



**Sharing their Dance of Life with young people in hardship**

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Nirmal Jena and Chitrita Mukerjee, founders of the Odissi Dance Company, in Australia, are passionate about creativity, diversity, humanity and sustainability. These four pillars have sustained the two dance artists and educators from the time they met in Delhi, India, almost thirty years ago. They practise their unique family style of Odissi Indian classical dance daily, including with their children. During the COVID lockdown, their home studio in Sydney’s east comes alive with the dance and music, powerful tools for maintaining health, wellbeing and focus. They are now poised to share their art with young people experiencing hardship.

After years of performing and teaching, Nirmal says *I have done everything in the conventional arts industry, but my artistic practice is a lot more than that; it’s a way of life, a living philosophy that can build resilience like no other.*

Teaching the dance and music to the next generation is an urgent priority for Nirmal and Chitrita. And they want to do this in a Gurukul, a place of deep learning and eco-living, set in nature, and where the guru or the teacher guides and inspires every aspect of the learning process. Under their *Odissi: Dance for Humanity* initiative, they want to offer scholarships to young people who have experienced difficulties in life and have a passion for the arts. The students will live in the Gurukul and train intensively in the dance and music, and in essential life skills. Nirmal and Chitrita hope the training will be conferred as an accredited or honorary university degree. After completing their initial training, the young dancers will tour Australia and the world before returning to their respective communities to set up arts-based social enterprises and tourism hubs. In India, two not-for-profit partners are ready – Calcutta Rescue in Kolkata (<https://calcuttarescue.org/>) and Dream a Dream in Bengaluru (<https://dreamadream.org/>).



Nirmal and Chitrita’s Gurukul concept is based on the notion of Vasundhaiva Kutumbakam (*the world is one family* in Sanskrit), thus relevant to anyone who shares their passion, philosophy and commitment to the arts. Ideally, they would like the Gurukul to be in New South Wales, Australia, in the Blue Mountains or the Illawarra coastal strip, south of the Royal National Park. It needs to be near a railway station and other essential amenities. The Gurukul will offer a unique and powerful suite of arts and educational services for learners, practitioners, observers and anyone in the global community. They need partners, funding and resources. Nirmal and Chitrita invite collaborators, philanthropists, professionals and anyone interested to join them on this journey. They are excited about their Gurukul project, a valuable gift for the local and global community, at a time when the world really needs hope.

If they can embark on this ambitious project, it will be a first for Australia. Ausdance NSW strongly supports their initiative, claiming *If there was ever a time when this was necessary, it is now, when the world is rife with uncertainty and chaos. COVID-19 has forced a reset in an unprecedented way and ‘Odissi: Dance for Humanity’ has much to offer in this period of collective reflection and search for new avenues of creative exploration that redefines creative practice in contemporary, intercultural and international ways.*



Gavin Robins, Head of Movement in Australia’s National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), regularly invites Nirmal Jena to teach NIDA’s first year acting students. In support of *Odissi: Dance for Humanity*, he says *In a time when diversity and intercultural connections within our communities are increasingly important, the support for this project will have far reaching effects on the performing arts industry and importantly the lives and potential of the young individuals engaged in this rigorous learning.*

Nirmal Jena teaching at NIDA Photos: Rudolf Rindler

All funds/donations to Nirmal Jena and the Odissi Dance

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