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# MANJARI CHATURVEDI

Classical Indian Kathak Dancer | Director & Choreographer | TEDx Speaker  
Cultural Academic | Creator of Sufi Kathak | Restorer of the Dance of the  
Courtesans | President, Sufi Kathak Foundation

25+ years ★ 500+ concerts ★ 24+ productions ★ 26 countries  
385 musicians ★ 90+ artist collaborations ★ 30+ historical monuments



## PROFILE SUMMARY

- An internationally acclaimed danseuse, choreographer, director, and researcher, with over 25 years of professional experience performing, producing, and teaching in India and abroad.
- A leading exponent of classical dance in India, and the creator and sole practitioner of Sufi Kathak in the world. A unique union of spirituality and dance, Sufi Kathak combines the movements and rhythm of Indian classical dance form of Kathak with the mysticism of Sufism. Sufi Kathak has been an enduring and evolving form of classical dance since 1998. More than two decades on, I continue to work on finessing this art form.
- Extensive global experience including performances in Europe (France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, UK, Ireland, Armenia, Georgia), the Middle East (Dubai, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Kuwait), South and South East Asia (Thailand, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia), Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan), Australia, and the USA.
- Designed and directed over 24 productions, with meticulous research and documentation of oral histories and traditions contributing to my own unique artistic expression and interpretation of the subject.
- Creative and artistic collaborations with more than 90 Indian musicians of different genres including Qawwali, Sufi Music, Manganiars, and Kashmiri Sufi Music.
- A feminist artist and researcher, my performing art, projects, productions, and talks have extensively examined the gendered histories and interpretation of classical dance and music in the Indian subcontinent. My repertoire of work is an active and ongoing interrogation of structural inequalities in the performing arts, including gender and intersectional discrimination of artists in dance and music. All art is political, and political is personal, as is evidenced by the work undertaken by the not-for-profit Sufi Kathak Foundation that I set up in 2008.
- A postgraduate in Environmental Sciences, and a dancer representing the Lucknow *gharana* (house) of Kathak, I have performed uninterrupted since 1996, with my productions bridging the gap between tradition and modernity.
- A strong believer in giving back to the Arts, supporting artists, and the performing arts community, I campaigned during the Covid-19 pandemic to raise funds for artists, particularly from smaller towns in India, who were struggling for basic livelihood. Since April 2020, the 'Support an Artist' programme has collected donations and provided financial support to the families of 150 artists. In addition to consistent advocacy with the Indian Government to release cultural program funds to support these artistes, the project 'Artist Sustainability Programme' proposes to provide an online platform to Qawwali groups used to performing in the *dargahs* or shrines prior to the pandemic.

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## PERFORMANCE ARTS PROJECTS

25 years of choreographing, directing, & performing over 24 original creative works. Based on the histories and oral narratives and explored through the language of classical dance.

Each performance art project embodies a feminist perspective and interpretation of classical Indian dance and music, which are traditionally male dominated arenas.

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### ❖ [SUFİ KATHAK – DANCE OF THE MYSTICS - EXPLORING THE FEMININE IN SUFI POETRY](#) (2017 - PRESENT)

Sufi Kathak is essentially a study in history and gender resistance. Both traditions of Kathak and Sufism have a long history in the Indian subcontinent and beyond. But before my interpretation, the poems in Sufism were only sung, never danced on. Through years of practice, Sufi Kathak has crystallized into a dance form of its own; within it residing a melodious blend of Kathak and Sufism. In the modern world, Sufi Kathak transcends all forms of religion and gender, and reflects the need to pause and look within.

This unique dance production explores the feminine in Sufi poetry as depicted by Sufi mystics for their beloved, the Almighty. Subverting the traditional portrayal of both genders by male seers like Kabir, Hazrat Amir Khusrau, Baba Bulleh Shah and Hazrat Shah Niyaz, who characterized themselves as the wife, bride, and beloved of the Almighty, Sufi Kathak reclaims the space of the feminine for women dancers. Pushing the boundaries of art further, in Sufi Kathak, I dance to Qawwali music, which was not allowed previously, as women were not part of the Qawwali tradition.

### ❖ [THE JUGNI PROJECT](#) (2017 - Present)

Rooted in defiance and rebellion, *Jugni* is a deeply transgressive woman found in the popular and patriarchal poetry of Punjab, India. In this project, I bring to life stories of this fiery, rebellious character through live theatrical, multi-media, and musical dance productions.

Through these productions, I also reimagine the early writings of *Jugni* which are multi-layered and replete with spirituality, romance, personal narratives, and a strong sociopolitical commentary of the times.

In a largely patriarchal society, *Jugni* is a representation of free-spirited feminine energy that is transgressive and defiant of male enforced moral and social boundaries.

### ❖ [THE VRINDAVAN PROJECT](#) (2010, 2012, 2019)

This project explores the feminine force with Lord Krishna, his consort and epitome of selfless love, Radha Rani; and the emphasis in Hindu Vaishnav tradition of reaching the Divine through the feminine. The performance is based in Vrindavan, a holy place in Northern India, where unusually, the form of greeting is not the Lord's name, but that of his female lover, '*Radhe Radhe*'.

The performance explores the dance of Radha Rani through Kathak and delves into the Vaishnav tradition where the feminine (Radha) becomes the medium to reach the Divine (Krishna). The piece uses rare compositions that evoke emotions of the union with the Beloved, describe the intensity of separation, the *shringar*, the messengers of love like the parrot, and the river Yamuna, all conspiring to bring Radha and Krishna together in *raas*.

For centuries, Lord Krishna and Radha Rani have inspired painters, artists, and poets to express love through art. This production preserves the intangible arts, culture, music, and poetry associated with Lord Krishna through dance.

❖ **THE COURTESAN PROJECT: Celebrating the Women Performers, the *Tawaiifs* and the *Baijis* of North India (2015 – Present)**

A groundbreaking research and documentation exercise that seeks to chronicle the historically remarkable, but previously undocumented role of the '*tawaiif*' (women courtesans) in artistic life: as muse to poets and painters, writers and kings, musicians, and leaders. In doing so, the project aims to remove misinformation and social stigmas associated with courtesans, thereby giving these much-maligned women performers the respect and place in history due to them.

Belonging to the lower sections of society, these as artists par excellence were further marginalized because of their art, and referred to as 'Nautch Girls', or lowly dancers and singers. The Courtesan Project aims to restore the dignity and respect for the courtesans and their art, by giving them a platform, recognition, and an opportunity to showcase their dance and heritage to the world.

Over the years, this pioneering work on the courtesans has brought back this performing art into public discourse and popular imagination, spurring widespread interest in both the lives of these dancers and the intricacies of their dance form.

▪ **CONCERTS & PERFORMANCES**

A well-researched, multi-media and cultural production dedicated to the performing art of the Courtesan, these concerts are a medium to draw the attention of modern society towards erstwhile courtesans in Northern India; and demonstrate how the country's colonial past and patriarchal society led to discriminatory practices impacting the female courtesan's dance, lives, and those of their families, for generations.

Re-creating and re-living the music, dance, and poetry of these incredible women performers of the royal courts, through a live performance to:

- ensure the protection and preservation of this dying art form for posterity
- advocate for and create much required recognition for the courtesans as professional dancers
- ensure their work and contribution to the performing arts is duly documented and recorded in history
- promote exchange and dialogue between different cultural communities (most of the Courtesans belonged to the minority Muslim community in India, whereas in modern times, this art form is performed by all communities)

▪ **RESEARCH & DOCUMENTATION**

Over a decade of conducting rigorous and quality research and documentation to preserve the intangible dance,

culture, music, and poetry performed by the Courtesans of the Indian sub-continent.

The courtesans have been an integral part of Indian society. Yet, the subject of courtesans in Indian history is neither well researched nor well documented. Critical scholarly work on the courtesans emerged as late as the 1980s.

An integral part of this research is also to tell the stories of these women as the educated, elite, independent, and powerful women that they were in their time. With only a few surviving courtesans, this time-sensitive and important research aims to record their stories and document their art (Ghazal, Dadra, Thumri and Tappa), capturing it through short biographies and archiving the musical compositions for future use by music and arts enthusiasts.

Re-living the musical compositions and recreating the dance steps through research, this project aims to bring the wider audience closer to the art form of courtesans, thus gathering patronage for the dying art form - which in turn, will allow for further scholarly research and documentation on this topic.

#### ❖ [THE RUMI PROJECT \(2020 – Present\)](#)

Akin to the art of dance, Sufism's call for the divine is an old tradition practised throughout the world. The Rumi Project's, 'An Ode to Rumi', explores the separation of humankind with the Divine, through the metaphor of a reed in the famous poem, 'The Reed Song'. Like Rumi feels the pain of separation from the Divine, the dancer too seeks the Divine through her dance in this piece.

Using Sufi Kathak to evoke and embody Rumi's simple yet intricate poetry, the dance movements in this piece are at times minimal and at times ecstatic- denoting Rumi's own thoughts and emotions. The storytelling of the poem is translated to linear and angular dance movements, using the unspoken language and grammar of dance to tell a story of an ancient mystic from a faraway land. By interpreting the pain of the reed through Sufi Kathak, I effectively bring together two ancient mystic art forms in this performance art.

#### Performances:

- CHIRAGH-E-DEHLI
- MEHBOOB-E-ILLAHI
- BEDAM SHAH WARSI
- SHAH TURAB ALI QALANDAR
- BABA BULLEH SHAH

#### ❖ [THE 22 KHWAJA PROJECT: Dialogues from The Mystics \(2010, 2011, 2012, 2013\)](#)

Conceptualized and started the '22 *Khwaja* Project' in 2010, to create awareness about the 22 largely unknown Sufi shrines located in the vicinity of New Delhi. A long-term initiative, the project takes city dwellers through the lives and messages of the numerous Sufi Saints who had made the capital city their abode.

Through unique artist collaborations, and annual concerts promoting traditional Sufi music and dance, this initiative brings to foreground the lives of Sufi poets whose poetry is sung till today at various shrines, but their personal stories are lost to the public.

The project also revives the works of former lesser known, but exemplary Sufi poets of Awadh, Uttar Pradesh, who wrote extensively under the Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb*, or secular traditions.

## ❖ [THE QAWWALI PROJECT \(2011\)](#)

Founded and directed this initiative to archive and preserve the art form of Qawwali, spiritual music associated with Sufism. The project explores the syncretic traditions of the art form, as well as its social impact as a cultural symbol of 'unity in diversity' in the Indian subcontinent. Emphasis is also on the regional Sufi traditions and its impact on the form of Qawwali.

A kinship-oriented art form, Qawwali is increasingly becoming devolved, no longer limited to, or by religious institutions and the *Khanqahs*. This initiative, therefore, also studies the impact of modern times on the preservation of this art form, as oral traditions are the first to perish at the onslaught of technology.

This project has been successful in bringing several Qawwali singers, mostly from small town India, to international festivals in Armenia, Georgia, and the UK.

### ▪ [THE QAWWALI CAPSULES](#)

Developed and directed 'The Qawwali Capsules', which gives a voice and platform to small town Qawwali practitioners in India to speak about their performance art, their lives, and their association with the spiritual art form. These unsung artists practice their art amidst the public, in an organic, non-commercial set up. This initiative is an attempt to document this spiritual art form, associated with the Sufi traditions in India and Pakistan, as they exist at the shrines itself.

### ▪ [THE QAWWALI MEHFIL](#)

Curated numerous Qawwali performances of *Khanqahi Qawwals* in its traditional form, with a narrator leading the audiences through the music, and historical references and stories associated with the popular Qawwalis sung. These performances are an ode to the rich legacy and tradition of Qawwali, tracing the histories associated with the music.

### ▪ [THE QAWWALI PHOTO PROJECT](#)

Conceptualized and curated this initiative, where the untold story of Qawwali and its practitioners unfolds through the eyes of photographers. The project aims to explore the social and cultural dimensions of this age-old art form, through different perspectives, lens, and images, as a means of expression and communication. The images of the Qawwali practitioners are shot amidst people in an organic, non-commercial set up, including during their performances and personal lives, and at the Sufi shrines, where the two intersect.

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## Prominent Collaborations

*(with a wide range of international artists in Global Fusion Series)*

- Tim Ries (Saxophone, Rolling Stones, USA)
- Ustad Shujaat Hussain Khan (Sitar, India)
- Taufiq Quereshi (India)
- Kailash Kher (India)
- Rekha Bharadwaj (Vocals, India)
- Radhika Chopra (Vocals, India)
- Kevin Hays (Piano, USA)
- Dhaffer Yoseuf (Oudh, Vocals, Tunisia)
- Rahim Al Hajj (Oudh, Iraq)
- Patrick Possey (Saxophone, USA)
- Firas Shahrstan (Qanun, Syria)
- Micheal Glenn (Bass, USA)
- Reza Abaee (Kamaycha, Iran)
- Pedram Derakshani (Santoor, Iran)
- Ali Rahimi (Daff, Percussion, Iran)
- Gazi Khan (Percussionist, Rajasthan, India)
- Anwar Khan (Vocals, Rajasthan, India)
- Navtej Johar (Bharatnatyam dancer, India)
- Priyadarsini Govind (Bharatnatyam dancer, India)
- Zarina Begum (Vocals, Courtesan, Lucknow, India)
- Neelesh Misra (Storyteller, India)

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## Performances at Prestigious Venues

- Symphony Space, New York City, USA
- Judith Wright Centre for Performing Arts, Brisbane, Australia
- Smithsonian Museum, Washington DC, USA
- Royal Festival Hall, South Bank Centre, London, UK
- Sydney Opera House, Australia
- National Gallery of Victoria, Australia
- *Rashtrapati Bhawan* (Presidential Palace), New Delhi, India
- Parliament House, New Delhi, India
- Elphinstone Theatre, Colombo
- National Theatre, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Doha Theatre, Doha, Qatar
- Taj Mahal, 350th Anniversary Celebration, Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, India
- *Chowmahalla* Palace, Hyderabad, India
- Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi
- Elephanta Caves, Mumbai, India
- Conference on Living Heritage by UNESCO, Udaipur, India
- Curtain Raiser for Commonwealth Games at the Qutub Minar, New Delhi, India
- Bahai Lotus Temple, New Delhi, India
- National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai
- Royal Opera House, Mumbai, India
- Khajuraho Dance Festival, Khajuraho Temples, Madhya Pradesh, India
- Kala Ghoda, Mumbai, India
- Purana Quila, Delhi, India
- Jag Mandir Palace, Udaipur, India
- Lake Palace, Udaipur, India
- Aman-e-Bagh, Rajasthan, India
- Ram Bagh Palace, Jaipur, India
- Neemrana Fort, Rajasthan, India
- Devi Garh Fort, Rajasthan, India
- Qila Mubarak, Patiala, India
- Jagatjit Palace, Kapurthala, India
- Amber Fort, Jaipur, India
- Arab Ki Sarai, Humayun's Tomb, New Delhi, India
- Holkar Palace, Maheshwar, India
- Murshidabad Palace, Murshidabad, India

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## SUFI KATHAK FOUNDATION

*Established in 2008, [Sufi Kathak Foundation](#) is an institution for performing arts, registered with the Indian government as a not-for-profit organization; with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations as a learning centre; and with Google Arts and Culture as a museum for documentation of performance arts projects. It is currently in its [12<sup>th</sup> year running](#).*

- Spearheaded and established the Foundation to create global awareness about India's rich heritage in dance and to preserve the gradually fading 700-year-old Sufi traditions in music, through concerts, festivals, and research-based projects.
- The Foundation aims to create cultural unity in the world, by spreading the secular message of the Sufis, and helping initiate children and the youth to become self-employed through the arts.
- Cultural initiatives undertaken by the Foundation have created a milestone in persevering cultural symbols and set new benchmarks for promoting secular thought by weaving together different traditions.
- Protecting and preserving the traditional arts and artists in India and making a dedicated effort to

bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern.

- In the last decade, the foundation has held 8 national level seminars, 40 cultural events, and several talks at schools and universities on traditional arts, music, and dance.
- Working toward creating centres of dance and oral traditions, not formally taught in institutions, organize training, workshops, and musical concerts to promote Sufi music, Qawwali, Sufi Kathak, and folk & classical dance across the world.
- **QAWWALI HERITAGE MUSEUM**  
Designed and developed first of its kind modern digital museum of qawwali heritage, preserving the age old and endangered tradition of qawwali, by restoring and digitizing them, and creating an archive of recordings (with classification of compositions), documents, and photographs, made available for listening, scholarly research, and interested public.
- **SUFISM THROUGH ARTS**  
Developed this initiative under the Foundation for research students from around the world, keen on traditional Indian arts and the Sufi thought. In this programme, students can learn about various traditions associated with Sufism, through a combination of theoretical sessions and interactions with exponents of Sufism, artists, and their respective experiences.
- **SUPPORT AN ARTIST**  
As part of its activities, Sufi Kathak Foundation financially supports marginal artists (Sufi and Qawwals) and their families, and students, by providing scholarships, pensions, and medical support. The foundation also offers research opportunities to scholars under its banner.

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## SEMINARS

*By bringing together artists, students, film makers and academicians on the same platform, and through accessible film screenings and performances, these interactive seminars aim to bring a traditional performing art to the domain of serious academic discourse. The symposiums, through lectures and discussions not only serve an academic purpose, but also cater to large audiences eager to absorb the traditional culture of India.*

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## ❖ UNDERTSANDING QAWWALI SERIES - 5 EDITIONS OF SEMINARS

A first of its kind symposium held on Qawwali, a traditional Sufi art-form belonging to the Indian-subcontinent, bringing a traditional performing art to the domain of serious academic discourse.

- Understanding Qawwali, Royal Opera House, Mumbai (2019)
- The Poetic content and its social impact with regional sensibilities, India International Centre, New Delhi (2017)
- The anthropology and social impact of the art-form of Qawwali, India International Centre, New Delhi (2015)
- Symposium exploring the plurality of the unified art-form, India International Centre, New Delhi (2014)
- A symposium on the traditional art-form of Qawwali, India International Centre, New Delhi (2013)



- **Women Performers, India International Centre, New Delhi (2019)**- a comprehensive series of talks, discussions, photo documentation, and live performances.
- **Tehzeeb-e-Tawaif, The Royal Opera House, Mumbai (2019)** – a symposium rediscovering the life of the courtesans and featured scholars, film makers, traditional performers, and practitioners of *ghazal and thumri gayaki* (singing).
- **The Last Song of Awadh, Indira Gandhi Centre for Arts, New Delhi (2014)** - a symposium and performance exploring the music and dance of Awadh in the Royal era of Nawabs, **featuring Zarina Begum, the last living court singer of Awadh.**

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## ACADEMIC TALKS

*Centred on the performance art of women and Sufi traditions, exploring, and interrogating the gendered narratives in dance and the associated social stigma, these thought-provoking talks are an important medium for outreach to both audiences and academics.*

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## ❖ WOMEN PERFORMERS SERIES - 3 EDITIONS OF SEMINARS

An academic initiative to create awareness, preserve, and promote the intangible cultural heritage of the erstwhile *Tawaifs* (Courtesans), and the role of women dancers and performers in Indian Society.

The series of talks have centred around the core theme of 'Gender discrimination in performing arts and how this shapes the art for future vis a vis the *Tawaif* and *Baiji* – the women performers of 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century'. Systemic and structural gender discrimination in the field of arts has never been examined or addressed in society. Consequently, exceptionally talented women performers like the courtesans, have for long been considered inferior to the contemporary male artists.

My talks in this seminar series challenges this perception and disregard towards women dancers, artists, and their traditions.

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- Lecture and demonstration on Sufi Kathak, at Department of History, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, February 2020, New Delhi, India.
  - The American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, India, November 2019. Talk for Princeton students enrolled in 'Gender, Sexuality, and Feminism in South Asia', during their study trip to India.
  - Sufism at Smithsonian – Searching for the Divine through Arts, at the Smithsonian Museum, Washington D.C, 2012. Performance and discussion at the first ever Sufi Symposium held at the Museum.
  - Conference on Living heritage by UNESCO, Udaipur, India, 2012. Performance showcasing the intangible oral traditions of the Indian subcontinent.
  - 'The Untold Story of Kathak and the Women *Ustads*', at the prestigious Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at Teen Murti, New Delhi, India.
  - TEDx Talk: [The Lost Songs and Dance of the Courtesan](#), SRMU, Lucknow, December 2017. Analysing the gendered histories of women performers and their impact on the society.
  - TEDx Talk: [The Union of Sufi and Kathak, the Dance and Songs of the Courtesan](#). SIU Nashik, March 2020. Presenting the idea of the 'unseen', made visible through the performance art.
  - [The Uncharted History of India's Tawaifs](#), The Leela, Bengaluru, March 2020.
  - Interactive session on [The Courtesan Project](#), Bangalore Literature Festival, 2019.
  - [Subversive Ustads](#), talk at Algebra Conversations, dispelling myths about India's courtesans. May 2018, Bengaluru, India.
  - Guest lecture on 'Sufis as Mystics', as part of the undergraduate curriculum of Philosophy



Department, Ramnarain Ruia Autonomous College, August 2019, Mumbai, India.

- Lecture and demonstration on Sufi Kathak, at Indira Gandhi Open University, March 2016, New Delhi, India

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## DANCE TRAINING

*Distilling 25 years of professional learning and experience travelling around the world performing my unique dance and productions, into structured lessons, combining the classical dance tradition of Kathak with the Sufi traditions of whirling.*

*Emphasis on expression through body movements, emotions, music, and creativity, encouraging students to dance with free-flowing energy that allows them to explore their 'self' through the language and rhythm of their 'bodies'.*

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- 20 years of teaching dance to Indian and international students in my New Delhi studio, as well as through online workshops, bridging the barriers of language and boundaries through the unspoken language of dance.
  - Moving completely online since the Covid-19 pandemic, have conducted 28 new batches of dance workshops, covering 55 students, spanning several countries, including the UAE, UK, USA, Czech Republic, Japan.
  - Created the concept of 'naad meditation' where using the sound of *ghungruos* (ankle bells), I teach students to align their bodies, and quieten their minds, to a specified rhythm.
  - This concept works as meditation-in-motion and has been used extensively by Anna Pohlmann of Psychotherapeutic Institute for Dance Therapy ([PITTH](#)), who trained under me.

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## GURUS & MENTORS

- ❖ Trained in classical Kathak by Guru Late Pandit Arjun Mishra (1995-2002).
- ❖ Developed the detailing of *abhinaya* (expressions) under Late Smt. Kalanidhi Narayan and Smt. Priyadarshini Govind (2004 – 2006).
- ❖ Worked at Nrityagaram, in association with Guru Late Protima Bedi and Guru Kumudini Lakhia (1997-1998).
- ❖ Worked on the Sufi traditions with Shri Muzaffar Ali in 4 films 1998 to 2002, and as part of the Sufi Festival "Jahan-e-Khusrau" at New Delhi and London (2001 to 2005, 2011, 2020).
- ❖ Worked on Sufi music traditions of Punjab with Shri Madan Gopal Singh. (2017 to present)
- ❖ Worked on the music & lives of women performers with academicians & authors Late Shri Pran Nevile, Shri Saleem Kidwai, and Shri A N Sharma (2014 till present).

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## AWARDS & HONOURS

- ❖ Empanelled artist with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, India.
- ❖ Two-time Jury and member of 'Think Tank on Asian Dance' for the prestigious Asian Dance Committee, Korea.
- ❖ On the international panel of 16 experts from across Asia, representing Indian dance at the Asian Dance Committee, Korea.
- ❖ Women Achiever Award by YFLO, The Young FICCI Ladies Organization (2013).
- ❖ Nomination for the civilian 'Communal Harmony Award', India, for exemplary work in bringing together two religious and cultural schools of thought, through the creation and propagation of Sufi Kathak (2012).
- ❖ Collaborator and contributor to the first ever Sufi Symposium at the prestigious Smithsonian Museum, Washington D.C. (2012).
- ❖ Only Indian invited to perform at the Conference on Living Heritage by UNESCO (2012).
- ❖ Nomination for the highest civilian award in India, Padma Shree (2011).
- ❖ Awarded with Awadh Samman, Uttar Pradesh, India, in recognition of my pioneering work on Sufi Kathak (2009).