsia pathway to the entrance of a dance studio, as if to welcome the steps of a bride.

Since Protima Bedi's untimely death in a 1998 landslide while on pilgrimage in the Himalayas, the Nrityagram dream has been kept alive by her close friend Lynne Fernandez, who serves as executive director and lighting/technical designer, and Bedi's students – Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy – now, respectively, artistic director/choreographer and director of dance education. Today Nrityagram flourishes as a modern-day *gurukul* (residential school) for odissi classical dance. It adheres to the ancient *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) tradition, in which the disciple lives with the guru and absorbs the unbroken knowledge of the lineage – about the art form as well as life – passed on through a unique mentoring relationship based on complete dedication and trust between disciple and teacher. In fact, each class and rehearsal at

Nrityagram begins and concludes with the ages-old ritual of the shishya bowing to touch the guru's feet while the guru acknowledges the relationship by touching the shishya's head, back, or shoulder.

It is before 8:00 in the morning, and my walk to the main dance studio is accompanied by a multiplicity of sounds floating on the morning air – the insistent call of a frog, a variety of birdsong, the “caw” of the crows, the distant “vrrm” of a truck, and the recording of a woman's voice singing Hindustani ragas (Surupa Sen's morning music-listening ritual). The devotional melody playing next door permeates the studio as Bijayini Satpathy leads the residential students, who have made a one-year commitment to gurukul training and lifestyle, in a morning conditioning class. They bring their yoga mats and wear yoga attire to participate in the session combining yoga, modern dance center barre, Pilates mat work, and calisthenics strengthening exercises.

The final traveling sequences of ballistic flexibility movements are *kalari-payattu* exercises. This ancient martial arts form that originated in the southern Indian state of Kerala developed from and utilizes conditioning exercises based on movements for warfare.

Another morning the class consists of traveling sequences, which the participants perform divided into two groups. One group calls out songlike verses in Sanskrit that narrate the movements while the other performs the exercise. Then they reverse roles. Satpathy explains that these are exercises from the *Natya Shastra* (foundational, sacred, Sanskrit text dated between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., detailing the theory and practice of dance and drama, upon which all of the classical Indian dance forms are based). The exercises are called *caris*, thirty-two movements of the legs – sixteen earthbound variations and sixteen aerial variations – all performed traveling across the floor.

Each day the morning session closes



Bijayini Satpathy and students rehearsing *Battu*.
(Photo: Karen Greenspan)



Battu. (Photo: Shalini Jain)

with two mantras validating self, community, and the work in which they are all engaged. Teachers and students sit cross-legged with eyes closed in a meditative posture and chant together in Sanskrit:

Om Sahana Vavatu Sahanao . . .
 (May God protect and nourish us all
 – students and teachers.
 May our study together be brilliant
 and free of obstacles.
 May we work together without
 conflict.
 May there be peace.)

and

Om Purnamada Purnamidam . . .
 (The Almighty is completeness.
 We are completeness projected
 from that completeness.
 When completeness is added to or
 subtracted from, completeness
 always remains.)

As we walk to breakfast, Satpathy clarifies that body conditioning is not common practice among odissi dancers. An odissi dance class, or lesson, usually refers to a session devoted to learning a piece from the repertoire.

In contrast, at Nrityagram, Satpathy has assembled a physical regimen that develops and maintains strength, flexibility, and agility to support the dancers' ability to perform the technically demanding odissi choreography and extend the longevity of the dancer's career.

After breakfast, other groups involved in the upcoming performance arrive to rehearse. The children, ages eight to fifteen, come for lessons at Nrityagram every Saturday, and are not shy as they discuss who has studied there the longest. They are working arduously on a piece – *Vasant Pallavi* – that they began a year ago, and Satpathy is unrelenting in her challenging demands. Even the youngest responds with unabashed commitment and exactitude as they run through choreography filled with complex formations and step work, intricate hand gestures, and athletic squats and jumps. After a second run-through, Satpathy applauds with an affirming, "Good!"

Before leaving, the children perform a danced salutation to the earth and their gurus. The short ritual is performed by students and gurus together, in which they descend into grand plié to touch the earth drawing energy

from it. As they stand upright, their hands trace a circle around the eyes, behind the head, and come to rest at the heart while forming the palms-clasped *anjali* mudra.

The rehearsal after lunch moves to the large amphitheater, with its red clay stage and stone slab, overhead terrace supported by stone pillars. The dancers are now attired in their colorful dance or half saris, which are shorter than a regular sari. The length of fabric is wrapped around the waist in a wide skirt that hits just below the knee. Then it is draped diagonally upward across the chest, over the shoulder, down across the back, and tucked in at the waist.

The cast of residential students has been expanded with the addition of a sizeable group of adult women from the city who study odissi dance as an avocation. Sen speaks highly of these accomplished professional women with families who take dance classes three times a week – once on the Nrityagram campus and twice in Bangalore, where Sen commutes to teach them. They are committed, skilled, beautiful dancers.

A pink satin-cloaked statue of Jagannath (Lord of the Universe and incarnation of Vishnu) presides from the center of the terrace above the stage. The statue, always present in an odissi dance performance, calls to mind odissi's origins as a component of worship in the religious veneration of Jagannath. Today classical dance is still considered a form of embodied devotion to the divine.

Singing vocals and playing *mardala* (drum), sitar, and harmonium, the musicians sit cross-legged along the left side of the stage as the dancers rehearse the spacing for *Mangalacharan Namami* – an invocatory dance. The title means “may you become present” and is an invocation to Lord Ganesha, remover of obstacles, to insure a successful performance. The dance opens with a slow unfolding of static postures of praise and invocation using of-fertory gestures. The dancers assume deep pliés and low lunges as they bow to the deity. They eventually stand and the dance develops into a joyous display of driving rhythmic steps.

A traditional odissi program follows a specific order of five dance items beginning with *Mangalacharan* (Invocation) and ending with *Mokshya* (Liberation). Each dance item is designed to manifest glimpses of enlightenment (at oneness with the universe) that eventually lead the audience to spiritual fulfillment – *mokshya*.

For the second piece, *Battu*, the dancers are arranged in odissi sculptural poses all about the stage – under the terrace, leaning against the columns that support the upper platform, and downstage in the open space. This dance item displays the scope of odissi's postures and dance technique. Sen walks to the back of the grassy, tiered seating area to observe from a distance and shouts out spatial adjustments.

As the music begins, the sculptures come to life, shifting with sensual ease from pose to pose, dancing and miming actions of self-beautification – wearing earrings and garlands, tying sashes, coiffing one's hair, regarding oneself in a mirror, making offerings, and repose. These odissi poses are all variations on the feminine *tribhanga* stance, with its triple-bent sideward *S* curve, and the masculine *chouka*, or square plié stance.

Sen restaged *Battu* as well as *Mangalacharan-Namami*, both of which were choreographed by the great Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (1926–2004), who was instrumental in the twentieth-century reconstruction of the odissi dance form. He expanded the dance vocabulary and shaped its repertory from his research of the sculptures on the walls of the temples of Odisha. Guru Mohapatra taught and was actively involved at Nrityagram during its early years and his dancing image graces the wall of the temple at Nrityagram.

Satpathy and Reddy run through *Srimati*, an original choreography from a larger work, *Sri – In Search of the Goddess*, by Sen. It is a high energy *pallavi*, a pure dance composition of elaborate step work to melodic song. Sen joins the three musicians to play the finger cymbals, adding to the building energy of this dance duet, chock full of crazy, syncopated rhythms. The dancing travels all over the stage and cli-

maxes with a series of whirling spins pulled off like a magic trick. As the sun sets behind the stage platform, the sounds of odissi celebration play on until the dance ends with the dancers backing offstage, hands clasped in devotion. The pallavi prepares the heart to receive the next program item – *abhinaya* – an interpretive dance-drama expressing the theme of the human yearning for God.

After dinner, the three dance gurus and the three musicians return to the studio to work on *Dasavataar*. Sen explains that the accompanying piece of music composed by Dhaneswar Swain (rearranged by Sen) is a pure rhythm composition with melody only introduced during the devotional refrain. The subject matter is a popular odissi choice – *Dasavataar* – the first song from the *Gita Govinda*, the twelfth-century opus by poet Jayadeva. But there is nothing common about Sen's ingenious interpretation with its updated rhyming translation of the Sanskrit verses. She recounts:

Every time we fall apart
We call for the Gods
From the bottom of our hearts . . .
And so Jagadisha, Lord of the Universe
Comes to us in an appropriate form
To help evolution run along!

With her melodic voice, Sen is the ultimate storyteller. Standing downstage left, in front of the seated row of musicians, she narrates each verse in Sanskrit followed by her English retelling, as the muted drumbeat drives the story onward. All the while, she performs a poetic dance-mime enactment of Jayadeva's account of Lord Vishnu's ten incarnations. Onstage, Bijayini Satpathy and Pavithra Reddy physically convey through their powerful dancing the conflict, terror, and wonder of these dramatic episodes. Sen frequently joins the musicians in reciting the *bols* (spoken rhythms) and adds to the intensity of the rhythmic accompaniment for the dance scenes.

In each episode, Vishnu intervenes for the benefit of humanity. He takes on the forms of a fish, tortoise, wild boar, man-lion, dwarf, warrior-sage, Ramachandra (heroic deity from the *Ramayana* epic), the ploughman Balarama, the compassionate Buddha, and Kalki (who is yet to come).

"*Jaya Jagadisha Hare!*" caps the end of each verse. This *bhakti* (devotional worship) exclamation is repeated by the musicians and then sung in devotional-style refrain (like a Krishna consciousness sing-in). It is a stirring formula that builds expectation. But just as you think you know the format, Sen varies the presentational arrangement, creating renewed interest and excitement.

During a couple of episodes, Sen transitions from narrator to dancer, seamlessly entering the dance-drama. In a volatile *Ramayana* scene, Sen portrays the terrified Princess Sita as she is abducted by the evil demon-king Ravana, and then she joins the battling parties fighting the protracted, violent war to accomplish Sita's rescue. Returning to her storyteller's post, she catches her breath with a mere "*Jaya Jagadisha Hare!*" and proceeds with her tale.

For the tenth incarnation, "Vishnu will come as Kalki the destroyer, who shatters the earth," Sen jumps into action and dances Kalki's terrifying destruction of the universe while the vocalist carries on the narration. With trembling hands and fierce lunges, she displays her masterful skill of expressive movement and *abhinaya* (mimetic aspect) as she inspires the terror and awe of Kalki's cleansing annihilation of humanity when it has reached irredeemable degradation.

Satpathy and Reddy join her onstage as they all dance a rousing reprise of the movement motifs from Vishnu's ten avatars. The three whirl about like a crashing planetary system until they spin offstage. And with this final episode, Nrityagram leads the audience to an inspired state of sublime, undiluted rapture – *mokshya*.

Jaya Jagadisha Hare!