

Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

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Welcome to the second edition of *South Asian Dance Intersections* (SADI). We look at globally relevant, overarching themes of democracy, nationalism, and censorship in dance: the democratizing spaces of the internet and film, critical note on nationalism, and the rise of censorship during an era of hyper/cultural nationalism. This volume is our attempt to continue decolonizing dance discourses, in the belief that colonization is not just about material conquest—where land, air, and water are mere “resources” as Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang argue in their essay “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” (5)—but that colonization creates the canon as well. Unlike some settler colonialisms that “desire to be made innocent” (Tuck and Yang 9), native supremacies come from entitled positions often premised as natural; therefore, need to be resisted more firmly. SADI attempts to resist the tendency for naturalisation and valorization of cultural elitist practices.

SADI’s editorial journey has been an exhilarating one, as we offer the community, and especially young scholars, the opportunity to write about their own dance practices and intersections with other forms, disciplines, and pedagogies. This edition has a selection of essays—five journal-length articles and one brief review—from six countries—Pakistan, United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, and India—and brings several new voices to the fore. Manipuri dancer and anthropology scholar Debanjali Biswas presents a media-based ethnography in which she studies the digital in relation to the “material, sensory, and social worlds” in people’s everyday lives (Pink et al. 7). According to Harmony Bench and Alexandra Harlig, editors of the *International Journal for Screendance* (2021), “In 2020, the screen was seemingly the only venue, and its logics of geography and access to movement communities across the globe suddenly shifted in ways that will likely reverberate for years to come.” Dance seems to have escaped its limitations, finding a foothold across all media forms including on online platforms (Bench and Harlig 1). Cultural anthropologist Michel Wesch suggests that the internet is “the most public space on the planet” (21), and each upload cultivates a new audience while connecting with those who have witnessed their practice before. The COVID pandemic has irrevocably turned us towards digital spaces, and the trend is here to stay.

Referencing Trisha Brown’s *Roof Piece* (1971), Biswas studies a COVID-time initiative built around dances to Bengali literary genius Rabindranath Tagore’s songs

since the sensitivity of his writing, the everydayness of his metaphors and his embedded mysticism and spirituality was life-affirming. The act of giving back via dance, and the emotions invested in Tagorean humanism, gave these digital sharings the effulgence of a lamp in darkness. Admittedly, being able to dance and film at that time was an act of privilege, but it created an unexpected solidarity, a powerful safety net and a source of positivity for those who survived the pandemic. In the wake of backsliding from democracy seen in India according to *The Global State of Democracy 2021*, Biswas’s work on democratizing digital spaces has a thematic relevance to our volume given the retreat of South Asia’s biggest democracy, India, evidenced by the “backsliding” and the “violations”.

Meghna Bharadwaj’s essay, “Teaching Dance as a Multi-spatial/Multi-media Practice: Reflections on Devising Contemporary Dance Pedagogy in University Spaces,” addresses pedagogy in higher education. Bharadwaj’s piece predates National Education Policy 2020, the latest experiment in India where dance gets institutional valence as early as at the school level. In India, dance and music have always been part of the cultural fabric of society, but with little to no curricular integration. Most of the learning was left to specially interested students who pursued art forms through the traditional system of apprentice-learning, in institutions of varying tangibility and certification. Pedagogy for some dance practices and lineages has been controlled primarily by those gurus.

For the last decade, the main discussion on pedagogy in India has been about policing of state critique, politicized curricular scrutiny, as well as irrational erasures and additions in state-mandated syllabi. How different are these changes from the prescriptions of Macaulayan education? In her seminal essay “Decolonizing the Curriculum? Unsettling Possibilities for Performance Training,” dance scholar Janet O’Shea has referred to the university as “colonial and corporate”, and points to its links with the “precarity of neoliberalism” (O’Shea 750). Most Indian universities, including iconic liberal institutions and even some in the private space, have fallen victim to the ideological divide, and lost their cutting edge in the liberal art and education industry. They increasingly appear to be pre-colonial and corporate. Yet they retain their interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms of research, and an unpredictable scope for upsetting traditional

hierarchies and trajectories of dance pedagogy, while challenging the exclusive notion of dance itself.

While dance is significant as a self-standing discipline of body and space, a university setting also validates dance as a valuable methodology for research. During her own stint at a private liberal arts university, Bharadwaj realized that the understanding of dance as a research methodology lies in how it can enable the researcher to acknowledge her spatial and sensorial experiences within the network of her research activities involving knowledge, language, and text. Describing her access to contemporary dance training as “an identity-refuge” vis-à-vis a lack of Indian dance lineage in her practice, she claims that the term “contemporary” identifies her as a practitioner belonging in not one, but a multitude of dance vocabularies, as well as in a here-and-now time frame. The rubric of contemporary dance offers space for diversity, experimentation, inquiry, and novel expression. It provides tools to challenge old hermeneutics as well as to envision alternatives to the hegemony of more fixed dance ecologies. As this dance program was located in a visual arts department, the author was encouraged to interpret contemporary dance as not just an inquiry of multiple dance techniques, but as a multi-spatial and multi-sensorial process. She was thus encouraged to evolve a contemporary dance pedagogy, docking it into an engagement with camera, site, sound, and text, in addition to the dancing body. She came to understand that the university as a site whose unique architecture, inside and outside, provides exciting spaces for creative work; that writing, theorizing and documenting dance are part of practice; and that digital space has emerged as the dominant space following the university’s challenging experience with the pandemic.

French artiste Annette Leday and Cyrille Larrieu’s filmic exploration *Dance India Today* (2021) comprises of SADI’s feature: Hybrid Footprints. You can find it at the end of the journal in a special page it shares with the CFP for the next edition. The film contains the voices of performers in India who are trained in contemporary dance. It stirs in the mind some of the multivalent understandings of the term contemporary dance, that SanSan Kwan prospects in her piece “When is Contemporary Dance?” In this essay, Kwan argues that placing multiple uses of the term “contemporary” alongside one another reveals ways in which so-called “high art” dance and other so-called “lesser” genres are both increasingly braided and separated, exposing our artistic, cultural, and political prejudices. This churning is welcome in the context of the ubiquitousness of ‘classical’ dance in the Indian dance imaginary, leading to a dearth of creative exploration. Leday accompanies this collation of voices, narratives, and experiences of

key figures with a book *Contemporary Dance in India Today* published by New Delhi-based Goyal Publishers. We carry an introductory sketch of the book by David McRuvie. McRuvie is a Sydney-based Australian playwright who had worked with Annette in adapting Shakespeare to Kathakali dance in which Leday had trained. Leday has made the entire suite of unedited [interviews](#) also available for SADI.

In SADI’s premiering issue, we carried a richly embellished photo-essay on Vajira Chitrasena, Sri Lanka’s dance pioneer. In this edition, we feature a portrait of the brave and indefatigable dance pioneer of Pakistan, Indu Mitha through dancer-scholar Feriyal Aslam’s essay “The Tale of a Choreographer, her Student, a River, and an Endangered Heritage: Indu Mitha’s *Qaseeda-i-Ilm of Jamal/ An Ode to Wisdom and Beauty*.” Aslam writes about her guru Indu, the nonagenarian icon of dance in Pakistan. The article acquaints the reader with the trailblazing work of Mitha who adapted her training in bharatanatyam from India for her new home in Pakistan, where North Indian music was more familiar than Carnatic music. There are few dance stories from Pakistan and even fewer writings. In fact, in intransigent Pakistan, at times, even the sheer act of dancing, is not without risk. In our first edition board member Sheema Kermani wrote about the stigma about dance experienced by male dancers and by extension female dancers. The dance of women and those who dance about Hindu symbols is even more risk prone. Dance has been ubiquitous in all of South Asia and Pakistan is no exception (Gera Roy, 2010). Well-known dances include Dhammal which has Sufi links and Khattak, which is danced by Pashtun men, and only has an onomatopoeic similarity to the Indian classical form Kathak that has had a problematic history in Pakistan. Aslam recounts the last choreography created by Mitha *Qaseeda-i-Ilm of Jamal* (meaning an Ode to Wisdom and Beauty) and her own performance of it. Woven into the artistic tapestry of the recounting, Aslam dreams of pluralist spaces and interfaith harmony. Occluded her-stories juxtapose with the topographic symbolism to complicate geopolitical boundaries while creating appreciation for movement based social mobilization in Pakistan. We continue to hope that a growing number of dance writers and scholars working on Pakistan, will emerge in coming years.

Another facet of democratizing of dance is evident in Deepa Mahadevan’s “Dance Aesthetics When Bharatanatyam Moved from the Realm of the Popular to the Classical.” Mahadevan, a trained bharatanatyam dancer, describes changes within bharatanatyam through three waves: nationalism, globalization, and neoliberalism. She argues cogently that in the first wave, the dance moved from its popular form, as

seen in cinema, to the classical form on proscenium stages. She shifts the focus from dominant individuals and institutions, like Rukmini Devi Arundale and Kalakshetra toward more democratic trends. Mahadevan weaves together multiple issues of equity in the field of Bharatanatyam: the disenfranchisement of female hereditary dancers; the multiple pathways by which nattuvanars from hereditary families—often initially musicians accompanying renowned female hereditary dancers—gained in social equity; and the ways in which upper-caste dancers created their own aesthetic lineages by ascribing to the lineage of the hereditary male nattavunar from whom they had learnt the art after the female dancers of the community were disenfranchised. This essay is a seminal addition to the burgeoning field of Bharatanatyam studies that is seen as considerable churning in the field of Indian dance.

The last essay in this edition of SADI deals with censorship. Censorship is pervasive and deceptively close, as evident from the experience of SADI board member Ananya Chatterjea, Artistic Director of Ananya Dance Theatre. In 2022, Chatterjea's Ananya Dance Theatre was invited to present its new work *Nūn Gherāo* at the "Erasing Borders Dance Festival" organized by the Indo-American Arts Council. ADT is known for its social-justice work and for its people-powered-dances-of-transformation. *Nūn Gherāo* is a provocative piece in line with ADT's work that uses a 1978–79 massacre on the Marichjhapi Island in West Bengal, India, as its point of departure to explore betrayal, dispossession, and exile, as well as the desperate global resistance, which against great odds, fuels hope and survival. The last-minute and overnight cancellation and erasure of ADT from festival roster and social media dissemination by IAAC's curatorial committee, raises the issue of censorship and conscription. Two decades ago, Judith Lynne Hanna warned us that "dance with its power to arouse has subversive potential which leaves it open for negative interpretation regardless of actual intent" (Hanna 305).

In her essay "Censorship and the 'Nationalization' of Dance in India: An Overview from 1947 to the Present," author Arundhati Chakravarty inquires into the hegemonic forces of nationalism that determine patterns of privileging, excluding, and erasing. Chakravarty argues that a double-pronged effort is underway. One is of overt censorship enforced by instruments of state power, such as policymaking bodies that create censoring legislation, labels, and institutions carrying forward pernicious colonial legacy and an orientalist mindset. Another mode of censorship

was enacted through the laws that eliminated hereditary artist communities and professional women performers from mainstream practices of dance and sanitized those practices to be worthy of the labels of "high art" and "classical." In an argument that has also been proffered by Deepa Mahadevan, Chakravarty argues that this mode of censorship also influenced popular forms of dance, especially through cinema, by inscribing them with nationalist notions of womanhood, sexuality and, more recently, religious majoritarianism.

Among covert pathways the author includes pathways of patronage, of funding and making available other resources which in the absence of a clearly enunciated policy can be enacted rather whimsically. Such ways subscribe to the deeply embedded caste and class hierarchies and in more recent times communitarian categories compelling dance to fit its practices within the nationalist framework of a normative Indian cultural identity that is predominantly Hindu and Brahminical. Sustained efforts towards these ends have resulted in standardization of codes of aesthetics that through repetitions have constituted de facto policy. She concludes her argument by establishing how censorship has not just played a repressive role but also a productive one, especially through art washing, patently evident in the fact that due to the centrality of dance in the national cultural discourse, it has been successfully used as propaganda to censor negative actions or perceptions of the government. For example, the danced face of the idea of Amritkaal, and the priority accorded to finding, appropriating and tableauxing lesser-known heroes of the Indian nation and dancing their lives, are examples in the contemporary context, of Hindu majoritarian nationalism seeking to launder its exclusionary programs and, in the process, redefining Indian cultural identity on its terms. Where do we go from here? Scholar Brahma Prakash declares in a newspaper headline, "To truly democratize Indian art and culture, the 'classical' must be declared dead." More on such issues in the next issue of SADI themed around "Hierarchies"!

While the nation plays a very important role in this essay, I think the bigger picture reveals a global feel to the writings included here. SADI is not limited to the geographical limits of South Asia, rather it has a far bigger diaspora, and a global footprint. The Indian diaspora alone has been the largest of any country in the world since 2010 and SADI continues to recognize and find ways to occlude its loud presence in terms of thematic content or authorial ethnicities. SADI is committed to de-territorializing, breaking imaginaries,

and de-shackling dance studies from jaded labels by initiating exciting forays into the unfamiliar, while redefining the pithy, trite and jaded. Read the announcement at the end of the journal about the year-long array of symposiums coming up in 2024 around troubling the term, *choreography*.

This edition of SADI would not have been possible without the contributors, the peer reviewers, the board of SADI and the members of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, especially Savannah Lake, Wendy Fishman, Gretchen Alterowitz, and Ritika Prasad. I would be failing in my responsibilities if I were not to thank Kaustavi Sarkar, Assistant Professor of Dance at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, soloist Odissi dancer and educator, who has helmed this issue as SADI's *Interim Business Manager*. We make a good team and an unexpected benefit of this initiative is the close friendships it is fostering among the South Asianists.

I want to remind our readers that SADI is open to receiving articles written in regional languages. If selected, your work will be translated into English for our global readership. SADI also is proud to offer year-long mentoring to emergent scholars, writers, practitioners, and activists. SADI is available only on line and via free and open access, to enhance its unrestricted and democratic reach. We believe that knowledge needs to be dispersed unfettered to seed new ideas and enquiries. Should you like to write an essay, review, photo feature, or can come up with any another imaginative mode of academic dissemination, turn to the end, which will inform you of this year's themes and the process of submission.

Till then, happy reading!

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