

NAVIGATING FEMININE PROFESSIONAL SPACES: A STUDY OF MALE CLASSICAL DANCERS IN GUWAHATI CITY OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

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India is known for its rich artistic traditions, diversity, and cultural legacy, the northeastern state of Assam is known for its unique and original traditional dances. Guwahati which is the capital of Assam have different artistic forms and performances, which have developed new ideologies that have challenged the social norms. In Assam dancing is considered feminine, but there are countless men who are performing traditional dances defying the customary gender roles. These male dancers have the required skills and talents to execute the traditional dance forms with elegance. However, there is limited information regarding the effects of these traditional dances on the masculinity of the male dancers. This study has the purpose of critically assessing these areas by collecting information from 10 male traditional dancers who have preserved their masculinity despite engaging in the feminine professional environment with the help of qualitative interviews. The main findings of this study have indicated that the Assamese male dancers mainly choose the traditional dances because of their family members and their love for the culture. These dancers are preserving their masculinity by accomplishing and develop expertise in cultural dances and becoming a part of the community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the North-Eastern state of India, Assam, there are multiple traditional dance styles, such as Ojapali, Bhoratal and Bagurumba, which are mostly performed by female dancers. However, there are multiple male dancers who are performing these dance styles by challenging the social norms (Sethi, 2011). Their journey is difficult, and one of the key challenges they face is linked with persevering in their masculinity in the feminine professional spaces. This state is rich in heritage and culture, which have the capability of drawing the attention of the young ones into dance, irrespective of their gender (Sarmah & Sarma, 2024). In

this state, traditional dances are generally associated with females, but the present context is changing because of the male dancers who are shaping the social ideology by accomplishing greatness in art (Chatterjee, 2013). In the existing literature sources, there is limited information regarding the experience of the traditional male dancers of Assam in Guwahati city.

Despite the growing interest in gender dynamics and the increasing participation of males in traditionally "feminine" professional spaces, there is a notable gap in research that specifically explores the experiences of male classical dancers. Currently, most studies in the field of dance and gender focus on female dancers and their experiences. This gap in research leaves a

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significant knowledge deficit regarding the unique challenges and experiences faced by male classical dancers in Guwahati city of Assam. Specifically, there is a lack of research that examines how the profession of dancing affects male masculinity and identity in this particular context. The existing literature does not provide enough information about the specific experiences, challenges, and impacts on male masculinity in the context of male classical dancers in Guwahati city of Assam. This research paper tries to bridge in the existing gap to a certain extent.

1.1 Research Objectives-

- To explore the experiences of males performers in a female dominated performing arts.
- To understand the nature of stigma and challenges associated with the male classical dancers in the profession as dancers
- To understand the strategies employed by male classical dancers in negotiating gender norms and power dynamics within the dancing community.

1.2 Research Questions-

The main research questions are as follows-

- What factors motivated these men to pursue classical dance as a profession?
- What are their experiences in navigating a feminine professional space?
- How do they preserve their sense of masculinity despite being engaged in a feminine profession and its impact?

2. METHODOLOGY

For collecting the data, an interview was conducted among 10 professional male dancers of Guwahati, Assam, since they have the capability of providing crucial information which can be used to answer the main research questions. Four open-ended interview questions have also been created for this research, and the responses have been provided in the data analysis section (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). The “thematic data analysis” tool has been used in order to present the collected data in an academic manner.

3. DISCUSSION /ANALYSIS AND OUTCOMES

3.1 The main factors that motivate males to pursue classical dance as a professional which is mainly considered as a feminine professional space

The first question of the interview was linked with the main factors that motivate males to pursue classical dance as a professional which is mainly considered as a feminine professional space. The response has led to the understanding that these dancers are drawn to such traditional dances from a young age due to their family

members. Assam is known for its cultural heritage, there are multiple men who feel strong connections to their cultural roots and decide to become a dancer in order to preserve these customs.

“...my mother is a classical dancer; from my childhood, I have imitated her. I developed a passion and love for this art, and decided to become a professional dancer, despite the social norms.”-

Respondent 3.

“...due to my family background, I have strong connections with the traditional Assamese dances. I wanted to preserve and promote these styles, which motivated me to become a professional dancer.” –

Respondent 4.

The interview data have led to the understanding that in Guwahati, the gender roles regarding dancing are evolving, and more opportunities are being developed for male dancers. In the last decade, there was very limited scope for male dancers, but the situation has changed. In recent years, these dancers have had the scope of performing and choreographing traditional dances, which is drawing the attention of the next generation. It has been observed that the male dancers of Assam are pursuing traditional dances in order to break gender stereotypes. They are entering this field, which is predominately occupied by female dancers, since they have the perception that they have the right to pursue their passion without any restrictions.

“...now there is more scope for the male traditional dancers; I had the opportunity of following my passion and earn, which motivates me to become a professional dancer”-

Respondent 5

“...from my childhood, I have heard that traditional dancing is for the females. But I believe that art is not bound by gender, hence I become a professional dancer to challenge the social norms”-

Respondent 10.

The response of the interview has further depicted that, the male classical dancers of Guwahati are the parts of dance schools, which are motivating the male dancers to learn about these cultural dances. In these schools, they receive training role models and peers, which motivates them to become a professional dancer. In these schools, they become a part of a community, they do not feel out of place, and they do not hesitate to become a professional dancer. The respondent insights have indicated that some men also find joy as well as fulfilment, due to which they dedicate their lives to classic dances.

“...when I joined the dancing academy in Guwahati, I saw that there were multiple male dancers who were performing as traditional dancers. By observing them, I was developing the willingness of becoming a traditional dancer”-

Respondent 2.

“...I feel joy when I perform Bagurumba, as it represents my culture, and I also get the opportunity of showcasing my cultural roots on a global platform”-

Respondent 1.

3.2 Experiences of the traditional male classical dancers in navigating a feminine professional space

In Guwahati, the traditional male classical dancers have different experiences, mostly negative. The interview response has led to the understanding that, to date, these dancers are facing stereotyping as well as stigma since the traditional Assamese dances are considered feminine. Most of the time, they face backlash from their peers and society due to challenging social norms, which sometimes lead to mental health issues. The majority of male dancers also face gender identity crises because the masculine features often clash with the fluid as well as feminine nature of the classical dance forms. In the professional landscape, they sometimes have to reconcile their identity to meet the expectations of the dance forms.

"...my family members were supportive, but I have faced scepticism from society due to the negative comments I was facing mental health issues in the past." - **Respondent 2.**

"...for me, understanding the fluidity of the classical dance was challenging, but for females, it is easy" - **Respondent 3.**

In the professional fields, the development of effective networks is crucial, but male dancers face isolation as well as alienation because this field is mostly dominated by females. As a result, they struggle to attain support from their fellow dancers and face issues in becoming a part of the dancing community. The interview data have led to the understanding that the majority of the traditional Assam dances were developed for female dancers; for the male dance, matching the movement and expression becomes challenging. They have the responsibility of depicting feminine expression in their performance; however, this is a challenging affair. For male dancers, fulfilling the choreography effectively is not a simple affair.

"...when I started my professional dancing journey, I felt isolated since there were very few male dancers." - **Respondent 4.**

"...I have noticed that for male dancers like me, fulfilling the choreography becomes difficult as the traditional dances are mostly prepared for the females" - **Respondent 8**

The interview data have led to the understanding that for the male traditional dancers, the scope regarding career advancement is less compared to their female counterparts. Despite their effective performance, these dancers mostly fail to receive recognition and earn equally. They have the requirement of working harder than the female dancers in order to showcase their actual talents, but gender biases can become a major barrier in terms of casting decisions. It can be mentioned that the culture of Assam is mostly orthodox, due to which the male dancers face higher scrutiny and resistance mainly because of the social norms regarding gender roles. In this state, the males have to be masculine, but in traditional dances, they have to use feminine energy as well, which is still not acceptable in semi-urban and rural areas.

"...formale traditional dancers like me, the scope of career advancement is very limited; we face sexism in every step" - **Respondent 10.**

"...We struggle to get acceptance from the society and even family members" - **Respondent 1.**

3.3 How do the male dancers preserve their sense of masculinity despite being engaged in a feminine profession and its impact

It has been noted that the feminine professional phases are impacting the masculinity of the male dancers, however, they are implementing different tactics in order to preserve their sense of masculinity. One of the key aspects is linked with embracing multifaceted masculinity which is more inclusive and extensive. These dancers view this dance as a form of artistic approach which is not linked to their gender identity, but it allows them to showcase their creativity as well as grace. Another tactic is associated with using traditions and cultural values to earn the acceptance of society. In the Indian state of Assam, classical dances are deeply rooted in traditions, which is the reason they can get respect for their art, regardless of gender identity. These dancers are using the culture to protect their sense of masculinity and pride in their classic dancing careers.

"...for me, traditional dances are the way of depicting my creativity and grace; it is not associated with my gender identity" - **Respondent 5**

"...in my culture, art is not bound by gender; I am trying to change the mindset of the entire society through my craft, which allows me to protect my masculinity" - **Respondent 7.**

The interview data have further depicted that a large number of the Assamese traditional dancers are focusing on a sense of masculinity from the mastery of their crafts. These dancers have the aim of excelling in their dance form and gaining the recognition of the masses, and they derive a sense of masculinity from their expertise and achievements. It has been noted that, in recent years, multiple changes can be noted in the dancing community of Guwahati; Assam is changing, and now such dancers have the scope of attaining support from fellow male dancers. The sense of belonging plays a vital role in maintaining their confidence as well as their sense of masculinity.

"...I actually derive the sense of masculinity from the accomplishment and expertise in this field of traditional dancing" - **Respondent 8.**

"...now the situation has changed; male dancers like me can become a part of a community and attain mentorship without any concerns. This helps me to preserve my masculinity even though I am engaged in the feminine profession" - **Respondent 4.**

The fourth question is linked with the impact of the sense of masculinity on their traditional dances, the response of the participants has led to the understanding that it is impacting the preconceived notions regarding the roles and abilities. These dancers' success in the fields without compromising their masculinity plays a vital role in motivating other male dancers to pursue

these traditional dance forms. It is breaking the gender stereotypes as well as establishing a more inclusive understating of masculinity. These dancers are not conforming to the serotyping, but they are challenging the social norms so that the next generation does not limit masculinity with certain behaviours as well as professions.

"....I am proving that anyone can attain success in the traditional dances without compromising their sense of masculinity, it will motivate others like me to follow their passions without thinking about the social norms"-

Respondent5.

In the Indian state of Assam, there are multiple traditional dances which are mostly performed by female dancers, the male dancers who enter these fields are often ridiculed. Although the situation is improving, there are multiple barriers the male traditional dancers have to face, which can impact their mental health. The main outcomes of this research have indicated that male dancers actually pursue classical dance because they feel deep connections with the traditions and customs, which encourages them to become professional dancers. The male dancers of Assam are becoming a part of the traditional dances because they have the willingness to break the gender stereotype and change the overall perception of society (Bhattacharjee & Bora, 2015). It has been noted that the dancers have the perception of representing their cultural dances to the global audience, which is the reason they are not following the traditional gender norms (Basumatary, 2022).

The journey of the male dancers is not easy, as they face multiple barriers and issues, and quitting the traditional dance becomes the easy way out. It has been noted that they are facing scepticism from society, which also has an adverse impact on their mental health. However, they are pursuing this path mainly because of their love for the craft. As the number of male dancers is on the lower side, they often feel isolated, and they struggle to become part of the community and develop a sense of belonging (Doley, 2015). Additionally, the Assamese traditional dances are based on females; hence, for the male dancers, performing the dance according to the choreography becomes challenging. In this state, an orthodox mindset can be noticed, which is the reason the male traditional dances find it extremely difficult to advance in their career. Despite their superior craft, their female counterparts can become successful dancers without many issues, but for male dancers, it becomes challenging (Sharma 2017).

In addition to this, feminine energy is crucial for these traditional dances; however, the male dancers have the requirement of maintaining their masculinity without compromising the effectiveness of the performance. As a result, these dancers are deriving a sense of masculinity by becoming experts in their craft and from their accomplishments. They are trying to become the best traditional dancer and grow in their career, overcoming all the barriers. In recent years, due to the increment in the number of male dancers in Guwahati Assam, these dancers have received the scope of

becoming an integral part of a community. They are receiving peer support and mentorship without any complications, helping them to preserve their sense of masculinity (Mahanta, 2023).

In most Indian states along with Assam, the traditional dance forms are predominantly by female dancers which is the reason for the male dancers attaining success in this field is challenging. However as societies are becoming less orthodox, male dancers are also showing the courage to pursue their dreams and passion without thinking about society. The younger generation of Guwahati does not hesitate to support the male traditional dancers, which is the reason the number of such dancers is growing steadily. However, navigating through the feminine professional spaces is challenging, which can even result in serious mental illness if not addressed immediately (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, 2013). One of the biggest challenges of these dancers is linked with maintaining their masculinity; although it is difficult, the male dancers are showcasing viable results. As a result, it is expected that in the near future, the level of gender stereotyping will decrease in Assamese traditional dancing, and male dancers can pursue their passion without any backlash from their families and society (Duwarah, 2020)

4. CONCLUSION

Based on all the prevailing information it can be concluded that for the male dancers to become successful in the Assamese traditional dancing is challenging. For society, these dance forms are for the females. As a result, the male dancers who pursue their passion often face criticism from the community. However these dancers are not losing hope, and they are focusing on performing at their best level so that the perception of the society can be changed perceptions, opportunities, and treatment within the professional landscape. Incorporating an intersectional lens would shed light on the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by this population. These dancers are taking different steps in order to maintain their masculinity while navigating through the feminine professional spaces. These dancers are developing a community so that the male traditional dancers can receive mentorship and support whenever the need arises so that the next generation does not have to face all the challenges they have faced. Associating a certain gender with an art style is problematic. Although society is changing, speed is not effective. There is no doubt that male dancers will face multiple barriers from society and navigating through the feminine professional spaces, but in the near future, this issue can be addressed. Due to globalization, the society of Assam is advancing, it is expected that in the upcoming years, professional male dancers will receive equal opportunities. As a result, it can be expected that the mindset of the people of Assam will change, and the traditional dance forms will not be associated with

gender but the grace and capabilities. The young males will not hesitate to enter this profession and develop a name for themselves not just in India but in the entire world by gaining expertise in their art. A large number of male dancers are avoiding this because of the social reparations, but the inclusive approach will be helpful in advancing the Assamese cultural dances of the global domain.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

The research on male classical dancers in Guwahati, Assam, has shed light on the unique challenges faced by men in a traditionally female-dominated field. The study has highlighted the ways in which these male dancers navigate the gendered dynamics of the classical dance world, developing strategies to assert their masculinity and negotiate their place within a predominantly feminine professional space.

One potential area for future exploration is the role of intersectionality in shaping the experiences of male classical dancers. The study could investigate how

factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation intersect with gender to influence the dancers'

As the research suggests, further exploration of this topic could yield valuable insights into the broader societal attitudes and institutional structures that shape the experiences of male dancers. One avenue for future research could be an in-depth examination of the specific stigma-management techniques employed by male classical dancers, and how these strategies evolve over the course of their careers. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the experiences of male dancers in different cultural contexts, both within India and internationally, could illuminate the ways in which broader gender norms and expectations influence the trajectories of men in the classical dance field.

Another promising direction for future research would be to investigate the potential for male classical dancers to challenge hegemonic masculinity and disrupt the gendered power dynamics within the dance world. As the research on female protest dance has shown, the dancing body can serve as a powerful site of political and social resistance.

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