

*Labouring Dance, Labouring Performance:
Interdisciplinary Conversations on Erotic Dancing in India*

Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London

August 5-6, 2020

Wednesday, August 5, 2020

Panel 1: Historicizing Erotic Dancing in India

09:00 am – 11:00 am BST; 13:30 pm - 15:30 pm IST

Chair and Discussant: Bishnupriya Dutt, Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi

Aishika Chakraborty, Associate Professor, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University

Geeta Thatra, Doctoral Candidate, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi

Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, Associate Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi

The female performer has been one of the most unsettling figures throughout history and continues to be so in the present times. Her seemingly excessive visibility in the public sphere has challenged the very foundation of the patriarchal familial structure and become a cause of concern across the various classes of Indian society. The modern nation state has categorically excluded female performance communities from its legitimate spaces. A major section of people at the margins, especially courtesans, prostitutes, temple women (Devadasis) and public dancers have been left out and rarely surface in the mainstream discourse. It is in this context that the session aims to trace the genesis of erotic dancing and how dance as an art has changed its form and meaning over time in the Indian context- from temple dance to Mujra (initially a dance performed for the select few of the royal lineage) to a performance for the masses across classes for livelihood and erotic pleasure. We also consider how region-specific sexualized performances, cabaret and other forms of erotic dancing have emerged in recent times. The panel brings together historians, anthropologists and artists who have researched various aspects of erotic dancing in India. We are keen to interrogate the transformative history of erotic dancing in India and the cause of its denigration and further what the future holds for these performers in the face of modernity, the neo liberal market economy and most recently, the pandemic.

Break

11:00 – 11:30 BST; 15:30 – 16:00 IST (30 mins)

Public Lecture

'Street, Footpath, Gated Community: Masculinity, Pornography and the Erotics of Tradition and Modernity'

by

Professor Sanjay Srivastava, British Academy Global Professor, UCL
and Professor of Sociology, Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi

followed by discussion

11:30 – 13:00 BST, 16:00 – 17:30 IST

Chair: Prabha Kotiswaran, Professor, Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London

Break

13:00 – 13:30 BST; 17:30 – 18:00 IST (30 mins)

Panel 2: Feminist Discourse and the Political Economy of Erotic Dancing

13:30 pm – 16:00 pm BST; 18:00 pm - 20:30 pm IST

05:30 am – 08:00 am PST; 08:30 am – 11:00 am ET

Chair and Discussant: Davesh Soneji, Associate Professor, Department of South Asia Studies, University of Pennsylvania

Sujata Gothoskar, Feminist Activist, Mumbai

Meena Gopal, Professor, Tata Institute of Social Science, Mumbai

Brahma Prakash, Assistant Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi

Sandhya Gokhale, FAOW, Mumbai

Anna Morcom, Professor, UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music

Erotic dancing and bar dancing in particular have pushed feminists of different political identities to debate its status as reproductive labour. While on the one hand, a group of feminists associate bar dancing with exploitation and commodification of marginal caste women, others visualise such work as a form of labour that flourishes due to the demands of the market. How can an understanding of the political economy of bar dancing and the decision making process of bar dancers themselves inform these debates? One would also like to understand, among the marginalised groups, who chose to become a bar dancer and why? Is it their caste and the desire to continue being in caste-based occupations that brings these women to bar/erotic dancing or is it the lack of opportunity and absence of alternate skills that pushes marginalised women to this precarious livelihood option? Within these contending realities, it is necessary to locate the idea of caste and 'caste capital' and how it mediates different feminist camps and their views on bar dancing.

Thursday, August 6, 2020

Panel 3

The Legalities of Bar Dancing

10:00 – 14:30 BST; 15:00 – 19:00 IST

Chair and Discussant: Sophy, K.J, Post Doctoral Research Associate, Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London

First Half: 10:00 – 11:30 BST; 15:00 – 16:30 IST

Katie Cruz, Senior Lecturer in Law, University of Bristol

Kate Hardy, Associate Professor, University of Leeds

Break (30 Minutes)

Chair and Discussant: Prabha Kotiswaran, Professor, Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London

Second Half: 12:00 – 14:30 BST; 16:30 – 19:00 IST

Veena Gowda, Advocate, Mumbai High Court

Sameena Dalwai, Professor and Assistant Director, Centre for Women, Law and Social Change, Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana

Dance bars in Maharashtra were banned in 2005 “to prevent immoral activities, trafficking of women and to ensure the safety of women in general” and it took fifteen years to lift the ban. Post ban, there were a series of petitions and litigation by the Bhartiya Bar Girls Union- the union of bar dancers, as well by bar owners, with interventions from feminists and activists to uphold the right to livelihood before the Mumbai High Court and later, before the Supreme Court of India on the ground that it violates the constitutional right to equality and the right to work of one's choice. The petition was focused on the bars so that bar owners could continue their business, but the issues of the dancers were not highlighted such that some feminists believed that the bar dancers were reduced to a mere pawn in the hands of the bar owners. Why couldn't the bar dancers union collectivize as a standalone group and voice their demands? While bar dancers supported their employers during the ban as they believed that it would ensure their continuity in the business, why didn't bar owners voice the concerns of their employees and ensure legal protection of their working conditions? Why was there little discussion about better working conditions, better wages and access to welfare services that could be later taken up by both the union and the bar owners association? Hence, we need to ask whether the existing law has indeed been able to safeguard the interests of the community or whether such regulatory provisions pushed these women to a greater level of uncertainty and invisibility? In the case of UK meanwhile, for the longest time, there was no legal provision to address the issue of welfare, employment status and security for people engaged in erotic

dance and forms of sexual entertainment. In 2011-12, following a research study conducted by Teela Sanders, Kate Hardy and Rosie Campbell, several Local Authority Licensing Committees began to consider dancer welfare and safety, and some have added licensing conditions specifically to enhance working conditions. But on the flipside, Katie Cruz in her work talks about the 'legal othering' of the sexual labour of migrant labourers in the UK that justifies the precarity and devaluation of labour, abuse by the state, employers, intermediaries, and clients. By engaging in a comparative discussion of the legal scenario in UK and India, we hope that the panel will address some of these concerns and help us understand the sector better.

Thanks and wrap-up

14: 30 – 14:45 BST; 19:00 – 19:15 IST



*This workshop is part of project entitled *The Laws of Social Reproduction*, which seeks to study women's reproductive labour in five sectors bridging the marriage-market continuum: sex work, bar dancing, commercial surrogacy, paid domestic work and unpaid domestic work. The project is headed by Professor Prabha Kotiswaran at King's College London, with the support of postdoctoral researchers Dr. Sutapa Majumdar, Dr. Sophy Joseph, Dr. Sreerupa Pillai, and Dr. Shakthi Nataraj. The project is generously supported by the European Research Council.*

