

## ARTICLES

### From Postcolonial to Neoliberal: Identifying the “Other” Body in Indian Circus

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This article is part of my ongoing doctoral research work, *A Critical History of Indian Circus, Performers and Performance Acts: Negotiations with Popularity, State and Laws (1947–2015)*, which aims to map a history of circus practices in postcolonial India and view them within a larger field of cultural practices. As part of my research I am focusing on creating an inventory of circuses in recent times and closely studying how acts, historically and in the contemporary repertoire, have been affected by changing state policies and laws.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I identify the different performative codes, reception, and subsequent discourse built around the multiracial bodies present in Indian circuses across different periods. From Russians and Europeans in the twentieth century to Africans, Mongolians, Eastern Europeans, and other Asians in the twenty-first, the presence of bodies of different ethnicities in Indian circus has been a major factor in its rise and acceptance as a popular form. Taking the two key historical moments of Indian circus—its growth in the early twentieth century and its deterioration from the late twentieth century until the present, when racial differences in the circus arena are not only recorded but become prominent in the larger cultural discourse—I look at the presence of the white woman’s body and read it vis-à-vis the nonwhite local body, marking two perspectives to view the gendered body under nationalism/postcolonialism and globalization/neoliberalism and studying what becomes the “othered,” objectified, and regulated body in these socio-political contexts. The objective is to understand the popularity of these performers through race discourse and other kinds of exoticization. Here, I explore how racialized bodies are received and how racial characteristics are perceived in the relatively new context of globalization. Circus in India has over the last decade become a site for heated negotiations between the “local” and the “other,” with Indian artists losing their ground in the circus. This article aims to engage with these dynamics between circus bodies.

#### Key Historical Moment I: The Colonial and Early Postcolonial Period

Circus is one of the few popular performance genres in India where bodies of different ethnicities have performed and shared the same platform since the late nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1880s, circus in India included Russian and European performers who would stay on annual contracts or own and run circuses, train Indian artists, and later sell off their circuses to Indian managers. Giuseppe Chiarini’s *Royal Italian Circus* was the first circus to travel to India in the late nineteenth century (Champad 2013, 1), while artists from Russia, Hungary, Italy, and other European countries, as well as Syria, performed in Indian circuses in the early twentieth century (Sinha 1984, 35–40). As there was a constant flux in circus forms from both Europe and Asia, and various distinct forms from within Europe itself, one cannot necessarily say that the circus was introduced to India by the British, despite Britain’s colonial presence, or indeed that there was a singular form of circus that moved across India in that period. Travelling circus companies from

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Europe employed the local Indian artists, martial artists, gymnasts, and practitioners of other popular art forms contractually in their troupes, further complicating any sense of originary influence.

The October Revolution of 1917 influenced the thought process of Indian intellectuals in our own freedom struggle and, consequently, Indo-Russian cultural bonds strengthened deeply throughout the 1930s. After Indian independence, these bonds were further strengthened with the establishment of the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society in 1952. Months-of-friendship programs were organized, where artists from both nations came together (Chopra 2008). In the 1980s, the increased influx of Russian artists in Indian circuses can be seen as a consequence of growing relations between the two countries, primarily under the patronage of the Indian state and its support of the circus. This period marks an important connection between the socialist revolution of a Western nation and colonial nations such as India looking for alternative political and cultural ideologies.

Early- to mid-twentieth-century Indian circus established a strong foothold as a popular cultural form. Though it is not unusual for a circus audience to be aware of a range of performers prominently marked by multiracial, ethnically varied features, it is important to note that Indian circus has included a large number of white performers since the introduction of circus to the colony. It thus became important during India's nationalist phase that Indian women performers emerged and were perceived to be as strong and powerful as their white counterparts. According to Satyadev Sinha, Indian women entered the circus under the influence of European women and were immensely lauded for their daring acts (Sinha 1984, 41),<sup>2</sup> placing Indian and international women performers on the same pedestal.

The first Bengali circus had two women performers, whose acts were hailed as transformative (Basu 1936, 35): Sushila Sundari, who performed an act with Royal Bengal tigers, and Kumudini, who excelled in equestrian acts.



Sushila Sundari posing with tiger. Photo source:

[https://www.telegraphindia.com/1141130/jsp/calcutta/story\\_19100412.jsp](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1141130/jsp/calcutta/story_19100412.jsp).

Avada Bai, the wife of Vishnupanth Chhatre, performed with ferocious animals and served as a trainer to new women entrants in circus. Tara Bai managed and travelled with her own circus from 1920–25 and, with her powerful acts and stunts such as lifting heavy stones tied to her long tresses

and stopping a car running at high speed, her popularity outgrew that of her male compatriots. Champad notes that the popularity of these female acts placed the Indian and international women performers on equal footing in terms of skill; the Indian bodies were now seen as “equally strong” as the white bodies and the Indian performer acquired a certain equality and self-identification (Champad 2013, 19).

Historically, performers in circus, particularly female performers, have been understood as breaking barriers and pushing the limits of gender codes (Tait 2010, 3). The nationalist thought that pervaded India in the early 1940s personified the feminine body as the mother figure or the ideal wife in popular culture. This new image of the Indian woman was constructed with nationalism as its main objective, designating the inner, sacred, spiritual world as a female domain, whereas all that was material, outer, and profane became the area of maleness. The nationalist idea aimed at combining and realizing both the areas effectively, “with cultivation of material techniques of modern western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of national culture” (Chatterjee 2006, 238). The homebound woman became the representative of all that was ritual, spiritual, and religious, relegating her to the codes of traditional patriarchy—but with a new role to play in solidarity with the nation’s struggle to assert its nationalist image. The boundaries of home and the world were flexible only to the extent that her nationalist-coded femininity was not threatened. This process operated on the principle of making modernity consistent with the nationalist project: a dancer on the public stage was situated in the role of mother or goddess, which served to erase her sexual self in the world outside the home. While these artists continued to be marginalized in society, Hindu women were presented in popular culture as icons of Mother India, as evidenced by images of these women artists taming tigers. The training of the tigers involved both discipline and empathy. However, it is the perception that they were tamed through mind/body/relational acumen that gave this dynamic between female trainer and tiger its distinct character under the colonial/postcolonial paradigm. In *Bangalir Circus*, Basu notes that the “new” Indian circus was seen as evolving out of a new nationalist movement in the aftermath of the Bengal partition and protests of 1905 (1936, 41). He cites the November 25, 1901 issue of the newspaper the *Englishman* edited by J. H. Stocqueler (1801–86): “What impresses the observer the most are the performances of Miss Sushila and the two Royal Bengal tigers. Hindu women are notoriously most timid but in the person of Sushila, there is one who with the utmost fearlessness, enters the den of the two apparently savage beasts without either whip or any other defensive appliance.”

The visual dominion of these women over tigers thus epitomizes a particular image of Mother India and is emblematic of the maternal roles imposed on women within this nationalist narrative.

## **Key Historical Moment II: The Globalized/Neoliberal Period**

In 1998, the use of animal performers in the circus including tigers, panthers, leopards, monkeys, and bears was banned in India. The interviews I have conducted with circus managers revealed that the circus has lost a major percentage of child audiences: children, who once made up 65–75% of the audience, had dwindled to 30% by 2007 (Bahadur interview 2016). A 2006 petition by the nongovernmental organization Bachpan Bachao Andolan initiated a debate around child performers’ vulnerability and exploitation. It petitioned the Supreme Court of India to ban the employment of children under eighteen years of age in circuses. The judgment was delivered in 2011 by the Apex Court putting a ban on the employment of children in circuses under various laws of child labour, exploitation, and trafficking (Supreme Court of India 2011). With this landmark ban on child labour,

the circus started to lose Indian artists as well. It is crucial to see this judgment within a larger scenario of neoliberalism and the recently proposed modification to the child labour laws, which aims to allow children to work in “family enterprises.” This modification, made in 2015, allows for children below the age of fourteen to work in select “non-hazardous” family enterprises, with two major areas specified. First, a child may help “his family or family enterprises, which is other than any hazardous occupation . . . after his school hours or during vacations,” and second, a child may work “as an artist in an audio-visual entertainment industry, including advertisement, films, TV serials or any such other entertainment or sports activities except the circus” (Chauhan 2015). Importantly, the circus is singled out as the only field where children cannot be employed, although the amendment concedes to children performing in the prospering film and television media business. While there are obvious differences in terms of amateur and professional demands, and a child working in circus cannot hope to be employed only in after-school hours, my observations and surveys of the last ten years (Indian television began producing television reflective of international reality-based talent shows around 2005)<sup>3</sup> reveal that there are also strong class differences between the two; the middle class dominates the audio-visual media, while circuses recruit from the poorest demographics.

With this ban on local child labour, Indian circuses have sought out international artists and have found access to them because of neoliberal policies that enable employment across borders—but now they do not just come from Europe or Russia.<sup>4</sup> A gamut of international artists has begun to find work in Indian circuses on a contract basis, from Mongolia, Eastern Europe, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Kenya, and Ethiopia. My field work and interviews with Indian circuses over the last three years have revealed that this employment varies from season to season and depends on what individual circuses can afford; a circus with better infrastructural support might employ Mongolian and East European performers in the high season, whereas African performers are usually present throughout the year in mid- and high-profile circuses. Regarding Indian performers, the interviews and data collection with circuses further revealed that artists generally come from areas with the greatest rates of poverty: Jharkhand, the Northeast, and Nepal.

This diversity of performer bodies is not without its repercussions. As these international artists permeate local performance spaces, the role of Indian women performers is further diminished and marginalized. This loss is felt not only in terms of economic precarity and social insecurity but also technique and rigour. Khushi and Sita, two female circus artists from Nepal interviewed as part of this ongoing research, joined the Great Apollo Circus at the age of 15–16 and later got married to other artists in the circus. Khushi says, “We don’t practise every day. It’s only when we feel the need or [are concerned about] not being able to perform well that we go to practise in the ring” (Khushi interview, Great Apollo Circus, Chandigarh, 2016).

### **Contesting and Constructing Perspectives of the Body**

Thus, we can argue that the previous notion of white and black performers being on equal footing is overturned in the contemporary scenario. We see the reentry, overt publicity, and celebration of white and international performers and techniques in Indian circus, whereas the Indian woman performer is marginalized, with only a few symbolic remains on the stage, occupying roles such as cyclists, gun-shooters, junior dancers, hula-hoopers, silk-robe dancers, and presenters of dog and bird shows. While these Indian performers, whose acts constitute only a few manoeuvres and can end abruptly, cannot hold the attention of the audience for long due to their limited skills, the

international performers, with their honed skills and lithe bodies, take centre stage and become the “star performers.” It is only the older generation of Indian performers who display skills that keep the audience captivated and perform effective solo acts; the younger generation, with their reduced skills, mostly perform in groups or duets.

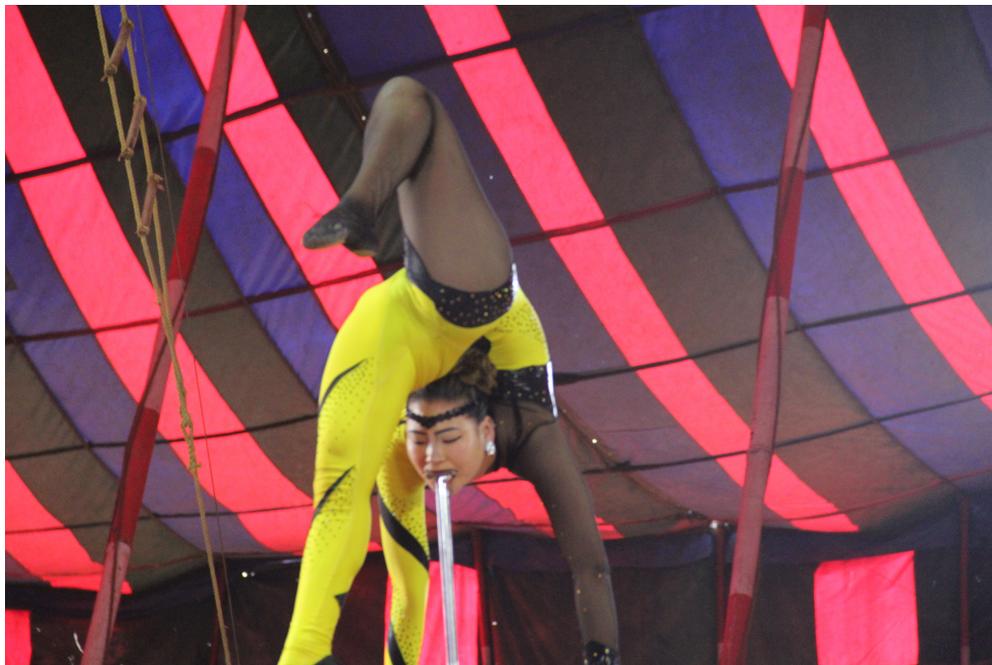


Young Indian artists perform at Raymon Circus, New Delhi, December 2015. Photo by Aastha Gandhi.



Older artist performing solo act in Raymon Circus, New Delhi, December 2015. Photo by Aastha Gandhi.

Given the previously established distinction within the Indian nationalist narrative of private female spaces and public male spaces, Indian women performers also face social and economic obstacles in the public—and therefore male—circus ring. As demonstrated by my interviews with Khushi and Sita, Indian women performers’ technique is also deteriorating. Circus owners are of the opinion that white circus artists and agile international gymnasts hold the audience’s attention better than Indian performers (Bhattacharya 2007). Nadeem, a talent agent with Ajanta Circus in Kolkata, elaborates in a phone interview, “Indian artists don’t maintain themselves. International artists pay to learn at those schools, therefore they maintain themselves to earn that money” (Nadeem interview 2016). Thus, there does seem to be a drastic difference between the level of expertise and skill of international artists and Indian artists; in any case, it is Vietnamese, Mongolian, and Eastern European artists, not Indian or Nepalese artists, who are contractually employed during the high season and attract large audiences.



Mongolian artist performing at Great Royal Circus, New Delhi, 2015. Photo by Bishnupriya Dutt.

It can be argued that the instability articulated above is a major factor in the hierarchy of performer bodies and skills present in contemporary Indian circus, but it is not clear if this factor is related to technical skill alone or whether either colonial or postcolonial desire is at play—although the lasting social, economic, and political impact of colonialism suggests the latter. Regardless, it can be seen that, while historically both Indian and non-Indian artists have held space within Indian circus, under the conditions of neoliberal precarity one has more or less replaced the other. Circus artists find that they need to make themselves a profitable commodity—either as an object of sexual desire or visceral feeling, holding audience’s attention through unexpected displays of athletic skill.

There are two perspectives through which female performing bodies in the Indian circus are received: as desirable or visceral. Through this first perspective, the body of the Indian circus performer is exoticized. The primary emotion driving spectator association with this body is supposedly that of desire; it is both understood and expected that audiences make an association with the performer by desiring her. The performer is scantily clad in provocative attire; her movements are meant to arouse sexual desire, and the audience becomes a voyeur to this display of the body (Tait 2010, 84). There is a clear distinction between the reception of the performing bodies of Asian and Indian women by male audiences during circus shows. The Indian body becomes the objectified “available” body whereas the “white” (that is, non-Indian) body of the East Asian performer is much desired yet unattainable and unavailable. This can be understood through what Fanon calls the universal equivalent of whiteness, where even if the body is non-English or non-European, the closer this body is to “white” the more unattainable it is to the colonized (Fanon 1952). Indeed, one can see the same dynamic of this “whiteness” and the “colonized” in Indian audiences’ reception of Mongolian, Vietnamese, Chinese, or Russian dancers, who are not necessarily “white” yet are perceived similarly.

This is not to say that whiteness does not also invite a certain fetishizing voyeurism. The proliferation of East European and white Central Asian women in Indian mass culture—in

enterprises such as Bollywood, private parties, wedding receptions etc., where whiteness is valued and fetishized—does suggest that the white female body is coded as “exotic.” This fetishization of whiteness may also proliferate throughout the circus, in which colonial desire is interwoven into the spectacle. However, one might question how this exoticized whiteness is coded differently than the exotic body of the Indian woman performer. The historical presence of white women and the convention of whiteness in Indian circus is apparent, but the relationship of whiteness to colonial discourse, particularly in the Indian context, means that the white female body—sexualized though it may be—still connotes supremacy and superiority. The Indian female body is not granted such privilege. The exoticization of *her* body is entangled in the same process of marginalization mentioned above, in which both skill and beauty are dismissed as lesser than her white counterparts.

Second, the circus body can be viewed as the visceral body. The primary emotion underlying the viewing of this body by the spectator is empathy (Tait 2010, 146), which, according to Tait, “demands reciprocating bodily awareness from spectators during live performance,” leading to an emotional or affective response in the spectator where their bodies, through sensorial reception, almost try to catch the performer’s body in air, evoking the feeling of nearly touching it (141). Tait reads this as a “cultural transaction” (148), a “visceral encounter with an ambiguous body [which] bends pre-existing patterns of body to body (or bodies’ physical exchange) and is potentially disruptive of hierarchical patterning” (150).

Through this lens, and conversely to the exoticizing perspective articulated above, the performing body is seen to be breaking gender codes, existing in a nonsexualized space where “the spectator might be attracted to the athletic movement that is physically familiar. Whether it is sport, dance, or aerial movement, the body is not seen as an object of desire. Conversely, the audience might be bodily drawn to watch unfamiliar extremes” (Tait 2016, 305). Tait refers to this as experiencing the “physicality, viscosity and tactility of the bodies” (Tait 2010, 141). In the context of Indian circus, this visceral perspective can enable resistance to the exoticization of the Indian woman performer by emphasizing her display of real athletic force; the athletic body of the agile dancer transgresses her limits in a manner that resists objectifying sexualization and “othering.” The visceral body of the Indian woman performer thus enables her to slip out of the racist hierarchies that permeate this culture of the circus—even if only momentarily.

Despite these potentially liberating qualities of the visceral body, however, the question remains: in the globalized neoliberal context, in which white performer bodies are consistently prioritized over Indian performer bodies, can the Indian female body ever function as wholly visceral, eschewing the patterns of exoticization that both sexualize the body and diminish its skill? In the colonial and early postcolonial period of Indian circus, even though a hierarchy no doubt existed between whites and nonwhites, Indian women artists held their own protected space in the circus ring. Within the nationalist agenda, they had a specific and important role, hailed as the local (brown) body depicting the mighty “Mother India”—a role that could not be matched by the foreign white body. In the contemporary neoliberal period, international employment laws and policies are modified in such a way that local performers lose more and more ground. Racialized viewing practices of exoticizing the local Indian body have only augmented such hierarchies. Given this current precarity, the Indian woman performer may feel she is required to build upon these fetishistic ideals of sexual desire to hold on to her job. What role, then, can the Indian woman performer play in this globalized field? If neoliberalism encourages the proliferation of whiteness throughout contemporary Indian circus to the near exclusion or marginalization of Indian performers, what resistance might the marginalized female Indian body engage in to combat this pervasive whiteness?

## Notes

1. This essay develops from another essay coauthored by the author and Bishnupriya Dutt (Gandhi and Dutt 2017).
2. All the quotes from this book have been translated from Hindi to English by the author.
3. Shows like *Indian Idol* marked a boom in talent shows and gave rise to other such local versions. Season One of *Indian Idol*, created by Simon Fuller, started airing on Sony TV in India in 2004–2005 and was followed by six subsequent seasons, including two seasons of *Indian Idol Junior*, over the decade. *India's Got Talent*, part of the global Britain's *Got Talent* franchise, which represented a cooperative effort between Colors and Britain's [FremantleMedia](#), premiered on Indian Television in 2009.
4. Russia's position as either a European or Asian country is contentious, as vast parts of the former Soviet Union are located within Asia. National identities can thus be somewhat fluid, and citizens of Asian former-Soviet countries may be referred to or refer to themselves as "Russian."

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## Interviews

Bahadur, Shiv, Manager, Great Apollo Circus (Mani Majra, Chandigarh), interviewed by the author on May 17, 2016.

Khushi, circus artist, interviewed by the author at Great Apollo Circus (Mani Majra, Chandigarh) on May 18, 2016.

Nadeem, circus artists’ agent, interviewed by the author by phone on May 12, 2016.

Sita, circus artist, interviewed by the author at Great Apollo Circus (Mani Majra, Chandigarh) on May 18, 2016.