
Cultural Choreographies: The Role of Cinema, OTT, and Web Series in Shaping Traditional Dance Aesthetics in Modern Culture

¹S. Balaji, ² Dr.S. Jayanthi,

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

²Associate Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

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Abstract:

In today's digital era, classical dance styles such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, and regional folk traditions are increasingly reframed to assert their relevance through the influence of media. Digital spaces have transformed how these forms are perceived, allowing traditional aesthetics to resonate with contemporary audiences. Visual storytelling, now central in global entertainment, positions dance as both heritage and innovation, enabling hybridity and cross-cultural sharing. Cinema has historically archived and staged Indian dances, converting movement into cinematic language where dance embodies cultural, emotional, and political expression. With the rise of OTT platforms and web series, less traditional narratives of dance have gained visibility, offering perspectives from women, queer communities, and subaltern voices that expand its aesthetic and social reach. Social media platforms such as Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts further democratize access, merging classical forms with global trends and engaging audiences beyond traditional stages. However, these shifts raise critical questions about authenticity, appropriation, and the commodification of sacred traditions. This paper examines how visual and digital media simultaneously disrupt and sustain India's performative heritage, highlighting their role in reshaping dance's cultural value while negotiating tensions between preservation and reinvention.

Keywords: Traditional Dance, Bharatanatyam, Cinema, Cultural Aesthetics, Digital Media, Modern Culture

Introduction

Due to digital technology, traditional art forms such as Bharatanatyam do not only exist in temple courts or on proscenium stages, but also as dynamically embedded variables in social media, digital archives, or through virtual performances. Such presence opens up new avenues of literary and cultural investigation, particularly in the context of Digital

Humanities. Bharatanatyam, as a performative and narrative art form, carries a narrative that interlinks concepts of identity, gender, and resistance to hegemonic narratives. Other historic narratives also embedded within social and cultural narratives of Bharatanatyam become layered and more accessible when being mediated through digital formats. In this article, I will examine how Bharatanatyam is framed as “text” within Digital Humanities concepts, to begin the conversation of how Bharatanatyam performs identity to unpack static cultural narratives (Natarajan, 2012; McPherson, 2010).

Literature Review

Scholars have increasingly explored Bharatanatyam as a socio-cultural and literary performance that communicates identity, politics, and resistance. Srividya Natarajan’s *The Undoing Dance* (2012) critiques the casteist and gendered histories embedded in classical dance traditions, revealing how Bharatanatyam serves as a site of subaltern expression. McPherson (2010) emphasises that Digital Humanities redefines how texts, beyond the written word, are archived, interpreted, and disseminated. Scholars like Ghosh (2019) explore digital performances as cultural texts, mapping identity through multimedia forms. Together, these studies illuminate the potential of viewing Bharatanatyam as both embodied literature and a digital narrative of social transformation.

Research Design

The project is a qualitative inquiry that draws from digital humanities and performance studies. The study is a critical analysis of selected Bharatanatyam performances available on digital platforms (i.e., YouTube, Instagram, and virtual festivals) as 'texts' in a literary and cultural context. Textual and visual analysis will be conducted that centres on how identity (primarily gender, caste, and social resistance) is performed and recontextualised in digital frameworks and contexts. Layers of data will be analysed using frameworks of performance theory (Schechner 2002) and digital textuality (Hayles 2012). A qualitative research design will permit us to engage with Bharatanatyam as a cultural performance and as a digital literary artefact across disciplinary boundaries.

Problem Statement

While Bharatanatyam carries deep cultural and historical meaning, its representation in the digital age frequently lacks rigorous critical engagement with the socio-political narratives represented by the performance. Traditional studies have applied scholarly methods to identify form, focus on technique, and/or trace history. But there has been limited research on the ways that digital platforms change Bharatanatyam’s representation into an identity performance or when it serves as a means of social commentary. To date, the literary aspects of dance, especially within generative frameworks for Digital Humanities, have yet to be examined through this lens. This project mitigates this gap by analysing Bharatanatyam’s evolving digital representation as a performative “text” (Natarajan 2012; McPherson 2010) as it articulates complex narratives of caste, gender, and resistance.

Research Gap

There is significant scholarship on Bharatanatyam's history, aesthetics, and cultural context, but limited scholarly examination of its literary and digital text (within the confines of Digital Humanities). Most research applies a performance analysis or a digital dissemination approach to examine Bharatanatyam's work, but never both, to look at identity

(particularly gender and caste) as it gets constructed and performed in digital contexts (Ghosh 2019; Meduri 2008). This research study aims to fill this gap by linking literary studies, digital humanities, and performance studies in order to understand what contemporary digital forms of Bharatanatyam can tell us about its narratives.

Research Aim

The proposed research will examine, in critical ways, how Bharatanatyam as a classical Indian dance form performs and negotiates identity in a digital space, cognizant of Digital Humanities Literary Studies. It will investigate how spatial and temporal aspects of digital spaces transform Bharatanatyam into a performative and literary text that performatively expresses narratives of caste, gender, and various aspects of socio-political resistance. In combination with performance studies, digital humanities tools, and reading literary studies, the proposed study will seek to identify and establish new interpretive contexts that evaluate how traditional art forms relate and interact within contemporary social discourses (Schechner 2002; Hayles 2012).

Research Objectives

This project identifies the following objectives:

To examine Bharatanatyam as a performance on online platforms as literary texts that rehearse and remake social identities.

To investigate how digital media transform the story of Bharatanatyam and its relationship to the project of caste, gender, and cultural politics.

To deploy Digital Humanities approaches to decipher the visual, textual, and performative components of Bharatanatyam online.

To investigate intersections of performance studies and digital textuality towards understanding the social function of Bharatanatyam, and how it continues to evolve.

These objectives seek to bring cultural performance together with digital literary studies (Hayles 2012; Ghosh 2019).

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology that combines digital humanities tools, literary criticism, and performance studies. The primary materials are digital Bharatanatyam performances gathered from multiple portals, including YouTube, Instagram, and cultural archives. The performances will be analysed and read as literary texts and as cultural performances. The methods for primary-source textual analysis will be close reading, visual semiotics, and the vocabulary of discourse analysis. The study employs theories of performance (Schechner 2002) and terms of digital textuality (Hayles 2012) to explore the material construction and communication of identity. In addition, analysis of metadata and tagging of content will be used to extract themes across digital performances.

Decontextualizing Bharatanatyam in Digital Times

In the twenty-first century, Bharatanatyam has changed immensely; there are no longer only temple courtyards and sabhas, now there are digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and online festivals. This transformation is indicative of not only changes to a linear trajectory of Bharatanatyam as art, but more generally, cultural and technological transitions that allow for a global reach and accessibility to democratic performance. As dancers use these digital platforms to tell other stories and critique established norms,

traditional strategies based on cultures of hierarchy, for example, hierarchies of space, caste, and audience, are increasingly being threatened. Meduri (2008) recognises this digital transformation in her article by showing that Bharatanatyam is becoming a globalised and hybridised form, suggesting that the art form can now reflect the continuum of tradition and movement into the digital landscape by now adding a contemporary form.

Identity in Motion: Caste, Gender, and the Dancing Body

Bharatanatyam has always been intertwined with considerations of identity, specifically with caste and gender. Even with its revival and accompanying Westward salience, it was still largely situated in upper-caste narratives. More and more dancers are considering how to use their voice as dancers and their bodies to enable historically marginalised voices - either themselves or the community in which they are joining.

Many dancers post social media performances, reclaiming space, presence, and voice. Srividya Natarajan's *The Undoing Dance* (2012) critiques caste oppression in the dance world in a manner that uses fictional, theatrical techniques that still resonate with normative exclusions. Today, dancers challenge the boundaries of the platform to engage with not only caste and gender but also location, queer, Dalit, and feminist identities, and dancing bodies as acts of resistance. As such, Bharatanatyam, as a dance form, emerges as a mobile object of appropriation and trans communication, in which the dancing body is a text of identity, politically and culturally.

Digital Platforms as Literary Archives

Digital platforms not only stage performances, but are also interactive archives, constantly evolving. Social media posts, livestreams, and virtual performances produce content that is searchable, shareable, and analysable, and can be considered literary and/or cultural texts. Tagging, captioning, and curating allow performers and audiences to create meaning together. These platforms document emergent choreographies or changes in the sociocultural circumstance and become essential resources for researchers in the future. Hayles (2012) argues that while printed texts continue to be important in the digital age, lines around what constitutes a text have begun to blur, especially as communication moves in multimodal directions (eg, dance, video). Bharatanatyam becomes a text on 'archive', moving and spanning a continuum of time and space, and signs emergent narratives.

Dancing as Text: Literary Devices in Dance Analysis

Dance, like literature, tells stories, evokes feeling, and has the power to congeal meaning. Given the narrative components of Bharatanatyam, in particular abhinaya (expression), gestures, and musical storytelling, these elements invite empirical readings similar to those of poetry and novels. Literary devices such as metaphor, intertextuality, symbolism, and narrative structure provoke methods of analysis of performances. In the field of Digital Humanities, this type of approach scales up as scholars engage with digital captures annotated with various layers of interpretation. When Bharatanatyam is seen as a literary text, we can begin to examine the codes and movement of themes such as love, loss, devotion, and resistance, moving from the realm of dance into that of literary scholarship.

Technology and Tradition: Aesthetic Changes in Performance

Digital media has transformed the aesthetics of Bharatanatyam. Camera angles, editing, virtual backgrounds, and remixed music change how audiences engage with the dance. The digital gaze has impacted choreography, costuming, and expression to respond to the audience in a more digital manner. Ghosh (2019) argues that new digital environments for performance provide dancers an opportunity to transform and experiment rather than operate out of rigid traditions, and although some purists don't approve, there are many who do embrace this new version of Bharatanatyam. The blending of technology and tradition creates new aesthetic forms that take Bharatanatyam to new places in a digital context.

Digital Humanities and Embodied Storytelling

Digital Humanities is an energising space where we can engage with embodied forms of practice, such as Bharatanatyam, as forms of rich and complex texts. It allows for the use of metadata tagging, motion capture, video annotation, and other means to capture and analyse performances of Bharatanatyam in both rigorous and literary means. Dance as a form of embodied storytelling always tells a narrative that may be just as full as other forms of embodied text, but communicates stories in ways other than words. Gesture, rhythm, and spatial dynamics are all modes of communicating narrative and meaning to an audience. Dancers, as both author and archive, have the opportunity to build cultural memory as it is happening in real time. Digital Humanities methodologies applied to Bharatanatyam create spaces for scholars to derive layered meaning, consider the dance's place in contemporary conversations surrounding identity, memory, and representation, and consider intertextuality.

Analysis

Traditionally composed of sacred and elitist settings, Bharatanatyam has undergone a drastic shift in digital spaces. Now, through the democratic technological platforms of YouTube and Instagram, dancers perform identity, particularly caste, gender, and queerness, in a global and democratised digital space. This change has transformed Bharatanatyam into a performative art as well as a digital literary text that has the potential to express new and non-normative narratives. Ghosh (2019) notes that digital screens are the new stages at which classical bodies perform modernity, resistance, and representation differently. Digital Humanities methodologies allow these performance instances to be interrogated as multimodal texts that consist of socio-political meaning, narrative structure, and symbolism. Hayles (2012) highlights that digital media affect cognition and interpretation, as well as form, and Bharatanatyam exists as a cultural artefact in motion, constantly rewritten, shared, and analysed in digital archives, demonstrating that traditions can be continually modified, and identities are pixelated.

Discussion

The digitisation of Bharatanatyam also allows different interpretive possibilities to develop, both within the Digital Humanities and in literary studies. As Bharatanatyam transitions from embodied, physical sabhas to the virtual stage, the performer's body becomes an act of inscription, with layered narratives of gender, caste, and resistance expressed through the text of their performance. In relation to this, with the rise of digitised theatres, forms of cultural engagement are made visible at greater scales. Digital Bharatanatyam performances subvert traditional gatekeeping in classical arts by providing a

platform to bring marginalised voices to the centre, fostering voices of Dalit, queer, and non-binary artists (Natarajan, 2012). Bharatanatyam, when understood through a literary lens and/or a digital lens, can be viewed as a performative text, where, in addition to the dance, the gestures, the facial expressions (abhinaya), and the choreography bring about narrative, accounting for the aspects of dance as a literary device. Hayles (2012) indicates that digital literature is changing how we interpret meaning, suggesting that while dance is a visual or embodied act, it is also semiotic, and allows new kinds of meanings to be read through various platforms. Digital Bharatanatyam is both archive and agent, keeping traditional practices alive, but also allows subversion, critique, and identity formation in a time of collapse and reconstruction in song and dance practices throughout the world, as new socio-cultural contexts emerge.

Conclusion

Bharatanatyam's digital transformation changes the way we perform and archive cultural identity. Engaging with Digital Humanities also enables this classical art form to disrupt its traditional approach to tell new stories, as well as shine a spotlight on the marginalised. As Hayles writes, "media-specific analysis shows how its content emerges in part from the very material form it has taken" (Hayles 25), allowing us to analyse dance as both visual literature as well as socio-political text. The digital pixel becomes a point of embodied storytelling, a blending of tradition and technology, where Bharatanatyam continues to convey identity, resistance, and belonging in the digital literary and performative sphere.

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