

Gendered Socialization: Patriarchal Attitudes Towards Bharatanatyam

Nandini Mukherjee Lecturer –
Basanti Devi College
nandinimukherjee82@gmail.com

Present study tries to give focus on the factors which are changing patriarchal attitude which is well evident in this segment of Indian culture. As such, the art form of dance has become an environment for women to discuss debate and evaluate issues and their outcomes to build up the connection between knowledge and action. However, to negotiate the culture-market successfully, it needs to earn the social support in a way that will permit to maintain its artistic importance.

Harmonious styles and traditions play important roles in the construction and expression of cultural identity. At the same time, the status of the traditional anonymous dances is changing with new notion of artistic set up. In this scenario, how do the Bharatanatyam Dancers survive with their cultural legacy?

Secondly, the power politics between existing dance form and changing nature.

Thirdly, artistic traditions are also deliberately re-described and reinvented to create new audiences and markets for them. Hence how patriarchy imposes restrictions and promotes the changing form of dance?

The traditional language of dance dynamics presents men as carriers, enablers, and restrictors of the female movements; while women are the ones being enabled, guided, supported, and restricted. In many cases, we are observing that women are being projected as a commodity in many dances (like belly dance, strip tease etc).¹ Mass media is largely constructed around the spectacle principle, ideologically coded with patriarchal hierarchy, domination, and power struggles. Feminist art, to this day, is more concerned with deconstructing, mocking, mimicking, exaggerating and exposing patriarchy for what it is, rather than constructing positive and inspiring visions of femininity.² Basically dance is considered as feminine field but history shows that it is very much male dominated and indirectly controlled by the need of our society.

Society always tries to create gender hegemony. It representing the conceptualized manhood that typically projected the dominant position of men and subordinate position of women. W.C. McGrew told that – “Culture is considered to be group – specific behavior that is acquired, at least is part, from social influences.”³ Therefore, some functions and classifications are socially accepted as

‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’. Thus, in every society, gender roles are considered to be socially constructed for individuals of a specific sex in the context of various cultural set ups. ⁴ For that reason, male and female are typically projected by others as binary and opposites of each other. Even in dance, we also notice that kind of discriminations. One way to interpret **Simone de**

Beauvoir’s state that one is not born but rather becomes a woman is to take it as a claim about gender socialization: females become women through a procedure whereby they get feminine qualities and learn feminine behavior.⁵ Masculinity and femininity are products of social support by which individuals are brought up in a different way. Therefore, this notion of gender construction reflects in the field of dance also.

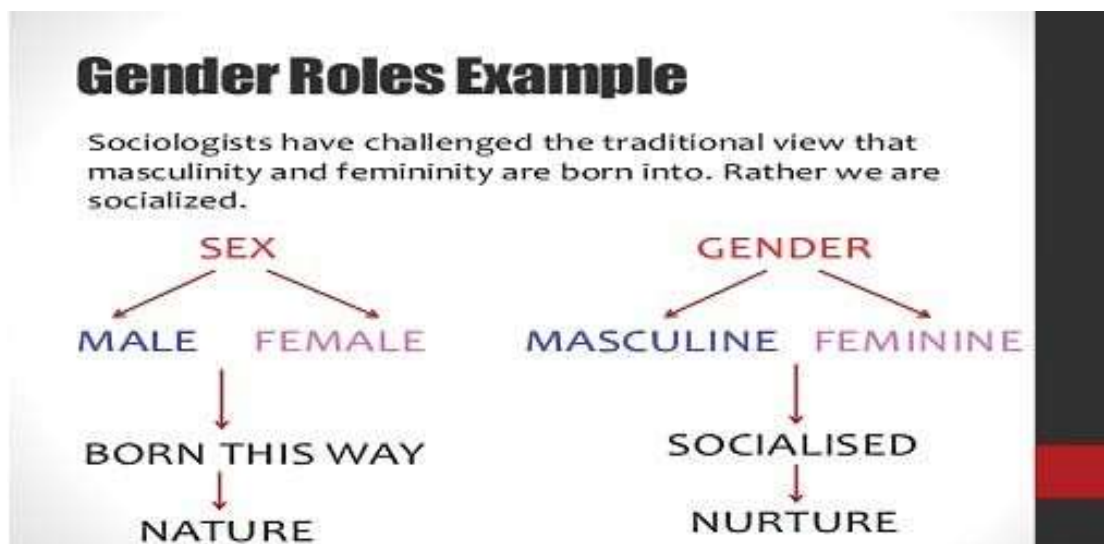


Figure 1. Gender Roles

We basically believe that women are weaker and sensitive than men. Even in classical dance, this part is not indistinct. There is a story that Shiva is the king of dance. His dancing symbolizes the creation, preservation and destruction (sristi, sthithi, laya).⁶ We do not know how long dance is considered primitive, but it can be deduced from the behavior of primitive tribes and the dancers took the best from their tradition.⁷ We further observe that gender discrimination is also prevailing in the field of dance and these divisions exist in classical, folk and modern dance. In addition to age, gender is one of the universal dimensions on which status differences are based. Unlike sex, which is a biological concept, gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow. According to Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, gender is the “costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance”.⁸ The reality of women’s lives remains invisible and this invisibility persists at all levels beginning with the family to the nation. Although geographically men and women share the same space, they live in different worlds. The mere fact that “**Women hold up half the sky**”- does not appear to give them a position of dignity and equality.

Dance in India has seep into several other realms like poetry, sculpture, architecture, literature, music and theatre. The earliest archaeological evidence is a beautiful statuette of a dancing girl; dated around 6000 B.C. Bharata’s Natya Shastra (believed to be penned between second century B.C. and second century A.D.). In India it was a custom prevalent in Southern part of the country.

In this system, girls were dedicated to temples in the name of gods and goddesses. The girls were then onwards known as ‘Devadasis’ meaning servant of god. These Devadasis were supposed to live the life of celibacy. All the requirements of Devadasis were fulfilled by the grants given to the temples. In temple they used to spend their time in worshipping the god and by singing and dancing for the god. Some kings used to invite temple dancers to perform at their court for the pleasure of courtiers.



Figure 2: Temple dancers

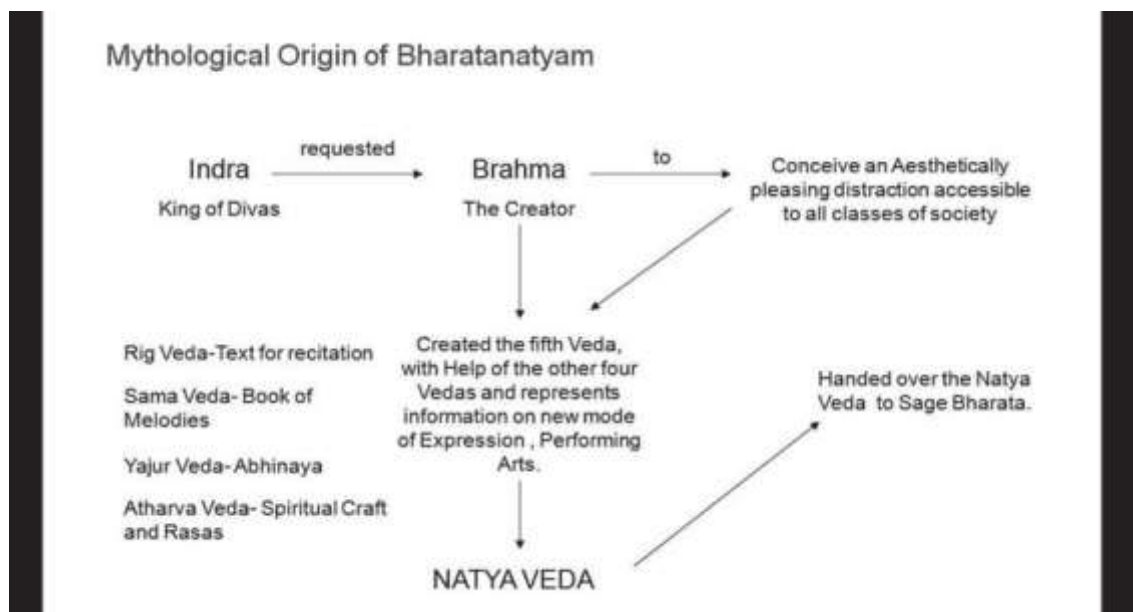


Figure 3: Origin of Bharatanatyam

As the temples became poorer and lost their patron kings (and, in some cases, were destroyed), the Devadasis were forced into a life of poverty, misery, and, in some cases, prostitution. During

the British rule (1858 – 1947), they banned Sadir in India, confusing it with nautch dance which was performed by prostitutes. “The devadasi seemingly lost a battle in which she was ironically relegated to the sidelines. In 1930,

Bill No. 5 was passed by which Devadasis were absolved of their services to the temples; their material interests were then converted to land grants or deeds (pattas) to be administered by the government. Devadasis had previously been allotted temple land shares as part of their dedication and service. Furthermore, men could not previously inherit these shares (as could the dedicated sisters), the process of converting traditional rights to public land (attached to office) into private taxable property favored the men over their womenfolk as men controlled the marketplace and could purchase the previously unavailable land. Furthermore, as part of this “liberating” process, the “freed” devadasi was often forced to convert her remaining wealth into a dowry in order to attract a husband and, thereby, acquire social respectability. In

1947, the Congress Ministry dealt a final death blow to the devadasi, passing the Madras Devadasi Act which officially abolished all temple dedications”⁹.



Figure 4: Dancers performing at court for the pleasure of courtiers.

Rukiminidevi Arundale, a member of a dominant Brahmin family, is credited with reviving the art form and bringing it to the stage in the year 1933 (first time performance of the dance form called Sadir). In 1936 she founded Kalakshetra (an academy of dance and music) and started teaching a simplified style of her own creation called Kalakshetra style. She was trying to re shape this dance form with a new wide aspect. So that dancers give a platform to show their talent and obtain deserved social support. The knowledge of Bharatanatyam in Indian society encouraged a variety of styles of the dance to be familiar such as *Pandanallur*, *Vazhuvur*, and *Thanjavur*. Bharatanatyam slowly got the international recognition too. Today’s Bharatanatyam is basically amalgamation of four style i.e. *Sadir Natyam*, *Bhagavata Melam*, *Kuravanji* and *Kuchipudi*. It is one of the popular dance forms of India. “Significantly, when the dance is disconnected from its divine potential, it may sit as an inanimate object, ready for commoditization and control. Most of the time, the theme involves shedding dependence on the male. Even in today most of the teachers, composers, choreographers, musicians, and organizers are male. Different types of changes are

noticed in the dance pattern. However, a shift is happening to patriarchal attitudes too. But deviation from the norm by a woman either in her personal or dance life is not looked at very favorably even in the era of development. As a result, dancers are trying to survive with the patriarchal societal setup. The temple erotic dancer or the devadasi’s *dasi attam* which was abolished was revived and sanctioned Brahminical decorum as Bharatanatyam. Preserved with domestic, religious and social acceptance, it enjoys the spotlight and remains an interesting twist in the world of dance performers in India. The paradox is that the dance itself underwent a change, from the erotic to the socially accepted dance stature”¹⁰



Figure 5: Modern Bharatanatyam dance style

In present day, dancers require the skill which will entertain the audience according to their needs. Today, dance is performed in theatres and rarely in temples, in front of the audiences of varied nature. Electric lights have replaced in place of oil lamps. The duration of performances has been shortened so that the audiences can catch the last bus home. Ancient sculptures portray women bare above the waist, with a loosely-draped dhoti-style garment tied below. But nowadays costumes are altered. This is reflected in the tight costumes that emphasize important body parts, the positions and stances that the woman is expected to take, the speed at which she is expected to perform to the loud banging of the mridangam and the themes. Media coverage has also been expanded. To earn money, dancers start teaching early in their careers. These situations have created a descending curve of declining standard. However, a conflict between “Atma-anubhavam” and “Rasanubhava” is up-and-coming. The patriarchal society always tries to portray women as an obedient and submissive one.

With the development of market and the globalization of media, the blow of popular culture eventually has a disruptive influence both upon the folk and elite forms of traditional culture. Culture is then

increasingly converted into commodity. Not it’s content but its packaging and marketability that matters the most. Bharatanatyam is now open for innovation and creation. It is not bad but problem is inappropriate innovations destroy the artistic form and rhythm. Though the Nattuvanans are the custodian of it but their numbers are falling. Thus a gap is visible in that segment. Popular culture alienates not only the artist from his art forms but also art from its organic link with the community. The two institutes which get deeply influenced by these changes are family and community. Though dance is concerned as a female domain, but patriarchal norms exist directly or indirectly, therefore, women are always being emphasized by the man making process. Dance in general, and Bharatanatyam in particular, are not exceptional.

Therefore, the scope of the research lies to find out the causes which are responsible to create binary between male and female. Therefore, female dancers are facing some difficulties to adjust themselves in this hegemonic gendered structure. Furthermore, the notion of gender is questioned by the theorists and researchers. At the end, the scope of works here provides a new lens into the intellectual, theoretical, and cultural lives of the dancers. It will provide a wide range of understanding by which research feedback will create a chance for further enquiry and analysis.



Figure 6: Bharatanatyam dance figure

End Notes: -

- ¹ Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, *A Century of Negotiations: The Changing Sphere of the Woman Dancer in India* New Delhi: Primus Books. 2011.
- ² Modern Dance and Gender Relations, posted on [March 11, 2010](#) by [Kat Sark](#), <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/2010/03/11/hello-world/>
- ³ 20th Century discourses from Wikipedia. <https://mail.google.com/mail/h/1um6imab204bu/view=att&th=130742d38a975a2d.....11/6/2011>
- ⁴ Satyabrata Chakraborty (Edt.), *Political Sociology*, Macmillan India Ltd., New Delhi, 2005.
- ⁵ V. Geetha, *Gender Stree* 2001.
- ⁶ Margaret Mead, *GENDER AND SOCIETY*, <http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/gender.html>.
- ⁷ Manjulika Roy Chowdhury, *Nritye Bharat*, Kolkata – G.M. Library, 1968
- ⁸ Narayan Shovona, *Indian Classical Dances*, Shubi Publication, 2005.
- ⁹ The Journal of Religion and Theatre, Pamyla A. Stiehl, '*Bharata Natyam: A Dialogical Interrogation of Feminist Voices in Search of the Divine Dance*'. Vol. 3, No. 2, page 275-302, Fall 2004 <http://www.rjournal.org>.
- ¹⁰ [From erotic to religious: Journey of dancers from pre-Independent times](#), Sudha G Tilak, *Hindustan Times*, Mumbai | Updated: Oct 18, 2014 06:38 IST.

References

1. Satyabrata Chakraborty (Edt.), *Political Sociology*, Macmillan India Ltd., New Delhi, 2005.
2. William M. Clements, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and FolkLife* (Vol. – 2), Greenwood press, Westport, Connecticut, London.
3. Manjulika Roy Chowdhury, *Nritye Bharat*, Kolkata – G.M. Library, 1968.
4. Narayan Shovona, *Indian Classical Dances*, Shubi Publication, 2005.
5. Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Banglar Lok Shanskriti*, National Book Trust of India, (4th edition) 2005.
6. Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, *A Century of Negotiations: The Changing Sphere of the Woman Dancer in India*, New Delhi: Primus Books. 2011.
7. Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf Jeanne, Perrault, and Jean Barman (Eds.). *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010.
8. Khokar, Mohan, "NATYA Bhagavata Mela and Kuchipudi." *Classical and Folk Dances of India*. Bombay: Marg Publications, 1963.
9. Rukmini Devi Arundale Birth Centenary Volume. Chennai: The Kalakshetra Foundation, 2004.
10. Kothari, Sunil, *Bharata Natyam*. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2000.

Picture Sources

1. <http://www.slideshare.net/WatHistory/1208-sociology>
2. http://acceleratedmotion.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/image_2a.jpg
3. http://www.coroflot.com/shalini_krishnan/Bharatanatyam-Emoticons-at-NID
4. <http://ngmaindia.gov.in/images/showcase/european/pic4-big.jpg>
5. https://0bharatanatyam.files.wordpress.com/2009/08/bharatanatyam_012_s.jpg
6. <http://www.icpabangalore.com/uploads/icpabangalore/Bharatanatyam.png>