Mauktik – Pearl: 35 years of Nupur Arts



Join **Shreya Vadnerkar**, dance artist and Associate Director of Nupur Arts on a journey through it's evolution: from humble beginnings as newcomers to the UK pioneering Bharatanatyam in the city of Leicester, to achieving recognition as an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO).



Shreya Vadnerkar. Photo: Daniel Phung.

'Mauktik', the Sanskrit word for pearl, symbolises for me the purity, beauty, and resilience that we at Nupur Arts have embodied as an institution throughout our journey.

I've seen this company blossom from every angle: as a student, as the daughter of the Artistic Director & Founder, and now as the Associate Director. Here is our story.

Origins: The journey

In 1988, my mother Smita Vadnerkar arrived in the city of Leicester in the English Midlands region, a world away from her hometown of Vadodara, India.

A newly-wed 19-year-old with very little English under her belt, she was constantly told that factory work was her only option. She did exactly that, however, despite facing language barriers and societal expectations, she also pursued her passion for dance alongside her work in a textile factory. She began performing at her typing classes and the local temple. Then came the classes. Starting with just one student in her home, Smita laid the foundation for Nupur Arts, introducing Bharatanatyam to Leicester and gradually expanding her teachings across city community centres.

By 2006, mum was ready to take the leap of dedicating herself full-time to Nupur Arts. It was a challenging time, with my dad working multiple jobs in the early years to support the family. Yet, with his support and her determination, she propelled the company forward.

Nupur Arts flourished, securing partnerships with prestigious city venues like Curve Theatre as an Associate Company group and becoming the Council's 'go to' for high-profile events such as opening the Special Olympics in 2009 and Olympic torch relay in 2012. You can watch a documentary made for our 25th Anniversary on YouTube.

Navigating Lockdown: Resilience and Growth

In 2020, the pandemic halted our momentum. With student numbers plummeting to less than 30 and survival becoming paramount, we reverted to a mode reminiscent of our parents' generation. Our parents endured so that we could thrive, but here we were surviving again. Lockdown underscored the vital role of community-focused organisations like ours in maintaining morale during challenging times. Through perseverance and passion, we powered through.

Our focus shifted to the well-being of our students and staff, with virtual events like games nights, digital showcases, dance & music festivals like Nartan Online Series and the global premiere of Emerge. We commissioned artists to create new work and challenged the students to stay creative. It was a rocky road back to the studio, with staff teaching dance at two metre distances and covered in PPE from head to toe. However, despite the setbacks, our efforts paid off, leading to the academy's resurgence.

The company grew as we eased out of lockdown, we were ready to thrive.

In quick succession, I applied for the Arts Council's NPO, Smita won the Lifetime Achievement Award in South Asian Dance, we moved out of our at-home office and into offices at Leicester's main creative business hub, LCB Depot and we grew the academy to the highest number of students on record.

Breaking Boundaries: Embracing Change

My own journey as Associate Director with Nupur Arts officially began in 2019, fresh out of university with a degree in Psychology. Eager to contribute, I volunteered my time to the academy, immersing myself in various roles from administration to teaching and performing. Navigating the intersection of family and business has been a journey of respect and innovation. Upholding my mum's vision while carving out my own path has been both challenging and rewarding. I'm committed to creating space for individuals like me and challenging traditional norms.

Equal representation in the arts remains a pressing issue, with global majority voices often marginalised. At a recent Arts Council NPO conference, I couldn't help but notice the lack of South Asian representation and that women comprised only 20% of the room. As a 25-year-old South Asian woman leading an NPO, I am determined to carve out space in this landscape for those who resonate with this under-representation. Age shouldn't be a barrier. I submitted my first NPO application at 23. For me, its all about determination, capability and believing in yourself. A quote I live by: "If you weren't ready, you wouldn't have the opportunity".

Nupur are not just challenging norms within the industry; we're also confronting misconceptions within our own community. I still get asked what my 'actual' job is, thinking this is just a hobby. Even after 35 years, Smita gets asked the same!

Sadly, within the South Asian community, the arts are often not considered a viable career path or even an art form for everyone to appreciate and partake in. Some don't like to accept that a child might be disabled or have additional needs and feel this is too taboo to mention or engage with. We are working to change that mindset, however. By nurturing both younger and older generations, we aim to foster greater acceptance of the arts, whether as a career choice or as something for everyone to enjoy. We encourage a space for openness and transparency to allow for better outcomes.

Through initiatives like our Artist Development programmes and training to work with disabled people, we're fostering a more diverse and inclusive >>

dance community. We've recently collaborated with We Are Epic's inclusive dance development initiative, ID Dance and are professionalising our governance to achieve better equity in our way of working. My solo dance piece, 'Breakin Boundaries,' explores the complexities of my British-Indian identity through Bharatanatyam and breakdance, sparking conversations within the South Asian diaspora community.

Next: The Future

In the future, I envision more South Asian dancers gracing the big screen, the grand stages and collaborating with top industry professionals. I hope to witness a surge of female, South Asian and young creative leaders taking the helm of companies, driving innovation and inclusivity in the arts and a move away from being mere checkboxes for funding towards recognition for our talent and craft, beyond the confines of ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

What part will Nupur play in this future?

- ***Creating Pathways*** – the public support of Arts Council England, has been pivotal in nurturing our vision. We advocate for continued recognition and substantial funding for community organisations like ours as essential for fostering cultural communities and diversity within the arts.



- ***Unlocking Potential*** – seeking sponsorships from passionate arts enthusiasts. These have unlocked boundless opportunities for non-profits like ours, enabling us to empower the next generation and preserve South Asian culture for years to come.
- ***Embracing Collaboration*** – Collaboration is key to expanding our reach and impact. By bridging gaps across industries and styles, we want to amplify our voices and reach wider audiences; to unite with the broader hip-hop, ballet and contemporary scenes to create life-time experiences.
- ***Acknowledging Our Worth*** – An unfortunate trend of offering 'exposure' instead of remuneration for dance work devalues it and only encourages misconceptions about the professionalism of



L to R – Smita Vadnekar, Shreya Vadnerkar. Photo: Simon Richardson Artists private collection.

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our industry. We want to lead the way in asking for recognition and fair compensation for our contributions, challenging perceptions and showcasing the arts as a sustainable career path.

35 Years of Nupur Arts: Looking back and moving on

The one thing that has remained consistent over the decades at Nupur is Smita's ethos of nurturing talent beyond the studio walls, earning her the endearing title of 'second mum' among her students.

The success stories of Nupur students speak volumes: from Shree Savani winning the BBC Young Dancer South Asian category finals to Devesh Sodha composing music for Hollywood blockbusters. Our dancers even made their mark in Marvel Studio's Eternals.

The bond between guru and student extends beyond dance; it's about imparting life lessons and providing unwavering support. Mum has been the guiding force for countless individuals, empowering them to explore new horizons while always welcoming them back home to Nupur Arts. They always find their way back home and it's reassuring to see the power of a Guruji (1) exercised correctly.

This summer, in recognition of Nupur's contribution to the creative industries, Mum and I attended the prestigious 2024 Buckingham Palace garden party. Now, as we approach our 35th anniversary, we stand proud as Leicester's leading South Asian dance academy, boasting over 200 students ranging from age 3-65.

In our quest for progress, we're opening doors, challenging taboos, and advocating for accessibility and inclusivity in dance. By embracing change and embracing our cultural heritage, we're shaping a more vibrant and inclusive dance landscape for future generations.

Nupur's is a journey of surviving to thriving and, like a pearl – tough, precious, meticulously grown over time to become highly prized – a 35-year testament to our resilience and commitment to spreading joy through dance.

References

1. Guruji is a word made up of the Sanskrit word, guru, meaning 'teacher','guide' or 'master' and the suffix -ji, which is commonly used in many South Asian languages as a gender-neutral honorific. As such, the whole term guruji is a very respectful and affectionate term for one's guru or spiritual teacher.

Info

https://nupurarts.org.uk/
https://www.youtube.com/user/NupurArtsDance



Nupur Arts, Dance Dhamaka 2024. Photo: Simon Richardson.