

# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT





# CORE VALUES



## ADVANCE

*We advance the universal  
value of kathak*



## RELATIONSHIPS

*We center our work on  
relationships*



## ARTISTS

*We place artists at the  
center of our work*



## ELEVATE

*We elevate the standard  
of the art*



## COLLECTIVE

*We ground our work in the  
practice of collective creativity*



## INNOVATE

*We innovate while remaining  
grounded in tradition*



## TRANSFORM

*We transform the field of  
kathak and beyond*

# LEELA DANCE COLLECTIVE

In 2024, Leela Dance Collective continued to advance kathak dance on the world stage and in communities around the United States. Through the development and presentation of major artistic works such as Encounters with Beauty as well as performances of the traditional kathak solo and a range of solo experimental works, Leela engaged diverse artists and audiences with kathak dance and North Indian classical music. At the same time, the collective reaffirmed its commitment to arts education, and training and mentorship of next-generation dancers. Put together, Leela’s efforts this year honored and preserved the tradition of kathak while making it relevant and alive for contemporary audiences.

## IMPACT

7	9	58	10.4K
CITIES	PERFORMANCES	ARTISTS FEATURED	AUDIENCE MEMBERS



## NOTABLE PERFORMANCES

**Greeley, CO**  
Rhapsody in Jog, Solo Work  
by Sarah Morelli, University of  
Northern Colorado

**13**  
JANUARY

**New York, NY**  
Excerpts of Encounters with Beauty,  
directed by Rukhmani Mehta & Seibi  
Lee, APAP Conference

**19**  
JANUARY

**1&2**  
MARCH

**New York, NY**  
Reclaiming the Divine Feminine, Solo  
Work by Rachna Nivas, New York  
Live Arts

**Tempe, AZ**  
Imagine India, directed by  
Rukhmani Mehta & Seibi Lee, ASU  
Gammage

**02**  
APRIL

**27**  
APRIL

**Aurora, CO**  
Traditional Kathak Solo by Sarah  
Morelli, Colorado Fine Arts  
Association

**Culver City, CA**  
Leela Dance Collective celebrates  
AAPI Heritage Month, Culver Steps

**4&5**  
MAY

**21**  
JUNE

**New York, NY**  
Traditional Kathak Solo by Rachna  
Nivas, New York Kathak Festival

**New York, NY**  
Shuniya, Solo Work by Rachna  
Nivas, We R Dancing Festival

**05**  
OCTOBER

**19**  
OCTOBER

**San Jose, CA**  
Leela Dance Collective at the Tuti  
Gala 2024, San Jose Civic Auditorium

**Los Angeles, CA**  
Leela Dance Collective at the  
Women in Dance Conference,  
Aratani Theater

**19**  
OCTOBER

**07**  
DECEMBER

**Culver City, CA**  
Kathak Utsav featuring Seema Barua  
and Sasha Salvi, Brasil Brasil Cultural  
Center



# ENCOUNTERS WITH BEAUTY & AMERICAN MIRROR

In 2022, Leela began to experiment with bringing kathak dance and Hindustani classical music in conversation with Western classical music. Over the past several years, this experiment has led to the development of two distinct works choreographed and directed by Rukhmani Mehta and Seibi Lee.

The first is a collaboration with composer Derrick Skye and LA-based chamber ensemble, Salastina, based on Skye's seminal work, American Mirror. Together Leela's choreography and Skye's music tell the story of diverse cultures and communities coming together to create the America we know.

The second is a collaboration with composer Reena Esmail and Hindustani vocalist Saili Oak - Encounters with Beauty. This work takes its inspiration from the Beyond album which features original compositions by Smt. Ashwini Bhide reimagined for string quartet. These compositions are based on the mystical poetry of Kabir, Meera, Surdas and more. Leela's choreography combines with a compellingly unique soundscape that bridges cultures and traditions to create a sublime experience for audiences.



*"With power, precision and grace, the dancers embody mystery, discovery and merger. The result: we are transported into a time out of time, where the longing of mystics mingle with modern-day hearts. It feels like drinking from a sacred wellspring. Or entering a chamber of the heart longing to be opened."*  
Valarie Kaur, author of See No Stranger





## KATHAK DANCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Leela Dance Collective was proud to partner with ASU Gammage to bring the richness and depth of kathak dance to over 1200 K-12 students in Tempe, Arizona through its show, Imagine India. Leela's performance provided students with the opportunity to move beyond a textbook education of India and engage with Indian history, mythology, and philosophy as a living tradition. Teachers and educators used supplementary educational guides to help students understand the cultural and historical context for Leela's performance and connect dance and music to everyday school subjects such as math and science.

Artistic Direction & Choreography: Seibi Lee & Rukhmani Mehta

Dancers: Poonam Narkar, Seema Barua, Neha Tummula, Ayanna Kanan, Sasha Salvi, Sneha Bolisetti, Aishwaria Raj





## BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK: A LIVING LESSON IN INDIA

Leela Dance Collective is proud to partner with The Music Center's Performing Artists in Schools and Neighborhoods program, bringing the rich traditions of kathak dance and Hindustani classical music to K-12 students across Los Angeles. Through engaging school assemblies and community performances, thousands of students and their families are introduced to these vibrant art forms—often for the first time outside of textbooks or mainstream media. Since joining the program in Fall 2022, Leela has reached over 17,000 students in 27 schools and neighborhoods, raising awareness of Indian arts and culture and nurturing an appreciation for cultural diversity.

Artistic Direction: Rukhmani Mehta

Dancers: Ayanna Kannan, Seema Barua, Sasha Salvi, Pallavi Salvi

Musicians: Rajib Karmakar, Ravindra Deo, Chirag Dixit

### SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES SERVED

Santa Fe Library  
Red Oak Elementary  
Dayton Heights Elementary  
Oak Hills Elementary  
Santa Susana High School  
Viewpoint Upper Calabasas  
Curtis School  
Dayton Heights Elementary  
St James Episcopal School  
Grape Street Elementary  
Lanark Park, Canoga Park

City of El Segundo  
St. Timothy Catholic School  
Lake Balboa College Preparatory  
Magnet  
Van Deene Elementary  
James Foster Elementary  
Pan Asian Pacific Arts Festival,  
Woodland Hills  
Hollywood Elementary School  
Thousand Oaks Library  
Mar Vista Elementary

Balboa Elementary School  
107th Street Elementary  
Ladera Stars Academy  
Beethoven Elementary School  
Vena Avenue Elementary  
Linwood Howe Elementary  
Caroldale Learning Academy  
Laurence School  
Ybarra Academy  
Theodore Roosevelt Elementary

## THE TRADITIONAL SOLO

The traditional kathak solo - a tour-de-force performance of dance, music, rhythm, and storytelling - represents kathak at its highest level. The raw, unproduced, highly interactive and improvisatory format creates a visceral and intimate experience for audiences bringing them into the tradition of kathak like nothing else. In a time when the solo is increasingly being replaced by highly produced group choreography, Leela Dance Collective remains dedicated to performing the solo, ensuring the art form is preserved in its purest and most elevated form.





## SOLO WORKS

In 2024, Leela Dance Collective continued to showcase kathak dance as a powerful medium and forum for personal expression and experimentation through a range of solo works. Amongst these are Rachna Nivas' "Reclaiming the Feminine Divine" and Sarah Morelli's "Rhapsody in Jog". Nivas' work delves into India's ancient tantric traditions to explore the sacred feminine and its place in modern society. Morelli's work explores improvisation in Western and Eastern musical and dance traditions using the Hindustani classical raga, Jog as a framework. These works showcase how artists can represent continuity with lineage and tradition while pushing the boundaries of kathak and exploring unique and diverse themes and styles of expression.





## FROM GURU TO SHISHYA: A YEAR OF TRANSFORMATION

In 2024 with support from the Alliance of California Traditional Arts, Seibi Lee and Sonali Toppur embarked on a year-long journey as master artist and apprentice delving deeply into the expressive and storytelling aspects of kathak dance. In that year Lee worked with Toppur to create a new story centered on the Hindu deity, Ganesh. Through hours of intensive in-person training, Sonali worked closely with Seibi in every phase of the creative process—from researching legends and storyboarding, to composing movement and refining expressive nuance. This kind of focused, one-on-one mentorship is essential to sustaining traditional art forms like kathak—it provides the time, trust, and depth needed for meaningful artistic transformation and prepares the next generation of artists to carry forward tradition with confidence, creativity, and care.





## SHAPING THE FUTURE OF KATHAK

Leela is proud to provide world-class kathak training through immersive residencies, retreats and one-on-one mentoring. Students have the opportunity to train intensively in the dynamic style of Pandit Chitresh Das under the guidance of Seibi Lee, Rachna Nivas, Rukhmani Mehta, and Sarah Morelli. Leela's educational programs emphasize technical mastery, study of music, movement, rhythm, and cultural history while fostering artistic excellence. With pre-professional and professional training for all ages, Leela nurtures a new generation of kathak artists across Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Denver.

# LEELA YOUTH DANCE COMPANY

Activating the Voices of Young Indian American Women  
Artistic Direction: Rukhmani Mehta

The Leela Youth Dance Company (LYDC), champions excellence in kathak dance while empowering young Indian-American women to become cultural ambassadors and leaders within their own communities and beyond. In 2024, the company boasted 16 members and performed for 3400 audience members across California.

.....

## IMPACT

13

PERFORMANCES

8

COMMUNITIES

16

YOUTH  
DANCERS

3400

AUDIENCE  
MEMBERS







## FACULTY

Artistic Direction:  
Rukhmani Mehta

Senior Faculty:  
Seibi Lee, Joanna Meinl

Junior Faculty:  
Ahana Mukherjee

## MEMBERS

Anushka Bettigiri  
Pragya Agarwal  
Varnika Bhat  
Maanvi Dhadoti  
Shriya Patel  
Prisha Patel

Anvi Joshi  
Praajnya Gowder  
Anirra Kutty  
Avni Madhu  
Poorvi Sangli  
Tvisha Soni

Mahika Goswamy  
Ananya Bhardwaj  
Maya Bhatia  
Anaya Doshi

## NOTABLE PERFORMANCES

MARCH 26	APRIL 22	MAY 10	AUGUST 11	NOVEMBER 11	NOVEMBER 14
Philadelphia Youth Dance Festival at Mandel Theater	Holi: A Music and Dance Celebration, Lanark Park	The Museum of the San Fernando Valley	LA International Music and Arts Retreat	Diwali Celebration, Rossmore Event Center	Diwali Celebration, Thousand Oaks Library



# CARRYING FORWARD TRADITION

In the 2023-24 academic year, the Leela Youth Dance Company was proud to present five classroom concerts featuring youth company members performing traditional kathak as soloists with live musical accompaniment. These concerts demonstrated Leela’s commitment to providing training and mentorship at the highest level for youth company members, and to building community amongst dancers, musicians and audience members. Over 1500 audience members attended these free concerts in-person and/or joined in online.

OCTOBER 2023	DECEMBER 2023	FEBRUARY 2024	MARCH 2024	APRIL 2024
Varnika Bhat & Praajnya Gowder with Chirag Dixit & Shivam Sudame	Maanvi Dhadhoti & Anvi Joshi with Chirag Dixit & Ravindra Deo	Anushka Bettigiri & Pragya Agarwal with Chirag Dixit & Ravindra Deo	Shriya & Prisha Patel with Chirag Dixit & Shivam Sudame	Anirra Kutty & Poorvi Sanghli with Ben Kunin & Nabin Shreshta





# BRINGING INDIA ALIVE FOR CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCES

In May 2024, the Leela Youth Dance Company premiered their first ever full-length production, *Imagine India*, which led audiences on a journey through time from ancient to modern India. Featuring original compositions by master artist and guru, Pandit Chitresh Das as well as new choreography by Rukhmani Mehta and Seibi Lee, *Imagine India* thrilled audiences and ignited communities around Indian classical dance and music. *Imagine India* featured 16 youth company members in performance with renowned musical artists Jayanta Banerjee (Sitar) and Satyaprakash Mishra (Tabla).

MAY  
4

Presented by Ekal Vidyala, Portola High School Performing Arts Center, Irvine, CA

MAY  
11

Presented by Leela Youth Dance Company, Agoura Hills High School Performing Arts & Education Center, Agoura Hills, CA

# LEELA FOUNDATION

The Leela Foundation is committed to establishing the financial infrastructure necessary to advance kathak dance and Hindustani classical music on the world stage. It is the first self-standing endowment dedicated to supporting Indian classical artists and tradition bearers in the United States through salary support, cash awards, residencies and fellowships.

.....

## IMPACT

**536**

DONORS

**\$1M**

RAISED

**\$65K**

AWARDED  
TO ARTISTS

**14**

ARTISTS  
SUPPORTED





## ARTISTS SUPPORTED

Since 2020, Leela has been able to disburse \$65,000 to 14 esteemed Indian classical musicians and dancers in California and beyond. We are honored to have been able to support these artists and tradition bearers through artists awards, fees and honoraria for a range of performances and educational activities and creative residencies.

Jayanta Banerjee  
Joanna De Souza  
Ravindra Deo  
Chirag Dixit  
Jay Gandhi  
Gretchen Hayden  
Rajib Karmarkar

Ben Kunin  
Satyaprakash Mishra  
Salar Nader  
Saili Oak  
Debashish Sarkar  
Madhuri Devi Singha  
Shivam Sudame

# ENDOWMENT PERFORMANCE

## Portfolio Snapshot

(Jan. 1, 2024 - Dec. 31, 2024)

	Jan. 1, 2024	Dec. 31, 2024
Invested Funds	\$1,171,444.76	\$1,560,468.00
Cash	\$3,767.00	\$8,516.13

Endowment Payout\*

\$29K

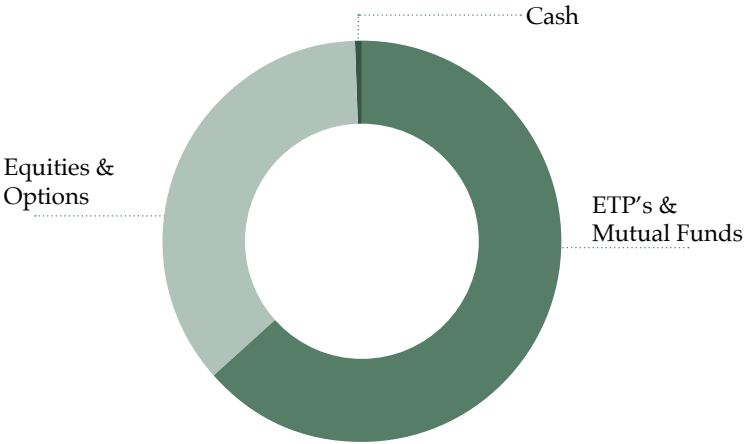
Annualized Rate of Return

32.5%

## Asset Allocation

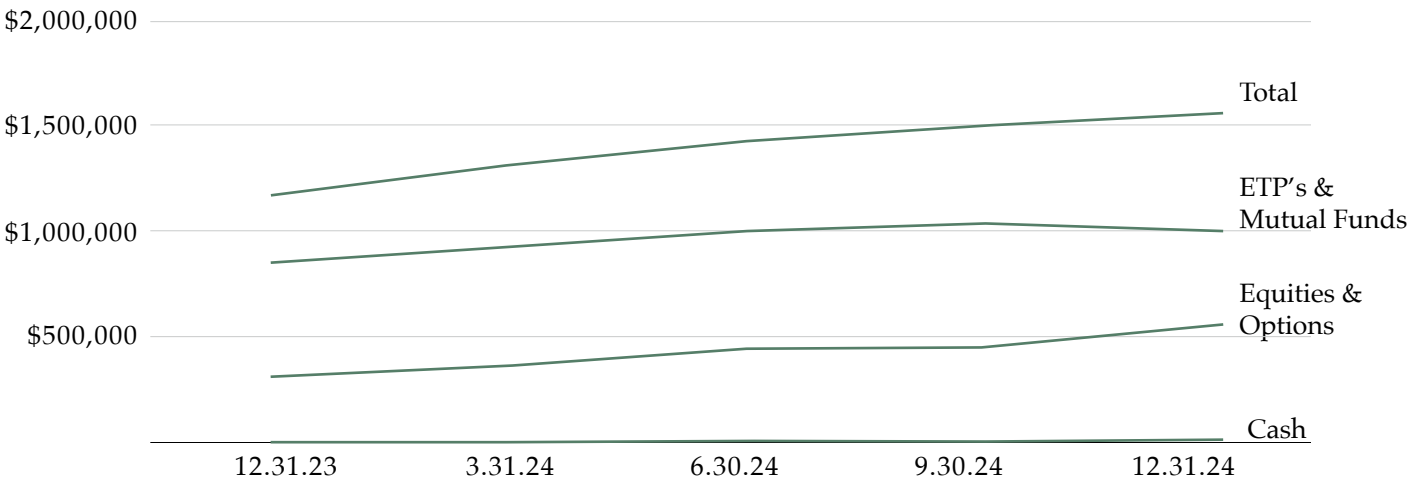
(as of December 31, 2024)

- ETP's & Mutual Funds - 63.5%
- Equities & Options - 36%
- Cash - 0.5%



## Portfolio Performance

(Jan. 1, 2024 - Dec. 31, 2024)



*\*\*The Leela Endowment's payout is based on an annual spending rate of 4%. Endowment funds support artist salaries, fees, residencies, and fellowships.*



## A LEGACY TO BUILD

In 2023, the Leela Foundation reached its first major fundraising milestone - \$1 million! This is a significant achievement made possible thanks to the generosity of our community of donors. However, \$1 million provides only \$40,000 in annual support—an amount that doesn't even cover the salary of a full-time staff member. While the endowment has allowed us to begin supporting artists and tradition bearers, our impact and scale remains limited. To make significant, fieldwide impact and ensure the advancement and global recognition of India's artistic traditions, we aim to grow the foundation's endowment to \$5 million. Our hope is that the foundation is able to support the many Indian classical artists and organizations that serve our community and advance India's artistic and cultural heritage.



# DONORS

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Janakiraman  
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Pratima & Navin Doshi

## Advocates (\$10,000+)

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Neha Jain



# FINANCIALS

## Expense by Program Area

- Performances & Artistic Development - 40.22%
- Training & Youth Education - 33.71%
- Administration - 14.08%
- Fundraising - 11.99%



## Income by Program Area

- Performances & Artistic Development - 30.54%
- Training & Youth Education - 50.48%
- Administration - 12.20%
- Fundraising - 6.78%



## Income by Type

- Earned Income - 39.79%
- Endowment Distribution - 6.79%
- Individual Donations - 4.12%
- Foundation & Government Support - 49.29%



# OUR TEAM

## Board of Directors

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Dinesh Mehta, Treasurer  
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Anna Cross  
Dinker Shah  
Sarah Morelli  
Bina Nivas  
Evanthia Spanos  
Minoo Gupta

## Artistic Direction

Seibi Lee  
Rachna Nivas  
Rukhmani Mehta

## Soloists & Faculty

Joanna Meinl  
Sarah Morelli

## Ensemble Dancers & Faculty

Sonali Toppur  
Ahana Mukherjee  
Carrie Jennings  
Ria DasGupta

## Apprentice Dancers & Faculty

Ayanna Kannan  
Sasha Salvi  
Seema Barua

## Faculty

Poonam Narkar  
Pallavi Salvi  
Shilpi Nikhil  
Katrina Yoshida  
Neha Tummala

## Resident Musicians

Jayanta Banerjee, Music  
Composition & Sitar  
Ben Kunin, Sarod  
Satyaprakash Mishra,  
Tabla & Pakhawaj

## Bookings and Company Management

Carrie Jennings

## Marketing

Shreya Mehta

## Administration

Lavina Mehta

## Investments

Saurin Munshaw

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Aparigrah Foundation  
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Esper A. Petersen Foundation  
Ford Theatre Foundation  
Los Angeles City Department  
of Cultural Affairs  
Los Angeles County  
Department of Arts & Culture  
MAP Fund  
MidAtlantic Arts Foundation  
Monali Jain Foundation  
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Arts  
New Music USA  
Palayam Foundation  
Perenchio Foundation  
Sarva Mangal Trust  
Tarsadia Foundation

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