

Dancing with the Stars: Bollywood, Nation and Gender

Dancing with the Stars: Bollywood, Nation and Gender,” examines popular Hindi cinema as a key site where ideas of Indian nationhood, gender, sexuality, and modernity are produced, contested, and transformed. Focusing on films from the post-Independence period to contemporary “New Bollywood,” the course treats cinema not merely as entertainment, but as a powerful cultural discourse that negotiates the relationship between state, market, and everyday life. Through close readings of films and critical scholarship, students will explore how screen bodies, genres, and narrative conventions encode shifting imaginaries of the nation and of normative and non-normative genders and sexualities.

A central concern of the course is how Bollywood has visualized the nation across different historical moments—from Nehruvian socialism and the crisis-ridden 1970s to the liberalization era and the current globalized media economy. Readings from *Bollywood and Globalization* and *Conjugations* frame this history by linking changes in film form (the social film, masala, diasporic romance, multiplex cinema) to transformations in state policy, class structure, and global capital. Students will analyse how iconic films imagine “India” through family melodrama, landscape, song sequences, and spectacular rituals, and how these imaginaries are reoriented when the Non-Resident Indian, the diaspora, or the transnational citizen becomes the privileged national subject. We will also look at the text of stardom and how “stars” have been formed over generations.

Alongside this national narrative, the course foregrounds the gendered and sexualized labour that underpins cinematic nation-making. Drawing on Ruth Vanita’s *Dancing with the Nation*, one module focuses on the courtesan/tawaif as a recurring figure who simultaneously embodies eros, cultural refinement, marginality, and an alternative, often matrilineal imagination of family and community. Courtesan films will be studied as some of the most sustained heroine-centred narratives in Hindi cinema, complicating standard binaries of vamp/virtuous wife and offering rich critiques of respectability, desire, and domesticity. The course will also attend to how female performance—song, dance, costuming, physical gesture—visibly carries the burden of national tradition even as it introduces modern, often transgressive forms of pleasure and mobility.

A further emphasis falls on the reconfiguration of gender and sexuality under globalization. Readings on “Bollywood babes,” queer dosti, and the new conjugality track how post-1990s cinema negotiates female desire, consumption, and “item numbers,” as well as homosocial and queer intimacies that unsettle heteronormative family ideals while ultimately being folded back into marriage and kinship plots. Students will explore how contemporary films stage a new ethic of enjoyment that aligns individual freedom, romantic fulfillment, and aspirational lifestyles with India’s insertion into global circuits of capital and media.

Methodologically, the course combines textual analysis of films (narrative, performance, mise-en-scène, sound) with close reading of theoretical and historical essays. Assessment will include short analytical responses, a sequence analysis, and a final research project that asks students to connect specific filmic representations of gender and sexuality to broader debates on nationalism, secularism/communalism, class, and globalization. By the end of the course, students will be equipped to read Bollywood as a complex, often contradictory archive in which gendered bodies dance with the nation—sometimes affirming, sometimes haunting, and sometimes radically rewriting its imagined community.

