A Historical Analysis of Dance and Transformation in its Teaching Methodology from 17th Century to Early 21st Century.

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Abstract

Before delvinge into the history of the dance form of Bharatanāṭyam and its evolution, it would not be out of place to first understand a related concept of "Communication". Communication is the process of generating meaning by way of sending and receiving verbal (making sounds- high pitch /low pitch) and non-verbal (symbols /signs/paintings) messages.[1] The conversion of symbols to sound to verbal communication and its usage is believed to have developed way back during Sage Nārada's time for passing on messages from one God to another. In all historical references, Sage Nārada is seen as one of the most potent communicators who played the role of the divine messenger, maintaining a constant link between the deva-s and humans. This could probably have marked the beginning of verbal language or speech.

Over centuries, the need to preserve and record verbal messages or stories gave rise to the origin of written communication. Manuscripts began to be drafted around three thousand five hundred BCE and this conversion of messages from oral to written marked an evolution in the history of communication.

Many innovative methods developed along the way as communication techniques grew and evolved. During the era of the kings, drums were beaten on special occasions, such as during wars or celebration or when kings wanted to address their subjects. Drumming patterns varied according to the message that needed to be passed on by the drummer. In fact, drums were also used as a long-distance communication method for sending signals across to neighboring villages, tribes, or groups.

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[1] https://www.creativedisplaysnow.com/articles/history-of-communication-from-cave-drawings-to-the-web/

Artistic mediums of communication like dance, art, literature and music were used for conveying social, cultural and political messages during the era of kingship. The Guru Śiśhya Paramparā gained importance as most kings were patrons of art and culture and treated the guru-s with utmost respect. The art became a powerful but subtle medium of communication.

Moving with times, modernisation brought in specialisation across fields and newer mediums of communication were developed.

Skill enhancement and technological advancement gradually revolutionized communication. The introduction of modern means of communication like print, radio, television, and the Internet[2] changed the communication scenario drastically, taking it from simple basic exchange of messages to a roll out of information and an interactive platform that is today bringing together people from across the globe.

Key words

Communication, Technology, Guru Śiśhya Paramparā , Social media.

Aim of the study

Traditionally, the pedagogy of Indian classical dance was based on the Guru Śiśhya paramparā. Students used to stay at the gurukul, and the guru used to impart detailed knowledge of the art form along with inculcating values in his disciples through the daily course of life. In current times, though the guru śiśhya paramparā is still in vogue, the modes and methods have evolved and changed considerably to suit the changing times. Institutionalisation has led to a more formalised relationship between the master and the disciple, also bringing with it a change in the approach and methodology of passing on knowledge. Individualisation, student specific training and teaching and the focus on enhancing life skills has undergone a changeover with the number of students under a particular master also increasing. Advancement in technology has worked towards changing the teaching model, even of traditional art forms like classical dance. The study aims to detail the traditional Guru Śiśhya system, examine evolutions in the pedagogy of Indian classical dance, study the platforms of social media, and the advantages, and disadvantages of technology driven teaching and learning modules for classical dance forms like Bharatanāṭyam.[3]

Introduction to the topic

The ancient dance form of Bharatanāṭyam was originally performed by devadāsi-s or temple dancers who dedicated their lives to serving at the temple and worshipping the deity. Later with royal patronage being given to these dancers, the performance platform shifted from the temples to the royal courts. During British rule, the entire devadāsi tradition was abolished. However, efforts by revivalists in the early nineteenth century brought Bharatanāṭyam and its learning and performance back to center stage.[4]

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2 https://www.creativedisplaysnow.com/articles/history-of-communication-from-cave-drawings-to-the-web/

3 https://www.academia.edu/9927927/The_impact_of_digital_media_on_the_pedagogy_of_Bharatanāṭyam
4 https://meetsudeshna.wordpress.com/tag/rajnartaki/

Over time, changes were brought about in the formatting and teaching technique of Bharatanāṭyam. However, the role of the guru or master was always unquestionable and held in high esteem. Whether it was training by the naṭṭuvanār-s, or under the traditional gurukul system, students spent an extensive amount of time with the guru with a focus on one-to-one training. Daily household chores were taught to instil the value of self-reliance. The pace of teaching of dance was slow because there was insistence on following through observation and memorisation, emphasis on discipline, perseverance, and devotion to the art form.

Since the 1930s, institutionalization resulted in slight dilution of the guru śiśhya paramparā with a syllabus for the pedagogy of Bharatanāṭyam. Earlier the guru used to decide about the syllabus to be imparted to each student depending on the capacity of the student. However, the establishment of various dance institutes resulted in the traditional gurukul system being converted from the one-to-one method of dance training to group lessons.

Today, the guru śiśhya relationship has become a blend of the traditional gurukul system, and a more modern teacher-student relationship. The unquestioning reverence for the guru that existed in olden days has been replaced by a questioning and inquisitive tone of students who feel free to challenge teaching systems and ask questions.

The introduction of digital media is also impacting the pedagogy of Bharatanāṭyam in a big way. Availability of recorded music, classical dance tutorials being made accessible online, and free, unrestricted video content on the internet, is influencing the learning patterns of Bharatanāṭyam. Students today are finding it easier to try and explore learning classical dance forms like Bharatanāṭyam without understanding the nuances or subtleties of the art.

However, looking at the macro picture, the internet, opportunities across digital platforms and dance reality shows on television are making classical dance more popular amongst common masses and making it more accessible. It will be interesting to see how the blend of the traditional and modern works towards inventing new methods of teaching, bringing in innovative choreography and interpreting mythological stories in unique ways while still maintaining respect and regard for the traditional gurukul system.

Importance of the subject

In today's day and age, it is very important to understand the way the world is changing with technology. This paper deals with how the era of the Guru Śiśhya Paramparā has gradually evolved and how teaching methodologies are transforming in the present era. The paper also deals with an exploration on how social media tools like Print, Cinema, Television, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are impacting learning trends in Bharatanāṭyam.

Research Methodology

Interactive and qualitative methods have been used to analyze the changing trends in teaching and learning methodologies of Bharatanāṭyam and the role, advantages, and disadvantages of the use of social media in the process.

Summary of the Research

The Guru Śiśhya parampara is an ancient Indian tradition of transmission of knowledge from Guru to Śiśhya. It is a very strong and deep-rooted relationship. The example of Śri Kṛshṇa and Arjuna is one of the best examples of the guru- siśhya relationship in Indian philosophy.

Once a guru accepts the disciple under his tutelage, their relationship becomes extremely strong since it is based on faith and devotion. With modernization, the system of one on one or individual classes has got disintegrated. Students today choose to get trained by various teachers for better and wider opportunities rather than sticking to one guru. The current generation aspires to achieve everything quickly starting from learning, performing on stage, or even earning fame. They do not want to put too much effort or time on dance training. Though it is heartening to note that the current generation is taking interest in learning about classical dance forms.

Technology has contributed greatly to the way classical dance is taught, performed, propagated, and communicated.

The first revolution was the print media which played a historically significant role in shaping the public discourse on classical dance in pre as well as post-independence.[5] 1857 is known as the year of the emergence of journalism in India and 1878 - "The Hindu"[6] was started in the English language, which was mainly distributed in Tamiḷ Nāḍu.

The relationship between dancer and print media was originally forged during the nineteenth century. As classical dance took to the auditorium, print media took on to the review culture through magazines. Newspapers were the only source of information regarding classical dance events, their dates and timings.

Magazine publishing started in the seventh century and the first periodical founded and edited by an Indian was the Hindustan Review, which commenced in 1900. This marked the beginning of the critical reviews "A forum for questions of the day"- political, literary, and artistic to which many great stalwarts contributed.[7]

5https://www.firstpost.com/living/on-indian-medias-role-in-historically-propagating-discourse-around-classical-dance-and-the-need-for-change-7046961.html
6 https://www.mapsofindia.com/on-this-day/20th-september-1878-the-hindu-is-published-for-the-first-time-as-a-weekly-newspaper-in-chennai
7 https://www.britannica.com/topic/publishing/The-19th-century-and-the-start-of-mass-circulation

Then came the importance of professional and pictorial magazines like Sruti (1983) founded by N.Pattabhiraman that gave exposure to upcoming artists, senior artists and guru-s.[8] This magazine published articles about people who supported the arts from behind the scenes like the costume, makeup and other supporting artists. Even the Femina magazine which was founded in 1959 published blogs about performing arts and classical dancers.

Dance forms the soul of many dramas based on mythological themes. In India, cinema became an evolved version of drama,[9] so music and dance played a vital role in Indian cinema. Successful movies gave an unforgettable status to the people who acted or danced in them. They became legends. The technological revolution brought big-screen cinemas to the comfort of our homes through -Television (TV). Reality shows telecast on television became another source of inspiration to learn classical dance.[10]

But the decline of the popularity of newspapers, magazines, television, and cinema during the late twentieth and the early twenty first century, made publishers, producers and directors rethink on their structure and growth plan to reach out to an extensive audience.[11]

This gave rise to a boom in online or social media marketing. Technology driven sources and social media helped to increase engagement with a wide audience. With the advent of the internet, websites and digital repository, an online database was freely introduced to masses having detailed information about Indian classical dance.

In April 2000, the website Narthaki went online.[12] It featured performance listings, articles, research papers, profiles of dancers, interviews and much more information about classical dance, which opened access for the academic community around the globe.

Pros and Cons

Pros

- Social media has become an important part of society. It has opened the doors to millions of audiences worldwide.
- It has created awareness about Indian classical dance amongst a wide base of viewers.
- It has made the knowledge and learning of classical dance accessible for a large population of students.
- It has created a pool of artists and performers and created a link between teachers, learners, guru-s and artists from across the globe.
- It has opened immense performance opportunities for students and artists.

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8 http://srutimag.blogspot.com/2017/10/npattabhi-raman.html?m=1

9 https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/72634/6/06_introduction.pdf

10 https://www.indiantelevision.com/television/tv-channels/gecs/the-era-of-dance-reality-shows-180428

11 https://clubs.waketech.edu/wake-review/magazine/creative-writing/non-fiction/the-decline-in-newspapers-a-closer-look-joseph-ahrens/

12 https://narthaki.com/aboutus.html

Cons

While social media has multiple benefits, it has had some negative impact on dancers.

- Live music was an important part of Bharatanātyam. However, with easy availability of recorded music post 1980, a lot of teachers started using pre-recorded music due to which they started stressing more on techniques rather than spontaneous expressions which could be achieved if there was a singer or the teacher themselves were singing.

- A lot of musicians lost out on their demand since some guru-s preferred not to look for live musicians thereby saving cost and time. However, a few guru-s denied compromising with recorded music. They argued that aesthetically it is very important to have a good connect between the teacher, singer and the dancer.

- Social media is a dominant way to spread dance across the world and an excellent learning tool where many people impart knowledge. Videos of eminent dancers help the young dancers to sharpen their skills. However, the individuality of the students is lost as they try to copy the movements of others. While learning from a teacher, the teacher can teach them in a method that is conducive to their body and their movements would be unique. This is lost during online learning.

Conclusion

Indian classical dance is rooted in ancient times. It has played a very important role in the creation of brilliant artists across generations.

But the advent of technology and the strengthening of social media has opened more avenues to learn and enjoy this art form. Eventually, in the coming years, something more advanced like Artificial Intelligence could be introduced and it may influence learning trends in every area and in the field of classical dance too. On 31st January 2020, an event called Event Management Awards 2020 was organized in Mumbai by NIEM institute of event management to give credit to students who have carried out various events in their college and done their best. Students from various reputed colleges of Mumbai attended the event. Interestingly, the organizer asked the selected nominees - "In this new era where everything is advancing towards technology, do you say that the student-teacher / Guru Śiśya Paramparā is important or online learning is a better option?"

The feedback given by the students aptly sums up the pathway that could guide the future of the art form. Most of them agreed with the fact that though they were tech-savvy and took the help of social media for learning, they surely needed a teacher who could mould them into better individuals, who could rectify their mistakes, guide them, clear their queries, and make them understand the nuances of each concept in a detailed manner.

"Technology will not replace great teachers but technology in the hands of great teachers can be transformational."

-     **George Couros**

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