

# Classical Foundations & Contemporary Interventions

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## Abstract

Classical foundations in dance have provided a codified structure of movement, rhythm and aesthetics, serving as a repository of history, spirituality and the structure of dance style. In India, traditions like Bharata Natyam, Mohiniattam, Kathak, Kuchipudi and Odissi draw upon the NatyaShastra to articulate rasa, bhava and tala. Likewise, the contemporary era has witnessed profound interventions in dance, reshaping its role in society. The dialogue between classical foundations and contemporary interventions reveals an understanding of this intersection that not only highlights the resilience of classical heritage but also illuminates how classical dance evolves as a dynamic medium of expression in the 21st century. Odissi Dance, based on the 'Jagannath Dharma' follows a repertoire of Mangalacharan, Batu, Pallavi, Abhinaya and Moksha. As time evolves, we see meaningful and innovative contemporary changes, with neo-classical/contemporary compositions.

Having the same set of traditional themes no matter how grounded, leads to the sameness of ideas and approach, in a sense taking away the freshness which would set apart a new work and this is where the contemporary interventions are helping the Indian and Foreign masses to connect with classical dances with visually appealing aesthetics and deeper level of connection to spirituality.

Parallel shifts like digital classes are generating new knowledge ecosystems alongside the Guru-Sishya Parampara. The neoclassical and contemporary explorations are not an exit from tradition but a return to its foundational spirit of inquiry. The task ahead is to sustain rigour while welcoming experiment, so that tomorrow's artists inherit both repertoire and tools for invention

**Keywords:** Odissi Dance, Neoclassical, contemporary interpretations, digital platforms

## INTRODUCTION

Classical foundations in dance have provided a codified structure of movement, rhythm and aesthetics, serving as a repository of history, spirituality and the structure of dance style. In India, traditions like Bharata Natyam, Mohiniattam, Kathak, Kuchipudi and Odissi draw upon the Natyashastra to articulate rasa, bhava and tala.

Likewise, the contemporary era has witnessed profound interventions in dance, reshaping its role in society. The dialogue between classical foundations and contemporary interventions reveals an understanding of this intersection. This not only highlights the resilience of classical heritage, but also illuminates how classical dance evolves as a dynamic medium of expression in the 21st century.

Odissi Dance, based on the 'Jagannath Dharma' follows a repertoire of Mangalacharan, Batu, Pallavi, Abhinaya and Moksha. As time evolves, we see meaningful and innovative contemporary changes, with

neo-classical/contemporary compositions like Namami Gange,<sup>1</sup> This neo-classical choreography tells the story of Ganga river, starting with its descent from the locks of Lord Shiva to its present day pollution caused by human actions.

The performance features intricate choreography and sophisticated light designing to create an aesthetically rich experience. The dance carries a strong environmental message emphasizing the need to address the pollution of the Ganga and restore its glory. The performance has served as a powerful artistic conclusion to the award ceremonies, drawing attention to the importance of river conservation. This, while maintaining the aesthetic technicalities of Odissi and bringing the message to the audience is commendable. This choreography is completely based on 'Namami Gange Programme', an Integrated Conservation Mission approved by the Union Government to accomplish the effective abatement of pollution, conservation and rejuvenation of national river Ganga in 2014.

Contemporary Odissi Concept like 'Tradition in Context: fire, trigger and enigmatic bliss',<sup>2</sup> is an Intercontinental creative collaboration with Dr. Kaustavi Sarkar. Fire has its constructive and destructive powers. The idea behind the thematic act is the dreadful impact of wildfires in California. The initial portion of the dance portrays the spirituality of Odissi where the verses are referred from Agni Purana. The dancer expresses the birth of fire. Trigger is the second act, which is deeply impactful which shows the gun violence in the United States of America (hereinafter USA) leading to the unfortunate death of innocent school children. This dance explores the unfulfilled dreams and potentials of the young students. Enigmatic bliss, is a piece influenced by the song of Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bichitro Anondo' which depicts the aspects of environmental injustice.

The movements and expressions of the dancer intertwine with the meaning of the dance.

The concepts are primarily abhinaya based with emotions ranging from devotion, beauty of nature to feeling of loss. It has all the Samabhanga, Abhanga, Tribhanga and Chouka movement patterns. The performance has served as a powerful conclusion, drawing attention to the expressive themes which the common people of USA were awestruck by after watching the choreography. This was done while maintaining the aesthetic technicalities of Odissi and bringing the message to the audience. The unconventional concept of the second portion 'Trigger' was a special mention. It truly captivated the audience. It left a lasting impact on the audience.

This is going to have a huge influence on the masses. Having the same set of traditional themes no matter how grounded, leads to the sameness of ideas and approach, in a sense taking away the freshness which would set apart a new work and this is where the contemporary interventions are helping the Indian and foreign masses to connect with classical dances. This is in the context of visually appealing aesthetics and deeper level of connection to spirituality.

Natyashastra and Abhinaya Darpana trace their historical significance and contributions and examine their ongoing influence on practise. The encounter between codified classical framework and modernity add a layer of complexity and an area of discussion among Gurus, scholars and artists who are still experimenting within this framework. Concepts such as Rasa (aesthetic essence) and Bhava (emotive states) remain central to the communicative power of dance.

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<sup>1</sup> Minati Singha, Kelucharan Mohapatra's dance school bid to restore Ganga's glory, *available at* [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/education/news/kelucharan-mohapatras-dance-school-bid-to-restore-gangas-glory/amp\\_articles/70853730.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/education/news/kelucharan-mohapatras-dance-school-bid-to-restore-gangas-glory/amp_articles/70853730.cms) (last accessed 05 Oct, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Srabani Basu, Traditional Odissi in contemporary global contexts: An exceptional creative approach with a resonating impact, *available at* <https://narthaki.com/info/rev25/rev3334.html> (last accessed at 05 Oct, 2025).

However with the onset of modernity and global cultural exchanges, contemporary interpretations portray a new shift. For instance, Akram Khan's intercultural productions merge Kathak vocabulary with contemporary dance techniques producing performances that speak to global spectators. As time evolves, we see meaningful and innovative contemporary changes, with neo-classical compositions. This fosters a deep appreciation for Odissi's pure style while making it accessible and compelling to a wider audience. In modern adaptations, dancers incorporate social themes such as environmental issues, women empowerment and mental health issues, for instance, Guru Smt. Mallika Sarabhai's works address gender justice. While modern performances expand themes and techniques, the core aesthetics, like rasa, bhava, chauka-tribhangi, movement grammar- remain central. Classical dance has played a formative role in Indian cinema which also influenced the contemporary dynamics of the dances. Movies like Umrao Jaan (1981), Devdas (2002), Tribhanga (2021) with cinematic choreography gained mass audiences with classical aesthetics.

The word 'classical' means long, established form or style. However in the new dynamics of today's era we have also seen how beautiful cross cultural influences have been taking place. For instance, 'The Cry of Sita' is a beautiful collaboration of Odissi and Balinese dance, a captivating blend showcasing the cultural connections of two countries which mesmerised the audience. It was a beautiful blend as a cross cultural project which highlights the story of Sita and her suffering in the island of Lanka . In Odissi it was presented by Dr. Pompei Paul and in Balinese dance by Dr. I Wayan Dibia.

Indian classical dances relies heavily on Guru Shishya Parampara, but with the rise of digital platforms, students from different corners of the world are fortunate to learn the core essence and technicalities of classical dances across continents digitally via zoom, google meet, etc., fostering a global diaspora of learners. Online classes are connecting students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such digital platforms are enabling lecture demonstrations, festivals and workshops which people from all over the world are able to access in virtual spaces. Performances are recorded keeping a vast digital archive for future generations.

Cross Cultural Influences in Global Diaspora: The Global connectivity in 21st century is transformative. Under the Exchange Mobility Programme by Albertina Accademia of Fine Arts, Turin, Italy and Sister Nivedita University, Kolkata; scholars like Sruti Swyamsiddha in Odissi dance and few others represented India, performed and conducted workshops in three days at the University premises and Mao Museum in June, 2025 in Italy. It was hugely appreciated with standing ovation.

The Academic Exchange Concept of 'Unity in Diversity' was presented by Sruti Swyamsiddha in Odissi and multiple other Indian classical dance forms by few Scholars and artists. The audience in Italy applauded the performance with a standing ovation of four minutes. This was a production of a beautiful artistic collaboration. University Students of Albertina Accademia of Fine Arts, also had a beautiful time learning basic technicalities of Odissi in the workshops. It was a beautiful learning time of Indian Culture, dance forms, etc. which is more appreciated as a cross cultural influence in 21st Century.

Government cultural institutions are also playing a vital role in promoting and funding classical dance based productions. Institutions like Sangeet Natak Akademi, Ministry of Culture and Zonal Cultural centres offer grants, scholarships and platforms to ensure the promotion of classical and contemporary dance productions. The new contemporary classical interpretations give a social message, raise awareness among masses which is also deeply connecting to the audience who might not have an in depth knowledge on Indian mythology. However, they connect with the grace of the dance form with a deep interpretation

of the social awareness. Moreover, performing arts like dance education in universities are enhancing awareness about the value and aesthetics of Indian classical dances and also increasing the employability. The word 'classical' means long, established form. However in the new dynamics of constantly evolving attributes of classical dance, cross cultural influences have been taking place.

Rasa is an essence or an emotional experience that connects the performer to the audience. It serves as a bridge between the inner world of human experience and outer world of artistic expression. Rasa has expanded beyond its classical foundations in new and innovative ways. It is not just a historical concept but a framework of the expression in the modern world. 'Dance is a form of communication that stems from a dancer's strong desire to connect with others'.

With contemporary thematic changes, in relation to the global context, audience is widely able to capture the essence of the classical dance form in the blink of an eye even when they might not have a strong knowledge on Indian culture and its roots, yet it is so appealing to the masses that people appreciate and dive deep into spirituality through the dance form.

One drawback of this continuous evolution is that many dancers, unaware about maintaining the technicalities of the dance form, are bringing new compositions with movements of angas which is a complete mismatch with the art form. This results in degradation to any Indian dance form. Respectable Gurus, scholars and art critics engage in scholarly comment regarding this situation. They are working on their projects to build an illustration of how meaningful contemporary compositions in Odissi, Bharata Natyam, Kathak can still be beautifully presented while maintaining the core aesthetics of the dance form. It is noteworthy that increased speed and vibrations in the music compositions have also added thrill in the dance compositions for the masses.

### Methodology

In the Proposed research I seek to examine that it will first cover the *historical method of research*. The historical roots, cultural significance and ancient dynamics of Odissi that lead to the beautiful, angular and structured form of Odissi, starting from Mahari (dance on Geeta Govinda Asta Padis) to Gotipua (dance based on Krishan-Radha expressional themes blended with acrobatic movements) to the decline period during Mughal & British patronage and the revivalism of Odissi from temple to stage postindependence in India by great scholars, artists, covering the elements of 'Abhinaya Chandrika' and 'Natyashastra' on their usage in Odissi dance needs a detailed orientation to his historical lineage.

As there is a shift, an evolving paradigm of contemporary changes that focuses on the duration of dance pieces, concept of choreographies and its dynamics and innovative approach with change of time, new themes and narratives and a broader cultural context with modern light design, speed and vibrancy in dance, maintaining authenticity and aesthetics while embracing new concepts that help shape a social and psychological message. This will incorporate the *exploratory method of research*.

### Conclusion

Patriarchy, socio cultural transformations, mental health are some key concepts which are presented nowadays in contemporary interpretations in some classical dances. This new shift is providing a common basis of communication for people within India and globally, further playing an important role in taking into consideration important scenarios in society and individual that needs transformations.

The task ahead is to welcome experiment keeping the technicalities and grace of the dance form in perfect synchronization. Therefore it is powerful reflection of the socio-cultural changes taking place in the

world. Like in Odissi, Digital Platforms can help with searchable archives and subtitle accuracy for Odia sahitya. Ultimately, Odissi will remain a living practice. This balance between preservation and reinvention has become one of the most significant benefits for the audiences.

Contemporary change in classical dance is not a threat but a gift: an opportunity to safeguard heritage while nurturing innovation. It allows classical dance to thrive as a living tradition, deeply rooted in its past yet courageously open to the present and future. By embracing contemporary contexts, classical dance not only sustains its relevance but also fulfils its highest purpose: to reflect, transform, and elevate human experience across time.

Economically, contemporary adaptations have opened up new avenues of sustainability for dancers. Collaborations with cinema, advertising, and international arts festivals provide platforms that were previously unavailable to classical practitioners. Funding agencies and cultural institutions are more inclined to support projects that highlight innovation, intercultural dialogue, and social commentary: spaces where contemporary classical dance thrives.

This has allowed many artists to sustain professional careers, ensuring that the art form is not merely a passion but a viable livelihood. On a philosophical level, the integration of contemporary sensibilities with classical discipline embodies the very spirit of Indian aesthetics: continuity in change. Another significant benefit of contemporary change is the role of technology.

Digital platforms enable dancers to archive performances, experiment with multimedia staging, and reach international audiences instantly. Students can now access gurus and institutions worldwide, ensuring that geographical constraints do not limit the transmission of knowledge. Moreover, contemporary changes have contributed to a renewed interest in research, pedagogy, and critical dialogue around classical dance. Younger dancers, who are digital natives and global citizens, seek platforms that allow them to express individuality while remaining rooted in tradition. Ultimately, contemporary change enriches classical dance by ensuring preservation, fostering relevance, and enabling expansion—proving that tradition, when adapted with sensitivity, thrives as a timeless medium of artistic expression and human transformation.

Another crucial benefit of contemporary change in classical dance is the way it fosters global cultural dialogue. Collaborations with international artists allow Indian classical forms to converse with world dance traditions, leading to hybrid performances that celebrate diversity without losing authenticity. Additionally, contemporary reinterpretations encourage youth engagement, making the art form attractive to younger generations through experimental music, modern narratives, and digital showcases. They also contribute to policy recognition, as governments and cultural bodies increasingly fund innovative projects. The blending of classical vocabulary with contemporary themes gives them a sense of ownership and pride in their heritage.

Universities<sup>3</sup> and independent scholars are increasingly exploring how tradition interacts with modernity, leading to fresh discourses on performance studies, cultural sustainability, and global aesthetics. This intellectual engagement further strengthens the position of dance within interdisciplinary studies, arts policies, and global cultural dialogues.

Classical treatises like the *Natyashastra* were themselves products of adaptation, compiling performance practices into codified systems while acknowledging regional variations and evolving traditions. Today's contemporary shifts mirror this historical precedent. By blending tradition with innovation, dancers are not breaking away from heritage but extending its lineage into the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. JVN Mallikarjuna & Dr. Ganji Bangla Bharati, *Evolution and Degeneration of Indian Classical Dance: A Critical Study*, 5(5) Int'l. J. Multidisciplinary Res. 6 (2023).

## **Suggestion**

1. Hence contemporary classical compositions are becoming a reflection in the multi-cultural world. Dance will continue to evolve, however it is important to maintain the grammar and aesthetics of the dance form wherein lies the true beauty and grace of its lineage.
2. Another benefit lies in the psychological and therapeutic potential that contemporary adaptations have revealed. With the growing awareness of dance movement therapy, practitioners are discovering how classical idioms—when contextualized within modern frameworks—can aid in emotional expression, healing, and personal transformation.