

National Cultural Policy Submission

Organisation: [Sangam](#): Performing Arts Platform and Festival Of South Asia & Diaspora

Submission: Made on behalf of 200+ South Asian artists represented by the platform/ Festival from 2019–present
– not a formalised peak body, organisation or agency
– Can be made public

Date: Thursday 18 August 2022

Contact details: C/o Dr. Priya Srinivasan co-Artistic Director of Sangam

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Keysborough, Victoria – 3173

ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION: SOUTH ASIAN PERFORMING ARTS

This submission attempts to represent some urgent and important views from the perspective of the Sangam Platform/Festival and the 200+ artists who have been a part of the festival/platform since its inception in 2019.

This submission reflects some voices from a vibrant and diverse sector within dance and music; South Asian Performing Arts including a video titled “Voices” which include intergenerational perspectives on the state of South Asian performing arts and lack of funding/ support for a thriving arts world that exists on the margins and fringes.

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.

Partner Organisations: BlakDance, City of Casey (Bunjil Place), Drum Theatre Dandenong, Abbotsford Convent, Dancehouse, Creative Victoria, Insite Arts, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, MAV, City of Yarra, City of Melbourne.

Artists: 200+

A Selection from the 45 schools/organisations represented by Sangam Festival/ Platform since 2019:

Melbourne Hindustani Classical Society, Gamaka, Keerthana Music School, Keerthana Ladies Choir, Laya Vidya Centre, Academy of Indian Music and Dance, Krishna Ravali School of Music, Sapthaswara School of Carnatic Music, Geethaanjalie School of Carnatic Music, Natyalaya School of Bharatanatyam, Nadanalaya Academy, Narthanalaya Academy of Indian Music and Dance, Nrithakshetra School of Indian Classical Dance, Chandralaya School of Dance, Natyatharu School of Dance, Shanthi Ramakrishnan’s School of Dance

Cultures Represented: Indian, Mauritian, Thai, Sri Lankan, Fijian Indian, Malaysian, Singaporean, European/Caucasian, Chinese, First Nations.

Sangam and First Nations Commitment

Sangam acknowledges and respects the crucial decolonial work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island artists who have pioneered mainstream success in the arts. Sangam acknowledges that we are based in the unceded lands of the Kulin Nation and sovereignty was never ceded. Sangam began a partnership with BlakDance (the leading organisation for First Nations representation in the arts) to find common goals and solutions to the discrimination that both South Asian artists

and First Nations artists face in the sector. 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. Acknowledging how 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 as has been evidenced in the ongoing partnership between Sangam and BlakDance. More funding for works that find ways to decolonise together is needed.

CONTEXT for Sangam:

Dr. Priya Srinivasan, Uthra Vijay, and Hari Sivanesan together with the Sangam team brought a unique festival like none other to Melbourne in 2019 and 2021 with 2020 being the year of online development, workshops, lectures, online international residencies and mentoring, despite covid lockdowns in Melbourne. Sangam has produced/ directed/ presented 16 sold out shows. Without doubt Sangam has changed the state of performance in Melbourne, Victoria. As the testimonials, critical industry and audience response suggest, artists and audiences alike ranging in age from 18 to 78 were moved, shaken, provoked, challenged and enjoyed the range of events that Sangam offered for the mind, soul and body.

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 8000-10000 students of these forms trained over decades with little or no funding and no avenues to explore their art outside community contexts.

Sangam responded to the very limited professional opportunities for these South Asian diaspora artists in Victoria who mainly perform in school halls, community centres, with a lack of access to professional theatre spaces. There is also the lack of connection to current programming in mainstream festivals of Asian art which do not take into account diaspora. Sangam created new models and pathways for thoughtful powerful engagement to address some of these imbalances thanks to the visionary support of Creative Victoria’s seed funding via the India Strategy Fund. Sangam also has partners in Melbourne City and outer Melbourne Suburbs with venue partners such as Bunjil Place, Dancehouse, Drum Theatre, Abbotsford Convent and MAV. Sangam also has artistic partners such as the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Australian Opera creating truly world quality intercultural work.

Sangam as a festival and platform has increased the level of training and performance of young Victorian artists in master classes with high profile international artists, and enabled collaborations at the highest level of art making between professional Victorian and international artists. Sangam generated provocative content that included multi-generational, multi-disciplinary forms ranging from classical to spoken word, comedy, performance art and contemporary with developmental and experimental components.

More than any other festival of India, Asia or South Asia in the past few years that has been presented in Victoria, this festival met and exceeded all KPI’s set for it by bringing the voice of the community in conversation with mainstream and venues, the professional framing of artistic work, deep engagement with artists and audiences, skill building and creating new pathways for professionalisation. The program has created the framework for long term connections for meaningful exchanges between Victoria and India by harnessing the skills of the diaspora as spelled out in DFAT’s India Economic Strategy (to 2035).

This has set the wheels in motion for soft power approaches to cultural diplomacy between India and Victoria, harnessing skills of Victorian artists while keeping stakeholders engaged and interested, with an eclectic inter-faith population of audiences coming to see the work because of its diverse and nuanced programming. At a time when there is a national dialogue around South Asia, the agenda set by Australia Council for the region, Sangam has already begun this conversation curated by Victorian South Asian artists to extend this vision of the diaspora both locally and globally.

Guided by BlakDance in working ethically on stolen land, Sangam brought together high profile established and emerging South Asian- Australian artists based in Melbourne on a shared platform with award winning, globally renowned artists from India. The meeting commenced a creative discourse on the intersections of their artistic practices, their shared and conflicting lineages and the paths they are forging into contemporary diasporic identities. This meant framing the experimental in conversation with the classical, and bringing together intergenerational, LGBTQIA+, and diverse artists with connections to South Asian performance in development and collaboration on urban platforms.

To create long term exchanges and meaningful engagement, each of the performances in the festival was designed with a residency/workshop and/or associated panels. By bringing lead artists from India and partnering them with Melbourne based South Asian arts practitioners, the skills and creative exchange facilitated through the festival was intended to create long-lasting impacts on the Melbourne arts scene alongside one-off performances. The festival provided opportunities for works-in-development to be showcased to gain insight into the process and possible outcomes of intercultural collaboration and skills exchange.

We now have a model for self-represented frameworks for festivals in Victoria in the move towards self-representation and equitable representation for and by Victorian artists of colour. Sangam heralds the beginning of the next phase of Australian arts – a reimagining of the arts sector that is equitable, rich with critical dialogue and practice to empower an upcoming generation of visionary artists, cultivated from the unique identity of the South Asian diaspora in Australia. However, without adequate and consistent funding Sangam cannot continue nor can it expand to a national level platform and festival and take the place it deserves on the funded arts ecology.

Rationale

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.

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. Support Sangam on a national level with regular access to rights such as 4 year funding

Support Sangam Platform and Festival with access to regular funding. 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 - Appoint South Asian leaders to funding bodies/ boards/ 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.

Support Material

- [How Indian Migration is Changing the Nation](#) (Marshall, 2022)
- [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)
- [Sangam Report 2021](#)
- [Sangam Report 2019](#)
- [Sangam MSO Bunjil Place collaboration](#)
- [Sangam 2021 Festival Highlights](#)
- [Sangam 2019 Festival Highlights](#)

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	South Asian Performing Arts leaders
	Contact: Dr Priya Srinivasan

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