

Title:

# Intersection of Gender and Pedagogy in Bharatanāṭyam: Analyzing Cross-Gender Teaching Practices and Exploring Gender Inclusive Training Methods

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### **Introduction:**

Bharatanāṭyam is one of the major classical dance forms of India which originated from the rich South Indian heritage. In ancient India, there were many male Naatuvanārs who were Bharatanāṭyam teachers. But they did not perform extensively. It was the females who took centre stage during performances. In the contemporary times, there has been a notable change in the rise of male performers. Although it is often being ignored, gender has known to have been having long term significant impact on the learning and teaching practices in Bharatanāṭyam. It influences the expectations, behaviours as well as the experiences and outcomes of the students. The dynamics which are prevalent in cross gender interactions between male Bharatanāṭyam teachers and female students and female Bharatanāṭyam teachers and male students gives rise to a very unique and nuanced area of inquiry.

### **Review of Literature:**

(Antara Gupta, 2022)'s work on "Gender Bias in Bharatanāṭyam: A Socio-Statistical Perspective" looks into the gender dynamics in Bharatanatyam. While this work focusses on the issues of gender in Bharatanāṭyam, it does not deal with the cross-gender teaching practices. Another existing paper - (Krithika V. Balaji et al., 2023)-The Gender Conundrum in Classical Dance-Bharatanāṭyam and Stereotyped Gender Roles -deals with the historical and artistic aspects of gender within Bharatanatyam. This work also does not deal with cross gender teaching nor does it deal with gender inclusive training methods. There is hence a gap in understanding how this works. With the increasing presence of male dancers teaching female students and vice versa in Bharatanāṭyam, there is need for broader examination of intersection of gender and pedagogy, approaches, challenges and experiences of students and teachers to provide a deeper understanding of the same. This research thus stands out for its focus on dealing with a different aspect associated with Bharatanāṭyam. In contrast to the existing studies which focusses on only the gender bias and journey of male dancers, this research aims to explore cross gender teaching practices and gender inclusive training methods. There is thus a need for in-depth exploration of how they manifest in the teaching and learning process.

### **Research Method/Design:**

This research uses a mixed-method approach to explore the perspectives of Bharatanāṭyam students and teachers. Interviews have been conducted with well-established male and female Bharatanāṭyam teachers to gain insights into their personal experiences and viewpoints regarding teaching the students of their opposite gender. The purpose of the questions in the interview was to generate thorough narratives so that the teachers can express their thoughts and opinions freely. These interviews were approximately spanned for half an hour each. Informed consent to record the interview has been taken from all the teachers who participated in the interview. Apart from this, a survey has also been taken to gather data from male and female students who are between the age range of 15-30 and are leaning from their opposite gender teachers to gather data on their perceptions and experiences regarding cross gender teaching practices and gender inclusive pedagogy. The survey had received 16 responses out of which there was one male student and 15 female students who gave their perspectives. There are many key thoughts which have emerged from the survey responses.

Observational data has also been gathered by directly observing Bharatanāṭyam classes involving the same. Thematic analysis has been done to analyse the qualitative data that has been gathered from the interviews. By integrating the data which is received from interviews, surveys and observation, this paper aims to unveil the nuances and potential pathways for understanding cross gender teaching practices and gender inclusive training methods. This paper follows the guidelines which is outlined in the APA Style Sheet for formatting and citation.

### **Scope and Limitations:**

The scope of this study will include a detailed examination of pedagogical practices that are influenced by gender in the context of Bharatanāṭyam. It will look into the current teaching practices of Bharatanāṭyam and will identify the potential gender barriers within the same. Despite the scope of this research, it still has some limitations. Firstly, this study will mainly focus on the cross-gender teaching practices in Bharatanāṭyam specifically in the geographical context of Bangalore and Chennai. Therefore, the findings of this research may not be universally applicable to all contexts. This study majorly relies on the self-report data, which is the data collected from Bharatanāṭyam teachers and students, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Also, it may face challenges in getting different perspectives from especially the underrepresented groups within Bharatanāṭyam community. Lastly, although the efforts are made to analyse the intersection of gender and pedagogy, the implementation of these and its effectiveness may vary depending on many factors like the institutional support, individual preferences and cultural norms of the society.

### **Analysis:**

Cross gender teaching practices in Bharatanāṭyam refers to the methods used when a teacher teaches to the students of their opposite gender than of their own. There has always been prevalence of cross gender teaching scenarios. These scenarios involve adapting to pedagogical methods, communication styles to suit the specific needs of a particular gender. The gender composition of student-teacher relationships can influence the dynamics that exist in the learning environment.

The training of Bharatanāṭyam may often involve the need for physical correction and guidance from the teachers. This might sometimes include touching or adjusting the student's body to correct a posture or movement. The teachers may face scrutiny and suspicion regarding their intentions. The teachers may thus find it challenging to establish reliability and rapport with the students including those who may previously be used to teachers of their own gender. Some of the teachers who had participated in the interview had given credits to their teachers for creating a very supportive and comfortable learning environment for them, regardless of their gender. The teachers of both the genders may need to approach such physical contact with sensitivity and professionalism in order to avoid any kind of discomfort or misunderstanding with the students.

The teachers were asked about the need to adapt movement pedagogy according to the male and female body separately. According to most of them, there was no need to change the pedagogy on the whole. They had underlined the significance of maintaining the consistency in first teaching the fundamental building block of Bharatanāṭyam which are the *adavus*. They stressed on the fact that each body is different and fine tuning the movements according to the individual students was necessary which could be done later. The survey participants stressed on the need for the teachers to be aware of the unique needs of dancers, adapt their teaching approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of students, particularly in relation to the gender differences. One of the participants mentioned in the survey, "Male and Female Bodies are not the same. Female goes through a lot of changes in her body so I think teachers should be aware of them and trained to teach according to each female dancer's needs." The diversity in perspectives among the teachers and students reflects the dynamic nature of Bharatanatyam teaching pedagogy. While some of them stress for the need for significant change in pedagogy according to male and female bodies, others find the existing pedagogy to be sufficient, stressing on the importance of minor adjustments to be made according to individual students' need irrespective of the gender. It may also be necessary to include a diverse range of compositions while training students in Bharatanāṭyam which consists of narratives and characters from different genders and different perspectives. This can be achieved by providing equal opportunities for all the students to explore roles generally associated with their gender as well as teaching them even those roles that are associated with that of their opposite gender. This can aid the students to have an in-depth understanding of portraying a particular character. There is thus a need to encourage students to explore a wide range of movements and expressions.

They were also asked questions regarding the societal perceptions and stereotypes regarding male Bharatanāṭyam dancers and whether there was a public concern about them becoming more feminine or inculcating feminine aspects to their everyday life. Some of them acknowledged the existence of stereotypes surrounding male dancers in Bharatanāṭyam which also included concerns regarding masculinity and femininity. Santosh Menon had mentioned that there is a constant fear among the people about men tending to become more feminine in their everyday lives if they start learning Bharatanatyam. Another challenge faced by the male dancers was to perform a heroine-based *padam* or *jāvali* on stage. Some of the teachers also said that they generally avoid to perform a composition like that on stage even if they were willing to do it as they were concerned about the opinion of the audience. They also mentioned that when they performed heroine-based compositions on stage, it was not very well received by the spectators. They felt that this was not the case when female dancers performed a male role or a *nāyaka* based composition which would be received in a much better way by the audience, where they would appreciate the energy of the female artist. Most of the male dancers who were interviewed felt the need for a change in this perspective. Most of the male Kalakshetra dancers who were interviewed gave credits to their male teachers for being a great source of inspiration to them. They all had expressed that emphasising their focus on the art form and having their determination to pursue their passion despite societal response was their goal. Most of them had believed that these perceptions could be overcome through proper teaching and awareness. Some of them had even stressed the need to address both the male and female students who are learning Bharatanatyam as just artists/ dancers/ performers. "Art is beyond gender," emphasized Praveen Kumar. His statement had reflected a very deep understanding of the inclusive nature of Bharatanāṭyam and stressed on the idea that art is not confined only by expectations related to gender.

A major challenge faced by teachers teaching students of their opposite gender is while teaching *śṛṅgāra* (love) based compositions and compositions based on their opposite gender like teaching a male student a *nāyikā* based composition and vice versa. Most of the teachers who gave the interview had expressed that teaching *śṛṅgāra* based compositions to students of their opposite gender was a little trickier. They found it challenging to convey the intricate nuances of expressions which are present in *śṛṅgāra*. They all had stated that instead of directly dealing with the intricate emotions and expressions, they had often chosen to focus on the other aspects associated with it like the musicality, literature as well as the historical context of these compositions. Sanjay Shantaram had mentioned that he generally tends to avoid teaching his male student's heroine-based



compositions. But in cases where they need to learn *nāyikā* based *padams* and *jāvalis* for the Karnataka board dance exams, he teaches the same by opting for subtle portrayals. Additionally, Srividya Anand had shared an anecdote about the legendary dancer CV Chandrashekar, who had asked his female students to learn *nāyikā* based compositions (abhinaya) from female teachers. He might have possibly had the belief that the female teachers could provide more comfort and understanding to their female students, particularly in abhinaya, because of their shared gender identity. Hemalatha Prakash had also shared an experience of hers where she had to teach ‘*Sakhi He’ aṣṭapadi* to her class which had only one male student among the other female students. Initially, she had a lot of concerns about proceeding with the teaching process. But as she had started teaching the composition, she was pleasantly surprised at how all the students including the male student showed no signs of discomfort. They had all learnt it with great enthusiasm by eagerly absorbing all the nuances of the characters and expressions. Her opinion on the same was that contemporary students tend to be more open minded when it comes to the learning process regardless of their gender compared to her generation. It also becomes necessary for the teachers to ensure that their approach of teaching respects the individual boundaries of the students and effectively convey the nuances of *śṛṅgāra* based expressions. Building trust with the students is necessary to enable effective teaching and learning process. There arises a necessity for the teachers to put their time and effort in creating an environment where the students feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically within the *śṛṅgāra* theme.

The number of male students in a Bharatanatyam class is very low compared to the number of female students. Some of the male teachers mentioned in the interview that they were self-conscious and not very comfortable as they were very less in number when they were learning. They sometimes had felt awkward to dance in the presence of other female students or even have a conversation with them. Most of them had agreed that it is the responsibility of the teacher to have an active participation of all the students in the class. The teachers can encourage collaborative activities among students like partner work or group choreographies which will promote interaction and emphasise the importance of cooperation and respect for each other’s strengths and abilities. There is a need to create an inclusive atmosphere where all students, regardless of their gender, feel encouraged to actively participate in the learning process. The teachers can ensure open communication about gender dynamics within Bharatanāṭyam and encourage students to share their perspectives and concerns related to gender identity in a very non-judgemental environment. They can also showcase of both male and female dancers/teachers who have excelled in the field of Bharatanāṭyam as role models to their students of both genders for them to look up to. By highlighting their achievements and contributions they have made to Bharatanāṭyam, they can create a sense of inspiration for their students. There was another participant in the survey who had mentioned, “the right kind of language to convey certain thoughts that are gender sensitive.”, which highlights the importance of using the right kind of gender inclusive language to make all the students feel comfortable irrespective of their gender. All of these can also be implemented by offering workshops to them which will focus on strategies for creating the same by rising more awareness.

When the teachers were asked about the influence of their training on their teaching philosophy, all of them had acknowledged the impact of their mentors in shaping their approach to teaching Bharatanāṭyam. They had emphasised the importance of quality teaching and having a rapport between teacher and student, rather than focusing on the gender of the teacher. When they were asked whether being taught by a male or a female teacher could have made any difference in their learning, the opinions received varied. Some of the teachers had expressed that gender was not a major factor in their learning experience, while the others had the opinion that certain aspects of the dance form could be better taught by a specific gender. Most of them had agreed that effective teaching can transcend gender. There is also sometimes a tendency for the female students to feel more connected with the female teachers by looking at them as role models or mentors. Similarly, the male students may find resonance with their male teachers by taking in their masculine interpretations of movements and expressions. There is a possibility for the female teachers to unintentionally give more importance to the aspects associated with femininity in their teaching methods like showing expressions of tenderness, compassion or sensitivity. On the other hand, male teachers may tend

to adopt a more assertive and authoritative way of teaching which is influenced by their societal expectations of masculinity. These factors also shape the expectations regarding performances in Bharatanāṭyam. The female students may tend to inculcate the ideas of more grace and emotional depth, while the male students who are performing may showcase more strength, power and assertiveness in their movements and expressions. There is a need to embrace gender inclusivity in order to ensure a broader range of artistic expression and creativity in Bharatanāṭyam. Each teacher/ student brings in their unique ideas, emotions and experiences to their dance which contributes to the overall advancement and mastery of Bharatanāṭyam. Implementation of gender inclusive training methods may have some challenges associated with them. This may be in the form of resistance from students, parents or the broader Bharatanāṭyam community to adopt these gender inclusive practices as they all may look at them as deviating from traditional norms or some teachers may even lack awareness and understanding regarding the same. They may not recognise the need of addressing gender related aspects of - Bharatanāṭyam or may even underestimate the impact of the same on the teaching and learning process.

### **Conclusion:**

This research paper has shed light on the intersection of gender and pedagogy within the domain of Bharatanāṭyam. It has highlighted about the importance of continuously adapting to teaching methodologies to ensure that this dance form is taught and learnt beyond gender in order to explore each students' ideas and abilities. In addition to the insights that are gained from this study, there is still more scope for further research on the same. Comparative study can be done across different set of regions to look into the various ways in which gender dynamics are prevalent in the Bharatanāṭyam pedagogy worldwide. Examination of teaching and learning practices of the LGBT community can also be done. Constant exploration of these can have a major contribution to the evolution of Bharatanāṭyam teaching and learning practices and inspire a new generation of Bharatanāṭyam dancers.

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**About the author:**

Gaayathri H is an engineering graduate in Computer Science who has a profound passion for Bharatanāṭyam. She is presently pursuing her Masters in Bharatanāṭyam from Christ University, Bengaluru. Gaayathri started learning Bharatanatyam at the tender age of six under the able guidance of Smt. Srividya Anand, where she developed a strong foundation in the art form. She is currently training under the guidance of acclaimed dancer and choreographer Shri. Sheejith Krishna from Chennai. Gaayathri looks at Bharatanāṭyam more than just a performing art. She looks at it as an expression of freedom, growth, and self-discovery.



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The training of Bharatanāṭyam may often involve the need for physical correction and guidance from the teachers. This might sometimes include touching or adjusting the student's body to correct a posture or movement. The teachers may face scrutiny and suspicion regarding their intentions. The teachers may thus find it challenging to establish reliability and rapport with the students including those who may previously be used to teachers of their own gender. Some of the teachers who had participated in the interview had given credits to their teachers for creating a very supportive and comfortable learning environment for them, regardless of their gender. The teachers of both the genders may need to approach such physical contact with sensitivity and professionalism in order to avoid any kind of discomfort or misunderstanding with the students.

The teachers were asked about the need to adapt movement pedagogy according to the male and female body separately. According to most of them, there was no need to change the pedagogy on the whole. They had underlined the significance of maintaining the consistency in first teaching the fundamental building block of Bharatanāṭyam which are the *adavus*. They stressed on the fact that each body is different and fine tuning the movements according to the individual students was necessary which could be done later. The survey participants stressed on the need for the teachers to be aware of the unique needs of dancers, adapt their teaching approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of students, particularly in relation to the gender differences. One of the participants mentioned in the survey, "Male and Female Bodies are not the same. Female goes through a lot of changes in her body so I think teachers should be aware of them and trained to teach according to each female dancer's needs." The diversity in perspectives among the teachers and students reflects the dynamic nature of Bharatanatyam teaching pedagogy. While some of them stress for the need for significant change in pedagogy according to male and female bodies, others find the existing pedagogy to be sufficient, stressing on the importance of minor adjustments to be made according to individual students' need irrespective of the gender. It may also be necessary to include a diverse range of compositions while training students in Bharatanāṭyam which consists of narratives and characters from different genders and different perspectives. This can be achieved by providing equal opportunities for all the students to explore roles generally associated with their gender as well as teaching them even those roles that are associated with that of their opposite gender. This can aid the students to have an in-depth understanding of portraying a particular character. There is thus a need to encourage students to explore a wide range of movements and expressions.

They were also asked questions regarding the societal perceptions and stereotypes regarding male Bharatanāṭyam dancers and whether there was a public concern about them becoming more feminine or inculcating feminine aspects to their everyday life. Some of them acknowledged the existence of stereotypes surrounding male dancers in Bharatanāṭyam which also included concerns regarding masculinity and femininity. Santosh Menon had mentioned that there is a constant fear among the people about men tending to become more feminine in their everyday lives if they start learning Bharatanatyam. Another challenge faced by the male dancers was to perform a heroine-based *padam* or *jāvali* on stage. Some of the teachers also said that they generally avoid to perform a composition like that on stage even if they were willing to do it as they were concerned about the opinion of the audience. They also mentioned that when they performed heroine-based compositions on stage, it was not very well received by the spectators. They felt that this was not the case when female dancers performed a male role or a *nāyaka* based composition which would be received in a much better way by the audience, where they would appreciate the energy of the female artist. Most of the male dancers who were interviewed felt the need for a change in this perspective. Most of the male Kalakshetra dancers who were interviewed gave credits to their male teachers for being a great source of inspiration to them. They all had expressed that emphasising their focus on the art form and having their determination to pursue their passion despite societal response was their goal. Most of them had believed that these perceptions could be overcome through proper teaching and awareness. Some of them had even stressed the need to address both the male and female students who are learning Bharatanatyam as just artists/ dancers/ performers. "Art is beyond gender," emphasized Praveen Kumar. His statement had reflected a very deep understanding of the inclusive nature of Bharatanāṭyam and stressed on the idea that art is not confined only by expectations related to gender.

A major challenge faced by teachers teaching students of their opposite gender is while teaching *śṛṅgāra* (love) based compositions and compositions based on their opposite gender like teaching a male student a *nāyikā* based composition and vice versa. Most of the teachers who gave the interview had expressed that teaching *śṛṅgāra* based compositions to students of their opposite gender was a little trickier. They found it challenging to convey the intricate nuances of expressions which are present in *śṛṅgāra*. They all had stated that instead of directly dealing with the intricate emotions and expressions, they had often chosen to focus on the other aspects associated with it like the musicality, literature as well as the historical context of these compositions. Sanjay Shantaram had mentioned that he generally tends to avoid teaching his male student's heroine-based

compositions. But in cases where they need to learn *nāyikā* based *padams* and *jāvalis* for the Karnataka board dance exams, he teaches the same by opting for subtle portrayals. Additionally, Srividya Anand had shared an anecdote about the legendary dancer CV Chandrashekar, who had asked his female students to learn *nāyikā* based compositions (abhinaya) from female teachers. He might have possibly had the belief that the female teachers could provide more comfort and understanding to their female students, particularly in abhinaya, because of their shared gender identity. Hemalatha Prakash had also shared an experience of hers where she had to teach ‘*Sakhi He’ aṣṭapadi* to her class which had only one male student among the other female students. Initially, she had a lot of concerns about proceeding with the teaching process. But as she had started teaching the composition, she was pleasantly surprised at how all the students including the male student showed no signs of discomfort. They had all learnt it with great enthusiasm by eagerly absorbing all the nuances of the characters and expressions. Her opinion on the same was that contemporary students tend to be more open minded when it comes to the learning process regardless of their gender compared to her generation. It also becomes necessary for the teachers to ensure that their approach of teaching respects the individual boundaries of the students and effectively convey the nuances of *śṛṅgāra* based expressions. Building trust with the students is necessary to enable effective teaching and learning process. There arises a necessity for the teachers to put their time and effort in creating an environment where the students feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically within the *śṛṅgāra* theme.

The number of male students in a Bharatanatyam class is very low compared to the number of female students. Some of the male teachers mentioned in the interview that they were self-conscious and not very comfortable as they were very less in number when they were learning. They sometimes had felt awkward to dance in the presence of other female students or even have a conversation with them. Most of them had agreed that it is the responsibility of the teacher to have an active participation of all the students in the class. The teachers can encourage collaborative activities among students like partner work or group choreographies which will promote interaction and emphasise the importance of cooperation and respect for each other’s strengths and abilities. There is a need to create an inclusive atmosphere where all students, regardless of their gender, feel encouraged to actively participate in the learning process. The teachers can ensure open communication about gender dynamics within Bharatanāṭyam and encourage students to share their perspectives and concerns related to gender identity in a very non-judgemental environment. They can also showcase of both male and female dancers/teachers who have excelled in the field of Bharatanāṭyam as role models to their students of both genders for them to look up to. By highlighting their achievements and contributions they have made to Bharatanāṭyam, they can create a sense of inspiration for their students. There was another participant in the survey who had mentioned, “the right kind of language to convey certain thoughts that are gender sensitive.”, which highlights the importance of using the right kind of gender inclusive language to make all the students feel comfortable irrespective of their gender. All of these can also be implemented by offering workshops to them which will focus on strategies for creating the same by rising more awareness.

When the teachers were asked about the influence of their training on their teaching philosophy, all of them had acknowledged the impact of their mentors in shaping their approach to teaching Bharatanāṭyam. They had emphasised the importance of quality teaching and having a rapport between teacher and student, rather than focusing on the gender of the teacher. When they were asked whether being taught by a male or a female teacher could have made any difference in their learning, the opinions received varied. Some of the teachers had expressed that gender was not a major factor in their learning experience, while the others had the opinion that certain aspects of the dance form could be better taught by a specific gender. Most of them had agreed that effective teaching can transcend gender. There is also sometimes a tendency for the female students to feel more connected with the female teachers by looking at them as role models or mentors. Similarly, the male students may find resonance with their male teachers by taking in their masculine interpretations of movements and expressions. There is a possibility for the female teachers to unintentionally give more importance to the aspects associated with femininity in their teaching methods like showing expressions of tenderness, compassion or sensitivity. On the other hand, male teachers may tend



to adopt a more assertive and authoritative way of teaching which is influenced by their societal expectations of masculinity. These factors also shape the expectations regarding performances in Bharatanāṭyam. The female students may tend to inculcate the ideas of more grace and emotional depth, while the male students who are performing may showcase more strength, power and assertiveness in their movements and expressions. There is a need to embrace gender inclusivity in order to ensure a broader range of artistic expression and creativity in Bharatanāṭyam. Each teacher/ student brings in their unique ideas, emotions and experiences to their dance which contributes to the overall advancement and mastery of Bharatanāṭyam. Implementation of gender inclusive training methods may have some challenges associated with them. This may be in the form of resistance from students, parents or the broader Bharatanāṭyam community to adopt these gender inclusive practices as they all may look at them as deviating from traditional norms or some teachers may even lack awareness and understanding regarding the same. They may not recognise the need of addressing gender related aspects of - Bharatanāṭyam or may even underestimate the impact of the same on the teaching and learning process.

### **Conclusion:**

This research paper has shed light on the intersection of gender and pedagogy within the domain of Bharatanāṭyam. It has highlighted about the importance of continuously adapting to teaching methodologies to ensure that this dance form is taught and learnt beyond gender in order to explore each students' ideas and abilities. In addition to the insights that are gained from this study, there is still more scope for further research on the same. Comparative study can be done across different set of regions to look into the various ways in which gender dynamics are prevalent in the Bharatanāṭyam pedagogy worldwide. Examination of teaching and learning practices of the LGBT community can also be done. Constant exploration of these can have a major contribution to the evolution of Bharatanāṭyam teaching and learning practices and inspire a new generation of Bharatanāṭyam dancers.

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