DANCE AND DEVOTION: BHARATANATYAM'S CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH TEMPLE CULTURE

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Resumo | Abstract

Bharatanatyam remains one of India's most widely performed classical dance forms, yet its identity as a temple ritual art has grown increasingly obscure. Originating within the sacred architecture of South Indian temples, where the dancing body, the sanctum, and divine iconography formed a single ritual system, the dance has since migrated into proscenium stages, institutional curricula, and global performance circuits. While it thrives as cultural heritage, its relationship to temple space, cosmology, and ritual time is often no longer legible, raising a heritage problem in which intangible practice and its tangible architectural origins risk becoming disconnected even as the practice persists.

This paper examines this transformation through the Chidambaram Nataraja Temple, where architecture and iconography remain deeply interwoven with dance. As the mythic abode of Nataraja, Shiva as Lord of Dance, the temple's sculptural program of the 108 *karanas* encodes dance technique within its fabric, offering a rare instance where built heritage and performing art are inseparably fused.

Read through the lens of cultural memory, the paper argues that the dance's temple origins are not lost but transformed, carried forward unevenly through gesture, oral transmission, and architectural presence even as their ritual meaning recedes from active recollection. Heritage, in this view, is a continually renegotiated memory, reactivated, reframed, or silenced anew in each context, whether temple, stage, or global platform.

Central to this argument are the concepts of de-ritualisation and decontextualisation: the process by which Bharatanatyam retains its outer form and technique while progressively losing the ritual function and architectural setting that once anchored its meaning. Chidambaram's architecture functions as a site of memory that makes this process visible, holding traces of a dance-divinity relationship that practice can recover, reinterpret, or leave dormant, revealing what is at stake when cultural memory of temple origins is no longer actively sustained.

Palavras-chave | Keywords

Bharatanatyam; temple culture; sacred space; tangible and intangible heritage; devotion.

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Resumo biográfico | Short biography

I am a master's student whose research interests include Bharatanatyam, South Indian temple heritage, and cultural heritage studies. My academic focus lies in the intersections of performance, devotion, and identity, with particular attention to how traditional art forms are transformed through historical change and contemporary cultural interpretation. I am especially interested in heritage theory, intangible cultural heritage, and the changing meanings of sacred traditions in modern contexts. My work explores how artistic practices preserve memory while also adapting to new social, cultural, and institutional settings. Through my research, I aim to examine the continuing relevance of religious and devotional traditions within present-day heritage discourse. I am particularly drawn to questions of authenticity, representation, and the relationship between living traditions and cultural preservation. My broader academic interest is in understanding how performance traditions can serve as both historical archives and active, evolving forms of cultural expression.