

May 1, 2022

To the editor:

In January 2021 “Decolonizing Dance Discourses”, our co-edited special issue for *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies*, was published online. As we explained in our preface, we had been invited to put into print the contributions from two connected Gatherings that we had curated at DSA’s 2019 Annual Conference at Northwestern University. As co-editors, we also took this opportunity to expand the remit of the issue by inviting additional scholar, artist, and activist voices who signaled and critiqued the race and caste inequalities, that many iterations of Dance Studies are built on. In our preface, we laid out some framing thoughts on what decolonization might mean for Dance Studies at that moment, and the content of the special issue tackled this question from a wide range of perspectives, each speaking to the need to dismantle the varied power asymmetries that are foundational to many areas in our field.

Since the publication of this special issue, we have come to reflect with greater nuance and depth on our original framing of “decolonization” in the preface due to critical interventions from Drs. Pallabi Chakravorty, Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, and Arshiya Sethi. Dr. Sethi’s intervention transpired during the DSA 2019 gatherings, and Drs. Chakravorty and Sarkar Munsri reached out to us subsequent to the release of the special issue. Their collective remarks have gone on to heighten our awareness of the ways in which the rhetoric of “decolonization” is being mobilised by the current Hindu majoritarian regime in India.

It is important to note that although we are scholars of Indian dance, our intention with the special issue was not to focus on Indian dance studies, but to examine what “decolonization” might mean across multiple cultural and national contexts. However, we agree it is important to understand how the term is often being deployed dangerously in India--and beyond. Through fabricated and harmful narratives that frame India’s histories in monolithic and reductive ways, the state’s call for “decolonization” is in fact manifesting in the oppression of and violence against its own minoritized populations, along the lines of faith, caste, gender, sexuality and other social positionalities. While we did not expressly mention Hindutva in the issue, it was implicitly critiqued through the inclusion of two essays, authored by Bahujan activist and hereditary dancer Nrithya Pillai, and *savarna* (caste privileged) scholar Anusha Kedhar, both of which centered anti-caste politics.

We have since come to a more complicated understanding of “decolonization” by listening in closely to further intervening voices like Meena Kandasamy (2021), Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib (S. Bhattacharya 2021) and others, who write from varying social positionalities on the power spectrum, and alert us to how “decoloniality” is being mobilized by many liberal and right-wing scholars and artists in India. Writing for *Scroll.in* on 13 November 2021, journalist Akash Bhattacharya warns that “[s]harp resistance to Hindu majoritarian rule by India’s democratic forces has evinced a clever counter-response from scholars who support the current dispensation. Historians such as Vikram Sampath have resorted to using the politically acceptable rhetoric of democracy and decolonisation to make Hindu domination sound reasonable” (2021). Bhattacharya goes on to point out that historians like Sampath suggest that the “decolonising Indian academic history should entail recovering Hinduism’s ancient glory as well as confronting the so-called trauma of “Islamic conquests” (2021). For context, Sampath is also the celebrated author of a biography of the dancer Gauhar Jaan, a book often referenced in studies of Indian performance, and which ironically centers a subject with a diverse cultural background.

Other writers like J. Sai Deepak in *India, that is Bharat* (2021) have made similar arguments about Hindu supremacy and religious nationalism, using “decolonial” analysis to position Hindus as

indigenous and Muslims as inherently alien to India, while framing Islam as an oppressive force in Indian society. The image of a golden Hindu era interrupted by violent Islamic invasions is a common conservative trope that defies the reality of the complex and heterogeneous histories shaping the subcontinent (see Thapar 1992, 2020). Deepak's project initially won the endorsement of Walter Mignolo, a key theorist of decolonization, although he did request to withdraw his endorsement quote eventually, when faced with critiques, sharing his correspondence with Deepak via a public Facebook post. However, seeing as the book had already been published by the time he wanted his endorsement removed, the quote remains in the first edition of Deepak's book.

Advocating for "decolonization" as scholars of Indian dance requires of us, then, a more textured position than our preface offered. Furthermore, through this necessary corrective to our preface it becomes apparent that a rightful critique of Hindutva, alongside its co-optation of the term "decolonization", has to be accompanied by a simultaneous critique of interlocking power regimes--including caste, religion, gender, and class, among other forms of stratification. And particularly at this moment, through the month of Ramadan, we have been witnessing a troubling escalation in anti-Muslim violence across India.

We write this letter then as a talk-back if you will to our own limited prefatory comments at the time. As Indian-heritage *savarna* scholars living and working in the diaspora, we wish to firstly admit this gap in attentiveness to right-wing deployments of decolonization in what we wrote. And we thank all those who have already signalled the potential dangers of decolonization projects when mobilised by state apparatuses in the guise of championing revanchist nationalism, leading us to more layered and intersectional thinking on the potential pitfalls of "decolonization."

Recognizing that our scholarship must remain responsive to shifting global political landscapes at all times, we humbly request that if you do engage with the special issue in your classrooms or in your scholarship, that you do so alongside this letter as well.

Royona Mitra and Anurima Banerji  
1 May 2022

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