



Any Body Can Dance: Youth, Rage and Precarity in the Dance Films of Bollywood

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Abstract:

This article tracks the rise of dance films in Bollywood cinema, when dance genres like hip-hop started dominating reality TV format-driven shows. I discuss how Anybody Can Dance films use a spectacle driven form to capture the rage and precarity of young lives through an embodied engagement with dance. Television screens and their discursive presence plays an important role in these narratives. However, the films use 3D technologies to invite audiences into film theatres to see reality TV dancing stars perform gravity defying movements through dance forms like Hip-Hop, Parkour and Breakdance. I argue that ABCD films need to be seen as part of new spectacle driven cinema that largely address concerns of youth located within specific geographies, while also highlighting their aspirations in a larger global context. Though, Any Body Can Dance films try to raise the nationalist themes in order to draw the bio power of the youth towards the symbolic discourses of the State, these remain as quick fix solutions, unable to shake off the spectre of rage, uncertainty and precarity in the lives of youth from the non-elite suburbs of Mumbai.

Keywords: Youth, Dance, Bollywood, Hip-Hop, Spectacle

Contemporary Bollywood cinema has been increasingly using the dance floor to raise contentious issues facing youth and adolescents in the uneven local, national and global terrains. Locating young adults within competitive arenas of performance, these films capture the struggle experienced by youth as they encounter intergenerational conflicts that are staged on a national and global stage. Deploying a spectacular form that piggy backs on the increased traffic of images, music and cultural commodities in a globalized world, films like *ABCD: Anybody Can Dance* (2013), *ABCD 2* (2015), captured global television's fascination for the youth genres of dance. In these films, the youth intimately and affectively encounter a visceral body that

has been amplified by changing media platforms like reality television and the post celluloid digital cinema. Dance films draw attention to youth aspirations in a market based liberalized economy, foregrounding tensions resulting from intergenerational conflicts, gender and class hierarchies, social exclusion, and a strong desire to pursue the passion for dance by destabilizing the boundaries between work and leisure.

Hardt and Negri have described the immaterial labor involved in the entertainment industry as affective labor. The products of this labor according to Hardt and Negri are “intangible” that can create a feeling of excitement and passion (2000: 293). This article addresses the emergence of the dance films in the context of the mutating form of media ecology, and the feedback loop allowing new genres to emerge in the multiplex form of Bombay cinema. While much has been written about the rise of the family film and its address to the Indian diaspora in the post globalized context, this article brings into discussion youth-oriented Bollywood films exploring narratives around dance and sports in the post millennial period. In the transmedia ecology, the emergence of the dance film needs to be seen as a response to the expanding audience base of televisual form and the rise of celebrity culture through talent-based reality shows. Digital technologies like 3 D are leveraged to depict young adults training themselves to heighten the affective power of the body under severe stress. While giving an enhanced and immersive experience to the audience in excess of the television form, these films bring to the fore issues related to precarity of bodies and lives, intergenerational conflicts and uncertain futures.

Dance Reality Shows on Indian Television

The deregulation of television accompanied by the opening up of the skies in the 1990s introduced audiences to a diverse range of images, music and genres that carried a global imaginary. Bollywood based content was brought forward in innovative formats to reclaim young audiences that were drifting towards American soaps or MTV. Pallabi Chakravarty shows how the quick spread of media along with a “bewildering ensemble of contradictions” made the aspirational

youth turn to dance as a quick road to stardom (2017, 3). Riding on the popularity of Bollywood songs, dance and music shows enabled talented youth to perform on television, and create a secondary market of B – level celebrities along with mushrooming of talent agencies and dance and music schools (Gaurav Jain 2010, 31). While Doordarshan until then had tilted towards folk and classical dance forms or film dances, reality shows like *Boogie Woogie*, in the mid-nineties, brought diverse forms such as rap, flamenco, Bollywood, break and hip hop into our television screens. The popularity of Indian Idol, format-based television quickly spread to the dance genre in the post millennial period. In 2006, Sony Entertainment Television introduced *Jhalak Dikh Jaa*, based on BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*. Tweaked by national and local television industries to leverage the rise of consumer markets and the telecom revolution, format driven shows had huge implications for the youth both as audiences as well as its actants. A new generation of dancers and choreographers from “lower middle classes with diverse caste and religious identities” could emerge in the cultural landscape after India's encounter with economic liberalization (Gaurav Jain, 2010: 31).

Youth have been centerstage in dance-based reality shows, introducing innovative narrative techniques to draw audience into a contestant's journey highlighting their financial struggles, difficult social circumstances and sometimes lack of social confidence. The use of grainy videos capturing the contestants with their family members in their humble surrounding before the show helped in creating the narrative arch. The shows mapped the transformations made possible through ‘dance’ by bringing out the enunciative capacity of the body in alignment with the demands of the hyper mediatized globalized world. Though each show tried to create a USP, laborious training to carve out a disciplined body was pushed as the formula for success. The figure of the mentor/choreographer who would put the contestants through various stages of skill training and groom them for the promised goal of social mobility became key figure. This involved the staging of a transaction, a handing over of the adolescent body from the care of the parent to the mentor.

Youth as a site of investment by the media and advertising industry have been seen within the context of their desire to construct their “adolescent selves” (Deutsch, J and E. Theodorou 2009, 230). More recently, scholars have drawn attention to the way globalization enables imagination, negotiated through processes of production, distribution and consumption of cultural forms (Darling-Wolf 2015, 2). Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade have discussed hip hop as both a hypercommodified youth culture as well as a “transnational and hybridized cultural form” that has enabled the youth to participate in political movements (2012, 2). Format based dance reality shows on Indian television have particularly showcased the way youth negotiate hybridity in the culturally globalized world. By bringing their passion in dialogue with transnational images of genres like hip-hop or break dance, youth could offer imagination of new identities in response to the uneven economic and social terrain (Dewey and Brison 2012, 3).

Anybody Can Dance: Enter Cinema

Dance driven spectacles have always been major attractions in popular Hindi films since the 1940s. Usha Iyer’s *Dancing Women* has drawn attention to the labor, material practices and gestural repertoires involved in the staging of the techno spectacle of the dance number of Bombay cinema (2020). Discussing the rise of dancing stars like Madhuri Dixit in the 1990s through her productive partnership with Saroj Khan, Iyer notes the use of the hook steps and fragmented body parts that underlined Dixit’s corporeal performance in songs like ‘Choli Ke Peeche Kya hai’ (*Khalnayak*, 1993). With the rise of dance-based contest shows on television, there was a transformation in the visual economy of dance sequences in Bollywood films. For example, in *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), spectacular dance sequences with an accent on a new vibrant style of group choreography were presented along with behind the scene activities of a spectacle driven economy. This included an overt visibilisation of branded active wear and designer studios. The film cast included top dancers of the industry to perform set pieces that were woven into the narrative. Elaborate sequences choreographed by Shaimak Dawar were devoted to characters rehearsing and

training for dance, while highlighting an undercurrent of rivalry between the two female dancers and their romantic involvement with the director of their dance group.

In the dance films under discussion, I consider the rise of a new genre that directly animated reality television's pervading influence on youth cultures. The rise of star choreographers, the highly mediatized coverage of star-based award shows had already set the stage of these interlinkages. I focus on *ABCD (2013)* and *ABCD 2 (2015)* both released as 3D films and directed by Remo D'Souza that introduced this new genre to Indian audiences. The *ABCD* films use dance as a way of life for youngsters coming from difficult background who yearn to train, rehearse and perform dance to get recognized as a serious, trained and talented dance group. The city of Bombay with its slums with its propensity for the legal and the para-legal infrastructures in a web of relations with each other becomes an important backdrop for the film. The film is set in Dongri, a suburb in Bombay known in the popular media for its brush with gangs and gang wars. The first time that the *ABCD* team is introduced in the film is through the perspective of Vishnu (Prabhu Deva) a dance choreographer who has been humiliated by JD (Kay Kay Menon) for not being open to new and creative ideas as a choreographer. JD wants to expand his Jahangir Dance Company (JDC) by pumping in more sponsors and money and calls a new choreographer from overseas to ensure an edge over other dance companies. Vishnu decides to leave the city for good until he comes across a group of young boys from the poor part of the city performing Parkour while dodging the police. This thrilling sequence brings the bodies of young dancers in direct contact with the slum city, negotiating roof tops, narrow lanes by using the techniques of running, climbing, vaulting and jumping.

ABCD's investment in dance as a particularly potent form throws up issues of alienation of youth experimenting with hybrid identities from the dominant social fabric, intergenerational conflict, class distinctions and inclusive/exclusive citizenship. The fluid relationship between the street and the rehearsal space is at the center of the body's relationship with dance, that becomes an embodied

scaffolding for self-affirmation. There are three vectors around which the film develops the theme of dance and the youth's passion for it. The first is the asymmetries between the upscale Jahangir Dance Company (JDC) whose owner JD is ready to bend all rules to win in dance competitions and the Dongri boys and girls, the underdogs who are talented and passionate but in-disciplined despite living in precarious conditions. The second narrative is that of D, a Muslim boy whose father wants him to run his butchery rather than waste time in dancing. The third is the relationship between Chandu who is trying to kick his drug addiction and Shaina, a bar dancer who is initially not accepted by the group for moral concerns. The formation of the Dongri Dance Revolution, the name that the group give themselves, is thus fraught with tensions. A strong rivalry between two gangs, both passionate about dance keeps Vishnu on his toes initially. The film opens at its seams issues related to inclusion and exclusion by tracking the various obstacles that the underdogs have to overcome to finally win in the dance competition. What is at the core of the film is the anxieties related to globalization and the corporatization of dance that threatens to strike a blow on the Dongri gang. The final drama is set in a dance-based television show where JD is determined to make his team win at any cost.

ABCD accommodates the off-screen context of the dance-based television shows and its synergies with Bollywood music, fashion and celebrity culture. Given the fact that *ABCD* was directed by Remo Dsouza, a well-known choreographer who became a celebrity judge in dance shows on Indian television, it is no surprising that a lot of the performative sequences were framed through the optics of television. Both Salman Yousuf Khan playing the role of Rocky and Dharmesh Yalende respectively had won in *Dance India Dance* and had a major fan following among young dance enthusiasts. Several other actors as key protagonists had performed on reality shows like *Jhalak Dikhlaja*. The dance films thus addressed a particular youth driven market that was familiar with dance reality shows and its star appeal. Chakravorty has highlighted the showcasing of 'cosmopolitan masculinity' derived from the global youth culture of Hip-Hop and Bollywood dances (158). In *ABCD 2*, for example, D's character is reintroduced as a boy from Surat who has landed in

Bombay to join the new team. D auditions dancing with his stylish sun glasses while performing a break dance routine and is applauded and welcomed by the team. The film acknowledges the stardom of television dancing stars and his appeal to hip hop enthusiasts by giving this performative platform to Dharmesh Yalende.

The transnational proliferation of hip-hop and its homogenizing influence on local cultures in the post-global world has been debated by scholars. Recent research on global translocation of hip-hop and rap have challenged the framing of hip-hop as an essentially 'American' cultural practice (Darling-Wolf 2015). As Bill Ashcroft suggests that 'there are many globalizations' (2013: 1). The symbolic marginalization as expressed through hip-hop cannot be applied simplistically to format driven dance reality shows as they are driven by the expansion of global media corporations into Asian economies. Secondly, these shows have enabled the rise of an aspirational youth who actively intervene in the media ecologies not just as consumers of global culture, but as producers who fold into their own local/global context to push the boundaries of their own cultural practice and identity formation.

Dance films like *ABCD* and its sequel *ABCD 2* need to be seen as part of new spectacle driven cinema addressed to a young audience located within specific geographies. However, the films also capture the youth's aspirations in a larger global context. Both the films address the anxieties of youth in the post liberalization urban environment, where the street forms of creative expression are pitted against the more upscale dance forms. In *ABCD*, while the trainees at JDC are shown practicing ballet, jazz and flamenco dance moves, Vishnu's Dongri team focuses on high energy hip-hop, break-dance combined with popping and up rock, forms identified with street dancing. By intercutting between the flattened rehearsal space of Jahangir Dance Company where the upscale trainees, many of them Caucasian youth are shown practicing against wall-to-wall mirrors, and the Dongri boys and girls who desperately look for makeshift, residual spaces to practice or the competition. The spatial flows between the rehearsal space and the neighbourhood turn it into a 'place' with its palpable material geography. The dancers of JDC are

framed through Jahangir's point of view, foregrounding his narcissism and egoistical tendencies. Jahangir's attempt to sexually assault his lead dancer further foregrounds the specular space as an entrapment. In contrast, the rehearsal space of the underdogs is animated through multiple view-points, first from D's rival gang who keep loitering around so that they can peep into the training sessions. Later members of the larger community of Dongri also keep an eye on the boys both from supportive and adversarial positions.

The climax of the film depicts how the Dongri Team fights back to win the dance show when they realize just before their act that their sequence has already been copied by JDC. The television screen in the green room mediates liveness with mediatization, bringing out the drama of a Reality TV show through its key protagonists. The Dongri boys watch their rival gang's performance on the television screen and realize that Jahangir had bribed one of their members to squeal on their choreographed sequence. The first suspicion is on D, the Muslim boy, but soon the team realizes that it was Mayur who had fallen prey to Jahangir's lure to gain an entry into the elite dance company. Dejected, the team almost gives up on performing until Vishnu encourages them to fight back by connecting to their heartfelt passion for dance. This is where the local, vernacular form is reconfigured to scale up the visual and aural power of the performance. Amidst chants of 'Ganapati Bappa Maurya,' the Dongri group performs an energetic street dance that they have always performed at the Ganapati festival. The camera and the editing style are leveraged to show a mesmerizing response by the live audience, as the boys claim an edge over other teams. By performing a dance in high energy and an unbounded dance form that combines free style Bollywood dancing with acrobatic and popping and flipping techniques. The lyrics of the song are a mix of Hindi, English, that include words like 'now raise your voice, make some noise for Bappa Maurya,' followed by the use of Sanskrit chants in the concluding part of the performance. The formation of the boys donning Ganesha heads, in a pyramid formation, as Ganapati's Aarti in Marathi fades up on the audio track is framed as a moment of revelation. Both Vishnu and his adversary Jahangir are moved to tears at this riveting performance with an invocation of the 'divine.'

The *darshana* of the god is captured through several point of view shots, including that of the judges, Jahangir, the adversarial team. As the rhythms and the dancing get scaled up, we see the live audience standing with folded hands. These images are intercut with that of the performance as well as the audience watching the show on their television screens, including the residents of Dongri. Another visual layer added to this sequence is a sepia toned flash back from Jahangir's point of view, a recollection of the past, as we see Jahangir and Vishnu dancing at the Ganapati festival in their younger days.

It is only by connecting with his past, the gestures and movements associated with the street dance that Jahangir starts recognizing the skill and the passion of the Dongri group. By investing in a more vernacular, local form of dance aesthetics where the street with its chaos, noise, violence and edginess becomes the ultimate theatre of dance. The hip hop genre identified with the youth of the street is evoked but also pressured by the local social and cultural context. At the same time, the powerful divine form and its specularity is instrumentalized to 'erase' all the egotistical differences and effect a smoothening of past rivalries.

Rage in Dance

Both *ABCD* and *ABCD 2* use dance in crucial sequences to express rage. In *ABCD*, D's father blocks the group's entry into the rehearsal space thus threatening to crush their dreams. In defiance of his father, D starts dancing in pouring rain, as the song 'Bezuban/mute,' fades up on the track. This extended set piece performed by D and his team mates captures the harnessing of bodies in choreographed movements to express rage. The use of water as a fluvial surface for dance helped in creating the fantasmatic experience of dance through the 3D effect with ripples of water adding to the visceral experience of the dancing body. Fast paced dancing synchronized to music is interrupted by leaping and jumping movements that are shown in slow motion. The depiction of a mediatized digital body, leaping in the air in slow motion as seen through the POV of the community captures the tensions between the desire for selfhood in the post liberalization and globalized context and older norms of forms of

filial loyalty. The film dramatizes how the effects of economic restructuring brings out a varied response across different age groups: the hyper presence of media technologies such as television screens, boom boxes, CDs and the desire to 'be cool' is placed in confrontation with the older generation although the reason for their disenchantment is never fleshed out¹. Another important character in the film is Chandru who battles his drug addiction through his passionate engagement with dance.

ABCD 2 opens with interviews of audiences of a television dance show cheering for the popular Mumbai Stunners team. What follows is a series of performative acts including that of the Mumbai Stunners, who disappoint the judges and their fans by performing a piece that has been plagiarized from the well-known international hip hop group. Suresh (Varun Dhawan) is personally humiliated by the judge for bringing disrepute to his late mother who had been honored with a Padma Shri for her contribution to Indian classical dance. Suresh is the only person in the film who is fleshed out with few flashback sequences that show him watching his mother performing on stage. 'Chunar/Scarf,' the song that follows becomes a leitmotif to exteriorize Suresh's inner landscape, his fragile self, anguished by his mother's name being dragged into this humiliation. The 'rage' sequence that follows shows Suresh performing a solo dance with his visceral body combining hip-hop with Kalari dance moves, and ending with frenzied Islamic motifs of dervish style movements.

Released just two years after *ABCD*, *ABCD 2* captures the movement of Bollywoodized version of hip-hop dance on an international arena. The film fictionalizes the real-life story of Suresh and Vernon, two boys from Nalasopara, who formed the *Fictitious Dance Company*. The film was made at a much bigger budget with Walt Disney Pictures stepping in to produce the film for Remo Dsouza. By casting Varun Dhawan and Shraddha Kapoor in lead roles, the production team was also legitimizing the emergence of the dance genre. The film gestures towards the presence of a powerful mediatized landscape through the opening sequence itself, where the site specificity of television screen at diverse locations is tracked as

part of the feedback loop with recording of the show in the presence of a live audience. Accused of lifting an act of an international hip hop team without acknowledging them, the team sets out to look for a coach who can guide them and help them prepare for the Las Vegas international hip hop dance competition. Mimicking the narrative style of reality shows, the film juxtaposes the everyday and mundane events such as the group shopping at a mall before their trip to Las Vegas, with the spectacles of dance.

The youth in *ABCD 2* are part of the service industry working as pizza delivery boys or in beauty salons, who pursue their passion for dance in their free time. Suresh waits at tables in a restaurant and harbors his dreams to make it big in hip hop dance. It is important to consider the way the youth express themselves through dance genres like Hip-Hop, Parkour and Breakdance that resonates with the way they negotiate their lives as part of the service economy. Jumping, running, flipping and jumping across rooftops or vaulting involve intense bodily engagement that required skillful negotiation of space through speed. In the service economy, delivery boys too are expected to negotiate vast spaces across locations with speed. In *ABCD 2*, the team members get humiliated by their clients when they go about their everyday work life in the city. With Vishnu as their mentor, the team goes to contest at a competition in Bangalore where they desperately try to shake off the tag of being plagiarists. Recalling the memory of the sequence from *ABCD*, the group performs to 'Bezuban/mute,' to articulate their desire to express their passion and rage through dance. The sequence also uses water as a medium for the mobile bodies to express themselves. Their next destination is Las Vegas: the film shows the team members facing a series of disasters that keep them on their toes. The film highlights Suresh's inner resolve to win so that he can bring back the honor to his mother's sullied name. The team's final performance riding on a mixed tape begins with the Chunar song in a child's voice, reanimating the mother's theme. This is followed by a rap section where the Indian youth show their determination to take on the world. The aural assemblage includes an eclectic mix of the sounds of the nadaswaram, the 'Chunar' theme in Daler Mehndi's voice, and the lines 'Sujalam Shitalam' from Bankim Chandra's *Vande Mataram*.

As the Mumbai Stunners leap and dance, the three colours of the Indian flag create a psychedelic effect with the song: with digitally simulated effects of the dispersal of color matching on screen with the leaping and vaulting bodies, manipulated through the use of slow motion the chunar/veil of the mother mutates into the national flag.

Precarity

A parallel track in both the dance films is that of Punit Pathak who plays the role of Chandru in ABCD, a character who tries to get over his substance abuse. In ABCD 2, Pathak plays the role of Vinod, who suffers from hearing impairment but experiences music through his body and responds to it through his own innovative dance style. In Las Vegas, D discovers that Vinod is suffering from a terrible cough, realizing that he may be suffering from consumption. Vinod pleads with him not to inform the rest of the team. Thus, morbidity and precarity in the lives of youth living in the bottom rung of Mumbai city resonates in both the films through intertextual registers. In the final round, the team struggles to pull off the act of building the pyramid with human bodies, as Vinod suffers from another bout of illness. It is at this moment that the nationalist fervor is drummed up by intercutting with the shots of the spectators at this global stage where flags of different nationalities are being waved. After the first unsuccessful attempt, the team rises again with the chants of Lord Ganapati to make the formation of the pyramid. As Suresh ascends on the bodies of his team mates, to hoist the Indian flag, the labour of aspirational underclass protagonists performing at a global scale in a dazzling spectacle form, gets yoked to nationalist iconography.

This is where the question of scale making becomes important. Scale according to Anna Tsing is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world but needs to be “brought into being” (2000). The concept of scale allows us to analyse relationships between objects or a set of bodies and their representation. I am using scale as a method to bring into view the visual iconography of the flag that is being deployed to create a sense of magnificence and elevation by creating a hierarchy of scale. The visual iconography, the use of height to showcase the flag on top of the human pyramid, the vertical vision with a focus on

on-screen fans who need to turn their gaze upwards and get dazzled by its look. There is a certain 'to be looked at ness' which is being encoded repeatedly in dance sequences being deployed to mask the unevenness and the rough edges of the lives of these youth into a flattened mediatized ecology. However, 'Vande Matram' in *ABCD 2* is not a stand-alone entity but part of a medley that includes rap sections and EDM music, providing an aural hook to a set of young bodies performing hip hop dance with high energy. The image of the Indian team and the waving of the tri-colour in slow motion cheered by a live audience from the global community, including the rival German team, is in excess of 'realistic codes of a reality TV show.'

The scaled-up production numbers in Bollywood film usually seem to arrest the narrative enabling spectators to enjoy the star driven performances. In the dance films under discussion the dance spectacles become key sites of struggle, imitating the narrative and aesthetic drive of dance contest shows on television. Use of slow motion, freeze frames, replays, memory driven flashbacks get inserted into dance numbers to resolve past conflicts or reenergize the performance of the underdog protagonists to help them win the competition. Digital technologies, 3D effects, aural motifs are repurposed across both the films to insert the spectators in a paratextual form that draws on the televisual. Finally, I have tried to demonstrate that though the *Any Body Can Dance* films try to raise the nationalist themes in order to draw the bio power of the youth to symbolic discourses of the State, these remain as quick fix solutions that are unable to shake off the spectre of rage, uncertainty and precarity in the lives of youth who have been raised in the non-elite suburbs of Mumbai. This theme of precarity gets further explored in *Street Dancers* (2020), through the theme of illegal migrants and their abject lives in the city of London. More research needs to be done on the intersections between dance, rage and precarity in Bollywood cinema to understand further its wider aesthetic, political and spatial dimension.

Endnotes

1. Chandu's battle with substance abuse is another thread where we see Chandu practicing hard at night, in an attempt to discipline the mind through intense physical training

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