IN WHAT WAYS HAVE GENDER REPRESENTATIONS IN INDIAN CLASSICAL AND FOLK DANCE FORMS EVOLVED, AND HOW DO CONTEMPORARY DANCERS NEGOTIATE GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH THEIR PERFORMANCES?

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Abstract
This paper explores the evolution of gender representations in Indian classical and folk dance forms, focusing on how contemporary performers negotiate and express gender identities through their art. It analyzes dance as both a performative act and a medium of meaning, drawing from aesthetics, anthropology, and sociology. Classical dance forms, shaped by the Natyasastra and Vedic traditions, exhibit a complex relationship with gender—often reinforcing patriarchal norms in narrative but allowing for gender fluidity in performance. Folk dances, on the other hand, are more closely tied to the lived experiences and socio-cultural norms of specific communities. The study highlights variations in gender roles, expressions, and inclusivity across regions and traditions. Through case studies such as Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Melam, and Bihu, the paper illustrates how dance continues to evolve with societal shifts, especially under the influence of digital media and changing gender discourses. The research concludes that both classical and folk dances are gradually moving toward more inclusive and flexible interpretations of gender, reflecting broader cultural transformations in India.

Keywords: Gender representation, Indian classical dance, folk dance, Natyasastra, gender identity, patriarchy, performance studies, dance and culture, gender fluidity, Indian performing arts

Introduction

"Dance is a set of rhythmic movements that can be defined as a form of non-verbal communication." (Garfinkel,2018). A simple and rather comprehensive definition for dance. According to this definition, there is a performed aspect for dance, and an aspect of meaning that is conveyed through the performance. This is common for all art forms. For example, in painting, there is an aspect that consists of the action of painting and the result of a physical painting that is the direct result of that action. Then there is the story, emotion, and other concepts represented in the painting. In dance, there is the performance of a dance and a performed piece that is the direct

result of the performance. There is also the story, emotions, and other non material aspects that are represented in the performed piece.

There are several streams of studies trying to make sense of dance such as aesthetics, sociology, anthropology and history. All of these disciplines agree on these two aspects of dance. Anything that is said about dance is said about both or either of these aspects, or about the relation between these two aspects.

In this paper, I will be looking at how the concept of gender has been represented and evolved over the years in Indian classical and folk dances.

The term 'classical' indicates that the artform described as classical adheres to or conforms to a set of established frameworks, appeal, and critical standards unified with the objective of performing for an audience who has cultivated a taste for it. (Pani, 2)[1]. A differentiation between classical and non-classical is difficult to make with this definition of 'classical art' provided by Jiwan Pani. Defining the genre of classical as a tradition that has an established framework, appeal, and critical standards gives an impression that something non-classical lacks all these qualities. It makes a hierarchical difference between classical and non- classical traditions. If we look closely, it is only commonsensical to know that any dance form needs to have fulfilled these three conditions to grow into a tradition that is learned and performed. The second part of the definition says that the first three conditions are so that the art form can be enjoyed by a crowd that has cultivated a taste for it. This implies that anything classical cannot be enjoyed or understood by all. This can be understood as an attempt to limit the access people have to the art form by tagging it as exclusive. Any art form that has a cultural context to it will be difficult to understand and enjoy by someone who is newly introduced to the culture or the art form. The non-classical category we are looking at is the genre of folk. A folk dance form might not make sense to someone who has never seen a folk dance before in her life. Such superficial and frivolous definitions of 'classical art' has to be carefully set aside before we begin our discussion.

By the term 'classical dance', I simply mean the dance forms in India sharing a common origin; the Natyasastra. There are eight classical dance forms in India that can be understood as originated from Natyasastra; Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, Odissi and Sattriya. Each of them belong to different parts of the country speaking different languages. They all still share a common text as their manual. They all have interpreted the basic tenets of performance given by Natyasastra in their own cultural and linguistic context.   (Sukhatankar, 11,12)

Folk dance is a tradition of dance performed by common folks of a community sharing a common life style, belief systems, and language. These communities bound by certain socio- cultural norms often share resources and responsibilities of life where community living is the practiced way of living. They share occasions of celebrations and leisure. Indian folk dances originated as a way of relaxing and entertaining during these occasions. This is the reason why most of the folk dances are group dances. Another important feature of folk dance is the blurring of boundaries between the performer and the audience. Most of these dance forms are such that any random person from the community could join them and start dancing . garba, for example. They mostly have simple and repeated rhythms and steps for this same reason. (Sukhatankar, 12)

In the first section of the paper, I will be looking at the early representation of the concept of gender in classical and folk dances. I will be looking at both the performance aspect and the aspect of the meaning that is represented in the performance.

Gender in Classical and Folk Dances of India

Dance probably is the very first form of art human beings engaged in. If we understand dance as the expression of emotions, thoughts, stories, and imagination, using our body, the early attempts to communicate can be understood as a primitive form of dance. But how did these attempts to communicate with each other take the shape of art forms with nuanced details and rules? While acknowledging that dancing, in a larger sense of the term, is not unique to human beings. The male birds with elaborate dance routines as a part of their mating ritual has become somewhat of a common knowledge, especially with the popularity of instagram reels. I, nevertheless, will be using the term dance to talk about art form among human beings.

Many historical accounts of dance as a unique practice of human beings, based on psychological theories, claim that it was a tool human beings developed to make peace with the mysteries around them. Physical movements help human beings release excess energy and regain psychological and physical equilibrium. This quality of dance must have led to the activity evolving into a ritual that people did in groups or individually, as a way of relaxing. This way of regulating their energy must have led people to believe that these actions had powers to get things done, though they did not understand how it worked. For example, dancing as a ritual to request rain was a common practice across different cultures.(Hanna, 2004)[2] Elaborate meanings and stories associated with dances are later additions. This ritualistic performance of dance led to spiritual and later religious practices of performances. Hanna Talks about how different religions took up dance forms and utilised the synchronised involvement of mind and body as a medium and metaphor for the higher spiritual engagements they offer. She points out how the Indian royalties, both male and female, were

trained in Natya Sastra. This she believes is not a mere training in a performing art, but a comprehensive guide on how to conduct one's life. The performed aspect helps one find a fine balance between mind and body. The narratives that are told through the performances, and the rationale that is used to build these narratives gives one the wisdom to deal with real life situations. She observes that the forms of dances learned and performed by men and women were different during this period in India. For example, Kathakali, she observes, was a dance form that was performed only by male dancers while the dance of Devadasis were performed only by women (Hanna, 4). Though the dance forms performed by male and female artists were different, both the kinds of dances had male and female characters and characteristics within the dance forms. This would mean that the male performers playing the female parts and the female performers playing the male parts. Can we interpret this as a way in which the classical indian dance forms were gender fluid?

The narratives played out in a particular performance having both male and female characters need not indicate gender fluidity, as it is maintaining the binary of masculine and feminine, even while the same person(male or female) playing the male and female characters. But if we look at the performing aspect, we can identify some of the ways in which a body (female or male) is accommodating both masculine and feminine movements and postures causing to blur the gendered assumptions of physicalities. Let us take the example of Bharatanatyam incorporating both masculine and feminine forms and movements into a single movement or pose. " to depict Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati at once, I may transform the right half of my body into a more curved and smaller representation with my right foot placed behind my left on its tip toes, with my knee bent inward to tuck the rest of my right leg behind the left, and with my right hand curved inwards to represent a soft, feminine bird, elbow drooping slightly and tucked close to my waist. On the other hand, my left foot would be placed flat on the ground, toes pointed to the side so that my left leg fully faced the audience, taking up as much of the horizontal plane as possible, with my left hand pointed downwards, palm facing up and elbow proudly thrust to the side to uniformly take up additional horizontal space. The feminine signifiers on the right side of my body and the male signifiers on the left side of my body along with the symbol created with the mudras[3] of my right and left hands all come together to represent the combination of ShivaParvati in Bharatanatyam." (Rudraraju, 26,27)[4]

The above account of the performer shows how he/she has to let go of the gendered understandings of one's own body to stay true to his/her art. Thus, it is safe to assume that the art form demands gender fluidity from the performer.

This observation is about the the performed aspect, as I mentioned before. While the thematic content of a dance tell us about the cultural understandings of gender, the performing aspect tells us about the the ways in which the particular dance form engages with, accommodate, or rebel against aspects of this 'cultural construction of gender' (Hanna, 1993, 120)[5]. Judith Hanna points out that Indian dances have several commitments outside of the dance itself, such as religion, the philosophical inclinations of the gurus[6], the socio-cultural norms etc. She claims that the construction of gender identities within these elements have a direct influence on the representation of gender in Indian dances. For example, Natyasastra, the common manual for all Indian classical dances was composed by a male sage during the Epic and Classical period (440 BC to AD 600) Natyasastra is often considered as the fifth Veda. Vedas notoriously consider women as a possession of the male members of the society. Her position as a subordinate to man should be obvious in her appearance, behaviour, and even subtle movements such as the way she stands, the tone of her voice. Natyasastra follows these conceptions without exception.

While the classical dances of India portray the Vedic conception of harmonious union of male and female which is reflected as gender-fluid in the performed part of the dance, the depiction of female or feminine is as submissive to the male. Kathakali, a dance form performed exclusively by men, is a form of theatre that tells heroic stories from puranas.

1. Pani, I. (Ed.). (n.d.). Celebration of life: Indian folk dances. Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India.
2. Hanna, Judith. (1988). Dance and Ritual. Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance. 59. 40-43. 10.1080/07303084.1988.10606315.
3. A symbolic gesture stands for a word, a phrase, an expression, or an emotion in a dance form that can be understood as one of the basic units of a dance form.
4. 'Dragging the Classics: On the Pursuit of (Trans)Gender Liberation through Indian Classical Dance', Rudraraju,Prabhas, A thesis submitted in partial satisfactionof the requirements for the degree Master ofArts in Asian American Studies, 2024. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/90k507ss
5. Hanna, Judith. (1993). Classical Indian Dance and Women's Status. 10.1007/978-1- 349- 23842-2_8.
6. A guru is an authority of a subject, discipline, an art, or a skill from who is also an educator of his/her area of expertise.

Different dance forms and the gender connectivity
Ritual Dances
1) Lai Haroba
Lai haroba in Manipur is performed by a priestess called Maibi and a priest called maiba, Legend says that 9 gods brought earth from heaven. 9 godesses took the earth from the god and threw it into the primordial ocean.
On the first day of Lai Harobara Gods and goddesses take symbolic birth from water. Two Maibis wearing spotless white costumes along with villagers go near a stream, taking two leaves,symbolizing the male and female principles are put in water one facing upward and one facing downward, it is imagined that the seed of creation is within the two leaves. The ripples suggest the union of male and female principles.

2) karagram

In Karagam, the main dancer balances on his head a pitcher filled with uncooked rice and water. Here the rice symbolizes food that sustains life and therefore is sacred. Earlier only male dancers were performing this dance. Nowadays female dancers also participate.

3) Chearaw

In the Union Territory of Mizoram the most popular dance is Cheraw. It is danced mainly by the girls of Mizo tribe. hen a child dies, the spirit proceed towards Pzalral, the heavenly abode of the dead. The Cheraw dance is performed to propitiate the death of the child. Mizo girls wearing their traditional colourful skirts, matching blouses, and headgears decorated with beads and feathers dance Cheraw. Non-dancer boys or girls squat on the ground holding long bamboo poles.

CEREMONIAL DANCES

There are two kinds of ceremonies : religious and social. The ceremonial dances have ritualistic overtones and are celebrative in character.

1) Chawnglaizuan

The Chawnglazuanis a unique ceremonial funeral dance performed by the Pawi tribal community to honor a deceased village chief or a wealthy individual. The name translates to "dance and jump for glory," reflecting the community's reverence for life and death. The Pawis consider a person's birth and death as the two most significant events in life. Originally, the dance was performed by a single dancer carrying a gun, occasionally firing shots upward while dancing and singing. Over time, it evolved into a group performance with **16 men and 16 women dancers accompanied by five musicians playing gongs and drums. The ceremony also involves a feast, with the chief's family gifting pigs and fowls to the villagers. The dance serves as a tribute to the deceased, celebrating their life and legacy.

2) Chilori

Chilori is a ceremonial dance from Madhya Pradesh, performed by girls aged 12 to 16, typically in groups of 16 to 20 dancers. The dance is performed twice a year, a fortnight before Diwali and Holi, and continues daily until the festival day. The performance takes place at a designated area called akhraa. The dancers form a circle, holding each other's waist, and sway alternately to the left and right. They wear flowers on their temples and ghungroo (jingle bells) on their ankles. The dance starts at a slow tempo, gradually increasing in speed. The dancers sing **chilor-string** songs while dancing, and at the end of each line, they jump and strike the ground hard with both feet.

3) Hiroria

Hiroria of Madhya pradesh is a dance of men only. It is performed in the lunar month of shravan. It is called Dandaa-nrityaa because the dancers hold batons in both their hands while dancing in circular movement hit the batons held by the nearest dancer. It is similar to Dandiya of gujarat.

Harvest Dances

Bihu, celebrated during Rongali Bihu in Assam, marks the Assamese New Year and the harvest season, with both men and women participating in synchronized movements to the rhythmic beats of the dhol and pepa, promoting equality in the joy of the harvest. In Rajasthan, the Ghoomar dance, originally performed solely by women, celebrates agricultural success and showcases the grace and unity of women in rural communities. The Bhagoria Dance in Madhya Pradesh, performed during the harvest festival, involves both genders in playful, joyous movements that symbolize harmony and partnership. In Odisha, the Dalkhai dance is associated with Sambalpuri culture, where women perform while men provide musical accompaniment with instruments like the dhol and tasa, illustrating collaboration. Lastly, the Nongkrem Dance in Meghalaya, performed by the Khasi tribe, celebrates a successful harvest with both men and women participating, each taking on specific roles that highlight interdependence.

Gender in Folk Dances of India

In a multilingual, multicultural country like India, talking about folk dances as a unified unit is not possible. As mentioned in the introduction, folk dances are shaped by the cultural and linguistic identities of a community. They do not share a common storyline, a rule book or an aesthetic code. Each of these dances have their loyalty and allegiance solely towards their own cultural contexts, unlike the classical dances. Attempts to form a common understanding or form a common judgement on folk dances will only be a futile endeavour. One can claim that the role of spontaneity and reciprocity is higher in folk dances while in classical dances pre-established rules take this higher role. Folk dances, hence, reflect more immediate and less adulterated convictions and conditionings of a community.

Ted Polhemus in his article 'Dance, Gender and Culture', claims that the fundamental body movements and mannerisms of a person is as cultural as biological. (Polhemus,4) Art is often challenging, questioning, or battling with these very conditioning within the cultural norms. For example, Melam, a folk dance tradition among the telugu speaking tribe in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, mimics emotions such as jealousy, anger, along with romance as a part of the routine. Melam is a folk dance performed during religious occasions. The style and content of the performances does not change with the occasion. The dance routine usually has three characters; a hero, a heroin, and a clown (an anti-hero character). All these characters are played by male performers. In addition to the performers, there

are three to five men involved in the dance as musicians. The main thread of the performance is the romantic interaction between the hero and the heroine, interrupted by the clown trying to win over the heroine through deception. The performance begins with prayers to the goddess Chengalamma followed by episodes of romance performed with songs from Telugu cinemas. The dance and drama accompanied by the film songs are free-styled and seemingly spontaneous with a to and fro performance by the participants. The community of Yanadi of Sriharikota has their own song for the performance which they have maintained as several other communities shifted to the film songs. In these performances, the clown's actions and mannerisms are expected to be offensive and what is usually unacceptable in the public spaces. This unconventional and anti-social behaviour is considered to be funny within the context of the performance. (Rao, N S, $_{58,59}$)[1] Here the dance is performed only by male artists. But this cannot be read and understood with the same framework we used in the classical dance section. Some of the significant aspects to note here is that the performance is addressing and dedicating to a goddess. It is unheard of among the classical tradition that a bunch of male performers dedicate a performance to a female deity.

1 Rao, N. S. (1997). An anthropological approach to folk dances. Indian Anthropologist, 27(1), 57–75. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41919815

One might argue that parallels can be drawn between the gender exclusivity of the performance part. Another significant thing that has to be taken into consideration here is the socio-cultural understanding of gender and gender roles in this particular community. Yanadi, like most other communities, places men ideologically in a higher position. Much of this is lost in the practice though. For example, the division of labour is not strictly gendered among yanadis. People participate in all kinds of labour irrespective of their gender. The individual freedom practiced in choosing the spouse, staying within the marriage, or remarriages are equal among male and female members within this community. The tradition of marriage is not conditioned with factors such as virginity or dowry. (Rao, N.S, 64) It is against this social reality, one has to read and interpret the gender politics of Melam.

There are, nevertheless, folk dances that maintain a gender distinction similar to classical dances, in both performance and the meaning aspects. The folk dances of Punjab are examples for this. There are folk dances in Punjab originated along the different regions and communities that live along the five rivers of Punjab. They are differentiated according to religion, region and the specific gender that performs it. bhangra, jhummar, luddi, dhamal, julli, and dhankara/gatka are performed by male artists while, giddha, sammi, kikli, teeyan, and jaggo are female dance forms. The style of dancing is very different for the male and female dances here. The dances meant for male performers are with vigorous movements and showcasing of stamina and strength. Female dance traditions on the other hand are with gentle and graceful movements. Even the musical instruments used for these performances are divided this way. Instruments requiring strength to operate such as dhol are used for male performances while smaller and gentler instruments susch as dholki are used for female performances. The meaning aspect of the art is also gendered among these communities. The songs that accompanied male performances are about women, alcohol, desire, war, bravery etc, while the songs women dance to are about compassion, affection, devotion, and longing. (Roy, A.G, 202)[2]

Folk dance tradition cannot be unified under one description. Nevertheless, one can form arguments and judgements about a category called folk dances. This is because as a genre, all the individual folk dances share what can be called as a family resemblance. Because of this very fact that there are no common rules that govern execution, growth and interpretation of the art practices, the chances of folk dances adapting and reflecting the socio-cultural changes within the communities.

Conclusion

Growing up, I have noticed that the conversations, advertisements, and dialogues regarding classical dances such as Bharatanatyam or Kuchipudi are mostly accompanied by an image of a female performer. Rarely one comes across the representation of male performers when it comes to the popular classical dances, unless it is Kathakali. The art form of Kathakali is almost only represented with the image of a specific male character type named 'pacha'.

The images of folk dances of India were mostly seen on a tourism brochure or tourism advertisement. It is not very often one comes across a public performance of Indian Folk dances. But unlike in classical dances, there are male and female performers represented in these images.

Similar is the case in hip hope or other western dance studios advertisements. They use the images of male performers as well as female performers. This got me wondering if Indian classical dances are essentially gender biased. This paper was a result of the enquiry that followed this thought.

2 Roy, A. G. (2020). Gendering dance. Religions, 11(4), 202. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11040202

Art forms irrespective of whether they are classical or folk reflect the norms, morality, and culture of the society where they originated and performed. India is largely a patriarchal society. The art forms originated and evolved in India will reflect the values of patriarchy and will conform to the norms of patriarchy. This is rather evident from the visible trends regarding who performs what dances in public spaces. As discussed in the first session, these classical dances have a historical origin that is gendered. Since classical dances had their allegiance very clearly placed upon the one text, Natyasasthra, and the vedic tradition, the practices did not change as much even with the time. But with the internet boom there has been huge changes in the ways in which these classical dance forms are practiced and performed.

My first conclusion is that the gender bias prevalent among folk and classical dances in India had their base in the historical origin of these dances. It is the gender bias that existed in the culture that got transferred to the dance forms. As the Indian society stayed patriarchal over the centuries, the bias in the practice of art also got carried over in different shapes and colours.

My second conclusion is that the lack of one common code of conduct among folk dance traditions makes them free to evolve in different directions and some of them move ahead of the biases if the community evolves tools to move ahead of the biases.

My third conclusion is that the Internet has been liberating both classical and folk dance traditions from these centuries old sexism and patriarchal practices by culturally, economically, and psychologically uplifting the artists.

This study has opened up more questions for me as I answered a few. I believe studying contemporary art practices is essential in understanding the evolution of our social and moral values, as the changes in the society are inevitably reflected in the art forms of the society.

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