

## Social Stigma around Bharatanatyam

Why this theme?

Achala Bhargavi R

Received 17 Jan, 2022; Revised 28 Jan, 2022; Accepted 31 Jan, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

A Classical Dance form of Tamil Nadu State in India, the Bharatanatyam, is around 2000 years old and has suffered under the Indian Caste System which is older, i.e., about 3000 years old. The need for study related to Social Stigma around Bharatanatyam not only covers the art form itself, but also the prevalent and changing Caste System in India. The aim is to study the path in which the current day Bharatanatyam is flourishing and to identify the causes, effects and goal of overcoming the Social Stigma attached to it.

The earlier mentions about Bharatanatyam are traced during the Sangam period (i.e., the early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century) and the Chola kingdom (i.e., from 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Century). A major Sangam period text called 'Shilappadikaram' refers to Madhavi, a Devadasi dancer, who was treated equal to Kannagi, the chaste wife of the hero, Kovalan,

The Chola dynasty was well known for its literature, art, music, and architectural abilities through structures, such as the Brihadeeshwarar Temple, which still stands today. This set the Chola dynasty apart from others during the time.

Devadasis were then also known as DevarAdigalar. Devar, in Tamil means "God" and Adigalar means "servant." Over 400 Devadasis were able to dance in the name of Hindu gods and serve the Chola Empire in the Brihadeeswarar Temple. The Devadasis were such a large part of Chola life, that even the Chola princess, Kundavai, learned Bharatanatyam from a Devadasi.

Ancient India was an agrarian based society and by devoting a small proportion of the population to the art of Bharatanatyam for religious purposes.

As per Erica Caren Belkin of the Wesleyan University, "The Indian caste system is hereditarily selective with little to no opportunity to move between castes. Thus, the caste system is a key element in the identity of an Indian individual and significantly affects their social life and environment" (Belkin, 2008)<sup>1</sup>.

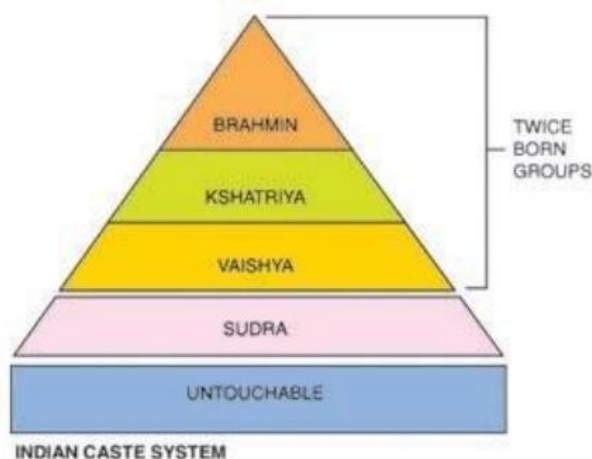


Figure 1. Indian Caste System (Belkin, 2008)

The caste system in India had five major levels of hierarchy i.e., in the order of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and the Untouchables. The upper caste Brahmins were only allowed to learn this art form and practice it in religious functions like temple rituals, while the lower castes were only dancing in non-religious functions like marriages. During this time, Politics and religion,

which stand on caste system, were heavily intertwined. Due to the link between politics and religion, Devadasis remained in proximity to the Chola rulers which raised their status in the society. The Devadasi's were supported financially by the Chola rulers. In turn, the Devadasi's supported / raised the prestige and wealth of the temples. The Devadasis' association with religion allowed them to become central to the Chola social system.

During the post-colonization period of British and other European powers in India during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the picture of Bharatanatyam changed entirely. The decline of Devadasi's practicing this artform was majorly due to the annexe of Indian kingdom by foreigners. Indian rulers were left powerless resulting in dependency. This left them with no choice but to act as foreigners' managers only. The 'King' title was just name-sake. Without power, and no financial support available for and from the Kings, the Devadasi's used this art form for livelihood which was momentary. This gave way for judgemental attitude from Indian society that, only the poor were practising this for livelihood. The Status of these dancers dropped heavily. The society shunned these dancers from performing, once they aged and lost their physical beauty. This left them optionless and pushed them to poverty. Bharatanatyam began to lose its charisma as an artform of offering due to loss of its identity with religion. Gradually, girls who were offered to temples as a sign of devotion during ancient era, were later offered as last resort to avoid poverty. So also, to fill up the male absence in the lives of women of low status or unmarried older girls or girls born out of premarital conception, unchaste, low caste and so on. Using the Indian Cultural parameters for judging, a Devadasi was perceived to be disrespectful, honourless and women with negative attitudes, which made them vulgar, leaving them to drop their cherished status in society.

When the Colonial rule in India started to end, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, revival of Bharatanatyam started through abolition of the Devadasi System. This led to a revolution that girls need not devote their entire life to temples, but can pursue Bharatanatyam without any prejudices. Though the struggle for abolishing this Devadasi System started around 17<sup>th</sup> Century, it was by the tireless efforts of a Physician called Dr.Muttulakshmi Reddy. Though not being a dancer, she worked hard for successful abolition of the Devadasi System. With the joint efforts of stalwarts like Sri. Krishna Iyer and Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale, revival of Bharatanatyam started to happen, and this art form was refined by removing the elements of vulgarity from it. Since then, the perception and purpose of Bharatanatyam has changed drastically. Now, there are dedicated, prestigious Institutions have emerged all over the world which glorify and propagate Bharatanatyam. Several Devadasi's from the last lineage like Smt. Gowri Ammal of Mylapore, started teaching this artform to all those well-deserved. What ever is available, is their tradition being passed on to the younger generations.

This journey of Bharatanatyam is evident through the development of society, as what not is involved in this theme? Education, Physical Training, Music, Yoga, Exercises, creativity, mode of expression, gender studies, Sociology, Psychology, Therapeutic Medicine, Health, Marketing, Commerce, Mass / Multimedia, Sound Engineering, Dramatics, Theatre, Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies, almost everything connected with human existence and purpose. Every movement is Dance and every single being is a dancer!

#### **Developing a dialogue outline:**

A few scholars in the class, who would volunteer, would be asked to express their opinion about kinds of social stigma that they have experienced or viewed lately in relation to Bharatanatyam or any artform. They would be requested to share their knowledge about Bharatanatyam.

After active peer participation, conversation as to what is the concept behind Bharatanatyam would be explained as Bha – the Bhaava (feeling), Ra – the Raaga (mood, colour, music) and Ta – the Taala (the rhythm) - Natyam (Dance). .

To explain about the social stigma around Bharatanatyam, one needs to know about this art form, which definitely needs an introduction. I am sure that, very few would be knowing the original name of Bharatanatyam. It was called as 'Sadir' and 'DasiAttam' which was performed in temples to please Gods. Gods were and are indispensable parts of the Indian culture and society. Majority of those who performed, were ladies.

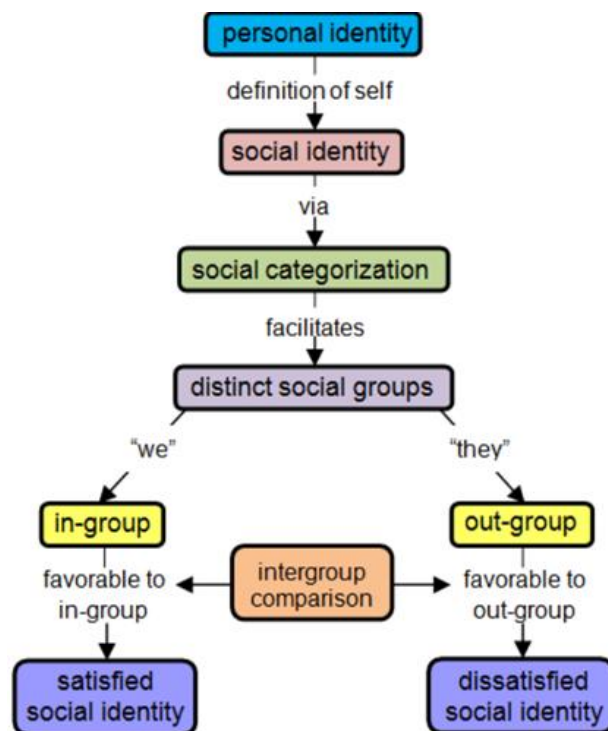
Later on, Kings brought them to their Courts for performances which gave way for attachment of social stigma very gradually. Though the Kings were the patrons of the art form, the temple dancers, who were Devadasi's meaning, 'Servants of God', were made to serve in the Royal Courts. Slowly, they stopped serving in temples and moved in search of basic life necessities to different Royal Courts and created their own lineage of dancers and patrons. The compositions too lost the poetic names or Ankita-s of Gods, which were replaced by the

names of the Kings whom they served. Though this transition saved this art form, it got attached to the social stigma that, high profile ladies were barred from learning this sacred art form.

What is Social Stigma? From the researchers' point of view, how should this Social Stigma be addressed?

The basic theory is that the Social stigma is the disapproval of, or discrimination against, a person based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society. Social stigmas are commonly related to culture, gender, race, intelligence, and health. The Bharatanatyam has gone through all of these stages so far.

As per the Goffman's theory of social stigma<sup>2</sup>, a stigma is an attribute, behaviour or reputation, which is socially discrediting in a particular way: it causes an individual to be mentally classified by others in an undesirable, rejected stereotype rather than in an accepted, normal one.



It is very sad to notice that, not only a few of faces of Social Stigma like culture, gender, intelligence and health still exist, but new ones like Popular Culture, Social Status, Styles, Lineage of Guru-s, Sponsors, Education, Corruption, Body-Shaming, Caste, Gender Bias, are crawling into the scenario. Let us try to decode these now:

1. **Popular Culture** – There are negative effects of popular cultures on artforms like Bharatanatyam. Stigma impedes the evolution of the whole dance form biased by the trending popular cultures. For example, North Indians may not relish the Bharatanatyam, but tend to get drawn towards the Hindustani Music or Kathak dance. This is a impediment for the development of a standardized research culture.
2. **Social Status** – Any dance for that matter, say Bharatanatyam, is a costly art. The Social Status (how wealthy the dancer is) of a dancer has remained a prominent determinant of the quality of presentations made. A dance production, be it a solo or a group presentation, lot of commerce is involved. The social status of a dancer, built on the acquaintances and contacts, affects his or her progress in Bharatanatyam as a career.
3. **Styles** – This refers to the Bani or the Style of Bharatanatyam that a dancer pursues. There has always been a bias in choosing style before induction into this art form. Some favour the Kalakshetra Bani, some the Valavur Bani, the Tanjavoor Bani, the Mysore Bani and so on. Nobody is bothered to look into the fineness and richness in these Bani's and realization that each one of these are superior on their own in terms of execution. They claim equal respect. Dancers get drawn towards the longer queues in front of dance schools and tend to adopt that style of Bharatanatyam.

4. **Lineage of Guru-s** – People turn judgmental when it comes to the lineage to which the dancer or performing artist belongs. If the Guru has made name and fame, people perceive that the student is bound to be the best. It should be clearly understood that, every individual has an element of creativity, which is a notable contribution expected by this art form. With this judgmental attitude, there is no scope for creativity and the dancers are driven to perform just like their Guru-s or start to imitate them.

5. **Education** – It is always reflected that, those who could not make their mark in academia, cannot move forward to higher education and finally end up pursuing arts, especially performing arts. The Bharatanatyam dancers are branded to be lesser intellectuals than those who pursue technical education. They forget that the science of dance is difficult to decode. Research in Dance Education is not viewed on par research in any other Education.

6. **Corruption** – Now a days, Bharatanatyam dance platforms offer variety of exposure by ways and means unknown, and corruption is one of them. The dancers are asked to perform free of cost or either handed over the check for a discount. Those who agree to this, get more and more opportunities to perform. This is the sad reality. Even the awards are bought and sold!

7. **Body-shaming** – The Dance Shows which have branded dancers, have created an image of a dancer based on sculpture, literature, and what all, but what really goes into a chiselled Bharatanatyam dancer, is his or her flexibility to execute and emote. But the said aesthetics are lost in the gimmicks of glorified proportions. The essence of Rasa-Sutra (tasteful diction with reference to theatrics) of Bharata Muni, that dance is the communication with the Sahrdaya (sensitive-hearted audience) is lost completely.

8. **Caste** – Bharatanatyam has again fallen into the same loop of caste system. The upper castes are still the ones who pursue this art form and this form has remained not-reachable for the other castes of the society either due to lack of interest or knowledge. The Caste Reservation System in all levels of academia has resulted in lack of interest in the unreserved categories also and vice-versa. The Reservation System has resulted in creation of seats at school, high school, college, under graduate, post graduate and doctoral levels. But due to lack of applications from the reserved categories, they lie vacant, which in turn creates frustration among the other categories, who are required to waste another precious year!

9. **Gender Bias** – It is a well-known perception that dancing or doing Bharatanatyam is only for girls. So also, male dancing has turned out to be a comic work these days. Since Bharatanatyam was practised only by girls earlier, majority of men are afraid to take up this art form as their career, due to lack of support system for male dancers. The elders of a family shun the boys from learning Bharatanatyam, the reason being the boys acquiring girly mannerisms once they start learning and practicing Bharatanatyam. A Male Bharatanatyam dancer many not get a suitable bride at all, as learning this art form is presumed as unmanly!

The Social Stigma is multi-dimensional. Building from Goffman's initial conceptualization, Jones and colleagues (1984) identified the following six dimensions of Social Stigma, which need introspection in order to address the above issues:

- 1) Concealable – the extent to which others can see the stigma
- 2) Course of the mark – whether the stigma's prominence increases, decreases, or disappears
- 3) Disruptiveness – the degree to which the stigma and/or others' reaction to it impedes social interactions
- 4) Aesthetics – the subset of others' reactions to the stigma comprising reactions that are positive/approving or negative/disapproving but represent estimations of qualities other than the stigmatized person's inherent worth or dignity
- 5) Origin – whether others think the stigma is present at birth, accidental, or deliberate
- 6) Peril – the danger that others perceive (whether accurately or inaccurately) the stigma to pose to them.

Further, Goffman divides the individual's relation to a stigma into three categories:

1. the 'Stigmatized' are those who bear the stigma;
2. the 'Normals' are those who do not bear the stigma; and
3. the 'Wise' are those among the 'Normals', who are accepted by the stigmatized as "Wise" to their condition (borrowing the term from the homosexual community).

Right balance in the above mix is the secret to ward off Social Stigma. If the number of 'Stigmatised' is more, more will the artform suffer and if the number of 'Normals' is high, then high will be the number of 'Wise' in society. Then only can a society free from any kind of Stigma be dreamt of! <sup>3</sup>

- 
- <sup>1</sup>Belkin, Erica. 2008. "Creating Groups Outside the Caste System: The Devadasis and Hijras of India." BA. Hons. Thesis. Wesleyan University: Connecticut. [Google Scholar]
- <sup>2</sup>Goffman. I. 1963. "Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. [Google Scholar]