

## Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of *SADI—South Asian Dance Intersections*—a progressive, scholarly, blind peer-reviewed, open-access online journal. *SADI* was conceived during the pandemic as a transnational feminist project. It proposes a field-defining modality of looking at scholarship around South Asian dance studies emerging within the field across values, theories, and practices. It seeks to carry to newer and larger audiences, a unique blend of high-quality research in scholarly, theoretical, textual, choreographic, contemporary, social justice, and community-oriented, interdisciplinary, and intersectional writing. *SADI* explores the ecosphere of South Asian dance activities, celebrating plural practices, diversity, and richness, while challenging incongruencies.

*SADI* is a manifestation of the frameworks of decolonization we have heard in recent times in dance studies. It is a pushback against prevailing paradigms of power-predicated knowledge qualifiers. However, dance as a deeply meaningful and complex cultural practice in the region of South Asia, urges different and newer ways of reading. Therefore, the writings in *SADI* are inclusive, often self-representational, and frame alternative points of view to the exclusionary, singularized, unidimensional determinant, and prescriptive lens of what constitutes knowledge. The alterity is reflected in the foregrounding of lesser-heard and, often marginalized, voices who live the practices, and is reflected in the disparate ways of writing. This scholarship prioritizes alternate artistic canons that root and nourish these regional practices.

Decolonization today is a loaded term, strategically used to satisfy different, often oppositional, agendas. In fact, it is the key word deftly being used to replace one supremacist paradigm by another. That is why *SADI* is a two-way pushback. It is a pushback against Western ways, but it is equally a pushback against the entrenched hierarchies and privileges prevailing within the South Asian region. This includes the region's diasporic, cultural, and performative migrations and poor advocacy

for rights, freedom, agency, and choices. The stranglehold of fossilized knowledge, reinforced by unquestioning and blind acceptance of descriptions, definitions, and discourses, buttress hierarchies and supremacies, including of race, caste, faith, gender, and sexuality that prevail locally in the crucial cartography. By interrogating and challenging power structures that reinforce local legacies of elitist stratifications, which influence corporeal politics through censorship, exclusion, shaming, and silences, egalitarian access to knowledge is impeded. Many within the region have been kept outside of the portals of knowledge, including artistic knowledge, while being subject to particular, regressive, unchanged, and unchallenged ways of social and epistemological orderings.

This has forced us to contemplate what is at risk in the face of the persistence of shackling perspectives—both Western and homegrown—and in the face of the incubus of homogeneity facing the academy. Also, this feminist initiative in praxis resists the academic literary and theoretical fascism that devalue situated kinesthetic contexts and epistemologies and reinforces the debilitating mind-body binary and subversion of the body. In the unstated contract between generations whose time it is and generations whose time is yet to come, lies the understanding that each generation will carry the next into a new dawn. *SADI* seeks to do precisely this—usher in a new dawn of fresh writing—honest, bold, and interrogative, yet respectful.

To guide us in this process, we have worked with a hands-on board consisting of important scholars from the South Asian region, scholars of South Asian origins in different parts of the world, and renowned South Asianists who don't hail from South Asia per se, but whose work has embellished our understanding of the region. In fact, editorial board member Sarah Morelli suggested the title: *South Asian Dance Intersections*; the acronym *SADI* means “ours” in my first language—Punjabi.

A process that involved collecting invited and curated essays and submissions that went through a scholarly review process and mentoring of younger scholars was undertaken. This situates *SADI*'s nurturing ethos and commitment to grow capacity among young scholars and practitioners from the region. Although not encountered in this inaugural issue, it shall be *SADI*'s endeavor to encourage writing in regional languages, which, if found suitable, will be translated before inclusion, in the hope of highlighting hesitant and recalcitrant voices and the South Asian flavor.

The inaugural issue's call for articles carried two themes: The first was, *nation and citizen*, and the other was the *Covid public health disaster*. We received far more entries than we are carrying. This inaugural edition contains research from six countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Australia, and the USA, organized in a set of seven thought-provoking essays. These essays range from hard-hitting political writing, contemplative arguments, personal musings, and a return to roots and looking at moments of troublesome and problematic pasts. Essayists use this opportunity to expose invisibilizations, marginalizations, intersectionalities, blind spots, and denials, using self-reflexive, dialogic processes that can help reveal appropriations and hybridities. Along the way many unexpected archives, serendipitous truths, and small histories that lie in the interstices of chronicled broad strokes may be uncovered and may interestingly segue into possible answers to long-persisting enquiries, garnered from the past itself.

The flagship essay “Crossroads,” is a tryptic written by Urmimala Sarkar, Pallabi Chakravorty, and Priya Srinivasan. The challenges to the fullness of citizenship offered by acts like the Citizenship Amendment Act, the exclusionary intent of the National Register of Citizenship, the strengthening of the already draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA)—especially with the tightening of the bail clause—serves as the backdrop for “Crossroads.” It is a provocative piece that raises a red flag. In doing so, it argues that dance should be reflective of the present. Dance should not, it argues, glorify or mitigate

the ills of an imagined past by upholding a specific statist agenda or relegating all South Asian dance to history. It disclaims the tendency of states to promote favored dancers and pleads for an expansion of the artistic and terpsichorean population, believing that many voices will be better reflective of the state of the Art and the State of the art. *SADI* believes in multiple voices, not just the well-networked, as a way of articulating the realities of the dance studies field more accurately. It also makes a plea to find safe third spaces, which would allow dance, itself, to be a product of the dancer's agency and not the product of a political/cultural/historical agenda. Finally, “Crossroads” serves as a clarion call for making dance studies a representative, reflective, rigorous, and robust field of study.

Sri Lankan scholar Mirak Raheem, presently working on a large research project on the iconic Kandyan dancer, Chitrasena, shared with us a piece, “Vajira: The Pioneering Female Kandyan Dancer.” Vajira Chitrasena is the first female professional Kandyan dancer, who, in 2021 at the age of 89, was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India, in recognition of her contribution to culture. This award came after a host of awards and honors had already come her way. Vajira, who was Chitrasena's partner in life and on stage, has been mostly hailed for breaking the gender barrier. But her role and contribution are much more, including the fact that, in addition to being a performer, she has been a choreographer of traditional dance items and a co-creator of productions. She has also been a teacher to numerous dancers over the decades and, in this role, has developed her own influential pedagogy. This article is accompanied by a rich selection of photographs from the archives of the Chitrasena Dance Company, many of which have never been seen before and which, together, give a rich pictorial glimpse into a female dance pioneer's life.

Pakistan-based dancer-activist, Sheema Kermani, authored the essay, “The Truth of Male Dancers in Pakistan.” Kermani creates an argumentation across verbal and multimedia modes of expression. The essay covers the history of male dancers in Pakistan since its formation in 1947 and testifies

to the intertwined dance histories between India and Pakistan. The writing is accompanied by a recent video interview with a male dancer, Asif, struggling to sustain himself through dance. The directness of the questions and the unfiltered lens of the camera create an intimacy between the subject and the consumer of this essay. The space available for dance is decreasing, especially for the male dancer in a society with pre-determined stereotypes of masculinity and stigma around the art of dancing. In fact, both the interviewer and interviewee acknowledge the soft politics and defiance of their artistic pursuit, which they see as in line with Pakistan's Sufi lineages and cultural productions.

Lubna Marium, apart from being a trained dancer, has been deeply involved with the artistic life of Bangladesh for almost five decades. She has firsthand knowledge of the dance archives of Bangladesh and has been an active mover and shaker on issues, pedagogy, scholarship, and showcases of dance in her country. This is the reason why her essay, "The 'Wicked Problem' of Safeguarding Dance in Bangladesh" gains in kinesthetic and epistemological significance. The "wicked problem" that Marium writes about pertains to "epistemologies of blindness" and our tendencies toward deliberate exclusion of the marginalized in identity formation of self, cultures, or nations. In the highly stratified societies of South Asia, Marium's essay, rich in pictorial, theoretical, and factual details, speaks to many in the region—mostly the excluded. Marium weaves in the pluralistic and pre-Islamic practices persisting in Bangladesh. Despite the fact that the state religion of Bangladesh is Islam, the pluralism is something that the population at large holds dear. But reminders of this diverse mosaic become important in our difficult, attritional, and stressed times.

Swaranamalya Ganesh investigates vernacular performative literatures, such as *Abhyudayamu*-s and *Yakshagānamu*-s, from pre-colonial *Taṅjāvur*, placing creative traditions as mnemo-history in re-framing South Asia's historical consciousness. *Raghunātha-abhyudayamu*, a Telugu *Yakshagāna* text written by Vijayarāghava Nāyaka in the

seventeenth century, records a day in the life of his father *Raghunātha Nāyaka*. The text, in the performative *Yakshagānam* genre, with song and dance as its central mode of expression, extolls *Raghunātha's* greatness through factual historic conquests, his administrative prowess, warfare accomplishments, processions and cultural activities, and romantic alliances. Performing it daily in open court can be read as layered ways of embedding historic memory in public consciousness. Thus, argues Ganesh, *yakshagāna* literature becomes an important historical intervention through the performing arts.

The second theme that the *SADI* board suggested for the inaugural issue was the public health crisis of Covid. Two essays caught its impact. The first essay is an unusual writing, a first-person musing by Yashoda Thakore, who, due to severe travel restrictions, was unable to get to Australia for an Indo-Australian performance that featured her—even after the country opened up for performances. Eventually, by an imaginative scenario of digital stage hybridity she delivered the performance. Thakore's essay makes for interesting reading by itself. The sudden twist in the content makes it a piece that will live long and be cited frequently in subsequent writings. The second piece related to this theme explores many initiatives that were created during the Covid pandemic and its restrictions. Capturing the darkened stage floors through a political and filmic re-churning, Kaustavi Sarkar writes about this output in "Failure of Rasa: Story of Indian Dance During COVID-19." Her piece concludes by featuring a topical poem, "Why sometimes the show must not go on," written by the Mumbai based Kathak dancer Sanjukta Wagh.

"Rethinking Endings: Amany's Persistence," by Yashoda Thakore, relies on reflexive ethnographic methods to theorize claims to artistic and creative ownership. It focuses on the performance, *Encounters*, an international production based on the life story of the "bayadere," Amany, of the early and mid-nineteenth century. The author participated in the production—digitally, given the Covid restrictions—exploring the history of a group of Indian dancers from Puducherry and Yanam who were taken to Europe in 1838 to perform at

numerous European venues. While Amany has been immortalized by the sculptor Jean Auguste Barre (1811-1896) and her story is somewhat known, the rest of the story is an eye-opener. By revisiting the repertoire performed by them and the representation of these dancers, Thakore argues that autoethnography revealed facts that make these women relevant to present-day performing artists, in particular, and society at large. The little-known histories of Amany and the author coalesce, brought together by the author's guru, Annabatulla Mangatayaru, whose ancestress—six generations removed—was Amany. Thakore's style of writing captures effectively the thrill of the serendipitous discovery of the linkage.

In her piece, Kaustavi Sarkar, herself a practitioner of the Indian dance style of Odissi, interrogates the premise and promise of *Rasa* during a period of confusion, turmoil, and fear of human connection. The *Rasic* experience is possible only when the practitioner or "patra" has an audience, which becomes "sahridaya," meaning of one heart with the performer. This transaction assumes a spatial intimacy for the *Rasic* experience to transfer and translate. Have the writings on *Rasa*, this uniquely Indian idea, in any of the texts that dancers use as their manual, ever anticipated the conditions similar to those of the COVID-19 pandemic? Sarkar's ideational exploration is a seminal contribution to critically interrogating *Rasic* adaptability in crises. But it begets further questions: Even when the anxieties between creator and consumer are urgent and shared, can *Rasic* intimacy be created and transmitted via mediated bodies as dancers moved on to the digital platforms of social media? Did the poetry underlining the *Danced Poems of Double Authorship*, a collaboration between Covid-specific poetics with choreography by dancers worldwide, work, or did the dance in the dance-films render mute the poetry? Did we need to dance the spectacle or was it alright for the show not to go on?

All of these brilliantly-written intersectional essays bode well for the new direction of South Asian dance studies. The call for submission for the next issue is included in this edition and we urge scholars to consider submitting through the Open

Journal Systems.

We are very grateful to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for encouraging us and supporting us at every step. I would take this opportunity to particularly thank Wendy Fisher, Savannah Lake, and Kaustavi Sarkar from UNC Charlotte. A big thank you to all of the members of the Board and a special shout out to our Interim Journal Manager, Kaustavi Sarkar, for being a rock throughout this process.

For me, this is a thirty-year-old dream coming true. Thirty years ago, it was unrealistic. Now, it has fructified. I have only gratitude in my heart. Here's to strengthening South Asian dance studies and multiplying and amplifying local voices to stand at par with the best in the world.