

FROM PARAMPARA TO PLATFORM: REIMAGINING LINEAGE, AUTHORITY, AND PEDAGOGY IN BHARATANATYAM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of Bharatanatyam has traditionally followed the Guru–Shishya Parampara, where learning takes place through close interaction, regular practice, and gradual understanding. In this system, knowledge is not only taught but experienced over time. However, with changing social conditions and the growth of institutions, the structure of teaching has already undergone some transformation. In recent years, digital technology has brought another shift, especially with the increasing use of online classes and virtual platforms. This study looks at how these changes are influencing Bharatanatyam pedagogy today. It draws from classical ideas, modern research, and practical observation of current teaching methods. While digital platforms have made learning more accessible and flexible, they also create certain challenges, particularly in areas like physical correction, expression, and detailed training. The study suggests that traditional and digital methods are not in conflict but are gradually coming together. A mixed approach, where online learning is supported by in-person training, seems to be developing naturally. This reflects an ongoing adjustment within the tradition rather than a complete break from it.

Key words: Bharatanatyam; Guru–Shishya Parampara; Digital Pedagogy; Embodiment; Cultural Continuity

Introduction

Bharatanatyam is one of the most well-established classical dance traditions of India, and its learning process has always been deeply rooted in practice and experience rather than just theory. Traditionally, the Guru–Shishya Parampara formed the backbone of this system, where knowledge was passed through close interaction between teacher and student. In such a setting, learning was not limited to structured lessons; instead, it developed gradually through observation, repetition, correction, and continuous involvement in the artistic environment.

Over time, this traditional system began to change. During the twentieth century, social reform movements and cultural shifts led to the institutionalization of Bharatanatyam. Training moved from hereditary and community-based spaces into academies and universities. This made the dance more accessible to a wider group of learners, but it also introduced a more structured and time-bound approach to teaching. Naturally, this shift affected how authority, discipline, and knowledge transmission were understood.

In recent years, another major change has taken place with the rise of digital technology. Online classes, recorded sessions, and virtual performances have become quite common, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, students from different parts of the world can learn from the same teacher without being physically present. While this has opened many new opportunities, it has also raised some important questions.

For example, Bharatanatyam depends heavily on body alignment, rhythm, and expression. These aspects are usually refined through direct correction and close guidance. So, when learning happens through a screen, it becomes important to ask whether the same depth of understanding can be achieved. Similarly, the idea of lineage and authenticity also needs to be reconsidered in a space where learning is no longer limited by geography.

This paper attempts to explore these changes by placing current digital practices within the broader history of Bharatanatyam pedagogy. Rather than treating tradition and technology as opposites, it looks at how both interact with each other. The aim is to understand whether this shift represents a break from tradition or simply another stage in its ongoing evolution.

Review of Literature

This paper was presented at the 'Swar Sanskar National Seminar', organized by Swar Sanskar Sangeet Gurukul
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The study of Bharatanatyam has been discussed by many scholars from different perspectives, including theory, history, and performance practice. One of the earliest and most important sources is the Nāṭyaśāstra, attributed to Bharata (1951), which explains performance as a complete system that brings together art, emotion, and knowledge. In this understanding, dance is not only about movement but also about expressing deeper ideas and experiences.

Scholars like Vatsyayan (1968) have pointed out that Indian classical arts survive mainly through continuous transmission from teacher to student. This process depends heavily on practice and observation rather than written material alone. Similarly, Balasaraswati (1974) emphasized that Bharatanatyam should be lived and experienced, not just performed on stage. Such views highlight the importance of embodiment in learning.

Looking at the historical background, Bharatanatyam was earlier practiced within hereditary communities, especially among devadasis and nattuvanars. Training usually took place in temples or homes, where students learned directly from their teachers over long periods. The idea of bani, or stylistic lineage, developed from this system, where each teacher passed on a distinct style to their students.

During the twentieth century, major changes took place. Meduri (1988) has discussed how Bharatanatyam was redefined during this time, especially through reform movements. Institutions like Kalakshetra played an important role in making the training more structured and accessible. However, this also changed the nature of the teacher–student relationship, making it less personal than before.

Kothari (1979) has also noted how stage presentation changed when Bharatanatyam moved to proscenium theatres. This influenced choreography and led to some level of standardization in performance.

With globalization, Bharatanatyam spread to many parts of the world. Appadurai (1996) helps explain how cultural practices move across regions and adapt to new environments. In this context, O'Shea (2007) shows how Bharatanatyam has become an important part of cultural identity for many diaspora communities.

More recently, attention has shifted toward digital learning. Although this area is still developing, some studies suggest that online platforms are changing how dance is taught and shared. While these platforms increase access and visibility, they also raise concerns about whether the depth of traditional training can be maintained.

Overall, earlier research shows that Bharatanatyam has never remained completely unchanged. It has adapted over time, moving from hereditary systems to institutions and now to digital spaces. This study builds on these ideas by focusing specifically on how digital technology is influencing teaching methods, authority, and the learning experience today.

Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach to understand how Bharatanatyam pedagogy is changing in the present context. Instead of using numerical data, the focus here is on interpretation, observation, and analysis of existing practices.

The research is based on both textual study and practical observation. Classical sources such as the Nāṭyaśāstra have been referred to in order to understand the traditional ideas of performance and learning. Along with this, writings by modern scholars on Bharatanatyam, cultural change, and globalization have been used to build a broader academic perspective.

Apart from written sources, some attention has also been given to current teaching practices. This includes observing online classes, virtual workshops, and performances shared through digital platforms. These observations help in understanding how teaching methods are being adapted in real situations, especially after the increased use of online learning.

A simple comparative approach is used in this study. Three different modes of learning are considered: the traditional Guru–Shishya system, institutional training, and online or digital teaching. Instead of treating them as separate or opposing systems, the study looks at how they overlap and influence each other.

The aim is not to measure or prove something in a strict scientific way, but to understand the changes that are taking place. This approach allows a more flexible and realistic view of how Bharatanatyam continues to evolve in today's time.

Result

The observations made during this study show that Bharatanatyam pedagogy is clearly going through a phase of change. The traditional Guru–Shishya system is still respected and followed, but at the same time, newer methods of teaching, especially through digital platforms are becoming more common.

One of the most noticeable outcomes is the increase in accessibility. Students who earlier did not have the opportunity to learn Bharatanatyam due to distance or other limitations can now attend classes online. This has made learning more flexible and open to a wider group of people.

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However, some challenges also become visible in this process. In online classes, it is not always easy for the teacher to correct posture, hand positions, or subtle expressions. Small mistakes can sometimes continue without being noticed. This is especially important in a dance form like Bharatanatyam, where precision and detail matter a lot.

Another point that comes up is the change in how learning and performance are structured. Digital platforms often encourage shorter videos and quick presentation styles. Because of this, longer and more detailed pieces may be broken into smaller parts. While this makes content easier to share, it can affect the overall depth of understanding for students.

At the same time, it is also seen that many teachers and students are trying to adjust to this situation. Some follow a mixed method, where online classes are supported by occasional in-person training. This helps in maintaining both flexibility and quality.

Overall, the results suggest that Bharatanatyam pedagogy is not being replaced but is adapting to new conditions. Traditional and modern methods are now existing together, creating a new kind of learning environment.

Discussion

The changes taking place in Bharatanatyam pedagogy today cannot simply be described as either positive or negative. Instead, they reflect a gradual shift where traditional practices and new methods are interacting in complex ways. Rather than replacing older systems, digital approaches seem to be reshaping how learning happens.

One of the most noticeable concerns is related to embodiment. Bharatanatyam is not just about learning steps; it involves control over the body, awareness of rhythm, and depth in expression. In a physical classroom, the guru can immediately correct posture, hand gestures, or eye focus. This kind of direct guidance plays an important role in shaping the dancer's understanding. In online classes, however, this process becomes less precise. Sometimes the teacher cannot fully see the student's alignment, and small errors may go unnoticed. Over time, this can affect the overall quality of training.

At the same time, it would not be fair to overlook the advantages of digital learning. One clear benefit is accessibility. Many students who previously had no opportunity to learn Bharatanatyam can now join classes from different parts of the world. This has made the art form more inclusive. In some cases, students are even able to learn from multiple teachers, which was not easily possible earlier.

The idea of authority is also changing in this environment. Traditionally, authenticity was closely linked to lineage, or bani, and the identity of the guru. Today, visibility on platforms like YouTube and Instagram can influence how a dancer is perceived. A performer with a strong online presence may gain recognition quickly, even without long-term training under a particular lineage. This creates a new kind of space where traditional and modern forms of validation exist side by side.

Another shift can be seen in how performances are presented. Digital platforms often favour shorter videos that are visually engaging. Because of this, longer and more complex pieces are sometimes broken into smaller segments. While this makes the content easier to share and watch, it may reduce the depth and continuity of traditional presentations like the margam. Still, these platforms also help in documenting and preserving performances, which is an important advantage.

In practice, many dancers and teachers are now trying to balance both systems. Online classes are combined with in-person workshops or intensive training sessions. This kind of mixed approach seems to work well, as it allows flexibility without completely losing the depth of traditional learning. It also shows that adaptation is already happening naturally within the community.

Overall, the situation suggests that Bharatanatyam is not losing its traditional base but adjusting to new conditions. The real challenge is to use digital tools carefully, without compromising the essential qualities of the art. If handled thoughtfully, this combination of tradition and technology can support the continued growth of Bharatanatyam in today's world.

Conclusion

The shift from traditional parampara to digital platforms in Bharatanatyam does not seem to be a complete break from the past. Instead, it appears more like a gradual adjustment to changing times. The Guru-Shishya system, which has always been central to this art form, still holds its importance, even though the ways of teaching and learning are expanding.

Digital technology has definitely made Bharatanatyam more accessible. Students from different parts of the world can now connect with teachers and continue their training without major limitations. At the same time, this convenience also brings certain challenges, especially in maintaining the depth and precision that the dance form requires.

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It becomes clear that neither system—traditional nor digital—can fully replace the other. Physical presence and direct interaction remain essential for developing expression, discipline, and technical clarity. However, digital tools can support learning when used in the right way.

What seems to be emerging is a balanced or mixed approach. Many practitioners are already combining online learning with in-person training. This shows that adaptation is happening naturally, without completely losing the roots of the tradition.

In the end, the future of Bharatanatyam depends on how thoughtfully these changes are handled. If technology is used carefully, it can help the art grow while still preserving its core values. Rather than seeing change as a problem, it may be better to view it as part of the ongoing journey of the tradition.

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