

# Bharatanatyam as a Medium of Social Change: Revisiting Gender and LGBTQ+ Inclusivity Through Dance

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## Abstract:

Bharatanatyam, one of India's most revered classical dance forms, has always been more than just an art—it has been a path to spiritual enlightenment, social empowerment, and cultural expression. Originating as Devadasiattam, it provided women with a sacred space for self-expression and societal respect in a deeply patriarchal society. This paper explores how Bharatanatyam, with its deep philosophical roots, can play a crucial role in addressing gender biases and fostering LGBTQ+ inclusivity in modern times.

By analyzing historical texts like the Natyashastra, the Kamasutra, and the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, this study highlights how Indian traditions historically acknowledged and respected non-binary identities. It examines how Bharatanatyam, with its deep philosophical and aesthetic foundations, can serve as a medium to reintroduce these inclusive perspectives into modern discourse.

**Keywords:** Bharatanatyam, Spirituality, Gender Bias, LGBTQ+ Inclusivity, Tiritiya Prakriti, Natyashastra, Indian Classical Dance, Body Politics, Dance Activism

## Introduction:

First of all we should understand the philosophy behind the origin of Classical dances. It is believed that it is gifted by the Gods, scripted by the Sages and Rishis and directly came out of the Vedas as mentioned in the "Natyottpatti katha" the first chapter of Natyashastra.

Bharatanatyam a classical dance form originated in the temples of Southern India, has a long history rooted in specific cultural and aesthetic traditions. Prior Bharatanatyam was known as 'Devadasiattam' literally translated as (dance of the God's servants). At the time period when women were not allowed to dance or perform, Devadasiattam gave a new perspective to look at 'deva dasis' (servants of God). In this patriarchal society 'Devadasiattam' gave equality to women and even more respect than men or Kings.

Now the question is why devasis had so much respect that even a King cannot compete it? It is because the Devadasis made the dance as the path of Salvation.

As it is known in Hindu philosophy that Salvation or Moksha is the ultimate target to achieve. 'Bramhachari' and 'Sanyasi' were considered as the most respected section of society. At that time period only men were given the path to proceed towards salvation through 'sanyas' (renunciation). The prestigious right of 'upnayan sanskar' (sacred thread ceremony) was reserved only for men and only they

had rights to recite the Vedas, Upnishads or granthas. Women were limited to household chores. In such a situation, 'Devadasittam' opened the way for the social respect for women, even higher than men.

Now the question arises that can Bharatanatyam influence the societal norms and gender biasness regarding LGBTQ+ issues as it has supported women empowerment in past. In the first chapter of Natyashastra it is mentioned that "Dance and drama has been descendant to Earth to show the right path to the human beings. According to the Natyashastra, dance is meant to influence the society.

In the Vedic society the Sanskrit term 'Tritiya Prakriti' or third nature, has been used to classify the third gender. The eunuchs have been an integral part of Indian society. In the ancient texts they were mentioned as guards and companions of Kings. The third sex are analyzed in the ancient text 'Kama Sutra' and broken down into several categories that are still visible today generally referred to as gays and lesbians. Hindu philosophy believes there are no accidents or errors and everything which nature has created has its own importance. Duality and conflict of thoughts are only shadow of divine dance of the supreme being. Every being is equal and has its own place in this universe. Everything originates from Brahma, resides in that Brahma and disappears in that Brahma.

However, there is an attempt to fit the character of the third gender into a limited framework. Bharatanatyam, through its dance and its philosophy of dance based on Hindu beliefs, can change this perspective. It can also participate in the LGBTQ+ discourse from an Indian perspective.

In these many years the minds have been conditioned regarding the Gender perceptions due to Historical reasons which has become the part of the culture too. The dichotomy of man, woman and LGBTQ+ was introduced by Gender Scholars as the concept of 'Body Politics'. Body politics implies that "the human body is itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped the histories and practices of containment and control". Any deviation from male standards marks was seen as inferior or wrong.

In the Vedic society the Sanskrit term 'Tritiya Prakriti' or third nature, has been used to classify the third gender. The eunuchs or hijras have been an integral part of Indian society. In the ancient texts they were mentioned as guards of harems, and as companions, by Kings and emperors.

The third sex are analyzed In the Kama Sutra and broken down into several categories that are still visible today generally referred to as gays and lesbians.

They were an important and integral part of the society. In Hinduism there are no accidents or errors and everything which nature has created has its own importance. They make a living by dancing and celebrating in births and marriages. It is said that they brought the Good Luck to the family where they go for the celebrations, it is still believed by the majority of the people. No celebration is considered complete without their participation and blessings.

In the Vedic era, they had quite a respect back then. They were not considered as a threat to the society. They were allowed to live, wear, talk as per their own will. For Lesbians there was a term 'Svarini' meaning independent women. They were not expected to accept a husband, it was up to them. The third gender were welcomed as a part of civilized Vedic society. Not only in the Vedic civilization, the importance of third gender has also been described in the greatest epics i.e. Ramayana and Mahabharata through the characters of Shikhandini, Brihnnala.

Later their status degraded by the time, and often they have to resort other means to make both ends meet. Gradually they were pushed out of the gender binary, so they had to start begging on the streets or jumped into prostitution, and then Men became the First Gender, Women the Second, and "Them" as the Third Gender. However, their community is again coming back to the mainstream. A member of the eunuch

community, Shabnam Mausi, was elected as a member of legislative assembly in 1999. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi a Bharatanatyam dancer and a Hijra right activist. Thus, there are names who are achieving their goals but only few of them we get to hear.

Rukmini Devi ji says that “Dance is the dangerous art because of its medium -body as its instrument”. Dance is not mere a physical activity. It is the fusion of four abhinayas “Angika” body as an instrument, “Vachika” verbal expressions “Aharya” dressing up like one and “Satvika” becoming one with the character. For attaining all four of these qualities the one needs to meditate and imbibe spirituality and discipline in their lives because the outward form is the visual sign of our inward personality. The dancer, through Abhinaya and Bhakti, becomes a vessel for divine expression, making the art a living form of devotion and worship.

The first introduction to dance is given by Lord Shiva himself as “Nataraja”. He performs the Cosmic dance “Tandava”, Krishna is known as “Natwar” he playfully dances and plays flute to attract living beings to connect with him and demonstrates the complete oneness of body and soul, that this oneness can be attained through dance. This is why dance is described as the language of God, not merely a physical activity.

Dance is a philosophy in itself and many learned scholars have said that through the dance one can get “Moksha” or salvation both to the audience and to the dancer, if they are properly tuned to it.

Rukmini Devi’s revival of Bharatanatyam was driven by her vision to reconnect the dance form with its spiritual roots. In her speeches, she frequently criticized the modification of classical dance, emphasizing its original purpose as a sacred art. She observed, “In the purest sense, Bharatanatyam is not about performance; it is about transformation”.

Time to time – Era to era, the face of classical dance has been changed and it is still changing. There is always a scope of betterment. But it is our responsibility to keep it’s purity as well as use it as a medium of changing the thought process of the society. As it is said in the greatest text (5<sup>th</sup> Veda) “Natyashastra by Bharat muni)” that ‘Dance and Drama has been descendant to Earth to teach the values, ethics, morality, do’s and don’ts to the local people, because they were having lack of awareness about how to lead the society. So through visualization they will learn to lead their lives. Classical dances are the best medium to influence the society rather than getting influenced by the society.

“Classical music and dance are not just for entertainment – they are designed to elevate your consciousness- Sadhguru”.

## Conclusion:

Bharatanatyam, with its profound philosophical roots and cultural significance, stands as more than just a classical dance form—it is a medium of self-expression, spiritual enlightenment, and societal transformation. Its origin as Devadasiattam empowered marginalized women in a patriarchal society, offering them a path to salvation and respect through devotion and art. Similarly, its foundational philosophy, grounded in concepts like Aham Brahmasmi (the unity of the individual soul with the universal essence), offers a vision of inclusivity that transcends social constructs, including gender. A dancer's world is not black or white, it's full of colors. When a dancer is on stage: He, She or They are the in charge. It doesn't matter what gender you are or who you identify yourself as, when you are on stage you are a 'Dancer'.

By reconnecting with the ancient Indic perspective of gender fluidity and inclusivity—seen in terms like Tiritiya Prakriti and the revered roles of the third gender in Vedic society—Bharatanatyam holds immense

potential to challenge modern-day gender biases and promote acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities. The dance form's aesthetic and philosophical elements can dismantle rigid binaries and present a harmonious understanding of human diversity as intrinsic to the cosmic order.

All the Indian Classical Dances are a path of spiritual enlightenment. It is the process of awakening the human consciousness. By practicing this devotional art, one can get to know their own soul, the performer can get to relate themselves with the supreme being and feels the heart to heart connection with the God head. Once the performer reaches to the epitome of spirituality, there will be no self doubt, identity crisis or societal issues. If the performer is truly enlightened then audience also gets uplifted as they can feel the rasas shown by the performer, this is why Bharatanatyam can be the tool of spiritual enlightenment.

This research not only highlights the transformative potential of Bharatanatyam but also offers a decolonized approach to the LGBTQ+ debate by framing it within Indic philosophical traditions. In doing so, it bridges ancient wisdom with modern concerns, reaffirming the timeless relevance of this art form in fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

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