What Stays, What Changes, and What Is Carried Forward: Bharatanatyam Across Geographic and Diasporic Contexts

Abstract

Bharatanatyam is an ancient, over 2,000 year old dance form where intricate physical movements, hand gestures, and spoken Sanskrit verses connect to form a shared art form that is passed down from teacher to student through movement and performance. However, learning Bharatanatyam also involves learning stories, values, and ideas about culture and identity. These parts of the tradition do not always stay the same when dancers move to different countries or grow older. This paper looks at how Bharatanatyam is passed down across different geographic and diasporic settings, focusing on what dancers remember, what changes in their practice, and what they choose to carry forward. The study draws on oral-history responses from dancers and teachers in India, the United States, Europe, Southeast Asia, and other diasporic communities. Across the interviews, participants described lessons about values including intentional movement, discipline, and the relationship between guru and student. At the same time, several dancers described finding new ways to use Bharatanatyam, including creating work about contemporary issues such as caste violence and domestic violence. These responses show that change does not necessarily mean that a tradition is disappearing. Instead, dancers can keep the structure of Bharatanatyam while changing how they understand and use it. Geography affects the role Bharatanatyam plays in a dancer's life, but the tradition continues because dancers find personal reasons to keep practicing and teaching it.

Introduction

Bharatanatyam is more than a collection of movements. For dancers who spend years learning the form, they build a connection to community and personal identity. A dancer may begin by learning how to move their hands or feet correctly, but over time, they can also learn ideas about storytelling and how to approach the art itself. Much of this knowledge is not written down, as bharatanatyam is a fundamentally oral teaching tradition. It is learned by watching a teacher, repeating movements, listening to corrections, performing, and spending time around other dancers.

This experience with the art form is especially interesting when Bharatanatyam is practiced in different places. A student learning in Chennai, India may have a very different environment from a student learning in London or Oklahoma. The dance itself may still look familiar, but the reasons for learning it, the people surrounding the dancer, and the role it plays in the dancer's life can all be different. Moving between countries can also change a dancer's relationship with the form. Bharatanatyam might become a stronger connection to cultural identity, or it might become a way to explore experiences that have little to do with the traditional stories a dancer first learned. This does not mean that Bharatanatyam outside India is simply a less traditional version of the form. Anita Kumar's research on Bharatanatyam in the South Asian diaspora shows that the dance can play an important role in racial, ethnic, and religious identity while also becoming a space where people create and interpret culture. Her work challenges the idea that culture has to stay exactly the same in order to remain meaningful. The interviews in this study show a similar pattern. Dancers often described a strong respect for what they learned from their teachers, but they also talked about finding their own relationship with the form. One dancer who moved to London from Italy described Bharatanatyam as "a language that carries history, philosophy, devotion, and human emotion." The dancer also explained that more recent training

had encouraged them to ask why they were doing a movement instead of only thinking about how to perform it.

This paper therefore asks three main questions: What parts of Bharatanatyam stay with dancers across different places and stages of life? What changes when dancers move between geographic or social contexts? And what do dancers choose to carry forward? The central argument that reveals itself is that geography changes the experience people have with Bharatanatyam more than it changes the form of the tradition itself. The movements, training, and relationship between teacher and student continue to matter, but dancers use and understand them differently depending on their circumstances. In other words, the movement vocabulary can stay recognizable even when the reason for using it changes.

Literature Review

Bharatanatyam as a Historical and Social Tradition

It is easy to think of Bharatanatyam as an ancient tradition that has simply been passed down from one generation to another. Its history, however, is much more complicated. The form that is now recognized as modern Bharatanatyam was shaped by social reform, nationalism, changing ideas about respectability, and debates about caste and class. Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures* examines the history of devadasis and the changes that affected performance traditions in South India. His work shows that the history of Indian classical dance cannot be separated from the social and political changes surrounding the communities that practiced it (Soneji 2012). This history is also discussed by several contemporary scholars who examine caste, class, aesthetics, and the making of modern Bharatanatyam (Krishnan 2019; Pillai 2022; Soneji 2012).

They explain how the modern form became connected to Indian cultural nationalism and how caste and class affected who was able to perform and define the form.

This is important for the present study because it means that Bharatanatyam has never been completely separate from change. The tradition that dancers inherit today has already gone through major changes in the past. When contemporary dancers reinterpret the form, they are therefore participating in a much longer history of deciding what should be kept, changed, or emphasized. The interviews reflect this idea. One participant described learning from a mother who encouraged both respect for tradition and individual expression. When the participant wanted to create a dance about the Chipko movement instead of performing another familiar story, the teacher encouraged the idea. The participant later explained that this experience shaped the way they think about Bharatanatyam: they still value the structure of the form but also ask how they can make it relevant to the world they live in.

Bharatanatyam in Diaspora

Bharatanatyam has become an important cultural practice in many South Asian diasporic communities. For some families, it is a way of maintaining a connection to Indian culture. For students, it can also become a community, a creative outlet, or an important part of their identity. Kumar's (2014) research in Los Angeles is useful here because it shows that Bharatanatyam can become part of how dancers understand their racial, ethnic, and religious identities. At the same time, the dancers are not simply receiving a fixed identity from the dance. They are actively creating meaning through their participation in it. Stuart Hall's (1990) work on cultural identity and diaspora also provides a useful way to think about this. Hall argues that cultural identity is shaped by history and experience and is not simply something that remains exactly the same over

time. This is relevant to Bharatanatyam because dancers can inherit the same form while developing very different relationships with it.

The interviews make this especially clear. The participants did not describe one universal "diaspora experience." Instead, their experiences depended on where they lived, who they learned from, what their communities looked like, and what stage of life they were in. A dancer in London, for example, may have a different relationship to Bharatanatyam than someone who learns through a collegiate team in the United States.

Transmission, Memory, and Place

A major part of Bharatanatyam is the relationship between teacher and student. A teacher does not only teach choreography. Teachers also pass down ideas about how to practice, how to perform, and how to understand the art. One participant remembered a first guru who repeatedly said, "Every movement must have intention." The participant explained that the lesson was not just about making beautiful shapes or performing technically correct movements. Every gesture and glance was supposed to have a purpose. The participant said this lesson stayed with them because it could be applied both on and off stage. Another participant remembered being taught to enjoy the journey rather than focus only on the destination. The participant had started Bharatanatyam in the United States as a young child but did not enjoy it and eventually stopped. After moving to India, the participant encountered the dance again through a friend and a new teacher. The environment was different, and the participant began to enjoy practicing. These stories show that what dancers remember from their teachers is not always a specific piece of choreography. Sometimes it is a sentence, an attitude, or a way of thinking that stays with them for years.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative oral-history responses from Bharatanatyam dancers, students, teachers, and people involved in Bharatanatyam communities. The participants represent several geographic and institutional settings, including India, the United States, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Because the sample is qualitative, the purpose is not to claim that these experiences represent every Bharatanatyam dancer. Instead, the interviews are used to understand the different ways dancers describe continuity and change in their own experiences. The analysis was organized around three ideas: what stays, what changes, and what dancers choose to carry forward. These categories came from the interviews themselves. Participants often talked about something they learned from a teacher and then explained how that lesson changed as they got older or moved into a different environment. The study also includes a structured collection of Bharatanatyam audio recordings that documents Sanskrit śloka material used in training. This documentation provides an example of one part of the tradition that can be recorded and organized, while the oral histories provide information about how dancers actually experience and interpret the tradition. The two sources are treated differently because a recorded śloka and a dancer's memory of a teacher represent different types of cultural knowledge.

Findings and Analysis

What Stays Across Locations

One of the strongest patterns in the interviews is that certain lessons stay with dancers even when their circumstances change. These lessons include intention, discipline, patience, enjoyment, mindfulness, and authenticity. The participant who remembered the lesson "Every movement

must have intention" explained that it changed how they thought about both dance and life. The point was not simply to execute a movement correctly. The dancer had to actually be present and understand what the movement was doing. Another participant remembered a teacher emphasizing that dance should be enjoyable. During Arangetram preparation, the teacher cared about whether the students were enjoying themselves rather than only whether every movement was perfect. Years later, the participant still thought about this lesson during stressful periods at school. Instead of always thinking about the next goal, the participant tried to slow down and enjoy the process. This suggests that some of the most important things passed down through Bharatanatyam are not movements at all. They are ways of approaching the movement.

India and the United States

One participant's experience shows how much the environment surrounding dance can matter. The participant first started Bharatanatyam in the United States at around six years old. They did not enjoy it, disliked practicing, and eventually stopped. After moving to India, they saw a friend practicing Bharatanatyam and began practicing alongside her. The teacher was welcoming, and the participant remembered having fun while practicing. The participant then described the first few years in India as some of the most enjoyable years of their dance experience. They practiced alongside older "akkas," who were teenagers and college students. The studio became a social environment rather than simply a place where the participant was expected to practice. The important difference in this story was not necessarily the dance itself. It was everything surrounding the dance. The teacher, other students, and atmosphere changed the participant's experience enough that they returned to Bharatanatyam. This example also shows why comparing India and the United States as two completely separate experiences can be too simple.

The participant's own experience moved between the two. Their relationship with Bharatanatyam changed because of the environment in which they encountered it.

Diaspora Is Not One Experience

The interviews also show that there is no single way to experience Bharatanatyam outside India. Participants lived in different countries and participated in different kinds of communities. Some learned through teachers and private studios, while others became involved with collegiate teams or community organizations. The participant who moved to London from Italy described Bharatanatyam as a language carrying "history, philosophy, devotion, and human emotion." Their experience also involved learning from several teachers and eventually being encouraged to think about why they move rather than only how. This is different from the participant whose strongest memory was connected to the social environment of a studio in India. Both dancers are deeply connected to Bharatanatyam, but the role the dance plays in their lives is not identical.

This matters because the word "diaspora" can make many different experiences sound like one experience. The interviews instead show several different ways of living with the same tradition.

What Changes When the Dancer Gets Older

Another pattern in the interviews is a change in what dancers pay attention to as they gain experience. Younger dancers often focus heavily on learning the correct movements. Later, dancers may begin thinking more about interpretation, intention, and whether the movement actually communicates what they want it to communicate. One participant described this as moving from asking "how" to asking "why." After years of training, the dancer was no longer

only concerned with reproducing choreography. They were also trying to develop their own artistic voice while staying connected to the tradition.

Another participant explained that Bharatanatyam training is very structured, especially in the beginning. The dancer described this structure as necessary because Bharatanatyam requires precise and controlled movements. At the same time, the dancer emphasized the importance of eventually asking whether their movement was authentic to the form and to themselves. This does not mean that experienced dancers stop caring about technique. Instead, technique becomes the starting point for other questions.

Technique and Interpretation

The interviews suggest that technique and individual expression are not necessarily opposites. In fact, several dancers described technical training as the foundation that eventually allowed them to interpret the form more personally. The dancer who discussed structured training explained that control over the body is important when someone is first learning Bharatanatyam. Once that foundation is developed, however, the dancer can become more reflective about how the movements work for their own body. The participant who moved to London described a similar process. Training had encouraged the dancer to ask why they moved instead of simply how they moved. The goal was to find an authentic artistic voice while remaining rooted in tradition. In both cases, the dancer does not throw away what they learned. They use it differently. The rules become something they understand well enough to interpret.

When Bharatanatyam Becomes a Language for Contemporary Issues

One of the most interesting examples of change came from a collegiate dancer who described using Bharatanatyam to tell stories that are not traditionally associated with the form. The dancer discussed creating work about issues such as caste violence and domestic violence. This was not described as a rejection of Bharatanatyam. Instead, the dancer was trying to figure out what Bharatanatyam could do as a form of expression. The dancer explained that growing up, they had mostly learned to use the movements to tell stories that had already been told. After entering college and working with other dancers and artists, they began thinking about what stories they wanted to tell themselves. The dancer also described having to think about the relationship between Bharatanatyam and dance more generally. When telling a story about a contemporary issue, the dancer sometimes had to decide whether communicating the message was more important than following every traditional rule exactly. This connects directly to the history of Bharatanatyam. Scholarship on caste, class, and the making of modern Bharatanatyam shows that the form itself has been shaped by changing ideas about society and who gets to represent it. The fact that contemporary dancers use Bharatanatyam to discuss caste and other social issues therefore adds another layer to an already complicated history.

Making the Dance One's Own

The idea of making Bharatanatyam personal came up in several interviews. One participant described a teacher who encouraged students to "make the dance our own." The teacher still valued tradition and the responsibility of passing it down, but also encouraged students to find their own meaning in it. The participant remembered wanting to create a piece about the Chipko movement while still young. Instead of telling the participant to choose a more familiar topic, the teacher encouraged the idea and worked with them to figure out how to approach it. The participant said this experience continued to shape how they think about Bharatanatyam. Another

dancer described being given the opportunity to use Bharatanatyam to tell stories they personally wanted to tell as “transformational.” These experiences suggest that making the dance one’s own does not require abandoning the tradition. It can mean taking something inherited and finding a reason for it to matter personally.

What Dancers Carry Beyond the Studio

The interviews also show that dancers often carry lessons from Bharatanatyam into other parts of their lives. A participant who learned that every movement should have intention said the lesson affected both dance and life. Similarly, the participant who learned to enjoy the journey described thinking about that lesson during stressful periods at school. These examples are important because they show that cultural transmission does not stop when a dancer leaves the studio. A lesson can continue to exist even when the dancer is studying, working, or doing something completely unrelated to dance. This also changes the meaning of preservation. Preserving Bharatanatyam does not necessarily mean keeping every movement exactly the same. It can also mean carrying forward the values and ways of thinking that dancers associate with their training.

The Role of Gurus and Intergenerational Memory

Teachers are one of the main ways knowledge moves between generations. However, the interviews suggest that teachers pass down much more than choreography. The participant who described the Guru-Shishya relationship emphasized that it involves values, discipline, and a way of seeing the art in addition to technique. This helps explain why a short sentence from a teacher can remain important long after the student has learned hundreds of other movements. Another participant described learning from a mother who was also a teacher. The teacher’s influence was

not only through direct instruction but through watching her teach other students. The participant remembered the freedom the teacher gave students to find their own meaning in the dance.

This means that transmission is not always a simple teacher-to-student process. Students observe how teachers behave, how teachers respond to new ideas, and what teachers consider important. They then decide what to remember and what to use themselves.

Preservation Is Selective

The interviews make it clear that dancers do not carry every part of Bharatanatyam with them in exactly the same way. Some lessons become especially important. Some movements may be forgotten. Some stories may be replaced by new ones. Some parts of training may become more meaningful only years later. This is why preservation can never be completely neutral. Someone has to decide what should be recorded, what should be taught, and what should be remembered. A structured collection of Bharatanatyam śloka recordings, for example, can preserve one part of the tradition in a form that students and researchers can access later. But a recording cannot capture everything that happens during training. It cannot fully capture the relationship between a student and teacher, the feeling of learning a movement for the first time, or why a particular lesson becomes important to someone years later. The oral histories provide another type of record. They preserve memories of the people who learned the tradition and the ways they understood it. Neither type of documentation can represent the entire tradition, but both can help show what parts of it people choose to carry forward.

Geography Changes the Function of Bharatanatyam

Looking across the interviews, the biggest difference between participants is not whether they continue to practice Bharatanatyam. It is what Bharatanatyam does for them. For one dancer, it is connected strongly to family and cultural background. For another, it is a community. For another, it is a way to think about mindfulness and discipline. For another, it is a language for discussing contemporary issues. These roles can also change over time. The participant who moved between the United States and India shows how much this function can change depending on the environment. The dancer first experienced Bharatanatyam as something they did not enjoy and later returned to it in a different social setting where it became meaningful. The participant who moved from Italy to London experienced Bharatanatyam across multiple geographic contexts and eventually described it as a language carrying history, philosophy, devotion, and human emotion. These experiences suggest that geography does not determine exactly what Bharatanatyam will mean to someone. Instead, geography changes the circumstances in which dancers make meaning from the form.

Discussion

The interviews point to a simple but important idea: preserving a tradition and changing it can happen at the same time. Dancers first learn an inherited form. They learn movements, rhythm, stories, terminology, and expectations from teachers. Then they bring that knowledge into their own lives. Sometimes they move to a different country. Sometimes they join a college team. Sometimes they encounter new artists or begin thinking about issues they did not consider when they were younger. Those experiences lead to questions about what the form can mean to them. A dancer may begin asking why a movement exists, whether it works for their body, or whether Bharatanatyam can communicate something outside its traditional repertoire. Eventually, the

dancer becomes part of the next stage of transmission. They teach younger dancers, choreograph pieces, lead practices, perform for new audiences, or simply carry lessons from their teachers into their own lives.

This creates a cycle. Someone inherits the tradition, experiences it in a new context, changes their relationship with it, and then passes some version of that relationship to someone else. The caste and domestic violence example makes this especially clear. The dancer is using an inherited classical form to communicate something about the present. The subject matter changes, but the dancer still relies on years of training in Bharatanatyam. The tradition is not being left behind. It is being used for a different purpose. The same thing happens in less obvious ways. A dancer who learns to be patient through repetitive practice is carrying something forward. A dancer who learns that movement should have intention is carrying something forward. A dancer who learns to question why they move is carrying something forward. This is why the idea of "purity" is not particularly useful for understanding these interviews. Bharatanatyam has already changed throughout its history. The modern form itself was shaped by social and cultural changes, including debates surrounding caste, class, nationalism, and performance. The question is therefore not whether Bharatanatyam changes. It does. The more interesting question is what remains recognizable after the change. The interviews suggest three stages: what survives, what changes, and what people choose to carry forward. What survives can include technique, movement vocabulary, teacher-student relationships, discipline, and ideas about the meaning of the form. What changes can include the dancer's environment, audience, identity, repertoire, and reasons for performing. What gets carried forward is whatever dancers continue to teach, practice, remember, and find meaningful.

Conclusion

Bharatanatyam does not stay alive simply because dancers repeat the same movements exactly as they were taught. It stays alive because people continue to learn the form and find ways to connect it to their own lives. The oral histories show that some things remain surprisingly consistent. Dancers remember lessons about intention, discipline, patience, enjoyment, and authenticity. These lessons can remain important even after dancers leave the studio or move to a different country. At the same time, the role of Bharatanatyam can change significantly. A dancer may first learn it because of family and later practice it because it provides a community. Another dancer may begin with technical training and eventually use the form to explore contemporary social issues. Someone who once focused on learning movements may eventually become more interested in why those movements matter. These changes should not automatically be viewed as cultural loss. Bharatanatyam has its own history of transformation, and contemporary dancers are continuing that process in their own ways. The interviews show that cultural transmission is selective. Dancers remember certain lessons, adapt certain movements, create new performances, and pass particular ideas to the next generation. No dancer carries the entire tradition forward by themselves. Instead, each person contributes a small part of what comes next. Ultimately, geography changes the function of Bharatanatyam more than it changes its existence. The dance can mean different things in Chennai, London, Oklahoma, or a college campus, but it can still connect dancers to a shared history and vocabulary. The movement may stay the same. The reason for using it may change. What matters is that dancers continue to find something worth carrying forward.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The number of participants is relatively small, so these interviews cannot represent the experiences of all Bharatanatyam dancers. The participants also come from different backgrounds and levels of training, which makes direct comparison difficult. At the same time, those differences are useful because they show how varied experiences with the same tradition can be. The interviews are also based on memory. Participants were asked to describe what they remembered as meaningful, so the responses naturally focus on certain experiences more than others. A lesson that someone remembers years later may not represent everything that happened during their training. Future research could include a larger number of dancers from different countries and training backgrounds. Another possible direction would be to follow dancers over several years to see how their relationship with Bharatanatyam changes as they move from childhood training into college and adulthood. Future work could also bring oral histories together with larger documentation projects. Recorded language, movement, and terminology can preserve one part of the tradition, while interviews can preserve the experiences and meanings attached to that knowledge. Together, these sources could provide a fuller picture of how Bharatanatyam continues to change while remaining recognizable to the people who practice it.

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