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A Study on the Existence of LGBTQ Dancers in Bharatanatyam with Special Reference to Chennai, India

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Abstract

Bharatanatyam, one of the oldest classical dance forms of India, has long been associated with tradition, devotion, and a rigid performance structure. However, the evolving socio-cultural landscape has led to increasing inclusivity, allowing diverse identities, including LGBTQ artists, to find their space in this art form. This study explores the existence, representation, and challenges faced by LGBTQ dancers in Bharatanatyam, with a special focus on Chennai, a city renowned as a hub for classical dance.

Through qualitative research, this paper examines the intersection of gender identity, sexuality, and classical dance. It delves into issues of acceptance, discrimination, and visibility within the traditional dance community. Additionally, it highlights how contemporary interpretations of Bharatanatyam are being shaped by the personal narratives of LGBTQ performers. The study finds that while some progressive dance institutions and artists have begun embracing inclusivity, deep-rooted biases still exist, often limiting opportunities for LGBTQ dancers. However, emerging digital platforms and independent performances have allowed greater self-expression and visibility. The paper argues that Bharatanatyam, as a dynamic and evolving art form, must continue to adapt to ensure inclusivity and equal opportunities for all artists, irrespective of gender or sexual identity.

By shedding light on these experiences, this research contributes to the discourse on diversity in classical arts and calls for a more inclusive cultural landscape in India.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, LGBTQ dancers, inclusivity, classical dance, gender identity, cultural evolution.

1. Introduction

Bharatanatyam is a 2000-year-old art form that has evolved from palaces to temples to Sabhas, but the art form's core part has not changed. It still follows a strict Guru Shishya Parampara. The inclusion of a student into a dance school is not as easy as enrolling in Zumba classes especially if the Bharatanatyam class has not changed their traditional approach. In such institutions, it is necessary to be approved by the guru, only if the guru thinks that the student will add value or if the guru thinks that there is a certain 'spark' in a particular student only then will he/she be admitted into the school.

LGBTQ is not a new acronym although the awareness of one's sexual orientation has only begun. Members of the LGBTQ community are predominantly homosexual that is they like people of the same gender. LGBTQ is a vast umbrella term that is used by people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, ally and more.

As we all know LGBTQ community is against society's norms and Bharatanatyam or any art form for that matter is set in a traditional backdrop will find it hard to accept members of such a community as dancers, this paper delves into the existence of LGBTQ dancers in the field.

Transgender is identified with lord Shiva as there is a form of lord Shiva where he is one half and his wife is another and thus that form is considered transgender. This is the reason given for accepting transgender into the dance community by saying that they are after all the form of lord Shiva. They are also said to have both masculine and feminine energy, making them excellent dancers. One such example is Narthaki Natraj, a transgender Padma Shree awardee.

Navtej Singh Johar who played a crucial role in decriminalizing Section 377 is also a Bharatanatyam dancer who is a student from Kalakshetra and is bisexual.

This paper focuses on whether Bharatanatyam dancers face discrimination or bias or violence because of their sexual orientation in the field.

2. Research Design

a) Research Problem

- i). Why is it thought that the members of the LGBTQ community are not a significant part of Bharatanatyam
- ii). Do they face discrimination in being a part of a dance school
- iii). Do they face bias in getting opportunities in a performance

iv). Do the rasika’s(audience) not like the dancer/dance once they get to know the dancer’s sexual orientation

b) Hypothesis

- i). LGBTQ members are not a predominant part of the Bharatanatyam industry because of societal norms
- ii). They face discrimination in all levels because of their sexual orientation
- iii). The rasika’s behavior changes because of the dancer’s sexual orientation
- iv). Identifying a dancer’s orientation is hard as they don’t reveal it to the dancer community due to fear of discrimination.

c) Sampling Technique

Simple Random Sampling

d) Type of Data Used

Primary Data

e) Data Collection Technique

Questionnaire Method

f) Limitations

- i). The age group answering the survey ranges from 15-36 which did not fetch varied responses.
- ii). The responses are mainly from dancers and rasikas
- iii). The response is restricted to the period of study September-October 2024
- iv). The response is limited geographically to Chennai, Tamil Nadu

3. Data Analysis

A. Pie Charts

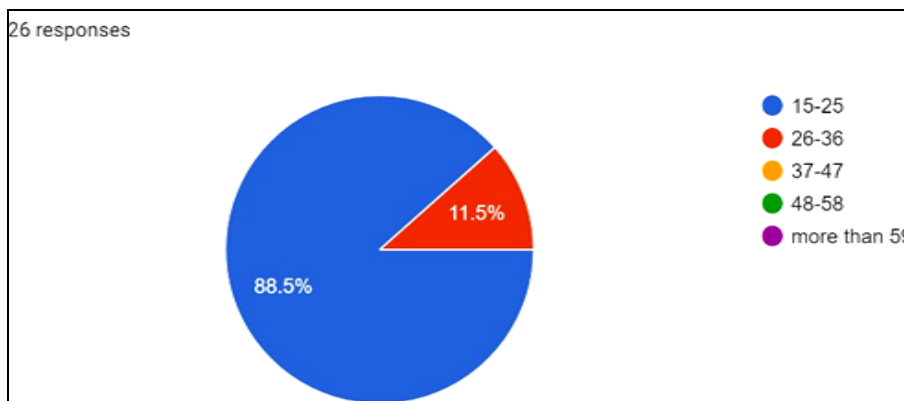


Chart 1: Age

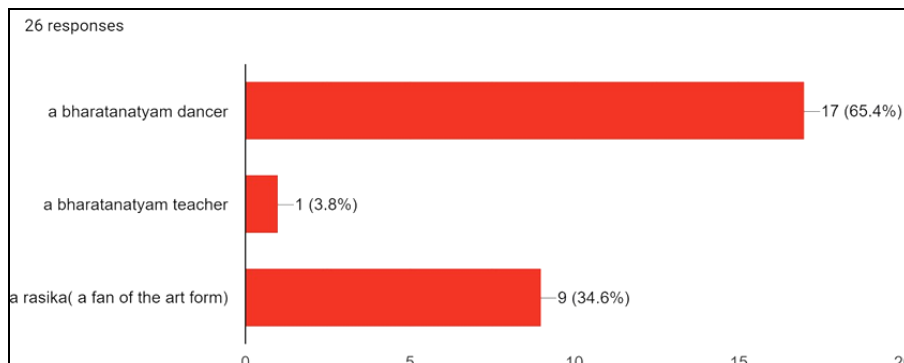


Chart 2: How are you related to Bharatanatyam

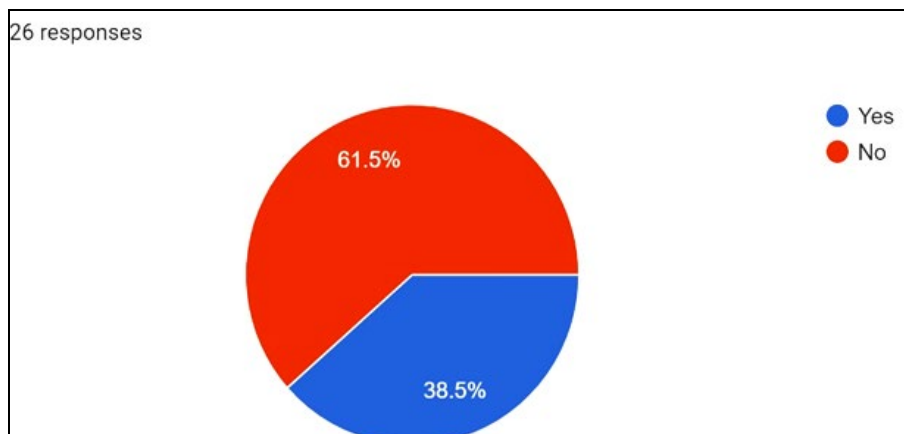


Chart 3: Do you personally know dancers who identify as members of the LGBTQ community.

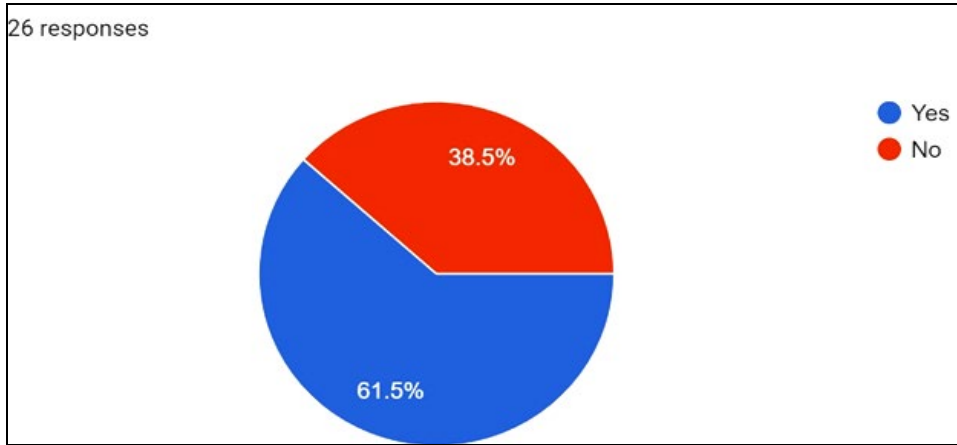


Chart 4: Have you heard of dancers who identify as members of LGBTQ community.

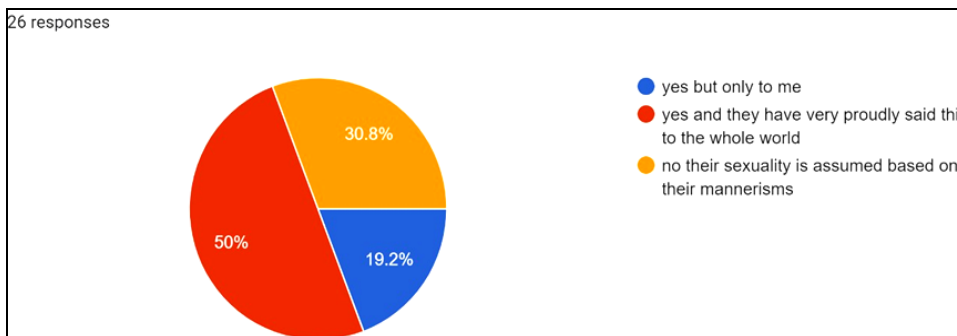


Chart 5: Have those dancers declared themselves as members of the LGBTQ community.

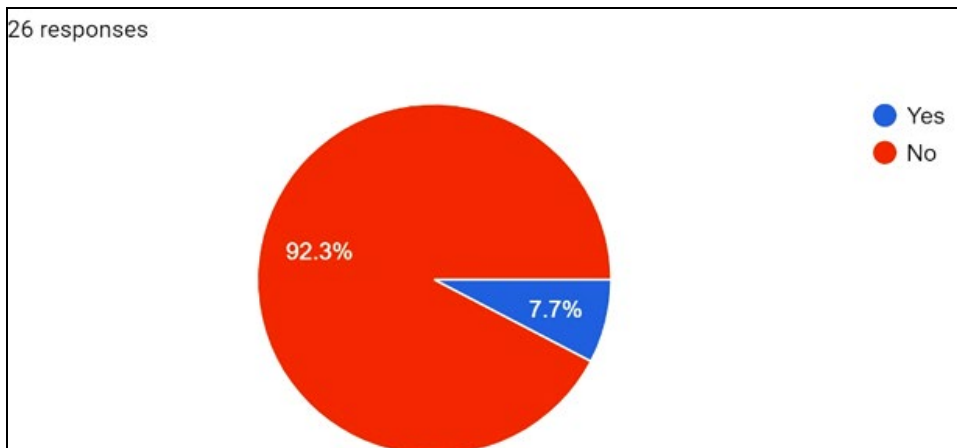


Chart 6: Did the way you look at them as dancers change due to their identity?

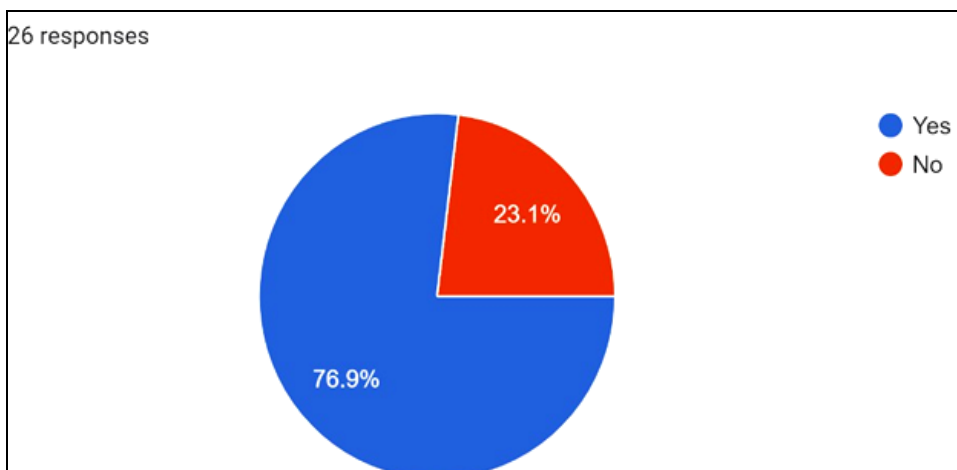


Chart 7: Do you feel because of a person's mannerisms their sexual orientation is assumed and they are not given opportunities in the dance field.

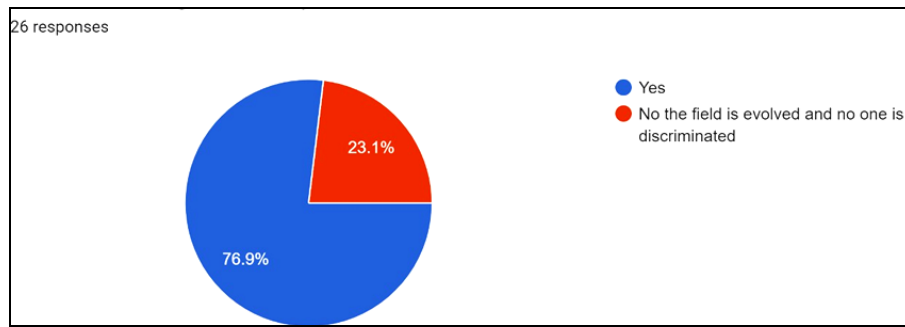


Chart 8: Do you think the above happen because the dance field is orthodox and the LGBTQ community is still considered against society norms.

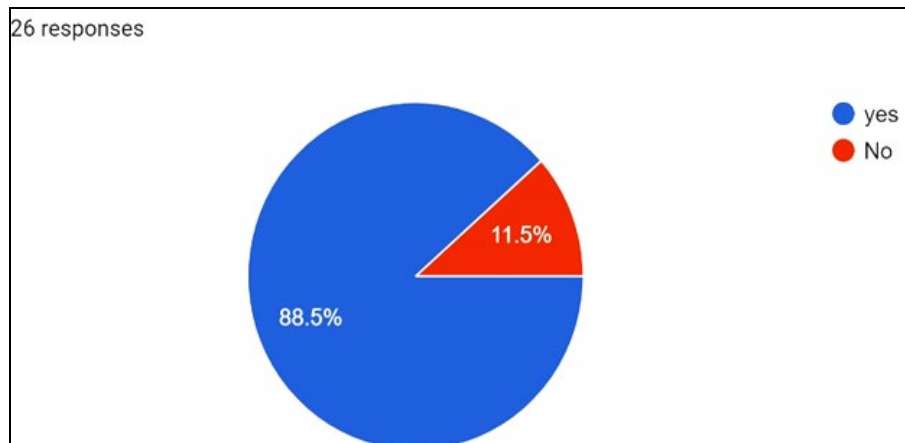


Chart 9: Do you think dancers do not come out in the open because they do not want to be judge.

Tell me your opinion on whether a person's sexual identity affects their existence as Bharatanatyam dancers 26 responses

- i). Definitely. Although Bharatanatyam is meant to be this divine art form that knows no discrimination, I personally know people who are part of the community that remain closeted about their sexual identities just to maintain their name. It's genuinely upsetting to see how they aren't allowed to express who they love freely.
- ii). Their identity should not affect their career as dancers
- iii). no it will not, art doesn't have barriers
- iv). Though Bharatanatyam rooted in tradition, it often intersects with cultural norms and expectations based on gender and sexuality.
- v). In an ideal world it should not. However, there are people/institutions still stuck in the last century. Dance is a beautiful expression that should be for all. Hope the future looks better.
- vi). Firstly there are only 3 genders, a person's sexual identity does not affect their ability to excel as a Bharatanatyam dancer, as the art form is about expression, not identity. Dance transcends personal characteristics, focusing on skill, devotion, and storytelling.
- vii). I don't think their identity comes in front of their talent

B. Inference

The survey proves that there is existence of LGBTQ members in the dance field as more than half of the responses know of dancers who identify as LGBTQ members and handful of people from this set know a few dancers who are members of LGBTQ personally.

A very important part of Bharatanatyam is the bhavam that sticks to the person and shows up in the person's mannerisms, for girls, it is assumed to be normal and a natural thing but for boys, because of societal stereotypes, these mannerisms are

considered unnatural due to which their sexual identity is assumed. About 5 people from 26 responses said that a few dancers are assumed to be members of the LGBTQ community because of their mannerisms when asked if LGBTQ dancers have declared themselves proudly to the world or only to trusted friends and told them in confidence or if their sexual identity is assumed due to their mannerism. About 13 people said yes to the former and about 8 people said yes to the latter.

Personally, 24 people said that after knowing the dancer's sexual orientation as a person it did not change their view or opinion on the dancer and 20 people felt that a person's sexual orientation is assumed from their mannerisms.

It was agreed by more than half of the people who responded that LGBTQ dancers are still closeted because of fear of judgment by their gurus and peers which may affect their future opportunities.

C. Findings

- i). LGBTQ members are not a predominant part of the Bharatanatyam industry because of societal norms. According to the primary data collected, LGBTQ members exist in the Bharatanatyam field. Still, those dancers do not reveal their identity because of fear of judgment by their peers and especially by their gurus which will directly affect their opportunities in the field.
- ii). They face discrimination at all levels because of their sexual orientation. According to the responses received and the fact that Bharatanatyam's guru shishya Parampara is very traditional and is governed as per the guru's wishes, it is tough for dancers who do not follow societal norms to be accepted into dance institutions and further into dance production.
- iii). The rasika's behavior changes because of the dancer's sexual orientation

The rasika's behavior towards the dancer did not change for the majority of people after they knew the dancer's sexual orientation, for them dance and the dance piece performed are way above the dancer's sexual orientation iv). Identifying a dancer's orientation is hard as they don't reveal it to the dancer community due to fear of discrimination.

The fact that someone's identity is assumed from the way they talk, behave is wrong and is majorly based on stereotypes. Something that dance imbibes in a person is the bhavam that becomes innate and for boys, it is considered against the norms. The fact that even straight people are assumed to be gay and are discriminated against is enough reason for members of the LGBTQ community to hide their identity.

4. Suggestions

Gurus and other institution heads should focus on the talent and interest of the dancer and not their sexual orientation

Accepting these dancers for who they are will open up newer interpretations to dance pieces adding the field of dance.

Giving such dancers a safe place in an art form will help the field and the person grow.

The dance should be given importance over a person's sexual orientation as that is the whole point of being a part of the dance community.

5. Conclusion

The field has given modern interpretations and choreography to traditional dance pieces, various institutions use Instagram to reach a larger audience. Women above the age of 50 come back to dance and boys are graciously accepted into dance classes now, yet members of the LGBTQ community feel the need to hide their identity.

Yes society still considers them as against the norms and it is hard for a traditional field to accept them, but institutions need to give them a safe space because when you dance you are vulnerable, a dance piece's abhinayam always has the dancer's personal experiences and emotions attached to it.

According to the responses, the rasikas and fellow dancers have changed their view on dancers and their sexual orientation and truly believe that dance is above all this and dance should be the focal point and the only thing that matters. But, in reality, dance institutions are still backward when it comes to accepting them as part of the dance community.

While dancing one expresses what is truly inside them and to hide something so important while dancing constricts not only the person but also the dancer.

References

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