

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Gender Dynamics in Yakshagana: Examining Male and Female Representation

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Abstract

This research paper examines the gender dynamics in the performing arts industry, focusing on the barriers and strategies for male and female representation in Yakshagana. Despite significant progress towards gender equality in various sectors, the art form Yakshagana continues to exhibit disparities in terms of opportunities and visibility for male and female artists. By analysing existing literature in the field, this study aims to identify the underlying factors contributing to these imbalances. The research explores the societal norms, stereotypes, and biases that influence the representation of genders in yakshagana, as well as the structural and systemic challenges faced by male and female artists. Additionally, it investigates the strategies implemented by individuals, organizations, and institutions to address these barriers and promote gender equity. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the complexities of gender dynamics in Yakshagana besides calling for an inclusive and diverse industry that supports and empowers artists of both genders.

Key words: Gender, Female representation, Stereotypes, Gender dynamics, performing arts, Yakshagana.

I. Introduction

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.”

-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

There are many institutions and practices that keep the Gendered dynamics functioning in the world. The pattern works primarily by subordination and cultural practices. Any power structure conditions the humans into thinking and acting in certain ways. “It works primarily by inserting the subordinate class into the key institutions and structures which support the power and social authority of the dominate order. It is, above all, in these structures and relations that a subordinate class lives its subordination” (Hall, *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. 1976:39).

Subordination that happens on economic, social, religious and gender levels stem out of cultural differences too. The biological differences that are natural gradually started creating obstacles to women’s freedom and they started appearing as key elements of subordination. Kate Millett in her seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970) observes that the difference between sexes which was merely based on biological differences paved the way for different roles and life experiences differently for both the sexes. Eventually, this took a

different turn and these differences became cultural differences. The cultural constructs led to the formation of gendered constructions. This differences between Genders as male and female complicated the way these two genders functioned. Ultimately, the domination of one gender over the other, changed the life experiences for the other gender. This made one gender superior and the other gender weak. “Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different” (Millett, *Sexual politics*, 1970:362)

II. Main Discussion: Indian performing Art forms and Gender

There are certain dance forms that are recognised by the Government of India like Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Kathak, Odissi, Kathakali, Mohiniattam, Kuchipudi, Sattriya, Chhau (Ministry of Culture, Government of India). With this there are numerous folk-Art forms that enrich the arena of the Indian art form. The source of the origin of most of the dance forms of India is the *Natya Shastra* of sage Bharatha. The times are changing now and the notion of “Art for art’s sake” has changed to “Art for life’s sake” with the young generation finding their careers in their passion. This is where I believe my research paper holds prominence. For anybody that is interested in Gender studies and art forms, it is no surprise that gender dynamics has a very strong hold on art forms including the Indian classical and folk-dance forms. Dance, dancers, audience and dance teachers are all shaped by the cultural and gender differences ultimately.

“As dance evolved into a more sophisticated art with a distinction between the dancers and audience there also developed sharper differences between male and female roles and a gradual dominance of the female in dance which came to be considered a more feminine art”. (V. Subramaniam, *Gender monopolies in Indian classical Dance: A sociological Analysis of cause and context*, 1995).

Any dance or any hobby is to be enjoyed and practiced for recreational purpose or if to be taken as a career. In the world that is changing, careers seem to not have a gender. But to think that dance forms still get practiced based on the gender of the practitioner seems ridiculous. What is needed for the dance is to create an inclusive environment where people can practice it without the ambiguity of if the art for supports their gender.

One of the oldest dance forms of India, Bharatanatyam was known to be an art form that includes only women. The history of Bharatanatyam and its origin from temples make it a dance form extra inclusive of females. But now it has opened itself to male dancers. Still, the social stigma attached to male dancers in Bharatanatyam is something that male dancers have to undergo even now. Sara Azzarelli’s article, *Dancing Across Gender Boundaries* throws some light on how gender identity is constructed through the Indian classical Dance Bharatanatyam. Since in Bharatanatyam both the roles of female and male should be depicted using *abhinaya*, it can be a point of hesitation. The writer tries to show that gender and sexuality are not always fixed it is unstable. Though boys and men are embracing the dance form of Bharatanatyam, they are made to be comic figures. Family members shun the young boys from learning this

dance for the fear of society. So, the problems faced by a male dancer in Bharatanatyam is really challenging. well known author Mahesh Dattani has written about Bharatanatyam being appropriated by women and he has been vocal about such issues.

Coastal Karnataka's dance form Yakshagana which is very often called 'Gandu kale' is one more dance form where Gender negotiations can be seen. Doctoral dissertation of Dr. Nagaveni Manchi, later published as a book on Yakshagana, *Yaksha Sthree* tells the story of female artists in Yakshagana. She also discusses the men who play the female character in Yakshagana and gives clear details about the major artists. Then she goes and talks about the challenges women face in Yakshgana, important artists and their achievements. This is said to be the first dissertation on women in Yakshagana. Here she mentions the reasons why yakshagana is a male dominant art form. One such reason is that male dominance is overwhelming, possibly because of the reason that it is performed throughout the night and requires heavy steps and physical energy and the artists are only men (Dr.Nagaveni, *Yakshasthree*, 2012:5) Here is an art field that is dominated by men.

She also narrates the initial stage when women started venturing into this art form. She mentions the unpleasant comments that were made. One such is, when attempts were made to break gender barriers in this art form there have been constant oppositions. In the All-India Yakshagana conference that was held in Udupi, Yakshagana artist Malpe Ramadasa samaga openly remarked that "The participation of women in yakshagana was neutral before

but now their participation is increasing. But, let them not take part in yakshagana because it goes against its basic principles” (Dr.Nagaveni, *Yakshasthree*, 2012:7)

One of the main reasons women are kept away from yakshagana and encouragement doesn't flow is because it is an art form that is more divine and spiritual rather than something that is just performed for entertainment. In her book *Yakshastree* (2012), Dr. Nagaveni N. states that all Yakshagana troupes are associated with the temple because they must start and end their journey from the temple. Participate in temples and religious events. Therefore, the influence of religion on the creation of this art form as Gandukale (the dominant art form of men) cannot be ignored. At the same time, women must experience certain biological changes such as pregnancy and childbirth. This presents a physical challenge to women. This book also presents its readers the details of pioneers in the field of women performers in yakshagana.

One more taboo that is associated with women and yakshagana was menstrual cycle. It is already established that yakshagana is a religious and spiritual art form and the place called *chowkimane* has the God that is associated with that particular group. Since menstruation is associated with impurity women are forbidden from attending shows. “Women have a limitation called monthly menstruation. Yakshagana is a spiritual art form, God resides in Chowki mane , so women who are menstruating are not allowed there”(*Yaksha Gana Leelavali* 2021:58).

The biography of the only professional female artist in Yakshagana Ms. Leelavati Baipadittaya titled *Yaksha Gaana Leela Vali* (2021) traces her coming to form as a background

singer (Bhagavata) in yakshagana, what prompted her to take up yakshagana as profession and the challenges she faced in this process and how she overcame these challenges. In this book she talks about her journey as a professional female yakshagana artist and how it was an adventure for her to get into the area of Male dominant art form. Society has always given a lot of prominence to chastity of a woman. In her biography Ms. Leelavathi talks about how she was frightened by the stigma attached to female performers and the negative comments that were shot at female yakshagana artists. To protect herself from this she chooses to go and perform only with her husband (her husband was also a professional artist). “Since my husband was always with me, I always felt protected “ (Dr.Nagaveni, *Yakshasthree*, 2012:67). This establishes that for a woman it is not an easy task to venture into the domain of men.

Though times are changing in yakshagana, female artists are seen in comparatively huge numbers , they are not accepted well by the society nor the male artists. They are considered as threat to the art form itself sometimes. There are audience and artists who think yakshagana should remain a gandu kale based on gender . But for the art to flourish and develop and evolve what is needed is inclusiveness including gender inclusiveness.

III. Conclusion

Irrespective of what the dance form is the gender dynamics ultimately play a prominent role . This mostly happens because art is considered as Public sphere and women belong to private sphere. The innate qualities of the dance form also cannot be neglected. Whatever is the cause effect of this, it is necessary that each art form should evolve itself with changing times and

make it inclusive for artists from all the gender backgrounds. Only then the dance form can thrive.

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