

Online Conference:

Emerging Trends in Research on Classical Indian Dance – Ed. III

Department of Asian and Islamic Art History, University of Bonn, Germany

Centre for Research in Arts and Creative Exchange (CRACE), University of Roehampton, UK

List of abstracts

Comparison Between the *Rasas* of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the Basic Emotions of Western Psychology’ Katja Skudelny (Pending, previously Tamil University, Thanjavur)

The core of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the 6th Adhyāya [Sanskrit: Chapter], deals with eight rasas. Rasa is usually translated as sentiments or emotions, but there is no appropriate term in another language. Even in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself the term 'rasa' needs to be explained: Bharata Muni, the author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, compared rasa to the experience of taste. These rasas are expressed, among other things, through facial expressions, which are described in detail in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* within.

The term “basic emotions” is used nowadays in Western psychology. There are different definitions of basic emotions in terms of quality and quantity from researchers within the Western science of psychology. Paul Ekman is considered as one of the leading scientists in the field of emotion psychology. Initially, Ekman wanted to refute the theory of innate expressions of emotions of the eminent evolutionary researcher Charles R. Darwin, who defined more than 30 emotions. Both researchers have in common to describe precisely the emotions by their respective facial expressions. Due to his research, Ekman defined seven basic emotions himself.

Since both the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Ekman, describe the facial expressions of a nearly similar number of emotions, it, therefore, makes sense to examine the historical source of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by comparing it with Ekman’s basic emotions in Western psychology. As a result, comparing the descriptions of the facial expressions shows that some of the descriptions have strong or at least significant overlaps.

Insights from the Motion Capture analysis of the lower body movements (*Cārīs*) of *Nāṭyaśāstra*

Sripadma Ganapathi (University of Roehampton, London)

Despite extensive research, injury is still a real problem in dancers of a variety of genres including bharatanatyam (an Indian classical dance form). Injury can be prevented by adequate and consistent warmup before training but warmup is either neglected or inadequate in bharatanatyam dancers. Absence of an aesthetic warmup routine and varying training methods across bharatanatyam schools may be the reason for the lack of adherence and consistency in the warmup. To prevent dance injuries, a dynamic warmup, comprised of the movements from the dance form itself should be adopted, but such a routine does not exist in bharatanatyam - the gap which this research addresses. Dance-based body training exercises are explained in detail in *Nāṭyaśāstra* (dated 500 BCE-500 CE), the earliest known extant Indian

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performing art treatise. A large subset of these exercises looks visually similar to the evidence-based warmup exercises (Ganapathi 2021). In this first-of-its-kind interdisciplinary research project, lower-body movements (Cārīs) mentioned in *Nāṭyaśāstra* are subjected to biomechanical analysis using motion capture technology, to construct an effective and aesthetic dance-based warmup routine. Results showed that these movements may have a positive effect on the dancer when performed before the dance activity. They encourage the body to go through optimal ranges of motion at hip, knee and ankle, absorb vertical force and prepare the body to achieve balance and coordination as expected from a warmup routine. This research bridges the gap between evidence- and pedagogy-based practices that is necessary to meaningfully transform bharatanatyam training methods and prevent injury.

Moksha: Odissi's Legacy of Resistance

Heemal Pandey (Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur)

Odissi, one of Bharat's classical dance forms, is both an artistic expression and a symbol of cultural resilience. The final piece in its performance cycle, *Moksha*, embodies spiritual liberation, while the dance itself reflects the resistance against centuries of suppression. Odissi originated over 2,000 years ago, performed by *Mahārīs* in Odisha's temples as a sacred offering to Lord Jagannātha. However, foreign invasions and colonialism nearly eradicated the dance. Yet, Odissi survived, largely due to the preservation of its essence through key literary texts and traditions.

In addition to Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda*, which provided the narrative and emotional core of *abhinaya* (expressive dance), ancient texts like *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Chandrikā* preserved Odissi's technical foundations. These treatises outlined the intricate movements, postures, and expressions essential to the dance, and served as guides for its revival. Other important texts, such as *Abhinay Darpan Prakasha* and *Natya Manorama*, along with manuscripts like *Sangeeta Narayana*, *Sangeeta Kalpalata*, and *Sangeeta Parijata*, also played a crucial role in maintaining the classical grammar of Odissi through centuries of disruption. The efforts of the Jayantika group, led by gurus like Kelucharan Mohapatra and Pankaj Charan Das, were instrumental in reviving Odissi in the mid-20th century. Drawing from these ancient texts and temple sculptures, they restored the dance form, ensuring its spiritual and aesthetic continuity. *Moksha*, the final piece of the performance cycle, symbolizes not only the dancer's liberation but also Odissi's journey from suppression to resurgence.

This paper explores how Odissi's essence was preserved through literature, even during its darkest periods and how it was ultimately restored through the dedication of scholars and practitioners, making it a legacy of resistance. By incorporating cultural theory terms to enhance the understanding and approach towards

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the art form. Looking at it as not just a performance piece but a heritage that is preserved, loved and passed down authentically.

Keywords: Moksha, Odissi, Jayantika, Revival, Nāṭyaśāstra, Resistance, Heritage

Classicization of Kuchipudi Music and its Consequences

Dr. Sindhuja S (University of Silicon Andhra, Milpitas)

It is not unusual for forms to adapt and evolve. The predicament arises when something voyages from where it began and is robbed of its indigenous roots. Kuchipudi is one such form with its share of transformations owing to socio-political factors. This paper focuses on the musical aspects of those changes. Music is a prime determinant, with sound and texture as its elements in creating movement, identifying, and defining a form. Kuchipudi's music was unique, with a specific set of *rāgas*, dynamic shifts, and typical rhythmic patterns, emphasizing *bhāva* and communication owing to its drama origins. However, once the form achieved classical status and diversified into solo and dance-drama genres, the music swerved towards the Carnatic style. I argue that this *Sanskritization* and its consequential acceptance as a major tradition steered Kuchipudi's sound in a direction that diluted the essence of its regional flavor. When dances like Odissi (which got national recognition around the same time as Kuchipudi) adhered to their Odia musical heritages, Kuchipudi was propelled to resonate with 'classical' rather than 'rustic'. While it served the then-desired purpose of marking Kuchipudi 'classical', the audio sort of turned into a blanket with the likes of Bharatanatyam. Eventually, an influx of Carnatic compositions, *rāga* structures, and standardization of Kuchipudi music may be observed. Through this work, I propose to analyze the melodic and rhythmic elements by examining the audio-visual representations and documented narratives that led to the shift in Kuchipudi music and thus the movement.

From Dance to Discourse: Challenges to Cultural Research on Mohiniyattam

Devika K (Christ University, Bangalore)

The history and identity of Mohiniyattam, one of India's eight classical dance forms, was constructed to align with the nationalistic and regional ideologies of post-independent India. Along with the socio-political agenda, the (re)construction was fueled by the significant gaps in the early performative identity and history of Mohiniyattam. Drawing on extensive ethnographic and historical research, early practitioners worked to establish a culturally acceptable tradition for the art form. Hence, the development of Mohiniyattam came with the awareness of the significance of research in preserving and expanding the performing tradition. However, academic engagement with classical dance has focused on the performative aspects of it, thereby

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prioritizing the aesthetics of movement, expression, and repertoire. Such an emphasis disregards the cultural significance of dance, leaving critical explorations of social, political, and cultural influences, including gender, caste, body politics, religion, and power dynamics, largely unexplored. Specific to Mohiniyattam, the majority of research has examined its lyrical, aesthetic, and feminine dimensions, with scant attention to the socio-cultural narratives that construct its identity. This paper addresses the challenges to doing cultural research on Mohiniyattam, including contested history, scarcity of primary texts, linguistic barriers, stylistic biases and limited methodological intervention. Drawing insights from various sources, this paper will delve into the intricate interplay of traditionalist and contemporary perceptions of dance research. Shifting the focus from the dance form to the discourse surrounding it, this paper proposes potential strategies to overcome the challenges to cultural research on Mohiniyattam.

Bharatanatyam Meets the West: A Fusion Revolution on Dance Reality Shows

Raj Barani K (Annamalai University, Chidambaram)

This study explores the fusion of Bharatanatyam, a traditional Indian dance form, with Western dance styles on dance reality shows. The dance world has witnessed a fascinating convergence of cultures, with traditional dance forms like Bharatanatyam blending with Western styles on dance reality shows. This fusion has captivated audiences and inspired dancers to experiment with new techniques. Bharatanatyam, a structured Indian dance, has evolved through the integration of ballet, jazz, and contemporary dance. Dance reality shows have played a crucial role in showcasing these fusions, encouraging dancers to challenge traditional boundaries. One notable trend is the incorporation of Western dance elements into Bharatanatyam routines. Dancers seamlessly blend ballet's elegance, jazz's energy, and contemporary dance's fluidity with Bharatanatyam's classical grace, creating visually stunning performances.

Another trend is the use of Western music in Bharatanatyam. While Carnatic music is traditional, dancers now experiment with Western pop, rock, and electronic music, adding a contemporary touch and making the dance more accessible to a wider audience. Dance reality shows have provided a platform for dancers to showcase their creativity and innovation. Choreographers are pushing the boundaries of Bharatanatyam by incorporating Western elements, creating original and thought-provoking routines. It has captivated audiences and inspired dancers to explore new artistic possibilities. As this fusion continues to evolve, we can expect to see even more innovative and exciting performances that celebrate the beauty and diversity of Dance. The investigation reveals a significant shift in the perception and presentation of Bharatanatyam, transforming it from a traditional art form to a dynamic, global dance phenomenon.

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A Dance(d) Story: From Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Rukmini Devi Arundale

Dr. des. Sandra Jasmin Schlage (University of Bonn)

“Der Gott und die Bajadere” is a poem written by Germany’s most famous poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in 1797 CE. This investigation traces the roots and legacy of the poem into the 21st century, with particular consideration of the representation of and influence on dance and socio-religious discourses in India and Germany.

Goethe’s story of an Indian temple dancer, at his time called *Bajadere* in Germany, who sacrifices herself for a god in the guise of a mortal man is inspired by travel accounts of Indian culture and religion mixed with Western, Christian ideas. His characterisation of the protagonist thus participates in the Orientalist discourse on temple prostitutes which was opposed to the real Indian temple women (e.g. *devadāsīs*) who were ritual and artistic specialists.

The analysis of the historical sources of the story will be followed by the discussion of its impact on Western dance productions. Due to Europe’s fascination with India, several ballets and operas based on Goethe’s poem were created throughout the 19th century. Of particular importance to the history of Indian dances is the influence of these dance dramas on the so-called revival of Classical Indian Dances in the first half of the 20th century and associated artists such as Rukmini Devi Arundale.

This poem’s journey through time does not end in the middle of the 20th century. Therefore, the investigation concludes with a discussion of artistic productions based on Goethe’s poem and *Bajadere* ballets in the 21st century.

Grandeur of Frozen Movement in Stone – With Special Reference to *Vasantōtsava* Sculptures of Vijayanagar Times

Dr. Padmini Shreedhar (Jain University Bangalore)

This study aims at throwing light on the celebrated *Vijayanagara* period of south Indian history, a time of artistic awakening, societal oneness and religious tolerance. The focus is to expose the grandeur of movement of *Vasantōtsava* festivities in the *Vijayanagar* Temples and the court, drawing a parallel to the *desi* group dance forms relevant to the spring festival. The study is a multi-disciplinary endeavour which includes dance, music, sculptures and literature of the medieval times. One of the emerging trends in the new millennium is the realization of bygone traditions through a research perspective. This paper belongs to one such emerging trend.

Carved in stone, the temple walls of Hampi sites of the erstwhile *Vijayanagar* period reveal the themes and concepts of *Vasantōtsava* celebrations. Understanding the reflections of observing the festival through

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performing arts, one can witness the grandeur in the sculptural depiction as testimony. The thematic commemoration of *Vasantōtsava* as *Madanōtsava*, *Madanātryōdaśi*, *holi*, *jalakreeda*. *Vasanta Utsava*, *Caccari*, *Jājara pāta*, *dandarāsaka* can be identified in the sculptures. The gaiety in the court, temple and the community are portrayed through beautiful sculptures worth a qualitative analysis.

A historical, exploratory study with a phenomenological (interpretative) approach was undertaken to study the sculptures. A literary survey was conducted to understand the nuances of choreography of the period. The *desi* tradition sources of music and dance helped in an accurate reconstruction of an hour-long dance feature on *Vasantōtsava*.

This paper comprises of a qualitative investigation of these glorious sculptures and dance compositions of *Vasantōtsava* and a researched attempt to revisit revive and reconstruct the spring dances for posterity.

Keywords: *Vijayanagara*, *Vasantōtsava*, sculptures, dance forms, multi-disciplinary

Harnessing Nāṭya for Current Research in Embodiment Studies

Dr. Rajyashree Ramesh (Independent scholar, Alumna of the Europa-University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder))

Dance research in general gets embedded within other fields of study. With performative practices having a long-standing varied history, as in the Indian dance/dance theatre traditions, academic research tends to focus on their historicity, socio-cultural/-political and/or religious contexts in which they have been practiced. While this inroad is essential in enabling knowledge about their relevance, an all too contextually defined research lens restricts, more often than not, an understanding of the fundamentally embodied relevance their practice also holds. Some aspects remain implicit and thus unarticulated, or even forgotten, while other aspects get over-articulated. The pitfall most observed in the discursive understanding is a kind of reductivism, as if relevance, practice and the depicted are *only* definable within a given context, and an understanding of the context is necessary to comprehend these.

Looking beyond can bring path-breaking research possibilities that enable existent practice and academic enquiry to inform each other in new ways. My lecture proposes to draw from my cross-disciplinary doctoral research methodology to underscore this. Intrigued by insights from current fields of research such as Linguistic Gesture Studies, Cognitive Linguistics, Brain Research on Emotions and Fascia Research, I took an extensive movement-based analytic approach as a seasoned practitioner and Certified Movement Analyst, to harness the theory and practice of Nāṭya for an enquiry into the very mechanisms underlying embodiment. Reviewed as ushering in a new research field, the central findings unveiled how the most fundamental embodied experiences grounded in *body-brain emotive-kinetic processes* are primordially operative as meaning-making in Nāṭya.

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Bharatanatyam Praxis Through Ages

Dr. Divya Patel (Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara)

I was born in Patan a small town in North Gujarat India. After 7 years of Bharatanatyam training and Aarngetram brought me to Department of Dance, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara to do Graduate and Post Graduate in Bharatanatyam. Starting the research with Two years of Dissertation in Masters and 7 years of Doctoral work in “The Changing dynamics of Tradition art form: Case study of Bharatanatyam Margam under Prof. Dr Parul shah as my supervisor. This extensive and detailed study became my passion. Starting with Natyashastra, the solo classical dance form has gone through tremendous development and changes. As we know very well that all these developments can only happened with intense research work. As our arts being more oral tradition with limited written documentation. From Natyashastra we move to rupaka and uprupaka tradition. By Sangeet Ratnakar around 10th Cen. The concept of ‘*Ek Aaharya Lasya*’ was crystalized. Solo dance and dancers are highlighted in Sanskrit kavya & literature like Madhavi, Malvika and such. Chola Period was the pick of temple tradition where the devadasi tradition was flourished. Sadir evolved from Prabandha and Nirupana, the precursor of Present Bharatanatyam. The transformation of Sadir into Bharatanatyam reflects the dynamic nature of cultural practices, which evolve in response to changing social, political, and economic contexts. This paper delves into the dynamic evolution of the Bharatanatyam Margam (traditional repertoire), examining how changes in presentation have shaped the dance's contemporary identity. My presentation will explore in detail. This study underscores the ongoing evolution of Bharatanatyam as it continues to navigate the dynamic interplay between historical authenticity and creative expression.

The Forgotten Compositions of Mysore Wodeyar’s Period

Dr. Usha Dinakar (Independent scholar, Alumna of the Kannada University, Hampi)

Karnataka, one of the states in Southern India, has a rich cultural heritage when it comes to the dance history as the royal families encouraged and protected the dance traditions. Mysore Wodeyars have patronaged and contributed a lot in continuing the dance traditions which exist even today. My presentation will focus on the historical compositions done during Wodeyar’s period which have not gained much popularity and are rarely seen in the present-day performances. This tells us that there is a dire need for their study and put them into practice so that they are not lost and forgotten.

The Wodeyars, who lived between 14th – 20th century, have composed several compositions that can be used for dance like “Geeta Gopala” (early 18th century) and “Chikkadevaraya Saptapadi” (late 17th century).

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Both the works are done in a Saptapadi format. “Geeta Gangadhara” or “Sangeeta Gangadhara” (18th century) is a rare Shivashtapadi from Wodeyar’s period written by Kalale Nanjaraja. This poetic work is very similar to Jayadeva’s Geeta Govinda. The above-mentioned compositions can be easily adapted to dance because of the presence of navarasas and Nayaka-Nayika bedhas. The revival of these compositions is important as they are rare and not popular and bringing them on to stage will not only give them life but add luster and uniqueness to the dance performance by connecting it with its rich history.

Sacred and the Sewage- the Many Facets of the Ganges as Depicted in the Classical Indian Dance ballet ‘Namamey Gange’

Giridhar Raghunathan (University of Roehampton, London)

The river Ganges is one of the five most important rivers in Hinduism. According to Nārada Purāṇa (9th or 10th century CE), the river was brought to the earth by the penance of King Bhagīratha, to immerse his forefathers’ ashes. Hindus immerse the ashes of their kin in the Gaṅgā (Ganges) and perform cremation of the dead in the banks of the holy river. Over the past few decades, the river has been transformed into an ecological disaster, as a result of excessive pollution caused by untreated sewage, industrial wastes, carcasses and unburnt remains of funeral pyre. In 2014, the government of India approved *Namami Gange*, a flagship programme for the conservation of the Ganges. Scientific evidence demonstrates that the level of pollution has not decreased despite huge financial investments on this project. Against this socio-politico-economic backdrop, this presentation analyses the bharatanatyam production *Namamey Gange (2018)*, conceived and choreographed by Dr Saroja Vaidyanathan, based on the river sanitation project. The critical viewing of the dance-ballad raises the question, ‘Can a performative artwork create change in people?’. Using gender as a theoretical lens, this paper analyses the various textual and choreographic constructions of the Ganges’ personification as the damsel in distress, the mother and tangible extension of the supreme power. Further, it examines the impact of the performance through selected newspaper excerpts and reviews. The production illustrates how Indian classical dance can demonstrate the potential to bridge myth, environment and performance, suggesting a community-driven social change for championing ecological conservation.

Studying the Impact of Performance Spaces on the Reconstruction of Bharatanatyam

Megha Shekawat (Pending, Alumna of the Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon)

Studying the impact of performance spaces on the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam is ongoing research, which encompasses the spectrum of experiences and practices that I have developed as a choreographer,

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dancer and with other practitioners. I have identified various changes that have occurred in Bharatanatyam over time. For instance, we see a paradigm shift when traditional frameworks cannot account for social realities and thus become ineffective. For example, the street (when Bharatanatyam is performed on the streets) has emerged from a sense of dissatisfaction with the conventional performance space called the Stage.

I argue that performance spaces act as a major foundation for the process of reconstruction of Bharatanatyam. Entering each space, we need to keep questioning the ongoing power shifts, how they affect the performers and spectators?

As performances have moved outside traditional auditoria, this engagement with geography has proliferated because practitioners are forced to engage with the qualities and politics of different performance spaces, ranging from unused factories to virtual environments and thus the relationship between space, place and praxis is continually being reconfigured.

The advancement of digital culture adds another caveat as it has worked as a catalyst for the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam. Artists are consistently transforming their ways of presenting their art forms to the spectators. Such transformations have pushed them to think about their art form in a different light. The changes in platforms also affect the dance form as it brings changes like introduction of novel hand gestures, literature, music, choreography and themes.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, performance-space, hand gestures, Bharatanatyam, choreography

Going “Viral”: Reworking Bharata Natyam Practice and Performance through Social Media Platforms Dr. Rohini Acharya (Independent scholar, Alumna of The Ohio State University, Columbus)

In this paper, I examine how second-generation South Asian Americans utilize social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok to rework Bharata Natyam techniques, compositions, and themes through contemporary issues from within their own generational, political, social, and cultural context in the US. Through ethnographic research and choreographic analysis, I analyze the aesthetic and thematic changes practitioners make to the Bharata Natyam repertoire through the combination of dance, music, text, and dialogue to create “viral” videos on these platforms that reflect their experiences of living in the US. I argue that second-generation practitioners are interested in utilizing social media to transform Indian cultural attitudes around gender, religion, and nationalism through practices manifesting cultural hybridity that make Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice. Making Bharata Natyam an accessible and relevant practice means making work that is accessible and visible to audiences globally and increasing performance opportunities and resources for practitioners. While second-generation practitioners rework

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Bharata Natyam on these platforms, I also examine the ways they reinforce issues of Indian nationalism in the diaspora in the ways they label their work on videos they upload to social media. I analyze the tension between wanting to challenge Indian cultural attitudes and reinforcing these issues in their work as I highlight the stakes for South Asian American dancers in the diaspora to develop Bharata Natyam in the US. I further discuss the importance of these platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the pandemic changed the circulation and reception of Bharata Natyam practice.