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| Contemporary South Asian Dance |
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| Contemporary South Asian Dance is performed in the geographical territories of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and in the diaspora of South Asians in the global North and South. In the early twentieth century, migrations into Southeast Asia, parts of Africa, and the Caribbean originated from British colonization. Later, South Asians relocated to Canada, Britain, Europe, Australia, and the US.  Contemporary South Asian choreography is inspired by indigenous traditions, Indian classical dance styles, and is at times hindered by political and religious restrictions repressing dance expression in public. Overview of Contemporary South Asian Dance Aritsts Indian-American Diaspora includes first-generation teachers of classical Indian dance in the US and Canada whose new work on contemporary themes and dance-dramas from Indian epics is based on classical Indian dance. Bharatanatyam teachers in North America include Los Angeles based Viji Prakash, Ramya Harishankar, Toronto-based Menaka Thakkar and Lata Pada, among others; kathak teachers include Los Angeles-based Anjani Ambegaonkar, Prachi Dixit, San Francisco-based Chitresh Das, among others. |
| Summary  Contemporary South Asian Dance is performed in the geographical territories of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and in the diaspora of South Asians in the global North and South. In the early twentieth century, migrations into Southeast Asia, parts of Africa, and the Caribbean originated from British colonization. Later, South Asians relocated to Canada, Britain, Europe, Australia, and the US.  Contemporary South Asian choreography is inspired by indigenous traditions, Indian classical dance styles, and is at times hindered by political and religious restrictions repressing dance expression in public. Overview of Contemporary South Asian Dance Aritsts Indian-American Diaspora includes first-generation teachers of classical Indian dance in the US and Canada whose new work on contemporary themes and dance-dramas from Indian epics is based on classical Indian dance. Bharatanatyam teachers in North America include Los Angeles based Viji Prakash, Ramya Harishankar, Toronto-based Menaka Thakkar and Lata Pada, among others; kathak teachers include Los Angeles-based Anjani Ambegaonkar, Prachi Dixit, San Francisco-based Chitresh Das, among others.  Second-generation artists of Indian or part-Indian origin trained in Indian classical dance and/or in ballet, modern dance, or yoga innovate from multiple movement vocabularies creating hybrid contemporary work with multimedia. They include Post Natyam Collective (originating in Los Angeles and now based in Los Angeles, Kansas, and Germany) who create ‘long-distance choreography’ via the internet; Sheetal Gandhi (Los Angeles), Parijat Desai (New York), among other artists.[[1]](#endnote-1)  Hari Krishnan (Toronto-based) grew up in Singapore, studying bharatanatyam from a young age. He creates contemporary Indian dance with his multiethnic InDance Company, challenging national and gender stereotypes.[[2]](#endnote-2) Natasha Bakht (Ottawa-based) creates hybrid choreography from bharatanatyam training.  Contemporary British-Indian artists include bharatanatyam-trained Shobana Jeyasingh, Anusha Subramaniam, Mayuri Boonham among others. Second-generation Akram Khan, who is British-Bangladeshi, grew up in London where he studied kathak and contemporary dance. His choreography includes high profile collaborations with dancers, visual artists, and sculptors.[[3]](#endnote-3)  In London, organizations such as Kadam host the ‘Unlocking Creativity’ workshop that enables emerging artists to develop work with senior mentors. Akademi, another significant organization, plays an extremely influential role in bringing South Asian Dance to the British mainstream. *Pulse Magazine: Asian Music and Dance,* also London-based and published by Kadam and edited by Sanjeevini Dutta, includes local and global South Asian artist profiles, interviews, feature articles, reviews of performances, books, and conferences.  Dance Festivals such as Erasing Borders, Engendered Rituals (in New York), Desh Pradesh, and Contemporary Choreography (Toronto) provide significant platforms for new, edgy work.  Contemporary dance in Pakistan faces many challenges. Since 1947 when the colonial British brokered the Partition between India and Pakistan leading to the formation of an Islamic state in Pakistan, the climate for dance and other performances in public has been severely restricted. Pakistan’s mostly military governments since 1947 espouse conservative, bordering on fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.  The influence of India’s bharatanatyam in Pakistan was fraught with conflicts since this style was ‘revived’ and named as such (from the original *sadir* dance of temple dancers or *devadasis*) and given Indian nationalist designation in a common mistranslation as ‘dance of India’. Furthermore, bharatanatyam was elided with Hinduism – a development that was not welcome to the majority Muslim population in Pakistan.  Prior to the 1947 Partition, prominent bharatanatyam dancer, Indu Mitha received training in the Uday Shankar style from Zohra and Kameshwan Sehgal in Lahore during her high school years. Later, she came to India to study Kalakshetra-style bharatanatyam in Delhi and Chennai with Lalita Shashtri. Mitha then moved back to Pakistan after marriage and continued teaching bharatanatyam even during General Zia’s repressive regime when dance performances were relegated to private homes. Mitha, now in her eighties, adapted her signature bharatanatyam style to include Urdu songs attuned to Pakistani cultural identity.  Mitha’s daughter and disciple, Tehreema Mitha, taught and choreographed works from 1993-1997, moving in 1997 to the US and forming Tehreema Aabvaan Dance Productions Company in Maryland where she now lives. Like her mother, Tehreema adheres to bharatanatyam with inventive uses of North Indian music, folk instruments, along with guitar, saxophone, and piano for contemporary work. Tehreema’s choreographic explorations move away from Hindu mythology to themes she considers universal, drawing from science, philosophy, literature, everyday struggles of modern life, and gender issues. Tehreema remarks, ‘My work is not fusion. It is what we are today; now, I refuse to be tidily slotted and labeled as “Ethnic”, “Oriental”, or “Traditional” . . . We are part of a dynamic, ever changing World Culture in which, if we do not lose our roots and sense of self, we can discover so much more’[[4]](#endnote-4)  Tehreema Mitha with Sheema Kirmani (odissi) and Nighat Choudhry (kathak) presented innovative choreography based on poems by Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Bulleh Shah at the first National Dance Festival in Pakistan (1995). Sheema Kirmani studied at the Croydon College of Arts in London, later in India with Leela Samson, Mayadhur Raut, and Aloka Pannikar. Nighat Choudhry, born in Pakistan, grew up in London, studying ballet, contemporary dance, then at Kathak Kendra (Delhi) with the late Pandit Durga Lal and his disciple Uma Dogra in Bombay. At the 1995 National Dance Festival in Pakistan, all three artists, Mitha, Kirmani, and Choudhry created works inspired by humanists (Rabindranath Tagore), feminists (Ismat Chugtai), and Sufi saints (Rumi, Bulleh Shah), demonstrating ‘a wealth of initiative and imagination (that) augurs well for the development of a new generation of Pakistani dancers.’[[5]](#endnote-5) Kirmani’s theatre and dance group Therik-e-Niswan uses odissi in contemporary choreography to explore social attitudes towards women, striving for gender equality.  Creative dance is allowed freer expression in Bangladesh than in Pakistan’s Islamic State from which Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) separated after the 1971 war of independence. Bangladeshi contemporary dance is based on various influences—the Indian classical dance style, Manipuri, Middle Eastern dance, and Bangladeshi folk and tribal dances such as *santal*, *chhokra* (where boys play female roles), *lathi* (performed by youth carrying daggers and cymbals during Muharram, the Muslim holy month), *ghatu* dance, and Kali dance.  Although predominantly Muslim, Bangladesh borders the Indian state of West Bengal, which is mostly Hindu; the two states share the Bengali language and a love for Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s dance dramas and music. In 2012, in celebration of Tagore’s 150th birth centenary, the Bangladeshi Shadhona Company adapted Tagore’s *Tasher Desh* using Manipuri dance and Purulia *chhau* (West Bengal’s martial arts with huge masks and actors playing gods, demons, animals) with contemporary movement vocabularies. This innovative venture was a collaboration between well-known Bangladeshi dancer Warda Rihab, specializing in Manipuri, and Rachel Krische from the UK.  British-Bangladeshi Akram Khan returned to his parents’ native Bangladesh with his work, *Desh* (homeland), after previous renowned contemporary choreography with Juliette Binoche in *In-I*, with Sidi Larbi Cherouki in *zero degrees*. *Desh* contends with identity and immigrant dilemmas of belonging rendered in Khan’s signature virtuosic technique.  Contemporary dance in Sri Lanka includes traditional Sri Lankan and western contemporary styles. naTANDA, Sri Lanka’s first contemporary dance company blends traditional Kandyan dance with ballet, yoga, and bharatanatyam in its signature style creating contemporary Sri Lankan dance theatre.  Chitrasena Dance Company, founded in the 1940s, is Sri Lanka’s oldest, most prestigious, and pioneering dance company. The company experiments with movement vocabularies and preserves traditional dance forms and innovates within them. Similarly, Mohan Sudusinghe—Meranga Dancing Company explores new avenues in modern dance and along with traditional forms creates contemporary works. Venuri Perera, a member of Chitrasena Vajira Dance Ensemble, a choreographer-dancer and psychologist collaborates in various dance/theatre/multimedia projects in Sri Lanka, UK, Japan, Spain, and Cambodia.  Nilan Maligaspe of Arpegio Creative Dancing Academy offers underprivileged children the opportunity to learn Creative Dance, ballet, and modern dance. Maligaspe has produced *Black White and Red*, a ballet, and *Solace in Stone* a dance-theatre piece (2010). Currently, he is creating a dance theatre based on Aime Cesaire’s *Tempest*.  Contemporary Dance in South Asia is vibrant and evolving. Artists based in the geographical territory of South Asia and those in the diaspora all contribute to creative developments in contemporary dance. |
| Further reading:  (Interview with Shobana Jeyasingh)  (Katrak)  (Kothari)  (Mitra)  (O’Shea) |

1. See Ketu H. Katrak, *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See especially Chapters 5 & 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. www.inDANCE.ca [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk](http://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk) and www.akramkhancompany.net [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.jazbah.org/tehreemam.php [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. http:samarmagazine.org/archive/articles/77 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)