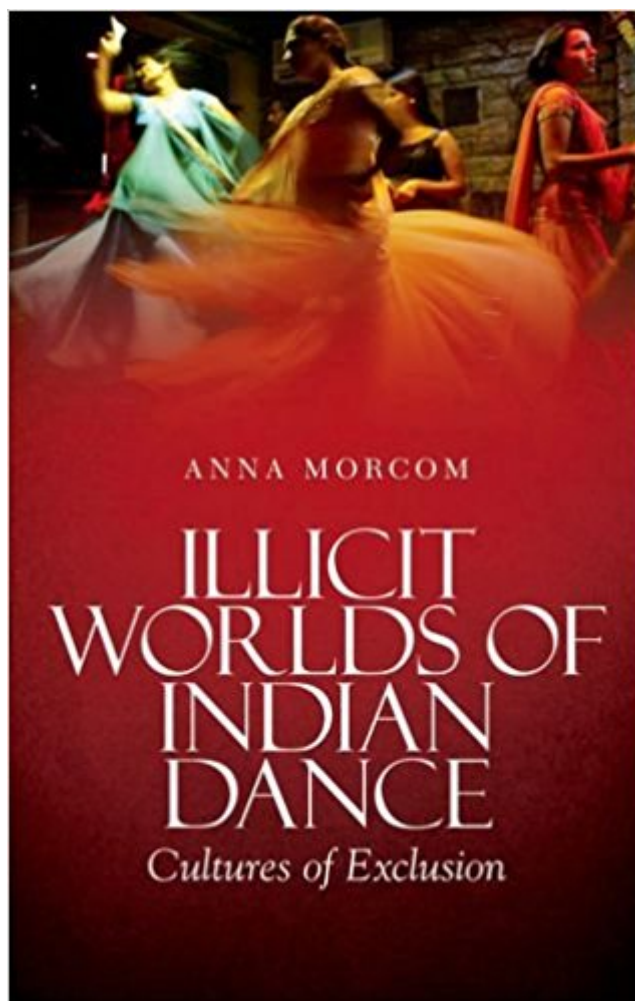


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# Illicit Worlds Of Indian Dance: Cultures Of Exclusion



## Synopsis

Until the 1930s no woman could perform in public and retain respectability in India. Professional female performers were courtesans and dancing girls who lived beyond the confines of marriage, but were often powerful figures in social and cultural life. Women's roles were often also taken by boys and men, some of whom were simply female impersonators, others transgender. Since the late nineteenth century the status, livelihood and identity of these performers have all diminished, with the result that many of them have become involved in sexual transactions and sexualised performances. Meanwhile, upper-class, upper-caste women have taken control of the classical performing arts and also entered the film industry, while a Bollywood dance and fitness craze has recently swept middle class India. In her historical on-the-ground study, Anna Morcom investigates the emergence of illicit worlds of dance in the shadow of India's official performing arts. She explores over a century of marginalisation of courtesans, dancing girls, bar girls and transgender performers, and de-scribes their lives as they struggle with stigmatisation, derision and loss of livelihood.

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## Customer Reviews

"Anna Morcom's extraordinarily compelling book represents one of the most significant interventions in the study of dance in contemporary South Asia. Masterfully bridging discourses on class, gender, globalization, economics, morality, and aesthetics, it effectively foregrounds the forms of inequality and power at work in the production, consumption, and politicization of dance in today's India." -- Davesh Soneji, McGill University, author of *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory and Modernity*

in South India" A hugely valuable addition to the literature on the performing arts in India, focusing as it does on communities of highly marginalized dancers who have received scant academic attention. *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance* deals with a wide-ranging set of dance sectors including female hereditary performers, bar dancers, transgender erotic performers and kothi dancers, interpreting the author's rich ethnographic detail through a variety of theoretical lenses. On all counts, a very welcome and timely scholarly contribution." -- Prabha Kotiswaran, Senior Lecturer in Criminal Law, King's College London, and author of *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India*" Until very recently the world of hereditary professional women performers of dance and music in South Asia, was largely hidden and inaccessible. This is the first book-length study of such professional women performers from throughout India, past and present. Anna Morcom provides a bold and incisive study that is first-rate in its scholarship, theoretically sophisticated and exceptionally comprehensive. Providing both historical and ethnographic perspectives, this will be an invaluable work for anyone interested in the performing arts of South Asia and a certainly a required addition to the library of any serious scholar." -- Daniel M. Neuman, Professor Mohindar Brar Sambhi Chair of Indian Music University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)" This fascinating investigation of the hidden hereditary communities of female and transgender dancers in contemporary India compels us to rethink our assumptions about Indian public culture, sexualities, and entertainment. Expertly moving between colonial and postcolonial discourses on these communities, Anna Morcom reveals the ways in which postcolonial nation-building in the name of progress and modernity has excluded a range of non-elite subjectivities and marginalised their role as carriers of embodied culture. Morcom's book not only chronicles their complex relationships with mainstream society and legitimate performing arts (including Bollywood), their legal struggles, and their talents, but, in doing so, offers a compassionate and timely valorisation of these illicit and yet ever-present worlds." -- Ananya Jahanara Kabir, Professor of English Literature, King's College London, and author of *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*" Anna Morcom's *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* is a much-needed addition to Indian dance studies as it shifts the focus to 'underground' dance cultures or 'low art' forms such as Nautanki, Lavani, bar dancing, and kothi performers (men performing as women)." -- Usha Iyer, *South Asian Popular Culture*" Anna Morcom should have our thanks for introducing us to a neglected, buried, and forgotten landscape of dance and dancers of the Hindi belt. As the title of the book tells us, it is the hidden and disesteemed locus of performance that is scrutinised, but it goes beyond that to formulate an argument propagating the hereditary legitimacy of a culture through the voices of a section of performers today" -- Radhika Dontala, *Fountain Ink* magazine "Anna Morcom's

breathtaking book, 'Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance', is based on extensive field interviews and archival research which lays bare the marginalisation and stigmatisation of traditional performers in stark contrast to social acceptance of upper-class, upper-caste women monopolising the classical performing arts and the film industry even as a Bollywood dance and fitness craze has swept middle-class India off its feet." -- S.N.M. Abdi, Gulf News, 2014"Anna Morcom's extensively researched book moves away from the world of classical Indian dances like Bharatanatyam, Kathak associated with religion and sanctioned as acceptable. It deals with those that remain popular in India but are deemed non-classical and whose traditions often do not meet the norms of culture, social, gender and sexual acceptance." -- Sudha G Tilak, Hindustan Times, Mumbai, 2014"A unique addition to the scholarship on performance written in a highly erudite, well-researched, yet extremely readable manner. Anyone working in the field of South Asian performing arts needs to read this book ...brilliant." -- newbooks.asia"Anna Morcom's Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion is a much-needed addition to Indian dance studies as it shifts the focus to 'underground' dance cultures or 'low art' forms such as Nautanki, Lavani, bar dancing, and kothi performers (men performing as women)." -- Usha Iyer, South Asian Popular Culture"Anna Morcom should have our thanks for introducing us to a neglected, buried, and forgotten landscape of dance and dancers of the Hindi belt. As the title of the book tells us, it is the hidden and disesteemed locus of performance that is scrutinised, but it goes beyond that to formulate an argument propagating the hereditary legitimacy of a culture through the voices of a section of performers today." -- Radhika Dontala, Fountain Ink magazine "Anna Morcom's breathtaking book is based on extensive field interviews and archival research which lays bare the marginalisation and stigmatisation of traditional performers in stark contrast to social acceptance of upper-class, upper-caste women monopolising the classical performing arts and the film industry even as a Bollywood dance and fitness craze has swept middle-class India off its feet." -- S.N.M. Abdi, Gulf News, 2014"Anna Morcom's extensively researched book moves away from the world of classical Indian dances like Bharatanatyam, Kathak associated with religion and sanctioned as acceptable. It deals with those that remain popular in India but are deemed non-classical and whose traditions often do not meet the norms of culture, social, gender and sexual acceptance." --Sudha G Tilak, Hindustan Times, Mumbai, 2014"A unique addition to the scholarship on performance written in a highly erudite, well-researched, yet extremely readable manner. Anyone working in the field of South Asian performing arts needs to read this book ...brilliant." -- newbooks.asia"... groundbreaking work [that] reframes the worlds of female and transgender performance as excluded rather than vanished ... no small nor unimportant feat and pre sents us with a surfeit of ethnographic data." --Economic and Political Weekly"Illicit

Worlds of Indian Dance not only joins [the existing] body of scholarship with its own substantial contribution that invites South Asianists to critique many of our own conclusions and limitations, but also presents groundbreaking new data about 'public/erotic' dancers and performance contexts ... a sensitive, provocative, and highly original study that both informs and challenges the reader." -- Margaret E. Walker, Ethnomusicology Forum"... groundbreaking work [that] reframes the worlds of female and transgender performance as excluded rather than vanished - no small nor unimportant feat - and presents us with a surfeit of ethnographic data." -- Economic and Political Weekly"Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance not only joins [the existing] body of scholarship with its own substantial contribution that invites South Asianists to critique many of our own conclusions and limitations, but also presents groundbreaking new data about 'public/erotic' dancers and performance contexts ... a sensitive, provocative, and highly original study that both informs and challenges the reader." -- Margaret E. Walker, Ethnomusicology Forum"Anna Morcom's masterful weaving of historical and ethnographic details into a powerful and compelling narrative of India's rich traditions of erotic dance challenges its readers to reconsider old information and formulate new questions. It is a welcome addition to the literature on music and dance, gender, sexuality, and colonial and post-colonial studies, and well deserves the Merriam Prize it was awarded at the Society for Ethnomusicology's 2014 Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh. I am confident that scholars investigating comparable traditions in other parts of the world will find much to inspire them in Illicit Worlds." -- Ethnomusicology"... a conversation-changing contribution to the scholarship on women and performance cultures in South Asia. After a generation of research on women and dance written through primarily nationalist-historical frameworks, which focused exclusively on elite and heteropatriarchal performance cultures, Morcom deftly widens our lens to include queer, transgender, and otherwise sexually nonnormative performers."--Rumya S. Putcha, Women and Music

Anna Morcom works on music and dance in India and Tibet from a number of perspectives pertaining to modernity and the contemporary world. Her publications include Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema and Unity and Discord: Music and Politics in Contemporary Tibet. She is a lecturer in the Music Department at Royal Holloway, University of London.

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