

Fusion, Identity and Digital Visibility in Contemporary Indian Dance

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Abstract:

Contemporary Indian dance is increasingly shaped by the meeting of classical vocabularies, street dance forms and the experiences of diaspora and mixed heritage. This paper examines two cases of such fusion: the choreographer Kumari Suraj, who combines Bharatanatyam, Waacking and hip hop in a style called Bollywaack, and the Chicago-based twin dancers Poonam and Priyanka Shah, who blend Bharatanatyam with Popping in a style called Bfusion. Drawing on published interviews, secondary scholarship and the dancers' online presence, the paper reads their work through Homi Bhabha's idea of the third space and Eric Hobsbawm's idea of invented tradition. It is argued that fusion allows these artists to remain connected to inherited classical forms while claiming individual, gendered and cultural self-expression, and that digital platforms have become the stage on which this negotiation is made visible to global audiences.

Keywords: Contemporary Indian Dance, Fusion, Bharatanatyam, Hybridity, Diaspora, Third Space, Digital Media

1. Introduction

Indian performance has long been a hybrid practice. Between the 1850s and the 1930s, Parsi theatre adapted Western plays to Indian sensibilities by weaving songs and dance into the original text, and the reliance on music and dance that defines Bollywood is traced to this hybrid stage [1]. Bollywood song and dance has since travelled far beyond the subcontinent, and its circulation cannot be understood simply as a conversation between the West and the rest [2].

Within this longer history, the term contemporary Indian dance is used for choreography that combines classical Indian vocabulary with other movement traditions, in India and in its diaspora [3]. Innovative choreography in both settings now includes intercultural fusions and cross-styles [4]. Such work raises questions about tradition, authenticity, identity and the role of the individual artist, which are explored in this paper through two cases.

The first case is Kumari Suraj, a choreographer of mixed heritage who combines Bharatanatyam, Waacking and hip hop in a style called Bollywaack. The second is the pair of identical twins Poonam and Priyanka Shah, based in Chicago, whose style Bfusion blends Bharatanatyam with Popping. The analysis draws on published interviews, media features, the dancers' own online presence and secondary scholarship. It is argued that fusion allows these artists to remain connected to inherited classical forms while claiming individual, gendered and cultural self-expression, and that digital platforms have become the stage on which this negotiation becomes visible to global audiences.

2. Fusion in Practice

2.1. Kumari Suraj and Bollywaack

Kumari Suraj was born into a multicultural family in which both parents served in the military. Her mother is Native American and European, and her father is West Indian, Desi and Sikh [5]. Suraj has travelled widely to teach and perform her own fusion, Bollywaack [5]. Recalling her childhood, she states that late-night Bollywood item numbers on television fascinated her, and that watching them felt like seeing “a part of my blood” while also being a source of sadness because she did not look like the performers. She dreamed of choreographing and working in the Bollywood film industry [5].

Her style draws on Bharatanatyam, Waacking and hip hop. Waacking is a street dance created in the gay clubs of Los Angeles during the 1970s disco era, typically performed to disco music and distinguished by rotational arm movements, posing and an emphasis on expressiveness [6]. Suraj observes that her inspiration lies in classical traditional styles and their similarity with the hand gestures of Waacking [5]. Certain mudras (hand gestures) of Bharatanatyam thus recur in her contemporary work, forming a line of connection between the two movement vocabularies.

2.2. Poonam and Priyanka Shah and Bfusion

Poonam and Priyanka Shah, identical twins based in Chicago, have developed an experimental fusion of Bharatanatyam and Popping, known as Bfusion [7, 8]. At the age of 10, they were enrolled in Bharatanatyam classes by their mother, who had always wanted to learn dance but never had the chance, and they trained in the United States for about eight years under their teacher Mohana Swamy and at the Mudra Dance Academy [7].

Popping is a street dance that developed in California out of the earlier Boogaloo style. It is rooted in the rhythms of live funk music and is based on the quick contraction and relaxation of muscles, which causes a jerk or sudden stop in the dancer’s body, referred to as a pose, pop or hit [9]. The blend of this form with Bharatanatyam is an example of the new space that contemporary Indian dance occupies between modern and traditional forms.

This training reflects a wider diasporic pattern. Since the 1980s, first-generation teachers of Bharatanatyam and Kathak in the diaspora have taught a critical mass of second-generation Indian American students in metropolitan areas such as New York City, Los Angeles, Houston and Chicago, many of whom are children of immigrants who arrived after the landmark United States immigration legislation of 1965 [3]. Training commonly culminates in the arangetram, a graduation ceremony in which the guru presents the pupil to the public, which traces its origins to the devadasi (temple dancer) tradition.

The twins state that they are open to anything and intend to keep learning dance styles and creating fusion pieces [7]. Priyanka Shah adds that the main purpose is to inspire creativity and unique self-expression in others, and the twins initially set out to create content and enhance South Asian visibility [8]. Table 1 summarises the two cases.

Table 1: Comparison of the Two Cases

Dancer	Forms Combined	Style Name	Main Platforms
Kumari Suraj	Bharatanatyam, Waacking, hip hop	Bollywaack	Website, YouTube, social media

Dancer	Forms Combined	Style Name	Main Platforms
Poonam and Priyanka Shah	Bharatanatyam, Popping, hip hop	Bfusion	YouTube, social media, booking page

3. In-Betweenness, Invented Tradition and the Third Space

The space between movement vocabularies, ethnicities, nationalities and geographies is a key feature of contemporary Indian dance [3]. Homi Bhabha names such in-betweenness the third space, the location of “the cutting-edge of translation and negotiation” [10]. In dance, the idea can be linked to the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*, in which emotion felt by the dancer is communicated to the audience and returns to energise the performer. Contemporary Indian dance aims to make audiences reflect on social injustice and to inspire action beyond the performance arena [3].

In-betweenness is also indexed in the hyphen of dual identities, such as Indian and American or British and South Asian. Such straddling is familiar to colonised peoples, who have histories of recuperating what Michel Foucault calls “submerged knowledge” from dominant colonising powers [3]. New forms such as Bollywaack and Bfusion are born from this in-betweenness.

Fusion of this kind may also be understood as an invented tradition. Eric Hobsbawm (1983) describes invented traditions as practices, usually governed by accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic character, that instil values and norms through repetition and so imply continuity with the past [11]. When classical roots merge with Western dance forms, dancers gain room to retain their individuality, and the result can be read as such a tradition. The recurrence of *mudras* within Waacking, and the presentation of Bharatanatyam training as the foundation of Bfusion, claim continuity with the past while producing something new. Choreography in this work also includes theatrical elements, such as eclectic music, voice, spoken script, props, lighting, costume and staging [3].

4. Body, Gender and Self-Expression

The negotiation between classical form and personal expression is also a negotiation about gender. The twentieth-century history of classical Indian dance began with a reform agenda that sought to save the *devadasis*, the dancing women, from themselves and from the world [12, 13]. Indian womanhood became synonymous with Indian tradition and culture, and the revival of dance came to represent an authentic Indian identity idealised in Hindu gender terms [12, 13]. Newer choreography challenges this ideal feminine body by addressing issues rooted in the patriarchal and feudal order of the past and by reclaiming dance for self-expression [13].

Sushmita Banerjee, a Kathak dancer from Calcutta, describes this change. Told that audiences were bored with the same Kathak routine, she conducted her own research and presented Ravana dressing for Sita, a scene present in the Ramayana but previously overshadowed by images of women dressing and waiting for their lovers, an outcome she attributes to the dominance of male gurus. She adds that dancers now think in terms of “national and international markets” [4].

The same impulse is visible in Suraj’s account. Describing a household in which she was both mixed and a bigger woman, she recalls being told to shine but not too much, and names becoming comfortable in her own skin as her greatest challenge [5]. Waacking, the form that expresses her individuality, emerged in clubs where

gay men who had to hide their identity in public found freedom in funk and disco music [6]. Suraj defines pride as the ability to be oneself freely while accepting the identities and preferences of others, and observes that safe spaces for the queer community are expanding [5]. Her first single and music video, “Desi Girl Chant”, is presented as an anthem for Desi femmes around the world, creating visual space for trans, drag, queer, cis and mixed-race performers [14]. Dancers of this kind encourage others to voice their individuality through movement, and they widen what the sensual, sexual and spiritual body is permitted to express.

5. Multicultural Identity and Acculturation

The language of contemporary Indian dance represents multicultural voices in a global world. Multicultural identity may be a source of strength and also of confusion, since bicultural individuals may find it difficult to sort out their group membership and their cultural attitudes, values, perspectives and behaviours [15]. The intermix of two cultures affects the identity of an individual.

The myth of Trishanku is evident in this context. Trishanku, a king in Hindu mythology, was left suspended between heaven and earth, belonging to neither. The struggle to connect oneself with any one nation is problematic, and it results in acculturation, which occurs when two cultures come into long-term contact and produce changes in the values, behaviours and language of both [15]. For Suraj and the Shah twins, multicultural identity is the main reason behind the intermixing of classical and modern dance forms. Fusion thus offers a way of turning the Trishanku condition of belonging nowhere into a creative position of belonging to several traditions at once.

6. Technology and Digital Visibility

Technology plays a crucial role in these careers. Both Suraj and the Shah twins began experimenting with fusion through videos posted online. One of the first viral videos posted by the twins was a choreographed rendition of “Ramta Jogi”, a song from the 1999 Bollywood film “Taal”, and a Bfusion and hip-hop exercise video shot in their kitchen later reached more than 2.2 million views [8]. The dancers are regarded as popular figures on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Suraj maintains a website that offers her designed clothing and dance workshops [14], while the twins use a page managed by their manager for bookings.

The visibility gained online has encouraged other dancers to add their own flavour of experimentation and to express their individuality. Technology brings both positive and negative effects. In this context, it acts as a co-worker in spreading modernity across the world, and it supports the demand for newness that audiences place on artists.

7. Conclusion

Change is an inevitable process, and for social change to be meaningful, it must pass through its roots. The dancers examined here gain acceptance from Western and traditional audiences alike by holding on to their classical roots while experimenting, and the public demand for newness supports their work. Performance plays a crucial role in this process. Diana Taylor (2006) describes performance as a vital act of transfer [16]. First-generation performers transmit knowledge of a particular dance form, and the second generation perceives that knowledge and employs it in its own style. The result is an art that voices the artist rather than an external perspective, and it motivates other dancers to do the same. An invented tradition of this kind connects with the past in order to break the stereotypes set by society.

This study is limited to two cases and to published interviews and online material. Future research could extend the analysis through fieldwork, interviews with dancers and teachers, and comparison with fusion practices in other diasporic locations.

Authors' Biography

Samridhi Saini is the Founder of FolkDeep CIC, a community interest company based in Belfast and Delhi that connects folk and traditional arts with participatory storytelling, cultural documentation and cross-cultural exchange. Her work focuses on participatory oral history, cultural memory, migration and diaspora, and community-led cultural exchange.

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