

Breaking The Binary: Third-Gender Discrimination In Indian Classical Dance

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Abstract

As it is strongly embedded into the spiritual and the cultural traditions, there is a range of gender identities in which Indian classical dance is historically embedded. In ancient readings, temple iconography and mythologies, the non-binary interpretation of gender was not only tolerated, but admired, as it being performed by non-binary actors. Yet, this breadth of mainstream pedagogy and performance became eroded over time by the dogmatic binaries of colonial interventions and post-colonial conservatism.

Today, LGBTQ+ dancers, especially those that self-identify as third genders, experience persistently marginal educational and employment obstacles, both inside educational institutions and on stages. That is not true of the battles making a repossession of space by a group of artists who have been waiting, definitive and combative.

The present paper explores the sources of gendered fluidity in Indian classical dance, reports about third-gender dancers and a new policy agenda, pedagogical practice, and discourses. Going back to its hugging origins, Indian classical dance can break the threshold set on it and reclaim its mission and aim to mean a depiction of universal expression.

Keywords: Indian Classical Dance · *Nāṭyaśāstra* · Gender Fluidity · LGBTQ+ · *Ardhanārīśvara* · Inclusivity · Temple Iconography · Mythology · Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Not only is *Śāstrīya Nṛtya* Indian classical dance an activity of aestheticism, but it is also a divine incarnation of philosophy, piety and memory of the culture. The multiplicity of form, the multiplicity of feeling, the multiplicity of identity has been praised in the past, according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, by these and many other traditions. It was not dualistic in describing the dance, but was gender-fluid human experience-seeking with non-normative associations.

However, it was the colonial experience that destroyed such a comprehensive spirit. Third-gender performers nourished institutional memory and created fixed binary categories that would never permit third-gender performers to gain a footing within the Victorian regime of morality, legal proscriptions and missionary education. It is to revive that memory that the following paper is addressed, in view of the past history and paper documentation of current ills and execution of solutions.

Historical Context

This sense of belonging, which is left behind in Indian classical dance, is not present in any one of the longing lines today, though it owes its origins to the artistically and philosophically thought-through subcontinental tradition. In ancient text and temple sculpture, gender and identity were more of a continuum well before colonial structures put formal boundaries around bipolarity.

Bharata is the author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which describes the rules of drama, and never establishes strict gender norms. The nature of its characterizations and descriptions of emotional conditions allows subtle descriptions, not restricted to dichotomous descriptions. Neither so much a guide to techniques as an extrapolation of a world where performance is an act of human complexity.

Architecture of temples is in touch with this spirit. The *Ardhanārīśvara* statue of Chidambaram is one of the deepest symbols of duality—*Śiva* / *Pārvatī* in one body, neither bigger nor smaller than the other.



Figure 1: The sculpture of *Ardhanārīśvara* present at the Chidambaram temple, which represents the union of the powers of man and woman.

In other areas, the erotic scenes of *Khajurāho* and *Konārka* portray intimacy between same sexes in a graceful and dignified manner. These carvings do not exist in a vacuum, but are a component of a greater aesthetics which enjoyed love in all of its forms.



Figure 2: Sculpture of *Konārka* sun temple



Figure 3: Panel of *Khajurāho* temple describing intimate interactions between male-male. representing loving couple of men.

This inclusivity is reflected within literary sources. This is the *Mahābhārata* which brings forth then a warrior using the female name as *Śikhandī* but becomes a male later. His place in the *Kurukṣetra* conflict is stellar—not despite his change of gender, but due to that gender change.



Figure 4: *Śikhandī*, a warrior in the *Mahābhārata*, a transgender person whose identity is the determining factor of epic fate.

Works such as the *Kāmasūtra* and *Jayamaṅgalā* go to greater lengths. According to the *Vātsyāyana* treatise, third-gender persons (*trīyaka-prakṛti*) and same-sex relations belong to the human axis of existence. The commentary of 12th century by *Yāśodhara* even ratifies same-sex marriage based on love and trust.



Figure 5: Illustration on folio, contained in the *Kāmasūtra*, referring to emotional intimacy and gender diversity.

A cumulative study of these writings, however, shows that they comprise a cultural topology in regard to which no dichotomy of gendering, but rather a continuum, has been embodied in sculpture, scripture and stage.

Worked off and off colonial/legal power.

These laws were introduced by the British colonies, and Section 377 of Indian Penal Code states according to which relations between two people of the same sex were treated as a crime and gender difference became one of the pathologies. The discourse has been transformed by missionary education and Victorian morality which render (third)-gender performers deviant or immoral.

Many dance schools established at this time, most of them still extant today, embraced these norms of exclusivity. There was the destruction of the *Devadāsī* system, which used to be a tradition in high esteem, and along with it several third-gender performers. The stripping away was cultural, pedagogical, and not only legal but also spiritual.

Modern problems are bringing down the Third-Gender Dancers.

In present-day India, the exclusions of the third-gender dancers are stigmatized. Formal training is often made inaccessible because of institutional gatekeeping and biases against individuals. Students might also even experience micro aggressive discrimination on an admission, by being misgendered, being marginalized or excluded entry into performance opportunities.



Figure 6: The first transgender dance troupes in India are called Dancing Queens and they are performing during a pride there.

Third-gender artists have rarely been represented in public space; when it does, it is either a cloned representation, or a genuine addition. Already, such performers are reduced to marginal status, because of insufficient or no finances, professional confidence and psychological support.

Abhina Aher combines traditional language with contemporary gender speech and becomes an idol among younger gay and lesbian artists.

Nevertheless, third-gender dance practitioners still add to classical dance. Padma Shri awardee *Narthaki Nataraj* danced her way out of poverty and rejection, and learned *Bhāratanāṭyam*, and she redefines the *Bhāratanāṭyam* using oral teachings such as *Ardhanārīśvara* with deep implications.



Figure 7: *Narthaki Nataraj: Bhāgavata Natarāj* described as the embodiment of spiritual duality. They were not on the fringes but in the middle of the epics and were of an identity that accepted society.



Figure 8: *Abhina Aher* does a fusion work on identity and resilience.

Dr. Rose Muralikrishnan infuses the ideas of choreography with real life relying on her life experience, combining the traditional and the modern.



Figure 9: *Dr. Rose Muralikrishnan* gives a thematic presentation on transformation and healing. These artists break the mould, enrich the expressive language of Indian classical dance, and repossess space, with dignity.

Systematic Change.

There are many statements of the category of gender fluidity in Indian mythology. As the Goddess representing *Viṣṇu*, *Mohinī* attracts both demons and gods, which is a sort of goddess transformation. *Arjuna* has a female counterpart who is called by the name of *Brhannalā*, who was uneducated on dancing and music until *Virāṭaka* taught her in the musical court.



Figure 10: Mythical image of *Mohinī* in the form of goddess of fluidity as well as the goddess of temptation.

Reformations should be multi-layered in terms of the institutes of dance:

Curriculum Change: Included 3rd-gender stories, history, myths to curriculum.

Activities: Be a leader in anti-discrimination in admissions and recruiting.

Representation: Inform third-gen faculty, advisory and curatorial boards.

Collaborations: Relating to culturally-sensitive peer therapy/mentoring.

The works, films and dramas of third-gender artists are not exceptions, they are recitations of the long past procedure of a custom which once celebrated inclusiveness with admiration and reverence.

An Indian Erotic Sculptural Anthology.

Use performances and outreach to defy stereotypes and facilitate dialogue via public engagement.

CONCLUSION

Indian classical dance has to reestablish its paramount inclusive cultural heritage in order to be spiritually and culturally sanctified. It can break through limitations imposed on it by its own history and assert itself as a vehicle of universalization by honoring all identities, both past and present. The works, films and plays of the third-gender artist do not exist in a vacuum, but are the products of the ancient tradition when diversity might have been the glory to blindly, unquestioningly adhere to.

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