



The White Girls of Bollywood

Obsession with whiteness has given European women an interesting opportunity: dancing with Bollywood stars?

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 GIFT STORY FOR FREE



After a recent breakup, 21-year-old London dancer Pippa Hughes was eager for a change of scenery. “I always wanted to be a backup dancer but I wasn't *that* good” she reflected. She knew a girl who was finishing a contract as a backup

Good, she thought. She knew a girl who was modeling a contract as a backup dancer in India. “Do you want to take my spot?” the girl asked.

A few months later, Hughes was on her way to Mumbai on a six-month contract with an agency called White Horse Entertainment. She had never seen a Bollywood movie, but would soon be in a position many would kill for — dancing behind Shah Rukh Khan.

You see them all the time: pale white women gyrating behind Bollywood stars. Sometimes they’re wearing Indian clothing, and sometimes they’re not wearing much at all. To a Westerner, it might look ridiculous to see a hundred white girls spring out of the ether to dance behind Kareena Kapoor. But these women have been used as exotic flavor for years, a kind of ornamentation to induct audiences into a world full of booze, money, and easy sex.

“I’ve never really thought about it,” said Rahul Desai, a critic for Film Companion. He remembers asking his parents about “the dancers behind the brown actors” and never getting a satisfying answer. But the phenomenon is both normalized and under-the-table — these women don’t feature in credits, and their agents make them hard to find.

“The white backup dance industry is an underground sort of industry,” said Desai.

When Hughes landed in Mumbai, a man who didn’t speak English greeted her at the airport, and claimed to be her driver. “I was petrified and thought, ‘I’m just gonna go with this guy,’” she said. “Really dangerous, I know, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

Luckily, the man was in fact her driver. Soon, Hughes was whisked off to her first assignment: doing a stunt. “I had no stunt training,” she said. “I was tied up to this harness and I had to jump across different cliffs.” Hughes found it exhilarating. But when she returned to her agency-assigned apartment, the other dancers started telling her the rules.

“You’re not allowed to talk to boys, you’re not allowed to talk to any production

people, you're not allowed to really make friends." Indian boyfriends were prohibited — except the agent himself, who was having an affair with her roommate. "He wouldn't pay [the dancers] if they went against his guidelines," she said.

The rules were restrictive and the apartment was falling down. But the pay was good: ₹80,000 (~\$1,200) a month, with free room and board. The schedule, however, was grueling: they worked most days. The night before a gig, Hughes would get a message to pack her bag for a distant city. The work could be anything, from being an extra, to doing stunts, to dancing new routines.

"We didn't know what we were doing until we went there," said Hughes. "And if the costumes were a bit revealing...we couldn't say anything. We had to just get it done."

Hughes's agent wasn't one of the best, but he wasn't one of the worst either. "I heard stories about some girls who would get sent for night club dancing or bar work." Still, Hughes acknowledged, "he didn't treat us very well." Many of the girls left, and the agent couldn't get more dancers from England, the most sought-after foreigners for the industry. Hughes decided to complete her contract and use her savings to take Hindi and acting classes.

Despite never having acted in England, she felt "overqualified" during auditions. On one film, set in colonial India, she was the only Brit — most were Russians, sporting obvious accents. "There was also an American guy," she said. "He played Winston Churchill."



“That’s the biggest, biggest thing in India,” said Leysan Karimova, a 23-year-old actress and dancer. “If you’re foreign, you’re supposed to be British. It’s like no other foreigners exist here.”

Karimova has worked in Mumbai for three years. Like many Russians in the industry, she began as a backpacker in Goa without previous acting experience, and did shoots when she ran out of cash.

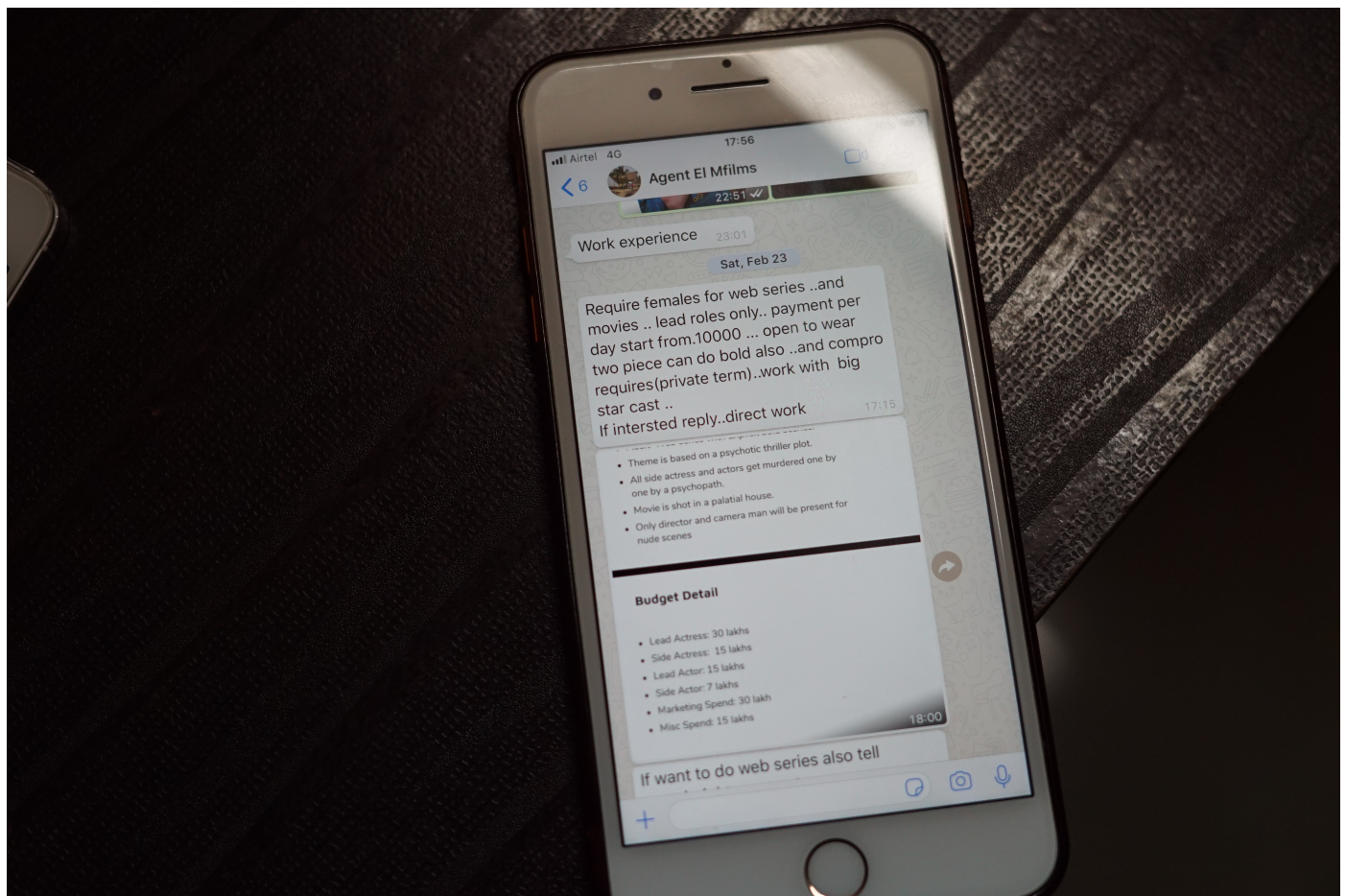
With a friend who knew the ropes, Karimova went to Mumbai, where people pay ₹6,000-10,000 (\$87-146) a night for beautiful white girls to attend parties, mostly weddings. From there, Karimova began acting, starting with typical ‘sexy foreigner’ roles, eventually starring in a web series as a Hindi-speaking mafia don.

But it was more difficult for Karimova than Hughes. Although Russian-speakers

represent the majority of Mumbai's expat community — one source estimates two-thirds — they are paid half the rates of native English speakers, sometimes less. A British person might get ₹20,000 (~\$300) for a day's shoot, while a Russian speaker probably gets ₹10,000 (\$150).

While models and dancers are usually on work visas with a single agency, actors are on tourist visas and operate as freelancers within a large network of casting directors, who ask for a cut of their pay.

"I don't think this is a job you see on business cards," said Desai. "The first thing that comes to my mind when I see these girls is how much shit they have to go through on a daily basis not be exploited by these guys. It's very easy to be taken for a ride here. Not only foreigners, even Indians."



Maria Vorobeva is a 29-year-old Russian woman who moved to Bombay from Goa three months ago. When she sent out her profile to casting directors,

many would ask for “compro.”

“Compro,” industry slang for “compromise,” informs actresses that sexual acts are a requirement for the job. One of Vorobeva’s numerous Whatsapp messages reads: *“10,000. Open to wear two-piece and do bold also. And compro required (private term).”*

“People are asking me every single day,” said Karimova. “You will end up being fucked and you will not receive anything. I spoke with many girls who did that. Most of the time they had sex and nothing happened.”

Still, according to Karimova, foreign girls are less vulnerable than local actresses. Their scarcity makes them more valuable — Karimova estimates that there are only 5,000 foreign actresses in Mumbai, and that around 20 qualify for a given role. If compro is demanded, girls can band together and decline.

“There’s a Whatsapp group for foreigners in the industry,” said 22-year-old Ida Straume, who has acted in Mumbai for one year. “You can text and ask ‘Is this dude a good casting director?’” Beyond safety, these networks work as an informal union, keeping rates fair. “We’ll set a price together, saying we won’t go lower than that,” said Straume.

Foreign women have other tricks up their sleeves.

“I know a girl, she’s Spanish, and she’s saying she’s half-Indian, half-English. I know another girl, she’s Russian, and she’s saying she’s half-Indian, quarter British, quarter Spanish, something like that,” said Karimova. Lying about their backgrounds might get them better work, and casting directors on small productions can’t always detect accents. Women often dye their hair to pass as half-Indian, hoping to qualify for modeling gigs and meatier Bollywood roles. There are even rumors that Bollywood superstar Katrina Kaif is lying about her half-Kashmiri heritage.

Hughes recounts the story of a dancer rejected by a casting director looking for English girls. “He said she looked too much like an Indian dancer,” she said,

referring to the dancer's tan.



The foreign women of Bollywood live a paradox. They profit from the obsession with whiteness, but are limited by these roles. Breaking in is easy, but moving up is difficult. It's accepted that it's less about skill than skin. But most foreign actresses in the industry admit that they are in it more for the experience than to become the next [Elli Avram](#), a Swedish Greek Bollywood actor, who bagged her first leading role without knowing Hindi.

Desai reflected that the trend of hiring white background dancers in Bollywood songs is on the wane. Huge dance sequences are on their way out in Bollywood, and white skin isn't as exotic as it used to be. Casting directors are sending dancers down south, where the novelty hasn't worn off.

Hughes, meanwhile, is back in London. She leveraged her contacts to work as a Bollywood screenwriter, and hopes to write better roles for both foreign and Indian women.

Unfortunately, Hughes is the exception. Most foreigners in Bollywood have more modest goals. They work for the love of India, or to escape dreary office jobs in cold, dark countries, where they could never dream of even the slightest bit of fame.

Michaela Stone Cross currently lives in Mumbai, where she spends most of her time trying to explain why she's there. She's written for several publications, including VICE.

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