Dancing through Screens: Indian Traditional Dance Bharatanatyam in the Visual Media of Modern Society

[1]S. Balaji, [2] Dr.S. Jayanthi,

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

Gmail: balajinss1990@gmail.com. 9092718676

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

angeljayanthi@gmail.com

Abstract

Bharatanatyam, one of India's oldest classical dance forms, has historically embodied spirituality, cultural identity, and aesthetic discipline. However, in modern society, it is increasingly mediated through digital technologies and visual media such as cinema, television, and social platforms. This paper examines how Bharatanatyam has been represented, reinterpreted, and recontextualised through visual media, analysing both its opportunities and challenges in a globalised cultural landscape. By situating Bharatanatyam within the broader discourse of cultural preservation, popularisation, and commercialisation, the study evaluates how digital mediation transforms the reception of the art form in contemporary society. The paper concludes that while visual media have democratized Bharatanatyam and expanded its global reach, it has simultaneously generated debates on authenticity, commodification, and cultural politics.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, visual media, Indian dance, cultural representation, globalisation, digital society

Introduction

Bharatanatyam, a classical dance form rooted in Tamil Nadu, has transcended its origins in temple rituals to become a global cultural phenomenon. Codified in the *Natya Shastra* and shaped by devotional practices, Bharatanatyam historically functioned as a medium of worship, storytelling, and cultural continuity. Its intricate gestures (*mudras*), rhythmic patterns (*adavus*), and narrative expressivity (*abhinaya*) have carried mythological, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions through centuries. Yet, in the 20th and 21st centuries, Bharatanatyam has been increasingly mediated through visual technologies. The invention of film and television, followed by the proliferation of digital and social media platforms, has altered how audiences engage with the dance. Bharatanatyam is no longer confined to live performances in temples, sabhas, or proscenium stages; it is now encountered through cinematic sequences, televised cultural programs, YouTube tutorials, Instagram reels, and even AI-generated visualisations. This shift invites critical questions: How does Bharatanatyam change when filtered through screens? Does visual mediation dilute its traditional significance, or does it enable new modes of cultural survival and global circulation? This paper addresses these questions by situating Bharatanatyam in the context of modern visual media. It traces its cinematic representations, televisual broadcasts, and digital reinventions, while also analysing the tensions between authenticity and innovation, tradition and modernity, local rootedness and global circulation.

Bharatanatyam and the Cinematic Lens

Indian cinema has long played a crucial role in popularising Bharatanatyam beyond its elite cultural spaces. Tamil films of the mid-20th century, such as Chandralekha (1948) and Salangai Oli (1983), wove Bharatanatyam into their narratives, framing it as both a marker of cultural authenticity and a dramatic device for storytelling. Similarly, Hindi films like *Shankarabharanam* (1979) and *Kalpana* (1948) depicted Bharatanatyam as an emblem of Indian tradition and aesthetics. The cinematic medium reshaped Bharatanatyam in two significant ways. First, the camera enabled close-ups, dynamic angles, and editing techniques that highlighted expressive details often missed in live performance. The subtlety of *abhinaya*, the dancer's eyes, facial expressions, and hand gestures, gained intensified visibility through cinematic framing. Second, cinema contextualised Bharatanatyam within new narratives of romance, nationalism, and modernity. For instance, in *Jeans* (1998), Aishwarya Rai's Bharatanatyam performance in front of world monuments symbolised both global modernity and cultural rootedness.

However, cinematic adaptations also generated concerns of dilution. Bharatanatyam sequences were sometimes abbreviated, stylised, or hybridised with other dance forms to suit commercial demands. Purists argue that such mediations compromise the form's spiritual and aesthetic integrity, transforming it into spectacle rather than ritual. Yet, from another perspective, cinema democratized Bharatanatyam, enabling audiences who would never attend a live recital to encounter the art form.

Bharatanatyam on Television

The advent of television in India during the 1980s further expanded Bharatanatyam's accessibility. Doordarshan regularly featured cultural programs, including dance performances, thereby bringing classical arts into middle-class living rooms. Televised dance competitions and cultural festivals blurred the lines between professional artistry and amateur participation. Television's mass reach had both positive and problematic implications. On one hand, it created a platform for aspiring dancers to showcase talent, encouraged cultural appreciation among younger generations, and normalised Bharatanatyam as part of India's "cultural capital." On the other hand, television's time-bound and entertainment-driven logic often reduced Bharatanatyam to short segments, favouring visual spectacle over depth. The pedagogical aspect, rigorous training, and contextual understanding of bhakti or rasa theory were often absent.

Digital Media and the Globalisation of Bharatanatyam

The 21st-century digital revolution has profoundly reshaped the circulation of Bharatanatyam. Social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok host thousands of Bharatanatyam videos, ranging from full-fledged performances to short reels of *adavus*. Digital mediation allows Bharatanatyam to transcend geographical boundaries, with dancers and audiences spanning continents. Online pedagogy is another transformative phenomenon. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many gurus shifted to Zoom and Skype classes, creating new pedagogical models that challenged the teacher-student proximity traditionally valued in Indian performing arts. While digital pedagogy democratizes access for diaspora students, it also raises questions about embodied discipline, correction, and transmission of intangible cultural nuances.

Moreover, digital media fosters hybrid experiments. Many young dancers create "fusion" performances, combining Bharatanatyam with contemporary music, hip-hop, or global narratives. While such hybridisation appeals to new audiences, it polarises the cultural community: some view it as an innovative cultural adaptation, while others regard it as a dilution of authenticity.

Visual Media, Commodification, and Cultural Politics

The visual mediation of Bharatanatyam is inseparable from broader debates about commodification and cultural politics. Commercial sponsorships, branding, and algorithmic visibility determine which performances circulate widely online. Dance festivals are increasingly streamed for ticketed audiences, monetising digital access. This raises concerns about Bharatanatyam's transformation

from a spiritual and cultural practice into a marketable commodity. The language of "likes," "views," and "followers" shifts focus from aesthetic depth to virality. A carefully edited 30-second Instagram reel of *nritta* may garner millions of views, while a two-hour *margam* recital may struggle for visibility.

At the same time, visual media also enables resistance and inclusion. Marginalized voices such as male dancers, transgender artists, and dancers from non-Brahmin or non-Hindu backgrounds use digital platforms to challenge the caste, gender, and religious hierarchies embedded in Bharatanatyam's history. Online spaces thus function as both sites of commodification and arenas of democratisation.

The Question of Authenticity in Screen Mediation

One of the most persistent debates concerns the notion of "authenticity." Can Bharatanatyam transmitted through screens retain its essence? Traditionalists argue that the sacredness of Bharatanatyam lies in its live, embodied, and communal experience, where the dancer's energy interacts with the audience's collective consciousness. Screen mediation, they claim, interrupts this exchange, reducing the performance to an image consumed passively. Yet, others argue that authenticity is not static but negotiated. Bharatanatyam has historically adapted to changing contexts from temple rituals to colonial suppression, from nationalist revival to global stages. In this view, digital mediation is simply the next phase in its evolution. The essence of Bharatanatyam lies not in rigid preservation but in its capacity to rearticulate meaning across generations and media.

Case Studies of Bharatanatyam in Visual Media

Several case studies illustrate the dynamics discussed above:

1. **Salangai Oli (1983):** Kamal Haasan's role as a dancer dramatized the tension between artistic purity and societal pressures, using Bharatanatyam as a narrative core.
2. **Jeans (1998):** The choreographed Bharatanatyam sequence in front of global monuments symbolised India's cultural pride and modern cosmopolitanism.
3. **YouTube Channels:** Platforms like *Nritya Tales* or individual dancers' channels have garnered global followings, making Bharatanatyam accessible to diaspora communities.
4. **Instagram Reels:** Short clips by young dancers have introduced Bharatanatyam vocabulary to audiences unfamiliar with classical dance, albeit often at the expense of depth.
5. **Virtual Festivals:** Events such as the *Natyanjali Online* Festival during the pandemic highlighted how digital platforms sustain cultural continuity during crises.

These case studies reveal the layered negotiations between tradition, technology, and society.

Conclusion

Bharatanatyam's journey through visual media reflects the broader story of cultural adaptation in a technologically mediated world. Cinema amplified its dramatic expressivity, television mainstreamed its presence in everyday households, and digital platforms globalised their reach while fostering hybridisation and democratisation. Yet, these transformations also raise complex questions about authenticity, commodification, and cultural politics. Rather than framing visual mediation as a threat, this paper suggests recognising it as a dynamic process that simultaneously challenges and revitalises Bharatanatyam. In modern society, screens have become both mirrors and stages reflecting tradition while offering new platforms of creativity. For Bharatanatyam, the challenge is not merely to survive digital mediation but to use it as a space for meaningful reinvention that honours the past while engaging the future.

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