

An Indigenous Pedagogy in Contemporary Times

MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE
GURUKUL SYSTEM OF TRAINING

By *Miti Desai*

The Initiation

It all began with a simple yet deep dissatisfaction when I was 20. On the first day of my first job, I spurned the possibility of how my time would be spent. With a clear intuition that I did not want to engage in commercial work whose end was just financial transactions; an inward journey had unknowingly begun. The discomfort, which was actually a yearning for something more than the perceivable life around me, continued. This search led me to a Place and a Person which turned and churned my life around.

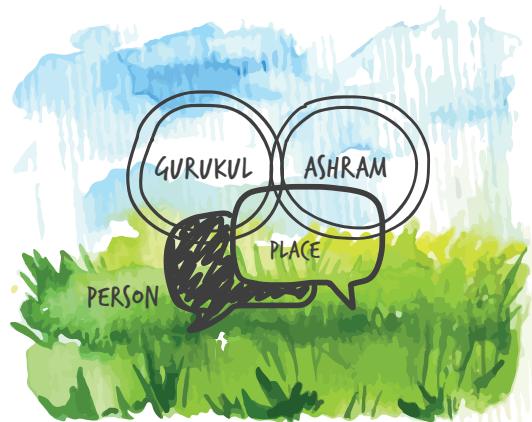
I was all of 23 years of age, with barely any life experiences, but with a gut feeling of what I did not want from my life; when I serendipitously landed at a *Gurukul* (home of the master) in the midst of a jungle, in a beautiful valley in Maharashtra, India. I went there with an intention to train in classical Indian dance. Little did I know that the intent to train in an art form would churn a whirlwind of changes to my life. This emerged as a deep and nourishing journey that marked a return to my cultural roots, holistic living - and most importantly, gave me a worldview, which inspires me and guides my life.

I arrived at the *Gurukul* as a city-girl; born and brought up in Mumbai. My life vision was largely established through an educational system which was a result of British colonialism and a simultaneous influence of the West. I was at the fringes of the understanding of my own culture - that which I received from living in India and naturally absorbed in everyday life. However, the real understanding, assimilation and application of the essence of the culture was somewhere absent.

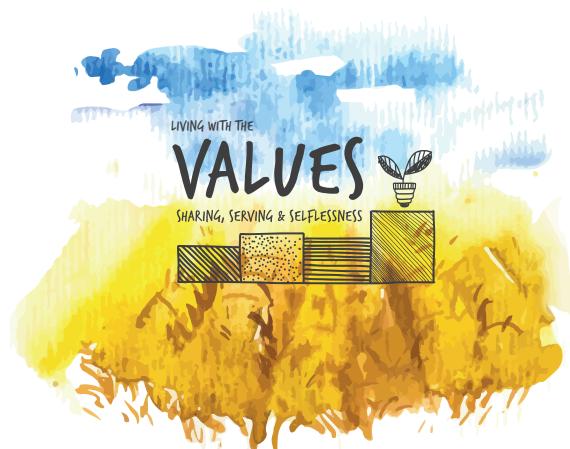
I vividly remember entering a beautiful lush green valley, and being welcomed warmly at the entrance by the open expanse of a magnificent space and a person who I had only communicated with via a letter and subsequent phone call. The place had a deep sense of silence, and so did the person. At that moment, I was entirely unaware that this place and person would become the two essential forces that form the framework through which I live my life.

The Place & The Person

The *Gurukul* system of training is an age-old pedagogy where the teacher and the taught live together and every aspect of life becomes a medium of learning. The name *gurukul* or *gurukulam* comes from the Sanskrit word *Guru*, meaning the teacher; and *kul*, meaning domain. It translates as “the domain, the teaching centre or the family of the *guru*.” As I understand it, the *Gurukul* is not as much a place, but a pedagogy. Traditionally it would manifest in a place called an *ashram*. An *ashram*, in essence, is a space which integrates the values of mindfulness, holistic lifestyle, ecological sensitivity and community living. Together the terms *gurukul* and *ashram* - represent the Person and the Place - the Pedagogy and the Values - which becomes the framework of teaching and learning in this traditional educational system of training.



Framework of teaching and learning in the gurukul system of training



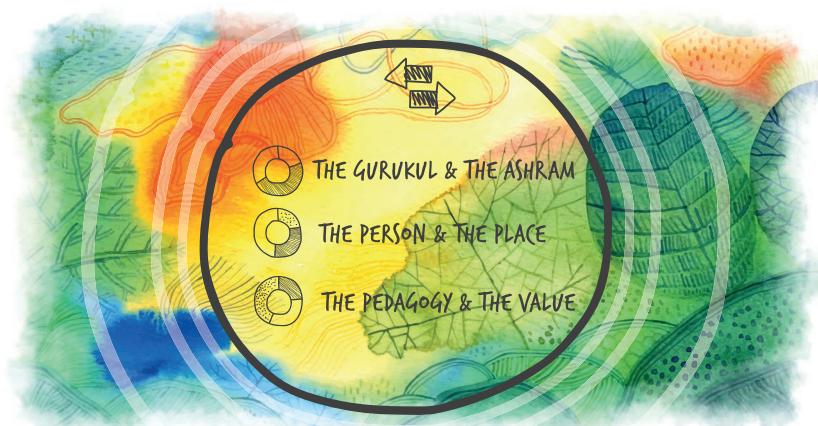
Values of living

The role of the Person and the Place become the essential ingredients in the recipe of holistic learning. The person/the guide, plays the role of a mirror that simply reflects you. The qualities of a mirror are that of non-judgement, dispassion and showing that which is as it is. When the guide is able to play this role and the learner is able to trust the mirroring, a kind of metamorphosis becomes possible. Through the process of repeated reflection comes awareness and transformation. The teacher works on skill building with a simultaneous initiation into a worldview, which essentially has the potential to become a framework - a kit of tools, to live life through. The place (ashram environment and activities) is meant to facilitate and create an avenue of living close to nature, of becoming sensitive and mindful of all actions and surroundings, and living with the values of sharing, serving and selflessness. Essentially an Awareness-centered, Earth-centered, Love-centered, Community-centered and Soul-centered worldview. That which begins inside and travels outside.

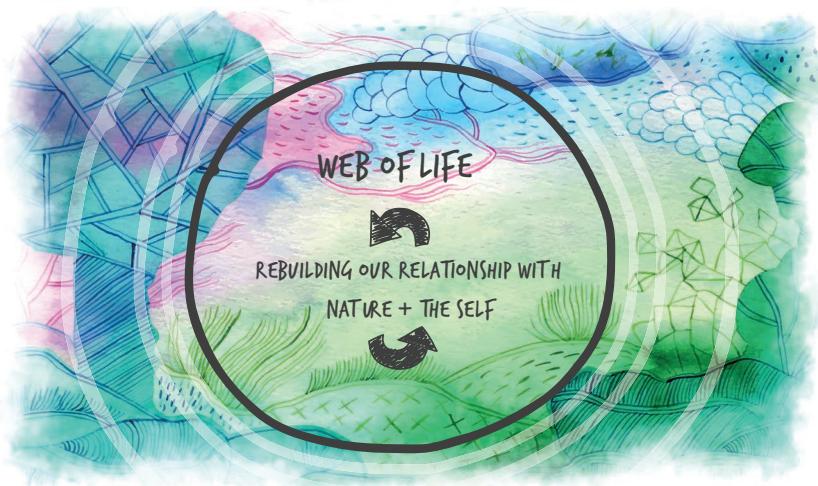


Elements of the Worldview

The *Gurukul* & The *Ashram*, The Person & The Place, The Pedagogy & The Values are different terms that facilitate a holistic worldview which emerges through rebuilding our relationship with nature and with the self, so that we experience our reciprocal relationship from within the web of life. The pedagogy gives tools to see the dynamic interplay in an interdependent world of relationships. This is a process and as with any processes, because of their remarkable nature, it does not fade in time. It makes us human and thus alive. Such has been my journey engaging and being a part of a *Gurukul* system of training.



Aspects that facilitate a holistic worldview



Reciprocal Relationship

A Journey Of Self Discovery

I had come to the *gurukul* with the intention to train in a particular style of classical Indian dance - '*Bharatanatyam*'. (a classical dance form hailing from the state of Tamil Nadu; India has eight different classical dance forms). In my first conversation with my teacher, I communicated my wish to train in the form of *Bharatanatyam* and to my surprise she said that she did not teach that style of dance but taught another style of dance called *Mohiniattam* (a classical dance form hailing from the southern Indian state of Kerala). I had never heard of the dance form of *Mohiniattam*. She politely mentioned, "if *Bharatanatyam* was the style you want to train in, then you should find another teacher". In that very breath she casually spoke the vital words that changed the course of my life. She said "... though styles are not important, but THE TEACHER IS". In that moment, I somehow sensed the vastness of that statement, yet did not know what it actually meant. Following my inner voice, I decided to train in whatever this teacher had to teach. Now, in hindsight, these words pierce deep into my consciousness, as I truly understand the importance and role a teacher can play. For the next nine years I was absorbed in rigorous training under the chosen teacher.

The training began with learning a dance style through skill building, but very seamlessly penetrated into the study of the dancer, and not just the dance. The vision was holistic. It was an amalgamation of palpable philosophy, symbolism, mindfulness, living close to nature and most importantly, receiving a world-view through which one practices an art form and lives one's life. The process was immersive and experiential, enriching every iota of my consciousness. The approach was inside-out.

This pedagogy facilitated transformative learning. There were three core facets through which learning took place.



Core facets through which learning took place



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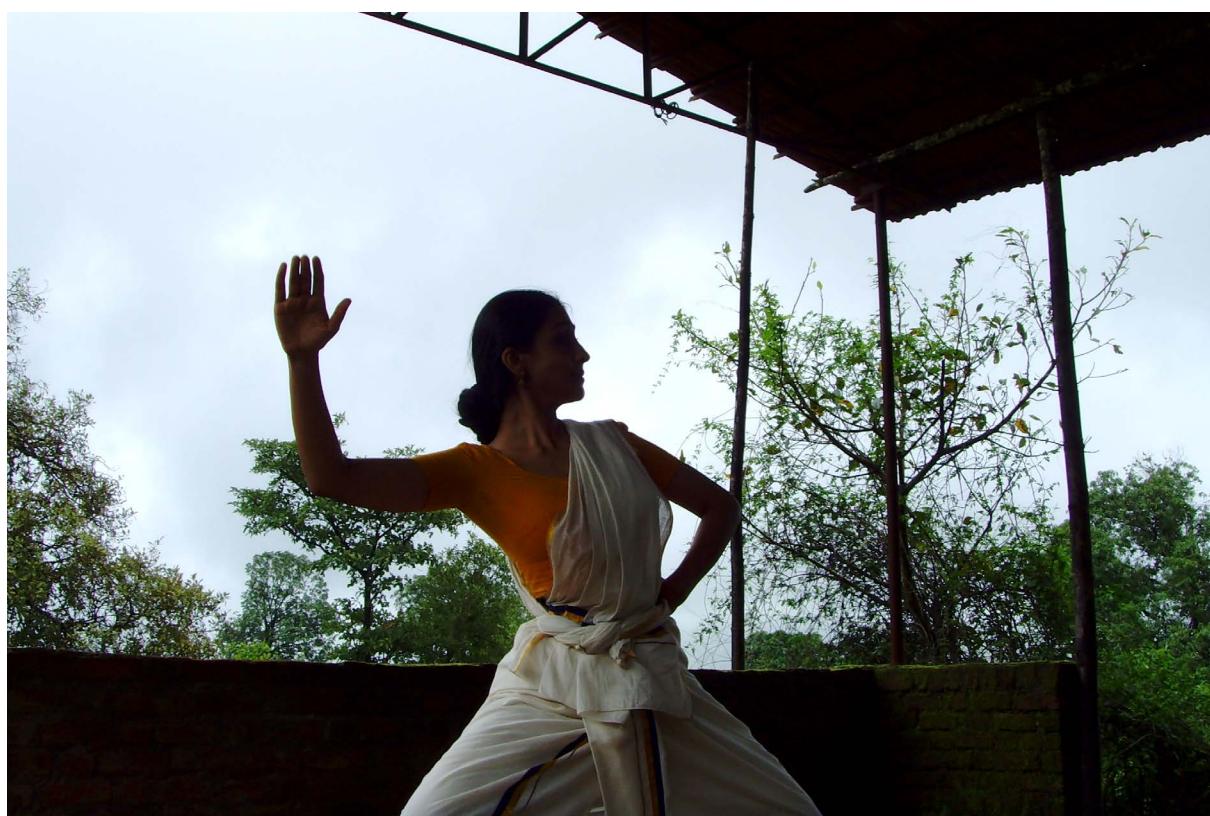
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The first facet was - **Learning the Subject and the Skill.**

Classical Indian dance is a multidimensional idiom. The training began at the level of skills but very soon it pierced into a deeper understanding of the form, content and its symbolism, and further penetrated into the essence that the form had to offer. Learning the form became a medium which began a process of deconditioning.

A scheduled learning session which was meant to last one hour would sometimes go on for three and more. Dance training is a very intimate and tangible experience. The involvement of the body as the primary medium of expression gives it a vulnerable quality. The dance sessions with my teacher had a subtle and intimate quality. In that moment my teacher was the mirror, witnessing my limitations, awkwardness, resistances and the possible potentials. The instruction would begin at the physical level but the solutions that were pointed out needed piercing at a much deeper level of thoughts and concepts. My teacher would say (and still does) that every part of the body has its own ego, and one has to work towards surrendering to that. Sometimes the instruction or mirroring was tough to accept, and the only way it could be assimilated was because of the complete trust and love for the art form and the teacher. It was a process of working on skill-building and engaging with the body with rigour, discipline and awareness on one hand; and on the other hand a journey of deconditioning thoughts and concepts, which facilitated the real understanding, assimilation and application of the essence of the art form.

Through this approach, I established a deep rootedness within my culture and its context.



Miti Desai at Shaktiyogashrama Gurukulam in 2007 | Photograph by Shivani Gupta



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A dance training session at Shaktiyogashrama Gurukulam in 2007 | Photograph by Shivani Gupta

The second facet was - **Living and Working at the Ashram.**

Being at the *ashram* formed the foundation of my learnings. From the way you live, eat, work, learn and engage; every aspect is intrinsic to beginning an inward journey.

To start with, it deepened my connections with nature. I had never lived in the midst of a jungle. Living close to nature came with an experience of abundance of nature, but along with that came the challenges of living in the wild.

I recall a dance intensive that we had at the *ashram* in my early years of training. It was scheduled in the month of August. The *ashram* is located in the Western Ghats surrounded by the Sahyadri Hills and the annual rainfall is in abundance with its peak in the month of August. The romance and rigour of nature was at its height. The unimaginable lush (almost fluorescent) green landscape with waterfalls, rain and wind evoked an indescribable magic in my heart, and simultaneously the pouring rain and wild wind, made basic living very tough. We were wet and cold all the time. And in the midst of that, the dance training went on. It was on this occasion that the reality of nature in its romantic and rigorous form came alive. The reality of the life cycle emerged in front of me as I lived through it.



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On another occasion, we were given a dance exercise, which was to mime the form and flow of the trees at the *ashram* with our bodies. It is an exercise that still stands relevant, inspiring and daunting to me. To try and mime the shape, the stability, the strength, the grace, the flow, the texture of a trunk, a branch, a leaf, a flower - is a stimulating, tough, and immersive task. Moments like these gave me a chance to engage imaginatively with nature; a coherency between nature and human creativity was harnessed, enabling me to base my actions on an ethic of mutual respect and interdependence.

The *ashram* has no electricity, phone or internet connectivity. Being a city person, that was a lesson of independence from the dependence on technology. It taught me to assimilate and live in simplicity. And as time went by I experienced the beauty of living in simplicity. The holistic engagement somehow disciplined and integrated the mind-body complex. It gave me toughness, strength of character and a discipline of the senses.

Working at the *ashram* gave me an experience of what it is to work with abundance of love and joy. It taught me the power of selfless/voluntary work. The work ranged from creative work, to administrative work to logistic maintenance of the space. That all work is important, all work is equal, all work is sacred, emerged as a vital learning.

A typical day at the *ashram* started at 6.00am, with a suggested silence period from 6.00 am to 9.00 am, after which breakfast was served. This time was meant for gathering energies by meditation, practice of *yoga asanas* and walks in nature. This simple tool of silence when practiced and assimilated, centered my consciousness. And over the years, no matter where I am, it has become a part of my daily routine. As my teacher always says “external ashrams are only to provide a space for that search; an outer model for that inner peace”. And now still, the journey to find the *ashram* within one’s own integrated self continues.

From 10.00 am the learning sessions would commence. The day would unfold with sessions interspersed with voluntary work. And the most precious part of the day was the afternoon naps under the mango tree with co-learners. The non-stop chatter, the sharing, the dialogues under the mango tree have led to very strong bonds and lifelong friendships.

Living, working and learning at the *ashram* chalked a pathway for me of how one can engage with life holistically. It taught me the strengths and importance of selfless giving in community work and community living.

As I share about living and working at the *ashram*, I would like to draw attention that there was a substantial part of the training that happened in Mumbai City at my teacher’s residence. The learning venue was organically interspersed between the *ashram* in the outskirts of the city, and with the teacher’s home in Mumbai. But the values and pedagogy seamlessly entered both the spaces. Which draws attention to the fact that an *ashram/gurukul* in essence is more than just a space. The essence can manifest anywhere. The values and pedagogy form the basis of this essence.



Shaktiyogashrama Gurukulam,
Maharashtra, India

The third and seemingly most important facet was - **Living in close vicinity with the Master.**

Living in close vicinity with the master results in osmosis. For me it was the most powerful mode of absorption and learning. The time spent in a classroom or learning session with the teacher facilitates learning to one extent. The larger life lessons of mindfulness and living the principles that are being shared, happened in simple moments of cooking, eating, chatting and simply hanging with and around the teacher.

There have been endless moments which were not intended as teaching lessons, but have taught the most fundamental, deep, and thoughtful lessons which have stayed with me till date. One such occasion was my second interaction with my teacher when she was simply talking to me trying to understand why I was interested in training in dance. Honestly, I have no memory of what we really spoke that day, but what has stayed with me till date is her act of peeling an apple and cutting beautiful pieces and sharing it with me as we spoke. The peel of the apple was removed with a simple knife (and not a peeler) with love, respect, patience and skill. The whole peel was removed very thin in continuity to form a beautiful one piece spiral that so effortlessly dropped off from the apple. And further pieces of the apple were cut gently and were offered to me as we spoke. This was a very profound lesson for me. A lesson of the beauty of having a skill, the power of peace that comes from patience, the respect being given to a fruit and a lesson in love, which I experienced as I was fed the apple.

For me, no books or lectures can come close to the learning that was triggered by being inspired by another person and their being. In the process I also learnt the importance of having a spiritual discipline in one's life through a living example, on a day to day basis.

As I write this, I am realising the abundance of grace that was showered upon me. I had an opportunity and the privilege of spending unlimited hours with my master. Those times and learnings have been priceless.

When the teachings go beyond the subject and skill; when the teachings are not standardized but customised; when the teachings become a deep source of inspiration to excel in the discipline being learnt; when then the teachings inspire you to be a better human being; when the teachings become a guiding light to live and engage in life - then, in this emergence, the teacher transforms into a *guru* (master) and the student into a *shishya* (disciple). This connection is also a lesson of the coexistence of toughness and tenderness. The bond and connection between the *guru* and *shishya* is sacred and comes with deep reverence and responsibility.

Life Lessons

The experience of learning and living in the *gurukul* system of training has given me the priceless gift of devotion and faith; it has deepened my connections with Mother Earth and with myself; it has given me the discipline and practice of an art form which enriches my hearth and being; it has given me the gift of being fearless of living in simplicity, and the courage to follow my heart and live life with awareness, love and dignity.

The learning has been all-encompassing. The study and immersion continues to nourish and churn my mind, my intellect, my intelligence, my body and my consciousness. Also, in the process, I have discovered the meaning of true education and how this age-old system of education is not only different, but also more inclusive and transformative than other education systems that I have experienced or been exposed to.



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And above all, the rigour and the inclusiveness of the system has taught me and is still teaching me the value of accepting, of letting go, and most importantly, of surrendering the ego, as these are the essential ingredients for any inclusive and deep learning, receiving, sharing and living to be able to manifest.

The *gurukul* system of training is an informal one, and it is my understanding that it can only be as great as the individual awareness and intention of those who participate in it. The integrity of intention that the Teacher and the Taught bring to it is critical. This makes the system vulnerable to potential subversion or distortion of its true spirit. It is difficult to adhere to the principle that it is the knowledge itself that is the primary guru, rather than the personalities involved. However if this principle is held steadily in mind, with utmost rigour of awareness and intention, by both the Teacher and Taught, then the essence of this system manifests, with an incredible exuberance of spirit, and holds an extraordinary potential for transformation.

I now live in the city of Bengaluru (Karnataka, India), with an artistic practice that weaves within the realm of design, dance, holistic education and culture. In all humility I say that the essence of the *ashram* and the *gurukul* teachings have deeply penetrated into my consciousness and have shaped my being. Whether it is the work I do or the way I live, the worldview I acquired there is my guiding light. Within each moment I am learning and trying to be true to the teachings that have been so lovingly and generously imparted on me. The learning goes on just as life goes on.

A Special Note

The Person and The Place that I am sharing about have both been my Gurus (guiding lights).

I would like to share with you who they are:

The Person: Mandakini Trivedi, a master teacher, danseuse and educationist.

The Place: Shaktiyogashrama Gurukulam - Maharashtra, India.

This writing is an offering to both of my gurus (The Person & The Place)

*Guru Govind dou khade, kake laagun paanv
Balihaari guru devan ki, mhane Govind diyo bataaye*
“The Teacher and Lord are both before me, at whose feet shall I bow?
I surrender to my teachers, for they show me the way to the Lord”.

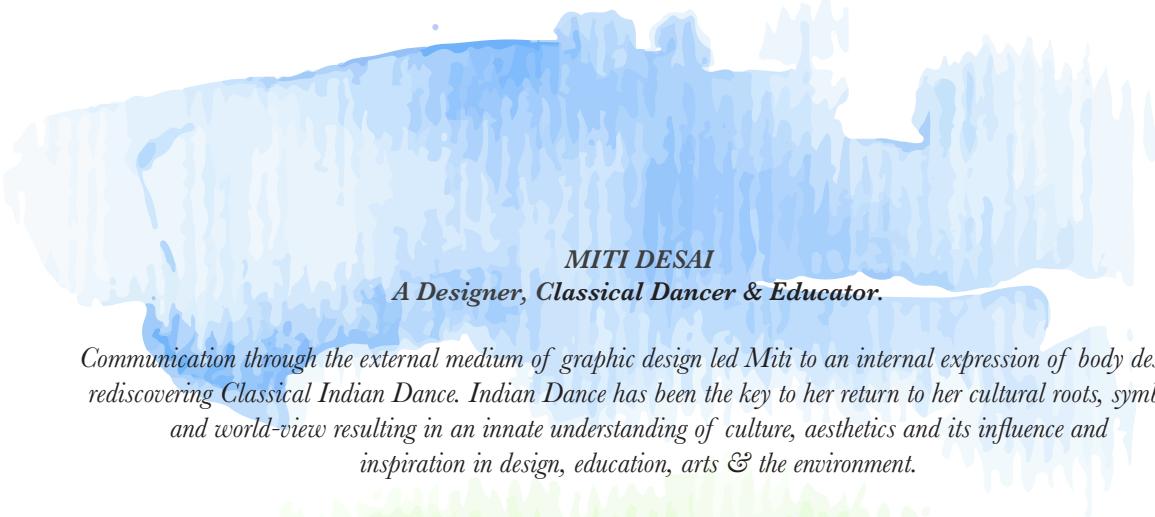
A verse by saint poet Kabir.



Left: Miti Desai
Right: Mandakini Trivedi

At: Shaktiyogashrama Gurukulam,
Maharashtra, India

A training session in 2005



MITI DESAI
A Designer, Classical Dancer & Educator.

Communication through the external medium of graphic design led Miti to an internal expression of body design, rediscovering Classical Indian Dance. Indian Dance has been the key to her return to her cultural roots, symbols and world-view resulting in an innate understanding of culture, aesthetics and its influence and inspiration in design, education, arts & the environment.



She is a Mohiniattam dancer & the founder - creative head at Miti Design Lab. Miti Design Lab is an interdisciplinary design studio and engages in communication design, experiential design, exhibition design and social design. Her artistic practice weaves within the realm of design, movement, holistic education and culture - with an environmental consciousness.

Miti is also the Executive Trustee at Shaktiyogashrama Gurukulam, an educational and cultural centre.

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