

Dream Machine

DREAM MACHINE

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You weren't supposed to relate to her—only gawk at her or measure your own distance from her. The cabaret dancer of the Hindi films of 1960s and 70s was bold, brazen, and lascivious. She showed skin in skimpy outfits, smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol, and thrust about her curves suggestively in villains' dens or flashy bars, tempting the hero off his noble path. But she didn't belong in the world of the movie. She appeared only for the length of a song-and-dance interlude, usually advertised in the corner of the movie poster to entice audiences. And most importantly, she was usually foreign—pale-skinned, blond-haired, at a safe remove from the ideal of the demure Indian woman, usually essayed by the film's heroine. No wonder the Anglo-Burmese dancer Helen became the queen of the cabaret dancers in the Hindi cinema of that era.

For those who grew up with that vision of the cabaret girl, the women of Mira Nair's *India Cabaret* (1985) may come as a bit of a shock. The setting, a bar called Meghraj in the Ghatkopar suburb of Bombay, is familiar from the movies, if a little shabbier than its cinematic counterpart: a dark room aglow in rutilant light; men in well-pressed shirts and trousers sitting at tables encircling a small dance floor; a live band of musicians in suits blending Beatles numbers and romantic Hindi songs in a corner. The moves of the dancers—intoxicated, jerky, solicitous—are also familiar. But the women look nothing like Helen. For one, they are brown-skinned and black-haired. Some are skinny and others are plump, their thighs and love handles jiggling as they perform.

Roland Barthes wrote that striptease is rooted in a contradiction: by eroticizing the gestures of a woman's undressing, it negates the terrifying sexuality of her body. If, as he says, exoticism is often the first of the coverings involved in this "spectacle based on fear," then the women of *India Cabaret* are already far more exposed than the fantasy vamp of Hindi cinema. Unlike her, they actually do strip. They arrive at Meghraj in sarees and salwar kameezes, with flowers in their hair and bindis on their foreheads, before changing into the tight bras, thongs, dresses, and skirts that they then peel off on the dance floor. They represent not only the terror of an unabashed female sexuality, but something more unsettling—the suggestion that it may be *close to home*. In these dancers, an Indian woman might just see something of herself. And, as the synecdochal gesture of Nair's suggests, viewers might just see something of India itself.

In the opening scenes of *India Cabaret*, the handheld camera, operated by Mitch Epstein, snakes its way into the bar, following two of the dancers, and gives us a frenetic tour of the cramped interiors of the building: the kitchen, the office, the changing rooms where the ladies paint their faces and change into their shimmering costumes. What ensues is something like a modestly scaled, *vérité* take on the backstage musical. Weaving in and out of rapturous scenes of performance, Nair surveys the milieu of Meghraj, interviewing the dancers, the patrons, and the proprietor. At one point, she even forays into a customer's home to speak to his wife and family. Her questions, posed offscreen, revolve around what she has described as the film's main line of inquiry: what are the lines that separate "good" and "bad" women in India?

The cheeky, cigarette-huffing Rekha, something of a protagonist, says with a twinkle in her eye that when she walks to work, she's a "virtuous virgin"—she veils her head with her sari to demonstrate a demure gaze, never meeting a man's eye—but once she's in the bar, she's "wicked," telling the men whatever they want to hear to squeeze them for cash. The men are dissembling, too. They have two sides, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, says one patron. They all want to marry the good girl but enjoy the spectacle of the lustful seductress. That no woman can be both is the real tragedy, as a sequence that cuts between Rekha and a housewife drives home: the dancer wishes for a life of stability and settlement, while the wife regrets that she's seen so little of the world outside the home that she doesn't even know what to dream about. "All my desires remain buried in my heart," she says.

Underneath these conversations about what constitutes a real, respectable Indian woman, one senses another anxiety, another question. What constitutes a real, respectable India?

The first dance bar opened in Bombay in 1972, the latest iteration in a long lineage of erotic entertainments popular in the city. For centuries, courtesans had performed classical Indian dances for royal and aristocratic audiences; when they lost their feudal patrons after India gained independence, their descendants continued the tradition in more modest, sometimes seedier establishments, performing *mujra* for paying audiences. In the city's upscale hotels, live cabarets became popular in the 1930s and 40s. Patrons wore formal Western attire and drank imported alcohol as troupes and bands visiting from France, the United States, Spain, and other countries performed on Art Deco stages.

But the dance bar was something different, offering neither the classically-trained eroticism of the courtesan, nor the elite pleasures of foreign cabaret. In the 1980s, Mumbai started to experience the first stirrings of globalization, provoked in part by IMF-encouraged structural adjustment policies that would definitively liberalize the country's economy in 1991. Erstwhile Prohibition laws had progressively weakened since the 1960s, and by the 1970s, the state began granting restaurants and bars liquor permits—and pocketing a hefty 20% tax on sales. The city's textile mills, a longtime economic engine, began to shutter, with real-estate companies swooping in on the land to build luxury high-rises and malls. International business was starting to flow into the financial capital; one rumour has it that dance bars came about because the chairman of a foreign company complained about Mumbai's nightlife to a local CEO.

As neoliberalism bloomed, so did an ascendant, Hindu nationalist right wing; in 1985, the nativist, anti-immigrant Shiv Sena party came to power in Mumbai's municipal elections. A new middle-class was taking shape, negotiating its place and identity within a rapidly commercializing—and parochializing—India. If there is anything vulgar about what happens in *India Cabaret*, it is materialism. Talk of finances pervades the film, and a discerning viewer will soon pick up that it isn't morality that shapes "good" and "bad" women; it's money. Rosy, a dancer from Hyderabad whose family accepts her regular remittances even as they shun her because of profession, compares the slim prospects of an office worker to the generous earnings of the cabaret dancer. Rekha says she has a boyfriend who wants to marry her—but she has her savings and her own land, so she never has to depend on a man's capricious desires. A customer drives Nair around

Kamathipura, Mumbai's red-light area, and points out the differently priced prostitutes; when asked what separates them from the dancers, he admits that it's nothing in and of itself, just socially constructed value. Tellingly, when dance bars were banned in the state in 2005, an exception was carved out for "elite establishments."

Femininity emerges here as a flimsy thing, cut to the measure of its price. Perhaps this is what the dancers keep at bay with their routines, their play with vice and virtue: the brutal realities of a world where little has meaning beyond its transactional value, including the performance of gender. Gunvor Nelson's masterful *Take Off* (1972) is a perfect illustration, taking Barthes's "spectacle based on fear" to its extralogical conclusion. Dancer Elliott Ness performs a slow, sensuous striptease for the camera in front of a depthless black background, waving about furs, undoing bras, shaking an ass thinly veiled by a silky fringe. Once she is nude, she keeps going. Off comes her hair, her arm, her nose. The film takes a turn from eros to body horror, as the woman dismembers herself until there's nothing left, only some debris floating in the starry expanse of a dark sky. Here is a terror far more potent than that of a woman's body: the idea that womanhood may itself be a canny masquerade, a series of layers concealing nothing but smoke.

What does that say about Mother India? She, too, is a dream, a fantasy veiling the bloody negotiations of power and capital. Like the patrons of the cabaret, nationalists pay to see their desires reified—and it is precisely those relegated outside the bounds of the nation who make their dreams come true.