



Title of the article: Re-Negotiating Aesthetic Citizenship: A Case Study of Dancers from South and Southeast Asia

Name of the Author: Paavni Dhanjal

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Abstract

This paper argues that dance is inextricably linked to the political realm. It is viewed as a continuous form of communication and intervention that offers a vital expressive avenue to challenge the standard, often restrictive, verbal representations of human political lives.

This research examines the political agency of dancing bodies through a case study analysis of the choreographic work of Ananya Chatterjea, Akram Khan, and Ramli Ibrahim. The central argument is that their performances are not mere entertainment; they are a direct reflection of the larger political climate, serving as powerful tools for social commentary and activism in South and Southeast Asia. The core of this research delves into the concept of "aesthetic citizenship" to demonstrate how these artists—using their diverse dance styles—actively transcend and challenge hyper-nationalist identities, particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. By showcasing the transformative power of dance, their work addresses complex international issues and provokes crucial public discourse on the interplay between art, politics, and identity.

To unpack their work, the paper employs three main analytical frameworks: cultural diplomacy and soft power in Asia; the idea of aesthetic citizenship, which frames artistic endeavours as a legitimate means of political participation; and the critical theory of "overreading" dance, which connects movement to broader social and political contexts. Ultimately, this research argues that aesthetic citizenship empowers these choreographer-practitioners to transcend national boundaries and significantly influence the cultural and artistic landscape, reshaping the context for both innovative dance developments and broader social movements.

Keywords: Aesthetic citizenship; political participation; overreading; Ananya Chatterjea; Akram Khan; Ramli Ibrahim

Biography

Paavni Dhanjal recently graduated from the Shiv Nadar Institute of Eminence, where she completed a research-based bachelor's degree in International Relations with a minor in Dance Studies.

Her academic path has always been driven by a need for multidisciplinary exploration, leading her to intentionally connect her core field with her passion for classical dance. Beyond her studies, she is a trained Bharatanatyam dancer, having completed her 5th year from the prestigious Prayag Sangit Samiti. This artistic discipline and cultural depth are essential to her perspective. They allow her to view dance not merely as an art form, but as a dynamic lens for understanding cultural diplomacy, identity negotiation, and political discourse across South and Southeast Asia. This publication represents the first step in using her unique background to examine the powerful role of dance in international relations.

Contact Information: pd669@snu.edu.in

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Introduction

Dance is more than just a physical act; it is a sustained form of communication with its grammatical structures and symbolic interpretations. It acts as an intervention, bringing new voices into shared spaces while challenging and transcending verbal representations of human political lives. Dance has long played an important role in human society, thus, allowing people to express themselves and influence their audiences through movement. These dancing bodies are political entities, weaving symbolic networks of identities and perceptions. Thus, dance and politics are inextricably linked. Understanding dance as politics allows for a more in-depth exploration of issues and concepts expressed through movement (Mackrell, 2024). Dance studies scholars have investigated how dance is used to communicate, intervene, and interpret in the political realm. Examining dance as a form of expression and protest, thus challenging traditional political views, scholars have argued that dance broadens and deepens our understanding of political acts. Since dance has always been an integral part of human life, with individuals and communities using it to contest marginalization and assert their political identities, dancing has evolved into a meaningful form of activism (See Stewart 2023; Cherkasov 2022). In keeping with the idea that dancing is a political act, this paper takes a case study approach to examine the work of Ananya Chatterjea, Akram Khan, and Ramli Ibrahim to argue that their choreographic work reflects the larger political climate.

This paper attempts to show that through their performances, they not only entertain but also inspire change and provoke thought, but by showcasing the transformative power of dance they make dance as a tool for social commentary and activism. This juxtaposition highlights the complex interplay between art, politics, and identity in South and Southeast Asia. The paper delves into the idea of aesthetic citizenship through the works of these dancers and choreographers. Through their diverse dance styles, these artists challenge conventional norms associated with hyper-nationalist identities in Asia, particularly India, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. Additionally, the paper will investigate how their artworks address international issues and aim to raise awareness among the general public.

To unpack and analyze the politics of the work of these artists the paper will employ three analytical frameworks; cultural diplomacy in Asia and soft power as dance, locating “aesthetic citizenship” (Fişek 2017) in analysing identity, dance, and artistic expression, and theorist Randy Martin’s concept of “overreading” dance (2004). Culture now plays a more important role in international relations than ever. This originates from the wider, interconnected, and human-centered values of culture. Culture serves as our tool for comprehending and connecting with others, embodying cherished values that we both enjoy and actively pursue in life. As identity politics have a greater impact on domestic and international exchanges, these characteristics make culture an

important forum for negotiation and a medium of exchange in finding common solutions. The cultural contract provides a forum for unofficial political relationship-building: it keeps negotiating channels open with countries where political connections are threatened. It also aids in the recalibration of relationships with emerging powers such as India and China, for example, to reflect changing times. In the future, alliances will be formed based on cultural understanding as well as economic or geographic factors (see Bound et al 2013; Warburton 2017).

This research project unpacks the work of choreographer-practitioners such as Ananya Chatterjea, Akram Khan, and Ramli Bin Ibrahim by “overreading” to argue that the aesthetic citizenship enables the artists to transcend national boundaries through their art forms (Martin 2004), thereby influencing the cultural and artistic landscape beyond South and Southeast Asia. As “overreading” implies, we must closely examine the dance to determine how the artist reflects societal issues through their performance and understand the artist's intentions and thoughts while creating their piece. The approach in this essay uses social movements alongside dance to reshape the context for both innovative dance developments and broader social movements that occur outside the stage.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research project is the case study approach, which involves an in-depth analysis and evaluation of specific real-world situations to derive generalizations and insights. Case studies can focus on various subjects, Journal of Emerging Dance Scholarship © Paavni Dhanjal

including individuals, groups, organizations, or events. Chatterjea, Khan, and Ibrahim are examined as case studies due to their diverse backgrounds and the significant issues they address through their artworks, interviews, websites, and the articles written by or on them. I will explore a specific facet of the argument for each artist, examining how their work serves as a form of political expression and activism.

CASE STUDY 1: ANANYA CHATTERJEA



Fig.1. Ananya Chatterjea; Source: College of Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota website

Dr. Ananya Chatterjea, a professor at the University of Minnesota and the force behind Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT), blends contemporary dance with social justice, inviting a diverse range of participants, particularly from BIPOC communities, to explore the Yorchhā movement vocabulary and ADT's choreographic methodologies. Teaching herself



Fig.2: Mohona: Estuaries of Desire; Image: Ananya Dance Theatre)

choreography while drawing inspiration from her guru's teachings, Chatterjea embraced jagged rhythms and emotional landscapes, challenging conventional norms and advocating for inclusivity and justice. In her work, she seamlessly weaves the spirit of "complex-standingness" and multiplicity into her artistic expression. She brings a unique perspective to her art, emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal and political struggles within her creative process, balancing traditional and contemporary dance forms, visibility, and invisibility. She advocates for women's rights, builds grassroots communities, and empowers marginalized voices through her work. Her workshops attract activists, advocates, scholars, and students in dance studies, sociology, and gender studies, reflecting her commitment to community engagement and intersectional activism. Recognized with prestigious awards like the Guggenheim Choreography Fellowship, McKnight Choreography Fellowships, and the Joyce Award, Chatterjea's groundbreaking work continues to challenge conventional notions of dance and pave the way for others to follow.

Chatterjea's production, *Mohona: Estuaries of Desire* which is the culmination of a four-year project by Ananya Dance Theater, initiated with *Kshoy! /Decay!* in 2009, which delved into the pervasive issue of violence against women in global communities of color. Recognizing the complexity and depth of these issues, the company embarked on extensive research to develop effective artistic strategies aimed at combating violence. Drawing inspiration from women's narratives surrounding water, *Mohona* serves as a poignant medium for remembering, imagining, and celebrating their legacies.

Water, symbolizing both a tangible necessity and a metaphor for flow, femininity, and resistance, emerges as the central theme of the creative space within *Mohona*. Designed as an estuary where breath, movement, and voice intersect, the performance evokes the force and fluidity of water through vivid imagery. Scenes range from women queuing for water in Mumbai slums to indigenous rituals like the Mother Earth Water Walk ceremony, capturing the breadth of experiences tied to this

essential resource. The appearance of water goddesses at critical junctures symbolizes watershed moments in environmental history, further emphasizing the interconnectedness of water with human life and cultural practices. Chatterjea reflects on the significance of the Bengali word *mohona*, meaning "estuary," which emerged during the creative process. *Mohona* embodies the convergence of diverse influences and narratives, blending stories of struggle and pain with those of cleansing and reclaiming. This convergence mirrors the emotional essence of water and humanity's reliance on it for survival. *Mohona* thus serves as a call to action, urging audiences to reimagine their relationship with water in the face of a looming global crisis.

Through various participatory elements, the audience is invited to engage actively in shifting their energetic connection to water and embracing the themes explored in the performance. Ultimately, *Mohona* concludes Ananya Dance Theater's exploration of women's experiences with systemic violence, highlighting their resilience, hope, and capacity to envision sustainability amidst adversity. *Mohona* inspires collective action and fosters a deeper understanding of the intricate connections between water, culture, and social justice (Chatterjea 2013).

Parallels Between Mohona: Estuaries of Desire and Brahmaputra River Issue Between India and China

The parallels between the water-related tensions in India's northeastern region and the artistic exploration of water issues in *Mohona: Estuaries of Desire* illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of

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water, transcending its mere physical presence to explore its symbolic significance in cultural, environmental, and geopolitical narratives.

Water, which is essential for life and ecosystems, is at the center of tensions in India's northeastern region as a result of protests against dam construction by the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS). China's extensive dam construction on Tibet's Brahmaputra River raises concerns about the downstream effects on India and Bangladesh. Despite China's assurances of minimal disruption, concerns remain due to China's history of opaque water management and the Brahmaputra basin's fragile ecology.

China's rapid development in Tibet, including projects such as the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, jeopardizes the region's delicate ecological balance, exacerbating climate change impacts. This poses a risk to downstream communities that rely on the Brahmaputra for food and income. In response, the Assam government is working with China to address dam concerns, while political factions in India emphasize seismic risks and advocate for water treaties with China. The Indian government has formed an Inter-Ministerial Group to assess the environmental impact of proposed Brahmaputra basin projects. India prioritizes long-term water resource management, with a focus on run-of-river projects that balance hydropower generation and environmental preservation.

The Brahmaputra River, which originates in Tibet and flows into Arunachal Pradesh (claimed by China), is a major source of contention between China and India. China, as the upper riparian, withholds critical hydrological data from India,

raising suspicions. Recent events, such as China's hydropower plans near India's border and blockages in the Galwan River caused by border clashes, have raised concerns about the use of water resources for geopolitical leverage. Despite the absence of formal water-sharing agreements, armed conflicts over water have been avoided. However, the intertwined nature of border and water disputes, combined with water scarcity concerns, feeds speculation about "water wars." Both countries want to de-securitize the water dispute by prioritizing dialogue over security discourse. China and India try to downplay the risks posed by dam construction, emphasizing economic growth and conflict risk reduction.

The deterioration of China-India relations, exacerbated by border disputes, geopolitical shifts, and the COVID-19 pandemic, complicates efforts to resolve the water dispute. Water disputes have historically escalated into conflict. Recent events, such as the Doklam crisis and clashes in the Galwan Valley, demonstrate the fragility of China-India relations. As competition heats up and border clashes exacerbate tensions, managing the water dispute becomes increasingly difficult, despite de-escalation efforts (See Wu and Latham, 2023; Wuthnow et al., 2020; Giordano and Wahal 2022).

The ongoing protests led by the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) against large-scale dam projects serve as a poignant reminder of the delicate balance required in managing water resources while safeguarding environmental integrity. These protests underscore the complexities inherent in balancing the need for energy generation with the imperative of preserving fragile ecosystems

and indigenous livelihoods. Similarly, China's extensive dam-building efforts along Tibet's Brahmaputra River raise concerns about the downstream impact on neighboring countries, amplifying the already intricate dynamics of water management and geopolitical tensions in the region.

In contrast, Mohona delves into the artistic exploration of water as a central theme, symbolizing both tangible necessity and metaphorical resonance. Drawing inspiration from women's stories about water, the performance illuminates the violence inflicted by the corporatization of this communal resource. Through vivid imagery, evocative storytelling, and captivating choreography, Mohona serves as a powerful medium for amplifying women's voices and experiences, shedding light on the intersections of femininity, resistance, and environmental justice. By highlighting the struggles and resilience of women in the face of water-related injustices, Mohona transcends its artistic boundaries to provoke thought and inspire action in addressing real-world water disputes.

Both contexts emphasize the importance of recognizing water as more than just a physical resource—it embodies cultural, social, and political significance that transcends national borders. Mohona, as an artistic endeavor, seeks to engage audiences in a dialogue about humanity's relationship with water, urging collective action to reimagine our stewardship of this vital resource in the face of global crises such as climate change and environmental degradation. Similarly, stakeholders in India's north-eastern region advocate for sustainable water resource management,

emphasizing the need for comprehensive approaches that prioritize ecological integrity, community participation, and equitable development.

Ultimately, both the water-related tensions in India and the artistic exploration in Mohona: Estuaries of Desire underscore the interconnectedness of water issues with broader social, environmental, and political concerns. Through dialogue, activism, and artistic expression, these contexts invite audiences to reflect on the complexities of water governance, challenge existing power structures, and envision pathways toward a more sustainable and just future where water is valued, protected, and shared equitably among all communities.

This production, using dance and artistic expression, serves as a transformative cultural diplomacy, delving deeply into the intricate weaving of societal narratives surrounding themes of violence against women, the essence of water, and the resilience inherent in the human spirit. Drawing inspiration from a rich mosaic of women's stories and experiences, particularly those intertwined with the fluidity and significance of water, Mohona crosses geographical boundaries, embracing diverse cultural influences, including South East Asia's vibrant landscape. The performance's artistic narrative skillfully weaves together threads of collective memory and shared experiences, resulting in a captivating exploration of humanity's relationship with water and the profound implications it has for social justice and environmental awareness.

At its core, Mohona demonstrates the transformative power of soft power, using artistic

expression to shape perceptions, influence attitudes, and foster meaningful dialogue across communities. The production captivates audiences with its evocative storytelling and mesmerizing choreography while also sparking thought-provoking conversations about the intersections of water, femininity, and societal structures. By addressing these critical issues on an emotional and visceral level, Mohona goes beyond mere entertainment to serve as a catalyst for social change and cultural understanding. It aims to bridge gaps, cultivate empathy, and foster connections between people from various backgrounds, demonstrating the power of artistic expression as a tool for promoting goodwill and cooperation on a local and global scale. In essence, Mohona is a ray of hope, inviting audiences to embark on a transformative journey of introspection, connection, and collective action towards a more just and sustainable future. The performance of Mohona can be viewed as a powerful force in shaping individual and collective identities, instilling a sense of belonging, and catalyzing societal change. The production exemplifies aesthetic citizenship, demonstrating how artistic endeavors can serve as catalysts for engagement with complex dynamics surrounding water security issues. These endeavors, which include dance performances and immersive cultural narratives, allow people to navigate and question their social realities while asserting their agency and imagining alternative realities.

Identity is central to this framework, as Ananya Dance Theater's exploration of water and violence against women intersects with nuanced

discussions of gender identity, cultural heritage, and socioeconomic status. The performance uses evocative choreography and storytelling to allow marginalized communities to express themselves and advocate for their rights and recognition. The fluidity and symbolism of water serve as metaphors for the fluidity of identity, prompting audiences to consider their sense of self and place in society.

Furthermore, artistic expression emerges as an effective tool for amplifying marginalized voices, challenging entrenched power structures, and fostering solidarity among diverse communities. Through the emotive language of dance, Mohona highlight shared experiences of disenfranchisement and resilience, bridging divides and forging connections across cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic boundaries. By focusing on the stories of those traditionally marginalized or silenced, these artistic endeavors challenge dominant narratives and inspire collective action towards a more just and equitable society.

In essence, through Fişek's ideas of aesthetic citizenship, Chatterjea's artistic expression is viewed as a vehicle of personal and collective transformation, encouraging people to reclaim their narratives, celebrate their distinct identities, and advocate for social change to envision a more inclusive and socially conscious future.

CASE STUDY 2: AKRAM KHAN



Fig.3: Akram Khan; image source- Akram Khan Company

Akram Khan, born in Bangladesh and raised in the United Kingdom, is a pioneering dance artist renowned for fusing traditional north Indian classical dance Kathak with contemporary styles, creating a unique language of movement. His early training in Kathak laid the groundwork for this innovative blend, which emerged when it collided with contemporary dance training, forming an artistic vision driven by collaborative learning across disciplines. Khan's works explore profound cultural, mythological, religious, and political themes, reflecting his experiences from navigating a dual identity as a British Asian.

Khan's artistic process is heavily influenced by conversations with collaborators and individuals whose stories are often left untold. He believes in the power and responsibility of sharing these narratives through movement. His choreography embodies a spirit of shared exploration across cultures and disciplines, as evidenced by an extensive list of collaborators that includes the National Ballet of China, actress Juliette Binoche, ballerina Sylvie

Guillem, choreographers/dancers Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Israel Galván, singer Kylie Minogue, indie rock band Florence and the Machine, visual artists Anish Kapoor, Antony Gormley, and Tim Yip, writer Hanif Kureishi, and composers Steve Reich, Nitin Sawhney, Jocelyn Pook, and Ben Frost. His contribution to the London Olympic Games Opening Ceremony (2012) was universally acclaimed. Building on this success, through his performances, he aims to raise awareness about pressing social issues and target those in positions of influence within the bureaucracy to inspire meaningful change and foster a more socially conscious society.

collation of memory, experience, and myth. DESH, premiered in 2011. Khan creates a dreamlike collection of memories, experience, and imagination wanting to move fluidly between Britain and Bangladesh. Khan's choreography is influenced by Indian classical dance Kathak, contemporary technique, break dance, and martial arts, resulting in a dance language that alternates between intimate and epic. DESH is an exploration of fragility and resilience, highlighting the human spirit's ability to persevere in the face of natural forces and societal challenges. Through a series of stories, Khan moves between his father's and niece's worlds, each demanding attention and understanding before revealing a generational narrative shaped by myth,



Fig.4: DESH; Source: Akram Khan Company

Reiterating Martin's framework of "over-reading", the following section delves into Khan's choreography DESH, his most intimate and personal full-length contemporary solo, which explores the complexities of identity, homeland, and cultural roots. The title, which means 'homeland' in multiple Indian languages, explores Khan's journey of self-discovery and attempt to reconcile his British upbringing with his Bangladeshi heritage, through a

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reality, and imagination.

The performance begins with Khan striking a mound of sand with a sledgehammer to represent his father's symbolic grave, accompanied by sounds inspired by Bengali shipyard workers. This rhythmic and hypnotic sequence sets the tone for DESH's multifaceted investigation into identity, culture, and history. One of DESH's most memorable scenes shows Khan interacting with an animated

storytelling segment, narrating a story to his niece about a boy, honey, and magical bees. With enchanting visual effects curated by Oscar-winning visual artist Tim Yip and lighting designer Michael Hulls, the stage transforms into an immersive world of mangrove forests, rivers, and encounters with exotic animals. Additionally, the performance includes contributions from poet Karthika Nair, spoken word artist PolarBear, composer Jocelyn Pook, who created a soundtrack that combines sounds collected on trips to Bangladesh with lyrical chants and hymns.

The performance also delves into Bangladesh's turbulent history, with scenes highlighting historical events and revolutions that helped shape the country. These powerful scenes, heightened by Khan's exceptional acting abilities, provide a contrast to the dreamlike sequences that transport the audience on a surreal journey through Khan's imagined homeland. Throughout *DESH*, Khan demonstrates exceptional mimicry skills, manipulating his head to mimic his father's gestures and engaging in compelling mimed scenes with his disembodied niece. His ability to express intimate feelings and tell stories through dance reaches a climax highlighting his distinct and eclectic dance style. The performance culminates in a transformative sequence in which Khan interacts with cascading silky cloth, resulting in a mesmerizing waterfall effect. This ethereal moment represents the end of Khan's journey when he discovers himself and embraces his parents' history and culture. *DESH* received the prestigious Olivier Award in 2012. In a heartfelt and sincere manner, the

production highlights Khan's exceptional abilities of creating a dance language to take the audience on a deeply personal and immersive journey, reaffirming the value of cultural identity and nationality in today's globalized world (See Khan 2022; Marotto 2022; Robles 2021).

Parallels Between *DESH* and India- Bangladesh Migration Issue

India's geographical location, relative economic stability in comparison to its neighbors, and democratic values have historically made it a haven for people fleeing persecution or seeking a better future. India has historically hosted refugees and immigrants from Tibet, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, and, Bangladesh. The issue of Bangladesh refugees and illegality of immigrants remains contentious. This is amplified in areas experiencing large migrant influxes, and has also presented significant national security challenges to India. The lack of national refugee laws has exacerbated the situation, blurring the line between refugees and economic migrants while denying assistance to those in genuine need.

Bangladesh shares a 4,096-kilometer border with India, which includes the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The issue of immigration from Bangladesh is complex and multifaceted, necessitating comprehensive approach towards mitigating the challenges posed by illegal immigration while maintaining its humanitarian values and national security interests (see Tripathi 2016). Drawing parallels between Akram Khan's *DESH* and the migration issue between India and

Bangladesh, both narratives delve into the emotional complexities, challenges, and experiences of individuals caught between two worlds, emphasizing the multifaceted human stories that drive migration.

The emotional depth of Khan's performance captures the struggles, dreams, and aspirations of individuals

just a performance; it is Khan's quest for self-discovery but stands for thousands of journeys made by those leaving Bangladesh during turmoil, and reflect millions of people's desires to seek a safe home in the world even if it means being uprooted from homeland.

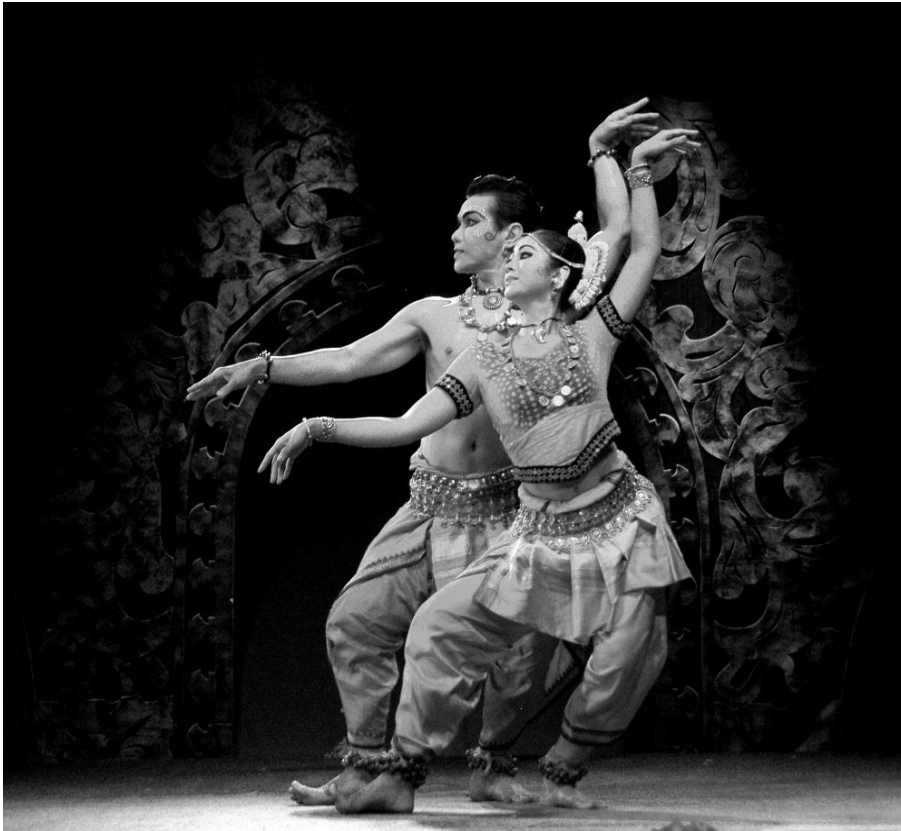


Fig.5. (L-R). Ibrahim in India, 2006, Source: Wikimedia Commons; Ramli Bin Ibrahim, 2017,

grappling with their cultural identity and connection to their homeland. In a similar manner, Khan and his family's migration from Bangladesh has been motivated by emotional desires for a better life, security, and opportunities. Their journeys reflect hopes, fears, and challenges as they adjust to a new culture, society, and environment, while suffering emotional hardships and trauma, through resilience. They also leave behind homes and loved ones and deal with discrimination, exploitation, and uncertainty in the host country. DESH is more than

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CASE STUDY 3: RAMLI BIN IBRAHIM

Ramli Bin Ibrahim, founder of Sutra Dance Theatre, has elevated Indian classical dance, and established Malaysia on the international arts stage. His formal dance education began unexpectedly while studying mechanical engineering at the University of Western Australia, leading him to discover and master Bharatanatyam and Odissi in India. Returning to Malaysia, Ibrahim founded Sutra Dance Theatre and the Sutra Foundation, where he mentored future generations of dancers. Despite

societal challenges related to his Muslim heritage, he's navigated the artistic landscape with resilience, blending classical, folk, and contemporary styles.

Ibrahim's choreography, influenced by various performing arts genres, often has a meditative quality, as seen in his work 'Mukaiji Reibo'. He has received international acclaim with recognitions such as Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Padma Shri from India, Malaysian Indian Entrepreneur Cooperative's Perdana Award, and the datukship from the Federal Government of Malaysia. He is well-regarded among Odissi dancers in India, frequently appearing at dance festivals and collaborating with renowned artists like Dinanath Pathy.

Reflecting on his journey, Ibrahim acknowledges the challenges he faced due to his Muslim identity and innovative approach to dance. However, with unwavering support, he has established himself as a prominent figure in the global arts community. His imaginative use of space, time, and movement, along with collaborations with artists like Sivarajah Natarajan, Sutra has received critical acclaim and cemented its place in the world of dance.

Ibrahim's career exemplifies Malaysia's support towards Indian classical dance, contemporary styles, and cultural identity. His innovative approach to blending Bharatanatyam and Odissi through modern interpretations demonstrates his ability to navigate a dual cultural identity while challenging artistic norms. His story sheds light on the complex intersections of culture, identity, and artistic practice in the global dance landscape.

Additionally, Ibrahim has showcased his artistry across renowned arts festivals, such as the Khajuraho Festival, where he has performed codified "Indian" classical dance. Through his performances, he has effectively disseminated Indian dance and culture to international delegates and audiences, and within his own country. This section, will over-read how Ibrahim embodies and promotes the concept of "aesthetic citizenship" through his artistic endeavors, challenging the conventional norms and hyper-nationalist identities in South and Southeast Asia.

Ibrahim's work *Krishna: Love Re-invented*, is a contemporary retelling of the timeless story of the Hindu deity Krishna, presenting him as the epitome of love. The performance focuses on Krishna's consorts - Radha and the Gopis, and their intense and passionate devotion to him. In this reimagined and re-choreographed version of the traditional story, the production incorporates various elements to enrich the narrative, such as *sahitya* (poetry), *sabda-swara-pata* (rhythmic syllables), and lyrical Oriya compositions.

The production delves deeply into the romantic and spiritual aspects of Krishna's love, a theme that has had a significant impact on literature and performing arts, particularly Odissi. Drawing from Odissi repertoire, Ibrahim, imagines Krishna with a dark complexion, lotus-like eyes, and peacock feathers, dancing ecstatically with his admirers whose profound devotion to Krishna is depicted as passionate, erotic, spiritual, and all-encompassing. A unique feature of the choreography is the dual portrayal of Krishna, both representing different facets of the divinity's personality and divine love.

The choreography distinguishes between the two Krishna-s through subtle differences in movement and expression. One Krishna embodies the playful and mischief characterized by quick, light-footed movements, dynamic spins, and flirtatious interactions with the Gopis reflecting the joy and spontaneity of divine love. In contrast, the other Krishna represents the serene and compassionate aspect of the deity, characterized by graceful and fluid movements, expressive hand gestures, and a deep connection with Radha, conveying the spiritual and transcendent nature of divine love. The choreography ingeniously integrates two contrasting portrayals of Krishna, creating a harmonious narrative that highlights the multifaceted nature of love and devotion. The production's innovative approach demonstrates Ibrahim's commitment to preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Indian classical dance while exploring new creative avenues, serving as a testament to the enduring appeal and universal resonance of the story of Krishna, transcending cultural boundaries and resonating with audiences worldwide (see Asia Society 2014).

Parallels Between Krishna: Love Re-Invented and The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA):

Ramli Ibrahim's dedication to spreading Indian culture through dance stands in stark contrast to the challenges faced by Muslims in India due to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The CAA, approved by the Indian Parliament in December 2019, allows non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to obtain

Indian citizenship faster. This decision sparked nationwide protests and raised concerns about the potential establishment of a religious criterion for Indian citizenship, which could marginalize Indian Muslims.

Critics argue that the CAA undermines India's secular principles and may disenfranchise its Muslim population. Notably, the law does not require proof of religious persecution for the listed non-Muslim groups, except persecuted Muslim communities such as Shi'a and Ahmadis. The CAA's implementation sparked nationwide protests, and legal challenges in the Supreme Court by various political parties, non-governmental organizations, and religious groups, as well as opposition from several states, including Kerala, Punjab, and West Bengal. International organizations including the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have also expressed concern. The ruling government's Hindutva ideology views India as a Hindu nation, frequently dismissing Muslims as foreigners and questioning their Indian citizenship legitimacy which would disproportionately affect Muslims, potentially rendering them stateless (Akins 202; USCIRF 2024).

The juxtaposition of artists such as Ibrahim's esteemed recognition in India with the concerns raised by the CAA and Hindutva ideology highlights the complex relationship between politics, religion, and citizenship in modern India. Ibrahim's commitment to preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Indian classical dance, despite the challenges faced by Muslims in India, serves as a

testament to the enduring appeal and universal resonance of the performing arts and cultural diplomacy which transcends international borders and identity politics resonating with audiences worldwide.

In *Krishna: Love Re-invented*, Ibrahim exemplifies cultural diplomacy and soft power. This contemporary retelling of the myth of Krishna shows a Malaysian Muslim, choreographing Indian classical dance to foster cultural understanding and appreciation between Southeast Asia and India, a creative process he has undertaken his entire life. Despite societal challenges related to his Islamic heritage, he has navigated the artistic landscape with resilience, crafting unique cultural identity, deepening inclusivity and diversity within both nations. Overall, Ibrahim's commitment to preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of India challenges conventional norms and hyper-nationalist identities embodying aesthetic citizenship through his artistic endeavors.

Conclusion

Ananya Chatterjea, Akram Khan, and Ramli Bin Ibrahim's works shed light on the complexities of human experience, cultural identity, and South and Southeast Asia's larger socio-political landscapes. These artists use respective artistic expressions to engage with, and transcend artistic boundaries across nations, challenging dominant narratives. Their contributions demonstrate art's transformative power to promote dialogue, empathy, and understanding across cultures, generations, and ideologies.

Their choreographic practice and artistic projects are vivid examples of cultural diplomacy in action. Using dance as a medium, they address pressing social and political issues prompting reflection on both the inclusive vision of art and the divisive politics surrounding identity and citizenship. These artists embody values of cultural diplomacy which further promote intercultural communication, respect, and collaboration.

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