

National Cultural Policy Submission

Organisation: Joint Submission from leaders from South Asian Performing Arts

Submission: Made on behalf of part of the South Asian Performing Arts Sector
– not a formalised peak body, organisation or agency
– Can be made public

Date: Thursday 18 August 2022

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ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION: SOUTH ASIAN PERFORMING ARTS

This submission has been developed and endorsed by a group of arts leaders with exemplary histories, practices and expertise in South Asian performing arts – diaspora Australian artists, forms and communities.

Leaders contributing to this Submission include:

- Dr Priya Srinivasan, [Sangam: Performing Arts Festival and Platform of South Asia and Diaspora](#)(Vic)
- Chandana Brijesh, Sindhubhairavi Centre for Indian Arts and Culture (Vic)
- Dr Chandrabhanu OAM, Bharatalaya Academy (Vic)
- Ghirija Jayaraj (WA/ Vic)
- Tara Rajakumar OAM, Natya Sudha Dance Company (Vic)
- Raina Peterson, Karma Dance (Vic)
- Shyamla Eswaran, Bindi Bosses (NSW)

The leaders were convened by Dancehouse and Critical Path with support of the Australia Council for the Arts.

Two digital consultation meetings were held with participants and were facilitated by Dr Priya Srinivasan. From these discussions, Dr Priya Srinivasan and Josh Wright, Dancehouse drafted a response which was then endorsed by all participants.

This submission reflects some leaders' voices from a vibrant and diverse sector within dance and music; South Asian Performing Arts.

Contributions and recognition of South Asian diaspora artists, forms, organisations, schools and communities have been mostly absent from recent state and federal arts policies and funding patterns.

This submission is not a consultation, but instead attempts to forward some urgent and important views from key leaders in the sector in a time-dependent process.

ABOUT SOUTH ASIAN PERFORMING ARTS

The contributors of this submission have practices in forms including: Bharatyanatyam, Bollywood, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam, Odissi and contemporary practice ...

Culturally, contributors represent lineages including: Indian, Tamil, Telugu, Fijian-Indian, Sri Lankan, Chinese and Malay heritage.

Although convened through the lens of “dance”, this submission uses the term “South Asian performing arts” to acknowledge the intrinsic interconnections between dance, song, music, and theatre through these forms.

South Asian performing arts are already inherently “contemporary” and connected to the diverse languages and cultures of India, South Asia and diaspora communities and their complex identity and evolution through colonisation. The history of most South Asian performing art forms is connected to their presentation context and reception e.g. at the temple, in the theatre, storytelling, on the street and in cinema.

Understanding of South Asian cultures comes through the forms: stories, traditions, song, music, theatre, language, gesture, costume, protocols, language, training, history, philosophy, and interrelationships between individuals and generations are all taught and learnt through the forms through years of oral transmission. There is a common misconception that these forms are purely religious.

Outside of South Asian communities, there is not the same recognition from the mainstream or wider public of the leaders and elders in these practices.

Within Australia South Asian forms have been subjected to racist immigration policies (such as the White Australia Policy) that have curtailed their practices while enabling white Euro-American forms to thrive. Euro-American forms themselves have been influenced by South Asian forms but these relationships remain hidden (Srinivasan, 2012, 2020). Despite these hurdles, South Asian forms have emerged as a strong and vibrant part of the arts sector (albeit largely unrecognised and unfunded post 2001)..

Dance and performance is deeply embedded in South Asian identity, community and knowledge making. It is a basic human and cultural right for South Asians to have access to their practices. Therefore implementation of structures that redress the marginalisation and erasure of these forms must be addressed at every level, in the many ways these forms are practiced as cultural dance, community dance, popular dance, traditional dance, ritual dance, social dance, film dance, contemporary dance, and experimental dance.

SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITIES

South Asian populations in Australia have exploded since a well-spring of performing arts in the 1980s. People of Indian ancestry alone in Australia number more than 780,000 – an increase of almost 165,000 since 2016 (Marshall, 2022). As migrant groups go, Indians now sit second only to the British – and demographic statistics show that they will be the highest migrant group in Australia within five years. There are more than 100 schools of classical music and dance in Melbourne (Srinivasan, 2020) with thousands of students of these forms trained over decades with little or no funding and no avenues to explore their art outside community contexts.

COMMENTARY

- Previous policies such as Arts in a Multicultural Australia (AMCA) provided some historical opportunities for artists in South Asian performing arts. Since these policies lapsed (early 2000s), opportunities have dried up and leaders have not been as visible or as influential as they once were.
- South Asian forms incorporate multiple performing arts forms incorporating dance, music, song and theatre. They are inseparable. Considering or receiving funding for just one singular discipline (such as dance) is to the detriment of the true nature of the form.
- South Asian artists acknowledge and respect the pioneering work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island artists who have pioneered mainstream success in the arts. Many South Asian artists have been mentored and supported by First Nations artists and leaders and collaborated with them. There are opportunities for First Nations artists and other people of colour (POC) to drive initiatives and collaborations, to collectively break down barriers to access and connotations of their works and decolonial practices from shared histories of colonialism. Specifically, First Nations arts leaders have been instrumental in challenging ideas and precepts of the “traditional” and “contemporary” which are also applied to South Asian performing arts.
- The word “contemporary” is an exclusionary term in Australian arts and has become synonymous with dance from white Western modern forms from the US and Europe (Srinivasan, 2012). Contemporary is a colonial term which appears to prioritise “new work” and “innovation” through the lens of American post/modernism — not defined by artists and communities themselves. South Asian Performing Arts are themselves a mix of contemporary fusions, mixes and practices in a state of ongoing change and evolution for millenia. They are dynamic forms and ideas fractured and contextualised by identity, nationhood, imperialism, postcoloniality and migration. Australian arts are a plurality of cultures, languages and voices. This term is a more comfortable expression than “multicultural” or “ethnic” which itself assumes a dominant White/ Anglo-centric culture.
- Through their presence and facilitation, leaders and practitioners of South Asian performing arts create accessible spaces for communities and audiences within institutions and structures (schools, performing arts centres, community halls, local councils). This is often at the financial expense of these artists and in addition to their work as art-makers/ teachers.
- There are recognised artists and leaders in South Asian Performing Arts within mainstream and experimental arts networks, but they are often exoticised further pressuring expectations from them. Like many people of colour, these artists become unofficial and unelected representatives of their cultures, forms and communities when they are themselves bridging other community intersections (gender, class, colour, language, sexuality and tradition). Like most contemporary artists, their role is often two-fold; to both preserve and critique their practiced cultures.
- Some South Asian performing arts and artists want to be experienced by the “mainstream” and others by diverse communities outside the mainstream. The inability to have choice currently is the main issue. These are forms for everyone — not exclusively the realm of South Asian and diaspora peoples. South Asian performing arts have wide and deep interest and exposure in the UK, Canada, US, and across South and South East Asia — this is not seen in Australia at the same level.

- There is desire for both professional artistic practice and community practice in the South Asian performing arts but there are few opportunities for paid work as elite practitioners in either area.
- The practice of South Asian performing arts is extremely effective at practicing and maintaining culture: sharing culture, promoting pride, self-worth and wellbeing, empowerment, community cohesion and coherence, as well as creative and recreational benefits.
- Influence and representation within existing mechanisms and institutions within the arts is an ongoing primary concern.
- Most of the work in South Asian performing arts is done by individuals running schools with multi-generational students, performers and collaborators. The schools offer regular multi-annual performances as recitals and this is primarily the only way to regularly see or experience South Asian performing arts. These schools are elite institutions often run as small businesses with no profit. They fulfill vital cultural roles in communities around Australia and have huge potential to reach mainstream audiences, take-up opportunities, and to collaborate with each-other as professional artistic companies.
- Cultural processes and self determined practices are key to South Asian dance development and representation.
- Sangam is perhaps the only platform and festival for South Asian Arts that exists currently in Melbourne since 2019. It is not an organisation nor does it have regular funding mechanisms in place. Sangam was established to rectify some of the inequities noted above by South Asian leaders in the sector. Over the last 3 years it has been supported by Creative Victoria's India Strategy Fund and local councils on a project to project basis to feature over 200 South Asian artists from diverse backgrounds and disciplinary practices but there has been very little support at the national level. It needs more support in order to continue the needed work in the sector. Currently it is still underfunded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) A national strategy for South Asian performing arts

A national strategy should be developed following a wider consultation with South Asian artists and communities. The strategy will articulate and respond to the growing strength, capacity and maturity of the sector and recommend programs, initiatives and policies to support, celebrate, platform and offer professional opportunities for the South Asian performing arts locally and nationally.

The strategy will include an audit of existing schools, artists, gurus and communities, and a short history of the South Asian forms in Australia and the legacy of key leaders, styles and lineages. Some of this work has already begun on a state level by Dr. Priya Srinivasan but this needs a national level exploration, support and funding to continue.

The strategy will outline how Government and the wider arts and education sector can collaborate and support South Asian performing arts through education, communication, and application.

2) A recurrent festival of South Asian performing arts

At least one, nationally recurring festival of South Asian performing arts produced and programmed by, for and with South Asian performing arts leaders and communities. Sangam is the only current platform and festival for South Asian Arts but does not have ongoing investment or support from Government.

The festival should be for a general public audience but will become a focal point for the South Asian performing arts sector and audiences. The festival celebrates Australian artists in these forms with a growing remit to engage internationally.

3) Portfolio investment in key South Asian Performing Arts Organisations

At least two recurrently funded organisation with a remit for South Asian performing arts:

- One professional organisation led by a senior making-artist
- One organisation with a remit as producing/ presenting house or peak body

These organisations become a foothold for the South Asian performing arts community: a beacon for both professional artistic practice and visibility. One organisation should be a professional company by a senior making artist. Another organisation – a producing/ presenting house – would support independent artists, organisations through targeted producing, programming and presenting initiatives. Both companies could invest in touring and education initiatives and act as important representatives.

4) Funding

In line with many other submissions, access to a more robust, transparent, accessible and contestable funding available to organisations and individuals. Importantly, South Asian performing arts should be competitive in these rounds. Grant programs should be accompanied with training to ensure grant access. Fellowships and grants to individuals already undertaking significant and diverse work in the community are important to the South Asian performing arts and have historically been impactful for leaders to undertake research, outreach and much-needed sabbaticals.

5) Equity, safety and cultural literacy

Programs and initiatives that support equity, safety, cultural awareness and literacy are needed across the arts sector, within Government and in education. Appropriate hiring and recruitment and representation: cluster hiring, specialist form knowledge, lived-experience are priorities for South Asian performing artists and arts workers.

6) Universal Basic Income and aligned strategies

Echoing the National Dance Managers submission, South Asian performing artists and arts workers earn a living through many activities, from casual work (in and outside the sector) to self-generated entrepreneurial activity and in the gig economy. The development of a mechanism that ensures this portfolio employment structure is sustainable, such as a Universal Basic Income, would support the precarious and uneven nature of most employment along with protecting and advancing individual rights, conditions and entitlements.

7) Targeted initiatives to strengthen the sector

Informed by a South Asian performing arts strategy, targeted initiatives have the opportunity to connect artists or colour to First Nations artists and others through mentoring, outreach, and professional development programs.

8) Quotas, affirmative action and Representation

South Asians and South Asian artists constitute a major part of the Australian population but are not reflected in arts funding categories that reflect this majority demographic. They are not present as leaders of arts organisations, festival directors. By any count, the size, diversity and professionalism of South Asian performing arts are not representative by any Government investment or policy (local, state or nationally). They also do not exist on boards, reviews, or peer processes; basically they do not occupy any positions of leadership or decision making in the arts sector. There is no parity with western artists and art forms in the arts sector. We request an overhaul of the current system.

Quotas, affirmative action and representation should be adopted and influenced by Government, and through Government influenced funding. Festivals and producing houses (often funded at State and Local Government level) have a significant part to play to present and produce South Asian performing arts. Quotas commit policy to practice and can be strongly influenced by Government and a National Cultural Policy and have been historically effective.

A quota based system that is instated on artistic "excellence" to account for alternate aesthetics and a widening of the definition of the "contemporary" to enable access and cultural equity.

9) National digital strategy

A National digital strategy would strongly benefit from South Asian performing arts content-makers, contributors, and audiences.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

- Survey: *Access to Excellence* commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts in 1988.
- Chandrabhanu on Tradition and Innovation for the Australia Council for the Arts in 1993.
- Marshall, Konrad. SMH, August 15, 2022.
<https://www.smh.com.au/national/educated-ambitious-ever-more-powerful-how-indian-migration-is-changing-the-nation-20220628-p5axb6.html?fbclid=IwAR32MosFgnjrO6WBal4mrkOERtDexoEh1jYQriudOaNDCgKmcIUe9rwNDCY>
- Srinivasan, Priya. *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labour*. Temple University Press, 2012.
- Srinivasan, Priya. "Indian Dance In Diaspora: US and Australian Contexts," Oxford Handbook, Oxford University Press,, 2020.
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/g3c82h71zaa2ss4/Oxford%20article%20india%20Australia.pdf?dl=0>
- FILM: *Voices of South Asian Arts* commissioned, directed and produced by Sangam (2019)
<https://vimeo.com/739650217> (password: Sangam2019)

PERMISSIONS

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