

<b>Institution: University of Roehampton</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Panel D, UoA 35A Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts: <b>Dance</b>
<b>Title of case study:</b> South Asian Dance: An Art Britain No Longer Ignores
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>This case study details the impact of South Asian dance research on its practitioners and organisations. Immediate beneficiaries include artists engaging in, and organisations supporting, South Asian dance. Through them, we have given prominence to dance genres outside the established canon and fostered broader understanding of dance in a culturally diverse society. By articulating the relationship between artistic practice and the social, political, and financial mechanisms of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century Britain, our research has influenced creative practice, teaching and dance writing, as well as contributing to the practicalities of artists' business ventures and grant applications.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The research underpinning this case study was undertaken over a period of fifteen years. The following researchers worked individually and collaboratively on four fully-funded interdisciplinary projects: Grau (1993 to date), Professor of the Anthropology of Dance; Prickett, (2000 to date), Principal Lecturer in Dance Studies; Lopez y Royo (1999 to August 2013), Reader in Dance and Visual Culture; Meduri (2005 to date), Reader in Dance and Performance Studies; and David (2007 to date), Reader in Dance Studies.</p> <p>1. <i>South Asian Dance in Britain: Negotiating Cultural Identity through Dance</i>, 1998-2001, directed by Grau with Lopez y Royo, with contributions from David (prior to her appointment) and Prickett.</p> <p>The project examined the place of South Asian dance within the multicultural fabric of contemporary Britain. Findings indicated the emergence of an exciting professional theatre practice in the UK and a lively parallel community practice. It also became clear that the two practices did not interact, and that the general public still had little knowledge of South Asian Dance genres. On the other hand, practitioners of, and organisations supporting, South Asian dance were keen to engage with academic researchers; the project's Advisory Board (all from outside academia) appreciated the opportunity to help shape the research.</p> <p>2. <i>New Directions in South Asian Dance: Postcolonial Identity Construction</i>, 2002-2007 led by Grau with Lopez y Royo, David, and Prickett, and with input from Meduri.</p> <p>In this project, while taking new approaches influenced by postcolonial theory, we focused on the aesthetics (Lopez y Royo) and pedagogy (Prickett) of the dance genres. This was a response to our collaborators' critique that our emphasis had been on the contexts rather than on the dance. Rich and productive debates between artists and scholars about classicism, communication and the use of rhythm unpacked choreographic techniques and ways of engaging with diverse audiences on issues of social justice. The fluidity of the genres' boundaries and the process by which a canon and a tradition are constructed and re-constructed were articulated. Developing from project 1, the research revealed South Asian dance as a vibrant contemporary art dance in Britain, while popular dance, especially in its Bollywood incarnation, was gaining public recognition (David). Grau also examined issue-based work through the collaboration with the Indian, Ahmadabad-based NGO Centre for Non-Violence through the Arts (directed by Mallika Sarabhai). After her appointment in 2005, Meduri's work on performing the postcolonial archive, the transnationalism of Indian dance and Rukmini Devi contributed to the research.</p> <p>3. <i>The Southall Story: A Cultural History of Britain's 'Little India' since 1979</i>, 2011-2013, a project hosted by the University of Exeter, with David as co-investigator, documented the cultural history of Southall, West London. David explored the multi-layered relationships between the popular genre bhangra and socio-political organisations and events, demonstrating that dance can operate at the centre of social analysis and play a key role in documenting and reconstructing a community's historical moments.</p> <p>4. <i>Interweaving Performance Cultures</i>. Meduri joined this project, based at the International Research Centre of the Freie Universität (Berlin) for the 2012-13 academic year. She examined the limits of 'interweaving' within the performance of translations of dance culture. The year's work culminated in two international meetings open to the general public: 1. <i>Indian Dance in a Global Age</i> (Berlin) a collaboration with the Tagore Centre and the Indian Council for Cultural</p>

Relations (a reviewer commenting that Meduri 'put together this whole symposium with purpose and flair') and 2. *Performance in/and the Public Sphere* (Tangier), a collaboration with the Moroccan NGO International Centre for Performance Studies.

### 3. References to the research

1. Grau, Andrée (2002) *South Asian Dance in Britain: Negotiating Cultural Identity Through Dance*, report to the Leverhulme Trust (can be supplied by the HEI on request).

Grants: Leverhulme Trust (c. £60,000); South Bank Centre (c. £2,000) for *Talam on the Thames* in 2001, opened by the Leverhulme Trust Director, a large public event, which disseminated the research through debates, workshops and performances, reaching a public beyond the South Asian Dance community. The event was described as 'The highlight of this year's Summer on the South Bank Festival'.

This 80-page report established Roehampton as a centre of excellence for South Asian dance, was read widely by the community, and continues to have an impact today. Its main themes were picked up by *Akademi, South Asian Dance UK*, in a number of wide reaching symposia in high profile venues, where team members presented their research in greater detail.

2. Meduri, Avanthi ed. (2005) *Rukmini Devi Arundale: A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and the Performing Arts* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers (can be supplied by the HEI on request).

Grant: The research was carried out when Meduri was a Ford Fellow and Academic Director of the Centre for Contemporary Culture, New Delhi. The book was launched under the auspices of Abdul Kalam Azad, then President of India. It is seen as a key text in South Asian Dance Studies.

3. David, Ann R. (2007) 'Beyond the Silver Screen: Bollywood and Filmi Dance in the UK', *South Asia Research*, February, 27: 5-24 (DOI: 10.1177/026272800602700101).

The article is currently number 9 in the most cited, and number 24 in the most frequently read articles of the journal published during the past two years.

4. Prickett, Stacey (2013) 'Encountering the South Asian Diaspora: Dance Education, Heritage and Public Performance in London' in S. Prickett, *Embodied Politics: Dancing Protest and Identities* London: Dance Books, 134-177 (in REF2).

5. Grau, Andrée (2013) 'Political Activism and Dance: The Sarabhais and Nonviolence Through the Arts', *Dance Chronicle*, Volume 36, issue 1, 1-35 (in REF2, DOI: 10.1080/01472526.2013.755599).

Although not long out, the article is currently number 17 in the most frequently read articles of the journal.

Grants: items 3 & 4 were part of the many outputs of Project 2, item 5 continued Grau's work on dance and social justice started under Project 2, funded by an AHRC grant in collaboration with the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University and the University of Surrey (c. £100,000 to Roehampton). David's outputs for this project led to an AHRC grant towards *The Southall Story* (Project 4) hosted by the University of Exeter (c. £25,000 to Roehampton).

6. Meduri, Avanthi (2012) "Geo-Politics, Dissensus, and Dance Citizenship: The Case of South Asian Dance in Britain," in G. Brandstetter and G. Klein (eds.) *Dance [and] Theory*, Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 177-182. (Book chapter, can be supplied by the HEI on request).

Grant: Fellowship awarded to Meduri (c. £40,000) from the International Research Centre, the Freie Universität, Berlin.

### 4. Details of the impact

Working with artists, public dance organisations and NGOs in the UK and overseas, the focus of our research on cultural life also benefits the communities that it investigates. Making South Asian dance more visible within the artistic landscape, it engages with civil society and helps artists thrive. We have engaged in long-standing dialogues, formal when mentoring or sharing a platform, and informal through discussions with those who have attended events we participated in and/or who read our research publications. Our research has benefitted both individuals and organisations.

Our research is embedded in our contributions to the professional magazine *Pulse* and the widely-read newspaper *CONFLUENCE: South Asian Perspective*, enriching discussions on South

Asian dance. Moreover, the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) acknowledges our work and commissioned Meduri (2008) and David (2013) to write for *DANCE Magazine*. Aimed at their 7,500+ members in 75 countries and drawing on the team's research (e.g. issues surrounding the term South Asian dance or the global reach of Indian dance), the articles share ideas that are relevant to the Classical Indian dance faculty, but also inform a wider dance audience. Our research has also reached the mainstream media, for example, we have worked alongside journalists, enabling their access to our field sites and presenting our research through their reporting, such as David's contribution to a BBC News audio slideshow in 2008.

Through communicating our research to broader constituencies, we are contributing to the development of a framework for dance criticism aimed at the next generation of writers/critics coming from the South Asian dance community. We formalised our collaboration with *Kadam*, the publisher of *Pulse*. The magazine and its associated social media outputs reaches 1000+ dance enthusiasts. We helped set up *Critical Writing 2* in collaboration with the well-known dance critic Sanjoy Roy and dancer Mavin Khoo (with whom we have been working for over a decade). This workshop was aimed at a small group of aspiring dance writers, enhancing their skills and increasing their confidence to write for *Pulse*. Prickett delivered the workshop, drawing from her research into institutions, politics of funding and relations of power (2013, from project 2). Two writers were subsequently published in the September 2013 issue. There were also contributions to dance blogs including writingaboutdance.com and <http://abundantart.net>. The collaboration will continue in 2014, linked to the residency at Roehampton of US-based artist-scholar Ananya Chatterjee.

Kathak practitioner Sonia Sabri noted that Prickett's research helped her to better articulate the distinctiveness of her work within the British cultural landscape. In 2009 she asked Prickett to join and chair the board of her company, Sonia Sabri Dance, thus ensuring continued collaboration. Ongoing dialogue saw her present with Prickett at the *Women in Asian Theatre Symposium*, University of Lincoln (2013), an encounter valued by the artist for illuminating and communicating the uniqueness of her practice. Prickett had also articulated the particular negotiations involved in presenting the body, in dance, in environments where neither is promoted. She contributed to Sabri's conceptualisation, with due cultural sensitivity, of her highly successful 2011 performances and workshops in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. In 2012, the company became a National Portfolio Organisation, funded by Arts Council England, a process assisted by Prickett's analysis of funding for dance companies outside the mainstream canon. The resulting financial stability allowed Sabri 'to plan for three years in terms of artistic vision'.

Shalini Bhalla, the creator of *Just Jhoom!* (an accredited Bollywood and bharatanatyam-derived fitness genre copyrighted in 2012), notes how our research challenged her assumptions and inspired her to think about cultural activity within an entrepreneurial framework. She had 'focused on Bharata Natyam...only exploring avenues within that discipline' as she had 'an internal conflict - some would say snobbery - between the classical and the popular'. She felt empowered to reassess the hierarchies within South Asian dance, reflecting on 1. Grau's observations (1993) that western classification of dance, into classical, folk and primitive, tells us more about class and race than dance 2. David's analysis of Bollywood within diasporic communities (2010) 3. Meduri's investigation of Rukmini Devi's cultural vision (2005). She 'became less rigid in [her] thoughts about classical versus popular' and started a Bollywood dance class. Our research helped her find the right niche for *Just Jhoom!*. Becoming one of the *Asian Women of Achievement 2013*, the judges commented: 'Shalini [...] turned an art form into a very successful business and is making a huge contribution to bringing an Asian dance form to the wider community and to a full range of generations - from the very young to the elderly.'

Our research also contributed to the development of the work of independent artist Anusha Subramanyam, in her capacity as bharatanatyam Programme Leader at the Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) for South Asian and Contemporary Dance (funded by the Department for Education and hosted by Birmingham's DanceXchange). Prickett's analysis of the ISTD syllabus (2007) and Meduri's discussion of the dispersal of the Rukmini Devi legacy in the diaspora (2005) helped her contextualise her teaching within a global context. Subramanyam noted that David's research and ongoing dialogue on dance in Indian UK society has shaped her thinking in her own community work. Grau's work on the Sarabhais' social commitment through dance (2013) validated Subramanyam's own artistic engagement within an ethos of social justice. Through such

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recognition she feels empowered to explore the emotive and gestural grammar of bharatanatyam and combine it with a contemporary dance style that generally shies away from such movement material.

Urja Desai Thakore, director of *Pagrav Dance Company*, came to our research initially through an Arts Council sponsored mentorship for research and development towards *Baharan – Spring* (2009). Mentoring by David in 2008 started a journey that took her artistic output into new directions. David's research helped illuminate and challenge the cultural values and assumptions that she held about the place of kathak and how it might be viewed. Today Thakore sees multiculturalism or the global reach of South Asian dance forms as potential subject matters. Fellow artists have noticed a marked shift in her work, commenting: 'This is something we never expected from you'.

Similarly advised by Meduri through an Arts Council mentorship in 2011, Divya Kasturi drew upon our research dealing with identity construction when she devised *NowHere*, a work that articulates two sensibilities of 'nowhere' and 'now here' and negotiates boundaries between the classical, traditional and contemporary aesthetics. Our reflections helped her articulate such issues within her artistic practice. The work toured internationally and was well received. A Dublin critic described *NowHere* as 'an interesting fusion of cultures ...[it] depicts a journey in search of one's identity'; whilst another critic wrote that Kasturi appeared 'to shed her past upon entering a multilayered examination of her tradition and identity'.

Long-established choreographers have also been keen to engage in intellectual dialogue with us. Shobhana Jeyasingh, for instance, invited Meduri as a consultant to help her unpack the way in which her choreographic work could be analysed within a broader framework of globalised dance and diasporic dialogues (from projects 2 and 4). The impact of this work was such that when, for the first time since its inception, her company was invited to undertake a ten days tour in India, she asked Meduri to contribute to this *HOME meets HOME* project. The result was the essay 'Traces and Trails' ([http://www.rescen.net/Shobana\\_Jeyasingh/HmH/delhi.html](http://www.rescen.net/Shobana_Jeyasingh/HmH/delhi.html)), which not only provides new spectatorial theories based on the 'look' and 'trace effects' in world choreographies but also makes academic theory accessible to a broad audience.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

### Personal testimonies

1. Director *Sonia Sabri Company*, <http://www.sscsco.org.uk>
2. Director *Just Jhoom!* <http://www.justjhoom.co.uk>,
3. Director of *Pagrav Dance Company*, <http://www.pagravdance.com/#/home/>.
4. Divya Kasturi, independent artist.
5. Director of *Beeja*, <http://anushasubramanyam.com>

### Internet sources where our interventions are noted

6. David, Ann Audio slideshow on BBC News website on Tamil Dance in the UK. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7758870.stm>
7. *Pulse*: Announcement and programme for *Critical Writing 2*. <http://www.pulseconnects.com/ArtCriticalWriting2>
8. Article by Harshini Vakkalanka in *The Hindu* (7.01.2013), a major national newspaper in India, reporting on a talk given by Meduri at the National Institute of Advanced Studies. The article highlights Meduri's research on the transnationalism of Indian dance and on the need to examine it from a global perspective. <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/dance/embracing-the-world/article4282982.ece>
9. Recent review of Meduri's edited collection listed in 3., describing it as an 'inspirational read'. <http://www.maduraimessenger.org/printed-version/2012/august/book-review/>