

# Exploring Male Participation in Bharatanatyam: Motivations, Challenges, and Opportunities in the 21st Century

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## ABSTRACT

With an emphasis on the opportunities obstacles and driving forces of the 21st century this study investigates the increasing involvement of male dancers in Bharatanatyam. A structured questionnaire consisting of Likert scale questions was used to gather data from 100 male Bharatanatyam dancers using a quantitative survey method. With 70% of respondents expressing a strong personal connection to the dance form the findings show that cultural significance and personal interest serve as the main drivers of male participation. But 62 percent of participants said they had experienced social stigma underscoring the ongoing problems with gender norms in the dance community. Notwithstanding these challenges 66 percent of participants expressed optimism about the prospects for male dancers bolstered by a network of mentors and peers.

**KEYWORDS:** Bharatanatyam, male dancers, participation, motivations, challenges, opportunities, gender norms, cultural heritage, inclusivity.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since its inception Bharatanatyam one of India's oldest classical dance forms has been linked to female performers and is frequently based on temple customs and ceremonies. Due to its complex footwork expressive gestures (mudras) and movement-based storytelling this dance form has primarily featured female dancers who represent deeply ingrained gender roles and cultural norms in Indian society (Coorlawala U. A. 2005)). But as more male dancers enter the Bharatanatyam arena in the twenty-first century there has been a noticeable change in this dynamic. This shift reflects broader shifts in society such as the questioning of traditional gender roles and the increasing inclusivity of the arts. As the number of male dancers in Bharatanatyam rises significant questions about the reasons for this trend and the difficulties, they face in an area traditionally dominated by women are raised (Foxhall L. and Salmon J. 2013).

There are a number of reasons why men are becoming more interested in Bharatanatyam. The changing views on performing arts and masculinity are a major motivator. Nowadays men who participate in activities that are typically associated with women—like dancing—are becoming more and more accepted in society. Male dancers are no longer seen as outliers but rather as respected artists as cultural barriers are being dismantled. In addition, the prominence of diverse media channels such as social media has been crucial in presenting male dancers and their performances thereby motivating others to explore dance as a feasible form of artistic expression. Male dancers who have made a name for themselves in Bharatanatyam have also played a part in this change by acting as role models

and showing that anyone can be an excellent dancer in this style regardless of gender (Banerjee S. 2021).

Male Bharatanatyam dancers still confront many difficulties in spite of the encouraging trends. A major barrier is the deeply embedded cultural belief that dance is associated with femininity which can cause male dancers to be stigmatized and marginalized. Many male dancers encounter scepticism from their families and communities who may question their choices and view dance as an inappropriate pursuit for men. Furthermore, there are additional obstacles for male dancers to overcome in the Bharatanatyam community because of long-standing conventions and expectations that can be resistant to change. Despite the growing interest in the art form these obstacles may discourage participation and foster a sense of isolation (Burt R. 2022).

Male dancers frequently face practical obstacles like access to training and performance opportunities in addition to societal ones. Even with the growing number of organizations and schools offering Bharatanatyam classes male dancers may still have trouble getting performance slots in an environment that has traditionally given preference to female dancers. It can be difficult for male performers to obtain recognition and build successful careers when they are not as visible in festivals and competitions (Chavali R. 2018).

This can contribute to the cycle of underrepresentation. Given the growing number of men participating in Bharatanatyam it is imperative to investigate these dynamics in depth. Comprehending the reasons behind men's adoption of this art form along with the obstacles and prospects they encounter can yield significant understanding regarding the trajectory of Bharatanatyam. By highlighting the experiences goals and changes that male dancers are going through this research hopes to advance our understanding of their world.

### **Objectives**

- To investigate the key factors and motivations driving the growing participation of male dancers in Bharatanatyam in the 21st century.
- To examine the challenges faced and opportunities available to male dancers in the contemporary Bharatanatyam landscape.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Rao (2018) highlights how like other traditional Indian practices like Yoga and Ayurveda it declined during the British colonial era in his investigation into the historical background of Bharatanatyam. He makes the case that the British Raj suppressed many facets of Hindu culture such as Bharatanatyam which came to be wrongly identified as a degenerate style connected to the Nautch dance of the devadasi class. The dance was thought to be in decline and the Anti-Nautch movement of the late 19th century made this stigma even worse. Rao disputes the idea that Bharatanatyam went into a dormant state during this time arguing that it not only survived but also saw tremendous development and innovation. He argues that Bharatanatyam underwent resilience and transformation during this period highlighting the contributions of well-known gurus and dancers during the late 19th century through Indian independence. \*

Azzarelli (2015) expands our understanding of Bharatanatyam by examining the dynamics of gender identity construction within the dance especially through the narrative element known as Abhinaya This feature of Bharatanatyam challenges gender norms by allowing dancers to take on both male and female roles. Azzarelli employs a Constructivist and anti-Essentialist perspective viewing gender and sexuality as culturally constructed and fluid. Azzarelli investigates how Bharatanatyam provides a forum for people who don't fit neatly

into one gender stereotype to express and negotiate their identities through ethnographic research with an LGBTQ+ group of dancers in Chennai. Bharatanatyams transformative potential as a medium for self-expression and identity exploration is highlighted by the study which illuminates how gay bisexual and transgender dancers use the art form to articulate diverse experiences and transcend societal expectations.

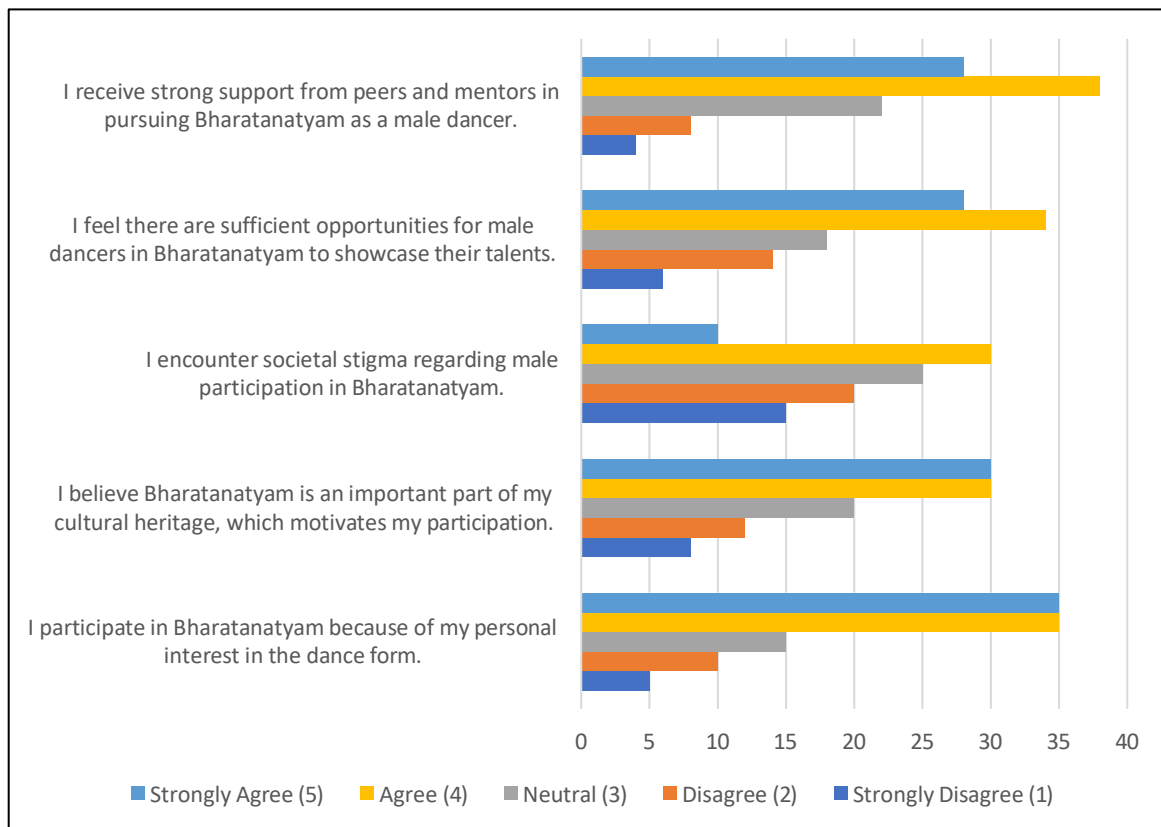
Thiagarajan (2017) focuses on the contributions made by men to Malaysian dance. The importance of male gurus like K. is discussed in the paper. P. Bhaskar along with V. J. Indian classical dance forms were popularized in colonial Malaysia by Sivadas. In addition to actively participating in choreography and teaching these individuals not only increased awareness of Bharatanatyam but also promoted an increased respect for Indian arts in Malaysian society. Despite the numerical dominance of female dancers in the field Thiagarajan draws attention to the rise of a new generation of male dancers in the 1980s who brought professional training and inventive approaches to choreography. The study takes a non-linear historical approach tracing the history of male involvement in Bharatanatyam and offering insights into Malaysia's multifaceted cultural environment through archival and ethnographic research.

Gupta (2022) examines the complexities of gender roles in Bharatanatyam emphasizing the existence and consequences of gender bias in the art form. Through sociological and statistical methods Gupta demonstrates how biases arise from society's perception of Bharatanatyam as primarily feminine even though the dance form retains a certain degree of gender neutrality. The research highlights a subconscious inclination toward female superiority among respondents despite a lack of conscious endorsement of gender bias in interactions. This research highlights the intricate relationships between genders in Bharatanatyam and emphasizes the need for a more thorough comprehension of the ways in which social and historical contexts influence gender stereotypes in the dance form.

### 3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the motivations difficulties and opportunities facing male dancers in the twenty-first century this study uses a quantitative research methodology. To measure the responses of 100 male Bharatanatyam dancers a structured survey was created and sent to them. The survey used Likert scale questions. Participants were able to rate their opinions on a scale of 1 to 5 for important areas like reasons for participating difficulties encountered and opportunities perceived. In order to ensure a diverse representation participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Online questionnaires were used to gather data. Descriptive statistics were added to the analysis to provide a summary of the data and frequency distribution was used to spot trends in responses.

### 4.0 Data Analysis



**Fig. 4.1 Representation of Responses**

**Table 4.1 Frequency Table for Respondents**

Questions	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I participate in Bharatanatyam because of my personal interest in the dance form.	5	10	15	35	35
I believe Bharatanatyam is an important part of my cultural heritage, which motivates my participation.	8	12	20	30	30
I encounter societal stigma regarding male participation in Bharatanatyam.	15	20	25	30	10
I feel there are sufficient opportunities for male dancers in Bharatanatyam to showcase their talents.	6	14	18	34	28
I receive strong support from peers and mentors in pursuing Bharatanatyam as a male dancer.	4	8	22	38	28

The quantitative survey results of one hundred male Bharatanatyam dancers offer insightful information about the opportunities obstacles and reasons behind male involvement in this

traditional dance form in the twenty-first century. Seventy percent of the respondents expressed a strong personal interest in Bharatanatyam indicating that their engagement with the dance is largely driven by intrinsic motivation. Additionally, 60% of the participants recognized the importance of Bharatanatyam in Indian culture indicating that many male dancers see their involvement as a way to stay connected to and preserve their cultural heritage

Remarkably 62 percent of the participants stated that they had encountered social stigma related to men practicing Bharatanatyam. This research highlights the enduring gender prejudices that male dancers face mirroring broader cultural views on traditional dance forms and masculinity. These prejudices present difficulties that may deter participation and have an impact on how men are generally portrayed in Bharatanatyam.

Although most respondents (66 percent) felt positively about the opportunities that are available for male dancers to display their talents a sizeable portion of respondents (notably) are still unsure or neutral about these opportunities. This suggests that in order to improve the visibility and recognition of male dancers in Bharatanatyam more organized platforms and initiatives are required.

Furthermore, according to the survey 66% of participants said they had support from peers and mentors which is a good thing that can lessen some of the difficulties they encounter. The presence of a supportive community can foster confidence and encourage more men to participate in Bharatanatyam.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

By examining the main causes of the rising number of male dancers in Bharatanatyam as well as the opportunities and difficulties they face in the modern world the study successfully satisfies its objectives. The results show that although societal stigma continues to be a major obstacle male participation is primarily motivated by personal interest and cultural significance. Raising awareness of Bharatanatyam's cultural significance and challenging gender norms that restrict participation are crucial steps towards creating a more welcoming atmosphere for male dancers. Furthermore, providing male dancers with additional platforms to exhibit their abilities will increase their visibility and representation in the Bharatanatyam community. Overall, the insights gained from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of male participation in Bharatanatyam offering a foundation for future research and initiatives aimed at promoting gender inclusivity in traditional dance forms.

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