

"South Asian Dance" - Exploring what it means

A discussion and presentation with

Brannavy Jeyasundaram



Photo courtesy of the artist

Sujit Vaidya



Photo by Beth Lugtu

Ahalya Satkunararatnam



Photo by Ryan Walter Wagne

Moderated by **Bageshree Vaze**



Photo by Magdalena M.

"South Asian Dance" - Exploring what it means

June 9, 2021

South Asian is not 'one' thing, just as 'diverse' is not a common experience, and yet we find ourselves needing to identify ourselves in this way. The experience of a Sri Lankan is vastly different from that of an Indian or a Pakistani. Also because these dances come from an ancient culture, they're not perceived as contemporary. It's important for presenters to be aware of these layers as they go forth and build audiences. - Bageshree Vaze Artistic Director, Pratibha Arts

BC-based dance artists Sujit Vaidya and Ahalya Satkunaratnam join Ontario-based dance writer Brannavy Jeyasundaram in a unique virtual conversation on June 9, 2021, at 12 p.m. PDT. to discuss and explore the layers and parameters of the term 'South Asian' as it relates to Canadian dance. The zoom session is hosted by Pratibha Arts in association with Dance West Network/Made in BC – Dance on Tour.

Moderated by Pratibha Arts' Artistic Director Bageshree Vaze, the event is part of Pratibha Arts' Diversity Dance Initiative (DDI) project addressing the lack of diversity in mainstage dance programming and is the third session in its 'Presenter Education/Outreach' series. Kathak dance artist Vaze conceived of this series in 2019 to follow up on DDI's advocacy efforts to promote visibility of culturally diverse and Indigenous dance forms on mainstages that continue to feature a predominance of Eurocentric aesthetics.

Presented in collaboration with Dance West Network, this session is part of Pratibha Arts' Diversity Initiative Presenter Education/ Outreach Project. www.pratibhaarts.com

CONVERSATION, TRANSCRIBED & EDITED

Simran Sachar

ARTIST INTRODUCTIONS

Ahalya: I teach Women's and Gender studies, my work is also in Performance Studies. In terms of dance, I was trained in Bharatanatyam and try to do contemporary work here.

Sujit: Hello everyone. Thank you Jane, Dance West Network, Bageshree and Pratibha Arts for inviting me to be on this panel. I'm also coming to you from the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. My pronouns are he/him/his. I am an independent dance artist, choreographer, and I'm trained in Bharatanatyam. I find it important to separate those two things, as opposed to calling myself a Bharatanatyam dancer which I've done for a bit. Maybe we can elaborate on that as the conversation proceeds.

I've been in Vancouver for almost 25 years now. I've started my dancing professionally here in Vancouver, before I went to India to pursue Bharatanatyam studies further.

Bageshree: Hi and Namaste everyone, I'm Bageshree. It's interesting, Sujit, you were talking about terms, we're going to be talking mostly about that in ways we must identify ourselves. My pronouns are she and her, and I'm coming from the place that we call Tkaronto.

Bageshree: Thank you Jane and Dance West Network for facilitating this space of dialogue about some really big things and really big ideas. Just to give you some background about how I envisioned the series of discussions happening since last Fall I'll tell you about Pratibha Arts - the organization I'm the Artistic Director of. Pratibha Arts began a diversity dance initiative back in early 2018. This grew out of the need to address inequities in the practice and presentation of dance in Canada. Particularly, the idea of having sessions and engaging with presenters also grew from a number of discussions that had already been happening, in which there were challenges identified in conversations with presenters.

Many dance presenters find it challenging to access audiences for non-European based dance forms, so that could be what we would now call: culturally diverse, Indigenous, or anything not coming from a European – Ballet, Contemporary, Western Contemporary background. Secondly, the presenters were not aware of diverse artists who exist and have been presenting and practicing for decades all across Canada. The hope with this particular presenter, education outreach discussions, is that while we all continue to be stuck indoors and not on stage, it's a great moment to reflect on and address these challenges. I'm really looking forward to today's discussion, which is focused on what South Asian Dance means in Canadian dance programming. (Bageshree continues)

DEFINING THE TERM “SOUTH ASIAN”: WHO DOES IT INCLUDE? WHAT DOES IT MEAN? AND HOW DO THESE ARTISTS USE IT, IF USED AT ALL

Bageshree: This refers to people and cultures from the following countries: India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives. In terms of South Asians living outside of these countries, the British Empire was a major force in spreading them abroad. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many South Asians went as indentured laborers to Fiji, South Africa, the Caribbeans, and South America. For business purposes, they migrated to East and Central Africa. The need for professional and manual workers in postwar Britain, the United States and Canada resulted in a period of mass immigration in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's. In the early 70's Idi Amin's expulsion of Southeast Asians from East Africa also brought many entrepreneurs and professionals to the West.

So, the South Asian experience in North America is unique and diverse. For example, it's a great dichotomy/irony that descendants of those that fought for independence from the British empire, have chosen to embrace another colonial reality, and unlike immigrants from other parts of South Asia, people from India are not necessarily fleeing civil war or religious extremism. There are many layers to what it means to be South Asian and yet this is a term that has now become an all-encompassing one when it comes to the practice of dance in Canada. There are all of these

layer that we are hoping to start to unravel but what we want to realize and to unpack here, is that we have all this diversity within South Asian culture, within South Asian dance, and this is something for dance presenters to be cognizant of, they are actually a reflection of the diversity of what it means to be Canadian. And I'd like to say that we are in a moment of tremendous historical reckoning of racial tension. Literally everyday there is something happening that is unearthing the brutality of the history where we are. But, it's also a tremendous opportunity to re-imagine our culture with these different layers of diversity, and perhaps to redress the predominance of European-based culture.

I've known Sujit for a number of years, while I've just gotten to know Brannavy and Ahalya in the last year. I thought it was an interesting and diverse group to bring together, because they all have unique experiences of where they are coming from, where they are trying to go, how they see themselves in relation to their art, as well as their scholarly work.

So just to start off, I'm going to ask you to talk about how I have set up this term of "South Asian," and how it relates to your background, where you are coming from, and how you see yourself situated on that spectrum.

Sujit: Thank you Bageshree, that was really insightful. I grew up in Bombay, and I only moved here in my mid-twenties, so I have a different idea of how I see and sense things I suppose. To be honest the term South East Asian was something I became familiar with after moving to this part of the world (Canada), and even more so when I started to pursue dance. When I first moved here in the early nineties, the first term I was introduced to, to define myself was east Indian, and that was another term I had never heard before growing up in Bombay. In India we referred to ourselves as Indian or in a broader perspective: Asian. And so, either of those two labels is what I grew up knowing my identity as, or influencing how I related to where I grew up.

The term East Indian, I wouldn't say I found it offensive, but I found it unfamiliar because it did not make sense to me. In many ways I was told that is how I define myself and all the Brown folk I knew. Now I hear the term Southeast Asian more and East Indian less, so I don't know if there is a shift.

Bageshree: By the way, it's *South Asian* not *Southeast Asian*

Sujit: I'm confusing all these labels, but what I am saying is, I am trying to get away from labels, I have a certain allergy to labels in general. I feel labels generalize an experience, and put on a lens of specificity. If one is viewed through this lens of specificity, then it's based on cliches, assumptions and stereotypes. Especially as artists, I find it to be such a gross disservice when one is boxed in by one's geographic situation. Those are the things that stand out to me when I am presented with a term that holds a collective experience.

Ahalya: I love what you shared with us, Bageshree. It was really helpful, and it sets up this term coming out of a contemporary moment and what it means in different places in terms of coming out of where we are, which is called Turtle Island by the Indigenous but not officially, so then different terms have different meanings according to the place we are in which is shaped by our own colonial history. The UK called it East India because there was a West Indies and they were looking at the region in terms of their colonial identity.

The term itself (South Asian) is a contemporary term which is reflective of the present. Sujit, I really appreciated that you said, “even where I am from, what is reflecting, is not what we use”. It shows the term is created in a particular context, for a particular language and understanding. How that language binds us or expands us, is really up to us, if we have that agency. For me I see it as not specific, but it unifies us, just like the term ‘Indigenous’ unifies across many different places and different histories.

When you talk about these different countries, some countries are more prominent in that region of South Asia than others. When I think about South Asia now, living in Canada after also living in the United States, and thinking about the politics of Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, about who is the majority and minority within these frameworks of South Asian dance. Then I think about India and Sri Lanka, who is the majority and minority within those places? How do these terms cover up particular differences within these geographical boundaries or geographical references we are using?

My grandparents moved from Sri Lanka to another British colony, Malaysia, and we have 5 generations in Malaysia now. Some of my family returned to Sri Lanka during the period where British colonization was diminishing. These cycles are important. Bageshree, thinking about how you mentioned the topic on the violence of colonialism, and the everyday presence of White supremacy dividing us, asking us to categorize ourselves. It’s a violence that we witnessed, continue to witness, and we continue to be part of. What is that violence that we have to be a part of?

Bageshree: I want to touch on when you talked about the majority/minority within these territories, but I think that Brannavy will also be able to speak to that too in terms of her background, and her thoughts about what the term (South Asian) means.

Brannavy: Thanks Bageshree, you opened up the conversation beautifully and provided the necessary framework. It feels like an overdue conversation to consider specifically South Asian dance, since our language creates consciousness and the agency around it. I was reflecting on “South Asian,” and I realized it’s a term I accept in relation to me and my family’s geography. However, when I think about it culturally, it brings me discomfort. I remember Toronto’s campus culture having a huge attraction to dance teams, and I was very hesitant to enter those South Asian dance spaces. As a person, like Ahalya, from the island of Sri Lanka who has a particular history of genocide, of recent genocide, it felt excluded, it felt like I was not able to have that openness to candidly speak about my families relationship to the island. I refrained from participation in South Asian spaces.

I think these ethnic categories according to geography or land mass are really interesting, because they have different connotations, even across the world. In my social relationships, the term Asian often refers to East Asian people, however it is becoming more and more inclusive of South Asian people as well. Then when you go to the UK, Asian is largely used to describe people from South Asia, so there are sociolinguistic contexts there. Even in Europe, it’s so fascinating that Europe is part of Asia’s land mass but it’s a distinct continent. The Middle East is another example which has been a part of our consciousness with what’s happening in

Palestine, so there are these systems of difference related to colonial conquest. Indo-Caribbeans also have intersecting histories that collide with South Asia. Especially in cast-based systems of enslavement and indentured laborers, who are not widely accepted or able to freely participate in South Asian spaces and who have a very specific and interesting dance history themselves. To answer your question, I accept the term South Asian, I understand its utility, however, it brings me uneasiness.

Bageshree: Also, I think it's important to not accept the term, because as Ahalya was saying, the very fact that we have to identify ourselves with these parameters, is a function of colonialism. Even this idea of identifying yourself as an artist of color, this construct has been created because of White-based culture. It's a system we have accepted. Growing up in Newfoundland, there were certain things we didn't question because we assumed it is how we fit into a White settler nation. It's only now that we are saying why we've accepted this. It should not have taken this long to do, but I think that there are certain incidents that become so extreme, like the killing of George Floyd, the killing of the family a couple of days ago in London – there are incidents like this all the time – it takes something extreme for these conversations to even happen.

I want to talk about this idea of predominance, even within South Asian culture. I was born in India, and with relation to dance, how dance was used to define the Indian Nationalist identity. In 1947 the focus was on India, and being the largest country population wise, all of a sudden India became an entity. It was the Indian subcontinent, now they have become different countries, but even India itself as a nation is so problematic because of its diversity. All of a sudden, a national identity had to be created and how that was going to happen was through classical dance and music. The government put all these structures in place to promote classical dance and classical music, so all of these art forms: Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kathak, became the markers to identify the Indian Nationalist Identity.

I want to talk about your work particularly, in terms of what you do as artists – you are all Bharatanatyam artists – what do all of these political questions mean when you approach your own work? and perhaps maybe getting away from all of these terms.

Sujit: I appreciate the conversation because I am learning a lot from Ahalya and Brannavy about what they've expressed through their experiences because it hasn't been my experience.

Especially Brannavy, something that stuck with me is that you said "I've learnt to accept the term" which is what you, Bageshree, were speaking to as well. For other reasons I've stayed away from the diaspora community and conversations around it. You know those are a different gamut of specific conversations that happen in a cultural context, and I can't relate to anything that is so specific. If you put a label on something, a lot of us subscribe to an absolute idea around that label. That's why I don't call myself a Bharatanatyam dancer anymore because a Bharatanatyam dancer means that I have to be a certain way, I have to walk a certain way, I have to talk a certain way, especially if I go to present India. I'm supposed to present this persona which is not me.

Bageshree: Can I ask you to define what that is?

DEFINING, REARRANGING AND EXPANDING THE BOX AROUND 'BHARATANATYAM'

Sujit: Some of it goes to what you said, Bageshree, about the Nationalist movement and the redefining of dance. In fact you used the term classical dance. I don't use classical in terms of Bharatanatyam anymore because I find it problematic, so I say Indian dance. I'm not saying anything is right or wrong, I'm just saying what I feel comfortable with, and I want to own it. I'm only coming to this conversation or to any conversation through my engagement. I do not represent Bharatanatyam in any way shape or form, and I make it clear that I am not talking for Bharatanatyam or Bharatanatyam artists. I'm coming from my personal engagement with the form. This whole idea of classicism is an excluding idea – it excludes a lot of people from the experience of that dance. We have problematic customs that are so predominant, even in 2021. This personality of a Bharatanatyam dancer is usually Brahmin. For those of you who are not familiar, Brahmin is the higher castes in India, even in terms of opportunity, training, resources etc.

I started going to India around 2010 to train, and I was shocked to be asked “are you Brahmin?” Just blatant. Even growing up in India, hearing conversations around me, but not growing up in that environment, it was jarring to be directly asked that. The reason being given, and it's not covert it's overt, is that we can program on these certain stages if you are Brahmin, which is mind boggling. So, this is part of a national identity, and this is how dance, music, etc., used those parameters to define what a national identity meant after 1947. As a Bharatanatyam dancer you speak a certain way, you dress a certain way, and I would never subscribe to that. That is not me, to put on another identity. I have seen people all over the world, and that is not necessarily how they are in these parts of the world (Canada, USA), who wholeheartedly subscribe to that kind of identity and play the part. I'm not judging that, that's fine, but that's not me.

Bageshree: Interesting, because that identity of Indian classical dance being a “Brahmin” art form also came much later. Even for Brahmin women, you wouldn't be able to dance on stage. In classical music, for example, these were not dances practiced by Brahmins, so how did that hierarchy even come into play, and how did those notions get solidified of what a Bharatanatyam dancer is supposed to behave like?

Can you talk about how you see yourself in terms of how you approach Bharatanatyam, or what you want to do as an artist with the form? Is it consciously trying to get away from this identity that people are expecting? How do you approach it artistically in what you are creating?

Bageshree: Can you introduce the clip we are about to see?

Sujit: My engagement with the dance evolves. I love the traditional aspects of the dance, but as I am making my own work, which is something new and I am exploring this, I don't necessarily see myself as South Asian, or a Bharatanatyam dancer, or a traditionally trained dancer. I see myself as someone who is trying to express through the medium of dance, using the language I have been trained in. This may sound privileged as we do have a history of violent marginalization of a certain community of dancers, from whom this form has been appropriated

on to Brahmin bodies. I get that, that is how I have come into this form, and I own it – so I don't see myself as a Bharatanatyam dancer, I use Bharatanatyam as a language to create what I have to say through dance. For me, it is a medium to explore my queer identity, and to create space for queer art and queer artists in this form, which is missing.

I want to tell my story, I want to live my experience through dance, and that is where I keep going instinctively. It's not a conscious choice to move away from Bharatanatyam, but I am not inclined to make work in the traditional context, because I find there is a lot of rich work already available. The work I make comes from that space, but it also stems from the experiences I have as a Canadian dancer in Vancouver. I live here as a proud queer man, and that is not available to me in a *Margam* (a traditional way of presenting dance). I absolutely love the fantasy of playing those characters Margam offers, so I'm not against that. I'm just saying the work I create comes from a place that hasn't been created, and I want to create that space for other queer artists because I know they feel similarly. It's my way of representing queer expression, narratives, aesthetics, and to hold space for queer identifying Bharatanatyam artists.

Sujit: The other dancer is Arun Mathai from LA. He is one of the few openly queer Bharatanatyam dancers. When I was conceiving this work Arun came to mind, in fact I had a conversation with him, because I needed to make sure he was open to all the avenues of where the work would go.

The musician is Curtis Andrews, he's originally from Newfoundland, and currently based in Vancouver. He is a percussionist; he is absolutely brilliant and the Mridangam is one of the instruments he plays amongst many others. I invited him through working in a different space together, and I love the rhythm he creates.

(Clip played of Sujit's work *Off Centre*, created in Vancouver at The Scotiabank Dance Centre for 12 Minutes Max)

Bageshree: You talk about how you don't see yourself as wanting to represent Bharatanatyam, but obviously the form is very clear in terms of the steps, the mudras, and even using the Mridangam. Within it, there are certain ingredients in the quest of doing something personal, which you can't erase. I would look at that and say it is Bharatanatyam.

Sujit: I wouldn't say it is Bharatanatyam, only because I know the conversations I am opening myself up to from Bharatanatyam artists, and it is going to be dismissive. My intention is not to veer away from Bharatanatyam, I am a proudly trained Bharatanatyam artist who also enjoys and thrives dancing Margam's. I am happy if you see Bharatanatyam because it is always going to come from a grounded place of training and love for the form. So yes, everything in my body manifests outwards into my dance. I'm not trying to get away from Bharatanatyam, but I don't want to put a specific label on it.

Another question offered to me by someone who's seen this, was, am I a queer artist or am I an artist who makes queer work? These labels are specific, and people arrive to my work with a certain lens. But, when I allow myself the freedom to make what I want to make without having the baggage of being South Asian, or a traditional dancer, or a Bharatanatyam dancer, I allow the

same freedom to whomever views it. I'm just not going to label it, and I am happy for you to call it Bharatanatyam. (40:43)

Bageshree: I wanted to touch upon the predominance of a particular culture. I recognize we are talking about Bharatanatyam here, as it is the form you all work within, and Bharatanatyam is as diverse as other classical/Indian dance styles from the Indian subcontinent. As somebody from India, we don't call ourselves South Asians. We may say 'Indian,' but even 'Indian' is a strange term (in terms of people calling it Bharat and Hindustan) and having to identify as Indian mainly to non-Indians.

Can you talk about your experience growing up here? Because your parents are not from India, they are from Sri-Lanka and Malaysia, so where do you feel you fit in learning the same dance styles from people in the Indian community? Because you spoke about feeling excluded – which is interesting. I think people use the term “South Asian” to include Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, so I would actually think of it as an inclusionary term. Can you talk about your experience with that?

THE CONNECTION OF THE TERM 'SOUTH ASIAN' WHEN IT COMES TO DANCE. Including the functionality of internal and external forces.

Ahalya: Before we saw Sujit's awesome work, many things came to mind about the history of these dance practices. For those of you who don't know, prior to colonization, there were different groups, who were in a community of performers, and artisans. I say it broadly, because I imagine this was happening in different states. They had different economic and government structures. By 1945/47, when there was the anti-Devadasi act instituted in newly independent India and across South Asia, these particular dancers were performing for temples as employees of the kings of these particular states. With the Act they were then banned from performing, which resonates with the banning of cultural practices that took place on these (Turtle Island/Canadian) territories in which we are now situated.

These political frameworks disrupted how we understood art. It changed what it meant, what its purpose was, and the people who were performing it. And so, we have an anti-Devadasi act which prevented the generational artisans of these dance and performing arts from doing their work, so then they were forced into different economies. When thinking about colonization, we can examine the economies we are forced into and who benefits from these economies.

This is not only about Europeans colonizing this land, it's about people in power embracing their power in order to own something that was not theirs in the first place. When we think about these statues tumbling down, there are dancers who have embraced these dances for one generation, and now are literally statues that we cannot tumble down. Sujit, when you said: “I don't say this is Bharatanatyam,” that's because the people who tell us what Bharatanatyam is, are literally drilling holes in our brain and bodies every day. When we talk about South Asians, we are so diverse and there are people in power and there are people who are not in power and we are using the same term, which makes it so complicated. Bharatanatyam is an excellent reflection of

that dynamic. Now we have practitioners who are a part of a generation, telling their children they are now the inheritors of their dance.

When Bharatanatyam was reformulated as an upper caste ancient dance practice, particular practitioners were evacuated from the dance. It became known as a pan-Asian dance form practiced across “Southeast Asia.” Many people who were part of this British empire across “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia” saw this dance as a symbol for surviving colonization. As somebody who has Sri Lankan ancestry, and whose grandmother was born in Malaysia, I thought, “this is a dance which can bring us back to something we have lost.” There is a lot of that in the foundation of what this dance is. It was considered pan-Asian, and recuperative of a pre-colonial experience, even though who was dancing and what was being danced were created through colonization.

When we think about Sri Lanka, it is diverse in terms of religion, what we call ethnicity, class, and language. We have different people performing this dance regardless of their background, because they saw it as a recuperative, anti-colonial form. In the early 20th century as tensions grew and as nationalism rose for the country and the state of Sri Lanka, then you had people deciding what is and isn't a part of Sri Lankan dance. Bharatanatyam was embraced at first and then it was like, “no, that is an Indian dance form, that is a foreign dance form, that is a minority Tamil dance form, we do not want to have it as a national dance.” I wanted to share this information, because I love the complexity of these practices which are sometimes undermined. In terms of my own practice, I have seen my own groups and teachers look down on people because of caste, I've seen them not want to eat in Sri Lankan homes because of caste. So, the caste part of Bharatanatyam is very present, but it's not something we have to be bound by because there are Sri Lankan, Indian, and Bangladeshi diaspora who are always countering these exclusive practices.

In university, I was always organizing emancipatory projects. I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire when I was 18/19. I ended up in an organization influenced educationally by Paulo Freire and *Theatre of the Oppressed* by Augusto Boal, and I really looked at art as a community-based activist project. So, my own dance work is really trying to address issues around liberation using the dance forms I studied. For the past 11 years I've been creating solo pieces and now an ensemble piece on the global war on terror. Sri Lanka was influenced by the idea of global war on terror, declared by George W. Bush. I'm thinking about what it means to be dispossessed of land, to be a part of these systems of imperialism, and how we are numbed to it. We can watch Palestine be bombed and we are numbed to it. We can watch India grieve and be numb to it. That's something I am learning, and it's a challenge because there is no sequence shared with me, and now I have to discover it on my own.

Brannavy: Ahalya spoke insightfully about the tension with the recuperation of studying Bharatanatyam to re-attach, relearn, and feel a sense of cultural identity, when the art form itself is evidence of India's Hindu nationalists' nation building and suppression of specific cast groups.

I came to learn Bharatanatyam in my dance teacher's basement, who would pride herself in being an exponent of Kalakshetra which is considered a prestigious dance academy, which pinpoints Rukmini Devi, who is considered a cultural icon in Bharatanatyam and South India. I

felt a sense of reclamation while learning the artform and I still consider my dance teacher's basement one of the safest places for me to connect with other young women. It was a tender environment for me to grow up in and come to know my culture. I am recently unlearning the historical evolution of Bharatanatyam, and how for displaced people, Bharatanatyam feels like a conduit to a culture we don't have access to, and are not able to freely express in Sri Lanka. We obscure these cast based histories of violence.

When I write about Bharatanatyam I have to really ask myself specific questions about how I situate the art form, its evolution, its introduction to myself, and if I need to be the one writing a specific piece about Bharatanatyam, or if there is someone who has a more intimate connection to these cast oppressed groups to be speaking on it. I really appreciate what Ahalya said about art being a project that is connected to liberation, because it's this constant interrogation I have to do when I think about producing work and writing around the dance form.

Bageshree: This is an opportunity for interrogation, we have to talk about the politics and the economy that created the cultural dance schools. This aspect of going to basement dance schools, I've been seeing the same phenomenon in any North American city, and suburb. When presenters look at South Asian dance practice in Canada and America, they think of that phenomenon of all these academies and schools. It's not something we represent, it's just one picture. Using dance as a conduit or as a way for the diaspora communities to connect with their culture, there is this whole politicization of it, because when I started learning Bharatanatyam, Bharatanatyam has nothing to do with my own ethnic culture or the culture that was left behind in India. But, you will have this experience of people wanting their children to learn, and it doesn't even matter which dance style it is, they want to learn any kind of South Asian dance style to connect with an idea of a culture that isn't present. There were never people in my family who were Bharatanatyam dancers, so how is that connected and why is dance used like that?

Ahalya: When I think about the schools, they have become this new economy which became a place for us to find belonging. Also, it was a place where that "belonging" was through a type of exclusion and exclusivity that still feels challenging to undo, because as much as we were finding a home through being with each other, I think we also learned behavioral practices that were very discriminatory, and I want to acknowledge that. Sujit, you didn't want to utter what a Bharatanatyam dancer might be expected to be like, but for me it was a lot of modesty, a lot of asexuality, a lot of body shaming around it, and there was a lot of upholding of people's backgrounds, there was a type of internal discrimination that was taught. I wanted to think about what it meant in terms of South Asian dance in the Canadian context

ADMITTING THE BARRIERS WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY AND PROXIMITY

Ahalya: I love how Bharatanatyam was created by colonization, and colonization is not only an external force but also an internal experience as well. Our own people were a part of colonization and colonization of other people within these territories. My issue around presentation is when I go to Sri Lanka or South Asia or Malaysia, I find the most amazing contemporary dance theater. But here, it's about tradition, bodies are expected to recoup this pre-colonial experience, and recoup our identities as we travel across oceans. There are walls put up around dance, and around

what Brown people are supposed to do in the places we call, “home.” There is more willingness to have those conversations there, then there are in some of the communities here, but these are general statements, there are always exceptions to everything that I say.

South Asian, Brown folks who are presenters, who are runners of festivals for 20 years, who are getting all of these grants have their own sob stories about how they suffered during the pandemic. In reality, they have been the barriers to creating a really cultivated audience. When I think about the arts, especially my last 7 years in British Columbia, I find it very exclusive, I find BIPOC folks being exclusive to other BIPOC folks. I think that White supremacy is a part of that conversation, I think land and land development is a part of that conversation. How are festivals thriving off of land development? How are festivals tied to colonization through the city? These are the types of conversations that need to be taking place for us to build a better audience and for us to build better art.

Bageshree: We are at this moment in time where everybody has to stop their programming, and there is all of this racial and historical reckoning. Now, this is a moment where things are changing, so in terms of dance presenters, and taking into account all of what we have talked about, how would a dance presenter approach a particular work? Maybe it's Bharatanatyam or Khattak based. How do you address the spectrum of truth and reconciliation and Black Lives Matter, without getting into box ticking? How do you present and market a particular dance work without getting into these labels?

Sujit, if we are going to talk about the general audience, how do you reflect and identify it?

Sujit: I wish I had an answer, but I don't know. I don't want to cater to an audience and let's not box an audience, an audience is an audience. Who responds and who wants to view a certain program is open. Firstly, I think before we begin to talk about that, there is a lot of work to be done by presenters and programmers. There is a whole lot of education needing to happen, because our dance forms exist in a culture. Where is the curiosity? Where is the intentionality? What is the creation of a certain artist, or what are they adding to a space? Secondly, providing access to artists who are trying to get funding or mentorships. Create an infrastructure for dancers, that dancers from the contemporary world have ready-made for them.

When we are pitted against the works from these established companies and artists, clearly they have that advantage. All of this needs to happen before we can talk about bringing audiences to our work.

Brannavy: I struggle with this as a writer, I think genres in music and dance really capture what we wish them to. I see the utility of “South Asian” as a label, and I can understand while it's rarely inclusive of all groups, it does serve a function introducing a specific cultural category to the stage.

In this cultural context, when we are uncovering graves of Indigenous children, and the mass movement towards Black liberation embodied through protest across the world, I think we need to be more creative in terms of how we gather and what we consider to be an opportunity for theater. I think in being inventive in how we gather and how we share our dance especially

whilst giving the utmost respect and care for the land that we are on, is an integral question moving forward, and it provides an opportunity for a type of exchange between cultures, and maybe reduces the importance of disingenuous labels to share our artforms.

Ahalya: I'm not sure I have an answer around presenters, I know that this is tied to an economy that sometimes feels very beyond us. When I think about who is an independent presenter, big festivals, small festivals, and in the midst of this one year being in the pandemic we are seeing a lot of small businesses close down, a lot of artists not being able to live here in Vancouver, as we celebrate how much our little parcel of land is worth. I looked at the TRC calls to action last night, and I have read them before, but when I look at those calls to action they are so specific, they are so informative, and yet so many people here have not read them. I want to remind everybody this is the only TRC in this whole world that has come through a lawsuit, and filed against the federal government. It was not the government of Canada who decided we need truth and reconciliation; it was survivors who said we need to sue our government in order to bring this forward. So, this is the work of them that created this platform, but yet so many people are not turning to it. The unpacking is happening in our own community, it needs to happen in our own community, it needs to happen across communities, it's not limited to one genre or one space. These are conversations that can embrace every single subject matter and individual.

Sujit: I ponder about this sometimes: In South Asian communities, how many of us really want these changes? because I find there are a lot of us who want to consider these specificities because of all the mandates that are coming to the funding bodies. People are promoting a certain way of viewing these arts and that keeps continuing.

I appreciate these conversations and I love being a part of them, but I also feel it is just lip service because the micro conversations don't happen and status quo prevails. It's really frustrating. In my opinion, there are not enough of us who want to push forward with changes. We are asking systems to change, we are asking for inclusivity, but before we do that let's get on the same page as practitioners and make sure that we are all working towards a collective goal

Bageshree: I have been on all of these diversity panels, and nothing was actually really changing, it was all the same programming. But I think that we are at an important junction where I think things have to change. The pandemic reflected whatever was happening before needed to be dismantled. (1:16mins)

BIOS

Dance Artists and Writers in Conversation: South Asian Dance – Exploring What It Means

Wednesday June 9, 2021

Brannavy Jeyasundaram is a writer and bharatanatyam dancer. Her main interest lies in exploring movement traditions and memory formation through understanding histories of displacement. Presently, she works as the Operations Officer at the non-profit organization People For Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL) and helps organize participatory arts initiatives with the Tamil Archive Project. She is also the Managing Editor of Adi Magazine. Her writing can be found in The Local, The Dance Current, Jacobin, and Tamil Guardian, among other places.

Ahalya Satkunaratham is an educator and artist who teaches courses in women's and gender studies and cultural studies. She is versed in liberatory education pedagogy that dynamically centers social change, transformation, and consciousness-raising and has, throughout her 20+ year career in teaching, designed courses and workshops that introduce human rights, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and decolonial practices through academic study and arts-making. She holds a Ph.D. in Critical Dance Studies from the University of California Riverside. She is a settler in Canada and currently lives on the unceded territories of the x̣m̄əθkwəȳəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwutlh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Ahalya's book, *Moving Bodies Navigating Conflict: Practicing Bharata Natyam in Colombo, Sri Lanka* (2020, Wesleyan University Press), explores how dance practices make and undo local and state nationalisms, the intersections of gender and ethnicity with cultural practices, and the personal experiences of Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war. Other written works can be found in the new edition of *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies*, *Dance Research Journal*, *SAMAR: South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection*, *Options Magazine*, *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies*, and in *Women's Studies Quarterly*.

Sujit Vaidya (Choreographer/Dancer) is an independent dance artist based in Vancouver BC. He has performed extensively in Canada, US, Europe and India. Trained in Bharatanatyam, he predominantly works as a soloist. He has collaborated with companies such as Co Erasga in Vancouver, inDANCE in Toronto, Nava Dance in California and Spilling Ink in Washington, DC to name a few. He continues his training with Guru A. Lakshman. His work reflects an urban sensibility juxtaposed seamlessly in an art form rooted in tradition. As a queer artist of colour, his choreographies and collaborations question the narrative and relevance of non-inclusive traditional texts. He aims to create space for queer expression within the context of Bharatanatyam and seeks collaborations with other queer artists of colour. His works have been part of festivals such as Vancouver International Dance Festival, *Dancing On The Edge* and *Dance Victoria* to name a few. He was one of six Canadian artists chosen to participate in a 3-week residency at CCOV, Montreal in May 2019. He was the first South Asian artist to receive the Vancouver City's Mayor's award as best emerging dance artist in 2010. Many of his works have been supported by BC Arts as well as the Canada Council. He is currently developing a dance on film titled *Sacred Sacrilegious* which is being supported by Anandam Dance Theatre as well as the Canada Council.

Bageshree Vaze is an Indo-Canadian dance artist and musician. Raised in St. John's, NL, Bageshree initially trained in Bharata Natyam, and studied vocal music with her father,

Damodar Vaze. She later trained in Kathak dance with Jai Kishan Maharaj in New Delhi, and studied vocal music with the renowned Veena Sahasrabuddhe. As a vocalist, Bageshree has five CDs to her credit, including Tarana, an album of music for Indian dance, which was released in India by Times Music under the name Khanak. In 2004, Bageshree was named an MTV India 'rising star" and in 2010, she was awarded the K.M. Hunter Award in Dance. Bageshree has created/choreographed numerous Kathak dance works and has performed in major festivals in Canada and abroad, such as the CanAsian International Dance Festival, the "Vasantotsav" festival in New Delhi, Joshua Tree Music festival in California, and the CANada Dance Festival. Her 2019 production "A Hidden Princess" was nominated for 3 Dora Mavor Moore Awards including Outstanding Performance by an Individual, Outstanding Sound Composition and Outstanding Production, and Bageshree was a finalist for the 2019 Johanna Metcalf Performing Arts Awards. Bageshree has lectured and taught dance through the University of Toronto, Indiana University, and the World Dance Alliance. Bageshree has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Carleton University and a master's in dance from York University.

Pratibha Art mission statement:

Pratibha Arts serves to enhance and advance the cultural fabric of Ontario and Canada through the production, education, and performance of arts, often featuring influences from South Asian cultures, which are reflective of this significant demographic in Canada. Under the Artistic leadership of Bageshree Vaze the organization's vision is to promote artistic excellence as well as nurture future generations of artists in Ontario and reflect the current "faces" of Toronto and Canada. "Pratibha" means "creative intelligence" in Sanskrit. Pratibha Arts activities enhance the collective artistic intelligence of Canadians, but also explore new avenues and models for intelligently supporting creativity.