

Received on: 01 September 2025

Revised on: 10 September 2025

Accepted on: 14 September 2025

## Indian Classical Dance as Aspirational Labour: Economic Marginalization and Muslim Bodies in Kerala's Performance Culture

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### Abstract

This ethnographic study examines how Indian classical dance functions as "aspirational labour" for marginalized communities, particularly Muslim performers in Kerala. Through extensive fieldwork involving interviews with dancers, parents, and cultural practitioners, this research reveals how capital-intensive performance culture systematically excludes marginalized bodies from classical dance discourse. The study demonstrates that despite Kerala's reputation for cultural democratization through school art festivals, the market-driven transformation of classical dance creates hierarchical access patterns that reinforce existing social inequalities. Negotiating caste Hindu cultural spaces and even their own religious communities for taking up a passion that systematically others them within these structures, Muslim classical dancers face compounded marginalization through both economic constraints and religious identity negotiations within elite performance traditions dominated by upper-caste, upper-class practitioners.

**Keywords:** classical dance, aspirational labour, marginalization, Muslim identity, Kerala, cultural capital

### Introduction

The term "Indian classical dance" refers specifically to performative traditions officially recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi and Ministry of Culture: Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohiniattam, Odissi, Manipuri, and Sattriya. While acknowledging extensive debates surrounding the appropriateness of "classical," particularly given colonial and postcolonial constructions, this study

adopts contemporary state recognition terminology while remaining critically aware of embedded power dynamics.

This ethnographic investigation explores how classical dance operates as what Duffy (2017) defines as "aspirational labour", unpaid or underpaid work performed in hopes of future recognition or economic reward. Even though the concept primarily focused on digital cultures, this paper focuses on creative labour such as classical dance performances within different spaces. For marginalized communities, particularly Muslims involved in classical dance practice in Kerala, classical dance represents both cultural aspiration and economic burden, creating complex negotiations between passion, identity, and financial survival within increasingly capital-intensive performance markets. Even though performers from marginalized communities take it up as their career through their passion, already challenging several structural dynamics, the complex market structures still make them vulnerable through various means.

Kerala's state art festivals, known locally as Kalolsavam, are annually conducted as competitions on various events, ostensibly democratizing access to classical dance forms. However, this study reveals how market-driven performance culture transforms classical dance with complex historical manifestations and institutional validation into a capital-intensive spectacle, fundamentally altering access patterns and reinforcing social hierarchies. Through detailed ethnographic analysis, this paper demonstrates how economic barriers systematically exclude participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, while elite performance culture maintains exclusionary mechanisms that marginalize working-class and minority performers.

Duffy's (2017) concept of aspirational labour provides a crucial framework for understanding how cultural workers invest in unpaid activities, hoping for future reward. This resonates with Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of cultural capital, where artistic skills and knowledge function as forms of social distinction that may or may not translate into economic benefits. For classical dancers from marginalized communities, accumulating cultural capital through training and performance rarely guarantees economic stability, creating an investment cycle without assured return. Gramsci's (1971) analysis of cultural hegemony illuminates how elite tastes become normalized as "high culture," creating exclusionary mechanisms that marginalize working-class and minority participants. In the context of Indian classical dance, these dynamics manifest through elaborate costume requirements, expensive training fees, and market expectations that favor spectacle over traditional technique, transforming cultural practice into aspirational labour for those seeking recognition

within elite-dominated performance hierarchies. This paper documents such narratives within the performative cultural practices in Kerala focusing on certain dance forms that has been institutionally validated as classical dance forms.

### **Methodology**

This ethnographic study was part of the larger project on studying Muslim classical dancers in Kerala, which was conducted from 2019 to 2023 across Kerala. It involved in-depth interviews with classical dancers, parents, and cultural practitioners. The research employed participant observation at school art festivals, training academies, and performance venues. Special attention was paid to Muslim practitioners' experiences, given their unique position within Hindu-dominated classical dance traditions operating under increasingly market-driven conditions.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with dancers across age groups and economic backgrounds, participant observation at Kerala State School Art Festival competitions, archival analysis of cultural policy documents, economic surveys of competition-related expenses, and ethnographic observation of makeup rooms, rehearsal spaces, and performance venues. The research utilized individual narratives and collective observations to understand how aspirational labour manifests across different socioeconomic positions within classical dance communities. All participants provided informed consent, and names have been anonymized to protect privacy. The research followed established protocols for ethnographic research with marginalized communities.

### **Capital-Intensive Performance Culture and the Economics of Aspiration**

Kerala's school to university art festival system represents a unique cultural space where performers trained in classical dance forms from marginalized communities can participate, distinguishing it from popular dance festivals or temple celebrations. However, this system creates significant economic barriers through its four tier structure spanning school, sub district, district, and state levels, effectively transforming what should be accessible cultural participation into a capital intensive pursuit that may exclude those it ostensibly serves. The testimony of a Muslim classical dancer's mother from Thiruvananthapuram reveals the extent of these financial demands:

Most of our income was spent on my daughter's training in classical dance forms. Being from a middle-class family, it was beyond our expectations. We must spend money on training, practice, costumes, ornaments, and appeals, or court fees if we don't get justice at a lower level, etc. Even though we

struggled a lot to meet our needs, we are still happy that she can continue her passion.

This narrative encapsulates how classical dance participation requires families to transform basic cultural engagement into aspirational labour, where economic sacrifice becomes necessary for cultural access. Many families resort to borrowing money from neighbors, securing bank loans, or mobilizing support from multiple sources, strategies that highlight how supposed democratic cultural participation actually demands significant economic investment that many cannot afford.

The parent from Kollam district who provided detailed cost comparisons over twenty-five years of Kalolsavam participation demonstrates the dramatic escalation of aspirational labour demands. Between 2000 and 2001 and 2023 and 2024, total competition expenses increased from rupees fifteen thousand seven hundred fifty to rupees sixty-five thousand just for a particular event like Bharatanatyam. As the person is located in a rural village and their children got trained under a teacher who took minimal fees, the estimation looks like this. This might be different for a teacher with higher demand or in certain parts of urban areas. This represents more than quadrupling over two decades. Choreography fees showed the most dramatic increase, rising from rupees three thousand five hundred to rupees thirty-five thousand, a tenfold increase representing the commercialization of what was once community-based cultural transmission.

Costume costs more than doubled from rupees five thousand to rupees twelve thousand, while ornament expenses shifted from purchasing inexpensive accessories (rupees five hundred) to renting traditional temple sets (rupees three thousand per competition, totaling rupees nine thousand for three levels). Makeup costs increased from rupees seven hundred fifty to rupees three thousand per competition. Even though live musical accompaniment was replaced by recordings, eliminating rupees nine thousand in orchestra expenses, this technological cost reduction was overwhelmed by increases in other categories.

Even though there are teachers or makeup artists who charge less than this, this has mostly become a market in Kerala where all these artists have their own networking circles like dance teachers' associations and makeup artists' associations. In other cases, participants rent costumes, which also range from rupees five hundred to rupees two thousand and creates additional burden even if they own costumes. The reason for such expenses is majorly pointed out as these programs give their children public attention, including media representation, which will gradually help

them establish themselves in the dance field or even in movie or modeling industries. Several parents pointed this out across economic statuses

These figures demonstrate how technological changes that could democratize access become absorbed into an inflationary system that maintains economic barriers while shifting cost structures, rather than reducing overall expenses, eliminating live orchestras simply redirected economic demands toward other performance elements, keeping the capital-intensive nature of classical dance participation.

The transformation of classical dance into market-driven spectacle creates additional layers of aspirational labour demands. A Muslim classical dance choreographer from Thiruvananthapuram explained how audience expectations shaped by media consumption require substantial production investments:

I have been in this field for a long time. I consider classical dance my passion and selflessly work towards it. However, financial investments for negotiating with the market are essential in establishing oneself in this field. Even when we examine classical dance performances these days, specifically stage shows, the whole conceptualization of performance has changed drastically. Some performances still adhere to conventional patterns, which are mostly limited to certain sabhas and other dance festivals. However, dance programs in temple festivals and other cultural events have changed due to the audience's changing visual and audio culture. Nowadays, when an audience attends a classical dance performance, they expect numerous visual and audio effects in dance besides technicalities and movements. Movies and media have already influenced audiences, so they generally expect cinematic experiences in dance shows.

This shift toward spectacular presentation requires dancers to invest in properties, lighting effects, elaborate makeup, and vibrant costumes to attract contemporary audiences. The choreographer noted that traditional sabhas might maintain conventional patterns. Still, some of the programs in temple festivals and cultural events demand cinematic experiences, pushing classical dancers toward capital-intensive market engagement that transforms cultural practice into aspirational labour.

The paradox emerges in her observation that audiences remain unwilling to pay substantial performance fees despite expensive production requirements. This creates a contradiction where dancers must invest heavily in spectacle while receiving

minimal compensation, the essence of aspirational labour, where present investment hopes for future reward that may never materialize. As she further elaborated:

Using properties, light effects, heavy makeup, and vibrant and glittering costumes provides an added advantage for attracting audiences in such casual settings. Even the technicalities in music recording have changed to create a better impact on stage... But the irony is that people are unwilling to invest money to watch a performance. They prefer going to a movie or a party. The venues where we attract audiences are typically on stage shows in temple festivals, and we might have sponsors for such performances. But the demand for such productions is so high that they become expensive, and we struggle to afford them.

This narrative reveals how market expectations create a cycle of aspirational labour where dancers continuously invest in production values, hoping to attract audiences who simultaneously devalue live performance relative to commercial entertainment alternatives.

The capital-intensive nature of classical dance extends beyond initial training into professional careers, creating sustained patterns of aspirational labour. A key research participant from Palakkad district, running a private dance institution, emphasized how performance culture demands continuous financial investment:

The struggle of artists in this field is enormous, especially regarding financial investment. Along with struggles concerning social identities, the affordability of classical dance in its performance culture must be discussed. Those who engage in classical dance spend significant money on music recording, costumes, orchestra, and venue arrangements. Even though we choreograph the item, we are also expected to invest in other components like orchestra, recording, makeup, and so on to present it on a stage. Makeup is also expensive. If we consider the example of Bharatanatyam, people generally prefer temple ornament sets and Kancheepuram sarees for costumes, which, including stitching charges, also make the overall cost expensive.

His observation that dancers must "contribute money from their pockets to cover the pay for orchestra, makeup, costume, light, and sound" demonstrates how professional classical dance operates through aspirational labour where performers subsidize their performances, hoping for recognition that might lead to future opportunities.

The institutional recognition paradox becomes evident in how state-sponsored training and grading systems fail to guarantee economic stability. Many interviewed dancers expressed that despite training by state institutions and receiving official recognition, their financial stability remains low compared to other professions. This gap between cultural capital accumulation and economic reward exemplifies aspirational labour's central contradiction: continuous investment without assured return.

### **Elite Performance Culture and Celebrity Hierarchies**

The 2024 Kerala State School Art Festival controversy illuminated the hierarchical structure of classical dance recognition that creates aspirational labour conditions for marginalized performers. When a film star demanded five lakh rupees to choreograph the opening dance, the resulting debate revealed systematic exclusion patterns where celebrity culture privileges upper-caste, upper-class performers while marginalizing trained classical dancers operating from economically precarious positions.

Classical dancers criticized the celebrity prioritization, pointing out that choreographing and presenting classical dance involves substantial costs compared to other art forms, while highlighting minimal compensation provided to artists for state-organized programs. The debate exposed how elite performance culture creates a two-tiered system where celebrities command substantial fees. At the same time, trained classical dancers engage in aspirational labour, accepting minimal compensation, hoping for recognition and future opportunities.

The controversy also revealed how celebrity culture systematically excludes classical dancers from marginal positions. Many practitioners noted that performance opportunities were consistently reserved for popular film personalities, creating barriers for those lacking social connections and economic resources. This exclusion pattern transforms classical dance into aspirational labour for marginalized performers who must compete for limited recognition within elite-dominated cultural frameworks.

As participants pointed out, prioritizing celebrities over unemployed institutionally trained classical dancers creates systematic exclusion despite Kerala's extensive institutional infrastructure for classical dance training. State-supported academies produce numerous qualified teachers and students, yet performance opportunities remain concentrated among celebrity practitioners from privileged backgrounds, forcing trained dancers into aspirational labour hoping for eventual recognition.

State-sponsored academies, sabhas, and cultural organizations mediate access to performance opportunities and funding, creating gatekeeping mechanisms that can exclude marginalized performers despite official commitments to cultural democratization. While institutional recognition provides cultural capital, it rarely guarantees economic stability or performance access for those lacking social networks and economic resources.

The research revealed how institutional frameworks, while ostensibly democratic, operate through informal networks that favor economically privileged participants. Muslim classical dancers face particular challenges accessing these networks, given their minority status within Hindu-dominated cultural frameworks where elite performance culture maintains exclusionary practices through social and economic barriers.

The gap between institutional training and performance access creates aspirational labour conditions where dancers invest in education and skill development without guaranteed pathways to professional recognition. Many participants described completing formal training programs, receiving official certifications, and developing technical expertise while struggling to access performance venues and audiences controlled by elite networks.

The commercial transformation of classical dance creates hierarchical access patterns where market success depends on production values and social connections rather than traditional technical mastery. Elite performance culture emphasizes spectacle and celebrity recognition over artistic skill, creating aspirational labour conditions for technically proficient dancers lacking economic resources for elaborate productions. A research participant noted that audiences and performers focus more on costumes, makeup, and visual effects than performance quality, creating market dynamics favoring economically privileged participants who can afford capital-intensive productions. This shift transforms classical dance into aspirational labour for skilled performers who must choose between maintaining traditional approaches or investing in market-oriented spectacle, hoping for commercial success.

The celebrity culture in classical dance creates hierarchical recognition systems where film personalities receive priority for central performances. In contrast, trained classical dancers engage in aspirational labour, accepting smaller venues and minimal compensation. This dynamic reinforces an elite performance culture where recognition depends on existing social status rather than artistic merit, marginalizing performers from working-class and minority backgrounds.

### **Class Structure and Differential Access Patterns**

The research revealed stark contrasts between economically privileged and disadvantaged dancers' experiences, demonstrating how class position determines access to high-quality training and performance opportunities. A Muslim classical dancer from Alappuzha acknowledged how family economic stability facilitated her classical dance journey:

Being part of the service class, I have never faced economic constraints. Even though it was costly, my parents could afford it.

This testimony illustrates how economic privilege eliminates aspirational labour conditions for upper-class participants who can afford training costs without financial sacrifice. Her acknowledgment of expense alongside affordability highlights how the same cultural practice becomes aspirational labour for marginalized participants while remaining an accessible leisure activity for economically privileged families.

A male Muslim classical dancer from Trivandrum reflected on his privileged school experience, revealing how economic capital enabled comprehensive training access:

I never faced economic constraints. Both my parents were working, and we had to invest significant capital to get trained in these forms. For example, we had to make new costumes for these many classical styles for every stage. Also, we didn't use CDs then, which is common now. We had a live orchestra. And we had to pay every artist who came to play the instruments. Even if we needed rehearsal, we had to pay for it. So, it was a considerable investment.

His family's capacity to hire live orchestras and fund extensive costume collections demonstrates how economic privilege provides access to premium training experiences. However, his eventual abandonment of classical dance for medical studies and business raises questions about the relationship between class privilege and cultural commitment, suggesting that for economically privileged participants, classical dance remains cultural exploration rather than aspirational labour seeking economic advancement.

A dance choreographer from Kottayam described traveling to Chennai for Bharatanatyam training and Bangalore and Mumbai for Kathak instruction during his school years, enabled by his father's economic capacity. This geographic mobility demonstrates how class privilege provides access to renowned instructors and diverse training experiences unavailable to economically constrained participants.

Twenty years ago, he could afford weekend travel to Chennai for classes, illustrating how economic privilege eliminates the aspirational labour conditions that

characterize marginalized participants' experiences. His access to multiple cities and renowned instructors contrasts sharply with economically disadvantaged dancers who rely on local training, fee waivers, and community support.

The quality differential in training access creates long-term implications for performance opportunities and career development. Economically privileged dancers accumulate superior cultural capital through access to renowned instructors and comprehensive training. At the same time, marginalized participants engage in aspirational labour hoping that local training and individual determination can compensate for structural disadvantages.

The research documented clear class consciousness within classical dance communities, which is evident in competition settings where economic disparities create hierarchical relationships among participants. A participant from Palakkad observed how class dynamics affect competition culture:

Nowadays, audiences and performers are more focused on the dress, makeup, etc, rather than the quality of the performance. This new performance culture also affects performers who can't afford such investments. As many of us mostly train students for competitions, we can also see a replica of this performance culture. In such competitions, there are various levels where they must arrange different costumes based on style and level. Class consciousness is observed among the students. People belonging to the upper class can afford it. This creates exclusion among the performers based on their class location, even among students in the competition.

This observation reveals how class structure operates within supposedly democratic cultural spaces, creating exclusion mechanisms based on economic capacity rather than artistic merit. The emphasis on visual presentation over technical skill transforms classical dance into aspirational labour for economically disadvantaged participants who must choose between financial sacrifice and cultural exclusion.

Ethnographic observations in competition makeup rooms confirmed these class dynamics. At a Trivandrum event, clear demarcations emerged through parents' gestures, phone calls, and conversations arranging cash payments. When the makeup artist collected ₹3,000 from each participant, visible stress among lower-income families highlighted economic pressures inherent in supposedly democratic cultural participation.

Despite training under different teachers, students supported each other through shared economic challenges, revealing how class position creates solidarity and

hierarchy within classical dance communities. These dynamics demonstrate how aspirational labour operates collectively among marginalized participants who share strategies for managing economic barriers while competing within elite-dominated cultural frameworks.

### **Muslim Bodies and Compounded Marginalization**

Muslim classical dancers face unique challenges navigating religious identity negotiations and economic constraints within Hindu-dominated performance traditions.

A young Muslim classical dancer from South Kerala described compounded marginalization following his father's death:

I started learning dance in the second grade. Initially, my mother taught me the basics of dance. Even though she was not a trained dancer, she still tried to help me dance for some television choreographies. Then, I joined a dance class and took training in Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Keralanadanam, and folk dance. Later, I changed my guru and went to a male teacher who didn't charge fees for my dance classes. My father, who studied up to the eighth grade, was a Gulf returnee and came back from the Gulf when I was studying in the fifth grade, and he was selling ice cream on the street. He passed away when I was studying in the ninth grade. I had significant economic concerns because I couldn't meet the expenses of the art festival competitions. The main cost was costumes and ornaments, except for the folk dance. All the costumes in different styles are costly. We used to borrow money from people and even borrowed money for competitions.

His experience illustrates how economic vulnerability intersects with religious marginalization, creating aspirational labour conditions where cultural participation requires continuous financial sacrifice. Following his father's death, he became the family's sole income source while continuing classical dance training, demonstrating extraordinary commitment under circumstances that would typically force abandonment of cultural pursuits.

The narrative reveals how marginal families rely on community support and informal networks to maintain classical dance participation. His teacher's willingness to provide free instruction and the family's borrowing strategies highlight survival mechanisms within marginalized communities pursuing cultural recognition through aspirational labour despite systematic exclusion from mainstream support systems.

Muslim classical dancers must navigate skepticism within their own religious communities regarding participation in Hindu performance traditions, adding layers of social pressure to economic challenges.

A Muslim classical dancer from Trivandram emphasized these dual negotiations:

There is a considerable investment when participating in classical dance competitions in Kerala schools and university art festivals. We must spend money learning new choreographies, stitching new costumes, etc. Many performers, including myself, compete in different classical dance forms in the competition. I also participated in Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, Kathakali, Keralanadanam, and Folk dance. Each of these forms demands its own investments. I was trained by renowned classical dance gurus across the state. I had to travel to different parts to get training. This also required significant financial investments.

Her participation across multiple classical forms required extensive financial investment while managing religious community concerns about Hindu cultural traditions. This dual marginalization, economic and spiritual, creates particular vulnerabilities for Muslim classical dancers seeking recognition within Kerala's cultural landscape dominated by Hindu practitioners and audiences.

The challenge of authenticity becomes particularly acute for Muslim performers who must demonstrate cultural legitimacy within traditions that may question their religious background. This creates additional aspirational labour where Muslim dancers must exceed standard performance expectations to gain acceptance, investing more time and resources to prove their cultural commitment and artistic competence.

The experience of the young Muslim dancer from South Kerala reveals intergenerational dimensions of aspirational labour where family sacrifice enables cultural participation across generations. His mother achieved her Arangetram in 2019, fulfilling a lifelong dream through her son's success:

My mother was passionate about dance; she consistently encouraged me through these struggles. I could give back to her because I taught her dance when I started a dance school, and her dream of dancing came true. She had her Arangetram in 2019.

This narrative demonstrates how aspirational labour operates across generations within marginalized communities, where parents sacrifice economic stability, hoping their children's cultural achievements will provide future opportunities. The mother's eventual Arangetram represents deferred gratification realized through sustained family investment in cultural aspiration.

The young dancer established a school where half the students receive fee concessions, demonstrating commitment to supporting other economically

disadvantaged performers. This practice reveals how successfully navigating aspirational labour conditions can create community support networks. However, individual success stories should not obscure systematic barriers that make such achievements exceptional rather than typical.

Muslim classical dancers develop survival strategies for managing compounded marginalization within elite-dominated performance culture. The young dancer from south Kerala described diversifying income sources and leveraging media visibility:

I run a dance school, and half of the students studying there receive fee concessions. As I struggled with finances for art, I would love to teach students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. I somehow manage my daily life through stage programs, dance classes, etc. Performing in a reality show also made me famous and helped me efficiently access performance opportunities.

His strategies, teaching, performance programs, and media appearances demonstrate how marginalized performers navigate aspirational labour conditions by diversifying cultural activities rather than relying solely on traditional performance venues. The reality show participation illustrates how contemporary media platforms can provide alternative pathways to recognition for those excluded from elite performance circuits.

However, these individual success strategies operate within structural constraints that exclude most Muslim classical dancers from mainstream recognition and economic stability. While personal determination and community support enable some to navigate aspirational labour successfully, systematic barriers remain intact, requiring exceptional effort and circumstances to overcome marginalization patterns embedded in Kerala's classical dance culture.

The experience of Muslim classical dancers reveals how religious marginalization compounds economic barriers, creating particularly intensive aspirational labour conditions where cultural participation requires navigating multiple exclusion mechanisms simultaneously. Their survival strategies and occasional successes demonstrate resilience and creativity but also highlight how individual achievement masks systematic patterns of exclusion that transform cultural participation into an arduous aspiration for marginalized communities.

## **Conclusion**

This ethnographic study reveals how Indian classical dance functions as aspirational labour for marginalized communities, particularly Muslim performers in Kerala,

through capital-intensive performance culture, elite hierarchies, embedded class structures, and compounded marginalization patterns. The research demonstrates that despite the rhetoric of cultural democratization through school art festivals, systematic economic barriers exclude participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, market forces transform classical dance into a commercially driven spectacle.

The capital-intensive nature of contemporary classical dance performance creates aspirational labour conditions where practitioners invest substantial resources, hoping for recognition and economic reward that rarely materializes. The dramatic cost inflation in competition expenses quadrupling over two decades illustrates how market forces penetrate democratic cultural institutions, maintaining economic barriers despite technological changes that could reduce costs. Contemporary performance expectations emphasizing visual spectacle over traditional technical mastery further disadvantage economically marginalized participants who cannot afford elaborate productions.

Elite performance culture systematically privileges celebrity practitioners and upper-class performers while marginalizing trained classical dancers from economically precarious positions. The celebrity culture controversy at the 2024 Kerala State School Art Festival exposed hierarchical recognition systems where film personalities command substantial fees while trained dancers engage in aspirational labour, accepting minimal compensation. This creates a two-tiered system where elite networks control performance opportunities, forcing marginalized practitioners to compete for limited recognition within frameworks that favor social connections over artistic merit.

Several scholars have already discussed politics of representations and caste manifestations in classical dance where class structure also fundamentally determines access to classical dance training and performance opportunities, creating differential experiences where economic privilege eliminates aspirational labour conditions for upper-class participants while maintaining systematic barriers for working-class performers. Geographic mobility, training quality, and cultural capital accumulation depend heavily on family economic capacity, producing long-term implications for career development and professional success. Class consciousness operates visibly within competition settings, creating exclusion mechanisms based on financial capacity rather than artistic competence.

Muslim classical dancers face compounded marginalization through both economic constraints and religious identity negotiations within Hindu-dominated performance traditions. They must navigate skepticism within their religious communities while managing systematic exclusion from elite performance networks, creating particularly intensive aspirational labour conditions. Survival strategies include community support networks, fee concession programs, and media platform utilization, though individual success stories mask persistent structural barriers that make achievement exceptional rather than typical.

These findings challenge assumptions about cultural democratization and highlight the need for structural interventions addressing economic accessibility in classical dance. Classical dance risks becoming increasingly exclusive without systematic change despite official commitments to cultural inclusion and diversity. The transformation of cultural practice into market-driven aspirational labour represents broader neoliberal cultural policy patterns that prioritize commercial success over democratic participation.

The experiences of Muslim classical dancers in Kerala provide crucial insights into how religious minorities navigate cultural participation within majority-dominated artistic traditions operating under increasingly capital-intensive conditions. Their narratives reveal how individual determination and community resilience enable some to succeed within aspirational labour systems while structural marginalization patterns remain intact, requiring exceptional circumstances to overcome systematic exclusion.

.The study demonstrates that cultural participation cannot be separated from economic realities and social hierarchies, requiring a comprehensive understanding of how aspirational labour shapes contemporary Indian cultural politics and marginalized communities' struggles for recognition within elite-dominated artistic fields.

Understanding classical dance as aspirational labour reveals its potential for individual transformation and its limitations in addressing systematic marginalization patterns. The research calls for critically examining how cultural democratization rhetoric masks persistent exclusion mechanisms and demands structural interventions that move beyond individual talent recognition toward comprehensive accessibility reform within India's institutionally recognised performing arts sector.

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