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## ***Matikor, Chutney, Odissi and Bollywood: Gender Negotiations in Indo-Trinidadian Dance***

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### **Abstract**

Four genres of Indo-Trinidadian dance—folk, film, chutney and classical—have opened spaces in which gender (as well as ethnic, national and class) identities are negotiated and chosen from an increasing variety of options. A women’s folk dance, matikor, brought by the early indentured Indians, represents resistance to the control of female sexuality. The survival and modern-day popularity of matikor highlights the importance of dance in Indo-Trinidadian women’s construction of identity in a diasporic setting. The importation of Indian (Bollywood) films to Trinidad opened up the realm of public performance for Indo-Trinidadian women, and dancing informed by Bollywood remains an arena in which women negotiate a plurality of both modern and traditional “Indian” roles. Chutney, a locally grown music and dance style, asserts female independence and self-determination through transgression of boundaries. Classical dance, despite appearances of conservatism, has created a new space for Indian women to gain respect and increased independence through mastery of classical forms. Changing attitudes toward women’s dancing within the last century provide an index of evolving gender ideologies within the Indo-Trinidadian community.

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## **Introduction**

In the swirl of a performer's festival costume, the hennaed hands of a classical dancer, or the sequined gyrations of a masquerader, dance is inscribed with political and cultural meanings. People dance to resist oppression, and dance to affirm community. Judith Lynne Hanna describes dance as a "multiplicity": in addition to being physical behavior, it folds in elements of cultural, social, psychological, economic, political, and communicative behaviors, becoming a kind of "text in motion" (1987, 4). It has even been argued that the communicative powers of dance exceed those of written and spoken language (Polhemus 1993, Hanna 1987). Academic scholarship is increasingly interested in the study of dance, because of its ability to shed light on cultural politics (Desmond 1997; Thomas 2003; Reed 1998).

## **Dance is more political than politics**

Dances in Trinidad are born of many layers of history and overlapping cultures—the legacies of slavery and indenture, post-colonial influences, and discourses of modernity and diaspora. To interpret the depth of meaning of these dances, they must be historicized and contextualized. Cynthia Novack (1995) outlines three interacting facets to be examined—the "art" (the choreographic structures, movement styles, and techniques of dance); the institutions (local, national, global) in which it is practiced and performed; and the people who participate as performers, producers, spectators, and commentators (181). Incorporating this contextualization, dance scholarship has the ability to inform on "the history of fluctuating events" (181), and can "participate in dialogues...about the most personal articulations of political forces and social power" (182). In other words, individual dancers have the power to analyze and respond to the greater cultural framework.

Four discernible genres of East Indian dance exist in Trinidad today—folk, film, chutney, and classical. The histories of these genres intertwine and overlap and, further, individual dancers can perform more than one kind of dance or even blend genres in one performance. These dances are separated, however, according to a general consensus and sense of boundaries existing in Trinidad's dance community.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how these four genres of Indo-Trinidadian dance create spaces in which gender identities are negotiated—and how women participating in each genre assert gradations of independence and self-determination, even in dances culturally coded as "appropriate" or "conservative." I engage a (Caribbean) feminist theoretical framework, following the premise that gender, ethnicity, nationality and class are interlocking systems that must be analyzed together. Adhering to Novack's model of contextualization, I draw in aspects of the "art," institutions, and audience reaction/participation. The study is grounded in the historical context of Indo-Trinidadian women's experiences of marginalization in Trinidadian culture.

## **Indo-Trinidadian identity**

Trinidad and Tobago is a dual-island nation in the South Caribbean, with a total population of about 1.3 million. There is no majority ethnic population; today, the

makeup is about 40% East Indian, 40% African, with the remaining 20% mixed, Chinese, Syrian, Portuguese, and others.<sup>1</sup> Occupied in turn by Spanish, French, and most recently British forces, slavery of African peoples took place here. After slavery was outlawed in the British Commonwealth in 1838, a system of indentured servitude from India was implemented, beginning in 1845. East Indians would continue to arrive in Trinidad until 1917, when indenture was made illegal. Although the conditions of indenture offered repatriation after the contract was up, most remained in Trinidad, claiming small parcels of land in exchange for the passage home.

Several factors in Trinidad changed the East Indians' way of life. For instance, according to Hindu beliefs, the act of crossing a large body of water meant defilement and erasure of caste status (Munasinghe 2001, 71). Indian dialects were gradually lost to English. With losses such as caste and language, however, other cultural markers such as music and dance took on greater symbolic importance (Manuel 1998, 21). Indian cultural and gender identities suffered rupture in Trinidad as certain practices were reinstated, others reformed, and others lost.

When indentured East Indians came to Trinidad, far more men came than women, shifting the gendered balance of power within the group. Ramabai Espinet describes the advantages of this situation for Indian women:

Scarcity increased their value as sexual partners and their wage-earning ability increased their independence. Indian women refused to accept bad treatment from husbands or lovers, and would leave rather than put up with such treatment (1993, 46).

The new-found abilities of Indian women to earn wages and leave abusive relationships represented a marked contrast to their social realities within the patriarchal system in India, which Espinet cites as having a "single germinating centre—the ownership of woman and her reproductive capacity" (43). Patricia Mohammed has written that a system of "competing patriarchies" in Trinidad added further pressure to Indian men's understanding of their own masculinity: accustomed to superior masculine status in India, Indian men now had to contend with European and African systems of patriarchy which were already vying for dominance in Trinidad (2002, 11). Despite their increased leverage and Indian patriarchy's relegation to non-dominant status, Indo-Trinidadian women still remained a marginalized group (within a marginalized group), enmeshed in processes of negotiating gender identity in a complex, multi-cultural setting.

Mohammed's (2002) concept of gender negotiation is basically this: in the new context of Trinidad, Indian men and women entered into a series of negotiations to forge "a new set of gender arrangements, and thus a negotiation with patriarchy itself" (12). These negotiations are not necessarily overt or logical, but can take place subtly in everyday situations, and involve "varying degrees of collusion, compromise and accommodation, resistance and subversion" (15). Further, negotiations are continually contested and can take place between groups and institutions as well as between individuals.

Through the history of the East Indian presence in Trinidad, negotiations of Indo-Trinidadian (gender, ethnic, class and national) identities have been influenced by processes of creolization,<sup>ii</sup>

a term which implies syncretism with the English-based, “Afro-Saxon” cultural mainstream identified with blacks, whites, and mulattos, and including such prominent entities as steelband, Carnival, and calypso. The creolization process has become particularly marked since the mid-twentieth century, as Indians have increasingly urbanized, modernized, forsaken Hindi for English, and in general come to enter [Trinidad’s] socio-economic and political mainstreams (Manuel 1997, 21).

Although creolization implies hegemony of the (Afro-Trinidadian) mainstream, processes of creolization allow for plural identities—Indo-Trinidadians can relate both to their East Indian traditions as well as to the mainstream, and indeed, to a mainstream national culture they increasingly co-create. Rhoda Reddock (1998) notes that contestations over national culture in Trinidad are ongoing, and as more groups seek to define themselves in this setting, this process “...could provide a basis for a more truly inclusive national and indeed regional identity” (435).

The celebration and culture of Carnival are at the heart of “creole” Trinidadian dance and performance traditions. The history of Carnival is rich and complex, and like Trinidad itself, born of many influences.<sup>iii</sup> Mainstays of this celebration are steelpan bands, calypso music, and *mas* (masquerade). Carnival *mas*<sup>iv</sup> represents a ritual outlet—its values are mass participation, spontaneity, and the inversion of boundaries. Other performance traditions in Trinidad are juxtaposed against this set of values (often referred to as “Carnival culture” or “Carnival mentality”) and react around it, some reflecting these values, and others pointedly resisting.

Participation in a certain type of dance is one way of asserting identity—a dancer circumscribes him- or herself within a dance’s perceived set of social meanings—to affirm them, to defy them, or redefine them. Susan Reed (1998) writes that dance “cultivates a body that initiates as well as responds” to a set of cultural values (421), and that performers “invent and reinvent identities through movement” (427). Similarly, Novack (1995) states that “dance may reflect *and* resist cultural values simultaneously.” Hanna (1998) cites dance’s unique positioning to “resist”:

Distanced from the everyday, a dance performance...permits exploration of dangerous challenges to the status quo, without the penalties of the everyday life situation” (196).

Like other human ritual, dance as theatrical performance “frames messages, and thereby bestows power on them” (Hanna 1998, 196). The messages framed by dance performance are co-created by an audience. Ann Daly (1995) has developed the idea of “reception as

co-creation,” stating that the dancing body is a site of cultural discourse, and the meaning of a performance is constructed through a dialogue between the dancer and the audiences.

Resistance against marginalization is a theme that unites the different genres of Indo-Trinidadian women’s dance. Part of the experience of Indo-Trinidadian women’s marginalization in Trinidadian culture has been their relative absence from what Ramabai Espinet calls “that sphere of influence which produces public figures, writers, artists, politicians, performers and other persons of impact and influence” (1993, 42). Indo-Trinidadian women, she continues, have been “present but unseen” (42). This is certainly shifting in Trinidad, and the study of gender negotiations within the development of dance genres provides an index of this change.

### **Folk dance**

East Indian folk dances are informed by the lifestyle of a particular region in India. Generally, a folk dance is performed in a recurring circle motif, movements are less controlled than in classical dance forms, and there are more vigorous movements of the dancers through the performance space. In addition to regional specificity, folk dances are also specific to certain occasions:

In India, there was a folk dance if there was a baby born—it was celebrated; if there was a crop and it was good, it was celebrated, if there was a wedding. Every festive occasion had a specific dance. It happened in Trinidad as well, but to a lesser extent (Sandra Sookdeo, personal communication, December 19, 2005).

The first East Indians to arrive Trinidad would have brought knowledge of these regional folk dances, but because they came from lower classes in India, they would not have had access to classical dance. What these people would have brought to Trinidad, as embodied knowledge, are the regionally specific folk dances of their villages.<sup>v</sup> In the context of Trinidad, these folk dances were probably acted as a form of resistance to encroaching westernization. These dances would have been performed as acts of collusion within the Indian communities themselves—not on a public stage, and certainly not for an audience of people of other ethnicities.

Today, East Indian dancers in Trinidad generally agree that a few types of folk dance made it to Trinidad, including the *charu*, a dance done with brooms; as well as a dance called *ras leela*, in which dancers hold sticks in each hand, striking them together in time to music. Lisa Bissoon, a classical dancer in the *Kathak* style, tells me that other, less formal dances were done during the early period of indenture:

Mostly in that time, they wouldn’t have known what they were doing. In the evening, these villagers would be sitting around and there would be a group of men sitting together and a group of women sitting together, the ladies wouldn’t mix a lot with the men. And the men would drink some rum, and maybe sing a little song, and that would be what we call a folk song. And the women would sit together and

maybe tap a little drum or tap a little bucket and some of them would dance. But there was no name to the song, there was no name to the dance (personal communication, May 4, 2006).

Bissoon stresses that in the early period of indenture, East Indian men and women would be dancing separately. And indeed, at this time, women's dancing in public and excursions into public in general would have been controlled, despite their increased social leverage. Several older Indo-Trinidadian women told me that during their childhoods, it was unacceptable for them to dance, that they would be considered "loose," it would be a shameful activity for them.

There was a folk dance in which women were sexually explicit, however—the *matikor*<sup>vi</sup> ceremony. Matikor is a women-only ceremony performed as part of a Hindu wedding, a practice brought from India as embodied knowledge. The ceremony would take place somewhere near a source of running water:

On the Friday night before a wedding, the bride would get turmeric paste and yogurt all over her body to make a nice complexion and as purifying agents. Then there would be a procession which would take you to a river or a place with a pipe; there would be a little ritual and then after there would be drummers, *tassa* drummers, men who form a circle. Only women were allowed inside there, and the women will now be both dancers, women will portray men. There are only women allowed inside the circle. There is a little bit of vulgarity, and only women see this. The meaning of the dance is for the fertility of the couple. (Sandra Sookdeo, personal communication, December 19, 2005)

As Sookdeo alludes to here, the matikor ceremony was done in order to educate the bride about the sexual act. Older women would sing bawdy and sexually explicit songs in Hindi, while the "women portraying men" would give demonstrations of the male role in the sexual act, often using objects such as aubergines<sup>vii</sup> to imitate a phallus (Manuel 1998, 22). The (male) *tassa* drummers would stand at a distance, providing the rhythms for these songs and dances, though they were not supposed to see or overhear the women. This expression of women's open sexuality, rowdiness and explicit dancing was appropriate because it happened in a bound, private, women's only space, sanctioned by ritual. As Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen states, matikor was "one of those spaces that was probably fought for centuries by Indian women to collectively express their sexuality within Hinduism, which is generally a male-dominant religion and culture" (1999, 195). Similar to Carnival, matikor is a ritual outlet, the transgression of boundaries made acceptable because it is circumscribed by tradition.

Matikor is performed widely in the present day at Hindu weddings of all classes. It represents the most vibrantly alive of the folk dances—it has survived and retained its relevance, and is practiced often whereas the others are not. The traditional role of the Indian woman is as a transmitter of culture, writes Aparna Rayaprol (1997), and this role

is especially pertinent in circumstances of immigration (23). This is “memory work”—women are responsible for giving memories of the homeland a “concrete shape in the form of festivals, ethnic food, dress, and religious and language classes” (64). Because Indian women acted as torchbearers of tradition, the matikor ceremony was kept alive within their practices. Further, the traditional songs and dances of matikor have given rise to a new form of Indo-Trinidadian popular music and dance called chutney.

During my fieldwork, I saw elements of the matikor ceremony appear in public performance on a few occasions. A popular chutney song in early 2006 was called “Matikoor Night,” sung by Rasika Dindial. Dindial performed the song at an event called Chutney Soca Monarch, and was accompanied by dancers who entered the stage clutching yams and eggplants, and dancing around to simulate the ceremony to a crowd of ten thousand people. In an earlier performance to a recording of “Matikoor Night,” Clico Shiv Shakti featured a dancer dressed as an old Indian woman, complete with gray hair, head shawl and spectacles, dancing humorously, in a sexually suggestive manner. (This performance, incidentally, was for an overwhelmingly Afro-Trinidadian audience at an event called Ladies’ Night Out). This type of performance of matikor on a public stage, to humorous effect, represents a parody of the dance; that matikor can be referenced in this way, and that people (even Afro-Trinidadian people) recognize the imagery of the dance, shows that it is understood by Trinidadians as part of a communally shared experience.

Matikor reflects women’s assertion of their independent sexuality and resistance to control. The earliest, and longest-surviving folk dance, provides the lens through which subsequent women’s performances are understood. Other dance genres are an extrapolation of this first experience, informed by influences of modernity and cultural mixing, but retaining the root of women’s self-determination.

Despite the influences of matikor and other folk traditions as the beginning of Indian dance traditions in Trinidad, other types of dance have eclipsed the popularity of folk narratives. Susan Badree of Clico Shiv Shakti tells me, “People still perform [folk dances], but for a normal performance, people want to see something contemporary, something more appealing. There is a time and a place for those dances.” As Badree states, people are more interested in what is perceived as contemporary, and indeed, the most widely practiced East Indian dances in Trinidad are those that have been made more accessible or palatable to westernized tastes. In Trinidad, the globalization of media and, especially, of Bollywood films has provided new ways of connecting to a modern India, and has opened up a new realm of public performance for women.

### **Film dance**

Film in this case refers to dances taken from Hindi or “Bollywood” films, produced by India’s prolific film industry. Film, or “filmi” dance as it is sometimes called, is a mélange of styles, incorporating movements from classical dances, folk dances of different regions of India, and western moves, although a few films, such as *Devdas*, feature classical dance in its “pure” form, and I am told that many film stars have been trained classical dancers. Film music, similarly, incorporates a blending of various Indian

and foreign influences. Around the time of India's independence from Great Britain in 1947, film directors attempted to create a popular music of broad national appeal by mixing genres, thereby creating a "distinctly national, modern, popular music" with which all Indians could identify, reflecting the striving for a new, unified Indian national identity (Arnold, 1992, 128). In the present day, Bollywood song and dance reflect this history of mixing, as well as an increasing self-awareness of diasporic Indian populations, producing films set in London or New York.

While it is perhaps inaccurate to generalize such a prolific industry—seven hundred to eight hundred films are produced per year (Booth 1995, 170)—it can be said that most Bollywood films are musicals, with each film containing several song and dance scenes. These song and dance sequences are often spectacular, a single song involving several costume and scene changes. Although Bollywood films are often criticized as being "too westernized," direct connections can be found to the large body of epic stories that exist in Indian folklore, such as the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* (Booth 1995, 172). The importation of these films has been crucial to the development of East Indian dance in Trinidad as it exists today: nearly every dancer I met credits Indian films for his or her first exposure to Indian dance, even those who have gone on to study classical dances in India.

The first Indian film to arrive in Trinidad was called *Bala Jobhan*, introduced in 1935 by an engineer named Ramjit Kumar. By this time, the majority of the Indian population in Trinidad would have been second- and third-generation Trinidadians, and the films represented an India that many had never seen:

With the advent of Indian films, the epic grandeur of an India left behind was now being transmitted into the new land of their adoption. They saw India in the landscape, the clothing, the practices of religion which were transmitted on the screen, the fictional characters who lived out the morals which their priests preached they should replicate in their own lives. It gave greater credence to their own practices, when a wedding ceremony carried out on the screen mirrored what the pundits and imams in their own society were doing (Mohammed 1998, 404–405).

Indian films in Trinidad were responsible for a cultural rejuvenation in general, not only conveying myths and symbols, but also serving to transmit gender ideology. Patricia Mohammed writes as follows:

The actions of both male and female protagonists are interpreted by the audience as the moral point of film, and invariably replay the major themes of mythology, goodness over evil, and the trials and tribulations which a woman must endure to live a virtuous life and preserve her husband's honour (1998, 405).



Urvashi Butalia (1984) has noted that female characters in Bollywood films are often simplified and stereotyped into either “good” or “bad” roles. The “good” ones are “(self-sacrificing) mothers, (dutiful) daughters, (loyal) sisters or (obedient and respectful) wives”—keepers of tradition who support their menfolk (109). The so-called “bad” women are often portrayed as “modern,” widowed or single, “westernized (synonymous with being fast and ‘loose’), independent (a male preserve), aggressive (a male quality) and they may even smoke and drink” (109). While these films transmitted images of traditional Indian gender ideology to Trinidad, they also paved the way for changes in standards of gender-appropriate behavior, particularly concerning Indian women and public performance.

About a decade after the first Indian films appeared in Trinidad, a woman named Champa Devi became the first Indo-Trinidadian to gain renown as a dancer on the public scene.<sup>viii</sup> Beginning dance at age 15, she first became famous in Suriname and Guyana before returning to Trinidad to perform as the star of a stage production called *Gulshan Bahar* in 1943. This was the first stage production to attract the then-upper class Indians (*Natrang* 1992, 11), and it used a type of Indo-Trinidadian popular music called *Naya Zamana*, which was an adaptation of Indian film music (10). Champa Devi was largely self-taught, her dances inspired by Indian films. Sujata, an older Indo-Trinidadian woman and former classical dance teacher, tells me about the climate for women dancing at the time of Champa Devi’s emergence:

As a young child, my mother would be angry when I went to dance, young girls were not allowed to go to dance, it is not considered cultural. We were supposed to remain in the home and not really be in the front lines. There were a few dancers, like Champa Devi, she did filmi dances at weddings and so on, but parents didn’t want their children to imitate her. Parents didn’t allow their children to dance until the early ’70s. But it really wasn’t all that bad, because nowadays chutney is worse than that. Chutney has taken on a Carnival mentality (personal communication, April 17, 2006).

Dance in the Indo-Trinidadian community begins by being “not considered cultural,” and becomes an appropriate “cultural” activity in the span of a few decades. Rajsesh Seenath, a classically trained *Kuchipudi* dancer discusses the nature of the barrier Champa Devi crossed:

To break the ice at that time it would not be a timid person to do that. You’d have to be a really brave person and at those times when you’re doing shows, remember you have to go in the night and go out with a band which is consist of men. You understand, so in those days it was very restricted for women to not go out in those sort of company. So I know it was probably very hard for Champa Devi to break that ice so we could have an arena today. (personal communication, April 22, 2006).

Seenath stresses that Champa Devi would be going out at night with a group of men, an activity which was taboo for women at the time. Despite Champa Devi's crossing of gendered boundaries, she still became, as Seenath tells me, "very popular." In 1945, for instance, she performed in Skinner Park, San Fernando, Trinidad, to an audience of 20,000 people for the Indian Centenary celebration (*Natrang* 1992, 11). Her stage career lasted throughout the 1950s, and she began teaching dance in the 1960s.

The importation of Bollywood films prompted a cultural rejuvenation amongst the Indo-Trinidadian community, and provided a new source of ideas and imagery about what constitutes appropriate behavior for "virtuous" women. Rhoda Reddock (2004) shows that the importation of Bollywood films into Trinidad and the parallel emergence of East Indian radio and television contribute to an "alternative cultural space" (210) for Indo-Trinidadians, and that these media can play "a significant role in informing a sense of gender and gender identities, particularly through the display of sexual and gendered images" (190). Because these well-respected media showed women singing and dancing in public, the standards around Indo-Trinidadian women's purity began to relax, and Champa Devi was able to gain acceptance and even fame performing dances outside of private, women-only spaces. The appearance of Champa Devi and other early dancers on the public scene planted the seeds of acceptance for future generations of dancers, in film dance and other genres.

Since 1935, there has been a steady flow of Indian films into Trinidad. Today in Trinidad, newly released Indian films are shown in the major movie theaters, although they are outnumbered by Western (usually American) pictures. Jubilee Theatre in Chaguanas plays mostly Indian films. In addition to theater showings, Trinidad has a robust bootleg DVD industry, ranging from street vendors to sophisticated businesses complete with credit card swiping machines. Every DVD shop has a section featuring Indian pictures. These films usually sell for TT\$10 (less than US\$2), and I am told that they are usually obtained by (illegal) Internet downloads. Trinidadian daily newspapers occasionally feature celebrity gossip about Indian film stars, alongside the latest escapades of American stars. Radio stations such as 103FM, Masala 90.5 and Sangeet 106FM play film songs. In December 2005, the Bollywood Music Awards<sup>ix</sup> were held in Trinidad for the first time, providing a meeting space for Asia-born and Trinidad-born Indians.

Bollywood films are a way for Indo-Trinidadians to connect to modern India. However, despite their popularity, they are a contested presence within the dance community. Susan Badree, of Clico Shiv Shakti, once told me:

Well, yes, we like to see what is happening over there, we like to see how far they reach. When we see the movies we know what they are all about, we see their culture and what they are doing. But here is not there (personal communication, January 26, 2006).

Badree's positioning is one of distancing, of recognizing relatedness with India but planting herself in Trinidad. Although Clico Shiv Shakti performs to film music, Badree tells me that the group bases its dances on the song's lyrics, rather than on an adaptation

of the plot of the film. Clico Shiv Shakti<sup>x</sup> is the most famous East Indian dance group in Trinidad, and performs dances to film songs and Trinidadian popular music, at a wide variety of events. The Shiv Shakti dancers are a performing company<sup>xi</sup> of about 40 young Indo-Trinidadian women, many of whom are trained classical dancers. The group's popularity can be attributed to its ability to navigate plurality with ease—incorporating elements of film, classical and Trinidadian popular culture into performances which are energetic and highly entertaining.

Despite the popularity of Indian film dances, they are often criticized by classical dancers who have trained in India, especially because of their increasing “westernization.” Rajshesh Seenath, a male Kuchipudi dancer offered the following criticism:

I don't consider [film dance] to be Indian dance. It is really a watered-down American dance. There's nothing in a Bollywood film that a good dancer would want to go to learn. When I say good dancing, I mean a person who *knows* dance. These fly-by-night dancers would say, oh fine, that's a good dance. But people who know dance and know the art would not even think twice to look at that dance. I think the last good dance movie we had in Trinidad was *Devdas*. I mean, it's perfect. When last have we ever seen a dance like that again? Everything is with bikini, and wining, and vulgarity. So, it's senseless. And it's all about the money again (personal communication, April 22, 2006).

As Seenath mentions, the influence of westernization of the Bollywood industry alienates some dancers who are invested in the more “purely” Indian traditions of classical dance. Seenath's distaste reflects on a recent trend in Bollywood: increasingly, many films are made with a diasporic audience in mind, packaged to be more palatable to Western tastes. Seenath's reference to “wining” is interesting, since it is a local Trinidadian term, which would not be known in India. The use of this term to describe Western dancing in Indian films suggests that, to Seenath, the Afro-Trinidadian population represents what is “Western” in Trinidad, as opposed to the Indo-Trinidadian population which retains a non-Western identity. Despite Seenath's dislike of Bollywood dance, later in the interview he told me, “We are all film dancers at first.”

Nearly every Indian dancer I met, including those who continued to seek professional training in India, cited Indian films as their earliest teachers and inspiration.

Lisa Bissoon, a Kathak dancer, tells me about learning from films:

In Trinidad, we had the official government station, TTT, Trinidad and Tobago Television. They would show a Hindi movie every Sunday after lunch at I think 12 or 12:30. And when I was like nine or ten my parents bought a video player. And my dad would go and get movies and of course mostly Indian movies. I would say, “Hey dad, bring one with plenty dancing, bring one with plenty songs.” And I would, you know, view it over and over, especially the songs. So I became known

for my choreography, actually, after a while. (personal communication, May 4, 2006).

Bissoon charts her development as a dancer and choreographer beginning with her copying Indian films without knowing the meaning of the words, to over time becoming interested in classical forms, to her applying for a scholarship to India, where she learned Hindi and studied *Bharat Natyam* and Kathak for five years. Susan Mohip, a classically trained dancer and the youngest person to win Mastana Bahar,<sup>xii</sup> also began her study of dance as a young child, by watching and copying Indian film dance:

Going through the chutney world, and in the film world, I did a lot in Trinidad here, and I considered, that was dance in Trinidad. And I wanted to learn more. In film dance, I would see a classical move. I would see certain things that identified me with classical dance. So that's where I made my change in my personal career. I was able to train in Kathak, I was able to go through the discipline, which I had not been exposed to before, and I went through the sacrifices to become a full-fledged refined dancer (personal communication, April 24, 2006).

Among classical dancers who have trained extensively in India, Hindi films still inform what is considered authentic in Indian culture in Trinidad. For instance, at a practice at Sandra Sookdeo's *Odissi* studio, a class of teenage girls was rehearsing a folk dance in which a bride is being teased by her friends. There is a scene where they put on her wedding veil, which the girls kept getting wrong. Partly frustrated and partly teasing, Sookdeo said, "Go and watch an Indian movie and you'll see how to do it right!" In addition to classical dancers whose first exposure was through film dance, there are also dancers who perform film dances exclusively. Today in Trinidad, East Indian dance is so widespread, I have heard statements such as "there is a dancer for every family," or "every house has a car and every house has a dancer." Throughout Trinidad, there are countless amateur or "neighborhood" dance groups of young women whose inspiration is generally gathered from film dance.

I spent a great deal of time with a "neighborhood" film dance group called the Shiva Devi All Stars, led by Suzanne Nowbutt. There were about fifteen young women in the group, ranging from ages twelve to twenty-five, who lived in Tunapuna and the surrounding areas. The Shiva Devi All Stars practiced every Sunday afternoon at a Hindu center called the Tunapuna Hindu Mandir. Practices were a social event, with several mothers and younger siblings of the dancers staying to visit and watch. Practices would often start up to an hour late due to talking and teasing (I received several offers from the girls to find me "a nice Trini boyfriend"). Mothers of the dancers also helped sew costumes and organize performances. Practices were fluid and semi-disciplined: cell phone calls would interrupt practices, and the girls would take breaks to go to the Royal Castle next door for a soft drink or fried chicken. The group would perform dances choreographed to recorded film songs. Nowbutt asked a Hindi-speaking friend to help her translate song lyrics, and she would then choreograph dances based on the meaning of the lyrics. The Shiva Devi

All Stars performed at events such as Hindu weddings, Diwali or Phagwa celebrations, and competed in Mastana Bahar.

Songs from the films *Devdas*<sup>xiii</sup> and *Bunty aur Babli*<sup>xiv</sup> were among the most popular selections by the Shiva Devi All Stars, as they were for several other “neighborhood” dance groups I saw perform. These two films, as well as other recent Bollywood films, have qualities that make them accessible to westernized audiences, contributing to their popularity in Trinidad. In the Shiva Devi All Stars, sometimes the theme of a dance would be loosely interpreted from the context of the film from which the song was taken. For example, Nowbutt choreographed a dance to be performed at various Diwali<sup>xv</sup> celebrations organized by neighborhood committees around Tunapuna—celebrations which also feature tassa drumming, performers singing Bollywood and religious songs, raffles, and the crowning of that neighborhood’s “Diwali queen.” The song was taken from a scene in *Bunty aur Babli* in which the male lead, Bunty, and a police officer are both drunk and flirting with the same woman. In the Shiva Devi All Stars dance, Nowbutt played the lead role of the tempting woman, and a guest male dancer chased her around the stage, pretending to be drunk, as she coquettishly evaded him. The girls were background dancers, and were very familiar with this song: even before learning the dance, several of them had memorized the lyrics in Hindi and could lip sync along with the music. Their costumes were a bright magenta with gold braid trim; a cropped, short-sleeved top and long, A-line skirts. It seems that the dancers’ favorite part of the event was getting ready backstage—fixing each others’ hair and makeup, tying on ankle bells, adjusting costumes, veils, and heavy gold jewelry.

The atmosphere at each Diwali event was one of fun and celebration, although, during the performance, the audience was sitting quietly and watching, possibly walking around, but never dancing. Although these young women were performing an overtly flirtatious dance in flashy costumes, the rigid boundary between the dancers and the audience circumscribed this dance within the realm of the “non-vulgar,” and therefore an “acceptable” activity for young Indo-Trinidadian women. That the audience was watching this performance in a non-interactive way meant the idea that these young women are desirable and sexy was kept somewhat inert, or at least contained.

Participation in these Bollywood dances is a means by which young women negotiate appropriate boundaries of Indo-Trinidadian womanhood. In a study on Indo-Trinidadian young women and agency in Northern Trinidad, Gabrielle Hosein (2004) has found that these young women are continually balancing the identities and practices “appropriate” to different contexts. Because the demands on contemporary Indo-Trinidadian womanhood are shifting and plural, young women must “navigate different ideals as well as negotiate the expectations of each” (539). It is clear that young women participating in neighborhood film dance groups exhibit this kind of navigation and negotiation. Because Bollywood films have a history of respect in Trinidad as a way of connecting to all things Indian, dancers assert their Indianness by participating in a “cultural” activity. But because these films have increasing themes of westernization and modern costuming, ideas, and settings, they are more palatable to Indo-Trinidadian audiences accustomed to Western films and culture. Young women can be glamorous, modern, and gain a bit of

personal fame in their neighborhood, all the while participating in an “appropriate” Indian cultural activity and asserting community belonging. That a Hindu center allows the Shiva Devi All Stars a space to practice is evidence of this sanctioned “appropriateness.” Elsewhere, Hosein (2003) has shown that young Indo-Trinidadian women relate more closely to female characters in Western films, and their perceived independence, than to the more subservient female characters in Indian films. Young women can participate in Bollywood dancing for a few hours a week, and then return to an outside life, full of any number of influences.

For the Shiva Devi All Stars, the weekly dance practices create a women-only space, a place for women to gather outside of the home setting, to network, gossip, laugh, and support each other. In some ways, this practice space echoes the *matikor* space, with older women teaching the younger ones, and themes of sexuality and relationships discussed through teasing and laughing. Males—occasional guest dancers and little brothers—enter this space sometimes, though their status is that of “guest” rather than “member.”

The dances created by the women, from their shared, women-only space, are intended for the public eye, and a considerable amount of agency is inherent in producing the shows—the women choreograph, design costumes, conduct research to interpret Hindi lyrics, and book their own shows. The women intend to be seen and recognized by their communities as experts on Indian songs and films, and as glamorous entertainers. It also creates a space in which women may comment on sexual themes without incurring disapproval. These performances can be read as self-assertion of belonging as both “modern” and “traditional” Indian women.

Whereas film dance exhibits a connection to modern India that has been “imported,” the development of another dance style, chutney, exhibits the modernization of folk dance and expresses the continuity of the indenture experience.

### **Chutney dance**

Chutney is a form of popular music, and an accompanying dance style, that has developed in Trinidad from Indian rhythms and traditions.<sup>xvi</sup> Chutney, named after the spicy condiment, began to appear on the public scene in the early 1960s; an artist named Sundar Popo gained great popularity singing “light, chutney-style Hindi-English ‘local’ song...and his renditions of women’s songs recollected from his childhood” (Manuel 1998, 26). Chutney is commonly perceived as rooted in *matikor*.<sup>xvii</sup> As Susan Badree has told me, chutney is simply these old songs “spiced up” and made public (personal communication, January 26, 2006). The mid-1980s marked the beginning of chutney’s mass popularity in Trinidad, popularized largely through weekend chutney dance fetes (Manuel 1998, 26). Chutney is sung in a mix of Hindi and English, although lyrical complexity often takes a backseat to driving, danceable rhythms.

Chutney dance differs from film and classical dances in that it is a popular, rather than a theatrical, dance: it is non-rehearsed and performed in large crowds at chutney “fetes,” or parties. While chutney fetes sometimes include choreographed dances performed on

stage by dance groups such as Clico Shiv Shakti, chutney music is always accompanied by the dancing of the audience. The dance is basically a sensual gyration of the hips, with some focal hand movements; there is some contention as to whether chutney dancing is wining<sup>xviii</sup>, the waist and hip gyrations considered the mainstay of Carnival dancing, or a separate entity. Susan Mohip describes chutney dance as a combination of many influences:

It takes different cultural rhythmic movements. Whichever dance, they might be not Indian. You might see a Latin move, a calypso move, then you would see an Indian move, and you might see a Spanish move. Sometimes you may see an African move. And so I cannot say that it's one hundred percent Indian dance. It sucks in everything (personal communication, April 24, 2006).

Chutney's development in the multi-cultural setting of Trinidad represents the negotiation of national and ethnic belongings and identities, reflecting degrees of creolization of Indian culture, as well as "Indian-ization" of popular culture. Since the 1980s, chutney music has become increasingly accepted in the Trinidadian mainstream, and chutney soca—a variation of chutney utilizing more electronic instruments—is more overtly hybridized with soca, the dance music of Carnival.

Along with the increasing popularity comes an increase in controversy, generally based around the behavior of women at chutney fetes. At these events, it is common to see women of all ages wearing "revealing, Western" clothing (such as short skirts and high heels), consuming alcohol, and dancing freely with men, in groups of other women, on the stage, or by themselves. Representations of chutney as having origins in the matikor ceremony colors performance spaces in terms of the gendered appropriateness of behavior:

Performance context is one of the main differences between *mathkor* and *chutney*. The differences lie in the categorization of female/male performance and private/public domains. *Mathkor* was a private, religious and unrecorded ceremony in which female performers dominated. As such, the performance of the *mathkor* ceremony seems to accord with the model in which women's musical activity belongs to the realm of the private, in contrast to that of men which belongs to the public domain. But women's involvement in the public performance of *chutney*...contributes to a blurring of the private/public boundary. (Ramnarine 1998, 13; her italics).

The fact that the private women's dances of the matikor ceremony cross the private/public boundary and involve participation of men and women together, has spurred chutney's condemnation by conservative Hindu groups. Further, the spontaneous nature of chutney as popular dance, the mass participation creating a performance with fluid boundaries, and the drinking involved, create a performance space in which "no boundaries" and "lack of control" are main themes.

At a chutney show I attended at a venue called D Triangle, in Aranguez, Trinidad, performances of chutney songs by singers and bands were interspersed with “wining contests,” in which members of the audience were invited onto the stage to compete. There were as many as twelve audience members on the stage at any given time, wining energetically, dashing between the dancing on the stage and groups of friends in the audience. This event exemplifies chutney dance’s values of mass participation and blurring of boundaries between the audience and the performance space.

Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen (1999) views chutney as a positive development in terms of the “growing emancipation” of Indian women in Trinidad (196). Women dancing chutney represents “the loss of control by the individual Hindu male and the male-dominant Hindu community over the sexuality of the Hindu woman” (196) and points to the independence which Hindu women have achieved:

through their dancing in public in the Chutney festivals, they state emphatically that “my body and sexuality belong to me, and, nobody (not my man, father, brother, son, or the larger community) has the power to prevent my expression through dance” (197).

Chutney is often considered a lower class phenomenon. The censorship of chutney often comes from the upper and middle classes, “who see themselves as the preservers of so-called authentic Hindu culture” (197). Baksh-Soodeen believes that “it is always the lower classes which lead the struggle for meaningful social change” (197), and chutney is “clearly a movement by lower class Hindu women against male control” (198).

Chutney dance, as a popular, yet contested, genre in Trinidad exhibits a self-awareness of syncretism, plural identities, and diasporic identity. Unlike film and classical dance, which are versions of India imported after the Indian population was settled in Trinidad, chutney’s roots in the matikor ceremony (and/or other folk traditions) are from their earliest Trinidadian ancestors, and represent an India “remembered,” rather than an India “imported.” For Indo-Trinidadian people, chutney simultaneously acknowledges where they came from and where they are now, and the continuity of these experiences. Women’s participation in chutney dance is an assertion of their role in incubating the matikor tradition, and their decision to perform chutney outside of a ritualized context reflects their increasing self-determination as creators of Trinidadian popular culture. Through chutney dancing, Indo-Trinidadian women assert greater independence through *transgression*—of the public/private boundary, of the separation between men’s and women’s roles and spaces. The theme of “lack of control” in the music and dance style echoes the “lack of control” that men have over women’s bodies as they are dancing chutney.

### **Classical dance**

Classical dance in India has a complex history spanning thousands of years. There are several types of classical dance—including Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, *Chaau*, *Kathakali*, among others—born of different regions in India.. Each has its own system of costuming, makeup, music, themes, as well as movement styles—the history



and intricacy of classical dance are too vast to summarize here.<sup>xix</sup> However, a few points can be made: as a rule, classical dances are highly developed lexicons of movement that take several years of training to master. Classical dances have roots in a region's folk dances, but have been standardized into bounded systems of movement able to transcend regional specificity. Hand gestures feature prominently in classical dance, creating a sign language of sorts, through which dancers interpret song lyrics. Most classical dance disciplines maintain that through skillful combinations of movement, song, costume, and the sentiments or emotions displayed by dancers, a classical performance is able to convey a message to the audience that is more powerful than other mediums, such as reading a similar message in a text. In the Odissi discipline, this ability is called *abhinaya*.

The communicative abilities of classical dance are believed to be spiritual in nature. As Susan Mohip tells me, "You have to be spiritually minded to dance Indian dance, classical dance. [Dancing] is basically worship. You connect to God" (personal communication, April 24, 2006). Classical dances are rooted in Hindu traditions, and have overt religious connections—religious stories are portrayed through dances, and it is said that Lord Shiva, often depicted in a dancing pose, dances out the creation of the universe, his rhythms ordering the rhythms of the world (Hanna 1998, 199). Throughout Indian history (varying with geographical location and historical era), Hindu temples have housed virginal young female dancers, *devadasis*, whose occupation was to serve the gods through dance. Hanna notes that these ritual temple dances sometimes had sexual themes, as "women's dance movement emphasizes the beauty of the body and the erotic appeal of dance for an 'other'—god, husband, lover—in all its demanding exactitude" (Hanna 1998, 211). Because of a poor understanding of classical dance traditions, the British colonizing presence in India discouraged female dancing, mistakenly linking it to prostitution: "...a common strand of Hinduism, wherein sexual ecstasy is a path to spirituality, was an anathema to the British, who were in thrall to the Christian denial of the flesh" (213). A rejuvenation of classical dance occurred in the 1930s, however, as it was chosen as a symbol of a (noble, ancient) Indian cultural identity during India's fight for independence from Britain, and classical dance began to be taught to non-*devadasi* girls (214). This renaissance would have occurred after the last Indo-Trinidadians arrived in Trinidad in 1917—these early indentured peoples would have had little to no familiarity with classical dances, which arrived in Trinidad later, after some important changes took place.

Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain in 1962, becoming a sovereign nation. As Mohammed (1988) has noted, new economic developments in the 1960s and 1970s led to the expansion of a cash economy (391), causing subsequent social and cultural shifts. She noted as follows that these developments:

which made available jobs in the various sectors—commercial, petroleum, and other industrial and public—involved as well a greater geographical shifting and displacement in the Indian female population. Indian women began to enter the Public Service as well and mix with the Black men and women who predominated in the

public sector. Many Indian women joined the teaching profession—a profession in which they were encouraged as it was an extension of their nurturing role. Other Indian women who had had access to a university education began to move into other professions—the legal profession proving to be one of the most attractive. The main outcome of all this were the changes which began to occur in the traditional Indian family setting (391).

As Indo-Trinidadian women increasingly entered the workforce and mixed with Afro-Trinidadian culture, they gained more autonomy—as well as some heady contradictions in the construction of identity. Mohammed states that their acting outside the boundaries of the stereotype of the submissive woman caused uneasiness, especially among Indian men, who “have reacted to the growing confidence of Indian women in a confused and sometimes violent fashion,” especially toward those Indo-Trinidadian women “friendly with men outside their ethnic group” (395). This would signify a greater loss of control of Indian men over Indian women.

Nationhood and continued mixing with the Afro-Trinidadian population galvanized the search for Indo-Trinidadian identity. It is during this time of cultural shifts and changes in gender expectations that Indian classical dances began appearing in Trinidad<sup>xx</sup>. Processes of globalization such as relative ease of air travel and more efficient communications systems, as well as the increased wealth of the nation, allowed for more cross-cultural exchanges. The governments of both India and Trinidad and Tobago sponsored cultural exchange programs, bringing Indian dancers and musicians to Trinidad to teach, and sending Indo-Trinidadian dancers and musicians to India to study the classical arts. In the 1970s, the first Indo-Trinidadian dancer to travel to India was a man named Rajkumar Krishna Persad, who studied Bharat Natyam and returned to Trinidad to open the Trinidad School of Indian Dance. The first Indian dancers to travel to Trinidad were Pritap and Priya Persad, in 1977, through a combined effort from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the (Trinidadian) National Council of Indian Culture (NCIC), which led to the introduction of the Kathak and Odissi styles to Trinidad. Another Trinidadian named Satnarine Balkrarsingh studied in India, returning to Trinidad with his India-born wife, Mondira; together they started a classical dance school called the Nritanjali Theatre. Classical dance styles continued to gain ground, and indeed, were immediately “reputable.” As Sandra Sookdeo (1994) has noted, “Girls of ‘good character’ from respectable homes were then learning dance” (18).

Today, several types of classical dances are taught in Trinidad, typically by Indo-Trinidadians who have studied in India, on a government scholarship, for a period of a few years. Currently, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Bharat Natyam, and Odissi are disciplines being taught in various locations around Trinidad. Despite its growing popularity, classical dance reaches a smaller audience than more popular forms such as chutney or film dances. However, students of classical dance exhibit high levels of dedication and often spend several years studying with the same teacher, perfecting their skills.

Sandra Sookdeo’s Odissi<sup>xxi</sup> studio in Cunupia, Trinidad, is a large, open-air building constructed behind her family’s house especially for dance instruction. Chalkboards line

the back wall, with the current week's scripture passages and prayers; the front has a stage with drums, and pictures of Hindu deities hang around the room. For Sookdeo, who trained in Odissi for several years in India, a typical Saturday begins in the early morning with study of Hindi and Sanskrit, in order to better interpret ancient dance texts. Later in the morning, a class of small girls, about ages four to six, would begin, dressed in white, for purity, and orange, for holiness. During this class, several parents stay to observe, and older girls from the next class come early to help teach and to watch. Each class begins with an invocation, and proceeds to *batu*, or "pure steps"—practice of the technique of movements without imparting a message. Sookdeo instructs classes sitting on the stage, playing a drum and chanting to accompany the dancing. Later in the class, choreographed dance pieces are practiced. Classes last through the day, progressing in terms of age and ability. Sookdeo has eighty to a hundred students in total, all girls and young women. The mood during these classes is festive—it is obvious the girls enjoy dancing and spending time with each other, although classes are run with a specific protocol and high expectations. Dancers are expected to be serious students of the discipline, pay attention during class, rehearse at home during the week, and also succeed in their schoolwork outside of Odissi class (one older student has just started medical school, and several others are pursuing college degrees). Older classes are given a lesson on dance theory before each practice begins, and the students discuss how to best create moods and feelings through dance—a complex study. Sookdeo encourages students to study Hindu scriptures to understand what types of situations conjure up specific moods—to add more spiritual depth to their dance practice.

Stories about the immortal love and romantic encounters of Radha and Krishna are central to the Odissi discipline, and the conveyance of "mood" or "feeling" helps make telling sexually themed stories "appropriate." As Sookdeo has told me, the older classes can learn to dance the "great love stories," as they will understand how to portray these scenes with sensitivity: "If you are not careful, it can become pornography. If you don't feel it, you won't be able to show it. There is a scene where a man is taking off a woman's blouse, and it can be misconstrued if the right feelings are not present" (Sookdeo, personal communication, January 14, 2006). Having the "right feelings" present requires much practice—a mastery and a subtlety of movement, along with the ability to communicate nuanced feelings. Sexually themed stories are also made "appropriate" because they are filtered through the language of the hands—hand movements allow a sexual story to become a metaphor, making communication of sexual themes more distant and theoretical. Classical dances are usually performed on a stage, with audiences being expected to sit quietly and watch. Rajsesh Seenath describes a proper venue for a classical dance performance as follows:

Anything that is very nice, no alcohol, no moving around. No eating, no drinking. If it is a wedding, there will be a part where there is nothing going on, just the dance. Just to watch the dance. If you can't sit and watch my dance, my students dance, then it's no use dancing. When it is very quiet, my students will dance (personal communication, April 22, 2006).

This is demand for a specific kind of respect of an ancient art form and a dancer's many years of study: an audience should be at attention, all wits necessary to appreciate levels of complexity within a dance. With this kind of respect demanded, and received, from audiences, it is clear why classical dance is perceived as a virtuous activity for young women. Lisa Bissoon tells me that classical dance is an alternative to other types of dance:

Parents don't want to see their daughters, or girls who remind them of their daughters, onstage, wining, doing something vulgar. Parents are pulling back and reflecting, and they now want their daughter to learn something different. So they call up a classical dancer and say, "I want my daughter to learn from you now." After film dance for many years, there is more classical dancing now (personal communication, May 6, 2006).

Classical dancers are often dismissive or even disdainful of other types of dance, seeing their disciplines as more highly developed and tasteful. A common theme in this argument is that classical dance is a "science," and indeed, other types of dance cannot rival the classical schools in terms of complexity and organization of information. The term "vulgar" is often used to describe film dance, chutney dance, or wining, and it seems that the issue of what is vulgar and what is not vulgar hinges around ideas of subtlety, control/mastery of skills, and maintenance of boundaries between performance and audience—what is "vulgar" is "out of control."

Chutney performances are often criticized by classical dancers as void of meaning; in classical dance, meaning is produced through a mastery of subtle movements, and chutney dance is anything but subtle. During a dance practice at the Odissi studio, Sookdeo asked an older class, "What message is found in chutney?" One student answered, "Wildness!" Another replied, "Drunkenness. It is for a man to see your body." Sookdeo concluded, "It's vulgarity. Women dance to entertain the menfolk, and the men are drunk and want only the physical body."

The Odissi students communicated a disdain for chutney dance (at least in front of parents and adults), although a few girls told me they like Clico Shiv Shakti. The girls from the Shiva Devi All Stars, however, enjoyed chutney, telling me where to go to see the best shows. Their standards depart from conservative values and are more open to creolization, although even more conservative Hindu groups who eschew chutney dance support and encourage young women's involvement in classical dance, and even film dance performances. These elements of planning, control, and boundaries make classical or film dances seem less "volatile" than chutney, even though they provide emancipating experiences for women and may contain dances on sexual themes.

Indian classical dance in Trinidad is an assertion of a certain Indian identity. As processes of creolization of Indian culture progress in Trinidad, the return to an ancient Indian cultural practice is a way to reaffirm cultural roots that have ancient, noble, and more-or-less unchanging history. Because classical dances are uniform lexicons of movement, and

essentially practiced the same way in Trinidad as in India, a certain version of “authenticity” is implied—one that necessitates an “insider” knowledge of ancient culture as practiced in modern India, and a separation from Trinidadian mainstream culture. Sookdeo once told me, “Some people say that Trinidad is the culture of calypso, pan, and chutney. But it is not. That is not our culture.” This ideology of separation is not necessarily full-time, however. Teachers and students, leaving the classical dance context, assert Trinidadian belonging in other areas of their lives, and thus participation in classical dance is part of the ongoing negotiation of plural identities. Despite notions of being “authentically” East Indian, creolized notions of gender roles have nevertheless shaped classical dance, and how choices are made to display ethnicity. This is apparent in the absence of men. In India, classical dance has historically involved men in a variety of roles. Trinidad’s dance community is nearly all women, with a few standout teachers. Rajsesh Seenath tells me that it is the stigma of “being gay” if they are dancing that keeps men from this activity (personal communication, April 22, 2006). Seenath, a male Kuchipudi dancer, boasts the highest rate of involvement of male dancers at his studio, due to Kuchipudi’s style as “vigorous and masculine”; he also creates roles for them as powerful male Hindu figures such as Shiva or Krishna. Classical dance movements are often separated into *tandava*, the masculine—movements that are “virile,” “strong,” and “forceful”; and *lasya*, the feminine, with movements that are “soft,” “graceful,” and with “restricted movements” (Sookdeo 1994: 34). While these stereotypes seem in keeping with Western gender ideologies, there is a crucial difference: in classical dance in India, a man dancing in the *tandava* style enhances or highlights his masculinity, whereas in Trinidad, to dance at all, aside from wining or chutney dancing, can be emasculating.

Indo-Trinidadian men and women react around different sets of social pressures. As Mohammed (2002) has described, a system of “competing patriarchies” leaves Indo-Trinidadian men vying for dominance, usually on creolized or westernized terms. Male Indo-Trinidadian dancers are by no means shunned or excommunicated, but it is not necessarily the most admirable or popular thing a young man can do. While there is an ancient tradition of men doing theatrical dance in India, the western world does not have a similar theatrical dance tradition known for bolstering masculinity. In other words, the tradition of masculine theatrical dance does not translate, and Indo-Trinidadian men must negotiate positions of power within new frameworks: men negotiate by not participating. Instead, involvement in other Indian “cultural” activities, such as *tassa* drumming, asserts an Indian cultural identity within the framework of creolized standards of masculine behavior—drumming translates as “masculine.”

Indo-Trinidadian women react to increasing creolization as well. In the 1970s, women began working more outside the home and participating in mainstream culture—becoming more “modern”—and it is no coincidence that classical dances became popular during this time. Women’s role as bearers of tradition and keepers of “purity” was put under pressure, in terms of societal expectations, as well as constructions of group and individual identity. As women became more “modern”—they sought increasingly (or parents sought for their children), to participate in an “ancient” Indian activity, possibly to counterbalance these societal changes.

Classical dance did not act as a backlash, however, *against* women's new-found "modernity". Instead, it allowed women to make new kinds of independent choices. Through classical dance, women created for themselves activities and women's gathering places outside of the home. For some extra-dedicated women, the study of dance allowed them to travel unaccompanied to India, to study, dance, and learn a new language. Several women are self-employed as dance teachers. Sandra Sookdeo, for instance, has acquired two languages (Hindi and Sanskrit) in her study of dance, and has written and published a book on the subject (see Sookdeo 1994). Her dance studio is used as a meeting space for the local Hindu community, as a place to perform ceremonies. Owing to her mastery of classical dance, she has become a respected leader in her community. Lisa Bissoon spent five years, unaccompanied, in India, choosing teachers with whom to study. She returned to Trinidad, regarded as an expert on Indian culture. Other dancers have had similar experiences, and the process will surely continue, as young women become increasingly interested in the study of classical dance.

Shiva, the Hindu "lord of the dance," is described: "His face emanates masterly discipline, while his body depicts wild ecstasy which represents the duality of the universe" (Sookdeo 1994, 46). A founding idea in Indian classical dance is that "wild ecstasy" may be experienced through processes of discipline, practice, and control. This theme resonates for Indo-Trinidadian women in classical dance: through the discipline and controlled movements which help to sanction classical dance, certain kinds of freedoms can be negotiated. Because of the separation of performance space, and the rigidity with which the audience must respect a performance, women are dancing not for purposes of men's enjoyment, but to display their craft—women perform classical dance as a self-actualizing activity. These negotiations for independence are sanctioned and encouraged, even within male-dominated orthodox Hindu communities. Although it negotiates greater independence for women, and exhibits an ownership of sexual themes, classical dance is able to sidestep the controversy that surrounds chutney—whereas women's dancing chutney negotiates spaces of independence through transgression of boundaries, women's performing classical dance negotiates independence through a commanded respect of mastery.

### **Conclusions**

By dancing, Indo-Trinidadian women insist on being seen. Using their physical bodies as a medium, women express their history in Trinidad and the complexities of the ongoing construction of identity. The act of performing is a political one—women have insisted on creating performance spaces that they own, in which themes of gender and sexuality are hashed out. Indo-Trinidadian women's dances continue to command respect and attention, whether through navigation of plurality, transgression of boundaries, or mastery of classical forms.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> The island of Tobago has a population of about 50,000 that is almost completely of African origin. Trinidad is home to (nearly) the entire East Indian population, and all fieldwork was carried out there. The terms Indo-Trinidadian and Afro-Trinidadian will be used herein to describe Trinidad's two major ethnic groups.

<sup>ii</sup> "Creole" is a term used in Trinidad to describe an Afro-Trinidadian person, or something related to Afro-Trinidadian culture. Somewhat confusingly, the term "French Creole" describes a Trinidad-born Caucasian person. "Douglarization" is a Trinidadian term for the mixing of East Indian and African people or ideas, and is sometimes used interchangeably with "creolization." In Trinidad parlance, a "douglar" is a person of mixed East Indian and African heritage.

<sup>iii</sup> Carnival is often considered to be an Afro-Trinidadian invention, and indeed, many of the traditions were born of their unique experience. Indian people in Trinidad, however, have contributed to Carnival traditions—not only as masquerade participants, but also as composers of steel pan music, calypsonians, and creators of *mas* characters (Sankeralli 1998).

<sup>iv</sup> Carnival is a two-day celebration, taking place on the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday in the Christian calendar (although "Carnival season" begins the day after Christmas). The music of Carnival is *soca*, which is fast, energetic, and danceable. During Carnival Monday and Tuesday, Port-of-Spain and several other cities have celebrations in which costumed masqueraders move through the streets in a slow processional, dancing and drinking.

<sup>v</sup> In addition to the "remembered" dances brought by the earliest indentured East Indians, folk dances from other regions in India are performed in Trinidad today—these have been imported recently by dance teachers who have studied in India or by visiting East Indian teachers. Some folk dances have been more institutionalized than others, developing a more solidified lexicon of movements, in order to be transportable to other places. At Sandra Sookdeo's dance studio, for example, students learn folk dances from areas such as Punjab and Maharashtra. For the purposes of this study, however, I am most interested in folk dances as elements of retained or remembered culture and their place in contemporary constructions of Indo-Trinidadian identity; these recently acquired folk dances occupy much the same role as do recently acquired classical dances.

<sup>vi</sup> Alternate spellings include *math kor*, *matticore*, *matikoor*, etc.

<sup>vii</sup> eggplants

<sup>viii</sup> Peter Manuel (1998, 25) has recorded the existence of an earlier Indo-Trinidadian dancer named Alice Jan, who gained local fame as a dancer at weddings around the turn of the twentieth century. My informants were unfamiliar with Alice Jan, and were unable to comment on her influence. It is safe to say she was not as widely influential as Champa Devi.

<sup>ix</sup> The Bollywood Music Awards are sponsored by the Bollywood Group, and are held around the world in places with large populations of East Indian people. This particular event was held in the Hasely Crawford Stadium in Port of Spain.

<sup>x</sup> Clico is the name of a local insurance and investment company, the group's financial sponsor. Shiv Shakti, as the group is popularly known, asked me to use the full name in any publications.

<sup>xi</sup> In addition to being a performing company, Clico Shiv Shakti also has schools in eight locations around Trinidad, for young women who want to learn this style of dance; up to 100 young women are studying at each school.

<sup>xii</sup> Mastana Bahar is an annual competition in Trinidad showcasing local talent performing East-Indian-themed songs and dances.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Devdas* (2002) is the latest, and most famous, of several film adaptations of Sarat Chandra Chattopahdyay's (1917) novel of the same name. This version stars India's most famous male and female leads, Shahrukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai. As Rajsesh Seenath states, it is a more "Indian" Bollywood film, portraying "pure" classical dances, but it has crossover quality in terms of the style of the cinematography, and was the first Hindi film to be nominated for an Academy Award.



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<sup>xiv</sup> *Bunty aur Babli* (2005) is the story of two young bandits, Bunty and Babli, criss-crossing India on the run from the police. The storyline itself is a loose adaptation of the 1967 American film *Bonnie and Clyde*. Incidentally, the film is set in the northeastern state of Uttar Pradesh, where most of the indentured Indians in Trinidad came from. I was told by one bootleg DVD shop in Tunapuna that it is their best-selling Indian DVD by far.

<sup>xv</sup> Diwali is a Hindu celebration that occurs in October or November each year. Although the roots of the holiday are sometimes disputed (it is celebrated by Sikhs, Jains, Hindus, and some Buddhists in India), it is generally interpreted as the “Festival of Light,” a celebration of the victory of good over evil. The Indo-Trinidadian Hindu community celebrates the holiday with neighborhood festivals, preparation of special meals and sweets, and the lighting of small clay lamps.

<sup>xvi</sup> Chutney has also gained popularity among the East Indian populations of Guyana and Suriname.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ramnarine (1998) has found that chutney is usually considered a reinterpretation of song and dance from the matikor ceremony (4), although Manuel (1998) cites chutney’s roots as a “revival and repackaging” of a variety of folk genres, not just the matikor songs (25).

<sup>xviii</sup> According to Miller (1991), wining can be understood as an act of autosexuality, a momentary escape from sexual relationships as social exchanges—this is especially pertinent for women, for whom cross-gender and sexual relationships can be particularly oppressive.

<sup>xix</sup> For a more thorough history of Indian classical dance in the Caribbean, as well as a discussion of classical dance theory, see Sookdeo (1994), and for a history of evolving gender roles in classical dance in India, see Hanna (1998).

<sup>xx</sup> Because Indian classical dances stem from Hindu traditions, most participants in classical dance are Orthodox Hindu. Identity negotiation through classical dance generally does not apply to Muslim or Christian Indo-Trinidadians, who have other combinations of cultural obligation and means of creative expression with which negotiations are made.

<sup>xxi</sup> Odissi hails from the state of Orissa in North-eastern India, and is inspired by a series of poses depicted by thousands of sculptures of dancers adorning temples throughout Orissa. Odissi dance was taught to *devadasis*, until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when political unrest in Orissa disrupted religious practices, and *devadasis* became mistresses to royalty, losing their esteem as temple dancers. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Odissi was taught to young boys, or *gotipuas*. During oppressive British rule in the nineteenth century, Odissi fell into neglect, although it has experienced a rejuvenation since the 1950s (Sookdeo 1994, 22–24).

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