

# The Evolution and Contemporary Nature of Bharatanatyam in Temples – A Study

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**Abstract-** *Bharatanatyam stands as one of India's ancient classical dance traditions and has evolved as an art form deeply connected to the temples of Tamil Nadu. The art of dance played a pivotal role in conveying temple worship traditions, festivals, rituals, and religious concepts to the public. Specifically, the artistic nuances of Bharatanatyam were transmitted across generations within temples through the Devadasi tradition, music and dance artists, and the Nattuvanar lineage. Over time, as a result of social, political, and cultural changes, the dance traditions prevalent in temples underwent transformations, and Bharatanatyam acquired a new dimension as a performing art for the stage.*

*This study examines the historical background of the origin and growth of Bharatanatyam within the temple context, as well as its artistic and religious functions. Furthermore, it analyzes the transition of Bharatanatyam from the temple environment to auditoriums, stages, educational institutions, and modern performance venues. The study also focuses on contemporary aspects such as the modes of performance in temples, the nature of the events, the selection of themes, the format of the Arangetram (debut performance), and the use of modern technology. Ultimately, the primary objective of this research is to identify the continuity, transformation, and contemporary characteristics of the temple-based Bharatanatyam tradition.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Bharatanatyam, temple, temple worship, Devadasi tradition, Nattuvanar tradition, classical dance form, temple art, stage performance art, art and culture, contemporary style.*

## I. Research Objectives

To examine the historical and cultural connection between temples and Bharatanatyam.

To explore the role Bharatanatyam played within temple worship traditions and its associated artistic practices.

To investigate the contributions of the Devadasi and Nattuvanar traditions to the evolution of Bharatanatyam.

To study the historical transformation of Bharatanatyam from a temple-based context to a modern stage performance art.

To identify the modes of performance and unique styles of Bharatanatyam in contemporary temples.

To compare and analyze the traditional continuities and modern changes observed in temple-based Bharatanatyam.

To evaluate the significance of contemporary temple Bharatanatyam at the intersection of religion, culture, and art.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Historical metho  
Textual study

The development of Bharata art in temples

Many people have served as the basis and treasury for temples to become the preserves of Indian art. Among them, the three kings who ruled Tamil Nadu play an important role. These guardians built stone temples for the people to worship God and to cherish and preserve the arts, the Karana sculptures that are still famous today, the sculptors who carved these sculptures beautifully and accurately according to the Shastras, the dancers who danced the sculptured positions, the dance masters who made them dance, and the kings - all of them deserve praise. Art and culture are a reflection of the times. In every country, unique arts are created by the people, which are suitable for the people of that country.

Bharata Kalai is an art conceived by Brahma and compiled as the fifth Veda by taking the essence of the Irkutsa, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva Vedas. According to the mythological story, Brahma bestowed this art on Bharata, who taught it to his 100 children, who taught it to many people on earth and spread it. Moreover, Lord Shiva, who was pleased to see this art in Kailayampati, asked Sage Dandu to teach him his Tandava dance, and Sage Dandu taught Bharata the Tandava. Umadeviyar taught Ushaika Lasya, the daughter of Banasura. Ushaika taught it to the Gopi women of Dwaraka, who taught it to the people of Saurashtra. Thus, the mythological story says that this dance art spread across the world. Therefore, Bharata Kalai is associated with Brahma, the god of creation, and Lord Shiva, the god of destruction.

The Tamils saw the beauty of art in stone. They built stone temples. There they set up beautiful dance stages that reflected the art of Bharata. The glory of preserving and preserving the art of Bharata belongs to the temples. Temples have contributed greatly to the development and revival of this art. The temples are built according to the Agama rules. They are represented by idols, towers, pillars and wall sculptures. They are made in such a way that the divine and human feelings merge in these idols and sculptures. Idols built according to the Agama rules are mostly peaceful. The mudras they show are compatible with dance elements.

Sometimes the evil nature can also be seen in the idols. (Example: Durga) We can observe this in the idol of Durga. The movements of Nataraja, the goddess of dance, are specially designed with the dance element. The postures and postures of the temple sculptures are reflections of the art of dance. The sculptors and artists who created the idols had not only knowledge of the Vedas but also the skills of sculpture and Bharata Shastra. That is why all the temple sculptures and idols are arranged to reflect the dance postures.

From a chronological perspective, the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, a temple of the Saiva world, is worth mentioning. This temple is a great repository of dance. Here, people worship Lord Shiva in the form of a sky linga. Nataraja is an expert in the art of dance. There are 108 types of dances mentioned in the

Bharatanatyam Shastra. It is said that Lord Shiva performed all these dances in Chidambaram.

The magnificent Nataraja temple of Chidambaram was famous in the middle of the 7th century AD. The Chola kings who ruled Thanjavur worshipped Chitrambalanathar as their family deity. They covered the temple with gold. Due to this, the assembly was called 'Kanakasabha' and Nataraja, who dances with Chitrambalana, was called 'Kanakasabhapati'.

'Kanakasabha' is the place where Lord Nataraja is worshipped. Next to this, on the south side, is a statue of Lord Vishnu in a reclining position carved out of black stone. This is called the Thiruchithira Kudam. The Kanakasabha and the Chitsabha are gilded with gold.

The 'Chitsabai' is the central temple. This is where Lord Nataraja is enshrined. This is also known as the Chittramalam. To the right of this temple is the Chidambaram secret. A curtain is hung in front of it. The 'Devasabha' is located in the third courtyard to the east of the Nataraja temple. It is also called 'Beerambalam'. This is the place where the festival idols are installed. The 'Nirutta Sabha' is located in front of the temple of Lord Nataraja, to the south of the flagpole. This is the best part of the temple. The Urthuva Tandava idol is enshrined in it. It has 56 pillars and is decorated with wheels like a Thera structure with garlands.

Rajasabai' is a thousand-foot hall built on the lower side of the Sivaganga pond, about 160 feet long and 100 feet wide. It is surrounded by a circular palace and beautiful steps on all four sides. The Navalingam temple is located to the north of the pond. The dance performed by Nataraja in Kanakasabai was the Nadanta dance. At the request of Adisedan, Nataraja performed the dance again in Chidambaram, where he stood on the demon Muyalaka, who emerged from the sacrifice performed by the sages of Dharukavana.

These have sculptures for 108 Karanas and the Natya Shastra verses for each are engraved below them. Therefore, they are very easy to identify. The unity between the dance theory and the performance method is clear. The period of these is the 13th century AD.

Sundara Pandyaadeva, who ruled Madurai in 1250 AD, built the lower tower of this temple. Later, Pachaiyappa Mudaliar renovated it. It contains sculptures depicting the dance forms and images of Patanjali, Vyakrappa, Chandisa, and Shiva as a warrior. There is also a sculpture of Shiva and Vishnu sitting in a large chariot harnessed by seven horses, with Aruna driving the chariot.

Apart from the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, the Karana sculptures on the towers of the Vriddhachalam, Vridthagiriswaran temple and the Thiruvannamalai Thiruvathigai Arunachaleswarar temple are notable.

Dance was an important part of temple worship. Temple worship consisted of 16 parts called 'Shotasopasaram'. The Agama texts state that 'Geethavathiyam' was the fourteenth part and 'Nirdyopasaram' was the fifteenth part.

The books 'Isaan Guruge' and 'Pathati' describe how the Nritham was used in temple worship. They state that during the first circumambulation of the temple, the instruments should be played in the middle tempo, during the second circumambulation, i.e. when the Sri Bali is offered, in the late tempo, and the Sangeet, Lasyam, Tandavam, and Mandalam should be played accordingly, and during the third circumambulation, the Geeta and the instruments should be played in the fast tempo.

Sri Bali is a worship performed daily in temples. In this, food is offered to the gods like Brahma and the gods of Some special news is mentioned in the book 'Chidambara Kshetra Sarvasvam'. They perform the Geeta dance appropriate to the respective direction on the streets. It is also said that the Devadasis also perform the Brahmanas and other vilasa nrityas mentioned by Sage Bharata.

More than eighteen Nrithams are mentioned to be performed in Vishnu temples. Among these, Mandalam, Prishtha Kuttimam, Kamalam, Kamalavativritam, Sarvathopadram, Vilasam, Ketakam, Vishnukrantham, Bhadramali, Gandhara Kuttimam, Vrittha Kuttimam, Parabhadram, Katibandhanam are the dance types. In Saiva temples, Ajapa dance, Kukuda dance etc. were performed.

Dance and singing were prominent in the daily and occasional rituals performed in temples. During the Vedic period, i.e. from 2000 BC to 500 or 1000 BC, the art of dance and drama flourished. Music played a prominent role in the lives of the people of that time. Dance was performed in temples. According to the Agama rules, after the Abhidhamma, worship, etc. were completed, dance was performed as a final act in homage to the deity. Following this, Navasandhi Natyam was performed in temples.

"Navasanthi" is a worship service in which Brahma, the main deity of the temple, is worshipped at the entrance, and the eight directions from east to northeast, and Indra from Attati to Balakaras, are worshipped and prayed to be guarded by the instruments from the beginning to the end of the festival.

The nine dances considered as Navasandhi dances are Samapatham, Phujanga Lalitam, Sandhya Nritham, Urtva Padam, Kunjitam, Phujanga, Mandalam, Dandapatham, and Phujanga Drasaam. The nine dances are Brahma Sandhi, Indra Sandhi, Agni Sandhi, Yama Sandhi, Nirupthi Sandhi, Varuna Sandhi, Vayu Sandhi, Kubera Sandhi, and Eesana Sandhi. During the festivals of raising and lowering the flag, the deities associated with those dances are mentioned.

They have been danced according to these. There are references to dance in the Vedic period, found in the Yasur, Sama, and Atharva Vedas. On the first day of the festival, the children are presented with their own characteristics, rhythm, melody, rhythm, pan, and instruments. During this time, the Vedic hymns of each god are recited, and the Navasandhi Gauthuvas of each god are sung and danced. Of the sixteen types (sodasa) of upasaras that are included in the eternal and temporary activities, the Geethopasara and the Nrityopasara are notable. In ancient times, Nrityopasara was included not only in the temporary activities but also in the eternal activities.

The Pallavas emerged after the Pandyas in the line of Tamil kings who encouraged and encouraged the development of Bharata art in temples in Tamil Nadu. It was during their time that Bharata flourished in temples. The inscriptions in the Pudukkottai border

and the Karai wall sculptures in the Chitthanna Vasal cave temple are evidence that dance reached a very high level during the time of the Pallava king Mahendravarman. This king has described the Tandava dances of Shiva in his book "Mattha Vilasam". He also set these in the form of sculptures. The Pallava kings, who were well versed in the grammatical characteristics, gave a divine nature to dance, and it began to become a devotional art.

During the Chola period, which followed the Pallavas in the rule of Tamil Nadu, dance flourished in temples. Tamil Kuttu, Ariya Kuttu, and Shanthi Kuttu were performed in temples. The royal Thirupitika was performed with the help of the Jaffna tradition, and the Thirumurai songs were sung with music. To ensure that the Tamil temple work was not lacking, 400 Thevaradiyars were appointed from many places and plots were built for them in the north and south of the temple and each of them was given a job. Bharatakalai developed around the temples. We learn from the Silappadhikaram that experts in the art of dance were honored with the title of "Talaikoli".

After the Cholas, the Vijayanagara Empire emerged, following the Pandyas who ruled Tamil Nadu for a short time. In the 14th century, wealth and prosperity flourished under their rule. At the beginning of this period, many talented poets appeared, such as Kalamegha Pulava, Padikasu Pulava, and Dwetyar. Classical dance forms such as Pallu and Kuravanji, which were characterized by great dance qualities, emerged. Thirukkuttala Kuravanji and Muttukut Pallu are notable among them. These Kuravanjis were performed as dance dramas in temples during that period. After this, the ancient Kudiattam and Sakiyar Koothum laid the foundation for the creation of dance stories. Following Bharata Natyam, Krishna Natyam and Kathakali emerged in Kerala. Since the Lord is the master of dance, the art of

dancing flourished in temples. This art has developed in the religious environment as one of the ways of worshipping the Lord in the warmth of the temple. It is said in the book 'Nirudhyaratnavali' that among all the various offerings like flowers, water, lamps and incense, the Lord loves the Nritya offerings the most. These three - Geetha, Vadhyam and Nritya - are called 'Dhauriya Trikam'. Among these, Nritya is offered as

the fifteenth offering after the Geetha and Vadhyam. Not only the South Indian temples but also the North Indian temples preserved the art of Bharata. The sculptures at 'Bhavaya' in Gwalior contain dance scenes. One of these scenes is reminiscent of a modern dance concert. The dance scene sculptures at Deogad, Charni and Ajanta are notable. A beautiful statue of Nataraja dating back to the 5th century AD has been found at Nachna. A statue of the dancing god with many arms has been found at Sakore in Madhya Pradesh. The most beautiful statues of Nataraja at Ellora, Ajanta, Badami, Elipatta and Pathadakal are notable. A very beautiful statue of Nataraja in the Lalit style dating back to the 5th-6th century AD has been found at Elipatta. In 'Paral', the figure of a graceful Koothaphiran is depicted surrounded by Ganas and playing an instrument.

In the south, the dance sculptures at the Kailasanathar Temple in Kanchi bear witness to the fact that temples were repositories of Indian art.

### III. CONCLUSION

Temples have long served as significant cultural spaces deeply intertwined with the religious and cultural life of Indian society. Within this context, Bharatanatyam developed in close association with worship, ritual practices, festivals, devotional beliefs, and spiritual experiences. Particularly within the temple traditions of Tamil Nadu, music, dance, sculpture, architecture, and literature collectively contributed to the creation of a rich and integrated cultural environment. In such a context, Bharatanatyam functioned not merely as a form of entertainment, but also as a mode of artistic worship and as a medium for communicating religious and spiritual ideas.

The Devadasi and Nattuvanar traditions made significant contributions to the development and transmission of dance practices associated with temples. Songs, music, abhinaya, dance movements, and performance practices preserved and transmitted across generations contributed substantially to the artistic refinement of Bharatanatyam. Several forms of repertoire performed within temple contexts, including *Padam*, *Javali*, *Varnam*, and *Kirtana*, subsequently became part of the Bharatanatyam

performance tradition in various forms. This demonstrates that temple-based traditions constituted an important foundation for the development of Bharatanatyam as both an artistic form and a performance tradition.

Over time, social reform movements, political transformations, the colonial context, and the abolition of the Devadasi system brought significant changes to dance traditions that had been directly associated with temples. Consequently, Bharatanatyam gradually expanded beyond the temple environment into new performance spaces such as cultural sabhas, theatres, educational institutions, and modern stages. This transformation introduced new dimensions to its performance practices, thematic approaches, and modes of presentation. In particular, the revival and reconstruction efforts of the twentieth century played a significant role in establishing Bharatanatyam as a recognized classical performing art on the modern stage.

Nevertheless, Bharatanatyam has not become completely detached from its temple connections. In the contemporary context, Bharatanatyam performances continue to be presented on various occasions, including temple festivals, special religious observances, celebrations associated with Nataraja and Shiva, Margazhi events, and other religious and cultural programmes. Contemporary temple performances of Bharatanatyam retain several traditional elements while also incorporating aspects of modernity in terms of performance duration, stage arrangements, lighting and sound technology, costumes, presentation techniques, and audience-oriented approaches.

Furthermore, contemporary Bharatanatyam practitioners increasingly approach temples not merely as performance venues but also as spaces for artistic and spiritual experience. Temple architecture, sculptures, *Sthalapurana* traditions, sacred iconography, and ritual practices continue to serve as important sources of inspiration for thematic development and artistic interpretation in Bharatanatyam. Thus, the temple functions not only as a site of performance but also as a significant source for research, artistic creation, cultural interpretation, and creative expression.

At the same time, the incorporation of modernity into temple-based Bharatanatyam requires careful consideration of its fundamental traditional values. Modern technologies, innovative stage arrangements, and contemporary artistic interpretations should be employed in ways that enhance the artistic quality of Bharatanatyam without diminishing its traditional identity. In particular, the sacred character of the temple, the thematic and textual significance of the compositions performed, the traditional principles of abhinaya, and the cultural elements associated with temple rituals should be appropriately considered while designing and presenting performances.

Therefore, the development of Bharatanatyam in temple contexts should be understood not merely as a historical journey, but as a significant cultural process reflecting the evolution and interaction of religion, art, culture, and social transformation. Although Bharatanatyam has travelled from the temple environment to the modern stage, its artistic roots continue to remain closely connected with temple traditions. The continued development of the art form requires a meaningful balance between traditional heritage and contemporary needs, while preserving its distinctive artistic and cultural identity. In this regard, documenting temple-based Bharatanatyam traditions, preserving historical performance practices, recording the oral histories of artists and hereditary practitioners, and creating awareness among younger generations about this cultural heritage are essential for future research and for the continued development and transmission of Bharatanatyam.

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