

Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

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The lengthy process of crafting a new issue is a humbling one. To see the enthusiasm of our scholarly collaborators, the rigorous research manifest in their submissions, often undertaken in insalubrious conditions, the new ideas that their work generates not only offers an energizing mosaic of intellectual engagement but also offers an instant corrective to any intellectual complacency that may have crept in. It reminds me. The interesting ways in which these fertile minds join the dots, the new equations that they uncover, the unknown areas that they shine a torch on, and the ways in which they highlight practices old and new that would remain invisible without their efforts: these are the rewards of the yearlong labor involved in bringing out the next issue of SADI. It is with *Shukrana* or gratitude that I pen this editorial.

Writing is a privilege. In today's world of constraints and restraints on speech, text, and action, compounded by the avalanche of opinions on social media, and the incubus of the ever-looming threat of trolling, it is a privilege to be able to think critically, engage in discourse and express freely, as encouraged on this forum. But, as Allama Iqbal stated in his poem 'Shiqva:' "Humnava, Mein Bhi Koi Gul Hoon Ki Khamosh Rahoon?" Or, in my translation: "O friend, am I a but a flower, to remain silent?". In this edition of SADI, we welcome the multitude of voices that inhabit its pages, which refuse to remain *Khamost* (silent and muted) about those aspects of dance and its ecosphere, which are important and dear to them. We insist that such expression is a human right, not a privilege and are delighted to present the largest number of voices since SADI's inception.

In far too many parts of the world even the act of

dance, *Nach* or *Raqs*, is banned outright. Where permitted it is often stigmatized as evidenced by recent comments by politicians as part of political jousting. Even the Indian Prime Minister has not hesitated to refer to dance, especially *Mujra*, a traditional way of showcasing dance that required great artistry, in pejorative terms. Much of the stigma emerges from the belief that dance is intrinsically sexualized, that it is gendered, and that it threatens masculinity. This pejorative projection belies that dance and politics are *singular domains* in vogue with Jacques Ranciere's *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010). It is clearly evident that politics has exerted a negative power on dance, trivializing it in the domain of politics. This it does with scant respect for the unparalleled spiritual, transformative, and creative power of dance. Today, when democracy is threatened globally and constitutional forms of governance are increasingly paralyzed, the healing, creative, and transformative power of the arts offers a critical avenue towards recovery.

Jacqui M. Alexander's interdisciplinary anthology of essays *Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memories and the Sacred* (2005) served as the inspiration for this issue. The book was a startling revelation and its prognoses and issues continue to be extremely relevant even two decades later. Particularly significant is its urgent call to intervene in, interrupt, and interrogate the multiple sources and locations where knowledge is produced. Equally persuasive is the argument that no single crossing is sufficient to the ontological imperative of making the world intelligible to us. Consequently, crossings are never linear, neat, predictable or even familiar; instead, they demand repeated interrogation. But that is alright. As poet Walt Whitman asks in the poem

‘Song of myself:’ “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself; I am large, I contain multitudes.” Dance studies definitely contain multitudes of epistemologies, and worlds!

As if reflecting this fact, this issue of SADI brings to you fourteen essays and articles, the largest we have ever included in a single issue. Half of these essays speak directly to the themed section, while the rest are part of rolling submissions to the journal. Each article is augmented by visual media referencing powerful dance moments, digitally via photographs or video clips, allowing readers to experience dance directly as they read.

I would like to begin discussing this edition—that we subtitle ‘Ephemeral Crossings’—with Feriyal Amal Aslam’s “Spiritual Ecology of my Bharata Natyam Dance: A Peacebuilder’s Reflections on her Guru’s Pedagogies of Crossing.” This is Feriyal’s second piece to be selected for SADI and, in effect, presents the second part of her two-decade long reflexive journey of her own dance practice, body and spiritual path, aligning thereby with SADI’s efforts to make visible subordinated knowledge that remained unarticulated and marginalized at the confluence of multiple sites of power. It not only highlights a pioneering dance scholarship project for Pakistan, but also showcases an ongoing process of the mindful dispersal of interfaith harmony and peace-building via deeper connection to the lands in its new home in Nusantara, Indonesia.

One of the most interesting crossings is effectively taking a step from the dark unknown on to the limelight of the stage. In a photo essay “Gone in a Breath: A Visual Ode to Unnoticed Dance Devotion,” retired Bharatanatyam dancer turned photographer, Asif Musaddeque pays tribute to artists whose passion and commitment endures in the face of anonymity, neglect, and hardship, shedding light on the

finesse, raw beauty, and perseverance that thrives outside and beyond the proscenium. In a culture that glorifies visible success, this photo essay serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by artists, who are further marginalized by insensitive societal norms that deem them as inconsequential.

Continuing with the unpredictable trajectories and crossings of dancers, Siddhi Goel makes a case for lesser-known women dancers of Bombay cinema, in her article titled “Beyond the Holy Trinity of Vyjayanthimala, Waheeda Rahman, and Madhuri Dixit: A Case for Lesser-known Women Dancers of Bombay Cinema,” which is part of her ongoing research on the presence of Kathak in Bombay cinema. While acknowledging Kathak’s powerful imprint on the film industry and the ecosystem of dancers and choreographers who had trained in Kathak and entered the film industry for work opportunities in a new social and technological setting, she interrogates how the novel category of Bollywood dance, “a combination of Kathak, Bharatnatyam, folk, semi classical and mixed western forms” which engendered a hybrid form “greater than the sum of its parts.” She argues that “the glorious tradition of dance in Bombay cinema has been built on the shoulders of not only a few star actresses and choreographers, but on these countless nameless faces of women dancers”....who even if trained in classical forms learnt to “open up their bodies!” Goel explores how the paradigm of who gets forgotten and who is remembered reflects a value system that prioritises certain histories over others.

Sanchita Sharma’s piece on the “Crossings between Regional and National Culture” analyzes the work of Imphal-based choreographer, Surjit Nongmeikapam. Manipur is one of the most troubled federal states of the union of India, currently embroiled in what is probably its most intense period of conflict with the national center. An explicit manifestation

of the asymmetrical power between state and center is the Inner Line Permit which serves as a mode of surveillance as it restricts access to the state.. Despite the fact that the state borders of Manipur both frame and serve as center of violence, Nongmeikapam, a member of the Meitei community, has long seen his very presence as a dancer as a political act in Manipur's strife-ridden contexts. The author analyses Nongmeikapam's practice as choreosomatic—described as a “porous system of movement generation and organisation with varied crossings between them...from internal and external, local and global religious and indigenous”, but “always in relation and in dialogue with his ethnic and regional context.”

Canada-based dancer/choreographer Nova Bhattacharya joined hands with co-dancer and scholar Louis Laberge-Côté to describe both the original process of a collaborative work, and the process of revisiting it, twelve years after its premiere, and nine years after the same bodies last performed it together. Developing alongside their friendship, the piece worked itself out across geographic, cultural, and stylistic borders. Titled “Akshongay: Then and Now- Intercultural Artistic Duets and the Relational Practice of Collaboration,” it demonstrates a willingness to take risks via a process of experimentation undertaken by Bengali and French-Canadian dancers. Entering the creative-scape with integrity and inhabiting the uncertainty of their trajectory together, become pre-conditions to a long-term collaborative work, the kind that *Akshongay* turned out to be. The passage of time and the inevitability of bodily changes required reassessment and adaptation of movement, while keeping intact the aesthetic of the piece. The layered emotional terrain grappled with the question of how we can coexist despite our differences in a way that is true, responsive and understanding, to their

relationship.

Dancing and writing from three different diasporic locations, Leia Devadason, locates her essay “Traditional Dance/Mixed Genealogies: A Study in Diasporic Odissi,” at the epicentre of a contested terrain discussing variegated issues around cultural identity, canonical repertoire, conservative codes, resistance to departure from guru lineage, conceptual choreographies, and experiments in “cross-generic couplings that can produce unforeseen hybrids” in a diasporic setting. The author focuses on how Odissi is being stifled by concerns about its identity and its canonical predilections butting heads with a lack of funding. She argues the possibility or escaping “this cyclic bind” if Odissi is approached “from a different staring point, one which is premised upon historicity but radically deprioritises the question of Odissi’s non/alignment with its past”. This way it could escape the quagmire of “value judgements of tradition, modernity, innovation, dilution, authenticity and hybridity”. These arguments are prefaced in the context of a collaborative work, *Devotions* (2021). Produced and created in Singapore when a team of artists choreographed Western classical opera and oratorio songs with Odissi *Abhinaya* (expressional movement), this writing is embedded in the discourse that is growing around performance scholarship in diasporic settings, referencing artist/ scholars Anusha Kedhar’s and Aparna Nambiar’s work.

A thought-provoking essay by Nandini Sikand, “The Revolution will not be Exhibited” questions the ethics of presenting South Asian dance forms in a museum setting that displays “millions of objects, never destined for display in museal white walls...looted from the world, by different imperial agents.” Sikand discusses a moment when during the South Asian month celebrations, the collection of the British Museum, acquired through questionable

means, was marked by a dance performance situated against the immovable heritage objects. The author asks pointedly what it means to sacralize stolen objects with immigrant bodies dancing dances from colonized lands. The economic, cultural, social, and psychological problems of imperialism and colonial injuries is well documented, but the author discusses how this juxtaposition of dance and objects extends the “deprivation of colonial plundering”, and what role dance played in the decontextualised setting of the museum. In answer, Sikand takes after Alexander’s *crossings* configuring ontological and epistemological pathways.

Under the framework of ‘Epic Ecologies,’ we include two pieces of writings: Sylvie Belleau’s essay “Why Not Theatre’s Mahabharata: Storytelling Using Dance as a Prominent Motif,” and Maheshwar Kumar’s photo-essay, “Dancing for themselves: Ritual celebrations of Chaitra Parva in West Bengal”. Trained in Kathakali, Montreal-based performer and storyteller, Sylvie Belleau captures the majesty of the 2023 presentation of Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The author explains how artists of “Why Not Theatre”, many of whom are part of the Indian diaspora, belong to a new generation of artists who are questioning their family heritage while seeking to create a theatre in their own image, “rooted both in modernity and in the traditions linked to their origins” explains the author. This involves many forms of storytelling, from ancient traditions of gathering around a fire to share tales, to contemporary methods. The telling of the stories is not restricted to the stage; thus, many stories that do not find place on stage, are shared with the guests while sharing a meal. The many awards won by this production and its sold-out box office records seem to suggest that new ways of telling stories, including a wall made up of screens lined-up on stage, along with the time-tested song and dance, may well be the way forward.

In “Dancing for themselves: Ritual Celebrations of Chaitra Parva in West Bengal,” Maheshwar Kumar reflects on the dance festival in writing and photography that aims to visually capture how the *Chaitra Parva* festival embodies rural West Bengal’s cultural landscape. It also sheds light on how the rituals and rites that are part of it, accompanied by dance and music, offer people a sense of belongingness while representing a specific cultural identity. In the district of Purulia in West Bengal, in the month of *Chaitra* (April) according to the Bengali calendar, there is a celebration of the continuum of life through rituals, many of which include dance and music, as well as extreme austerities like renunciation and self-mortification. What makes the festival even more significant is that it rejects caste and is celebrated by non-brahmans for the well-being of the community. The writing and the photos reveal an ecology that is relatively unknown and makes a compelling record and narrative of this annual event in a remote corner of India.

In a section on ‘Critical pedagogies,’ Sriradha Paul’s essay titled “Memetic Disruption: How Internet Memes Challenge and Transform Traditional Power Hierarchies in the Guru-Shishya Relationship” addresses the foundational structure of dance pedagogy, including how this engenders abuse of power, including through sexual harassment. Paul then examines how graphic memes function as catalysts within the Indian classical dance community challenging entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and authority embedded in traditional pedagogical structures. The essay does not advocate that in-person training be eliminated. Instead, it shows how the digital realm challenges the guru’s singular role as the primary gatekeeper of knowledge. Also, how memes using humour and visual storytelling, often handle difficult subjects that ordinarily get swept under the carpet. Memes created and circulated by anyone with access to digital platforms, validate lived experiences, foster solidarity among users,

and offer an accessible yet subversive mode of resistance against pedagogical authority. In proposing memes as tools that both contest and reimagine modes of learning and belonging, the author raises a neglected issue, and augments conversations about power relations between gurus and disciples.

Using the example of *Kuttiyattam*—inscribed as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Knowledge by UNESCO in 2001—Ankita Nair's essay interrogates the idea that intergenerational transfer of complex arts continue an archaic, supposedly unchanged, pedagogy. She highlights the way in which various changes have resulted in subtle alterations of the teaching and learning ways over the last few decades, from gender inclusivity, institutionalization of *Kuttiyattam* training, shortening of training time, standardizing of stylistic differences, and curricular pressures that prevent in-depth training. While the core of traditional Gurukulam training may appear largely unchanged, Nair notes the subtle changes to pedagogy. *Kuttiyattam* contemporary pedagogical universe includes semi-traditional training and different kinds of peripheral pedagogies with knowledge being transmitted in small packages and capsule formats, almost in a fragmented fashion, including teaching and learning for youth competitions, research papers, and independent theatre-dance productions. The author argues that in the current pedagogical context, *Kuttiyattam* training is an amalgam or “coming together” of different pedagogies — a departure from the orthodox tradition, yet still rooted in it in some ways.”

This edition includes a seminal segment that aims to shine the torch “On the top of the world” and in this we include three essays. Amie Maciszewski’s “Dancing Cultural Sustainability at the Top of the World,” which inspired the section heading, is about a rarely studied area

of Gilgit and Baltistan surrounded by mountain ranges over twenty-one thousand feet high. This essay is part of a larger body of her decade long research on flows of migration—physical, discursive, and digital—of indigenous and its hybridized “modern” performance in Pakistan, including cultural sustainability in the face of climate change and irresponsible development. It looks at a specific ethnographic moment that occurred during fieldwork in the spring of 2024 while documenting a Hunza wedding. As in most South Asian cultures, a wedding is often an encapsulation of the cultural ethos of a community. Among members of the Burushaski community of Hunza, communal celebrations like weddings, comprising traditional music, and lively dance, is an integral part of their lifestyle and identity, of which there are multiple layers. The photos and video enhance the experience of the event that few of us are likely to witness!

The other two essays in this section, include a detailed examination of the past, present, and future of the folk theatre form of Bhand Pathar from Kashmir. The writing of both authors—one who lives in the diaspora and one in its cartographic mapping—confronts precarity and political brutality both from terrorism and the heavy hand of the state. One cannot escape the vision of Agha Shahid Ali's poem “Postcard from Kashmir” and “The Country without a Post office,” carrying a memory “a little out of focus,” where “the colors are not so brilliant.” In a detailed and well-illustrated article titled “*Bāñđi Pēthir* – The Traditional Folk Theatre of Kashmir:: Past, Present and Future,” USA-based Sadaf Mushi masterfully paints the subtle nuances of the art as seen over time on a papier mache artefact. Read Sadaf Munshi's piece for a lexicon of the art and as a dictionary for an understanding of the form's origins. His artistic fragility echoes the form's and its surrounding community's vulnerability; akin to papier mache in the rain.

Practicing artist Rayees Wathoori's, "Will the Chinar Smile Again? The Lost Art of a Wounded Valley" throws light on the centrality of dance in the performance of Bhand Pather and the lived travails and upheavals experienced by its current cohort of artists in an environment of violence. "It wasn't just entertainment, it was a way of life, a language of the people" writes the author. Some saw it featured in the film 'Haider.' Few realise that Bhand Jashn was part of Kashmir's rich and now mostly vanished Sufi culture. Performances were held during the Urs celebrations of saints. The author writes evocatively "The colourful traditions that once made our land so special have faded over years. ...Violence stole the peace that art needs to grow". He also writes about the dance art of Bacha Naghma. This personal journey offers an inside view of the art and artists. On reading these two essays one realizes that this is not a singular memory framed in one crucible of a single mind. Rather it is multiple memories borne in many memories of those who migrated, those who continue to live there, and those who have merely visited and still have loved the Kashmir of yore. Powerfully, Wathoori writes "Art cannot grow in fear. Joy cannot bloom in mourning." Working close to the ground with the community, Wathoori brings an intimacy to his writing palette while pushing forth the idea of newer themes for old practices.

Our next issue will be a special issue edited by SADI board member Dr. Yashoda Thakore. Dr. Thakore is an accomplished practitioner of Kuchipudi and Devadasi Nrityam, and a brilliant scholar who has authored "Kaivalya: Joy in Yoga and Dance" and co-translated the significant thirteenth century text *Nritya Ratnavali*. The call for papers for this special issue is called *Marginalized Voices and Histories* that can be found at the end of the journal.

No issue is possible without the yearlong labor of a large group of scholars, academics, faculty, and administrative and technical specialists,

who work in the spirit of giving back to the domain and investing in the future of dance discourses. I would fail in my duties if I do not thank particularly the board of SADI, a group of distinguished and incisive scholars of dance and South Asian studies, practitioners and activists of the domain located in the South Asian region, its diaspora and at prominent universities, globally. Many of them have offered their thoughts, ideas, and expertise to grow the journal and take time to mentor younger authors to develop and support the next generation of scholars. I want to thank the faculty at the Departments of Dance and History, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, for their continued support to this initiative to foreground the voices of South Asian Dance and its intersections. My deepest gratitude specifically to Wendy Fishman, Savannah Lake, Ritika Prasad, and Gretchen Alterowitz who have believed in the importance of this effort when it was just a dream for the team. SADI believes most strongly in intergenerational groups, a bit like South Asian family structures. The efficiency with which our younger colleagues help in holding the digital edifice of every edition, including this one, is indeed praiseworthy. Specific thanks go out to Dr. Rohini Acharya for her single-handed efforts on leading production and design. Finally, a shout out to Professor Kaustavi Sarkar of UNC Charlotte Dance who first floated the idea and who continues to burn the midnight oil to keep it on an upward turn, manage the daily grind, and fight any fires that may arise. SADI is finally ready to invest in another five-year strategic plan as we have accomplished with panache the first five years. This is the most diverse edition yet.

Happy reading!

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