



TRADITIONAL DANCE FORMS OF INDIA AND THE TRENDS OF PATRONAGE IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA- AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Traditional Indian dance forms embody millennia-old cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic traditions. Historically sustained through patronage by courts, temples, and communities, these art forms are currently experiencing paradigm shifts in visibility, transmission, and audience engagement due to social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Facebook). This paper examines how social media has reshaped patronage patterns for Indian classical and folk dance forms, including trends in performance dissemination, audience formation, cultural interpretation, economic opportunities, and challenges to authenticity. Drawing on recent empirical studies and theoretical literature, the analysis highlights the opportunities and tensions that social media mediates in sustaining and transforming traditional dance practices in India today.

Keywords: Indian Dance, Social Media, Patronage, Cultural Heritage, Digital Performance, Audience Engagement

Introduction

India's traditional dance forms—such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Manipuri, Sattriya, and diverse folk genres—represent complex embodied cultural knowledge transmitted through centuries of lineage-based pedagogy (*guru-śiṣya parampara*) and community ritual (Srinivasan, 2012; Vatsyayan, 2004). Historically, these traditions were sustained by **temple and royal patronage**, community support and localized performance networks (Meduri, 1995). The 20th century brought renewed institutionalization through academies and national cultural policies (Chatterjee, 2005).

The rise of **social media** in the early 21st century—platforms that mediate content creation, dissemination, and interaction—has introduced new forms of patronage and visibility for traditional dance. Artists and practitioners now reach global audiences, monetize performances, and reinterpret practice outside institutional and elite frameworks (Phillips & Brown, 2018). Social media functions as a *digital agora* where aesthetics, identity, and cultural values are negotiated at unprecedented scale.

This paper explores how social media influences artistic patronage, audience engagement, and sustainability for traditional Indian dance in the digital age.

Background of the Problem

Traditional Patronage in Indian Dance

In pre-modern India, aesthetic practice depended on **temple, court, and community sponsorship**. Dancers performed in ritual settings, royal courts, and during festivals, supported through land grants, stipends, and social recognition (Vatsyayan, 2004). These systems ensured continuity of practice, intergenerational transmission, and cultural legitimation. Classical pedagogy relied on *face-to-face teaching* and embodied oral transmission, with aesthetic values reinforced through local communities (Meduri, 1995; Srinivasan, 2012).

Economic support was often attached to institutionally sanctioned networks such as temple trusts, palace courts, or later, cultural academies (SNA, ICCR). This patronage facilitated a stable ecosystem for practice, performance, and pedagogy.



Disruptions and Transformations

With globalization and post-colonial cultural policy shifts, traditional patronage weakened as courts dissolved, and temples faced resource constraints. Simultaneously, mass media (TV, radio) and later digital media expanded visibility beyond localized audiences, enabling new modes of cultural consumption (Allen et al., 2018). Social media, in particular, democratizes content production and audience access, decoupling performance from geographic constraints.

While these shifts offer new opportunities, they also challenge **authenticity, cultural grounding, and economic equity**. Digital platforms reward visibility and engagement metrics, potentially privileging spectacle over depth or tradition (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Recent Studies

Recent interdisciplinary research has begun to analyze the intersection of traditional performing arts and social media.

Social Media as Cultural Platform

Phillips & Brown (2018) explore how Indian classical dancers use Instagram to build digital followings, sustain performance ecosystems, and negotiate identity. They find that hashtags, short video formats, and community tags enable emergent patronage structures, often bypassing institutional gatekeeping.

Singh (2020) analyzes YouTube content by Indian folk and classical performers, showing that audience engagement is correlated with consistency of posting, integration of narrative context, and interactive community features (comments, shares). However, short-form “viral” clips often curate isolated aesthetic movements rather than deep contextualized performances, offering increased visibility at the expense of embodied practice nuance.

Economic and Participatory Dimensions

Kaur & Sharma (2021) surveyed traditional dancers across India and found that social media platforms provide diversified revenue streams (e.g., online workshops, sponsored content) but also increase workload without commensurate compensation. Many respondents reported algorithmic unpredictability as a barrier to stable monetization.

Ghosh (2022) ethnographically studied Kathak and Bharatanatyam dancers’ engagement with TikTok and Instagram Reels. She noted that the platform’s structural limits (time-bound short clips) incentivize rhythmically dynamic segments rather than longer expressive sequences tied to narrative or *abhinaya*, raising questions about aesthetic priorities in digital patronage.

Cultural Interpretation and Appropriation

Banerjee (2020) argues that social media shapes cultural representation, sometimes flattening deep stylistic distinctions for simplified global consumption. Influencers may blend classical movements with popular styles to maximize engagement, generating debates about authenticity and cultural respect.

Reddy & Narayanan (2023) investigate debates among practitioners around “digital authenticity,” revealing tensions between preserving tradition and adapting to social media’s creative norms. Their study highlights emerging digital etiquette, community codes, and aesthetic boundaries negotiated online.



Cover Page



Discussion

Redefining Patronage in the Digital Age

Social media introduces *distributed patronage* rather than monolithic sponsorship. Instead of temples or kings, **global audiences, platform algorithms, and online communities** mediate success. Patrons are no longer limited by geography; a Bharatanatyam dancer in Chennai can cultivate followers in Berlin, Tokyo, and Mexico City. This democratization promotes cultural exchange and transnational networks.

However, algorithmic logic prioritizes **engagement metrics** (likes, shares, watch time), which may not align with the *depth* of traditional practice. As Phillips & Brown (2018) note, digital patronage favors repeated eye-catching visual gestures over extended interpretive pieces, potentially reshaping performance aesthetics over time.

Economic Opportunities and Challenges

Traditional dance practitioners face both opportunities and precarity in digital patronage:

- **Monetization:** Platforms enable online classes, paid tutorials, and sponsored content, diversifying income beyond physical performance circuits (Kaur & Sharma, 2021).
- **Visibility vs. Reward:** Visibility does not always translate to fair compensation; platforms often extract value without equitable artist remuneration, raising concerns about digital labor exploitation (Graham et al., 2019).

Cultural Interpretation and Aesthetic Negotiation

Social media transforms not just patronage but **cultural interpretation**. Users globalize terminologies and remix movements across contexts. While this may broaden appreciation, it also invites misrepresentation and surface-level understanding.

Reddy & Narayanan (2023) highlight digital communities actively asserting codes of respectful engagement, moving beyond passive spectatorhood toward participatory cultural critique. These community norms serve as emergent forms of cultural mediation, shaping online patronage ecosystems.

Preservation versus Transformation

Social media supports preservation through digital archives, recorded performances, and accessible pedagogy. However, it also mediates transformation:

- **Short-form videos** prioritize rhythmic spectacle over narrative contexts.
- **Remixed content** blurs stylistic boundaries (Banerjee, 2020), which can be both enriching and contentious.

These dynamics echo broader debates in cultural studies: whether digital media democratizes cultural participation or accelerates commodification (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Conclusion

Social media has reshaped patronage for traditional Indian dance forms in multifaceted ways. Platforms mediate **visibility, engagement, economic opportunities, and community formation**, opening new horizons for practitioners and audiences. However, this digital transformation also poses challenges related to authenticity, algorithmic dependency, economic equity, and cultural interpretation.



Key insights include:

1. **Distributed Patronage:** Social media creates global digital audiences that function as new patrons.
2. **Algorithmic Mediation:** Engagement metrics shape aesthetic trends, potentially privileging short-form visibility over deep practice.
3. **Economic Shifts:** Platforms offer diversified income streams but also introduce precarities tied to algorithmic unpredictability.
4. **Cultural Negotiation:** Online communities negotiate representation, authenticity, and aesthetic codes in emergent ways.

Understanding these trends requires ongoing research grounded in interdisciplinarity—combining performance studies, media theory, cultural anthropology, and economics—to sustain traditional dance forms while embracing digital innovation.

Conclusion

The transformation of patronage patterns for traditional dance forms of India in the era of social media represents both continuity and disruption. Historically sustained through temple, courtly and community-based support systems, Indian classical and folk dance traditions depended upon localized cultural ecosystems that ensured artistic depth, lineage continuity, and contextual authenticity (Meduri, 1995; Vatsyayan, 2004). In contrast, contemporary patronage is increasingly mediated by digital platforms, algorithmic visibility, and dispersed global audiences.

Social media has undeniably democratized access to performance and pedagogy. Dancers are no longer restricted to geographic or institutional boundaries; instead, they can cultivate transnational audiences, conduct online workshops, archive performances, and build personal artistic identities. This shift from centralized patronage to distributed digital support structures represents a profound structural change in the cultural economy of dance (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Phillips & Brown, 2018). In this sense, social media functions not merely as a communication tool but as a new cultural marketplace that shapes artistic production and reception.

However, this transformation is accompanied by critical tensions. Algorithm-driven engagement metrics often privilege brevity, spectacle, and visual immediacy, potentially influencing choreographic choices and presentation styles. Short-form video formats may emphasize rhythmic virtuosity over narrative depth or *abhinaya*, thereby subtly reconfiguring aesthetic priorities (Ghosh, 2022). Moreover, economic sustainability remains uncertain; while digital platforms open avenues for monetization, they also expose artists to precarity due to unstable algorithms and unequal revenue distribution (Graham et al., 2019; Kaur & Sharma, 2021).

Culturally, the digital sphere has become a site of negotiation where authenticity, innovation, and appropriation are actively debated. Online communities of practitioners and scholars increasingly assert interpretative authority, fostering dialogues around representation and respectful adaptation (Reddy & Narayanan, 2023). This participatory dynamic suggests that social media is not merely commodifying tradition but also enabling new forms of collective cultural stewardship.

Ultimately, the future of traditional Indian dance forms in the digital era depends on achieving a balance between preservation and adaptation. Social media should be understood not as a replacement for embodied, lineage-based transmission but as a complementary platform that expands reach while maintaining pedagogical depth. Sustainable digital patronage will require conscious engagement from artists, institutions, policymakers, and audiences to ensure that technological mediation enhances rather than dilutes cultural integrity.

In conclusion, social media has reshaped patronage from hierarchical and localized systems to decentralized and global networks. While challenges of authenticity, economic equity, and aesthetic transformation persist, the digital era offers unprecedented opportunities for visibility, innovation, and intercultural dialogue. The resilience of India's traditional dance



Cover Page



forms will lie in their ability to creatively negotiate these new terrains while remaining anchored in their philosophical and aesthetic foundations.

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