

# DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

“Anything goes, as long as the story requires it”

RUTH WOLTER

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**Sport is culture – a fact that may not be apparent at first glance. But this cultural dimension becomes visible in sports like dancing. Bollywood dance is one example of a very traditional form of dance that has arrived in our modern age.**

The Hindi film industry, also known as the Bollywood film industry, is the world’s largest film industry and tremendously significant as an Indian cultural phenomenon as well. Movies set the tone for events in popular Indian culture and shape taste and ideals of beauty. Indians adore their actors as icons and their actions have a huge impact on the daily lives of Indian citizens.

The industry’s feature elements are not always comprehensible to everyone, especially to people not familiar with Indian culture. One reason is that the patterns shown are based both on Indian traditions on the one hand and extremely modern elements on the other. The only thing that can always be relied on is the fact that every Bollywood movie has at least one dance scene.

## **Bollywood dance – a mash-up of different dance styles from all over the world**

In the beginning of Bollywood history, dance choreography was mainly influenced by traditional Indian dance styles. Today the influence of classical Indian dance is still visible, but so are contemporary and Western dance styles. Thus “there is no Bollywood dance as such”, according to Longinus Fernandes, a Bollywood choreographer. He worked on *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009) and won one of the highest Indian choreography awards, the Filmfare Best Choreography Award 2009. According to him, the central characteristics of Bollywood dance and his work are: “style, grace and elegance”. Beyond that “anything goes, as long as the story requires it”, he says. But he also concedes that there are some exceptions to the rule, like nudity, “something that would certainly not be accepted.”

Dance is an important part of the acting syllabus in India. However Longinus Fernandes says anyone can execute his choreography, so an actor or actress does not have to be a perfect dancer. Nowadays Bollywood dance is certainly not the most complex kind of dancing. It may vary in part depending on the actors’ or dancers’ personal abilities and the choreographer’s style, but mostly it depends on the genre of the movie and the story content.

## **Stories told through dancing**

The narrative element is a main feature of Bollywood dance. Motion and story are linked and a dance scene usually moves the story forward. In this sense, Bollywood dance is like traditional Indian dances. India has a long tradition of dance in which the story was and still is very important. Kathak is one of the oldest dance traditions from northern India. The word derives from the Hindi word for “telling stories”. The Berlin-based Kathak dancer and choreographer Ionna Srinivasan explains that compared to Kathak, Bollywood dance is more commercial and “choreographed through and through”. “Since you often see people dancing in a crowd in Bollywood movies,” she explains, there is no room for improvisation, as in traditional dancing. “A soloist Kathak dancer”, she says, “is very open to improvisation and reacts to the audience and the musicians”, while in a Bollywood production the choreography is set before shooting begins. The circumstances, time schedules and need for coordination lead to pre-determined movements. Bollywood dance follows its own market demands. To summarize: Narration is always more important in

Bollywood dance than technique and abstraction. Bollywood dance is entertaining, commercial, comprehensible for everyone and consists of a mixture of elements.

### **The Western element of shaking the hips**

Ultimately it is not possible to reduce Bollywood dance to a specific style, since that depends on the movie. Some are influenced by hip-hop, others contain folkloristic elements or might be very classical with modern movement. “You can also call it show dance,” according to Ionna Srinivasan. One of her favourite Bollywood movies is *Devdas*, in which “you can see pure Kathak choreography as you might see it on stage. But even in this movie you notice modern elements and Baranatyian style.” Kathak dance has movements with a special meaning like ‘mist’ and which are linked to special attributes and actions. There is also Krishna (flute), one of the simple examples. Some are also very complex and only a classicist or someone who knows the story in every detail would recognize them. Bollywood dance in contrast is aimed at the wide range of a mainstream audience all over in the world. That is probably the main reason modern elements are used in Bollywood dance. Ionna Srinivasan gives an example: “In traditional Indian dancing you do not shake your hips. In the movie *Devdas* you have a traditional Kathak dance to which they added the western element of shaking the hips.” Famous Bollywood choreographer Saroj Khan used Kathak choreographies in *Devdas* (2002), and has received multiple awards from national film institutions and also recently appeared in Bollywood as a director.

### **Love, dream, friendship and party**

Traditional Kathak dances begin with a story, just one example of how deeply both elements, dance and storytelling, are connected, and how this link is manifested in Indian culture. Murja dance is in the Kathak tradition and done by a woman, originally called a mistress or courtesan, dancing for her lover, a sovereign. Today Murja is often used in Bollywood dance as an important element in romantic scenes to express love between a man and woman. There are other ways to classify Bollywood dance styles thematically, such as by folkloristic elements, which are often taken from Bhandgra. In addition to love, there are dance movements that express the process of falling in love, getting to know each other and the categories of dream, friendship and party dance. Party dance often is used as an “item”, which is a dance scene that is not necessarily connected to the story and has high entertainment value. Still primarily women perform this type of dance. Probably the most famous ‘item girl’ in Bollywood history is Helen Richardson. As a matter of course, in the beginning men did not dance as much as women, least of all Murja, which is a classical form for women alone. Nowadays in Bollywood movies Western elements are often prevalent, which means traditional structures are breaking up. Men might be seen dancing and women might drop their clothes more often. Very light-skinned dancers and extras are also often seen on screen today.

### **Nudity and homosexuality: is everything allowed in Bollywood movies?**

Shaking hips and naked skin are innocent compared to certain types of sexual libertarianism shown in some Bollywood movies. Longinus Fernandes speaks from his own experience: “Romance has always had an edge over the rest and is more acceptable.” There is probably no example of a couple shown naked on screen in a popular movie, but otherwise, it seems, anything goes. Female Bollywood dancers in particular appear undressed in many movies, generally in “item scenes” and in certain situations like in nightclubs or at pool parties. Nevertheless there is an official mechanism of censorship in India: a rule against obscenity was established in the Indian Constitution and in the Cinematographic Act of 1953. State authorities invoked this rule in 2005, for example, when trying to ban smoking in movies and on television. Homosexuality, while not officially forbidden, is a very delicate issue in Bollywood. If you see two men dancing together in a Bollywood scene, you can be virtually certain that they are just friends. In India two men can be very close to each other (holding hands, caressing one other) without being considered gay and therefore without running the risk of discrimination. Homosexuality in Bollywood movies is still a taboo, which reflects the common attitude of society. And there are many topics still far from being depicted on screen in India.

### **Everyone is a born dancer – but not in Bollywood**

Bollywood choreographer Longinus Fernandes claims that: “everyone is a born dancer and anybody can become a professional Bollywood dancer.” But he also concedes that good dancing schools are expensive in India. Ionna Srinivasan takes it to the next level: “It is a privilege to be a dancer in India and not everyone can afford it. Though dancing is part of primary school education in India, you have to be able to afford a private dancing school first before you can try out for any official formation.” Like in the Western world, dancing is often not a good way to earn a living and dancers have to overcome social barriers. In Indian society a man is meant to provide for his family one day, so he is likely to choose a more profitable occupation over dancing. Regardless of gender or the success of a dancer, the profession comes with no guarantee that the dancer will achieve high social status. “When I was studying dance, I had a friend with a lot of talent, but one day her parents forced her to stop dancing because they feared the fact that she was dancing might complicate the marriage process” recalls Ionna Srinivasan. She also adds that: “it is not about cast or formal education. It depends on how open-minded a family is” and “most of the dancers and choreographers come from well-off families.” Maybe anyone can become a dancer in theory, but in practical terms most of the stars come from one of the so-called Bollywood dynasties.

### **Shady image and racism**

While Bollywood scenes may look very permissive and unreserved, there are some things they are most certainly not: feminist, homosexual-friendly or socially progressive. It takes a great deal of imagination to see any equality between men and women in Bollywood. Particularly attractive women are subjected to a beauty ideal. And media scholar Tejaswini Ganti explains cautiously that: “there is this kind of shadow of that slight disrepute that is associated with how public an actress has to be.” This is particularly pronounced for female dancers who are already burdened with a whiff of the immoral, the improper. In the past the Bollywood industry has also been accused of racism since light skin corresponds to the ideal of beauty, which has led to Indian women attempting to bleach their skin. Here is no different than anywhere else: it is hard to move beyond the comfort of the established and break open stereotypes. One difficulty is trying to meet all the demands of both society and the market. This is where Bollywood runs up against its limitations.

### **The flip side of Bollywood dance**

In contrast to social issues, which are dealt with quite progressively, some things will always be present in Bollywood film: family values, a process of spiritual catharsis, and the confirmation of traditional values and the existing world order. Bollywood mirrors the “common attitudes” or social consensus. Media scholar Tejaswini Ganti puts it quite succinctly when she says: “the films work both ways. The dominant moral values about chastity and controlled sexuality, that is problematic in terms of limiting women's choices and perspectives. But at the same time, there's the flip side to these films, which is that all of the women involved in the production of the films are some of the most independent and autonomous and liberated women in India, and they serve as some type of role model for young women in terms of seeing women as career women in one respect.” Though there is no one Bollywood dance in a sense, it is still likely to become popular in European and American dance schools. That is no criteria for exclusion, since basically anything is possible. To put it differently: everything is allowed as long as traditional structures are not questioned. In this way, Bollywood films with their dance scenes, no matter how westernised, are and will remain very Indian.