

Indian-American performing artists share stories on weathering the COVID-19 storm

By **Ela Dutt, Special Report** (<https://www.newsindiatimes.com/author/ela/>) - April 28, 2020

DJ Rekha, (Rekha Malhotra), tells me she can't talk to me because she has a "big event tomorrow" (April 26, 2020), and is preparing for it.

(<https://www.newsindiatimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Aum-Dance-Creations-of-NJ-Photo-courtesy-Rina-Shah.jpg>)

AUM Dance Creations of New Jersey holding an online dance class for students April 25, 2020. (Photo: courtesy Rina Shah of AUM)

That appears to be a good sign that all is not lost for what was, till a few weeks ago, the vibrant Indian-American performing arts world in the tri-state area. But DJ Rekha was shut down in the middle of her concert, but more on that in her exclusive interview.

From mom-and-pop schools to established dance and music company, classical to Bollywood, ragas to hip-hop, theater, fine art, all appear to be waiting to exhale from the shock of the coronavirus that has seemingly turned the world upside down for them, at least for now.

Several artists and organizations that Desi Talk spoke to have lost revenue, “down to zero” or just keeping their heads above water, and looking down the road to a less than promising future in the near or medium term.

They are hanging on by their bootstraps to weather this COVID-19 storm. Among those helping them are parents of children who are students at dance companies around New Jersey and New York, audiences online willing to donate something to watch a show, and non-profits staggering from the financial hit, trying to regain their footing.

Despite being in the clutches of the COVID-19 virus, most performing arts schools, individual performers, and companies, are nevertheless showing their generosity, offering free classes to a wider audience, in fact reaching out globally, to keep people moving inside their homes in the interest of maintaining good health, and their own visibility.

In this Tri-state multicolored tapestry which was a burgeoning center for artists of Indian origin, artists are facing sometimes dire straits, as they find ways to maintain a modicum of the relevance online that they had before COVID, and possibly some monies.

One of the benefits for consumers locked within the four walls of their homes, is a wealth of high quality shows to sooth the soul, in fact, one is hard-put to choose what to watch, listen to, or participate in.

As Aroon Shivdasani, former executive director of the Indo-American Arts Council indicated, things are hardly silent on the performing arts front. Aseem Chhabra who manages the New York International Film Festival, sends out regular reviews of winning NYIFF movies to watch; Samir Chatterjee of Chhandayan holds weekly virtual concerts. And some Indian artists and art galleries have been setting up virtual art galleries too, she points out.

Rakesh Kaul, vice chairman of IAAC, told Desi Talk all events, as required by law, have been suspended. But the organization continues to provide content to its members. As for helping artists, Kaul says, “As a non-profit that has seen its funding go down to zero,” it would be hard to help others right now. But IAAC has applied for funding, “and if we get it, we will share with artists.”

“All my gigs have been cancelled,” says Neel Murgai of Brooklyn Raga Massive. But the organization was hosting a concert online that same night, Sunday, April 25, that in a virtual viewing room made possible by VIEWCY, an event-management company. Those interested in watching are asked for a donation before accessing the show.

While in-person events are cancelled, BRM is holding twice-a-week free workshops for the public and paying artists to give them. It is also working actively, Murgai says, to perfect technology that reduces the latency in transmission of music online. It has also applied for the South Asian Arts Resiliency Fund just launched by the India Center Foundation.

(<https://www.newsindiatimes.com/content/uploads/2020/04/Neel-Murgai-Photo-Facebook.jpg>)

*Neel Murgai of Brooklyn Raga Massive
(Profile Photo: Facebook)*

The online concerts by BRM have had “very positive” reactions, Murgai says. Apart from the direct viewers to online shows, exposure through Facebook and the recent Rubin Museum sponsored concert, Raga Maqam, “had thousands” of listeners, which was more than pre-COVID concerts, Murgai said. Fundraising through the “Donate” button has been successful, as has been the outreach to matching donors.

Amit Shah, founder of AATMA Performing Arts, an award-winning dance company with offices in New York, New Jersey, and Los Angeles, says all the “Mystic India” world tours have been stopped. “It’s a huge thing for us. We don’t know when we will restart those, probably not till next year,” he told Desi Talk.

But teaching classes continue over Zoom and most students remain enrolled, and teachers paid. But the more than 60 artists that are part of the company in New York, New Jersey and Los Angeles are unpaid for now though they are given help in terms of where to go to try getting financial support.

The positive upshot for AATMA has been the wider connections it has developed through “Mystic India” at a global level, and the COVID-19, self-isolation is being used to strengthen those bonds. “We are now forced to find ways to connect virtually with that wider audience,” Shah said. “We have connected in a positive way ... Even after COVID, we will continue the online connection.”

(https://www.newsindiatimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/KS_06739edited-2.png)

AATMA Performing Arts annual event held every June has been postponed in 2020 due to COVID-19. These photos are from past events. (Photo: Kourosh Sootede, courtesy AATMA)

Despite financial constraints, AATMA offers free workshops “just to get people moving at home,” Amit Shah says, and it includes through other social media like Instagram and YouTube.

Rina Shah of Aum Dance Creations in New Jersey cites a similar experience, at least for its dance classes. The school teaches Kathak, Bharatnatyam, Bollywood dance forms including hip-hop, contemporary, and filmy fusion.

“We are expecting people to stay signed on.” And to keep students motivated in the online Zoom classes, Aum is continuing the challenging assignments in choreography. “We have a good response from the kids. Initially it took them time to adjust, but now everybody is on it,” she said. “Considering the situation we were presented with, we are doing okay.” And parents, she said, had come forward to help pay for any student not able to meet the fee.

Usually by this time of the year, children are excitedly practicing for the annual show in May. That’s not happening. “But once we figure it out, we will have some kind of virtual recital,” Rina Shah says. Ticket sales, stitching of costumes, all that is lost.

To make up revenue Aum has opened up classes to a wider audience, offering one free class a month, and paid classes once a week, hoping to expand enrollees.

"We are losing out on all our private performances ... This is the wedding season, and there are receptions and sangeets, costume rentals. None of that is happening," Rina Shah said.

Regardless, Aum is planning for the Fall "so that we can bounce back a hundred percent or better. It will bounce back," says an optimistic Rina Shah.

Indian-American artists, like others, are finding creative ways to help their bottom line, and may even express some satisfaction with their outreach, "But at its heart, art is enjoyed in person, and live," says Raoul Bhavnani, founder of the India Center Foundation which received some 119 applications for financial support from South Asian origin artists from more than 10 states in the country by its first deadline of April 24, 2020, for the South Asian Artists Resiliency Fund. Many of them say they have lost up to 80 percent of their income. The ICF is going to have future deadlines to encourage more applicants, Bhavnani indicates.

Organizations like the American Guild of Musical Artists have funds to help out artists, the AGMA Relief Fund. The organization says "hundreds of thousands of creative professionals" are out of work as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. The mainstream unions advocating for financial support and lobbying the federal government include the Actors' Equity Association, American Federation of Musicians; American Guild of Variety Artists, Directors Guild of America, Guild of Italian American Artists, and trade organizations representing everyone from electrical workers to directors and writers.

Local New York or New Jersey organizations may also be a source of funding. The New York State Council on the Arts (arts.ny.gov), has a whole section on "COVID-19 and the Arts" where it says, "We encourage you to reach out to us as we work together to preserve and strengthen the State's cultural ecology throughout this crisis." It offers numerous resources that could help, including for "immigrant artists." Organizations like Americans For The Arts Action Fund (artsactionfund.org); or DanceNYC which is holding a digital town hall April 28, on "Navigating COVID-19 for Immigrant Arts Workers: Rights Relief & Resources." There is also the COVID-19 Dance Relief Fund which accessible through DanceNYC.

"Dance/NYC invites metropolitan New York City area freelance dance workers and dance making organizations to submit applications for awards through the COVID-19 Dance Relief Fund," it says on its website.

The Asian American Arts Alliance whose mission is to strengthen Asian American artists and cultural groups through resource sharing, promotion, and community building, (artsalliance.org) says it is “here for you” in these times of uncertainty to ensure it is safe and supported. It lists the Van Lier Fellowship for young professional artists, which this year will go to a theater artist for the creation of new work.

There’s the Art Place America (artplaceamerica.org) a collaboration of foundations, federal agencies and financial institutions, and has a list of resources on its Facebook page.

“But you need to be able to know how to apply for them,” says DJ Rekha.

Kaul of the Indo American Arts Council is not making any predictions about the future. “It’s a new world we are moving into ... facing a dark unknown, and we have a lot to learn. Right now it’s very unpredictable.”

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