

## This is Me

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### Reflections from the Author

A summer afternoon 15 years ago. Five friends with nothing better to do, and an aunt's upcoming baby shower – the recipe for what would turn into one of my life's biggest passions. Many Indian girls are introduced to dance early on in their lives. On this summer afternoon 15 years ago, an aunt had requested performances for her baby shower. We started with our moms choreographing our dances for us while we complained about how traditional the steps were. As we grew and learned how to dance for ourselves, our dance styles fused—a combination of what our moms had taught us and what we had learned for ourselves from living in America. This reflects the recently unearthed concept of the “hyphenated American,” as many children of immigrants find that hyphens describe their identities: Mexican-American, Japanese-American, Italian-American, for example. We, too, became the hyphen: the hyphen in between Indian-American, and in this case, the hyphen in between Bollywood-Hip Hop.

As I am typing this paper, I realize that Microsoft Word does not recognize me<sup>1</sup>. It tells me I should “remove the unnecessary hyphen” between “Indian” and “American,” and although I realize it does not mean this as a microaggression, it shows even our technology has been systemized to invalidate certain identities. For example, let us say I type “Saheli”—a beautiful Hindi word meaning “friend,” a name with which my parents lovingly gifted me, a name just as valid as “Sam” or “John” or “Alex”—on a computer. I will be welcomed with that all-too-familiar little red squiggly line under my name. *You are wrong. You made a mistake. Try again.*

I can click the option “Ignore Once,” breathe in, breathe out, and let it go—just as I can do with any microaggression against my identity. However, that just means the action—the microaggression, or the red squiggly line—will occur again and again. So instead, I decide to educate Microsoft and click “Add to Dictionary,” and my name, my female Indian name, is finally accepted by a program created by an older-aged white man. And could you imagine? I type my name again, and again, and again, but the red squiggly line never comes back.

This is not assimilation, as I am holding on to my Indian identity. Rather, I am ensuring my Indian identity is accepted by Americans, those who identify with the dominant paradigm. That is exactly what I did with dance. If I held on to Bollywood dancing alone, perhaps those who are not Indian would still enjoy watching it; but only because it is “exotic.” If I only did hip hop dancing, I would lose my connection to Indian dancing. Thus, I joined a Bollywood-Hip Hop dance team in college—a fusion more accepted in Western culture and one that allows me to cherish both of my identities.

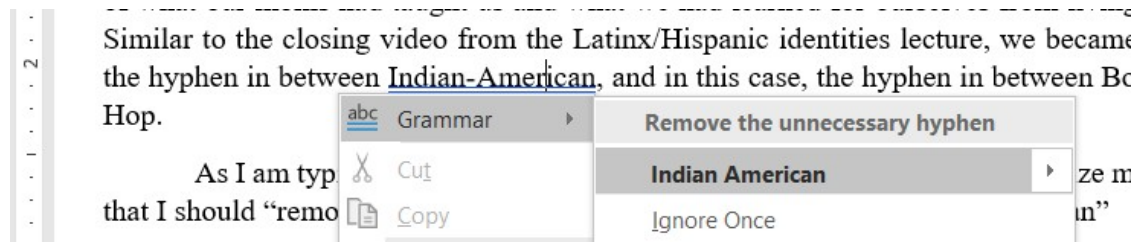
Before, I used to compartmentalize my identities—I am 50 percent Indian and 50 percent American. Now, I see myself as 100 percent both. Sure, that adds up to 200—and it rightfully should, because I get to experience two rich and diverse cultures simultaneously. On our dance team, we proudly dance to the following Indian styles: *kathak*, a classical dance form that translates to “story”; *bhangra*, an energetic dance form that emerged from Punjabi folk traditions; *bharatnatyam*, another classical dance form with roots of the word combining to mean “emotion, melody, rhythm, dance” (“Expression – Bharatnatyam,” n.d.); *garba*, a communal dance form emerging in Gujarat; and lastly, Bollywood, the more mainstream dancing for which the Indian movie industry is famous. We also dance to the following non-Indian styles: hip hop, which originates from the U.S. Black and Hispanic cultures; contemporary, which combines forms such as ballet and jazz; and Spanish hip hop, which involves dancing to more mainstream music that is in Spanish. I could not be happier that I have the opportunity to learn from all of these dance forms and dance with other amazing Indian-American friends who have turned into family. Zindaa, the name of the dance team, translates to “alive,” and indeed being a part of it has made me feel alive.

In one of my social work classes, we were once asked the question, “Would you want to be an individual of another ethnic group?” Although my ethnic identity is that of an oppressed group, I could not imagine life any other way. Although this may be a controversial opinion, I would not trade my culture, art, and friendships for privilege. Instead, I will wait until my ethnicity is accepted by those who are privileged. I will wait until they learn that the hyphen belongs and the red squiggly line does not. In the dance video below, Zindaa dances to a contemporary piece entitled “This is Me,” which accurately encompasses how through dance, I can embody my Indian-American identity; after all, this is me.

*Keywords: Indian, Dance, Bollywood, Hip-Hop, Identity*

## Supplementary Materials

### Appendix 1: Microsoft Word Error



### Appendix 2: Zindaa's 2020 Performance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQMCOWni0TI>

Zindaa's performance, February 2020, at Discover India, Foellinger Auditorium. I helped choreograph some of the routines and performed at this event.

*Dance styles broken up:*

<i>Time</i>	<i>Dance Style</i>	<i>Song Title</i>	<i>Artist(s)</i>
0:16-1:15	Kathak	"Taal Se Taal (Western)"	Sukhwinder Singh
1:16-2:13	Bollywood	"Dil Laga Na"	Mahalakshmi Iyer, Soham Chakraborty, Jolly Mukherjee, Suzanne D'Mello, Sukhbir, Pritam Chakraborty, Sameer
2:14-3:01	Bhangra	"Tunak Tunak (Remix)"	Daler Mehndi
3:02-4:56	Contemporary	"This is Me"	Keala Settle, The Greatest Showman Ensemble, Benj Pasek, Justin Paul
4:57-6:06	Spanish Hip Hop	"No Lie"	Sean Paul, Dua Lipa
6:05-7:48	Bollywood	"Jai Jai Shivshankar"	Benny Dayal, Vishal Dadlani

## References

“Expression - Bharatnatyam.” *Nrityagram*,

[www.nrityagram.org/expression/bnatyam/bnatyam.htm](http://www.nrityagram.org/expression/bnatyam/bnatyam.htm).