

CHAPTER 14

DANCE-OFF, OR A BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE

Dance Reality Shows in India

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HINDU mythology tells us that a most reasonable method of settling an argument is a dance-off. The story involves two of the most powerful Hindu deities, Shiva and Kali (who are husband and wife). Once they clashed over territorial dominance of the Thillai forest in the southern part of India. Kali was the patron goddess of the forest and the temple within it. But Shiva, following his two devotees who wanted to worship him in the temple (in the form of his abstract representation called the Shiva lingam), came to dance in the forest. This basically meant that Shiva wanted to occupy the forest and oust Kali. Kali refused to leave and challenged Shiva to enter a dance competition with her on the condition that the loser would leave the forest. Lord Vishnu presided as the judge.

Kali (the goddess of Shakti, or power, who is often shown naked in Hindu iconography, standing on the chest of her consort Shiva, prostrated beneath her) danced fearlessly. She matched Shiva's every move and every posture with ease and grace. Shiva, the cosmic dancer of the universe, danced his *tandava nritya* (the cyclic dance of creative destruction) with fierce intensity. They were unrelenting. They danced for days and nights, but no one won. Then Shiva performed a transgressive act. He cheated. He lifted one of his legs high above his head in what classical dance parlance calls *ananda tandavam* (the dance of bliss). Kali, a modest and respectable woman (despite her nakedness and unconventional lifestyle), could not follow. Thus, the story goes, she was unable to strike such a lurid posture. Shiva won the competition and Kali admitted defeat and left the forest. Thus, Shiva became the Supreme Being, the creator of the cosmos and the world we live in today.

This origin myth about the universe and about the competitive spirit that belongs to the divine or spirit world tells us that competition is also innately human. Undoubtedly, there is much to be gleaned from this tale about gender, art, justice, and power. But by narrating the tale here, I want to highlight the idea that artistic competitions are not

new in India. They have long been part of Indian myth and fictional history. Here I am thinking about the famous musical duel between Tansen and Baijnath Mishra in the Mughal court, where the latter melts a marble slab with the power of his singing, popularized through the Hindi movie *Baiju Bawra* (1952). These examples remind us about the power of the performing arts and the ability of the human spirit to ascend to great heights through performance. It comes as no surprise, then, that the current incarnation of dance competitions in India is as fierce and intense, as virtuoso and transformative, as it supposedly was in the past.

In this chapter, I explore the genre of dance reality shows that are now ubiquitous on Indian television to explicate the myriad meanings of dance competitions. First, I look at the reality show *Boogie Woogie*, as it is considered one of the earliest dance competitions on Indian television. Then I shift my analysis to a more recent and popular show, *Dance India Dance*. In addition to textual analysis, this analysis includes ethnographic material from my fieldwork in India in 2011.¹ Second, I analyze the meaning of *bhakti rasa*, or aesthetic desire, in classical Indian dances and its transformation into the “remix” of Bollywood dances that are performed on reality shows. I propose that the aesthetic of “remix” represents the desire for consumption in post-liberalization India. The act of winning a dance contest on reality television is packaged with the desire for commodity and celebrity culture. Third, I show how dance reality shows shape new embodiments of femininity and masculinity in India. Through my ethnographic work, I approach questions surrounding gender and respectability and analyze how they take on new meanings through dance competitions in contemporary India. Interestingly, in these changing times, female sexuality and eroticism through dance continue to remain as controversial as they were in the mythic past.

FROM BOOGIE WOOGIE TO DANCE INDIA DANCE

Television reality shows in India began to grow in the 1990s. The liberalization of the economy, or market reforms, triggered the globalization of media, which was accompanied by a staggering multiplication of television channels. This opening to the globalization of the culture and economy created a great turbulence in the public sphere, coalescing and dismantling previous boundaries between “high” and “low” cultural forms. The momentum of change facilitated various kinds of boundary crossings among cultural forms, between classical and folk, and Indian and Western, thus breaking down received and accepted classifications. The most important aspect of this chaotic economic and cultural change was the spread of media and electronic communication. The Bollywood industry and the song-and-dance sequence of Bollywood films (which is perhaps one of the most visible products of India’s new economy) spread in a rhizomatic reproduction through electronic media such as television, music videos, and YouTube

(Chakravorty 2009, 2016). Bombay film dance, or what was previously known as *filmee naach*, associated with lowbrow culture (as opposed to the classical arts) quickly transformed into a desirable, glamorous, and international product called Bollywood dance. It is important to note that there is a symbiotic relationship between Bollywood dance, the television industry, and the reality shows that are some of the building blocks of contemporary Indian celebrity culture.

One of the earliest television shows based on the format of a dance competition was *Boogie Woogie*, broadcast on the Sony cable network. It is often retrospectively called the first dance reality show on Indian television, although the term was not in circulation then. It first aired in 1997 and included contestants as young as six who danced to spicy numbers from hip-hop to classical dance genres (the show had no reference to the original “Boogie Woogie” style, other than the name). It displayed a new genre of Indian commercial dance where *filmee naach* (what is now Bollywood dance), classical, folk, hip-hop, breaking, and disco were packaged for consumption by a new generation and a new aspirational class. The judges were dancer Javed Jaffrey and celebrity personalities Naved Jaffrey and Ravi Behl. The show included special events such as child championship shows, teenage championship shows, and celebrity championship shows, where Bollywood film stars like Mithun Chakravorty and Govinda (who are excellent dancers themselves) appeared as celebrity judges. It also integrated humor, whereby the judges interacted with comedians on stage, and included a live audience. Initially, there were no cash prizes for the performers, merely enthusiastic applause from the judges and the live audience. The popularity of *Boogie Woogie* created an alternative narrative of dance in India that was for everyone, both experts and amateurs, and it released Indian dance from the more austere conventions of classicism (Chakravorty 2008).

Boogie Woogie is now considered one of the longest running dance talent or reality shows in India. It was discontinued and relaunched several times, including an international *Boogie Woogie* in 2008, which was launched by Sony Entertainment Television Asia in London. *Boogie Woogie* constantly innovated the content of the competition, which ranged from highlighting young solo dancers to group performances. In 2014, it organized an all-India show, which was promoted as “battles between gangs” to underline the intensity of the competition. The show even invited two actors/humorists from Pakistan to liven it up and offered a cash prize of eight lakh rupees to the winner. It began with Javed Jaffrey stating that *Boogie Woogie* was about to launch a “gang war” through its dance competition. The program, he claimed, was unstoppable, and that it was unique in the way it brought dance together with *mazak* (humor) to the audience. They had flown in *kalakar parindes* (artists who are like birds) from Pakistan for that particular show. Thus, in one stroke, *Boogie Woogie* was creating entertainment for a mass television audience and forging cultural diplomacy between the two archenemies Pakistan and India (although this is not unique to *Boogie Woogie*, as reality shows in India routinely feature artists and judges from Pakistan and Bangladesh). The two humorists from Pakistan, Aslam and Shakeel, worked hard to create a rapport with the audience. They admired the elaborate stage lighting design and compared it to a *mela* (kind of a *deshi* carnival or fair).

The dialogue and exchanges between the artists from Pakistan and their hosts created a humorous intertext before we saw the first “gang” on the dance floor. The tone of the exchanges highlighted that the “battles between gangs” were really about the fun of dancing among friendly performers. The first group of young male dancers, from Mumbai, spun a humorous story through their dancing and narrative. Before they launched their dance number, they shared with the audience a story about their journey from the streets of Mumbai to the stage. They said they had come from a village to Mumbai to get work and get rich, but instead had become beggars on the streets of the city. They were dressed in rags and their faces were smeared with black paint. One of the gang members/dancers was bare-chested, thin, and gaunt, emphasizing the theme of street urchins. They danced to the popular music video by Adnan Sami with these words addressed to *maula* (god): “Mujko Bhi Lift Karade, Bungla, Motor, Car Dila De” (Lift me up [maula/god] give me a bungalow, motorbike, and car, [like you have given others]). Throwing their arms around with energetic jumping and stomping, the group performed a humorous dance/theater enactment with this song. The dance included hip-hop moves, such as krumping, and tilting of the head and neck with energetic torso movements and hip thrusts. A double parody operated in their performance, as dance reality shows routinely shower their winners with fancy cars and money to buy luxury apartments; they are also considered tickets to “celebrity” for talented dancers among the struggling masses. Humorously knitting the story of coming to Mumbai from a village with the rags to riches story of reality shows, the performance underlined the everyday narrative of the influx of migrants from rural to urban India.

This group was followed by another group of young men dressed as women in Kathak costumes. They performed a gender-bending dance number to the song “Dil Cheez Kya Hai” (What Is This Thing Called Heart) from the Bombay/Bollywood film *Umrao Jaan* (1981), originally performed by the popular actress Rekha. The stage reverberated with the Kathak *bols* (rhythmic syllables) *Dha Gin Ta Dha Gin Ta Dha* as the dancers swirled around and stomped their belled feet in unison. They danced in the Kathak *mujra* style (associated with the *tawaiifs*/courtesans from Islamic courts, usually performed solo by a female), rendered here in a group choreography by males. The next group performed a Ganesh *Vandana* (invocation to the Hindu god Ganesha) in Bharatanatyam style, with flexed knees and angular arm movements, set to orchestral music. This group was from Alibagh, a small town south of Mumbai, in Maharashtra.

One by one, other groups arrived on the *Boogie Woogie* stage to perform their dances, and the clash of groups or the “gang war” intensified. There were other dance styles represented in these battles and some were received with loud applause from the audience. The one that stood out for me was a jazz number performed by a group from Bangalore, dressed in outfits that looked like black and white designer body suits. The event was the second elimination round for the *Boogie Woogie* contest and whoever won was to be included in the next contest, before it went to the final battle. Throughout the episode, there was humor and good cheer, which created a certain camaraderie among the contestants, and the judges played on and subverted the rhetoric of “gang war.” It reflected the show’s reputation for being civil, fair, and authentic (meaning the winners

were not fixed ahead of time), unlike some of the other reality shows where judges were known to fight among themselves, fix winners, or belittle contestants. *Boogie Woogie* is considered a precursor to the popular reality show on national television *Dance India Dance*, which started as *Dance Bangla Dance* on a local network, Zee Bangla.

Dance India Dance, or *DID*, premiered on Zee in 2009. It held all-India auditions in the leading metropolitan cities of India for contestants between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Those initial selections were then screened for selection into the “mega auditions” and thereafter selected for the final stage for *DID*, which was a prestigious milestone for the contestants. Once chosen for the final round, professional Bollywood choreographers trained the dancers. These final dancers had to be proficient in performing all styles of dancing from salsa, samba, and contemporary, to hip-hop, Bollywood, and Indian classical. The final round was between eighteen dancers, split up into three groups, who competed for the big prize in a fierce test of stamina and talent. The final award included the title of the “Best Dancer in India” and a cash prize of twenty lakh rupees (enough money to buy a nice apartment in a good neighborhood in almost any Indian city).

During my ethnographic fieldwork in Kolkata in 2011, I observed some of the contestants during an audition for *DID*. The auditions took place at the Swabhumi Heritage Plaza close to the Eastern Bypass. A gate had been constructed with the banner of *DID*, featuring large pictures of the three judges, Bollywood choreographers Remo D’souza, Geeta Kapoor, and Terence Lewis. The renowned *DID* judges were now household names. Terence Lewis specialized in contemporary dance and had trained in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Martha Graham Center for Contemporary Dance in New York. Remo D’souza was not only a successful dance choreographer but later also directed the 2013 film *Any Body Can Dance* (popularly known as *ABCD*), which led to a sequel *ABCD 2* (2015) that featured two *DID* contestants. Remo D’ Souza was self-trained and considered Michael Jackson his guru (he learned his moves from watching Jackson’s videos, a methodology used by many reality show contestants). He was first noticed during an “All India Dance Competition.” Geeta Kapoor’s journey to stardom followed a different and more traditional route for Bollywood choreographers. She became well-known by assisting the famous choreographer Farah Khan, who used to be an assistant to the legendary Bollywood choreographer Saroj Khan. Kapoor, unlike D’souza, belonged to a Bollywood dance lineage.

At Swabhumi, I was smuggled inside by one of the crew members into the privately sealed-off space for the *DID* auditions. This was a spacious area where multiple television sets hung and various cameras panned and focused on the contestants on 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 provide comments. In the next layer sat the audience in a raised makeshift gallery. I sat with the technicians on the ground behind the audience in the last layer and quietly observed.

Framing the stage were bright lights that hung from an extensive lighting grid and steel structures of industrial design. At the outer circumference of the stage were perched several cameras that followed the dancers across space. Many men with headsets stood

next to television monitors and watched the dancers closely. The judges behind these men were in an enclosed area.

A very young woman dressed in black tights, a skinny blacktop, and a short red skirt, with her hair pulled in a ponytail and a red flower clipped to the side, began to dance. She threw her right leg forward in a giant kick and then dragged the rest of her body weight forward; she extended her arms to her sides and threw her head back. She repeated the phrase again then quickly drew her legs together and crossed her palms above her head in the shape of a butterfly. She used the gesture or *mudra* from Bharatnatyam *tripataka* (which bends the ring finger while the palm remains flat and taut). She twirled a few times with her arms extended above her head, swung her hips, and then glided across the stage like a ballet dancer *en pointe*. The music was a fusion style with various instruments like drums, tabla, and guitar woven in, with a North Indian classical voice that sang “Jhum na na na” (the words associated with resounding anklets or bells tied around a dancer’s feet). The dancer had bare feet but was not wearing any bells, despite what the song suggested. The dancer used some Bharatnatyam moves with flexed knees and stomping. She extended her hands on both sides with flower-like gestures, but then changed from the Bharatanatyam-style moves to an angular kick and a quick turn. I recognized the dance as “freestyle dancing” prevalent in Bollywood. However, some dancers I spoke to during the auditions called this style of dancing “fusion,” and some even referred to the style as “contemporary dance.” It became apparent to me that the label was fluid.

The next dancer was a young male who carried a long ribbon like Chinese ribbon dancers. He wore a white outfit and manipulated the ribbon with a flourish, making a circular loop around his head. Then he began pirouetting like a ballet dancer. Both the dancer and the ribbon created an elegant visual. He then performed a feathery somersault to let go of the ribbon. He continued with a mix of moves from ballet, gymnastics, and Western modern dance. This song-and-dance genre was called “lyrical contemporary.” The next dancer provided a sharp contrast. He was dressed in black and he walked across the stage with the attitude of a hip-hop dancer and donned a pair of sunglasses. He then performed some breaking and popping moves. The music was a loud mechanical sound and he moved with it like a robot. He fell to the floor and did some isolation with his hands and then stood up in one swift move and continued his popping. The music changed continuously and the words were in English.

This event was like many other auditions of dance reality shows, including *Boogie Woogie*, that were regularly organized in various cities of India and abroad. *DID* was a major national reality show on Zee TV. To be seen on television as a contestant on this show was a huge accomplishment for young aspiring dancers. Many I spoke to believed that to win a *DID* contest would be a sure ticket to stardom, a ticket that they firmly believed would be theirs someday. The dancers and choreographers of reality shows such as *DID* represent the new dance embodiments and identities of an aspirational generation. Dance reality shows were their pathways to success and self-actualization. In the next section, I explore how such aspirations or desire to win shape the contemporary aesthetics of “remix.” The meaning of desire associated with classical/traditional

dance aesthetics of devotion (*bhakti rasa*), I argue, is transformed into a new kind of desire—a desire to win and participate in consumption in a globalizing Indian economy

EMBODIMENT OF REMIX AND COMMODITY DESIRE

The globalization of culture in India is integral to the spread of media and electronic communication; it is also associated with a culture of consumption that was sparked by liberalization. Both globalization and liberalization have created a spectacular sensory world of images, sounds, and commodities that are fueled by new desires and aspirations in an expanding economy. Anthropologist William Mazzarella associates contemporary India with “voluptuous desire” (2004). In order to analyze the new Indian dances of Bollywood and reality shows through an Indian aesthetics and experience, I look at the changing meaning of desire, as it was associated with Indian dances in the past and its present consumerist context.

Ideas of eroticism and desire have been foundational to traditional/classical Indian dances. In theories of the *bhava-rasa* emotive-aesthetic system (where *bhava* is everyday emotion and *rasa* is aesthetic emotion), desire and love have been fused to express both corporeal/sexual love and devotional love, or *bhakti*. The idea of *bhakti rasa* has encompassed a devotional desire that expresses both earthly and spiritual longings for one’s beloved or god. The aesthetics are derived from the mythopoetic genres of *bhakti* and Sufi traditions. The new desires and aesthetics in dance competitions we see in reality shows are diametrically different from such idealistic concepts of love and devotion found in mythopoetic genres, but it is important to understand some of the key features associated with an older aesthetic system like *bhakti rasa*. A close examination of the traditional enables us to grasp the new desires or the aspirational aesthetics of contemporary forms that are “remixes.”

Bhakti rasa is one of the key emotional/aesthetic concepts in classical Indian dances. *Bhakti*, which means “devotion,” is ignited through dancing, which is also considered a form of prayer, leading to the supplication of one’s ego to reach the sublime. The emotion of *bhakti* is also infused through the practice of dance pedagogy in India called *gurushishya parampara* (a student–teacher apprenticeship system), where the guru is equivalent to god and the *shishya*/student surrenders to the teacher as a *bhakta* (devotee). The immersion in classical dances through such training structures supposedly produces the spiritual/yogic bodies of the classical dancers. The training requires a long-term association and/or cohabitation with a particular teacher or guru, and knowledge is transmitted orally and through repetition. The student learns the metrical systems of *laya* and *tala* (cycles of rhythms) that are part of the movement repertoire and imbues them with kinesthetic memory and aesthetic emotions. The experience of time through the cyclical structures of *tala* are circular and continuous, and the exploration of space

is both inward and outward, thus making this experience both cosmological and real. In this kind of performance experience, space and time are molded through a subjective experience rather than an objective one.

The embodiment of dance in such a spatiotemporal construct is phenomenological and differently oriented than Western choreographic conventions derived from objective scientific time/space construct.² The modernization of Indian dance and its related aesthetics are associated with India's political independence in 1947, when the state, especially the central government, became the official patron of culture and various regional dances were refashioned to fit the concert stage. However, the ideology of *gurushishya parampara* was instituted in state institutions and cultural centers or Akademies, and it became an important ideological device for preserving and promoting India's cultural heritage. Accordingly, the aesthetics of *bhava-rasa* became the marker of India's (invented) classical traditions.

These hegemonic ideologies of classicism perpetuated through state institutions have come unhinged due to liberalization and globalization. Now the meaning of *guru* has become diffused. Moreover, the gurus are no longer strictly associated with long dynastic lineages or elite families (like in the past), nor are the dancers immersed in a singular dance aesthetic to embody a particular regional identity that has been deemed "classical." The dancers now learn from multiple sources and embody multiple styles to create flexible bodies and hybrid identities.³ Desire, which was once expressed through aesthetic concepts of devotion and love in Indian dances, is now expressed through the consumption of spectacular commodities. Purnima Mankekar (2004) writes about the relationship between experiencing emotion and producing/consuming commodity. Here desire and pleasure are not just about the acquisition of commodity, but gazing upon it and displaying it, that is, in consuming spectacles. She looks at the relationship between erotics and the consumption of commodities, and the reconfiguration of gender, family, caste, and nation in contemporary India. Detailing the eroticization of commodities through images, texts, billboards, television, and films in the late twentieth century, she shows how they stimulate the onlooker to desire, possess, or purchase the product. The conjunction between erotic desire and the desire to consume, she argues, is the "commodity affect" (Mankekar 2004, 408). Through this "affect," a new kind of subjectivity is produced: an active, sexual, and consuming subject full of desires. I suggest that the "item numbers" of Bollywood films (these are the song-and-dance sequences, to be elaborated in the next section) and the "item girl" and "item boy" who appear in "item numbers" embody the new consumerist desires of "remix" (much like the "commodity affect"), encoded through the aspirations of winning.

Therefore "remix," both as a practice and an embodied aesthetic, expresses the aspirational desires of consumerist modernity. Remix is usually associated with technological innovation, such as DJs mixing different musical styles. It is also an aspect of the hip-hop genre, such as "breaking" that mixes with other styles as it travels globally and morphs into new hybrid forms (Osumare 2002). This nomadic aspect of remix is now integral to Bollywood dance and music and their byproducts such as television reality shows. The remix aesthetics perpetuated by Bollywood dance fuses high and low, classical and

folk, Indian and other dance styles to produce endless hybridity. Therefore remix itself implies a multitude of categories that can borrow freely from Indian classical and folk dance traditions or from non-Indian/global dance traditions. It displays an aesthetics that are no longer bounded by the classical ideology of Indian dance whereby the purity and rigidity of the form have to be upheld. The dancer's body acts as an instrument where movements are mixed through a copy-and-paste technique, producing a particular kind of hybrid disembodied embodiment.

Remix is the embodiment of pastiche that blurs the line between culture and commodity (Jameson 1991, 1998). In Bollywood films, the song-and-dance sequences (now called "item numbers") have been the platform for remixes. The song-and-dance sequences have increasingly become detached from the main narrative of the film in the 1980s and 1990s to operate as individual products (Gopal and Moorthy, 2008). They circulate globally as music videos and as item numbers and are disseminated through various electronic outlets such as YouTube, iTunes, and social media such as Facebook.

The item numbers from Bollywood films are also remediated through the televisual format of dance reality shows, thus multiplying the process of circulation (Chakravorty 2016; Novak 2012). Ethnomusicologist David Novak (2012) explains remediation to be the repurposing of media from one context to another. In remix aesthetics, dance movements are uprooted from any context and remixed to produce an item number. Thus, dance reality shows use the song-and-dance sequences of Bollywood or item numbers to re-choreograph and repackage them to make a new product. The remixing and remediation produce the hybrid cosmopolitan dancing bodies of postmodernism, endowed with the new desire/emotion of aspiration. Indian dance now inhabits a world dominated by the aesthetics and bodily dispositions of remix, where experiential states once associated with the mythopoetics of *bhava-rasa* now appear as fleeting emotions of a bygone era. They create the experience of what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1997, 30) calls "nostalgia without memory." Dance reality shows open up the discursive space for the construction of new modes of dance that shape not only new concepts of desire, but also how these desires are expressed through new ways of being feminine and masculine. These are the hyper-sexualized item girls and item boys of Bollywood films. They shape the new gender codes of femininity and masculinity in contemporary India. In the next section, I focus on the construction of female sexuality by comparing two song-and-dance sequences from Bombay/Bollywood films to delve into the changing notions of women's sexuality.

FEMALE SEXUALITY IN SONG-AND-DANCE SEQUENCES

The two song-and-dance sequences I analyze here are both popular hits that created new standards for dance choreography on screen. The first one, "Mohe Panghat Pe

Nandalal Cheed Gayo Re” (On My Way to the River Nandalal Teases Me), is a poetic rendition of a Thumri (a North Indian classical musical genre associated with Kathak dance) from the Bombay film *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960). The song and the dance convey the amorous love play between the Hindu deities Radha and Krishna (Nandalal is another name for Krishna). In this particular sequence, Anarkali, who is a courtesan and a dancer in Mughal emperor Akbar’s court and is also the love of his son Salim, performs the dance. The story is about the transgressive love between a courtesan and a prince. The song-and-dance sequence juxtaposes the archetypal Radha and Krishna legend (also about illicit love, as Radha is a married woman) with the historical fictional story of Salim and Anarkali. The scene opens with Anarkali, played by Madhubala, seated at the center of Akbar’s *darbar* (court) with her long red skirt falling around her in a circle on the floor. She slowly rises up and lifts her veil to expose her bejeweled face. She wears a large nose ring, an ornament on her forehead, and bangles that extend to her palms, with attached rings for all the fingers. She makes undulating movements, and her hand gestures frame her face to create an intimate visual transaction with the audience. The camera cuts to the faces of the king and queen and we are drawn into a simultaneous exchange of interlocking gazes. The ornate architectural arches and the luminescent lamps in the backdrop add to the richness of the scene. The swirling multicolored skirts (*ghagras*) of the dancers in the background enhance the sensory experience. Madhubala lifts her arms in the shape of a pot, with her back to the audience, and moves toward the dancers with gentle hip sways. The dancers (replicating the cowherd girls of the Radha-Krishna tale) raise their hands like Madhubala and move in circles in similar kinesthetic nuances. They all wear *ghagra cholis* (long skirts and blouses) with the transparent fabric or *churnis* that cover their exposed torso. In another shot we see women musicians playing the sitar (a stringed instrument), seated in a row by water fountains, and next we see the dancers lined up behind them, dancing with stretched arms and gentle wrist movements. The gestures, movements, and the facial expressions are drawn from Kathak repertoire, and the legendary Kathak guru Lacchu Maharaj choreographed the dance. Although the portrayal of the dancing girl in this scene (the courtesan played by Madhubala) is not of an item girl, she can be considered the precursor to what emerged as the item girl in Bollywood films after the 1980s.

The song-and-dance sequence “Sheila Ki Jawani” (2010) from *Tees Maar Khan* (He Who Killed Thirty) is the definition of an item number with the explosive dancing girl (item girl) taking center stage. Here we see Katrina Kaif (playing the role of Anya Singh, a struggling actress) sprawled in bed, covered with a white satin sheet. The song, dance, and the lyrics are all remixes in this sequence, where English words are thrown in with Hindi, such as “I am too sexy for you,” “tere haath na anni” (do not let your hand touch me). The lyrics explicitly speak about the vitality of Sheila’s youth; no man can satiate her sexuality. From the bedroom scene, where she is surrounded by applauding men, the shot moves to a bar where Sheila dances with full abandonment a fusion combining belly dance with Bollywood pelvic thrusts. She goes through four costume changes as the shots change to capture her seductive dancing, surrounded by men who dance around her. In most of these, she wears a short tight *choli* (blouse) and a low-rise *ghagra* or *dhoti*

(skirt or pants). She wears no jewelry and her hair is open and flowing. The costumes expose a large part of her toned midriff as she gyrates energetically. She throws her arms upward and swings them freely, adhering to no particular style. The camera mostly lingers on her body parts, inviting the audience to explore the curvaceous undulations of her torso and the heaving breasts. The repeated pelvic thrusts and the jerky swaying of the hips and the arms create a wildly sexy and exuberant spectacle. In another shot, we see Katrina dressed in a white shirt with short boxers, wearing a hat, and doing MTV-like dancing moves reminiscent of Madonna's music videos, such as "Express Yourself" (1989). Not unlike that video, the item girl in this scene also exhibits excessive sexuality and is also surrounded by leering males. Both provoke a sense of forbidden and explosive sexuality. "Sheila Ki Jawani" was choreographed by Bollywood choreographer Farah Khan, became a rage, and earned her the best choreographer award that year.

No doubt, the representation of woman in this song-and-dance sequence is in sharp contrast to the previous sequence I discussed. However, both have transgressive elements that push the boundaries of idealized domesticated women of India's nationhood, which I will come to shortly. The transgressive sexuality of the courtesan in the first scene is tempered by the mythopoetic story of Radha and Krishna and the emotional *bhava-rasa* aesthetics of Kathak dance. The second scene pushes the acceptable norms of womanhood to create a controversial discourse on the excesses of women's sexuality—so much so, that the film and the song-and-dance sequence sparked a public discourse on women's sexuality and censorship before it was released. The Central Board of Film Certification in India tried to ban the film and urged the producers to delete the word "Sheila" from the lyrics. But the film was considered a comedy and a spoof and it ultimately passed the censorship board with very few changes. I delve deeper into issues of women's identity and sexuality in the next section to illustrate the challenges surrounding dance reality shows, Bollywood, and the constructions of femininity in contemporary India.

GENDERED IDENTITIES IN THE AGE OF COMMODITY

The popularity of dance reality shows and the ubiquitous item numbers that accompany them have created a public battleground for discourses surrounding women's bodies and sexuality in contemporary India. The confluence of consumerism, eroticization, and celebrity culture in dance reality shows forms an irresistible kind of desire that is constantly on display for consumption. Middle-class anxieties surrounding respectability are at the heart of this allure of the senses that is now intertwined with notions of success (to be a winner), the power of fame, and the glamor of celebrity culture. The new generation of dancers and choreographers of dance reality shows not only have replaced the past categories of embodied aesthetics, such as *bhava-rasa* derived from

classical dances, but also in the process they unsettle the past notions of Indianness and idealized gender identities (Bagchi 1995; Sangari and Vaid 1990; Sinha 1996). These past gender codes were molded by Indian nationalist discourse on “respectable women.” The nationalists constructed the ideal Indian women as repositories of tradition, domesticity, and spirituality (goddess/devi/domesticated mothers) (Bagchi 1995; Chatterjee 1989). It is now well accepted that classical Indian dances contributed to this ideal construction of Indian women, who were mostly Hindu and upper-caste. The selective appropriation and reconstruction of dances such as Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Kathak shaped gender codes in modern India and produced the Sanskritized bodies of Indian dances (Chakravorty 2016; Coorlawala 2004; Meduri 1996; Soneji 2012).⁴ Here, using my ethnographic research among reality show dancers and choreographers, I analyze recent debates surrounding the changing gender codes and middle-class respectability in contemporary India.

During my ethnographic research in Kolkata and Mumbai, I spoke with several dance reality show contestants and choreographers regarding their struggles and negotiations with women’s respectability. The issues ranged from what kind of dance they would perform, what kind of costumes they would wear, and how they would conduct themselves during makeup and costuming, rehearsals, and shootings. A very young contestant in Kolkata explained to me in great detail the atmosphere in these competitions that created the pressure to climb the ladder of success by winning different rounds. She said getting ahead and succeeding were of utmost importance; the ultimate goal was to be the champion. I sat with her in the intimate surrounding of her living room as she showed me many medals and gold and silver ornaments, all of which she had won from dance competitions. So, when she started competing in a dance reality show on a local television channel, she was ready to face the hardest competition and win. This dance reality show was one of the first of its kind on a Bengali television channel. *Naach Dhum Machale*, the reality show in question, had the categories of Eastern and Western dance themes, along with dance and film choreographers and directors as judges. She explained that “Eastern” meant Indian folk, classical, and modern dance such as Rabindrik (the style created by poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore) and “Western” meant Bollywood-inspired dances combining jazz, hip-hop, ballroom dancing, and other non-Indian dances.

She was disappointed from the very beginning because the choreographer designated to her was strong in Western dances and was not interested in choreographing in the styles with which she was comfortable, such as Bharatanatyam and Rabindrik. Her disappointment increased when the dances she was asked to perform also included wearing strange and revealing costumes. In a round that was called “seduction” she was dressed up like Helen, the famous Bollywood dancer, in a skimpy costume, and was asked to perform a “Western medley.” But the most embarrassing and vulgar dance (according to her) was when she was dressed like a tiger in a tight tube. She was eliminated after winning several rounds and she blamed her costumes, especially the tiger one, and her discomfort with dancing in a tube dress. As she described her struggles with the costume and her dance moves, I remembered what

one Bollywood choreographer had confided to me during my fieldwork in Film City Studios, Mumbai. Sunita Shetty, the assistant to the renowned Bollywood choreographer Ajay Borade, had said, "Sometimes after choreographing a piece I go home and think that what I did is much too vulgar. But what to do, the director wants it and nowadays no one wants to see Indian folk and classical forms. They only like 'Western dance' like 'item numbers.'"⁵

The general discomfort with reality shows was not confined to dancers and choreographers, but spilled over into public discourse regarding women's morality and sexuality. These discourses were often about the anxieties of westernization of Indian culture associated with globalization and Bollywoodization. I learned from some of the contestants that their schools and colleges have often been hostile and critical of students who participate in reality shows. Somehow, participating in dance reality shows marked them as promiscuous and women of low moral stature. The attitude perhaps was connected to the representation of women's bodies on screen, especially what was perpetuated by Bollywood item numbers, as some argue.

It was a subject of great concern among feminist activists and media scholars in India in general. In a recent show celebrating International Women's Day on the television network NDTV, sponsored by the cosmetics company L'Oréal, the Bollywood actress and feminist/activist Shabana Azmi pointed to the lyrics of the hit item song "Main To Tandoori Murgi Hoon Yaar, Gatkaale Saiyyan Alcohol Se" (I am a tandoori chicken, lover, gobble me with alcohol) as an example of the perpetuation of such sexual objectification of women in society. She argued that, although it was written, composed, and sponsored by a few, it was consumed by millions of Indians. Azmi added that women need autonomy on how the camera captures their bodies and that there should be self-regulation about such representation. Ravish Kumar, the journalist hosting the show, added that young children dance to these lyrics in schools every day, normalizing such sexualized portrayals of women. Of course, they are also regularly performed in dance reality shows by thousands of young men and women (and also children) and beamed from various television networks, which make them ubiquitous in contemporary India. If we take the long view, however, we recall, among other things, that this debate is not new; it was the sexually explicit lyrics in *devadasi* performances in colonial India that affronted women reformers such as Rukmini Devi and others who "cleaned up" and "purified" the form and made Bharatanatyam "classical" and oriented to worship and the divine.

In the context of this ongoing and complex social transformation in India, which looks at the new middle-class formations, sociologists Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase and Timothy Scrase (2009, 152) observe,

The struggle to preserve middle-class culture and identity in the face of great social change highlights the way in which cultural politics is at the core of middle-class opposition to neoliberal reforms and, moreover, these cultural struggles take place as much within the relative privacy of the home, as in the public sphere of the street, the workplace or the tea shop. In other words, while neoliberal reforms have inexorably

changed social and economic life, their indirect impact through globalised-induced cultural change has also been an affront to middle-class morals, culture, and identity.

Although these debates about gender codes and representation of women's bodies on screen reflect the sentiments and judgments of a section of the middle classes, some also actively contest these sentiments and moral judgments. Many of them clearly recognize the possibility of showcasing talent and class mobility in reality shows. These attitudes were repeatedly apparent to me during my conversations not only with the contestants and choreographers, but also with producers, recruiters, and audience members. Many from the small towns saw this as an opportunity to realize their dream of buying an apartment in Kolkata or a car. This was not unlike the humorous song-and-dance sequence for the reality show *Boogie Woogie* that I described at the beginning of the chapter, where dancers pretend to enact a rags-to-riches story that mirrors the experience of winning a reality show. In this chaotic social transition in India, dance reality shows throw into relief questions of class mobility, women's sexuality, respectability, and identity within the context of liberalization and globalization. Not unlike the Kali and Shiva myth, the battleground is the performance context, whether it is the precincts of a temple or a television screen. Both are windows into relations of gender, power, and norms of respectability.

NOTES

1. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in India, mainly in Kolkata and Mumbai, during 2006–2012 for my book project *This Is How We Dance Now* on television dance reality shows and Bollywood dance.
2. See Foster (2011) regarding choreography and notation.
3. Anusha Kedar (2014) writes about the intersection of race and citizenship in the context of the flexibility of the body among diaspora South Asian performers in the United Kingdom.
4. "Sanskritization" is a complex process that, at its root, involves the transformation of "low" and "folk" to "high" and "classical." It applies to culture (music, dance, literature) and social identity ("low" and "high" castes).
5. Shetty distinguishes Bollywood dance, which uses a remix aesthetics, from earlier *filmee naach* or dance in Bombay film, which uses traditional Indian aesthetics.

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