

Classical Dance in Vishal Bharat: A Living Heritage, Intersecting History, Culture and Climate

Bharti* , Kamran Haider Zaidi* and Prof. Mary Tahir**

Abstract

The dynamic interaction of culture, climate and history shapes Indian classical dance, which is examined in this work as a geographical and cultural phenomenon. The study examines selected classical dance forms, such as Bharatnatyam, Kathak and Manipuri, using an interdisciplinary approach based on cultural geography and performance studies. The present study is all about the living heritage of dance in India and South Asian countries. Using qualitative methods based on textual analysis, spatial interpretation and comparative evaluation, the study demonstrates that climatic conditions influence movement vocabulary, costume design and performance contexts, while historical patronage and cultural institutions shape stylistic evolution. The findings highlight dance as an embodied archive of ecological knowledge and cultural memory, emphasizing its relevance for understanding sustainable cultural practices and intangible heritage systems.

Keywords: Indian classical dance, cultural geography, cultural ecology, climate, cultural memory, intangible heritage, performance studies

Introduction

*Ayaṃ nijāḥ paro veti Gaṇanā Laghuchetasam
Udāracaritānām tu Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam
-Maha Upanishad 6.71-75*

* Research scholar, department of geography, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, dubeybharti007@gmail.com

** Professor, department of geography, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi

Translation: "This is my own relative and that is a stranger, is the calculation of the narrow-minded. For the magnanimous, the entire world is but one family." This verse reflects the historical, cultural and spiritual influence of India across South Asia, rooted in the philosophy of universal connection ("Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," n.d.).

Dance is one of the most important cultural activities of human civilization. It is the expression of emotions, rituals and traditions through body movements. Dance is a universal art form that has developed over the period of human civilization's many locations and eras. The globe has undergone significant social, political and technological change since the writing of ancient dance treatises (Basani and Himabindu, 2025). Indian authenticity is demonstrated by Indian classical dances (Chakravorty, 2000). The present study examines the interaction of culture, climate and history in shaping Indian classical dances. Dance in this region is not only a performance but also a representation of ecological and historical conditions. The study shows that classical dances preserve cultural memory and reflect the geographical conditions of the region. By focusing on Bharatnatyam (South India), Kathak (North Indian plains) and Manipuri (Northeast India), the study provides a comparative understanding of how regional variations shape performative practices. The movements, costumes and themes are influenced by climate and local environment. At the same time, historical patronage and institutions also play an important role in shaping these dance forms. The current study looks at how history, culture and environment have shaped Indian traditional dances in Vishal Bharat.

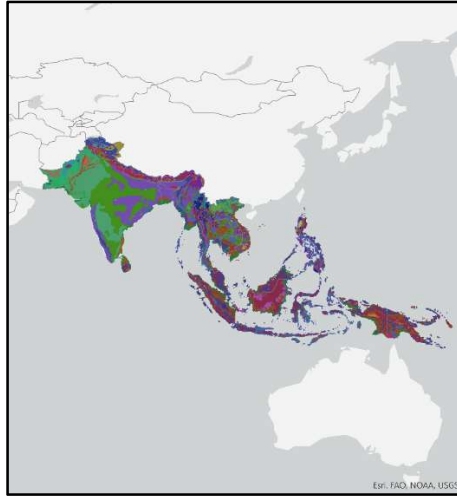


Figure 1. Indo-Malay Realm
(Source: Mackinnon, 1997)

Vishal Bharat refers to the cultural, intellectual and historical connection among the nations in South Asia (Kumar, 2026). When Sri Aurobindo spoke of Indian unity, he never meant homogeneity or force, but rather an awakening to the spiritual unity that underlies multiplicity. It has always been the ability of the Indian genius to "hold together countless diversities in a single organism without rigid uniformity or mechanical centralisation." According to him, Bharat is an "organic unity" that has been cultivated over generations by shared spiritual beliefs (Saha and Kumar, 2025). There are many studies on Indian classical dances, but very few works focus on the relationship between climate, geography and performance. So, the present study is an attempt to analyse these relationships systematically.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To analyse dance as a medium of historical and cultural heritage.

2. To explore the influence of climate and ecology on dance forms.
3. To study the influence of Indian Classical Dance and literature on South Asian Dances.

Study Area

The study area for this research is India, including regions where Bharatnatyam, Kathak and Manipuri are practiced. These regions include Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Manipur. Each region has different climatic and geographical conditions, such as tropical climate, coastal areas, plains and hilly regions. These variations influence the development of dance forms. In some contexts, to show the connection between classical India and South Asian countries, countries like Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia are also studied.



Figure 1. Classical Dances in India

(Source: Garg, 2020)

Database and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design based on secondary data sources, including classical texts such as Natya Shastra, academic literature and UNESCO reports.

To ensure analytical depth, three classical dance forms- Bharatnatyam, Kathak and Manipuri are selected based on geographical diversity and climatic variation. The analysis is conducted through:

- Textual analysis of classical and scholarly sources
- Comparative analysis across selected dance forms
- Spatial interpretation of regional distribution
- Interpretative analysis using the culture-climate-history framework

Key analytical dimensions include movement vocabulary, costume design, performance context and thematic content. While limited by reliance on secondary data, the study provides a structured conceptual analysis of environment-culture interactions in dance.

Literature Review

As a form of expression, dance embodies the spirit and cultural heritage of various regions worldwide. Traditional dances, rooted in specific geographical locations, reflect the customs, beliefs and history of local communities. Through graceful movements and dynamic choreography, dance transports audiences to distant lands, fostering understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures. Because geography shapes the cultural, environmental, historical and social conditions in which dance forms evolve, it plays a key role in forming and evolving dance forms. We can better appreciate the diversity and depth of dance cultures around the world by comprehending how geography affects dance (Baker et al., 2022).

The study of Indian classical dance has been examined through cultural, historical and performance-based perspectives. Scholars such as Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) and Connerton (1989) explain that cultural memory is preserved through embodied practices, while Taylor (2003) highlights performance as a “living archive” of knowledge. These theories establish dance as a medium for carrying forward traditions across generations. Historical texts such as the *Natya Shastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* provide foundational frameworks for aesthetics, *rasa* and *abhinaya*. Literary works like

Gita Govinda further contributed to the thematic and devotional dimensions of dance traditions.

Scholars such as (Chakravorty, 2008; Zarrilli, 2003) highlighted the role of institutional patronage, including temples, courts and religious institutions, in shaping forms like Kathak, Kathakali and Sattriya. These studies show that dance evolved through changing socio-political contexts and systems of patronage.

Anderson (2021) in his book claims that cultural geography investigates the points where context and culture converge. It poses the question of why specific cultural practices occur in specific settings. It is interested in investigating how cultural environments and behaviours interact, impact and possibly even come to be associated with one another.

UNESCO (2003) recognises dance as intangible cultural heritage, emphasising its role in preserving community identity, rituals and knowledge systems. Documentation of forms like Chhau and Manipuri Sankirtana reflects the integration of ecology, ritual and performance.

The theory of cultural ecology (Steward, 1973) suggests that environmental factors influence cultural practices, including dance themes, gestures and symbolism. Climate (Beck et al., 2018) provide scientific context to understand how regional climates may affect costumes, movement styles and performance conditions.

Additionally, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) discusses how modernisation and commercialisation impact intangible heritage, leading to transformation and sometimes loss of traditional context in dance practices.

Anne-Marie Gaston's book, *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre* (Gaston, 1996) is a comprehensive account of Bharata Natyam as a dance form that travelled from the temples of South India (Tamil Nadu in particular) to the foreground space of the theatre; "the evolution of Bharata Natyam from a

mysterious temple ritual to an artistic presentation performed in theatres.” She contextualises this “evolution” in the “changes in the social background of dancers and teachers” of Bharata Natyam. By describing traditional and modern performances and choreography, she traces changes in the repertoire and presentation that have taken place during the post-revival era. During its transition from performance in temples and courts to the concert stage, the making of modern Bharata Natyam has passed from the purview of traditional/hereditary families and dancers into the hands of the educated elite.

However, existing literature largely focuses on cultural, historical and institutional aspects, with limited interdisciplinary integration of climate and ecology, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and systematic research.

Theoretical Framework - Culture, History and Climate Nexus

The interdependence of climatic conditions, cultural activities and historical processes is explained by the Culture-Climate-History Nexus, an interdisciplinary paradigm under Cultural Geography and Climatic Humanities. It sees culture as a dynamic, adaptable system that has been formed by climate and passed down through time. Livelihoods, patterns of habitation and artistic expressions are all greatly influenced by climate. Cultural ecology theory emphasizes how cultures change in reaction to environmental limitations (Steward, 1973). Climate has an impact on both material and performative cultural forms in India. Ecological aspects and seasonal cycles are reflected in traditional dances like Kathak and Bharatanatyam. These dances frequently use gestures and stories to represent rain, plants, animals, and landscapes. Ritual performances linked to monsoons and agricultural cycles further demonstrate climate-culture connections. Culture also acts as a repository of ecological knowledge preserved through symbols, rituals and traditions. According to Geertz (1973), culture is a system of meanings expressed through symbolic forms.

In classical dance, ecological knowledge is embodied in gestures and storytelling traditions.

Many of these performative expressions are codified in the Natya Shastra. The importance of traditional knowledge in environmental sustainability is emphasized by academics such as Ramachandra Guha (Guha, 2000). Cultural and ecological knowledge can be transmitted and transformed through history. Textual record, institutional patronage and oral traditions all contribute to continuity. For instance, under Mughal influence, Kathak changed from temple customs to palace performances. In a same vein, Bharatanatyam became a national cultural icon during the colonial and postwar eras(Wang, 2024). These modifications show how cultural expression is reshaped by history while remaining consistent. Thus, classical dances can be seen as cultural identity, historical memory and socio-ecological environmental knowledge. This connection emphasizes how crucial it is to incorporate cultural knowledge into sustainability and adaptation plans considering climate change.

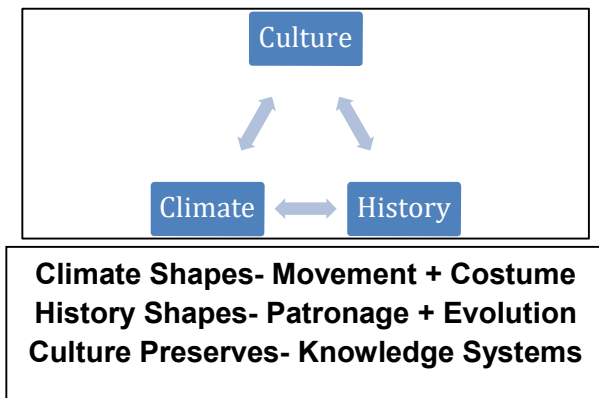


Figure 2. History, culture and climate nexus
 (Source: Guha, 2000; Steward, 1973)

Results and Discussion

Cultural and Historical Background

From the prehistoric era to the present, dancing has evolved. Temple sculptures, old manuscripts and cave paintings all contain the proof. For

instance, early human movement and artistic expression may be seen in the Bhimbetka rock shelters, suggesting that dance-like activities existed throughout prehistoric times. In contrast, human figures, weaponry, hunting scenes and group dances in rhythmic movement are depicted in the 30,000 year old paintings at the Bhimbetka caves, just like in Mesolithic paintings (Standage, 2018). Similar evidence of early artistic culture can be found at the Mohenjo-daro site in the Indus Valley though the interpretation of dance representation is still up for debate. Only the dancing girl's figure has been extracted from Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in the context of performing arts, indicating the existence of dancers in the society of that period. The Natya Shastra is one of the most important texts that describes the theory of dance and drama. The Shastra is somewhat connected to all the now-fragmented dance dramas and styles that are practised in both northern and southern India (Ambrose & Gopal, 1950). Other texts, such as Abhinaya Darpana and Geeta Govinda also contribute to the development of dance traditions.

Temples such as Brihadeshwara and Konark act as cultural centres where dance was practiced and preserved (Samson, 1987). The sculptural representation of dance poses (Karanas) in these temples reflects the connection between architecture and performance traditions. In the Chidambaram temple, wall carvings display all the 108 Karanas from the Natya Shastra by Bharata Muni and these postures from the foundation of Bharatnatyam. Temple had 1,000 pillars hall dedicated to Lord Shiva (Nagaswami, 1980).

Historical Influence on Dance

The evolution of Indian classical dances is greatly influenced by the historical context. Dance was mostly connected to religious rituals throughout the ancient era. Natya Shastra, which explains Rasa, Bhava and Abhinaya provides the theoretical foundation. Temple buildings like Konark and Brihadeshwara serve as archives of dance expertise. Dance forms like Kathak were influenced during the middle ages when the sponsorship of dance moved from temples to royal courts (Chakravorty, 2000). Large courtyards, extravagant domes, symbolic elements and detailed carvings are some of the main characteristics. Stepwells, temples, palaces and forts are a few notable buildings that

demonstrate the inventiveness of many eras' architecture(Karimbil, 2018). In Indian tradition, dance and architecture have a deep and complex relationship. Classical dances have always been performed in temples. These are frequently the hubs of social and cultural activity. These temples' elaborate halls (mandaps) and roomy grounds made them ideal venues for dance performances(Harle, 1994; Thapar, 2004).

Cultural Influence on Dance

A country's values, customs and social structure are shaped by its culture, which forms the basis of its identity. India is a prime example of unity in variety with its rich intangible cultural legacy, which includes traditional arts, rituals, paintings and literature. Communities use cultural spaces as gathering places to express and maintain their customs(Choudhary, 2025). The present study shows that culture is one of the most important factors that influences the development of Indian classical dance. Dance is not only a physical activity, but it is also a representation of beliefs, traditions and knowledge systems of society. The cultural practices are transferred from one generation to another through dance performance and a training system. Dance acts as a medium of preserving cultural memory. According to performance theory, the embodied practices, such as gesture, movement and expressions, help in storing knowledge in the human body rather than in written form (Connerton, 1989; Taylor, 2003). This indicates that dance forms work as a “living archive” of culture where traditions are maintained through continuous practice.

In India, dance forms also serve as “living archives” by embedding ecological wisdom and cultural history into their structure, from rhythmic footwork to ritualistic costumes. These traditions act as a repository of traditional knowledge that bridges the gap between ancestral wisdom and contemporary life (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995; Taylor, 2003). For example, Bharatanatyam, which originated in Tamil Nadu, is strongly connected with temple traditions and devotional practices. The themes of Bharatanatyam mainly include stories from Hindu mythology, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. Similarly, the Kathak dance form, which developed in North

India, shows the cultural influence of both Hindu temple storytelling and Mughal court traditions (Chakravorty, 2000).

Dance forms across India also function as repositories of ecological observation. There is also an elemental representation where Bharatanatyam represent natural elements, showing ecological understanding embedded in performance traditions (Steward, 1973). In Kathak, rhythmic bols such as “*jhan-jhan*” represent flowing water and pargana compositions include sounds of nature, showing how environmental sounds are integrated into performance. In Manipuri dance, soft movements reflect a non-aggressive relationship with the earth, aligning with ecological sensitivity in embodied practices.

Showing how dance acts as a medium of social memory (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995). Agricultural dances reflect seasonal cycles and environmental rhythms. Material culture is preserved through costumes such as handloom silk and bamboo elements, while spiritual continuity is maintained through temple-based dance traditions like Manipuri and Bharatanatyam. However, there are some challenges in the cultural preservation of dance. Due to urbanisation and commercialisation, traditional forms are changing and sometimes losing their original context (Kirshenblatt-gimblett, 2004).

Historical and Cultural Influence across South Asia

The Natya Shastra profoundly shaped Southeast Asian performing arts through Hindu-Buddhist cultural diffusion via trade routes, missionaries and empires from the 1st to 13th centuries CE, embedding its core principles of *Rasa* (aesthetic emotion), *Bhava* (expressive states), *Mudras* (hand gestures) and stylized movement into local traditions (Krishnanandayani, 2023).

Table 1. Specific Impact on Southeast Asia

Country	Performing Art Forms	Natya-Shastra Influences
Cambodia	Apsara dance (Royal Ballet), Lakhon Bassac	Mudras and abhinaya (facial expression) from devadasi traditions;

		Angkor reliefs depict tandava poses; rasa in Reamker (Ramayana adaptation) (Muni, n.d.)
Indonesia	Legong (Bali), Bedhaya (Java), Wayang wong/ Kulit	Nritya (pure dance) rhythms and lasya grace; Sendratari Ramayan ballets, Javanese texts cite rasa for shadow puppetry ethics (Krishnanandayani, 2023)
Thailand	Khon, Lakhon Na Bat	Masked Ramakien enactments use codified gestures; half-sitting postures and eye techniques mirror drishti (gaze) rules (Muni, n.d.)
Malaysia	Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit Siam	Rasa in trance rituals; epic storytelling with bhava transitions; silat martial elements blend with natya combat sequences (Krishnanandayani, 2023)
Vietnam	Mua Roi Nuoc (water puppetry), Roi Nuoc	Cham-influenced court dances incorporate hasta mudras, and narrative rasa evokes folklore emotions (Krishnanandayani, 2023)

(Source: Krishnanandayani, 2023; Muni, n.d.)

Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies, deities and epics (particularly the Rāmāyaṇa and to a lesser extent the Mahābhārata) expanded across mainland and island Southeast Asia between around 100 and 1000 CE. This happened through commerce, priests and royal patronage. Indian temple aesthetics and iconography, particularly the devadāsī-style sacred female dancer or apsara were assimilated in Angkorian Cambodia, Champa and subsequently in Thai and Burmese kingdoms, transforming local performance into court-ritual dance (Mishra, 2021). Bharatanatyam and Kathak are examples of Indian classical dances that often re-stage scenes from the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata as nritya–nritya–abhinaya packages. These packages include pure

rhythm, artistic form and emotive acting. Thai Khon, Khmer Apsara dances, Javanese and Balinese wayang wong, and other Southeast Asian styles tell the same stories through masked or stylised dance-drama, employing local music and drama while keeping the same mythic core (Chotrani, 2018; Mehak, 2026; Vietnam, 2018).

Climatic and Ecological Influence

The present study shows that climate and ecological conditions have an important role in shaping dance forms. In Tamil Nadu, Bharatanatyam costume is comparatively lighter and allows flexibility in movement.

Table 2. Climatic Distribution of Dances

Dance Form	State/Region	Key Geographical Features
Bharatnatyam	Tamil Nadu	Fertile plain, Temple cities like Chidambaram
Kathak	Northern Plain	Gangetic plains, Mughal courts
Manipuri	Manipur	Northeastern hills, valleys and lakes

(Source: Pant, 2026b, 2026a)

Movement is slow in Manipur because of the constant rainfall and humidity. Kathak, on the other hand, demonstrates dynamic footwork appropriate for public performance venues. Climate also affects how much energy is used and how the body moves. Dancers in humid areas regulate their intensity to prevent fatigue, while those in temperate climates engage in more strenuous

movements, demonstrating an adaptive interaction between the body and environment (Beck et al., 2018).



Figure 3. India's Physiographic Divisions and Origin of Dances
(Source: Created by Author using ArcMap 10.5)

Influence of Ecology on Themes: Ecological elements such as rivers, forests and animals are reflected in dance themes.

Table 3. Climatic Influence on Dances

Dances	Regional features	Appearance and movements
Tamil Nadu (Bharatnatyam)	Tropical climate + Temple Architecture	A lighter costume allows flexibility in movement.
Manipur (Manipuri)	Humid and high rainfall	Soft movements in Dance

Northern Plains (Kathak)	Fertile plains	Energetic footwork suited for open spaces performance.
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(Source: Banerji, 1986; Lilabati Devi, 2014; Vatsyayan, 1968)

Seasonal and Ritual Influence: Dance performances are often linked with seasons and festivals. Many dance traditions are performed during the monsoon and harvest seasons, showing a connection with agricultural cycles and environmental rhythms. This aligns with UNESCO’s category of “knowledge concerning nature and universe” within intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

Conclusion

The present study is based on the analysis of Indian classical dances in Vishal Bharat. The results shows that dance forms are shaped by cultural traditions, historical patronage and environmental conditions. Dance acts as a living archive that preserves cultural and ecological knowledge (Taylor, 2003). The study also shows that climate has an indirect influence on dance through costumes, themes and performance conditions. In the future, more detailed studies are required to understand the relationship between climate and dance in a scientific manner. This study highlights that classical dance traditions of India are integral to understanding the interplay between culture, climate and history within the framework of Vishal Bharat. Rooted in the Indian knowledge system, these dances function as living archives of ecological wisdom and cultural continuity.

Recognizing their value can contribute to:

- Sustainable cultural policies
- Climate-sensitive development
- Preservation of intangible heritage

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