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## Flexing and Remixing Bodies

In Mumbai, the autos are my lifeline for doing fieldwork in far-flung places. Crawling like fearless ants in traffic crammed with cars, trucks, and pedestrians, these autos are everywhere. In addition to the usual traffic hazards, last week I spotted a solitary elephant sauntering in the hullabaloo in Andheri; another time I saw one in Bandra. The thought of my auto squashed under a truck or an elephant's foot has not escaped my mind, but still it is better to be in an auto than a rented car in Mumbai. Parking is a worse nightmare. Despite the high ambient traffic noise, I see that every second person is chatting on his or her mobile phone. The heat and humidity that engulf Mumbai just before the arrival of the monsoons choke the streets with sweat, smoke, and dust. But they remain packed with pedestrians. Whether it is a quick chaat at the Hill Road Chaat Centre or an aimless browse through the roadside hawker shops, Mumbai is a city of shopkeepers and customers. The street kids are also active members of Mumbai's large informal economy—selling newspapers, books, magazines, bangles, and sundry cotton stuff. Every time my auto stops at a light, a beaming face greets me and thrusts a book or a magazine in my face. The innocent face of a ten-year-old boy cajoles me ... 'didi ye aap ke liye hai' (elder sister, this is for you). As if it is a gift for me. This is how I end up buying a

new pulped book written by a young Indian-American just after she graduated from high school.<sup>1</sup> It still sits on my bookshelf and reminds me of the angelic face that negotiated with me to buy the piece of junk for Rs 250.

Such unrelenting survival instincts, infectious vitality, and indomitable aspirations are characteristics that the gritty streets of Mumbai share with the ruthlessly competitive world of Bollywood dance and dance reality shows. During my fieldwork in the dance halls of Mumbai, I encountered a world of unbridled aspirations filled with intense passion among young dancers. They expressed themselves through their outpourings of exaltations and disappointments. I was immersed in their world, even if for a short duration. I see a so-called version of this world on Indian satellite television all the time, a world filled with dreams and the glitter of celebrity culture. I wore my anthropological hat to explore the world that is not seen on screen: the dance classes, rehearsals, struggles, and dreams of young dancers and choreographers in India. I explored 'who they are, how they are being trained, what motivates them', how they experience their dance, as well as the behind-the-scene production process of image-making and choreographing for cinema and television.

However, before I report on what I saw and heard in the backstage of the industry it is useful to provide some background on how to approach this material. Implicit here is what I had discussed in Chapter 2 at length about consciousness and desire, where the former is embodied and the latter is aesthetic/emotive. Here I will further explore the aesthetic/emotive in the contemporary context as the aspirational emotion of 'remix (already touched upon in Chapter 3) through the

<sup>1</sup> Apparently, the book *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life*, was plagiarized from several sources, taken off the shelves, and destroyed by the publisher.

framework of embodiment. Therefore, I begin by exploring the concept of 'embodiment' (as embodied subjectivity) and its connection to desire to examine how the dominant aesthetic emotion once associated with the song and dance sequences in films—*rasa*—is transformed not just through technological and aesthetic innovations on screen, but through the actual training of the body. I also explore how technology influences bodily knowledge transmission and how bodies adapt to technology. 'Remix', I have proposed in the previous chapter, expresses the new training techniques, film editing, and choreography of Indian screen dances. Since the older boundaries between high and low and classical and popular are being dissolved under globalization, a new emotion/affect associated with 'remix' is replacing the traditional codes and aesthetics of *rasa* (that was reinvented through the classical arts during nationalism). In order to explore Indian dance in this present condition, the phenomenological concept of 'embodiment' can offer us insights into how desires/aspirations are experienced and moulded through interactions with technology and the political economy of contemporary Indian culture.

As a dancer and an anthropologist I am excited to see the rising importance of the body as a locus of cultural analysis in social theory fora. Thomas Csordas (1994: 6) argues that 'this turn to the body in contemporary scholarship reflects the uneasy postmodern condition of indeterminacy. Body in social theory emerges as the "ground of culture"'. Needless to say, the dancing body is a powerful site for analysing cultural change.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that the intersection of the dancing body and the screen occupy a central place for studying the ongoing processes of subject formation and embodiment in contemporary Indian culture (more on this in Chapters 5 and 6). Many years ago Mauss (1934/1973:

<sup>2</sup> See Royona Mitra's (2015) recent work on Akram Khan on mobility, embodiment, and interculturalism in the UK.

1950) had noted this discomfiting subjective-objective grounding of the body, as it is at the same time the original tool with which humans shape their world and the original substance out of which the human world is shaped. Here I draw on overlapping traditions of ideas and practices in an eclectic and creative endeavour to examine the fundamental changes in the ways our bodies are experiencing culture and how culture is being shaped by our bodies.

The dancing body in Indian culture is an important site for analysing the perceptual changes taking place in our sensory world, affecting how we experience culture, self, and subjectivity. Thus, I propose that 'embodiment' of both *experience* and *expression* (see Chapter 1) offers a conceptual framework for analysing Indian dance as it transitions from a national narrative of tradition and culture associated with devotional and mystical desires to a market-driven panoply of 'item numbers'.

In the first section that follows, 'Embodiment of Devotional Desire to Commodity Desire', I briefly describe the traditional training system of gurushisya parampara that was adopted and adapted by the modern institutions of dance training in India and then link it to the changing aesthetics and contexts of screen dances. In the second section titled 'The Production of a Sequence', I move to Film City Studios to explore the processes of image making in the song and dance sequences in Bollywood films and the voices of choreographers as they reflect on their personal experiences of the commodification of aesthetics. In the third section, 'Dancing between Mumbai and Kolkata', I shift my focus to the training in dance halls in Mumbai and the dance classes and studios in Kolkata to analyse the pedagogical changes in training the body, especially among reality show participants and choreographers. I report on an audition for the hit reality show *Dance India Dance* held in Kolkata in 2012 to expand the context from classes to TV production and underline the interdependence of the film and TV worlds. My focus in these different ethnographic contexts—a movie set in Mumbai,



classes in Mumbai and Kolkata, and a TV audition in Kolkata—is to highlight the overlapping worlds of Bollywood and dance reality shows and the construction of the new embodiments of desire/aspiration in diverse contexts, expressed through the aesthetics of ‘remix’.

Scholars now agree that during nationalism (in the pre- and postcolonial phases) Indian identity was created through a particular (Sanskritic) narrative of tradition that drew on aesthetic emotion (the *bhava-rasa* structures of feeling), deep subjectivity, and a long civilizational lineage. Various dances were selectively deployed to construct a modern national identity (Chakravorty 1998; Coorlawala 2004; Meduri 1988; Soneji 2012; Walker 2014). A tradition was invented to serve modernity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). These dances were based on a model of durable and reproducible practice inculcated through institutions such as guru, abhyas/riyaz, parampara, that created a habitus arising from a sense of continuity and tradition (I have analysed dance riyaz or practice in the context of ‘habitus’ in Chakravorty 2004).<sup>3</sup> However, this kind of embodiment achieved through a grounded and reproducible emotional patterning from deep immersion in a particular dance style has come unmoored due to the multiple economic and technological changes of the last two decades that have resulted in the explosion of consumer culture in India.

My larger objective is to understand the crisis and reconstitution of the habitus that once connected identities to territorial locations and has led to ‘de-territorialization’ (Arjun Appadurai’s term, 1997). I show

<sup>3</sup> As Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983: 1) explain: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.’

that Bollywood dance and dance reality shows are important sites for seeing the embodied/disembodied aesthetics of 'remix' that are producing new subjectivities and narratives of nationhood and cosmopolitanism in India. In short, a new habitus is brought into being through the 'remix' practices of dance today.<sup>4</sup>

But before we get to that, it may be helpful to get a clear understanding of the relevance of the term 'practice' to analyse 'embodiment' in the context of dance. I emphasize this because practice in Indian dance (especially in the classical styles) has deep meaning and is expressed through words such as 'riyaz' or 'abhyas'. These terms are also connected to pedagogical structures connecting guru or teacher and student or *shisya* (to be elaborated later). Thus, practice/praxis is an important analytical node in dance scholarship both in the west and the east as it refers to both social theory (or a body of ideas) and the corporeal actions of the body enacted through habits. Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus, drawn from a phenomenological understanding of practice, has been important in movement scholarship (Farleigh 2000; Bender 2005). It enabled bodily meaning to be located outside discourses of representation, in the realm of experience and emotion (which connects 'embodiment' to the framework of experience and emotion as mentioned earlier). It integrated meaning with memory that was not nostalgia, but was embodied in a more immediate and tangible way. The concept of the habitus arising from durable and embedded systems of bodily comportments grounded particular bodies in particular places, which evoked specific aesthetic sensibilities and emotional patterns (Chakravorty 2004). In the context of Indian dance forms, the cultural rootedness of practice (however reconstructed, re-invented, or transnational) was embodied through a particular student-teacher

<sup>4</sup> See Born (2010) for a critique of habitus, also Berthoz (2000 mentioned in Foster 2011).

relationship based on gurushisya-parampara and the aesthetics of bhava and rasa (Vatsyayan 1977).

These particular embedded and reproducible forms of practice produced through a sense of emplacement and a long civilizational lineage are rapidly changing in contemporary India. A new form of dance practice is re-articulating and transforming the embodied aesthetics and ideology of Indian dances, where dancers inhabit multiple places and identities. This new practice is a 'remix', in which a fluid, porous, and ephemeral understanding replaces the notion of authentic, stable, and durable practice. In this new form of practice of mixing of forms—high and low, classical and folk, Indian and international—cultural forms mishmash to produce endless hybridity. 'Remix' is the postmodern experience of the consumption of pastiche where the lines between culture and commodity are blurred (Jameson 1991, 1998; Harvey 1989). 'Remix' recreates the intimate relationship between bodies and technology as well as the articulation of hybridity. The song and dance sequences in Bollywood as well as on reality shows capture this new global Indian modernity, perceptible through a new mediatized, technologized, and commercialized practice of dance. It is marked by the indeterminacy of the body in postmodernism, as it exists in a flux between the experiential 'subjective and objective continuum' posited by Csordas (2004). It captures the idea that in postmodern culture, realities are permeated and fragmented by technology so that the subjective and objective are diffused (discussed in Chapter 2 in the context of film reception, televisual culture, and the construction of the post-modern subject). I offer here such a dynamic and complex notion of the body and subjectivity.

In this new de-territorialized and mediatized embodiments, cultural and individual memories are unsettled due to media and migration (Appadurai 1995). The previous chapter charted such a trajectory for screen dances as they evolved from the mythopoetic/religio-aesthetic

genres in Bombay films to 'item numbers'. In this chapter, I chart this trajectory as it has evolved from the everyday practice associated with riyaz and affect (derived from bhava-rasa/religio-aesthetic) to the consumption of images represented through 'remix'.

I begin from the training systems in classical Indian dance and explore how the embodied aesthetics imparted through that training was/is connected to *bhakti rasa* (devotional desire). I argue here that this kind of devotional and/or aesthetic desire that was foundational to Indian concert dances in the postcolonial period (supported by state institutions) is in radical flux. Now dancers learn different dance styles from different contexts and teachers to create flexible bodies and hybrid identities. The idea of flexible bodies has been discussed by Kedar (2014) in a diasporic context. The notion of *bhakti rasa* has been replaced by voluptuous desires and spectacular commodities. 'Remix' is the conceptual node that integrates the everyday practice of Indian dance with its emergent cultural habitus (although whether it can be called a habitus is debatable as notions of cultural memory and unconscious habits are in turbulence). It is both a method of dance practice and an aesthetic style or affect. Condensing the past meaning of riyaz and *rasa* into both experience and representation, 'remix' encapsulates a subjective and objective continuum of identity.

## **Embodiment of Devotional Desire to Commodity Desire**

Training in classical Indian dances is primarily oral. The learning is a gradual process of enculturation in the dance heritage (through practices and routines). The aim is to perpetuate this knowledge from generation to generation by forging lifelong relationships. In classical dance, one's identity as a dancer is defined in part by the identity of one's teacher, who traces it back in line to a founding forefather (seldom female) who is traced back in genealogical terms to a known caste

group. This is what perpetuates the social organization of gurushisya-parampara and civilizational lineage. In the past, this was not only an economic arrangement but was meant to preserve the very 'essence' of the art form as pristine and uncorrupted by outside influences. Since knowledge was transmitted orally, it was the student's duty to replicate the teachings through riyaz.<sup>5</sup> The student's aim was to embody the guru in every way and the latter's knowledge was immortalized through the student. This was a very personal relationship and studying with one guru for a long period created a special bond. It often required co-habitation and complete emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical surrender to one's guru. In return, the student became assimilated into the genealogical lineage of an unbroken tradition and became an authoritative representative of that particular style (Chakravorty 2008; Morelli 2010). This was the idealized notion of gurushisya-parampara.

Let us focus on the key concept of bhakti to explicate some of the shifts in the Indian dance experience. One of the primary emotions in the classical Indian dances is bhakti rasa. This means igniting intense devotion through dance. Bhakti requires a complete surrender of one's ego through loving devotion to god. In the dance-training model of gurushisya parampara, this kind of unconditional devotional love forms the core relationship between the student and the guru, where the latter becomes an equivalent of god (see Chakravorty 2005). The emotional engagement created through bhakti is connected to Indian aesthetic structures of feelings (the bhavas and rasas) which supposedly produce the yogic spiritual body (derived from the Upanishidic traditions discussed in Chapter 2) of the dancers. For instance, a student of classical dance begins from simple footwork and years later moves to complex patterns that are elaborated through fluid hand gestures,

<sup>5</sup> My intimate knowledge of Kathak dance came from a decades-long immersion in riyaz.

eye movements, and footwork. The movements are structured around mnemonic syllables played on percussions. The student learns to memorize and count the rhythms and infuse the movements with kinesthetic memory and emotion. She learns to express emotions of devotion and desire by dancing to songs from the classical musical genres. The experience of time in the *tala* structures is circular and continuous just as space is both internal and external. The spatial and temporal experiences emerge from repetitive kinesthetic explorations. They are simultaneously cosmological and real. During performance, space and time are moulded through a subjective experience of making anew. This phenomenological approach to space and time is what sets Indian dance apart from western choreographic conventions (that emerge from an objective-scientific time/space construct; see Foster (2011) regarding choreography and its origins). After independence, when the state, especially the central government, became the official (and primary) patron of culture, the model of *gurushisya-parampara* became an important ideological device for protecting, preserving, and promoting India's national heritage.

The ideology of *parampara* once fostered by state institutions and many teachers or *gurus* is undergoing significant changes in the current context as the experiences of *bhakti* and *sringara* are commodified due to the contraction of state institutions and their replacement by market relations. The classical dances are now global art forms with diverse practitioners and audiences in an increasingly transnational context.<sup>6</sup> As Indian dance is moulded by transnational flows of images, global networks, international practitioners and markets, the social organization

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that the classical dances or Indian dancers were not transnational before, but the speed and depth of circulation is unprecedented. For a nuanced understanding of the transnational history of Indian dance, see Srinivasan (2012).



and practices of gurushisya-parampara are undergoing significant transformations. This new embodied aesthetics of Indian dance is no longer bounded by nation and tradition (propped up by state initiatives and dance festivals). Though I focus on new genres such as Bollywood dance and dance reality shows, it is necessary to recognize that even the classical forms are impacted by the practices and ideologies of 'remix'.<sup>7</sup>

My argument here is that some of these foundational concepts and structures of Indian dances are changing due to cultural shifts in a liberalized India, specifically pertaining to dance training, travel, and explosion of electronic media. Appadurai (1997: 44–5) observes this new condition of 'remix' and hybridity in another context when he writes:

The sort of transgenerational stability of knowledge that was presupposed in most theories of enculturation (or, in slightly broader terms, socialization) can no longer be assumed .... As the shapes of cultures grow less bounded and tacit, more fluid and politicized, the work of cultural reproduction becomes a daily hazard. Far more could, and should, be said about the work of reproduction in an age of mechanical art.

Some of this cultural fluidity and change are played out in the microcosm of the aspiring halls of fame in Mumbai, where the tabla player, the musicians and the guru of a typical dance context have been replaced by DJs, big stereo systems, the choreographer and his/her assistant, and a schedule to keep track of the renters of the space. In these studios, the dancers and choreographers gather to learn, practice, and choreograph 'item numbers' that draw on a variety of movements from a variety of cultures. The cultural landscape of the dance halls in Mumbai or dance

<sup>7</sup> However, postmodern hybridity is by definition internally contradictory. Therefore, it is no surprise that there are also many examples—such as Kalakshetra and Nrityagram—of the classical dances being preserved through institutions that closely resemble the gurukul tradition that nonetheless operate within a global culture-industry.



studios in Kolkata reflects a new dance culture in India that is hybrid, porous, and a part of the transnational culture-industry.

Many dancers and choreographers in Bollywood spoke to me of the erosion of the cultural and aesthetic codes connected to the traditional methods of imparting knowledge of the body. Geeta Kapoor, who has some Bharatanatyam training, and was assistant to the eminent choreographer Farah Khan, and now is a judge on the hit reality show *Dance India Dance*, talked about the emergence of 'item numbers':

In college people asked me to do fashion shows. I was partnered with dancer Javed Jaffrey. I worked with Ken Ghosh [a music video director, known for the hit musical *Ishq Vishk*]. I have done forty or so videos with him. I have been working with Farah Khan as her assistant from 1994. I have choreographed *Arman*, *Ashoka*, and *Pyar Me Kabhi*. I also do a lot of film shows and events. This is the time of the 'item numbers'. Dancers have specific looks and glamour, they are professionals. We know that dancing is all about having a good frame of mind and creating a good look.

The 'specific looks and glamour' Geeta Kapoor references here is associated with a certain kind of packaging associated with urbanism, professionalism, and a global Indian lifestyle. Pathak calls these new bodily dispositions and practices 'presentability' and it is an embodied form of cultural capital not unlike 'remix'. Pathak (2014: 322) writes that: 'Presentability—the expression of this global Indian identity at the site of the body—is rooted in the social position of the middle classes, specifically urban middle-class professionals, although it is consumed as an ideal by a wide range of Indians.' Presentability is about being groomed in a particular way which is encoded in the changing conception of an Indian body, its ability to wear western clothes, appear well-groomed with clear skin, and hair highlights and sport a consumption-oriented lifestyle. This ideology of presentability is related to the

idea that cosmetically improved bodies provide a sense of happiness and control in reality shows (discussed in Chapter 2). Similarly, here the body itself is transformed into a sign, a certain kind of packaging of cosmopolitan hybrid inspired by the images represented in song and dance sequences of Bollywood films.

The older dancing body constructed through bhakti and the relationships it forged between teacher and student or god and devotee are no longer relevant to the inter-generational transmission of knowledge. The structures of feeling associated with bhava rasa appear on 'item numbers' as fleeting emotions, almost cartoons or caricatures, of a bygone era. These bodies are not embedded in any particular cultural style. They are instruments on which movements are crafted using 'copy and paste' techniques. Therefore, various movements are uprooted from specific contexts and remixed to produce an 'item number'. They reflect the commodity-oriented consumption practices of a global and urban Indian postmodernity. Geeta Kapoor says:

We don't have formal dance training schools for Bollywood dances except for Shiamak Davar [although this is not true anymore]. Earlier, people got training in Bharatanatyam, Kathak, folk styles, etc. But you have to remember that earlier, dancers were fillers in Bombay films. Choreographers have given the dancers a presence in Bombay films. They make Rs 2,500–3,000 a day. We have a union. Now young people learn their moves in fashion shows. They also learn from music videos. Often their first encounter with dance is Bollywood dance numbers on television. They imitate them.

In Bollywood, the changes are not only encoded in the nature of dance practice once associated with traditional embodied aesthetics, but in the negotiations with new editing techniques, computer graphics, and an impetus to represent bodies that are inspired by commodity images. These sculpted dancing figures very often unite with fashion

models, as fashion shows and film dance numbers unite to create a common platform to display commodities.<sup>8</sup>

The film dances that were once deemed frivolous and lowbrow by the educated middle classes in India (in comparison to the classical concert dances) are now regularly taught in dance schools along with the classical forms. The live staged performances of the film dances are a big draw in India and among the diaspora and it circulates now as authentic Indian identity (see David, 2010 for an exploration of Bollywood dance among the South Asian diaspora in the U.K.). The result, Shreshtova (2011) argues, has been a vital transformation of a medium called 'filmee dance' or dance choreographies from films, influenced by the then-prominent classical and folk performance traditions, to a medium called Bollywood dance which has, in turn, influenced performed expressions of Indianness. This constant movement of dance from one medium to another or from one cultural context to another has resulted in a coalescing of various dance genres into perpetual hybrid formations that produce novel identities.<sup>9</sup> The dance spaces I traversed during my fieldwork were part of this new discursive field of Indian dance of fluid borders and aspiring choreographers and dancers. They came from all walks of life, breaking down many previous notions of middle class respectability as they forge hybrid and novel identities (more on this in Chapter 6).

## Producing a Sequence

On the sets of *Vivah* (2006; a film about the virtues of arranged marriage), in Film City Studios, the award-winning choreographer Jay Borade shared with me the new processes of commodification of images that are now part of the new Bollywood culture industry, to be distinguished

<sup>8</sup> The changing status of film dancers is reflected in how their title has changed from film extras to back-up dancers to junior artists.

<sup>9</sup> Weidman (2012) writes about this phenomenon in the context of music.

from the commercial industry of old Bombay films (see Figure 4.1). (I focus on the production of images to emphasize that the dancing in reality shows is a continuation of the same process of commodification of images that produces the mediatized embodiments of new camera work and editing technologies.) Borade explained how music videos and performance practices derived from western MTV aesthetics that explicitly sexualize the dancing body have been competing with the traditional/older romantic aesthetics of dance that informed the song and dance sequences of commercial Hindi cinema. This phenomenon, according to him, was transforming the industry.

I accompanied Sanjay Dabade, a renowned art director of Bollywood films, to the sets of *Vivah* in Goregaon (where Film City is located) where I met Jay Borade. Sanjay was designing the sets for *Vivah* (2006), a film by Rajshri Productions. The set included a terrace where the hero and heroine (played by Bollywood stars Shahid Kapoor and Amrita Rao) romance. The story was a family drama based on Indian values, I

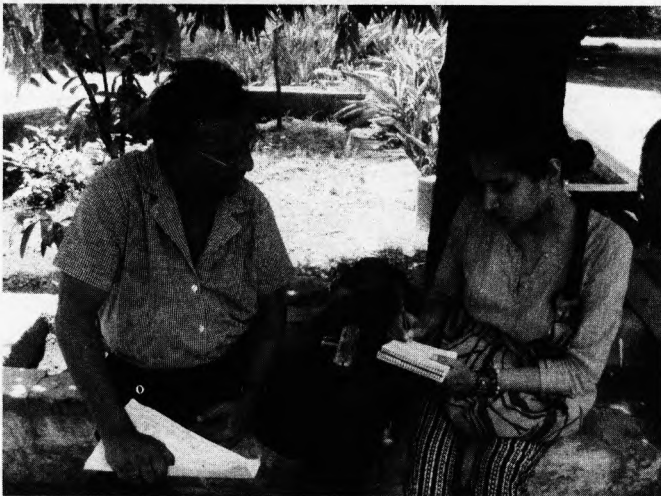


FIGURE 4.1 Jay Borade and Author in Film City Studios, Mumbai

Source: Author.

was told. When I arrived at the set, there was chaos all around. There were about 40 to 50 people working on different parts of the set, constructing platforms at various levels. Putting the set together required detailed craftsmanship for work such as laying a tiled floor, which was the most intricate aspect of the set; it was built with small marble tiles/chips that had to be laid one at a time in a pattern of a floral design. The terrace was lined with potted trees and stand fans (the atmosphere was hot, dusty, and stuffy). There was a water tank on one side of the terrace and a pond on the other side. There were people labouring away to make the water tank appear antiquated; they were staining its walls with great diligence. In another shaded area of the terrace, the director and producers sat together with television monitors. There was a big light above that represented the moon. The lighting designer was using 'black chroma' (I was told) to create the illusion of a moonlit night where the shadows gently cascaded the terrace. I looked up to see the light grid (*tarafa*, as the crew called it) and saw a few men crouching and working high up near the ceiling. The camera was mounted on a moving scooter-like vehicle, on which the cameraperson moved around vertically and horizontally to figure out various camera angles for filming the scene.

There was one person sitting with a megaphone giving directions to the crew. The diversity of Mumbai was very visible on the set. There were women crouching on the ground polishing the marble tiles, attired in typical Maharashtrian style (*nauvari*) saris. Some of the men by their side had flowing beards and fez caps marking their Muslim identity. The director Sooraj Barjatya was a Jain, which I discovered during lunch as he followed a strict Jain vegetarian diet. Amidst these activities, a person came in to distribute a box full of *prasad* (sacred food that has first been offered to and consumed by a deity), which consisted of little pieces of delicious coconut. There were also aspirational actresses hanging out with their portfolios, as well as *chaiwalas* (tea servers) hovering

around with cups of hot tea. A buzzing and unpredictable and chaotic Bollywood cinema world (that is never seen on screen) was unfolding in front of me.

I began visiting Film City regularly to see how the set was being put together for shooting one particular song sequence in *Vivah*. The scene was being choreographed by Jay Borade of *Hum Apke Hain Kaun?* fame. Although not a typical Bollywood dance sequence, it was a romantic scene that was based on postures, hand movements, and expressions based on Indian dance, Jay explained to me. The lines sung by Shreya Ghosal and Udit Narayan were 'Mujhe Haq Hai Tujhe Jee Bhar Ke Mein Dekhu' (I have the right to look at you to my heart's content); the music director was Ravindra Jain. Jay was choreographing the song on Sunita Shetty (his assistant, also a choreographer) and Vikram Borade (his assistant and son, and also a choreographer) (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Sunita explained to me that the song is recorded first and then *masterji* (the name for male choreographers in Bollywood) conceptualizes the scene and puts the work on the assistant choreographer to figure out



FIGURE 4.2 Sunita Shetty and Jay Borade, Choreographers in Film City Studios, Mumbai

Source: Author.





FIGURE 4.3 Vikram Borade and Sunita at the Sets of *Vivah* in Film City Studios, Mumbai

Source: Author.

the camera angles. This determines how the choreography will actually appear on the screen. This is also useful for training the assistant who gets to know how the master choreographer works. This is how (Sunita explained) Bombay film choreographers were usually trained. While I was sitting and talking with Jay and Sunita, the cameraperson was busy setting the lighting on another dummy (man) who was lying on the tiled floor covered with a white cloth. Sunita got up to replace the man on the floor, while Vijay positioned himself above her. They held hands in a lying position and Jay gave them directions to play with their hands and use Vijay's fingers to trace and separate the bangles. The lines were: 'Chudiyān Gun-gunā Ke Kya Kahe Sajana?' (What does the hum of the bangles say my beloved?).

Jay was intensely focused on how the hands should be designed for the camera. When he was ready, Amrita Rao, the Bollywood actress, appeared. She freshened her makeup, added a coat of lipstick, and then



lowered herself down to a lying position where Sunita was before. Shahid Kapoor took Vikram's position. The shots were taken a few times. But they were not satisfactory. While Amrita and Shahid left to wait in their air-conditioned buses, Sunita took her original position on the floor. Jay explained the camera angle to her. He decided that the camera should be on the ground facing the hands at a right angle. But there was still dissatisfaction with the shot from the director Sooraj Barjatya who had been patiently watching the scene on a television monitor in a shaded area on the terrace. The angle apparently was incorrect and the movement of the bangles could not be seen on the screen. There was a break at this point. The changing of the camera angle meant the whole position—lighting, set, and so on—needed to be rearranged.

After all the readjustments, Sunita and Vijay lay down again on the floor. The cameraman panned the hands and the bangles as the song progressed. Jay explained again that Sunita's face should come into focus. He turned to me and explained that the posture they were striking on the floor and their hand movements were from Indian dance. 'See how the girl lies flat with her right leg folded and the boy lies next to her leaning and holding her left hand ... I have choreographed it like a dance sequence.' He further explained, 'the face and bangles need to be under focus, then the camera should catch the man looking at the woman. The woman's left hand then shifts and moves to his right shoulder. All these exchanges and locking of glances follow techniques of dance.' However, the shot was cancelled again. The angle was still not right. Jay decided that it was a compact shot and there was no need for two cameras. He explained that the problems are always with close-up shots: the distance from the face to the camera has to be measured carefully; the dance movement and camera movement need to be synchronized; the movements have to be meticulously choreographed. He said:

I find it much easier to choreograph group dancing with a lot of action.

Moreover, for the close-ups you also need good actors, because the

movements need to match the right facial expression. Then comes editing, this is where the polishing happens. The director gives the choreographer the authority to edit the shots. During editing you can see where you have made mistakes.

On this particular day the camera angles did not work for the terrace scene. The shots were taken innumerable times. The makeup artist touched up Sunita's makeup several times. The shots had to be perfect with her hair flying in some shots and not-so in some others. I visited Film City and the *Vivah* set a number of times to talk at length, have lunch with the crew, and see Sunita, Vikram, and Jay at work as the shooting progressed. I give a selective account of these conversations below to highlight how the choreographers saw the changing aesthetics and values associated with Bombay film dance.

*Sunita Shetty (June 2006)*

There is a lot of competition in the dance scene. People often pull others down if they see talent. I am lucky because I got the opportunity to be an assistant to the Bollywood icon Saroj Khan. I trained only in Indian folk styles and do not have a classical background. I often have to choreograph women in the film shows and music videos in very revealing clothes. It is because the director wants it that way. It is for an artistic reason; but these days the dancers flash their bodies because they look good. I come back home sometimes, think back, and feel that the scene I choreographed was simply vulgar. The only choreographic scope is with women wearing scanty clothes and doing western dance. In this kind of dancing, you cannot express feelings like in Indian dances; you only exhibit your body. I have only studied until the 10th standard. I had to drop out to support my family through dance. That is how I became an assistant to Saroj Khan, whom I really admire. I keep busy with my work and travel around the world. I will be going to Canada soon to

work on a music video. But, I know that the demand will be for western style choreography.

*Jay Borade (June 2006)*

I learned western dances—Waltz, Tango, Rock and Roll, and Cha Cha—in Pune. I was from a military family and my father was a very good ballroom dancer. I worked as an assistant choreographer to Surya Kumar for many years. I have worked as an assistant for altogether 14 years. I was an assistant to Vijay Oskar in the film *Love in Goa* (1984). I have choreographed for about 300 films in Hindi (of course), Marathi, Bengali, Punjabi, Oriya, and Pakistani. But my main break came from *Hum Apke Hain Kaun?* Despite my success as a choreographer in Bombay cinema, I am not happy about what is happening with the so-called Bollywood dance. Nowadays people do not care about situation or context. There is no concept, no understanding of lyrics. I care about the lyrics and what movement should be associated with them. Now everyone is eager to make a fast buck. So, they just watch MTV and mix movements together. They only take a day to choreograph a music video. I always ask for the script so I can think about the situation and then I create the choreography. I can work on 10–12 films at a time because I have a system. I can keep track by creating a log [he drew the log on a piece of paper]. I write the serial number in the first column, then the lines of the lyrics, then the description of the situation, and then include the screenplay. It is not easy to conceive the situation. You have to consider the screenplay, lyrics, sets, and costumes to imagine the situation and then put the choreography together. Now, it is all about making money and taking shortcuts.

Although Jay Borade and Sunita Shetty were both quite critical of the changes in the Bollywood dance scene, one could argue that the particular de-contextualized aesthetics they describe have enabled the song and dance sequences to be a global success. The integration of

movement/dancing, music, sets, camera angles, editing, and picturization (akin to MTV aesthetics) has created the aesthetics of 'remix'. These methodologies and techniques of 'remix' especially, as they pertain to movement vocabulary, are practised in classrooms and dance halls creating mediated embodiments, as I show below.

## Dancing between Mumbai and Kolkata

'Jhik Jhik Ta, Jhik Jhik Ta, 1-2-3 and 1-2-3', resounded in my ears over and above the song bellowing from the stereo system in the room. The *tal* (metric) system was uniquely Bollywood, I thought to myself. I was in Vikram Borade's class in Shariq Hall in Andheri West. This was also where the famous Bollywood choreographer Ganesh Acharya held his classes (see Figures 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6). I was standing awkwardly in the



FIGURE 4.4 Ganesh Acharya Dance Academy, Mumbai, Where Dancers Rehearse Item Numbers

Source: Author.



FIGURE 4.5 Vikram Borade's Class, Mumbai

*Source:* Author.



FIGURE 4.6 Vikram Borade's Class, Mumbai

*Source:* Author.

corner of the studio with my notebook and micro cassette player trying to be unobtrusive and record what I was seeing, hearing, and experiencing. I was immersed in a world of new practices and new ways of knowledge transmission between dancing bodies.

The room I was in was a clean space with mirrored walls and an air conditioner. Vikram was teaching his dancers some Hip-Hop inspired movements. He was doing breaks and pops and throwing in some hand movements and gestures with the phrase he was showing. Vikram told his dancers, 'sab baatey bhul ke, bas ye baat yadh rakh' (Forget everything else, just remember these words). The girls looked like they were between 16 and 25 years of age. They all wore jeans, sweats, and sneakers. They were dressed in layers. The boys wore tight T-shirts that showed-off their buff bodies and toned muscles. Vikram was teaching them how to do partnering movements. Vikram was a very active choreographer. He had choreographed for major films, music videos, and dance shows. I could see that he was also an accomplished Bollywood dancer. He said he had assisted Raju Khan and choreographed the song 'Kinna Sona' by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. He said that he was choreographing an 'item number' for a film whose name had not been decided yet. He was not even aware of the story line except that a boy falls in love with a girl, but the boy was shy and the song was about his attitude to the girl. He said that the song was also about Bombay youth culture. In his words: 'I go with the lyrics and then I improvise. I visualize the song, then think about the steps, and then think about how the camera angle will work with the steps. It is about putting the best visual in the best way.'

Vikram constantly moved with the dancers to teach them a particular step or a gesture. The words of the song were ... 'chum le zara' (Kiss me a little). He instructed his dancers: 'put two fingers on your lips, one leg up, then extend the other free hand.' The hand gestures were simple and straightforward, he explained. He interpreted the

word 'bhramar' (bee) with his index finger circulating.<sup>10</sup> The dancing was powerful, acrobatic, and unadorned with symbolism (there is no strict codification of Bollywood dance yet, although there are attempts at it by several choreographers). I followed Vikram from Shariq Hall in Andheri to Satyam Studios in Juhu to observe his teaching methods. As I was told during my fieldwork by Rajubhai, the secretary of Indian Film Dance Directors Association: 'There are no schools in Bollywood that will make you a choreographer, there are no degrees you can earn to establish your credentials, you have to learn on the job and serve as an assistant choreographer for years before you might get noticed. It's all luck and network.'

The movements intensified inside the studio. The movements had hip shakes, shoulder shakes, fast steps, bent knees, going on tiptoes, flaying hands, and still hands. The music was loud, very loud, and it slowly ate into my brains. I could not think or take notes. The DJ person sat in front of the stereo system and constantly manipulated the music. There was only loud music and frenzied moving bodies. The dancers rehearsed nonstop; taking short breaks and then they were back again repeating the movements (over and over again). The studio slowly filled with the fumes of deodorant and sweat. The dancers kept spraying themselves with deodrants to stay dry. They told me that they always carried it in their backpack. I stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. I started talking to a very young dancer who had stepped outside for a break. She told me she used to hate dance but she came into this 'line' after her mother (who used to be the sole earning member in her family) met with an accident. She said:

I have no dance training. But I dance and rehearse twelve to thirteen hours every day. I love dancing item numbers. I also perform at

<sup>10</sup> The same word in classical dance is signified by specific mudras or hand gestures that take time (years, decades) to execute skilfully.



weddings. There is so much pressure ... sometimes you have to learn five dance items in two days. I earn Rs 2,000 to Rs 3,000 per day, about Rs 30,000 a month. It is better to be a dancer as there is always work. That is not the case for assistant choreographers like assistant-di [she pointed at Vikram's assistant Bhoomika]. Although the assistant is paid two and a half times more than the dancers, she has no regular work. We travel a lot. We just follow what the assistant-di tells us. We don't know what the dance is for, which film or music video. I am sixteen and can only dance until thirty. You need the figure and looks to make a dance career and by the time you reach thirty, you are out. I make the most of what I have. I have no college degree.

She gave me a sweet smile, finished her cigarette, I took a picture with her, and she ran back into the studio.

The 'remix' dances I was observing in Vijay Borade's classes were ubiquitous in 'maximum city' Mumbai's urban culture. Kolkata, where I went next, was far behind Mumbai in terms of commerce and industry and wealth, but was nonetheless also a hub for 'remix' dance practices and reality shows for the Bangla language audience. In Kolkata, the dance-spaces were tucked in various corners of the city, sometimes in the most unexpected places. I followed a few choreographers around as they held classes in a variety of contexts showing an incredible amount of dynamism, unpredictability, and flexibility but with a steady fixity of purpose. I had to reorganize my sense of time and place from the precise schedules of the American daily life I am used to. It was impossible to plan much as appointments and venues kept changing. This was a world of uncertainty and flexibility. This part of the story was the same both in Mumbai and Kolkata. The notion of fieldwork itself was challenged to suit this 'arrhythmic lifestyle' as Pandian (2013) eloquently expresses in his experience with filmmakers (2013). My frustration was echoed in my field notes.

Bhaskar came almost two hours late. I stood in front of the tall Exide building on Chowrangee Street in central Kolkata. This was a very busy

part of the city, but traffic was light as it was a Sunday. As I waited, smells of *chops* and *pakorras* (flour fritters) wafted in the air. A pavement hawker was frying them on a kerosene stove. I was tempted to indulge and was debating the potential health hazards of such mouth-watering street snacks when Bhaskar arrived. He said he could not answer my phone calls as he was riding his bike; I noticed he was holding his helmet. I accompanied him inside the old building. This was a landmark commercial building that had seen better days. We climbed up five dark and dilapidated floors to reach a bright well-lit room. This was the front office of Shubela Production. Bhaskar explained that his classes here were part of this production house, which was trying to bring dance and films on the same platform. We sat in the front office that led to the studio and talked for a while. The room had posters of many dance forms and dancers including a poster that had Bhaskar in the center. The poster next to it showed Michael Jackson moonwalking, his hands thrown up, his face looking down and covered with a hat. There was also a poster with many different dance poses that read Jazz, Street, Lyrical, Modern, Hip-Hop, Ballet, and Contemporary (see Figure 4.7).



FIGURE 4.7 Bhaskar Raut's Classes Being Advertised inside Shubela Production, Kolkata

Source: Author.

The studio itself was big and impressive (compared to some others I have seen in Kolkata). One side of the room was mirrored and there was also a bathroom attached to the studio. The lack of toilet facilities in dance-spaces where dancers gathered and rehearsed for long hours was a problem that I became acutely aware of during my fieldwork. I personally experienced how the heavy use of toilets without proper sanitary mechanisms for long hours created unsavory sensory immersions for sweaty dancers and their choreographers, especially during the hot and humid summer days. Here too the deodorant or 'deo' came to the rescue.

The dancers in the room were from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. They arrived at different times and at one point it seemed to me that they kept trickling in. Bhaskar told me that the starting time of the class was 4:30. I looked at my watch. It was already 5:30. As I waited for people to arrive, I began chatting with one of Bhaskar's dancers in the office room. The young man told me he was from a small town. He accidentally met Bhaskar in Mumbai in a cancer hospital where his sister was getting treatment. He saw Bhaskar and immediately recognized him from a dance reality show. 'I saw dada who was on TV in front of me. He is on TV, which is a very big thing (eta khub boro bepar).' This young man was very eager to work with Bhaskar and take lessons from him. Bhaskar encouraged him to come to Kolkata and attend his classes and rehearsals despite the fact that he had no money to pay Bhaskar. He said he was so excited to see the dance studios here with big mirrors: 'We can actually see ourselves and correct the mistakes.' He said he was learning Contemporary dance earlier, but Bhaskar was teaching him the 'real' Contemporary. I came to know from him that Bhaskar also generously shared his tiny flat with dancers like him who came from out of town. Now the young man would be appearing on a Bangla TV channel Star Jalsha in October in a dance show called *Mega Jalsha*. The choreographer was Bhaskar, of course.

Bhaskar's repertoire was eclectic and open-ended like all the choreographers and dancers of reality TV. It included Contemporary, filmi or Bollywood, and Bharatanatyam. Other than Bharatanatyam, both Contemporary and Bollywood were fusion styles with no clear boundaries and often used Hip-Hop, Break, Salsa, Ballroom, and Contact. Bhaskar had created a name for himself as a choreographer in the reality show circuit in Bengal and its surrounding states. He held classes outside Kolkata, including Cooch Behar (in North Bengal) and in a community hall belonging to Haldia Petrochemicals in Haldia (an industrial small city in South Bengal). He told me he liked to recruit his dancers from small towns outside Kolkata as those students were more eager to learn and willing to face many hardships. 'They don't have the know-it-all [shobjanta] attitude of Kolkata-based dancers,' he said. Bhaskar said he was also putting an international tour together and launching a website.

The class eventually filled up. There were backpacks that eventually lined up at the back of the room and sat next to Bhaskar's bike helmet. The bike helmet, like the glove and sunglass, were the symbols of youth, mobility, and movement for a new generation of dancers and choreographers in urban centres such as Kolkata and Mumbai. The laptop in the corner played some techno music. Bhaskar had two assistants (a male and a female) who helped him teach. The dancers began moving with steps that looked like a mixture of Hip-Hop, floor work, head spins, and lunges. When I asked about the repertoire of movements he was using, Bhaskar told me he called it 'freestyle'. The class looked unstructured with hands-on and ad hoc teaching methods. Bhaskar repeatedly showed the head spin to a young boy by breaking it down part by part. I cringed a few times as they were on a mosaic floor that strained their necks. It looked painful. But what to do? Sprung wooden floors were a rarity in the city. The males in the group were eager to execute the move. The atmosphere in the class was casual and non-hierarchical. Bhaskar changed the music playing on the laptop in the corner from

time to time but it appeared to me that the music was just being used as background filler and was unrelated to the movements.

During another visit to Bhaskar's class, I found him teaching without any music. The class was crowded with young males. Bhaskar gave precise instructions to the group, mostly in Hindi. He told me 'they are all coming from different places outside Kolkata such as Sodpur, Beharampur, Purulia,' and then he got busy with teaching. He showed them how to stretch one arm above their head with one arm to the side while reciting 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 and then how to drop to the floor on 8, then circle on the ground on their hips with legs split like scissors. He showed them how to quickly fall to the ground and hold the movement; 'hold', he shouted many times. His female assistant helped one male student hold his spine and stretch his legs. Bhaskar demonstrated how to rise from the floor and immediately go into motion: '1 and 2 and sashay and drop and hold with one leg up.' He repeatedly showed his students a phrase that included a drop to the floor, a turn on the floor using the hips as the pivot, then a head roll with legs split, rise up and take a little hopping step and turn and drop again and repeat. This phrase was difficult for the dancers. He patiently demonstrated again and again and told his students to observe his spine and think of their hips as the point of a compass to turn, turn, and turn.

Another evening in Bhaskar's studio inside the Exide building, I observed him teaching a completely different movement vocabulary. He told me that the particular movement he was teaching was from Kalariyapattu (a difficult and old martial art tradition from Kerala). He called out 'kick up' and showed a forceful kick with legs reaching out and up to almost his temple. Then he added 'step back immediately with the right leg.' He then told his students to stretch their hands forward and touch the hands while they had one leg up. He added another movement to the leg that was already up ... a circular movement with the kick, then stepped back and then to the side and he shouted, 'hold'. The group

observed him keenly. He suddenly pushed one of his students and said brusquely 'use force, show strength'. Bhaskar was on a roll. He added another movement that included a front kick, then a swinging back kick, then a half turn and then a full turn. He asked his students to show him the movements individually. They showed him their fall, reverse, get up, hold, and fall again. He talked incessantly. He said to his students that the person who taught him the Kalari movements came from Kerala. His name was Robi Josh, who was a small thin fellow, but had fantastic agility and was a powerful mover. He scolded them mildly: 'Please practice, do you practice at home?' One student asked how he could get lighter. 'Jog', he told him. I asked him whether these dancers were part of his performing group. He said that they were just his students. But some may be recruited. In his performing group, he added, they needed to know classical, folk, western, and Bollywood. Above all, they needed to be fit and flexible. He described to me how he slowly assembled his group while working in different cities and small towns.

The music blasted from another laptop in another dance studio in Kolkata. The youthful bodies moved to the music with shakes, breaks, jumps, twists, and turns. The instructor with a trendy cap on his head and a sleeveless tee shirt that revealed well-muscled arms shouted, 'drop to the floor'. The dancers clad in jeans and sneakers dropped horizontally on the floor from a vertical position with an easy slide. They moved constantly with furious energy and sweated profusely. The ceiling fan seemed decorative, wholly inadequate for the hot and humid air of a Kolkata summer. And then there was the ubiquitous laptop, a constant source of information. It was certainly one of the biggest investments for the choreographer whose class I was observing. Sajid explained the importance of the laptop for him:

I look up movements by famous Bollywood dancers like Hrithik Roshan, and if a movement is appealing I copy and put it on my dancers. This is not a new invention. I personally learned a lot of moves from just



watching Michael Jackson videos. I copied a move then practiced a lot. I loved dancing and would practice for hours. I was always a dancer. Now I want to be a famous choreographer.

The dancers in his class came from a variety of backgrounds, not unlike the other classes I had visited. Many had Indian classical training, many had western training (though the term ‘western’ was nebulous and could mean anything from Hip-Hop and Salsa to Bollywood free style), and many were self-trained. Although the dancers I was observing physically resembled the backup dancers of Bollywood, they were mostly local dancers with dreams of making it to Bollywood. Their instructor (Sajid) was once a backup dancer in Bollywood but left because he wanted to be a choreographer. The dancers in the room were young, ambitious, flexible, and adept at learning any steps or movements presented to them (see Figures 4.8, 4.9, and 4.10). A very talented dancer and a participant on the television dance reality show *Dhum Machale* (which I explore in detail in Chapter 5) explained:



FIGURE 4.8 Sajid Jamal's Class, Kolkata

Source: Author.



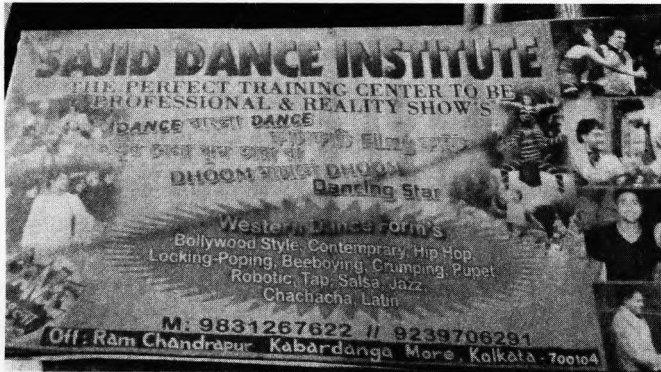


FIGURE 4.9 The Billboard for Sajid Jamal's Class in Kabardanga, Kolkata

Source: Author.



FIGURE 4.10 A Rehearsal for a TV Reality Show, Kolkata

Source: Author.

I began with Ananda Shankar's school of modern dance. I then studied the classical dance style of Odissi for a long time. However, I was always attracted to western dance. I looked at ballet on television and studied it on my own. I also tried to do moves used by gymnasts. Television was a source of inspiration. Now I am studying to learn western dance.

Sajid, the instructor and choreographer who I was visiting, came into limelight from dance reality shows. He was mostly self-trained and his forte was Michael Jackson-style break dancing with Bollywood punches thrown in. The son of a seamstress, Sajid grew up in difficult socio-economic circumstances. His fame was symbolic of the democratic potential of dance reality shows. In his words:

If you have talent it will come out in the reality shows. I like reality shows as it gave me a platform. People like me who lack backing needs such platforms. The laptop is most precious to me—it helps me to connect to Bollywood instantly and I can replicate some of the choreography. But I always try to be creative with movement.

I met Sajid again in Kabardanga (a neighbourhood of Behala in the far southern part of Kolkata) in a chaotic market area. Sajid had a class on the second floor of a building with a sign outside that said: 'Sajid's Dance Institute, perfect training center to be professional and Reality Show's western dance forms.' Then the board listed: 'Bollywood, Contemporary, Hip-Hop, Locking-Popping, Beeboying, Crumping, Puppet, Robotic, Tap, Salsa, Jazz, Chachacha, Latin.' The area was a very busy wet market area with a slaughterhouse situated right opposite Sajid's studio. The street lighting was thin and dim. Although far from Chowrangingee and urban landmarks such as the Exide building, Sajid had attracted plenty of students here, many from far away. Sajid said he only taught his junior students here. He taught and performed with his senior students in central Kolkata, in Chandni. He told me he seldom goes to the classes held in south Kolkata where I first met him a few years ago. He proudly said that he had recently choreographed for the super hit reality show *Dance Bangla Dance* on Zee channel, his choreography got the first prize, and now his fortune was rising. He added that he had about 68 students.

Sajid's class in Kabardanga was a modest room with chairs lining one wall. The ceiling seemed to be made of asbestos (it was definitely not concrete) with wooden rods crisscrossing the tiles. The fans were hung low from the wooden rods. The room had big glass windows on two

sides and they opened out to the busy streets. Sajid said that this particular class was meant for school-age students. The mothers of these children sat on chairs, waited patiently, and observed the class. Sajid played music from a portable CD player and danced with the remote in his hand. He counted 1-2-3-4 then 5-6-7-8 and showed how each count had a specific movement (I realized he had broken down the movements into their smallest segments to teach his students): they consisted of jumps, torso movements, head and neck movements. Some of the movements appeared to be simple and straightforward, almost like a drill exercise. But some were complicated, like lying on the floor face down, then springing back up and standing straight and dropping immediately with straight legs (certainly inspired by Hip Hop). There were times I saw them doing Hip Hop-inspired shoulder isolations. Some of the very young dancers in his class had aspirations of participating in the popular reality show *Dance Bangla Dance*. This particular reality show was a competition for children and young adults and had become the inspiration for the national reality show *Dance India Dance*.

Sajid's assistant worked individually with the kids. Some of them were able to remember and do the moves but some jumped around cluelessly. Sajid told me that he seldom diluted his movement vocabulary for kids. He wanted them to be exposed from an early age to difficult dance moves and expressions so that they were aware of his distinct style. I observed one little girl dancing with Bollywood-style facial expressions usually exhibited by 'item girls'. (This is usually considered very vulgar by most middle class Indians and many had expressed to me during academic conferences in India that their distaste for dance reality shows stems from such overt expression of sexuality by young children.)<sup>11</sup> Sajid said he usually taught using 'item numbers' so that his

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted here that the *abhinaya* or facial expressions associated with classical or *rasa* aesthetics in Indian dances is now replaced by the emphasis on choreography and group dances in general.

students learnt the 'item number' rather than a movement repertoire. He added that the movements he was teaching in the class were a mix of Bollywood, Hip-Hop, and Contemporary. He encouraged me to visit his class in Chandni in central Kolkata where he rehearsed with his professional group.

So I followed him to Chandni one day. Chandni was a bustling bazaar where, as the saying goes, you can buy anything from computer hardware to tiger's milk. I set out for Chandni around 7 in the evening, which is the peak rush hour in Kolkata, and it took me more than an hour to reach Chandni from the south of the city. Sajid was waiting for me in front of a restaurant. I spotted him immediately in the crowd; he had on his customary cap and sneakers and a bright purple shirt. I followed him to the back of the restaurant, climbed up dark stairs, leaving behind a bar on the mezzanine floor. I stepped inside a brightly lit, colorful studio with sparkling wooden floors and mirrored walls on one side. The walls were vivid orange and blue. There were shelves lining the room with children's toys and small statues of Hindu gods Ganesh and Saraswati. There was a music system in one corner. I wondered whether the space was also serving as a children's nursery school in the morning and the bar congregation in the evening. The hybrid/flexible functionality of the dance spaces I visited reflected the hybrid aesthetics of the dances being taught there.

Sajid's group was already rehearsing when we entered. There was an almost equal number of males and females in the group. The regional diversity of the group became evident as they started introducing themselves to me. The males were mostly college dropouts and from working class backgrounds. Some told me they had to drop out of school due to financial difficulties. There was one young man who had never been to any school or college and earned a living from sweeping streets. The men said they used the money they got from dancing to help their families. They said they could make up to Rs 3,000 per month from dancing (a big difference from the earnings of the Mumbai

dancers); sometimes it could be more. The males in the group seemed to be harder up financially than the females and they seemed to have no prospects of going to college, whereas some of the females were in college but had no interest in academics. Sajid added that all the dancers in his group were extremely hard working (*bahut mehnat karta*) but were from difficult financial situations (*paisa nahi hai*). They all seemed to have high regard for their leader, Sajid.

During my repeated visits to Chandni, I discovered the range of dancers who came to Sajid for him to choreograph their dance pieces. Some came to prepare for dance competitions, some for dance shows, and some came even for school curricula. Once I saw a young gymnast who had come to Sajid for him to design a choreography for her gymnastics competition. Sajid created his own mashup of several 'item numbers' on which he choreographed the dance pieces. His students learned the movements during the mashup process and everything was spontaneous and improvised. For instance, on one occasion, dancing to the hit 'item number' 'Sheila Ki Jawani' (Sheila's youth) from the Bollywood film *Tees Maar Khan*, the dancers used a wide range of styles from hip shakes, breaking, and popping, to splits, floor work, glide and heel-toe (Sajid used these terms for the movement vocabulary). In another song composed by Rahul Dev Burman *Duniya Mein, Logon Ko....Monica Oh My Darling* from the old Bombay film *Apna Desh* (My Country), with a pacey tempo and rock and roll beats, the dance vocabulary was a mix of Bollywood moves with shake and shimmy. Some of the movements looked like the original dancing in the scene in the movie, but some were Sajid's innovations. The dancers stood on the side and observed the movements before trying them. They all seemed to have a good rapport with each other and helped each other to learn the moves correctly. They all had great respect for Sajid, not only as their teacher, but also as a friend and someone who took care of their needs, financially and emotionally.

Outside Sajid's class in Chandni, a few mothers waited in the small and dark landing of the building. One mother, who I had also met in Kabardanga, brought her little girl to Chandni so she could improve by observing the older dancers. She told me she lived in Belur, an older industrial suburb north of Kolkata, a jute mill town where almost all the mills had closed. She had to take the train and auto for about three hours to come to class in Kabardanga, in the far south of the city. She wanted her daughter to excel in dance. She said that success can come from any source these days and her daughter was learning many kinds of dances, such as classical, Tagore, and Bollywood. The mothers echoed the dancers' sentiments that reality shows can open up chances for their children. That is, they could be 'someone' by participating in the shows; they may become a choreographer someday, and could even become famous. 'If you are on TV you are seen, if you are seen you are famous.' They all said the same thing. No doubt the fame they referred to here was associated with the 'celebrity culture' of Bollywood and the TV industry. Next, I visited the sets of auditions for *Dance India Dance* to further chart the journey of such dreams of stardom and celebrity.

### *Dance India Dance Auditions*

I had to break into the scene of the *Dance India Dance* audition in Kolkata rather abruptly as I came to know about it just the day before. Not having any prior connections with any of the organizers, I had to use some cajoling and coaxing, but I was determined to utilize this unexpected opportunity. I was learning to embrace the uncertainties of my field-work experiences. Things happened unexpectedly and schedules had to be rescheduled. The auditions were taking place in the Swabhumi Heritage Plaza next to the eastern bypass. A gate had been constructed with the banner of *Dance India Dance* with large pictures of the three judges of the show. There were throngs of people camping outside



from 3 am (I was told that thousands had arrived from the northeastern states of India). Fast food snack vendors had provided food and sustenance throughout the night. It had been a long night I could tell, as I saw the contestants and their friends, teachers, and families sprawled all over the parking lot. Some were reclining on their luggage and many were sleeping in various awkward positions. Despite the enormous numbers, it was an orderly crowd (see Figure 4.11).

The celebrity judges for *Dance India Dance* had arrived from Mumbai: Terence Lewis, Remo D'Souza, and Geeta Kapoor. They were now household names. Terence Lewis specialized in contemporary dance and had trained in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Martha Graham Center for Contemporary Dance in New York, U.S. He had choreographed for Bollywood films such as *Lagaan* (2001) and *Jhankaar Beats* (2003). Remo D'Souza was not only a successful dance choreographer but had also directed the film *Anybody Can Dance* (popularly known as ABCD, which later led to a sequel ABCD 2) which featured two *Dance India Dance* contestants. Remo D'Souza was self-trained and considered Michael Jackson his guru (he learned his moves from watching



FIGURE 4.11 Audition Setting for *Dance India Dance*, Kolkata

Source: Author.

his videos). He was first noticed during an *All India Dance Competition* (<http://www.india-forums.com/celebrity/9936/remo-dsouza/biography/India-Forums.com>). Geeta Kapoor's elevation to stardom followed a different and more traditional route for Bollywood choreographers. She became famous by assisting the famous choreographer Farah Khan, who was an assistant to the Bollywood icon Saroj Khan (Geeta had shared her career trajectory with me during my interactions with her in Mumbai).

The inner courtyard of Swabhumi was swarming with contestants dressed in a variety of dance costumes. Some were in full classical dance regalia like Bharatanatyam and Manipuri, some wore bodysuits with eyes painted black like raccoons, and some wore an eclectic mix of long skirts (*ghagra*) with short blouses and tights. The costumes and makeup reflected the mix of styles and genres, which were as randomly and innovatively put together as some of the movement repertoires I was about to observe. There were contestants hanging out dejectedly outside the audition area and some eagerly spoke to me. A group of boys from Sikkim were disappointed by the entire organization of the audition and the lack of fairness in the process of selection. They said they were all self-trained Hip-Hop artists and they had come from far and waited long hours only to be given less than half a minute of time for their audition. They claimed that the selection process was rigged. They were cut off in the preliminary rounds by one of the past winners, now turned junior judge for *Dance India Dance*. They claimed that the judges already had their favourites. A Bharatanatyam dancer said that she had been trying her luck in several reality shows and thought that the process was fair. She announced that she was not going to give up her dream and would win some day and be on TV.

I was smuggled inside by one of the crewmembers into the privately sealed off space for the *Dance India Dance* auditions. This was a big spacious area where multiple TV sets hung and various cameras panned

and focused on the contestants on the stage. The raised stage area had (*Dance India Dance*) written prominently across the backdrop. The judges sat at a distance from the stage to observe and give comments. In the next layer sat the audience in a raised makeshift gallery. I sat with the technicians on the ground behind the audience and we formed the last layer of observers. The contestants were all performing solo pieces. The judges gave them comments after their round was over; they were words of appreciation and/or criticism: 'you have to work on your balance, there are some problems with your release in the back, I liked your flexibility', and sometimes they said the most coveted words 'you are selected'. These words were always accompanied by loud squeals from the participants as they ran up to the judges for a quick *pranam* (gesture for showing respect). The audience exuberantly applauded. They were often asked to clap louder and show more emotion. This selection process continued until late evening and the judges were exhausted. One by one, 64 contestants were selected and the judges announced that the mega audition would be held in Mumbai on 3 December.

This event was like many other auditions of reality shows that are regularly organized in various cities of India and abroad. *Dance India Dance* was a major reality show on Zee TV. To be seen on TV as a contestant would be a huge accomplishment for the young aspiring dancers. Many of whom I spoke to believed that to win a *Dance India Dance* contest would be a sure ticket to stardom. A ticket that they believed would be theirs someday. The constant movement, running around, unpredictability and the ability to improvise both in the dance contexts and in real-life situations created the 'copy and paste' dance embodiment of 'remix' aesthetics. The new generation of dancers and choreographers of reality shows such as *Dance India Dance* represented the new embodiments of an aspirational emotion.

But there are important questions to consider. How far does the framework of 'embodiment' go in analysing the shifts in dance training

and the shaping of affect/desire in contemporary India? How are subjectivities shaped through this mobile and hybrid bodily training that is yet to have a stable identity or a name? And how do all these ideas mesh with the concept of 'remix'?

'Remix' works in several layers: first, in the process of image-making through set building, movement, editing, and camera angles and so on in places like Film City Studios in Mumbai. Then, in the dance halls of Mumbai and dance classes and studios in Kolkata, where students learn 'item numbers' from choreographers such as Vikram Borade and Bhaskar and Sajid, who teach hundreds of students in various locations; here the embodiment of 'remix' is accomplished through bodily training in a variety of danced styles but mostly through packaged 'item numbers'. Next, on the sets of *Dance India Dance* where participants perform 'item numbers' to be selected as contestants and begin their journey to 'celebrity-hood' someday. 'Remix' here symbolizes the aesthetics of consumption and aspirations of celebrity-hood. In other words, I argue that 'remix' is the new emotion of aspiration that creates a cosmopolitan hybrid Indian identity.

'Remix' is also reflected in the dance movements that are mixed—a variety of dance vocabularies during classes and rehearsals for shows or workshops are lifted by choreographers from YouTube and other media and using a 'copy and paste' technique and choreographed/pasted on the bodies of the dancers. But, at the same time, the choreographers also innovate and improvise. They introduce new movements so that the dancing bodies remain porous and flexible to learn new techniques and embody images that may appear from any visual world. The codified bodily techniques of classical Indian dance or bhava-rasa has no relevance for this new generation of dancers as their identities perpetually negotiate the 'remix' images they encounter in their classes and media. Their dance practice of 'remix' means porosity, flexibility, hybridity, and fluidity and cannot be attached to any iconography of dance. 'Copy

and paste' embodiment through dance belongs to no particular cultural domain or identity as the dancers inhabit multiple locations and embrace hybrid dance styles. Appadurai's (1997: 44) argument resonates here: 'Culture is now less what Pierre Bourdieu would have called habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practice and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation.' One could further argue that culture and cultural identity are now more about flexibility, contingency, and manipulation, as I show in the next chapter, than some adherence to unconscious habits or preexisting or prescribed category of social identity. Dance reality shows, and reality shows in general, produce a kind of human plasticity that is more real than the real, where dancers constantly negotiate the virtual and actual in a world where the screen dominates every aspect of experience.