

Performing Masculinity, Gender, Caste and Class in Indian Classical Dance

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Abstract

This paper explores how male dancers in Indian classical forms like Bharatanatyam and Odissi navigate gender norms within performance spaces. The study investigates how perceptions of masculinity intersect with caste and class to shape the experiences and reception of these dancers. Although classical dance is widely celebrated as part of India's cultural heritage, prior research highlights its deep entanglement with caste privilege and gendered expectations. Using Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Butler's concept of gender performativity, the study examines how these identities are negotiated in a traditionally feminized art form. Based on an online survey of 72 participants, including both quantitative and open-ended responses, findings show that male dancers often face gendered scrutiny, and that caste and class significantly influence public perceptions and access to opportunities. The research highlights the need for institutional reforms and broader cultural shifts to support gender and caste inclusivity in classical dance.

1. Introduction

The field of Indian classical dance is often celebrated as a domain of high culture, devotion, and discipline. Yet, beneath the surface of its aesthetic and spiritual narratives lie complex gendered and socio-cultural tensions. In particular, the participation of male dancers in classically feminised dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Odissi presents a layered terrain of conformity, resistance, and social negotiation. These dancers do not merely perform choreographed routines; they engage in a visible, embodied defiance of dominant expectations of masculinity. However, this defiance is neither uniformly experienced nor equally sanctioned. This study explores how male classical dancers navigate these expectations, and how caste and class backgrounds determine both their visibility and vulnerability within these spaces. In post-colonial India, Bharatanatyam and Odissi have been institutionally reconstructed as "respectable" classical forms largely through the intervention of elite, upper-caste reformers (Soneji & Krishnan, 2024; Jeevanandam, 2016; Arundale & Iyer, 1935). The revivals, while aesthetically influential, also contributed to the feminisation of the art, framing it as an extension of domestic, spiritual, and emotional expression (Meduri 2004; Gurudevan 2010 / 2014). In this context, male dancers have had to either masculinize their style of performance to conform to societal norms or risk being stigmatized, misread or excluded. The type and intensity of this backlash, however, varies significantly depending on the dancer's social location. Those from upper-caste and upper-class backgrounds often gain legitimacy as "guardians of tradition," while those from marginalized backgrounds are more likely to face institutional neglect, economic barriers, or public ridicule (2024 Oxford volume/contemporary critiques).

Although male dancers in Bharatanatyam and Odissi subvert hegemonic masculinity through performance, their ability to do so without social penalty is significantly shaped by their caste and class position. Performance, therefore, becomes both a space of gendered resistance and structural constraint.

Drawing from public attitude surveys and critical literature from gender studies and performance theory, this research situates male classical dancers at the intersection of gender, caste, and cultural legitimacy. The objective is not only to document their experiences, but to analyze how embodied performance interacts with larger systems of power in Indian society today.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classical dance and cultural identity

Indian classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi are widely regarded as cultural symbols of national heritage. However, their current institutionalized and stage-bound forms are the result of layered historical shifts that redefined their meaning and accessibility. Scholars like [Meduri \(1996\)](#) argue that classical dance, often assumed to be timeless and apolitical, has in fact undergone a process of transformation shaped by politics, colonialism, and social reform. During the colonial period, Bharatanatyam and Odissi, originally practiced by *devadasis* and *maharis* within temple premises, came under attack as immoral and degenerate (Meduri, 1996; Vatsyayan, 1974). This led to their near-erasure, followed by their reconstruction under nationalist and upper-caste reformers in the 20th century. This revival removed many of the dance forms' ritualistic and community-based elements and redefined them as elite art forms tied to nationalist identity. The process also removed *Dalit* and non-Brahmin practitioners from visibility, reinforcing caste-based exclusion (EPW, 2021; Nair, 2021).

Quantitative studies such as the one by Das and Gupta (2022) show that the demographic profile of professional Bharatanatyam dancers is still dominated by individuals from upper-caste and middle to upper-middle-class backgrounds. These findings confirm that despite democratization narratives, classical dance remains a caste-gated space. Access to institutional training is concentrated in urban areas, and costs associated with learning, fees, costumes, and transport further limit participation from economically and socially marginalized groups. In this context, classical dance no longer functions as a purely aesthetic form but as a site where social legitimacy is performed. Caste, class, and gender now inform which bodies are seen as “authentic” performers. Audiences tend to associate classical dance with a certain kind of performer, typically upper-caste, female, and urban (Kusuma, 2018). Male dancers and those from non-dominant caste backgrounds are perceived as exceptions (Kusuma, 2018), often facing skepticism unless they conform to institutional or cultural norms.

While the art is celebrated as a marker of “Indian culture,” participation is filtered through institutional training, language proficiency, and proximity to elite networks, all of which are linked to upper-caste access. This transformation has implications not just for who performs, but for how dance is socially understood. As Vatsyayan (1996) notes, the meaning of dance today is inseparable from the ideologies that shaped its reinvention. Dance becomes a carrier of cultural identity, but that identity is highly curated, selective, and often inaccessible to those outside the normative structure of caste and class.

2.2 Caste and Access to dance

While Bharatanatyam and Odissi are celebrated as national cultural treasures, their accessibility is still shaped by caste hierarchies. Historically, these dance forms were embedded in the ritual life of temple communities, performed by *devadasis* and *maharis*, many of whom belonged to *Dalit* or non-Brahmin castes. However, during the nationalist period, their custodianship shifted to upper-caste elites through a process scholars describe as Sanskritization (Meduri, 1996; EPW, 2021). This transformation was not purely aesthetic; it systematically erased the contributions of marginalized communities and redefined the art within institutional and Brahminical frameworks.

Access to classical dance today continues to be mediated by caste-coded structures: language proficiency (e.g., Sanskrit, Tamil), institutional affiliation, financial investment, and social capital. Studies show that dance schools are disproportionately located in urban upper-caste enclaves, where tuition fees, dress codes, and teaching styles reflect dominant cultural values (Das & Gupta, 2022). These barriers make it difficult for Dalit and lower-caste individuals to access formal training or public platforms. Kusuma (2018) and Devi (n.d.) observe that caste and class often intersect, limiting the ability of marginalized performers to engage with dance professionally. Data from this study's survey further supports this claim. When asked to rate the influence of caste and class on access to classical dance, 74% of respondents selected ratings of 4 or 5 (on a 5-point scale). Although many participants expressed uncertainty in open-ended questions, their quantitative responses suggest that caste operates subtly but strongly in shaping perceptions and opportunities. EPW (2021) notes this latent function of caste: it influences who is offered teaching positions, who is invited to festivals, and which bodies are seen as representing cultural "authenticity."

The 2022 Spectrum Institute study highlights that among male dancers in Assam, those from marginalized communities had significantly less access to stage opportunities and reported higher levels of social scrutiny. This is not just a question of access but of legitimacy. A male dancer from a lower-caste background is more likely to be perceived as out-of-place or lacking refinement, while a Brahmin male dancer is more often seen as disciplined, authentic, and culturally aligned. Building on these frameworks, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality helps contextualize how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape the lived experiences of male dancers in classical art spaces. Intersectionality challenges the idea that forms of oppression operate in isolation and instead highlights how overlapping social identities can create compounded forms of disadvantage. In the context of Indian classical dance, a male dancer from a dominant caste may face gendered scrutiny but still benefit from caste privilege and institutional support, whereas a dancer from a marginalised caste background might face simultaneous caste-based exclusion and gender-based stigma. This framework is essential to understanding why not all male dancers experience backlash in the same way, and how systemic hierarchies continue to govern access and legitimacy within these cultural spaces.

2.3 Gender dimensions of dance

In contemporary India, Bharatanatyam and Odissi continue to be perceived as feminized art forms. This perception is shaped by both historical shifts and aesthetic conventions that associate grace, emotional expression, and costume design with femininity. These gendered associations have significant implications for male dancers who participate in these traditions. Scholarship on gender and performance reveals how these associations impact participation, perception, and legitimacy in the classical dance ecosystem. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is central to understanding this issue. According to Butler (1990), gender is not a fixed identity but a set of repeated acts that acquire meaning over time. According to Butler (1990), gender is not a fixed identity but a set of repeated acts that acquire meaning over time. This concept, known as gender performativity, suggests that gender is produced through repeated bodily acts, gestures, and expressions. In the context of classical dance, this means that male dancers are not only performing choreography but also enacting masculinity in ways that may challenge or reinforce societal norms. In classical dance, the stylized gestures, costumes, and emotive expressions have historically been associated with the female body. As a result, when male dancers perform these same gestures, they are perceived as deviating from expected masculine behavior (Butler, 1990; Meduri, 1996).

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which privileges expressions of manhood such as restraint, physical dominance, and emotional control over traits like expressiveness or vulnerability (Connell, 2005). Classical dance, with its emphasis on emotion and fluidity, is often seen as incompatible with these dominant ideals. These attitudes are not limited to public audiences. Kusuma (2018) notes that even within dance institutions, male dancers are often subtly encouraged to adopt more "masculine" choreography or body language. Male dancers who adopt neutral or masculine-coded roles are more positively received in performances and digital platforms (Das and Gupta, 2022). This creates a dual burden: to master a feminized art form while simultaneously distancing themselves from it in performance. The result is a performance of constrained masculinity, one that constantly negotiates between artistic authenticity and social acceptability.

Quantitative studies also reflect this tension. In a Spectrum Institute (2022) study, 78% of respondents associated classical dance with femininity, and 65% believed that male dancers should adopt distinctly different expressions to maintain masculine integrity. These statistics highlight the pressure on male dancers to conform to gendered expectations, even in traditionally expressive spaces.

2.4 Male dancers and masculinity

Male participation in Bharatanatyam and Odissi often challenges dominant cultural expectations of masculinity in Indian society. These dance forms are associated with traits such as grace, emotional expressiveness, and ornamentation, qualities typically coded as feminine. As a result, male dancers must negotiate how to embody the form without being perceived as transgressing masculine ideals. This tension is central to understanding their experience in classical dance spaces. Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity helps explain this conflict. Rather than a fixed identity, masculinity operates as a social hierarchy in which certain expressions are privileged. In the Indian context, dominant masculinity emphasizes traits like stoicism, physical control, and rationality. Classical dance, by contrast, privileges emotive and aesthetic expression. This leads to a perception that male classical dancers are performing outside accepted norms of male behavior (Connell, 2005; Meduri, 1996).

Survey data reinforces this framework. A majority of participants rated classical dance as feminine on a 5-point scale, and several open-ended responses revealed surprise or discomfort when seeing male dancers perform. However, other respondents acknowledged admiration for male dancers' confidence and discipline. Some even suggested that masculinity could be redefined through classical dance. These diverse reactions highlight the double standard male dancers navigate: they must exhibit technical excellence while managing gendered perceptions that often question their alignment with masculine norms. Kusuma (2018) and Das & Gupta (2022) note that caste and class background significantly mediate how male dancers are perceived. An upper-caste, urban male dancer is often framed as progressive or boundary-breaking, while a marginalized male dancer may be viewed as inappropriate or lacking cultural alignment. Institutional responses mirror this divide: formal dance schools often steer male students toward roles and choreography considered "masculine," such as mythological warriors or sages, while discouraging participation in more expressive or feminized portrayals.

As a result, male dancers must continuously adjust their presentation. This includes emphasizing physical strength, using minimalistic expression, or selecting narratives that highlight valour. These are not organic expressions of gender but calculated responses to social pressure. The effect is a constrained version of masculinity, tailored to meet audience expectations while still preserving the dancer's legitimacy.

2.5 Authenticity and Social Perceptions

In Indian classical dance, "authenticity" is often used to validate who is considered a legitimate performer.

This notion is not purely artistic; it is constructed through social perceptions of caste, gender, and class. A dancer's authenticity is shaped as much by their technique as by their body's alignment with cultural expectations. Scholars argue that these expectations are embedded in both pedagogy and performance, and are rarely neutral (Goffman, 1959; Vannini & Williams, 2009).

Goffman's (1959) theory of performance suggests that individuals manage their self-presentation to meet societal norms. In classical dance, this theory applies to both stage performance and public identity. Dancers are expected to embody tradition not only through movement but also through speech, attire, and behavior. Male dancers, especially from marginalized caste or class backgrounds, often face greater scrutiny for how well they conform to these unspoken norms (Kusuma, 2018; EPW, 2021; Das & Gupta, 2022). Performers outside these expectations must work harder to be perceived as authentic, a process known as symbolic boundary management (Vannini, 2009).

Quantitative studies support these findings. In the study by Das & Gupta (2022), over 70% of participants agreed that male dancers should adapt their performance style to preserve traditional aesthetics. Similarly, the Spectrum study (2022) shows that dancers who present non-traditional gender expressions are less likely to be chosen for public performances or institutional teaching roles. This social construction of authenticity influences not just audience opinion but access to opportunity. Dancers who align with dominant ideals are more likely to receive institutional recognition, funding, and stage time. Those who diverge, by gender presentation, caste identity, or class background, often find their work viewed as experimental, controversial, or less "pure."

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods survey-based design to investigate how male dancers in Bharatanatyam and Odissi navigate gendered expectations and how caste and class shape their experiences of legitimacy, participation, and public perception. The approach combines quantitative questions (e.g., Likert scales, binary choices, and multiple-choice formats) with qualitative prompts (open-ended questions), enabling both breadth and depth of analysis.

The quantitative component captures general trends and statistical patterns across demographic groups, while the qualitative component offers deeper insight into subjective experiences, social attitudes, and implicit biases. This integrated strategy is particularly suited to examining cultural and performative phenomena where both measurable attitudes and lived experiences are essential for a comprehensive understanding.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data were gathered through a structured online survey administered via Google Forms. The survey included multiple-choice questions, binary yes/no options, and 5-point Likert scale items. These questions were designed to assess public perceptions regarding the gendered nature of classical dance, societal expectations of male dancers, and the influence of caste and class on access and authenticity.

List of questions:-

1. Do you consent to participate in this survey and allow your responses to be used for research purposes?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your age group?

4. What is your occupation?
5. Do you have any personal experience in learning or practising Indian classical dance?
6. Have you ever attended a classical dance performance?
7. Who do you most commonly associate Bharatanatyam/Odissi with?
8. On a scale of 1 to 5, how feminine do you perceive Bharatanatyam/Odissi to be?
9. On a scale of 1 to 5, how surprised are you when you see a male dancer performing Bharatanatyam or Odissi
10. Do you think male dancers are judged or stereotyped more in classical dance?
11. Do you believe classical dance should be gender-neutral or have gender-specific movements/roles?
12. Should male dancers express emotions on stage the same way as female dancers?
13. Do you think upper-caste or wealthier individuals have more access to classical dance training and performance spaces?
14. On a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent do caste and class affect how gender expression is perceived in classical dance?
15. Do you think male classical dancers need more visibility in society?
16. On a scale of 1 to 5, do you think classical dance can challenge traditional gender roles?
17. When you think of a man performing Bharatanatyam or Odissi, what thoughts or feelings come to mind? Why do you think you feel that way?
18. How do you think male dancers could be supported more?
19. If you have thoughts about gender in dance or any thoughts on the survey, feel free to share here.

Participants were asked to rate statements such as “Classical dance is a feminine art form” or “Caste influences who can become a professional dancer” on a scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The structure of these questions enabled the identification of broad trends and the statistical frequency of certain viewpoints.

3.2.2 Qualitative Data Collection

To complement the quantitative data, three open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey. The questions include “When you think of a man performing Bharatanatyam or Odissi, what thoughts or feelings come to mind? Why do you think you feel that way?” “How do you think male dancers could be supported more?” “If you have thoughts about gender in dance or any thoughts on the survey, feel free to share here”. These questions asked participants to elaborate on their views about male dancers in classical forms, perceptions of authenticity, and any observed societal attitudes they believed were relevant. The aim was to gather detailed, reflective responses that revealed the nuance behind the numerical trends.

These responses formed the basis for thematic analysis. Key phrases, ideas, and patterns were manually coded to identify dominant narratives and emerging themes, such as discomfort with non-normative gender presentation, the role of family and social support, and digital visibility of male dancers.

3.3 Sampling techniques

This study employed a non-probability, snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. The survey was initially disseminated through social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, as well as academic mailing lists and personal contacts. Participants were encouraged to share the survey link within their own networks, which allowed for broader outreach across diverse demographics.

A total of 72 responses were collected. Of these, 50 participants identified as female, 22 as male. The age range of participants spanned from none below 30, 13.9% age 30-42, 76.4% age 42-60, and 9.7% above

age 60.

Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and all participants were required to provide digital informed consent before proceeding. The survey emphasized anonymity and confidentiality, ensuring that no personally identifiable information was collected or stored. All responses were securely stored and accessed only by the primary researcher for analysis.

3.4 Procedure

The survey was conducted using Google Forms and remained open for a period of two weeks, from July 1 to July 15, 2025. Participants accessed the survey through a sharable link circulated via social media (Instagram, WhatsApp), academic circles, and personal networks. The landing page of the form included a detailed consent form, outlining the purpose of the research, assurance of anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw at any point. Only individuals who provided explicit digital consent were allowed to proceed with the survey.

The average completion time for the survey was approximately 8–10 minutes. Participants reported their personal demographics, then completed multiple-choice items about their experience with classical dance, multiple-choice opinion items, and ending with open-ended items. The form was mobile and desktop accessible, allowing for a wider demographic reach. Once completed, responses were automatically recorded in a Google Sheets document and later downloaded into Microsoft Excel for analysis.

All data was stored in a password-protected device, accessible only to the primary researcher. Ethical guidelines concerning voluntary participation, data protection, and confidentiality were strictly followed throughout the research process.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Overview of Data and Respondent Demographics

A total of 72 participants voluntarily responded to the survey, with 100% providing informed consent for their data to be used in this research. Among the respondents, 69.4% identified as female and 30.6% as male, with no participants selecting non-binary or “prefer not to say.” In terms of age, none of the participants were below 30; 13.9% were between the ages of 30 and 42, 76.4% between 42 and 60, and 9.7% above 60. The participants came from a range of occupational backgrounds, with the most common being business (15.3%), followed by software engineering and homemaking (8.3% each), law (5.6%), and human resources and finance (4.2% each). A variety of other roles such as consultants and directors were represented in smaller numbers. Furthermore, no participants identified as dancers. This is an important limitation, as it indicates a lack of insider or practitioner perspectives, which might influence the interpretation of the art form.

1. Dance Experience and Exposure:

Experience with Classical Dance: 33.3% have personal experience

2. Attendance at Performances:

In-person: 87.5%

Online: 1.4%

Never attended: 11.1%

This demographic and experiential overview reveals that while the majority of participants have been exposed to classical dance, their perspectives are primarily those of audience members or observers rather

than practitioners. This context is crucial for interpreting their views on gender, caste, and class in the sections that follow.

4.2 Perceptions on Gender and Dance

One of the central objectives of this study was to examine how respondents perceive the gendered nature of Indian classical dance forms, particularly Bharatanatyam and Odissi. The responses indicate a strong and persistent association between these art forms and femininity. When asked which gender is most commonly associated with these forms, 75% of respondents selected “female,” while none identified them as “mostly male.” Only 25% believed both genders were equally represented. This reveals that gendered assumptions are embedded in public perceptions of classical dance, with femininity occupying a default position of legitimacy. Further, when asked to rate the perceived femininity of classical dance on a 5-point scale, nearly three-fourths of respondents placed the forms on the higher end of the femininity spectrum (ratings 4 and 5). This aligns with the aesthetic coding of classical dance, such as costuming, facial expressions, and narrative roles, which have traditionally leaned towards themes culturally associated with women. These gendered elements create implicit barriers for male performers, who are viewed as deviating from the norm rather than participating within it.

This is further supported by the responses to the question of whether participants felt surprised when they saw a male dancer performing Bharatanatyam or Odissi. A striking 66.7% of respondents selected the highest level of surprise. This suggests that male participation is still seen as an anomaly, and that audiences may approach such performances with preconceived notions of gender-appropriate art forms. These reactions are not necessarily rooted in overt bias but stem from long-standing cultural patterns where visibility and representation of male dancers have been limited. When asked whether male dancers are judged or stereotyped, 69.4% of participants leaned towards agreement. This shows that a majority of the sample recognizes, at least to some extent, the existence of differential treatment based on gender. However, the distribution of responses suggests a degree of ambivalence. While some respondents strongly affirmed the existence of bias, others expressed uncertainty or neutrality. This mixed pattern indicates that while gendered expectations are visible, they are not always consciously acknowledged.

There is also a growing openness to challenging these norms. Over half (56.9%) of the participants stated that classical dance should be gender-neutral. However, 29.2% still believed that certain roles or movements should be gender-specific. This points to a tension between progressive ideas of inclusivity and the persistence of traditional frameworks. When asked if male dancers should express emotions in the same way as female dancers, a combined 86.1% supported either exact similarity or a mostly similar approach. This reflects an encouraging shift in attitudes, suggesting that audiences may be increasingly willing to accept expressive diversity in male performers.

4.3 Caste and Class Perceptions

While classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Odissi are celebrated as national cultural heritage, the survey data indicates that public perception is divided on whether caste and class play an active role in shaping access or visibility within these art spaces. When asked whether upper-caste or wealthier individuals have more access in classical dance, only 13.9% of respondents agreed, while 41.7% disagreed and a significant 44.4% reported uncertainty. This high level of uncertainty is particularly notable as it suggests that caste and class hierarchies may not be easily visible to those outside of the performance field. The ambiguity in responses shows a broader cultural pattern where caste and class privileges are naturalized and therefore rendered invisible. While institutional access, such as admission into prestigious dance schools, or visibility at high-profile festivals, often correlates with caste and class privilege, these

dynamics are not always consciously registered by observers. The absence of explicit recognition from a large section of respondents reflects this structural invisibility. It also demonstrates how audiences may consume performances without critically engaging with the social filters that determine who gets to perform in the first place.

The question of whether caste and class influence the perception of gender expression in classical dance also revealed certain patterns. On a 5-point scale, the majority of participants leaned towards the lower end, with 48.6% selecting “1” (no effect). Another 36.2% selected the middle values (2 or 3), suggesting ambivalence or limited awareness. Only 15.2% rated caste and class as having a strong effect (4 or 5). This data shows a disconnect between visible social realities within classical dance spaces, where dominant caste groups often influence who is seen as legitimate, even though most people may not be fully aware of it.

The under-recognition of caste-based filters may also be due to the symbolic elevation of classical dance as a neutral or apolitical space. Because these forms are associated with spirituality, tradition, and national pride, they are often imagined to exist outside everyday social inequalities. However, scholarship and insider accounts point to the contrary: caste capital often determines who is seen as an “authentic” or “ideal” performer, and who remains on the margins. The high number of “not sure” responses suggests that caste and class influence is present but rarely talked about directly. The data shows that while people are starting to notice gender bias in classical dance, they often overlook how caste and class also shape access. Because of this, male dancers from marginalized backgrounds may not have their challenges seen or acknowledged, which helps keep existing inequalities in place.

4.4 Visibility and Cultural Impact

One of the most revealing areas in the survey concerned how audiences perceive the visibility of male dancers and the broader cultural role of classical dance. When asked whether male dancers should have more visibility in classical dance spaces, 72.2% of respondents agreed, while only 1.4% disagreed. The remaining 26.4% were unsure. This support suggests a general public openness to diversifying the representation in classical dance, particularly in terms of gender. It also indicates that the issue may lie less in public resistance and more in institutional or systemic inertia, male dancers are not lacking in support, but perhaps in opportunities and platforms.

This finding contrasts sharply with earlier sections where many respondents rated classical dance as highly feminine and expressed surprise at seeing male performers. This shows how audiences are conditioned to associate classical dance with femininity, yet they are also willing, and in many cases eager, to embrace male dancers when they are visible. Exposure seems to change how people think. The data shows that when people see more male dancers, they are more likely to accept them and rethink gender roles in classical dance. Another key question explored whether classical dance can challenge traditional gender roles. Responses were spread along a 5-point scale, with 43.1% selecting the middle value (3). However, 22.2% strongly agreed and 20.8% agreed that classical dance could indeed challenge conventional gender norms, altogether making up 43% on the affirmative side. Only 13.8% expressed disagreement. The responses, though mixed, are mostly positive. They suggest that audiences see classical dance as something that could help bring social change, even if they aren't sure it's happening yet.

The responses suggest that while public attitudes toward classical dance remain influenced by traditional views on gender, there is also significant openness to change. Male dancers aren't held back by audience hostility, but by being underrepresented and not getting enough support from institutions. With broader media coverage, more frequent male-led performances, and inclusive educational spaces, the public

appears willing to adapt its perceptions. However, this shift depends heavily on visibility, not just of male dancers, but of dancers from diverse caste, class, and gender backgrounds.

4.5 Qualitative Data Analysis

To complement the statistical findings, open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic coding. Participants were asked three qualitative questions concerning their perceptions of male classical dancers, suggestions for support, and any final thoughts about gender and dance. Responses were manually coded to identify recurring ideas, emotional tones, and implicit attitudes. The analysis yielded several key themes, discussed below.

4.6 Perceptions of Male Classical Dancers

Most responses showed a mix of curiosity, appreciation, and influence from social norms. Many participants gave neutral or positive answers, saying they judged dancers based on skill or grace, not gender. Some said that dance should be seen as an art form beyond gender. One respondent noted, “A male classical dancer is an artist. It has got nothing to do with gender.” At the same time, other responses reflected strong links between classical dance and femininity. Some described male dancers as “effeminate” or felt they should “adapt the dance to their gender,” showing that gendered views are still common. A few said they were surprised to see a male dancer, but that the feeling faded with more exposure. This suggests that gender expectations affect first impressions, but these can change with familiarity. Some participants mentioned media, such as the film *Rocky Aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani*, as helping them change their views. This shows that popular culture can play a role in shifting how people think about gender in classical dance.

4.7 Suggestions for Support

When asked how male dancers could be supported, most respondents suggested increasing visibility, awareness, and media presence. Their suggestions included giving male dancers more stage time, promoting them in the media, and introducing classical dance to boys in schools. Many also pointed out that family and social attitudes discourage male participation and need to change. Some responses recommended using celebrity endorsements or featuring male dancers in mainstream entertainment to help normalize their presence. Others called for institutional changes like more solo male performances, better funding, and dedicated platforms for male dancers. A few respondents said classical dance should be presented as not only graceful but also as a form of strength and storytelling, qualities more often associated with masculinity. A small number of participants disagreed with the idea that male dancers need extra support. Instead, they said dance should be gender-neutral, and it is the institutions — not the dancers — that need to adapt.

4.8 Broader Reflections on Gender in Dance

The final open-ended question invited any remaining reflections on the topic. While many opted out (responding “N/A”), the responses that were shared further reinforced the earlier findings. Several participants emphasized that dance should be talent-based, not determined by gender. One wrote, “Dance has no gender, it is an expression of rhythm, emotion, and storytelling.” Another stressed the historical precedent for male dancers, noting how Krishna and other male deities are central figures in Indian dance traditions. There was also recognition that social biases persist, but change is possible. Respondents urged that both male and female dancers be given equal stage time and cultural respect, and that gender neutrality in dance education and representation would help normalize broader participation.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Perceptions of Male Classical Dancers

The responses to the first set of survey and interview questions reveal a complex and layered landscape of perceptions surrounding male performers in classical Indian dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Odissi. Despite the increasing visibility of male dancers in contemporary spaces, the data indicates that traditional gender associations remain deeply embedded in public perception. A significant portion of participants expressed initial surprise or unfamiliarity with male dancers in these styles, especially given the prevailing belief that such forms are “feminine” in nature. This is not surprising, as earlier sections have established that most respondents associate Bharatanatyam and Odissi primarily with women. However, the qualitative data adds nuance to this binary by showing that this surprise does not always translate into rejection or discomfort. Instead, many respondents articulated admiration for male performers who exhibited grace and skill, with statements such as “I feel wow even being a male he is performing so well” or “Watching someone perform with elegance is always a pleasure irrespective of gender.”

At the same time, the internalized association of classical dance with femininity often led to ambivalent or conflicted responses. Some participants admitted to perceiving male dancers as “effeminate” or struggling with the dissonance between gender expectations and the movements traditionally taught in these dance forms. These views point to social conditioning, where grace, fluidity, and expressive emoting are seen as feminine-coded traits, making it challenging for audiences to reconcile them with male bodies. One respondent noted, “We often tend to associate classical Indian dance with feminine movements... so the mind feels a slight disconnect.” Importantly, several respondents attempted to rationalize their support by citing historical male icons in classical dance (e.g., “Indian history is filled with legendary male performers such as Birju Maharaj and A. Shankar”), suggesting that the validation still depends on precedent or cultural authority rather than purely on artistic merit.

A particularly revealing theme is the notion of masculine adaptation, the idea that men should “adapt the dance according to their gender.” This suggests a lingering belief that emotional expressiveness and movement vocabularies should align with gender norms, and any perceived deviation may attract ridicule or unease. Yet this is countered by several progressive responses that reject gendering of art altogether, asserting that dance is an expressive medium that transcends binaries. Perhaps most telling is that many respondents emphasized neutrality, stating that they “just see them as dancers” and appreciate the art regardless of who performs it. These views represent a generational or cultural shift toward recognizing classical dance not as a gendered performance but as a human expression, even if social stigma has not fully disappeared.

5.2 Societal Judgments and Gender Norms

A recurring theme in the data is the influence of gender norms on how male performers in Bharatanatyam and Odissi are perceived by audiences. While several respondents expressed neutral or positive views, many associated classical dance with traditionally feminine traits such as grace, softness, and emotional expression. This association led to responses that framed male dancers as either “brave” for participating or “effeminate” for not conforming to conventional masculine behaviour. Such perceptions can be interpreted through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not a static identity but a set of actions repeated within a regulated framework of norms (Butler, 1990). In this context, classical dance becomes a site where these performances of gender are visibly scrutinized. The stylized movements and emotional expressiveness of Bharatanatyam and Odissi conflict with

dominant ideals of masculinity that emphasize restraint, strength, and control, concepts aligned with Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).

While some viewed male classical dancers as inspiring, others suggested that men should adapt their expression or movement to align more closely with masculine ideals. Several participants commented that male dancers appeared "too feminine" or should perform in a way "more suited to their gender," reinforcing the idea that certain movements are inherently gendered. These views indicate that audience discomfort often arises not from the performance itself but from the perceived gender incongruity of the performer. The emphasis on exceptionalism is also significant. Male dancers were frequently described as "breaking stereotypes" or as notable for choosing a path "not typically associated with men." This framing implies that male presence in classical dance is still considered "outside the norm", despite the historical role of men in shaping these art forms. Scholars such as Meduri (1996) and Srinivasan (1985) have shown that colonial and post-colonial restructuring of classical dance contributed to its feminization, distancing it from its more inclusive, ritual-based roots.

Importantly, not all respondents reinforced gender binaries. A smaller but notable group rejected gendered interpretations altogether, asserting that dance should be viewed as an art form independent of the performer's gender. However, these views were not as common, indicating that while there is some shift in public perception, dominant gender expectations still remain generally influential. Male performers must negotiate both artistic standards and societal expectations, navigating an environment in which deviation from masculine norms may affect both audience reception and professional legitimacy.

5.3 Role of Visibility, Media, and Representation

The digital era has introduced new dynamics in the visibility and representation of male dancers in Indian classical forms. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook allow dancers to present their work to wider audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers like institutions, sabhas, and cultural committees. Survey responses highlighted this dual impact, greater reach, but also greater scrutiny.

Many participants noted that social media visibility could normalize male participation by showcasing talent, diversity, and commitment. However, others emphasized that online content reinforces existing gender expectations. For instance, male dancers who appear "too expressive" or whose physicality contradicts dominant masculine ideals are often critiqued in comment sections or dismissed. This reinforces what Banaji (2017) terms the "visual economy of culture," in which bodies are evaluated through rapid consumption and normative bias. The data also reflect that visibility does not equate to acceptance. While 72.2% of respondents supported increased visibility for male dancers, a significant proportion (26.4%) remained ambivalent. This suggests that although visibility is crucial for challenging stereotypes, it must be accompanied by shifts in public discourse and representation strategies. Visibility, on its own, can sometimes exacerbate the problem by making non-normative performers more vulnerable to social judgment.

The discussion aligns with Vannini and Williams' (2009) argument that authenticity in digital identity is performative and constantly negotiated. Male dancers must not only present their art but also manage how their gender expression is perceived. Those who align with dominant norms of masculinity, through costume, body language, or choreography, tend to receive more positive engagement. In contrast, dancers who experiment with fluidity or challenge traditional boundaries often face some sort of criticism. Furthermore, there is a visible absence of mainstream media endorsement. While a few respondents cited popular films (e.g., *Rocky Aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani*) as useful interventions, most emphasized the need for more structured representation in cinema, television, and public programming. The data indicate that

when male classical dancers are represented by respected public figures or included in high-profile performances, social perceptions shift positively.

5.4 Intersections of Caste, Class, and Masculinity

The intersection of caste, class, and gender norms plays a significant role in shaping both access to and legitimacy within Indian classical dance. Although the dance forms of Bharatanatyam and Odissi are popularly celebrated as markers of cultural heritage, they remain closely tied to upper-caste, urban, and often English-speaking milieus. Survey data revealed that 44.4% of respondents were unsure whether caste and class affected access to classical dance, while 41.7% believed it did not. Despite this, when asked to rate the influence of caste/class on how gender is perceived in dance, a notable percentage gave mid-to-high scores, with 6.9% marking a “5” indicating a strong effect. This suggests a disconnect between conscious awareness and the latent impact of social structures, a dynamic reflected in Kusuma’s (2018) and EPW’s (2021) findings that caste often operates in subtle, coded ways within classical dance institutions.

Historically, male dancers from dominant caste and class backgrounds have enjoyed more freedom to explore dance without the burden of questioning legitimacy. These dancers are often perceived as “reviving” or “preserving” culture, particularly when their gender presentation aligns with mainstream notions of strength and restraint. In contrast, male dancers from non-dominant castes, if visible at all, face additional scrutiny not only for performing a feminized art form but for entering a space that has been distanced from its lower-caste origins. This stratification mirrors Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, where dominant ideals of masculinity intersect with class and caste privilege. In dance, this means that a male dancer’s legitimacy is shaped not just by skill but by how well his body, mannerisms, and social identity conform to elite expectations. Those outside this frame often encounter barriers in institutional training, mentorship, and performance opportunities.

While some respondents in the open ended questions spoke positively about male dancers, their praise often included caveats such as appearing “graceful” or “subtle,” suggesting an implicit standard shaped by caste-coded notions of refinement. The few responses that expressed skepticism or discomfort often aligned with dominant narratives about the appropriate behavior and appearance of male performers.

5.5 Evolving Public Attitudes and the Question of Legitimacy

One of the more nuanced findings of the study relates to how public attitudes toward male classical dancers are changing, even as they remain connected to traditional factors of legitimacy. While quantitative data showed that 66.7% of respondents were “very surprised” to see a man perform Bharatanatyam or Odissi, the open-ended responses provided a more layered perspective. Many participants expressed appreciation and respect for male dancers, often citing skill and dedication as primary evaluative criteria. However, this acceptance was still conditional, as it was tied to how well the male dancer adhered to certain expectations of grace, control, or appropriate masculinity. This conditionality aligns with Goffman’s (1959) theory of self-presentation and Vannini’s (2009) concept of symbolic boundary management, where individuals must continuously manage how they are perceived in relation to cultural norms. For male dancers, legitimacy is not simply a function of technical mastery; it is deeply tied to how convincingly they perform tradition, not just on stage, but in their social identity. The need to appear “authentic,” as defined by longstanding cultural ideals of gender and caste, continues to act as a gatekeeping mechanism in both institutional and popular settings.

Several respondents noted that they viewed classical dance as gender-neutral or expressive art, but this rhetoric of equality often coexists with implicit biases. For instance, suggestions that male dancers should

“adapt movements to suit their gender” or “appear more masculine” indicate that traditional notions of performance aesthetics remain influential. This reinforces the idea that acceptance does not necessarily equate to equity; rather, it often involves conformity to standards. Interestingly, some responses also reflected shifts in cultural framing, particularly among younger participants or those exposed to male performers through media. Mentions of film portrayals, like *Rocky Aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani*, were associated with increased openness toward male dancers, pointing to the role of popular culture in reshaping public discourse.

6. Limitations

As with any research study, this investigation is subject to a number of limitations that must be acknowledged in order to provide a balanced and transparent interpretation of the findings. While the study offers valuable insight into the intersection of gender, caste, and classical dance in contemporary India, several factors constrain the scope and generalizability of the results.

The sample was collected through snowball sampling and distributed on a digital platform (Forms), which inherently favored a more urban, educated, and internet-literate population. A major limitation is that none of the respondents identified as professional classical dancers. This absence limits the insider perspectives that would offer deeper, practice-based insights into the classical dance space. Consequently, much of the data reflects audience perceptions rather than practitioner experiences, which may skew the analysis toward external interpretations of dance and other gender norms.

All data were self-reported, introducing the possibility of response bias. Participants may have provided answers they deemed socially acceptable rather than entirely truthful. Particularly in the context of sensitive issues like caste privilege or gender roles, respondents might have downplayed prejudices or overstated progressive views. The influence of social desirability bias is especially important when analyzing perceptions of masculinity and authenticity in classical dance, where cultural taboos may silence more critical or conservative views.

Most respondents were from urban or semi-urban areas, limiting the study's ability to account for regional and rural variation. Classical dance practices and gender norms may differ significantly across regions of India, particularly in spaces where folk traditions, community performances, or caste-based occupational histories play a more prominent role. The absence of diverse regional representation restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader national context.

The data collection took place over a short, fixed period, (specifically over a week) and captured perceptions at a single moment in time. As social attitudes toward gender and caste in the arts are rapidly evolving, especially due to media, cinema, and digital exposure, the findings may not reflect long-term shifts or emerging generational changes. A longitudinal or comparative design might have revealed more nuanced trends in perception across time.

Although the qualitative data added depth to the quantitative findings, the open-ended questions were brief and self-administered. Without follow-up interviews, it was not possible to clarify ambiguous responses, explore contradictions, or delve deeper into personal narratives. As a result, while recurring themes could be identified, the level of interpretive richness was somewhat limited.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Policy and Practice Recommendations

Governments, institutions, and communities must reimagine policy not just as a tool for economic growth

but as a vehicle to foster gender inclusivity and cultural transformation within artistic and performative spaces. In light of the research findings, several interlinked and necessary recommendations emerge to support men's participation in Indian classical dance and address structural and perceptual inequities. Policies must begin with early education. Integrating classical dance into school curricula across genders, rather than positioning it as a feminised extracurricular activity, can help dismantle stereotypes from an early age. Educational institutions should actively invite male practitioners for workshops and demonstrations, normalising their presence and creating visible role models for young boys. Additionally, institutional dance bodies and cultural ministries must increase funding and access for all genders. Scholarships, fellowships, and awards should be gender-inclusive and, where necessary, implement corrective action to promote participation from marginalised genders and castes. Auditions and admissions into dance academies must be evaluated for bias and revised to ensure equitable treatment.

Media representation also requires critical intervention. Visual and narrative portrayals of classical dance in mainstream cinema and advertisements have often reinforced its alignment with femininity. Filmmakers, advertisers, and content creators should consciously include male dancers and gender-diverse performers in scripts, documentaries, and campaigns to challenge hegemonic norms. Community-level programs can also play a transformative role. Local dance sabhas, community centres, and performance festivals must explicitly reach out to and platform male dancers. Programs should include panels or interactive sessions where male artists share their journeys, thereby personalising and humanising their presence in the field. Support systems must also be extended to address the psychological and social barriers men face. Helplines, counselling groups, or peer forums facilitated through dance institutions can help address alienation or stigma experienced by male dancers. Moreover, academic institutions and researchers must commit to more longitudinal and intersectional studies focusing on the participation of men and non-binary individuals in classical arts.

8. Future research

While this study provides substantial insights into the perceptions surrounding gender and classical Indian dance, it also opens several avenues for future research. One notable direction would be to explore how these perceptions differ across rural and urban contexts. Given the socio-cultural and economic diversity between these settings, future studies could investigate whether traditional gender expectations in classical dance are more rigidly upheld in rural areas compared to urban counterparts, where exposure to global media and modern discourse may allow for more fluid understandings of gender roles.

Another promising area involves investigating the long-term impact of representation in classical dance on intergenerational attitudes toward gender expression. If young audiences regularly witness diverse gender performances, particularly in traditionally gendered art forms like Bharatanatyam or Odissi, it would be worth studying whether this exposure leads to more inclusive and egalitarian beliefs over time within those communities. Cross-cultural studies would also enrich this field significantly. Comparative research examining perceptions of gender in classical or traditional dance forms across countries, such as Japan's Noh theatre, Spain's Flamenco, or Indonesia's Legong dance, may illuminate how cultural specificity shapes the gendering of artistic expression. Such analysis could also reveal shared global patterns in how tradition and patriarchy intersect within performative spaces.

Qualitative studies that centre male classical dancers themselves, especially those who identify as queer or who challenge gender norms in their performances, could provide vital insider perspectives currently missing from the discourse. Their lived experiences could offer depth and nuance that public perception



alone cannot capture, potentially challenging many of the assumptions held by observers and audiences alike.