



Gender and Performance in Indian Classical Dance Forms

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Abstract

Indian classical dance forms are among the world's richest traditions of embodied storytelling, where gender is both performed and constructed through movement, costume, narrative, and social context. Historically shaped by religious texts, social hierarchies, and evolving cultural norms, these dance forms have served as both mirrors and agents of gender ideology in India. This research article examines the complex interplay between gender and performance in Indian classical dance, tracing its historical roots, analyzing the codification of gender in dance treatises, exploring the lived realities of male and female dancers, and investigating how contemporary performers negotiate, subvert, and reimagine gender identities on stage. Drawing on case studies of Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi, and other forms, as well as insights from performance studies, anthropology, and gender theory, the article demonstrates how Indian classical dance remains a dynamic site for both the reinforcement and transformation of gender roles in Indian society.

Keywords: Indian classical dance, Gender fluidity in performance, Tandava and Lasya, Gender and mythology in dance, Inclusivity in Indian dance

1. Introduction

Indian classical dance, with its ancient origins and contemporary vibrancy, occupies a unique place in the country's cultural imagination. These dance forms—Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, Sattriya, and others—are not merely aesthetic practices but are deeply intertwined with questions of identity, spirituality, and social order.

Gender, as both a biological and social construct, is central to the performance and perception of these dances. From the mythic narratives of gods and goddesses to the lived experiences of dancers, Indian classical dance has historically negotiated, codified, and sometimes challenged gender roles. In the 21st century, debates around gender fluidity, inclusivity, and resistance have brought new urgency to the study of gender and performance in these traditions.

This article explores the evolution of gender representations in Indian classical dance, the ways in which gender is performed and embodied, and how contemporary dancers navigate, contest, and reimagine gendered identities through their art.

2. Historical Context: Gender in the Origins of Indian Classical Dance

2.1. The *Natyashastra* and Gender Codification

The *Natyashastra*, attributed to Bharata Muni (c. 200 BCE–200 CE), is the foundational text for Indian classical dance and drama. It codifies not only the technical aspects of performance—gesture, movement, music, costume—but also the idealized roles of men and women on stage. The treatise reflects the patriarchal values of its time, positioning women as objects of beauty, devotion, and desire, while men are often the narrators, teachers, and interpreters of the art 26.

The *Natyashastra* prescribes specific bodily attitudes, gestures, and emotional expressions (*abhinaya*) for male and female characters.

The masculine (*tandava*) and feminine (*lasya*) styles are presented as complementary but hierarchically ordered, mirroring the cosmic dance of Shiva (*Nataraja*) and Parvati. The text's gender norms have profoundly influenced the structure and aesthetics of classical dance forms, even as performers have found ways to transcend or subvert these boundaries 23.

2.2. Devadasis, Courtesans, and Gendered Patronage

Historically, many Indian dance forms were performed by women attached to temples (*devadasis* in the South) or courts (*tawaifs* and courtesans in the North). These women, while marginalized in broader patriarchal society, often enjoyed significant autonomy, education, and artistic agency within their domains 3. Their art was both celebrated and stigmatized, especially under colonial rule, which conflated dance with immorality and led to the suppression and reform of these traditions.

Male dancers, on the other hand, often occupied roles as teachers (*gurus*), accompanists, or performers of specific forms (e.g., *Kathakali*, traditionally performed by men). The gendered dynamics of patronage, training, and performance have shaped the trajectories of Indian classical dance and continue to inform contemporary debates around authenticity, respectability, and access 38.

3. Gender Performance: Embodiment, Role-Play, and Fluidity

3.1. The Performed Body: Masculine and Feminine Styles

Indian classical dance is fundamentally a performative art: gender is not only represented but enacted through the body. The distinction between *tandava* (vigorous, masculine) and *lasya* (graceful, feminine) movements is central to many forms, especially *Bharatanatyam* and *Kathak* 35. Male dancers are traditionally associated with strength, rhythm, and dynamic movement, while female dancers embody grace, expressiveness, and emotional nuance.

However, these binaries are not rigid. The very structure of Indian dance allows for the portrayal of both male and female characters by any dancer, irrespective of their own gender. This is most evident in the *abhinaya* sections, where a single dancer may shift seamlessly between the roles of Krishna and Radha, Rama and Sita, or hero and heroine, using gesture, facial expression, and costume to signal the transformation 23.

3.2. Gender Fluidity and Transformation

The ability of dancers to transcend their own gender and embody the “other” is a hallmark of Indian classical performance. In *Bharatanatyam*, for example, the depiction of *Ardhanarishvara* (the composite form of Shiva and Parvati) requires the dancer to integrate masculine and feminine energies, gestures, and attitudes within a single body 2. In *Kathakali*, male dancers routinely portray female characters, mastering the delicate nuances of feminine movement and expression 23.

This performative fluidity challenges essentialist notions of gender and opens up space for alternative gender identities and expressions. As Judith Hanna observes, Indian dances “demand gender fluidity from the performer,” requiring them to “let go of the gendered understandings of one’s own body to stay true to his/her art” 2.

4. Gender, Narrative, and Myth in Classical Dance

4.1. Mythological Narratives and Gender Roles

The repertoire of Indian classical dance is replete with stories from Hindu mythology, epics (*Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*), and Puranic literature. These narratives often reinforce traditional gender roles—gods as heroic, powerful, and active; goddesses as nurturing, devoted, or seductive. Yet, the stories also contain moments of subversion, ambiguity, and empowerment.

For example, the *nayika* (heroine) in *Bharatanatyam* or *Odissi* is not merely a passive object of desire but often an active seeker, expressing longing, anger, or defiance. The *nayaka-nayika bheda* (classification of heroes and heroines) in the *Natyashastra* reflects both the social hierarchies of its time and the rich emotional complexity of female characters 7.

4.2. The Politics of the Gaze

Dance in India has historically been shaped by the male gaze, both in myth and in practice. The institution of *devadasis* and courtesans, while empowering in some respects, also positioned women as objects of entertainment and desire for male patrons 3. The colonial critique of dance as immoral was itself gendered, targeting women performers and associating them with prostitution.

Contemporary dancers and scholars have critiqued these dynamics, seeking to reclaim dance as a space for female agency, self-expression, and resistance 38. The act of performing gender on stage becomes a means of both conforming to and challenging the expectations of audience, tradition, and society.

5. Gendered Socialization and Training

5.1. Gurus, Lineages, and Gendered Authority

The traditional guru-shishya (teacher-student) system in Indian classical dance is itself gendered. Male gurus have historically held positions of authority, controlling access to training, repertoire, and performance opportunities. Female gurus, though increasingly prominent, have had to negotiate patriarchal structures and often face additional scrutiny 38.

Training in classical dance involves not only mastering technique but also internalizing gendered codes of behavior, dress, and deportment. Dancers are socialized into specific ideals of femininity (modesty, grace, emotional expressiveness) or masculinity (strength, control, assertiveness), which are reinforced through pedagogy, performance, and community norms 8.

5.2. Gender Bias and Representation

While many classical dance forms are theoretically open to both men and women, in practice, gender bias persists. *Bharatanatyam*, for instance, is often perceived as a “feminine” art, with female dancers dominating the stage, competitions, and media representation 58. Male dancers, though present, may face prejudice, lack of patronage, or challenges to their masculinity 45.

Conversely, forms like *Kathakali* and *Yakshagana* have been male-dominated, with women only recently gaining access to training and performance opportunities. The negotiation of gender roles in these traditions reflects broader social changes, including the rise of women’s education, urbanization, and shifting attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

6. Contemporary Transformations: Negotiating Gender in the 21st Century

6.1. Feminist Interventions and New Narratives

Contemporary women dancers are increasingly using classical forms to question, reinterpret, and subvert traditional gender roles. Through choreography, thematic innovation, and public discourse, they address issues such as female desire, domestic violence, gender discrimination, and queer identities 36. Dancers like Malavika Sarukkai, Alarmel Valli, and Mallika Sarabhai have created works that foreground women's voices and challenge patriarchal norms.

6.2. Male Dancers and Gender Stereotypes

Male dancers, too, are negotiating new identities, resisting stereotypes of effeminacy or marginality, and reclaiming space in forms like Bharatanatyam and Odissi 45. Many have become leading teachers, choreographers, and soloists, expanding the expressive range of their art and challenging the notion that dance is inherently "feminine."

6.3. LGBTQ+ Identities and Gender Fluidity

Recent years have seen a growing visibility of LGBTQ+ dancers and themes in Indian classical dance. Performers such as Ramli Ibrahim, Aniruddha Knight, and others have explored non-binary and queer identities through their work, drawing on the inherent fluidity of gender in Indian performance traditions 26. This has opened up new possibilities for representation, inclusivity, and dialogue within the dance community.

6.4. Digital Media and Globalization

The rise of digital media has facilitated the sharing of performances, debates, and innovations across regional and national boundaries. Online platforms have enabled dancers to reach new audiences, collaborate across genres, and engage with global discourses on gender, identity, and performance 26. This has accelerated the evolution of gender roles in Indian classical dance, making it a truly global and dynamic art form.

7. Case Studies: Gender and Performance in Major Dance Forms

7.1. Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam, originating in Tamil Nadu, is one of the most widely practiced classical dance forms in India and the diaspora. Traditionally associated with devadasis, it was reformed and "classicized" in the 20th century, with women as its primary exponents 35. The dance's repertoire includes both masculine and feminine roles, with dancers expected to master both *tandava* and *lasya* elements.

Contemporary Bharatanatyam has seen a resurgence of male dancers, as well as feminist and queer reinterpretations of mythological narratives. Dancers use the form to explore issues of gender, sexuality, and social justice, challenging the boundaries of tradition and innovation 56.

7.2. Kathak

Kathak, with roots in North India, has a history of both male and female performers. The form's narrative style allows for the portrayal of a wide range of characters, from heroic warriors to longing heroines. Male dancers such as Birju Maharaj have been celebrated for their ability to embody feminine emotions and roles, demonstrating the fluidity of

gender in performance 3.

Women dancers, meanwhile, have used Kathak to assert their artistic agency and address contemporary issues, often blending traditional stories with modern themes 36.

7.3. Kathakali

Kathakali, from Kerala, is traditionally performed by men, who play both male and female roles using elaborate makeup, costumes, and stylized gestures. The training for female roles is rigorous, requiring mastery of subtle facial expressions and delicate movements. In recent decades, women have begun to train and perform in Kathakali, challenging long-standing gender norms and expanding the expressive possibilities of the form 23.

7.4. Odissi and Other Forms

Odissi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, and Kuchipudi each have their own gendered histories and conventions. Odissi, for example, was historically performed by *maharis* (temple dancers) and later by *gotipuas* (young boys dressed as girls). The form's repertoire includes both masculine and feminine elements, and contemporary dancers continue to negotiate questions of gender, tradition, and innovation.

8. Gender, Power, and Resistance

8.1. Dance as Empowerment

For many women, dance has been a means of empowerment, education, and social mobility. The devadasis and courtesans of the past, despite their marginalization, were often highly skilled, independent, and influential artists 3. Today, women dancers use their art to assert agency, challenge stereotypes, and participate in public life.

8.2. Dance as Resistance

Dance has also been a site of resistance against patriarchal, colonial, and caste-based oppression. The revival and reform of classical dance in the 20th century were driven by women like Rukmini Devi Arundale and Balasaraswati, who reclaimed dance from colonial stigma and redefined it as a respectable, spiritual, and artistic pursuit 3.

Contemporary dancers continue this legacy, using performance to address issues such as gender violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and social justice. Their work demonstrates the potential of dance to both reflect and transform society.

9. Theoretical Perspectives: Performance Studies and Gender Theory

9.1. Performance as Gender Construction

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, scholars argue that dance is a key site where gender is constructed, enacted, and contested. The repeated stylization of the body in dance—through movement, costume, gesture, and narrative—produces and destabilizes gender identities 26.

9.2. Intersectionality

An intersectional approach recognizes that gender in Indian classical dance is shaped by other axes of identity, including caste, class, religion, region, and sexuality. The experiences of a Brahmin female dancer in Chennai may differ significantly from those of a Dalit male dancer in Mumbai or a queer performer in Delhi. Understanding these intersections is crucial for a nuanced analysis of gender and

performance 26.

10. Challenges and Future Directions

10.1. Persistent Stereotypes and Barriers

Despite significant progress, gender stereotypes and barriers persist in Indian classical dance. Women may face expectations of modesty, beauty, and subservience, while men may confront prejudices about masculinity and sexuality 45. LGBTQ+ dancers may encounter exclusion or discrimination within traditional institutions.

10.2. Need for Inclusivity and Reform

There is a growing call for greater inclusivity, representation, and reform within the dance community. This includes opening up training and performance opportunities to all genders, challenging discriminatory practices, and creating space for diverse narratives and identities 26.

10.3. Role of Education and Media

Education and media play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward gender in dance. Schools, academies, and online platforms can foster awareness, dialogue, and innovation, helping to build a more inclusive and dynamic future for Indian classical dance.

11. Conclusion

Indian classical dance forms are living traditions that both reflect and shape the gender norms of their societies. Through their embodied performances, dancers negotiate complex histories, cultural codes, and personal identities. The interplay of gender and performance in these forms is dynamic, contested, and ever-evolving. As dancers, teachers, and audiences continue to engage with questions of gender, power, and resistance, Indian classical dance will remain a vital arena for both the preservation and transformation of cultural values.

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