

# Remarkable Spatial Influences behind Shaping the Bangla Dance: Performer and Audience Perspectives

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**Abstract:** Dance is a form of art where the dancers express themselves by moving the body in a rhythmic and coordinated way with a surrounding environment. The environment in which dancers perform has always had an impact on dance forms. In this way, the distinctive landscape of this area has a significant influence on Bangla dance. From temples and crop fields to village courtyards and auditoriums, all these space variations resulted in various dance forms, movements, and ambiance. As time passed, rural areas became large cities. This significant change has made Bengal's cultural and spatial needs more versatile. People now perform dances in enclosed spaces instead of natural settings. Virtual spaces are gaining popularity among dancers. The transition of spatial influences has been neglected. This study will investigate the inseparable correlation between space and Bangla dance. This study will explore the profound impact of these changes on the characteristics of performance spaces. The author reviewed existing literature on dance, conducted online surveys, and conducted in-person interviews with expert dancers to get their opinions. All this information was collected, indicating a loss of our cultural identity due to the lack of proper spaces for the growth of Bangla dance.

**Keyword:** Dance; Bangla Dance; Folk Dance; Natural and Virtual Space; Culture.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

There's a statement that dance is art created for time and space (Briginshaw, 2001) (Emily Rai-Pi Huang, 1991). Dance has evolved based on the space it performed in, from cave dance in prehistoric times to auditoriums in modern times. Because, space influences dance to evolve with time. In the primitive era, the hunters danced together in their caves (Poignault, 2011). Dancing together allowed them to communicate with their fellow hunters through their physical movements. Dancing together also ensured the synchronization and team spirit required for a group huntraces (Rahman, 2022). The same goes for the war dances for ages: men gathered on large open fields, performing war dances to build teamwork and work themselves up for battles. (Emily Rai-Pi Huang, 1991).

Archaeology delivers traces of dance paintings that date back between 3100-2100 BC in Egypt and 9000 BC in India, telling stories where priests use musical instruments and dance to celebrate gods (Anon., n.d.). Temples became the performing space for the Bharatnatyam dance, considered a sacred duty towards the deities (Bhosale, 2016). Those dancers were called Devadasis. Which means the servants of God (Meduri, 2020)(Prickett, 2007). According to the Indian Natyashastra, Nataraja's dancing figure inspired the practice of performing Bharata Natyam in temples as a form of devotion to their deity (Bhosale, 2016) (Beltz, 2011).

In 700 BC, a notable change occurred in ancient Greece. They started building amphitheatres as dedicated spaces for their flourishing theatrical culture. Since most ancient Greek cities were located on or near hills, they typically built seating

into the slope of a mountain, creating a natural viewing area known as the theatron (literally, 'seeing place'). The actors performed at the bottom of the theatre, known as the orchestra. It was a circular piece of ground, meaning 'dancing space', where the chorus also danced in earlier periods. This phenomenon is considered a breakthrough in the history of dance spaces (Sultanova, 2023) ('Theatre of ancient Greece', n.d.)

The significant influence of spaces on dance is also evident in the history of Bangla folk dances. These folk dances originate primarily in rural Bangladesh and draw inspiration from the area's distinctively lush landscapes, rivers, forests, and even rural households. For example, Shaone Dala is part of river-centric rituals, and dhamail is performed within semi-outdoor or indoor courtyard-like spaces. (Mariam, 2022) The movements and storytelling of these dances are blended with natural settings and performed in intimate courtyards in our village households or the celebrations at village fair (Williams, 2012)(Ray, 2014).

Folk dances in Bangladesh are of three kinds: religious, social, and cultural. Some of these folk dances originated on riverbanks, while our village households treasured others in intimate courtyards or during village fair celebrations (Ray, 2014; Rahman et al., 2016). Additionally, Bangla festivals such as Nabanna, Pahela Baishakh, and PaushParban, among others, serve as public spaces that foster the environment for jatra palas and folk dances (Ahmed, 2023) (Rahman et al., 2016).

On the other hand, big cities like Dhaka are home to cultural academies where dance is practiced. These academies held classes, workshops, training, and cultural programs. Dance classes typically take place in indoor spaces that lack the necessary environment (Mridha, 2023). Also, the enclosed nature of the spaces isn't enough. However, as cities become more densely populated with buildings, open spaces such as playgrounds or fields become less prevalent (Merriman, 2010). Enclosed spaces now host dances that once took place in natural settings like Bottola. Also, outdoor dance performances are becoming less common (Mae De Sousa, Manhiça and Papanicolaou, 2022).

Virtual spaces have emerged as the most popular platform for performance content (Moura, Barros and Ferreira-Lopes, 2019). People create and upload content on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. People can reach millions of viewers by creating and uploading these performances. There's also the option of live streaming, which allows people to get access to see live stage performances without having to step out of their houses (Vincs and McCormick, 2010) (Piitulainen, Hämäläinen and Mekler, 2022). Because space is so important in dance, spatial characteristics should be considered for learning and performing (Mattoo, 2022). As the modern era is witnessing the constant change of wind in culture, the spatial influence on Bangla dance is much more significant and should be appropriately recognized (Rahman, 2022). This research will study the journey of Bangla dance and examine the spatial settings that have influenced it over time.

## II. METHODOLOGY

In Bangladesh, many regional dances have emerged from their nooks and corners. These dances retain not only the dancers' movements and gestures, but also the serenity of the places they are born from. In this research, a mixed-methods approach has the potential to make significant contributions, incorporating both quantitative outcome measures and qualitative insights from participant experiences.

The existing literature sources related to dance and space have been reviewed. Information from ancient books like the Natyashastra and the Valmiki Ramayana and recent journal papers, articles, online websites, and books on dance have been collected. For assessing the sources' relevance, spatial aspects of dance have been prioritized. While analyzing all the collected data, some sources directly linked dance and space, but most were limited to discussing the dance only.

Eventually, this led to the identification of the key findings. For example, a questionnaire survey was conducted online through Google Forms. The sampling method selected the sample of 300 participants based on criteria that included four different age groups; consisted of both dancers and non-dancers. The questionnaire includes eight general questions about their perspectives on dance and space. The questions were closed-ended. Both online surveys and in-person distribution methods were used to collect responses. After collecting the data, responses have been analyzed to conclude the key findings on **Fig. 1**.

The quantitative analysis for closed-ended questions helped generate charts. For example, interviews with expert dancers helped gather insights from their experience. The interviews were conducted in person. Each of the practitioners ensured they were aware and consented to using their response. The structure of the interview questions was open-ended, and everyone was interviewed individually. The responses of the interview participants were collected through the combination of audio recording and note-taking methods. Some of the interviews took place in the dance studios of the respective dancers. The chart below illustrates a sequence that summarizes the entire process:

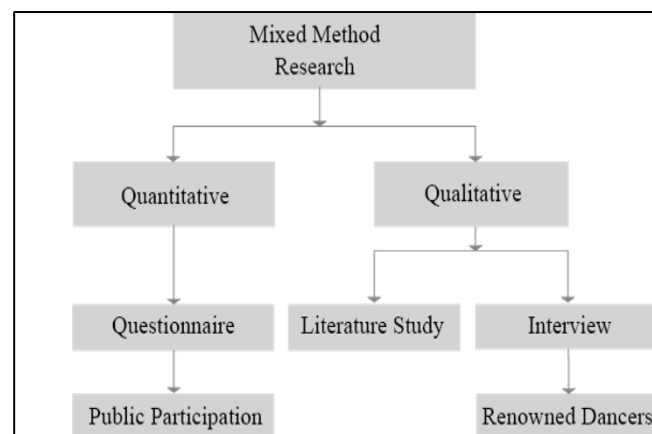


Fig 1 Mixed Method Research [Source: Author]

### III. DISCUSSION

Spatial influences on dance refer to the use of physical space, the arrangement of dancers, and movements within that space. And this influence changes over time (Mae De Sousa, Manhiça and Papanicolaou, 2022). This explains the evolution of Bangla dance over time. Bangla folk dance's performing spaces had always been open, close to nature, and public. Looking back at the ancient period, we can see that, not as celebratory, the folk dances were initially agricultural. While farming, all the farmers sing together and dance in a rhythmic way to cut off the stress from continuous work. Dancing helped the farmers to keep up their spirits (Rahman, 2022).

As villages evolved, dance became a core part of festivities and ceremonies. The Nobannoutsav, a harvest celebration, highlights this transition. During this occasion in Hemanta, farmers and their families expressed joy through dance, often in jatra performances (Rahman, 2022)(Williams, 2012). These dances, inspired by crop celebrations, demonstrated the intimate bond between people, their earth, and artistic expressions. Villages in Bangladesh have been the birthplace and stronghold of various folk dances. The serene countryside, with its relaxed and casual ambiance, has many of its own tales (Village of Bangladesh, 2020)(Ray, 2014). The courtyards of houses, village streets (methopaths), playgrounds, fields, and village fairs (mela) became natural stages for folk dances. These spaces allowed for the free expression of rural emotions and narratives.

➤ *Spatially, folk dances found their home in various community spaces:*

- In holy shrines, such as Muslim mazaars or Hindu mandirs.
- In the backyards of householders commissioning the performances, and
- The 'commons' or community spaces under open skies with easy public access, patronized by the community itself. (Mariam, 2022).

Folk dance traditions often took place in sacred spaces like Muslim mazars and Hindu mandirs, as well as in open community areas under the sky, where they were accessible to everyone. These spaces fostered community participation, creating a strong bond between the performers and the audience. Temples in Bangladesh, especially during festivals and religious ceremonies, have become spaces for Kirtan performances (Unb, 2008). The spiritual ambiance of the temple contributed to the devotional nature of the kirtan dance for ages (Rahman, 2022)(Husain and Tinker, no date).

Nabomita, a Bharatnatyam dancer, went back through memory lane while sharing her experience attending a classical dance workshop. That workshop was held on a Nat-mandir. Despite its essential nature, people often neglect ventilation, leading to a stuffy environment. Nata mandira (or Nata mandapa) is the square-shaped platform designated for temple performances. The layout of these platforms had influenced the arrangement of dancers and musicians,

fostering a sense of community participation and collective worship (Venkatesh, 2018). The baul tradition, especially at Lalon akhda in kushtia and jessore, also emphasizes the importance of space in dance (Husain and Tinker, no date)(Rahman *et al.*, 2016). At the akhda, baul practitioners focus on spirituality and philosophy, coming together in communal spaces to connect with their inner selves. These settings encourage unity and shared purpose (Dutt, 1954).

The courtyard is one such element in Bangla architecture, which is of spatial arrangement that may survive repeated periods of changes with society, culture, and need (Dutt, 1954). Traditional homes in Bangla were built around courtyards, which served as spaces for social activities and dance performances. The courtyards of well-off families houses are the connoisseurs and patrons of rural arts, customs, and rituals (Mariam, 2022). Sylhet commonly performs Dhamail, a regional dance, in courtyards during weddings and festivals. It provides an intimate setting for friends and family to participate. (Eaton, 1993) (Mashhur Zarif, 2020).

Madhobi Shill Puja, an enchanting dancer with nearly 10 years of experience, shared how important the natural spaces were in helping her grow as a dancer. She fondly recalled her childhood, when she used to go to her Guru's (dance teacher's) house and practice Bharatnatyam mudras in the uthan (courtyard). She thinks connecting to nature has made her learning process more peaceful and clear.

The experience of 22-year-old classical dancer Jahid Hasan Sagor further demonstrates the impact of nature on dance. Growing up near the Jadukata River in Sunamganj, he found inspiration in the river's flowing nature. However, the fierce nature of the Jadukata River has long since disappeared. The environmental changes altered this relationship between the natural landscapes and Sagor's artistic vision. Rivers have always played a unique role in Bangla dance traditions (Dutt, 1954)(Mridha, 2023). The riverine processional performance, which depicts Behula's journey in the myth of Manasa, the Serpent Goddess, during the Shaone Dala (Gift of Monsoon) ritual, had been performed either on the boats, the stoppages or the temporary stages by the riverbanks (Ahmed, 2018)(Mariam, 2022).

The British Colonial era brought significant changes to performance spaces by introducing theatres. During the British colonial era in the Indian subcontinent, theaters became popular (Kersten, 2008)(Ahmed, 2023). Among the most widespread folk dances performed on Jatra stages or theatres halls are the Gambhira, leto, jari, shaari, baul, manipuri, etc (Ray, 2014). Various locations, such as village squares, courtyards, or designated areas for cultural events, can host Jatra stages. Bamboo poles are erected on all four sides of the stage. The openness allows for a larger audience to gather and enjoy the performance. Dancers can move closer to spectators, making eye contact, engaging them in the performance, and creating a shared experience (Emily Rai-Pi Huang, 1991).

As urbanization developed, dance places in cities such as Dhaka changed dramatically. Dance performances started

to take place in auditoriums and amphitheatres (Rahman et al., 2016). Many prominent academies became dance learning places, including Bulbul Academy for Fine Arts, Nazrul Academy, Shishu Academy, Shadhona Cultural Academy, and soon (Ahmed, 2023)(Rahman, 2022). This change presented dancers with new problems, as well as opportunities. This transition from open to enclosed environments profoundly impacted Bangladeshi dance practices.

Shibli Mohammad remarked the space's size, shape, and characteristics can impact the creative choices made by choreographers and influence the way dancers express themselves. It's about how the space around dancers shapes their dance and how the audience experiences the performance. So, whenever a dancer dances in a indoor place, it lacks the touch of air, sun and nature with themselves. The classical dances and most of the folk dances need the nature to be absorbed, and devoted by the dancers in their learning process. The process is like being close to Earth to learn from the Earth. Today's modernized learning spaces lack the earthy touch, affecting a dancer's body and mind.

The presence of Virtual spaces is very evident in recent times. Augmenting and supporting dance through technology has been a topic of interest for years such as virtual platforms, providing new opportunities for creating social dancing experience(Piitulainen, Hämäläinen and Mekler, 2022) (Vincs and McCormick, 2010). This experience connects our time, virtual spaces, and dance performances in a common thread and gives an opportunity to enjoy or participate dance performances which was unthinkable in the past. People can easily access lots of dance performances at once and know different dance from worldwide (Giannachi, 2021).

Sreoshi Purkayastha is quite alarmed about this impact of virtual space on dance. Virtual space is accessible to

everyone, so people can showcase anything they want and reach millions in no time. However, this diminishes the value of dance as an art form. It is becoming more of an 'entertainment' because of the impact of virtual space. They practice in their house, where they face criticism and get discouraged. So, well-designed practice spaces can inspire dancers to learn dance wholeheartedly.

Mohua Mrinmoy, a young folk dancer, shared her experience of how the viewer's applause and cheers change when she performs on stage. Observing a performance in person differs significantly from watching it virtually in terms of how it is perceived. The visual connection, or performance, is all about the audience and the dancers' experiences. The quality of the experience is largely dependent on the space. The performance is not only a representation of the dance but a representation of the dance in the space (Armstrong, Morgan and Lipske, 1984)(Hanna, 1987).

#### IV. SURVEY FINDINGS

Both rural and urban areas have been visited, and sketches were created in real-time, while others were drawn from reference collections and other accessible resources. The sketches include the local temple, a village home with a courtyard, the bajra in haor, childhood memories of the village fair, the open amphitheater in Hatir Jhill, the auditorium at Shilpakala Academy [Figure 2]. Folk dances are an integral part of various community spaces such as the temple, courtyard, and other communal spaces. Understanding the spatial features is important to comprehend the evolution of folk dance. Therefore, the functional spaces, spatial characteristics, and types of dances typically performed in these locations have been identified. This has resulted in an evolutionary journey [Table 1].

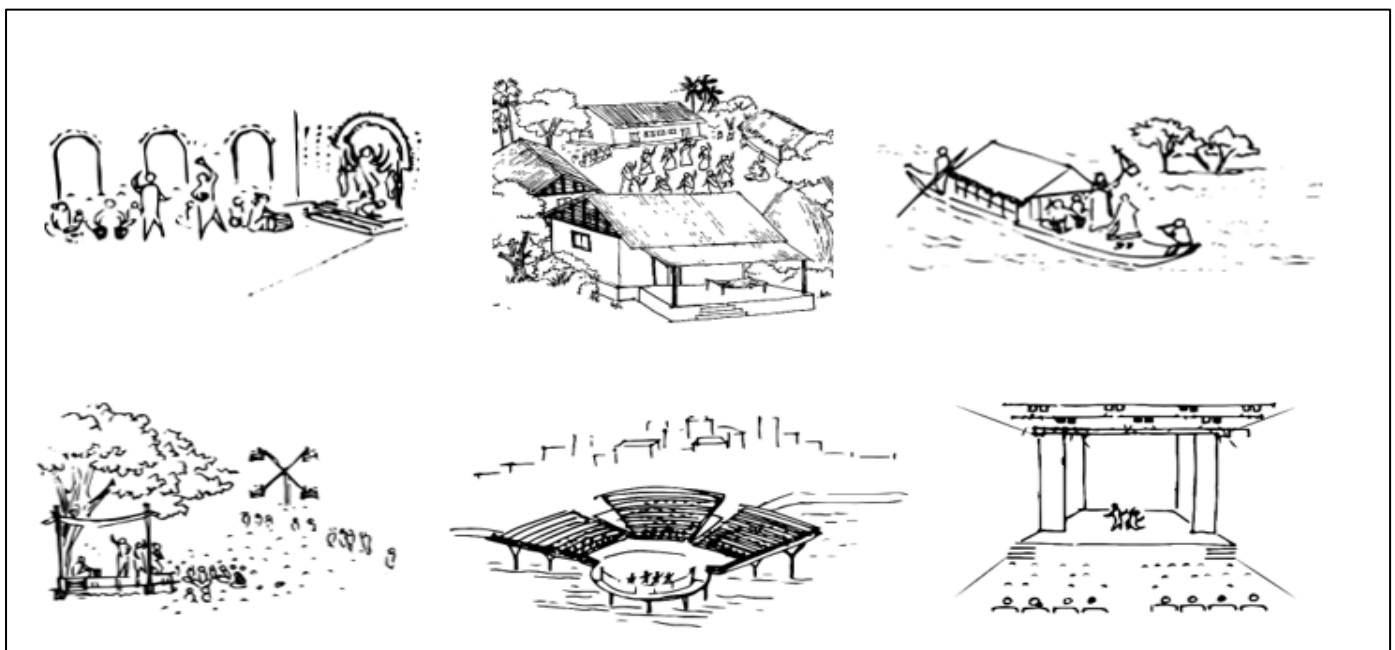


Fig 2 Spatial Evolution Various Community Spaces for Folk Dance Performances [Source: Author from Physical Surveys of 2022-2023 and (Venkatesh, 2018)].



	Functional space	Space characteristics	Dance type
Temple	Central spaces e.g. Nat-mandir	Semi-outdoor/Outdoor	Group dance
Courtyard	Outer courtyard	Semi-outdoor, Intimate, Natural	Circular Group dance
Community spaces	Village fair	Outdoor, Crowded	Mostly Jatra pala Group dance
	Riverside	Outdoor, Crowded	Both Group and solo dance
	Amphitheater	Outdoor, Crowded	Both Group and solo dance
	Auditorium	Indoor, Crowded	Both Group and solo dance

Table 1 Spatial Evolution Various Community Spaces for Folk Dance Performances [Source: Author from Physical Surveys of 2022-2023 and (Venkatesh, 2018)].

The results of surveys and interviews have been analyzed to determine changes in the spatial features of dance spaces. The public's needs and opinions have been represented in generated pie charts. A sample consisting of 280 individuals was used. Their opinions are summarized in the **Fig 3** and **Fig 4** below:

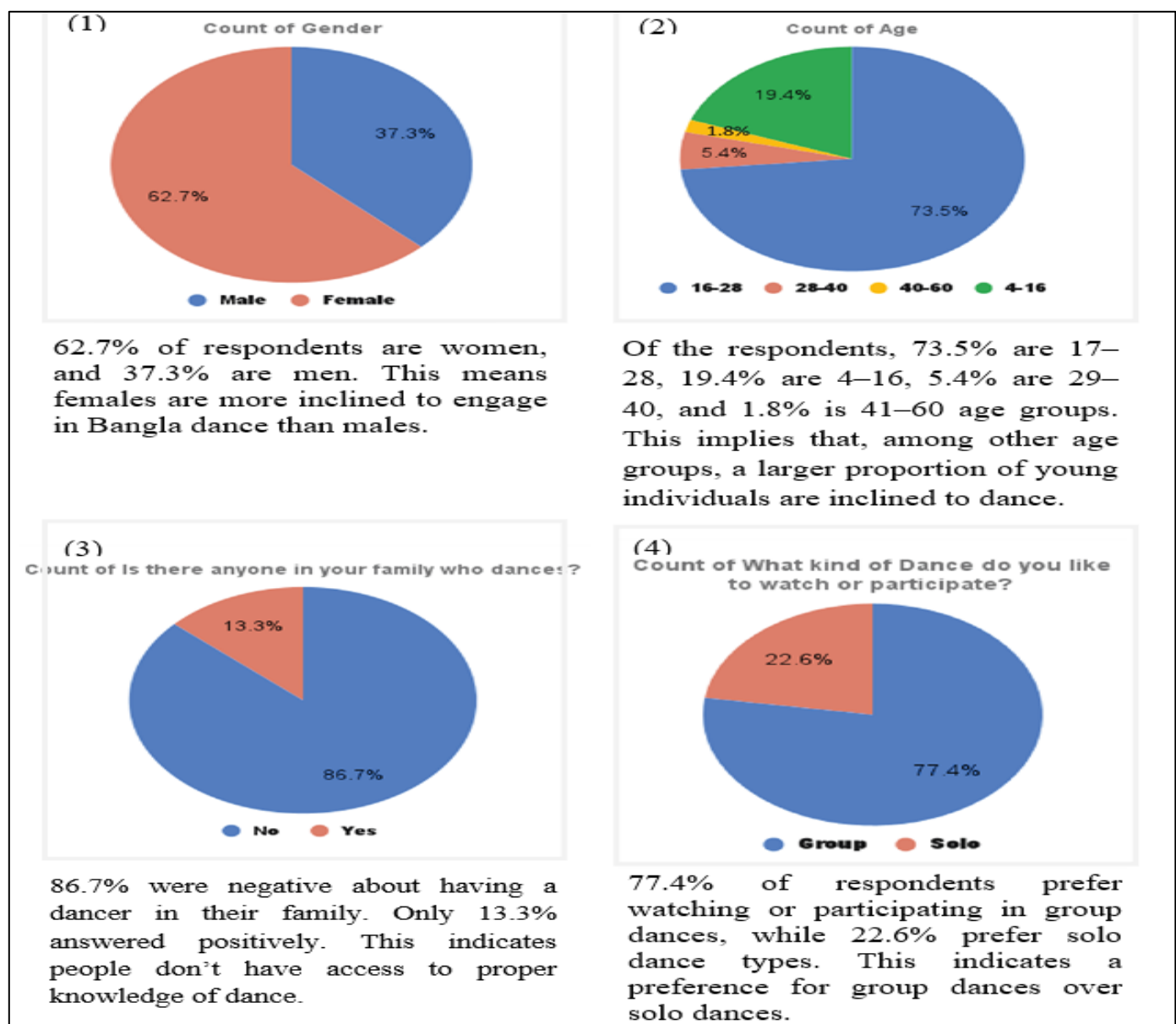


Fig 3 Survey outcome based on specific questions from 280 respondents (1) Gender (2) Age (3) Dancer in family (4) Types of dance [Source: Author].

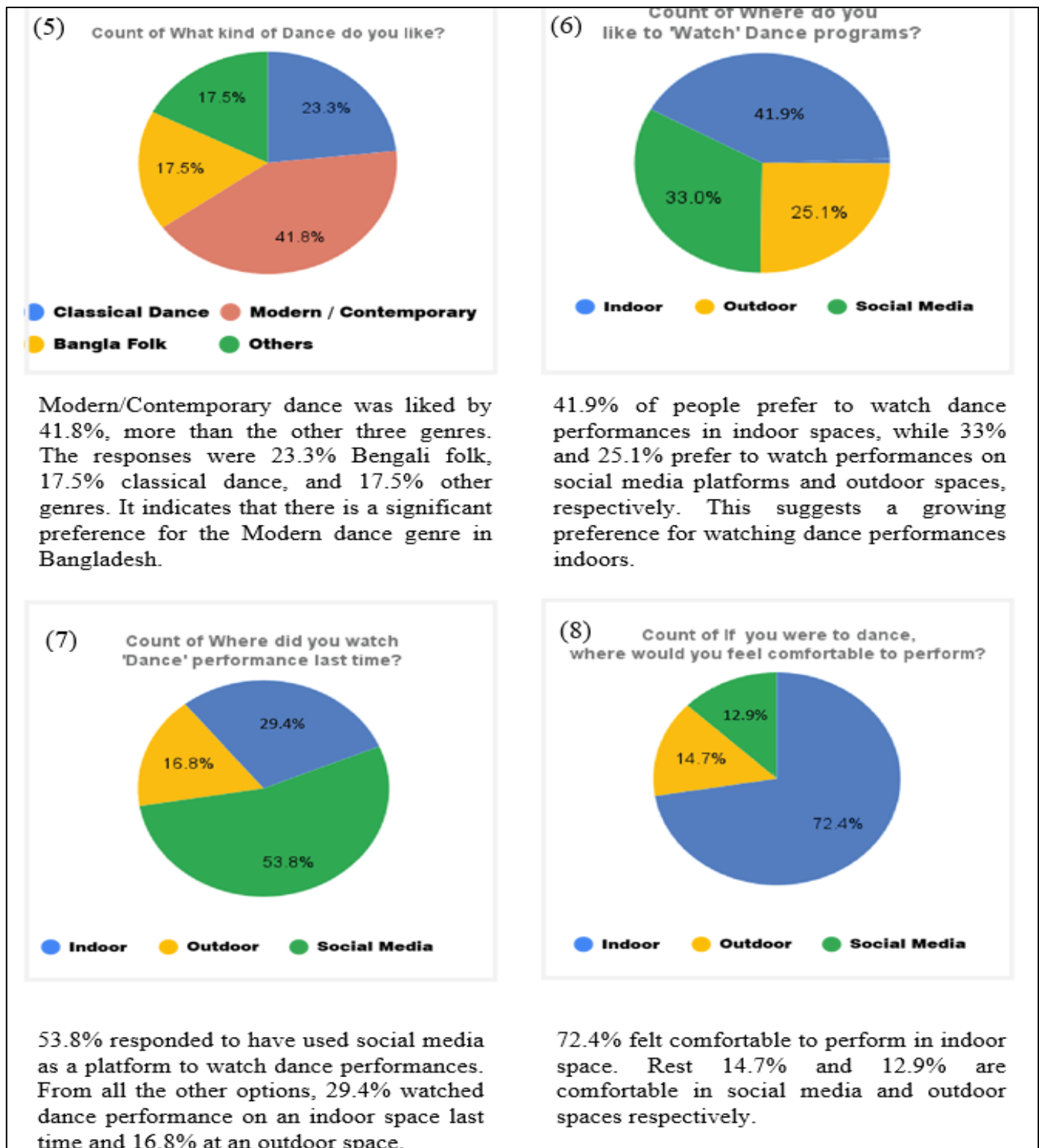


Fig 4: Survey outcome based on specific questions from 280 respondents (5) Kinds of dance (6) Usual space to watch dance (7) Space of last time watched dance performance (8) Comfortable space to perform dance [Source: Author].

## V. RESULT

Historically, dance has evolved within the spaces where it was performed. It has been devotional in temples, full of team spirit at village fairs, and a part of Jatra Pala performances. Emotion and cultural identity are infused in these spaces, significantly impacting the dances. These influences have led to evolutions over the years. However, in

this modern era of globalization, our very own Bangla dances are not practiced or nurtured in required spaces. This can cause us to lose our cultural identity, as the folk dances represent that. All the existing literature resources from different eras and the opinions of expert dancers suggest this downfall. Public opinion also refers to the same, supporting the virtual mediums.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The use of outdoor spaces for learning and performing should be encouraged. Bangla dance is deeply connected to our country's six seasons, and dancers miss out on the changing colours of the sky, the sound of river waves, and the rustling of leaves if confined to a classroom. Dance practiced during monsoon rain or celebrations like Nabanna Utsav can't be fully appreciated within four walls. Dancers need to connect with nature. While technological advancement and inflation of virtual spaces are inevitable, we must ensure the growth of Bangla dance culture alongside them. We should draw inspiration from history, where dance and Bangla culture have continuously adapted. The role of space in this adaptation is crucial, fostering a sense of present and belongings from the past.

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- 2. Age**
- ☐ 4-16
  - ☐ 17-28
  - ☐ 29-40
  - ☐ 41-60
- 3. Is there anyone in your family who dances?**
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
- 4. What kind of Dance do you like?**
- ☐ Classical Dance
  - ☐ Bengali Folk
  - ☐ Modern/Contemporary
  - ☐ Others
- 5. What kind of Dance do you like to watch or participate?**
- ☐ Solo dance
  - ☐ Group dance
- 6. Where do you like to 'Watch' Dance programs?**
- ☐ Indoor
  - ☐ Outdoor
  - ☐ Social Media
- 7. Where did you watch 'Dance' performance last time?**
- ☐ Indoor
  - ☐ Outdoor
  - ☐ Social Media
- 8. If you were to dance, where would you feel comfortable to perform?**
- ☐ Indoor
  - ☐ Outdoor
  - ☒ Social Media

## Appendix A

### Research Questionnaire on Bangla dance-

(This research aims to identify the impact of spatial characteristics on Bengali dance. The survey work is conducted for academic purpose).

### User Demography

- i. Date:
- ii. Participant name:
- iii. Location with country:
- iv. Contact number

### Questionnaire

#### 1. Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Others