

Classical Dance Pedagogy in Contemporary India: Lessons Learned for Classroom Education

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Abstract—This paper explores the guru-shishya relationship in classical dance and its differences from that of a pedagogical relationship between a student and a teacher in a classroom. While there is significant discussion about the cultural importance of a guru-shishya relationship, there is not enough comprehensive knowledge about its inner dynamics. There is little focus on understanding these inner workings such as what compels a student to stick to a teacher over many years. This paper investigates how learning takes place beyond just formal instruction and how the relationship between the guru and shishya contributes to a student's broader personal and artistic development. The study follows a qualitative approach, using open-ended survey questions and follow up conversations with both teachers and students within the field of classical dance to understand their own experiences of learning and teaching.

There is also an attempt to locate anecdotal evidence that may personify this relationship through the help of conscious reflection of their experience of learning and teaching. By looking at both perspectives, the paper explores the role of trust, respect, observation and experiential learning in the guru-shishya relationship. The findings suggest that the relationship extends beyond the transmission of dance skills, and plays an important role in shaping the student as an artist and an individual. At the same time, the traditional guru-shishya relationship has its own set of limitations and cannot be directly replicated in a modern educational setting. However, certain aspects of this model can provide useful insights into how teaching and learning can be made more personal and meaningful.

Index Terms—Guru-shishya relationship, classical dance, traditional pedagogy, experiential learning, personal development, student-teacher relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

During one of my many dance rehearsals, my teacher stopped the music just as I finished performing a piece I had practised multiple times, and asked me a simple question: “*What are you trying to say?*” This question completely caught me off guard. I was perplexed. I always thought there were only two ways to go about something: the right way or the wrong one. In school, I grew up thinking that answers exist in a black or white binary, something I learnt from my teachers - either something was correct, or it was incorrect. This is why I was not expecting this direct focus on my self-expression and every step I performed in the rehearsal. This made me curious about the relationship I have not only with my teacher, but also with the dance form - one built on understanding, interpretation, and years of practice. It is not about aiming to achieve something absolutely perfect but about improving on a form through constant repetition and practice. This incident resonated with me and made me wonder why learning in a dance classroom felt fundamentally different from that in an academic one.

Drawing from my experience, this study explores the insider perspectives of classical dance pedagogy to offer insights for mainstream classroom learning. To this end, it focuses on the guru-shishya relationship and the learning curve in Indian classical dance. A guru-shishya relationship is essentially taken from the Hindu religion, where, as per Sooklal (1990), a guru-shishya relationship is defined as “The relationship between a guru and his shishya was one of spiritual reciprocity. The guru provided guidance and knowledge on the spiritual path, and the shishya reciprocated with obedience and devotion.” In the context of dance pedagogy in Indian classical dance forms, the guru-shishya relationship as per Appa Rao in the paper by Chatterjea (1996) “an acharya or a teacher should have an intrinsic knowledge of vocal and instrumental music, dance, rhythm and movement. He should further have imagination, intelligence, creative faculty, memory, sharpness and capacity to shape the taught. The shishyas, or the taught, on the other hand should be intelligent, retentive, appreciative, devoted, enthusiastic and must have an innate desire to excel.”

Despite extensive literature on student-teacher relationships in physical education settings, very few studies explore the distinctive pedagogical dynamics of Indian classical dance. This gap limits deeper understanding of the embodied, experiential, and culturally embedded teaching practices that shape a person's identity in ways conventional learning would consider irrational. The guru-shishya relationship is recognised to have cultural significance; yet, some specifics remain to be explored. These include aspects such as - what compels a student to stick with one dance form and guru for many years, how personal growth fares against mainstream summative assessments such as exams and grades, and how this guru-shishya relationship compares to a student-teacher dynamic in a modern classroom. These specifics carry a significance beyond just Indian classical dance. It offers people a perspective of what education and true mentorship really mean - the compassion, empathy and devotion in both the student and the teacher. It also challenges mainstream ideas of success and mentions the qualities and experiences an individual gains from a traditional pedagogical experience is far more important.

Literature Review

Pedagogy is broadly understood as the theory and practice of teaching. It is not just the transmission of skill, but is centred around the relational and philosophical conditions under which learning and intellectual understanding take place (Freire, 1970). In the Western system of education, learning has long been dominated by rational and repetitive learning; the student is an independent individual who asks questions and acquires knowledge through structured, instruction-based learning. (Gardner, 2012) This is usually mediated through respective languages. These models treat student-teacher relationships as facilitative for skill acquisition rather than formative - in this model, the teacher is a guide and the students are the thinkers. This framework of a good student is one who challenges a teacher, thinks independently and ultimately transcends the lessons taught by a teacher. Any glimpse of reliance or dependency is regarded as failing to be corrected and not a necessity for learning.

These assumptions have been called into question by the relationships found in contemporary pedagogy (Freire, 1970). The study of dominant educational frameworks has captured the interest of scholars concerned with their historical and cultural contexts. These are not universal truths of how learning is acquired. Thus, debates in higher education have been raised around the value of knowledge, its transmission, and what is considered meaningful progress.

Fields in different forms of art, where learning happens through the body, through oral tradition, and through sustained practice over years, already provide answers to these questions. This form of pedagogy between a 'guru'(teacher) and 'shishya' (student) has been present for many years and they have a lot to offer to contemporary pedagogical learning in a classroom setting. Sarkar (2024) argues that dance pedagogy is not only technical but is shaped by forces like caste, gender, nationalism, and colonial history, and cannot be understood without them.

However, existing research fails to mention that despite the growing body of critical pedagogy, mainstream educational literature fails to account for learning systems when knowledge is passed on through the body, through relations, and through lived experiences rather than through text. Gardner (2012) draws on Walter Ong's distinction between oral and literature knowledge cultures to highlight a fundamental epistemological gap: Western academic institutions are built on the written, recordable model of knowledge - one that can be extracted, tested, and assessed. This makes them poorly trained to recognise forms of learning that depend on physical presence, imitation, and emotional stated live devotion.

Mainstream pedagogical literature also ignores the role of long-term commitment and trust between student and teacher as conditions for learning. The assumption that a student can learn without their teacher's authority closes off the possibility that some knowledge can only be attained through authority and relationship. Sarkar (2024) notes that in traditional Odissi Pedagogy, the highest measure of success is either being at equal or surpassing the guru, something that cannot be achieved in an academic setting, as this is not the standardised benchmark. These gaps in mainstream pedagogy become visible when we look at non-Western artistic traditions, where the entire structure of passing down of knowledge is built on conditions that institutional models either dismiss or cannot accommodate.

II. CLASSICAL DANCE LITERATURE AND PEDAGOGY

Classical Indian dance literature presents pedagogy as something deeply relational, immersive, and far more encompassing than skill instruction. Schnepel (2012) describes the human body not a tool of expression but as a divine vessel for divine energy - one that must be prepared for a minimum of 10 years of dedicated practice, dissolving any source of ego or arrogance so that something meaningful can move through it. Learning here is very similar to that of spiritual formation. The guru shapes not only a student's technique but their identity, awareness, and relationship to knowledge itself. Students absorb this not only through instructions but through the proximity - watching, practising and repeating with the teacher. This vision of pedagogy is embodied and durational in ways that resist replication present in institutions. Sikand (2010) observes that the vast number of Odissi dancers remain with a single guru for most of their training lives - a commitment for which there is no equivalent in an academic setting.

This is prevalent in other dance forms as well. This guru functions not only as an instructor but a keeper of lineage, culture, and traditions. Rahman (2015) adds a contestable point of view: the legitimacy in the dance is determined not only by the technical proficiency but also by the guru who has trained you and the lineage and respect they carry for the dance form. Bangladeshi dancers trained in Indian classical dance forms through government scholarship gain technical skill but remain outsiders, as disciplic lineage is the essence of a dance form. The Bangladeshi dancers' production still depended on Indian institutions and teachers, placing Indian gurus at the top of a hierarchy, turning this cultural exchange into a tool of showing power dynamics rather than equal contribution. As Sikand notes, in diasporic settings, the guru becomes the cultural anchor, or source of belonging, for dancers navigating different dance forms.

Another view that many researchers have explored is that a guru-shishya relationship functions through qualities like empathy and respect among the guru, shishya and the dance form. Gardner (2012) adds an epistemological dimension, arguing that guru-shishya relationships operate through presence, imitation and states of affection like devotion and humility rather than explicit instruction. Her concept of dance poetics places experience, memory, and the body as valid and irreducible forms of knowledge. Mitra (2021) strengthens this through her analysis of touch: within a classical dance training, the guru physically touches the student only to correct or adjust their 'mudras' or body movements. It is a one directional act that reinforces the guru's absolute authority and devotion to a student's body. Students touch their 'guru's' feet before and after every class as an act of spiritual respect and devotion. These small acts embed the power relationships into everyday rituals.

However, at the same time, the literature warns against completely imbibing traditional pedagogical systems since classical dance literature also exposes the costs of this system. Basu (n.d) argues that the gurukul system reproduced power imbalances rooted in caste and colonial history. It demands complete body, mind and economic commitment from students. She further notes that many communities like the Dalit community whose generations of artistic labour have contributed to creating these dance transitions have often been overlooked in official histories, while others have gained the recognition and authority.

Basu draws on Freire's concept of 'pedagogy of the oppressed' to argue this as a form of cultural violence, where knowledge is distributed within some lineages. They are also gatekept through some rituals like an arrangetram or manchapravesh where only those the teacher deems worthy can perform. Sarkar (2024) echoes that the traditional system reproduces obedience rather than personal agency and critical reflection. They both support the claim that Western education settings choose to produce technically capable students. Consequently effective pedagogical systems should seek the mentorship, embodiment, and relational learning of a classical dance setting while avoiding systems of authority.

III. INSIGHTS FROM CLASSICAL DANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY PEDAGOGY

Taken together, the literature suggests that classical dance pedagogy has insights for broader educational practice - it is not to completely copy traditional pedagogical teaching systems but to question the assumptions that mainstream or contemporary education has never taken into account. These are few aspects that guru-shishya relations give importance to and modern models ignore: the value of sustained trust between the teachers and student; learning through the constant physical presence and support of the teacher; long term commitment; and the idea that some knowledge cannot simply be broken down to grades and outcomes without losing what makes it meaningful.

Rahman (2015) shows that a guru does not only teach technique but also shapes the dancer's body, beliefs, cultural identity, and the entire way of seeing the world. This kind of deep connection is not even an attempt made in the academic setting. It reflects a decision to keep education narrow and simplistic. Mitra (2021) adds to this by showing how touch, ritual and physical repetition are teaching tools - they carry meaning and authority in ways that no written syllabus can.

At the same time, Basu (n.d) reminds us that depth and transformation are not enough to define a system that also reproduces inequalities. A pedagogy built on complete submission, caste-based gatekeeping, and the erasure of marginalised communities should not be romanticised. What the study of classical dance offers us instead is a set of useful questions: what would it look like to take embodied, relational, long-term learning seriously - while refusing hierarchies that have come with it? Basu's call for a pedagogical setting where dialogue, compassion, and shared creative practice points towards a model that is both fair and deep.

Sarkar's idea of "praxis", bringing together theory, community, physical patience, and critical thinking, offers a practical, implementable answer. Her teachings show that it is possible to draw on the richness of dance pedagogy without replicating its oppressive elements. Kaktikar (2020) suggests that the friction between classical dance and liberal arts education can be productive. What all the papers eventually show is that a student teacher relationship or a guru shishya relationship is never just about the passing down of skills. They are about identity, politics, and culture. Recognising this does not mean lowering academic standards but it shows what it means to be honest about what the standards were built to measure, and asking whether they need to be broader.

IV. METHODS

To conduct this study, I used a combination of qualitative, open-ended surveys and follow-up phone conversations. A total of 18 participants completed the surveys, and 6 participants subsequently engaged in a follow-up phone conversation lasting approximately 30 minutes each. This allowed a wide range of experiences to be gathered, and the significant themes were explored further.

The methodology was based on Braun et al. (2021), who claim that online qualitative surveys are suitable for collecting rich, experience-based responses via open-ended questions, and can be followed by discussions to delve deeper into the findings. Qualitative surveys seek to find out what experiences, reflections and interpretations participants form about a specific question and allow them to describe specific details or events in their own words, instead of gathering qualitative heavy data.

I first created a question guide for shishyas, considering the time constraint, but also making it open-ended so they can delve into the answer. This research evolved, and I wanted to interview gurus as well, so I created a parallel questionnaire with similar questions and a few additional ones to specifically understand the relationship with their guru and whether anything has changed along the way.

The questions were designed to help them remember certain anecdotes, memorable incidents, and personal experiences of either teaching or learning, and any specific thoughts they had on the concept of a guru-shishya relationship. This enabled the research to go beyond mere opinions to the practices, relationships, and individual interpretations of pedagogy. Follow-up conversations enabled a clarification of responses, discussion of recurring themes and an even greater understanding of their relationships. To ensure the anonymity of participants, their names have been hidden throughout the mentions on the paper so that their views could be best represented without any challenges to their privacy.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Beyond Technique: The Guru's Role

I believe the most powerful quote from the theme of a guru being the shape of a whole person and not only a person who transmits technique is: "A person who has the ability to bring out the best and beyond in any person. He/she is like a sculptor who molds a piece of clay and also gives the ability to take his/her own shape. Guru has the ability to 'give' unconditionally without expecting anything in return." This quote captures the essence of the theme because it moves beyond the idea of a guru as an instructor and instead presents the guru as someone involved in the formation of a student's entire identity. The comparison of a guru to a sculptor really resonated with me - while the guru shapes the student, they simultaneously allow the student to develop their own individuality. In this way, learning is not just the transfer of technical knowledge but a process of transformation.

This understanding was echoed consistently across both guru and shishya responses. One shishya explained that their guru had "not only helped me grow as a but also as an individual," while another recalled that they "did not just learn the hasta mudras but also how to be in life." A guru similarly reflected that their goal was "not always to make professional dancers, but help them learn from dance". Together these responses suggest that both teachers and students understand dance pedagogy as extending beyond superficial learning of artistic skills.

The findings strongly support the literature reviewed earlier. Schnepel (2012) argues that classical dance training is not merely technical instruction but the process through which the guru shapes a student's awareness and values. Similarly, Gardner's discussion of dance poetics suggests that learning occurs through proximity, observation, and lived experience rather than explicit instruction alone. The responses from both groups demonstrate the same. Participants repeatedly describe their gurus as guides, mentors, custodians of tradition and sources of life lessons.

This theme also highlights a significant difference between guru-shishya pedagogy and mainstream educational models. As discussed in the literature review, Western pedagogical systems tend to define teachers through subjects they teach and the outcomes they are expected to produce. Their responsibilities are generally bound by a curriculum. Gurus saw themselves as custodians of parampara or culture, while shishyas described them as role models whose influence extended into decisions about family, values, education, and personal conduct. The relationships represent an alternative pedagogical model in which education goes hand in hand with character growth, cultural transmission and development of identity.

Consequently, this theme reinforces one of the central arguments emerging from the literature review: classical dance pedagogy challenges the assumption that education should focus primarily on the transmission of knowledge and skills.

Emotional Safety and Support

Another theme highlighted through the research is emotional recognition and belief as the foundation of learning. The quote that best captures the theme comes from a guru reflecting on their own teacher: "My first Guruji would always tell my mother - she is going to grow up to be a dancer. He saw in me something which nobody in my family saw, nor did I see." The quote is particularly powerful because it clearly illustrates how a guru's role extends beyond providing skill and encouragement. Instead, the guru recognises a student's potential even before it becomes visible to the student themselves. The guru's belief is a foundation that a student builds upon and develops confidence and commitment. This suggests that emotional care within the guru-shishya relationship

This above understanding was seen across both the guru and the shishyas' responses. Guru remembered their own teachers as "an extension of my (their) family" and recalled being encouraged to pursue dance when they themselves doubted their abilities and lacked the motivation. Likewise, shishyas rarely described their strongest memories as moments of achievement. Instead, they recalled being comforted before a debut performance - "I was extremely nervous and during the car ride on the way to the venue, my guru comforted me and made me feel safe and supported"; repeated teachings of the guru - "she sat with me and patiently worked on the same thing for almost an hour until I finally got it"; or being called a teachers reflection - "called me her 'chavi' meaning - her reflection, which has always been the biggest compliment for me." Across both groups, the memories that remain with the shishyas today are those in which the guru responded with patience, belief and reassurance.

The findings support Gardner's (2012) and Kaktikar's (2020) argument that guru-shishya pedagogy operates through a teacher's presence, affection and their sustained and heartfelt relationship with the shishya rather than only explicit instruction. Similarly, Schnepel (2012) highlights that classical dance training shapes the learner through a long-term relational process rather than through technical instruction alone. However, these findings give explicit real-life examples to the arguments. While the literature discussed relational proximity, the responses identify moments of uncertainty, failure and self-doubt as the moments in which their relationship with their guru becomes most meaningful. The guru's presence was remembered not only because of the constant and long duration it existed for but for emotional support it carried.

The findings also suggest that the belief of a guru preceded the accomplishments of the shishyas rather than following it. The gurus recognise the potential in a 'shishya', nurture it, and then finally allow the students to gain confidence in themselves. In doing so, they create a conducive environment alongside technical instruction that nurtures learning. This suggests that emotional recognition is not just an accompanying factor, but an essential feature that makes learning and growth possible.

Consequently, this theme suggests that trust and emotional recognition are foundational to a guru-shishya relationship. It suggests that emotional care is not an optional characteristic, but as something central to cultural pedagogy that allows a student to develop commitment and confidence.

Embodied, Observational, and Contextual Learning

Another theme highlighted through the responses is the embodied, immersive and tacit learning that exists beyond the classroom. The quote that most clearly captures the essence of this theme comes from one guru who reflected on the nature of teaching within a guru-shishya tradition: “Any traditional Indian knowledge system like classical dance or music requires learning through immersion and osmosis. It cannot be taught in the prescriptive system of university education. It goes beyond syllabus or exams and speaks to the core of who you are.” This quote captures the central findings of the theme because it challenges the assumption that knowledge can always be transmitted through explicit instructions as seen in a classroom setting. Rather than viewing learning as the accumulation of information, the guru describes it as a process of immersion in which a student gradually absorbs knowledge through engagement with the art form and the guru or the person teaching it. The use of the words ‘immersion’ and ‘osmosis’ suggests that learning is continuous, extending beyond formal lessons into everyday observation, interaction and experienced/lived experiences.

This understanding was shown across both guru and shishya responses. Guru repeatedly described the knowledge as something that “cannot be revealed in books” and emphasized that students learn to “absorb things beyond words” by observing how a guru moves, speaks, and presents themselves. Similarly, the one shishya explained that learning happened through “observation, repetition, and correction” and another mentioned that dance classes frequently involved discussions of mythology and culture rather than movement alone. Several respondents also noted that they absorbed values and ways of learning by remaining in close proximity to their gurus over many years. Together, these responses suggest that the dance classroom functions not merely as a site of technical instruction but as an environment in which knowledge is gradually internalized within shishyas.

These findings strongly enforce Gardner's distinction between oral and literate knowledge systems discussed in the literature review. Whereas mainstream educational models often assume that knowledge should be standardized and learnt through a fixed syllabus, respondents repeatedly suggested that the most valuable knowledge of training within classical dance resists such codification. Knowledge was described as existing within people rather than written texts, requiring long-term proximity to be meaningfully obtained. This implies that certain forms of expertise cannot only be transferred through syllabus or testing without losing the relations processes through which they emerged.

Consequently, the theme suggests that the guru-shishya relationship represents a fundamentally different epistemology to learning. Rather than treating knowledge as information to be explicitly delivered, it treats knowledge as something that is lived and embodied.

The Guru-Shishya Relationship as a Distinct Learning Model

Another theme that emerged, highlights the importance of a guru-shishya relationship is the distinct pedagogical model with that of mainstream education and the uniqueness of the tradition. A quote that captures this suggests that

The understanding that a guru-shishya model is entirely different from that of mainstream education was echoed through both guru and shishya responses. Shishyas described the relationship as “much more intimate” than school, explaining that they learnt culture, values discipline, among other things, alongside dance itself. Others remarked that dance “has soul” and that they did not simply attend classes but “lived the dance form”. Gurus similarly emphasized that it “cannot be compared to a classroom setup,” noting the long term relation between a guru and shishya, continuity, and the two-way investment distinguishes the relationship from formal schooling. Interview participants further observed that school teachers often change from year to year whereas a guru remains constant most of the time and witnesses a student’s growth across different stages of their life. Taken together, the responses indicate that most of the responses clearly indicate how the participants viewed mainstream education as a completely different category.

However, this model of classical dance is not perfect, it also has its tensions. Negotiating discipline, authority and changing pedagogical expectations are some of the drawbacks of this form of pedagogy. The quote that captures this comes from a guru reflecting on her own teaching practices - “I have not been as rigorous as was the demand in our times. Also, soft and careful with words and anger.” This quote is particularly revealing because it illustrates that the guru-shishya relationship in a classical dance setting is not experienced as a fixed pedagogical system but something that keeps evolving and changing - adapting to the needs of its time. Rather than reproducing the methods through which they were taught, the guru adapts the changing social and students expectations.

The tension emerged consistently through both guru and shishya responses. Many gurus continue to describe discipline as a requirement, emphasizing high standards and patience. Likewise, several shishyas viewed strictness as a means of motivation. However, this was not a unanimous opinion. One respondent described her guru as “really strict and while being that she was not loving or supportive or encouraging towards me and a lot of her other students too”, which in turn led her to be “disinterested in pursuing my (her) dance later on in my (her) life.” Gurus themselves also recognised contemporary changes, noting that today's students require more explicit instruction, are more easily discouraged and many times, do not have enough time or have too many commitments. Furthermore, learning has also often become a more commercial and professional setting. Together, these responses

suggest that while discipline remains, there is no single opinion on how it should be practised or how people should behave within this relationship.

The findings therefore add an important nuance to the existing idea of pedagogy. Much of the literature presents authority as an essential figure or a source of exclusion. Effective gurus were not those who abandoned expectations and discipline but those who balanced it with emotional support. When the balance was achieved, strictness was interpreted as care; when it was absent, in some cases, students were disengaged from the dance form.

Consequently, this theme suggests that discipline is necessary but not enough to drive a guru-shishya relationship. This theme therefore challenges the simplistic understanding of traditional pedagogy as either nurturing or oppressive, instead revealing a dynamic system that is being reinterpreted as guru negotiating how to preserve traditional methods of pedagogy while existing it to the needs of contemporary learners.

VI. CONCLUSION

While it is evident that the guru-shishya relationship in dance education has its drawbacks: hierarchies of power, exclusivity, unquestioned authority, etc., these must not detract from the pedagogical advantages that have made it so enduring for centuries. Dance pedagogy does not need to be reproduced in all its entirety, but perhaps it is more useful to recognise and adapt the most relevant practices in the current context of education. The results of this research indicate that the effectiveness of a guru-shishya tradition is not limited to imparting technical knowledge, but also lies in the quality of the student-teacher relationship it forms and the values it fosters along the way, like empathy, devotion, dedication, and respect. Learning is embodied through observation, practice and reflection as opposed to just assessment. Mutual respect, mentorship, and individual attention provide an environment for learning. The emotionally supportive and communicative learning spaces, with high levels of student confidence, discipline, and belonging, is also an important component of dance pedagogy, where children are encouraged to feel good about themselves and connected to their practice, as well as learning the technical aspects of their work. The relational and embodied aspects of education could enhance the learning experiences and engagement in the mainstream education system, which has different structural constraints. In conclusion, the Guru-shishya relationship shows how education is not just the passing along of information, but the development of humans through purposeful connection and practice.

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