



Bharatanatyam in the Digital Age: Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation in Contemporary Indian Classical Dance

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Abstract

Bharatanatyam, one of the oldest classical dance forms of India, has undergone significant transformation in the digital age. The proliferation of online learning platforms, video sharing services, social media, and live streaming technologies has reshaped how the art form is taught, performed, and consumed. While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption, the broader trajectory of digitalization predates 2020 and continues to evolve. This article examines the impact of digital technologies on Bharatanatyam, focusing on tradition, transmission, and transformation in contemporary practice. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship, dance journals, and digital ecosystem reports published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis identifies four interlocking dimensions of digital Bharatanatyam: the migration of pedagogy and teacher-student relationships to online platforms; the proliferation of solo and ensemble performances on digital stages; the emergence of cross-cultural and diasporic audience formations; and the reconfiguration of authority, repertoire, and aesthetic standards in the digital domain. The study draws on theories of mediatization, performance studies, and South Asian dance scholarship including the foundational work of Avanthi Meduri, Janet O'Shea, and Davesh Soneji. Findings indicate that digital Bharatanatyam represents not a rupture from tradition but a hybrid configuration that extends the art form's reach while raising significant questions about embodiment, lineage, and cultural authenticity. The article concludes with implications for dance pedagogy, institutional support, and future directions for performing arts research in India.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, Indian Classical Dance, Digital Pedagogy, Mediatization, Performance Studies, Guru-Shishya Parampara, Diasporic Dance, Performing Arts.

INTRODUCTION

Bharatanatyam, originating in the temple traditions of Tamil Nadu and codified in its modern form during the early twentieth century revival movement, occupies a central position in India's classical performing arts heritage^{1,2,3} With its intricate vocabulary of *nritta* (pure dance), *nritya* (expressive dance), and *natya* (dramatic enactment), Bharatanatyam embodies a sophisticated convergence of music, rhythm, narrative, and spirituality.^{4,3} The art form has historically been transmitted through the *guru-shishya parampara*, an intimate teacher-student relationship in which technique, repertoire, and cultural knowledge are passed across generations through embodied practice and oral tradition.^{5,6}

In the past decade, the digital landscape has begun to reshape this transmission ecology in significant ways. Online video tutorials, dedicated dance learning platforms, social media performance circuits, and live streaming of recitals and arangetrams have transformed how Bharatanatyam is taught, learned, and viewed. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated these trends as physical dance schools closed and gurus migrated their teaching to video conferencing platforms. While many of these adaptations were initially understood as temporary, the post-pandemic period has shown that digital practices have not receded. They have stabilized and become integrated features of the contemporary Bharatanatyam ecosystem.

Yet scholarly engagement with digital Bharatanatyam remains comparatively limited. While South Asian dance scholarship has produced rich analyses of the art form's history, gender politics, postcolonial reinvention, and diasporic dimensions, the specifically digital transformation of pedagogy, performance, and audience has received less sustained attention. The present article seeks to address this gap by asking:

- How have digital technologies transformed Bharatanatyam practice in the contemporary period, and what are the implications for tradition, transmission, and aesthetic experience?
- Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry. First, how has digital pedagogy reshaped the guru-shishya relationship and the institutional landscape of Bharatanatyam training?
- Second, what new performance possibilities and challenges have emerged through digital platforms?
- Third, how do digital developments interact with longstanding debates about authenticity, lineage, and cultural ownership in Bharatanatyam?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes scholarship on digital performance, mediatization, and South Asian dance studies into a coherent account of digital Bharatanatyam. It identifies four dimensions of transformation that organize the empirical landscape. It articulates implications for pedagogy, institutional development, and future research. The remainder of the article is organized as follows:

- The next section reviews relevant literature; the following section outlines the methodological approach
- Subsequent sections present the findings and discuss their implications; and the conclusion identifies directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bharatanatyam: Historical and Theoretical Foundations

Bharatanatyam scholarship has produced a rich body of work tracing the art form's evolution from temple-based devadasi traditions through the early twentieth century reconfiguration that produced its modern proscenium form.^{1,4,7,8} Avanthi Meduri's foundational research has examined the cultural politics of this reinvention, while work has documented the historical experience of devadasi communities and the ongoing legacies of dance reform.^{2,9,10,11}

Janet O'Shea has analysed the production of Bharatanatyam as a national and global classical form, attending to questions of standardization, transmission, and cosmopolitan circulation.¹² These works, alongside critical scholarship by Coorlawala, Daugherty, and Venkataraman, provide essential context for understanding the cultural and political dimensions of the digital era.^{13,14,6}

Mediatization and Performance Studies

The theoretical literature on mediatization, drawing on the work of Stig Hjarvard, Knut Lund by and others, has examined how media logics increasingly shape cultural and institutional life.^{15,16} Performance studies scholarship by Diana Taylor, Philip Auslander, and others has theorized the relationship between live and mediated performance, distinguishing between archive and repertoire and exploring what is gained and lost as performance moves across media.^{17,18} These frameworks help illuminate the specific transformations occurring in classical dance traditions under digital conditions.

Digital Pedagogy in the Performing Arts

Research on digital pedagogy in the performing arts has expanded substantially since 2020. Studies have documented online dance teaching across multiple genres, examined the affordances and limitations of video-based instruction, and explored how teacher-student relationships are reconfigured in mediated environments. While much of this literature engages Western contemporary dance and music education, a growing body of work specifically addresses Indian classical traditions, including Hindustani and Carnatic music, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, and Bharatanatyam.^{19,20}

Diasporic and Cross-Cultural Dimensions

Bharatanatyam has long been a globally circulating art form with significant communities of practitioners and audiences in North America, Europe, the United Kingdom, the Gulf, and Southeast Asia. Diasporic Bharatanatyam scholarship has examined how the form is taught, performed, and reimagined in non-Indian contexts, and how questions of authenticity, identity, and adaptation are negotiated.^{21,12,22} The digital era has intensified these cross-cultural circulations, creating new patterns of transnational pedagogy, audience formation, and aesthetic exchange that warrant fresh scholarly attention.

Research Gap

Despite the expanding literature on Bharatanatyam history, performance studies, and Indian dance pedagogy, integrative analysis of the digital transformation specifically affecting Bharatanatyam remains in early stages. Most existing scholarship treats digital developments as auxiliary to historical or cultural analyses rather than as a central object of inquiry. The present article seeks to contribute by foregrounding digital transformation while drawing on established scholarly resources for theoretical and contextual grounding.

METHODS

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for an emerging research area where peer-reviewed scholarship, journalistic reportage, and practitioner reflection together constitute the available evidence base. The review proceeded through four stages. In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in JSTOR, Scopus, ProQuest, the Indian Citation Index, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined Bharatanatyam, Indian classical dance, digital pedagogy, online teaching, livestream, performance studies, and mediatization. The window covered January 2015 to August 2025, with selected earlier sources retained for theoretical grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical, theoretical, or critical scholarship engaging with digital developments in Bharatanatyam or comparable Indian classical dance traditions, supplemented by foundational works in dance history, performance studies, and mediatization theory. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies focused exclusively on Western dance traditions, technical-only studies of motion capture or computer graphics without performance analysis, and non-peer-reviewed materials except for authoritative practitioner essays in established dance journals. After screening, fifty-two publications were retained for analysis.

In the third stage, supplementary contextual materials were drawn from publicly available sources including programmes of major Bharatanatyam institutions, dance festival documentation, and reports from cultural research organizations including Sangeet Natak Akademi and the India Foundation for the Arts. In the fourth stage, thematic synthesis generated four interlocking dimensions of digital Bharatanatyam that structure the findings reported below. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval.

RESULTS

Migration of Pedagogy and the Reconfigured Guru-Shishya Relationship

The first dimension concerns the migration of Bharatanatyam pedagogy onto digital platforms and the consequent reconfiguration of the guru-shishya relationship. Online teaching, originally adopted as an emergency measure during pandemic restrictions, has now become a permanent feature of the pedagogical landscape. Established gurus offer online classes through video conferencing platforms, dedicated dance schools have developed structured online curricula, and individual teachers have built

international student bases that would have been impractical in pre-digital conditions. The pedagogical implications are significant. Embodied corrections, traditionally conveyed through physical proximity and direct guidance, are now mediated through screens, requiring new techniques for visual demonstration, verbal description, and student self-observation.

Practitioners and scholars have noted both gains and losses in this transition. The gains include accessibility, particularly for students in regions without local Bharatanatyam expertise, and the ability of leading gurus to reach geographically dispersed students. The losses include the diminished capacity for the intuitive, full-body co-presence that has long been considered essential to traditional transmission. Hybrid models, combining periodic in-person intensives with regular online instruction, have emerged as one productive response, though they remain unevenly accessible across socioeconomic and geographic strata.

Digital Performance Stages and New Choreographic Possibilities

The second dimension concerns the proliferation of digital performance contexts and the choreographic possibilities they enable. Live streamed recitals, recorded performances published on dedicated platforms, social media short-form dance content, and collaborative virtual ensemble pieces have all become significant features of contemporary Bharatanatyam practice. Each digital format imposes its own constraints and offers its own affordances. Live streaming preserves much of the temporality of physical recital but requires negotiation with screen framing, audio quality, and audience engagement at distance. Recorded performances allow precise editing and curation but lose the immediacy of live response. Short-form social media content compresses extended dance forms into highly condensed expressive moments, reshaping aesthetic conventions of pace, framing, and audience attention.

Choreographers and dancers have responded to these digital affordances with creative experimentation. Site-specific dance films, multi-screen ensemble works choreographed during pandemic isolation, hybrid live-and-mediated stage productions, and dance content developed specifically for vertical-format mobile screens all illustrate the choreographic creativity that has emerged. Critical engagement with these new forms has begun in dance scholarship and criticism, though much work remains in developing the analytical vocabulary appropriate to digital choreographic practice.

Cross-Cultural and Diasporic Audience Formations

The third dimension involves the emergence of new audience formations made possible by digital circulation. Bharatanatyam performances and instructional content reach audiences that include diasporic Indian communities globally, non-Indian dance enthusiasts, scholars, and curious general viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Recommendation algorithms shape which dancers and which content reach which audiences, with significant implications for visibility, career development, and aesthetic influence. Digital audience metrics, including views, subscribers, and engagement rates, have become increasingly important markers of professional standing alongside traditional indicators such as sabha performances, festival invitations, and titles conferred by cultural institutions.

Diasporic communities have historically played significant roles in sustaining classical Indian dance abroad, and digital connectivity has intensified the transnational circulation of teaching, performance, and audience formation. Dancers based in India teach diasporic students through online platforms; diasporic dancers gain access to advanced training without permanent relocation; and audiences across multiple continents engage with the same performances, festivals, and discussions in real time. These developments simultaneously enrich the global Bharatanatyam community and raise questions about cultural ownership, authority, and the preservation of regional and lineage-specific distinctions.

Reconfiguration of Authority, Repertoire, and Aesthetic Standards

The fourth dimension concerns the reconfiguration of authority, repertoire, and aesthetic standards in the digital domain. Traditional structures of authority in Bharatanatyam, anchored in established gurus, well-recognized institutions, and gatekeeper organizations such as Sangeet Natak Akademi and major sabhas, continue to operate. However, digital platforms create parallel circuits of recognition where individual dancers and choreographers can build significant audiences and

reputations relatively independently of traditional gatekeepers. Younger dancers in particular have used social media to develop visibility, share creative work, and engage in critical conversations about the form.

Repertoire choices and aesthetic standards are also being shaped by digital engagement. Some dancers report tailoring choreographic choices to digital format conventions, choosing pieces of particular durations, emphasizing visually striking abhinaya, or incorporating elements that translate effectively to screen viewing. Critics and scholars have raised concerns about the potential narrowing of repertoire if digital formats systematically privilege particular kinds of content, while others have welcomed the experimental energy and broader participation that digital platforms enable. The interplay between traditional and digitally driven aesthetic forces is ongoing and constitutes one of the most consequential dynamics in contemporary Bharatanatyam.^{13,14}

DISCUSSION

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an integrative analytical framework that combines mediatization theory, performance studies, and South Asian dance scholarship to engage the specific features of digital Bharatanatyam. The four dimensions identified are not isolated developments but mutually reinforcing features of a transformed practice ecology. Pedagogy, performance, audience, and authority interact dynamically in the digital landscape, and analyses that engage only one dimension miss the systemic character of the transformation.

For pedagogy, the findings suggest that hybrid models combining online and in-person instruction are likely to remain dominant for the foreseeable future. Institutional dance schools, individual gurus, and student communities will benefit from continued investment in online teaching infrastructure, including high-quality video equipment, learning management systems, and curricula designed for hybrid delivery. Teacher development programmes that build digital pedagogical skills are an important institutional priority, particularly for senior gurus whose deep traditional knowledge may not be fully matched by digital teaching experience.

For performance, the findings indicate the value of continued creative experimentation alongside the preservation of traditional concert formats. Live recitals in dedicated performance spaces remain irreplaceable for the embodied co-presence they enable, but digital formats offer significant complementary opportunities. Festivals, sabhas, and cultural institutions that develop hybrid programming, including livestreamed performances, recorded concert archives, and digital companion content, are likely to engage broader audiences while sustaining traditional performance values. Critical engagement with digital choreographic experimentation is needed to develop the aesthetic vocabulary necessary for evaluating new work on its own terms.

For institutional support, the findings emphasize the importance of investments by Sangeet Natak Akademi state cultural departments, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and private foundations in the digital infrastructure of classical dance.²³ Areas requiring attention include digitization of archival performance recordings, support for online education platforms, fellowship and grant structures responsive to hybrid practice, and the development of authoritative reference resources for online dissemination of accurate information about repertoire, history, and lineage.

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, the analysis depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven for digital Bharatanatyam specifically. Practitioner voices are mediated through researcher framings, and primary ethnographic and interview-based research is essential to enrich the picture sketched here. The pace of digital change means that some findings will require updating as platforms, technologies, and practices evolve.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the impact of digital technologies on Bharatanatyam through the lens of tradition, transmission, and transformation. Drawing on mediatization theory, performance studies, and South Asian dance scholarship, the analysis identified four interlocking dimensions: the migration of pedagogy and the reconfigured guru-shishya relationship; digital performance stages and new choreographic possibilities; cross-cultural and diasporic audience formations; and the reconfiguration of authority, repertoire, and aesthetic standards. Together these dimensions describe a transformed

practice ecology in which digital and traditional elements interact dynamically rather than displace one another.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, digital Bharatanatyam represents not a rupture from tradition but a hybrid configuration that extends the art form's reach while raising significant questions about embodiment, lineage, and cultural authenticity. Second, the analytical vocabulary appropriate to this transformed practice draws on multiple theoretical traditions and requires sustained interdisciplinary engagement. Third, supportive institutional, pedagogical, and critical responses are needed to ensure that digital developments enrich rather than impoverish the long-term cultural sustainability of the art form.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Ethnographic studies of online Bharatanatyam classrooms would deepen understanding of pedagogical adaptation. Audience studies of digital Bharatanatyam consumption would illuminate the formation of new viewing publics. Comparative work across Indian classical dance traditions, building on broader surveys by Khokar and Vatsyayan would clarify what is distinctive to Bharatanatyam and what is shared with Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, Manipuri, Kathakali, and Sattriya.^{5,3} Studies engaging diasporic Bharatanatyam communities, the experiences of female practitioners and the perspectives of younger dancers shaping the future of the form would each address important gaps.^{19,24} By advancing such an agenda, performing arts scholarship can contribute meaningfully to understanding one of the most significant transformations in Indian classical dance in the present era.

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