



Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion

Anna Morcom

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Until the 1930s no woman could perform in public and retain respectability in India. Professional female performers were courtesans and dancing girls who lived beyond the confines of marriage, but were often powerful figures in social and cultural life. Women's roles were often also taken by boys and men, some of whom were simply female impersonators, others transgender. Since the late nineteenth century the status, livelihood and identity of these performers have all diminished, with the result that many of them have become involved in sexual transactions and sexualised performances. Meanwhile, upper-class, upper-caste women have taken control of the classical performing arts and also entered the film industry, while a Bollywood dance and fitness craze has recently swept middle class India. In her historical on-the-ground study, Anna Morcom investigates the emergence of illicit worlds of dance in the shadow of India's official performing arts. She explores over a century of marginalisation of courtesans, dancing girls, bar girls and transgender performers, and describes their lives as they struggle with stigmatisation, derision and loss of livelihood.

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