



# Re-Evaluating Bharatanatyam Through The Visual Perspective Of Cinematography: An Analysis Of Tamil Film Jeans.

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## Abstract

The concept of aesthetic language in cinematography is examined in this research article through a qualitative study of the 1998 Tamil film *Jeans*, with special attention to the "*Kannodu Kaanbadhellam*" classical dance sequence. The term "aesthetic language of cinematography" describes the symbolic and visual techniques used by filmmakers to evoke meaning, emotion, and cultural resonance through movement, colour, lighting, framing, and mise-en-scène. The movie *Jeans* uses Bharatanatyam as a cinematic tool to portray idealized Indian femininity, divine beauty, and cultural identity in addition to being a dance performance. Bharatanatyam's standardized gestures, facial expressions, and mythological references are incorporated into high-end digital images to produce a hybrid aesthetic that is influenced by contemporary technology but has its roots in tradition. In order, to examine how traditional Indian aesthetics are integrated into the language of film, the research paper makes use of digital humanities tools like visual annotation and metadata tagging. The analysis demonstrates how dance turns into a visual and narrative metaphor by drawing on frameworks from Indian aesthetic theory, such as rasa and bhava, it also includes feminist film theory and performance studies. The study makes a point that *Jeans'* cinematographic depiction of Bharatanatyam creates an aesthetic spectacle highlighting the changing conversation between tradition and technology in Indian popular culture. It also preserves cultural symbols and commercializes them for a worldwide audience.

**Keywords:** Bharatanatyam, Tamil film, Cinematography, Classical dance, Femininity, Indian Aesthetics, Cultural Identity, Digital humanities, *Jeans*

## Introduction

One of the most traditional and structured types of Indian classical dance is Bharatanatyam. It began in Tamil Nadu temples and developed over centuries as a cultural performance and a spiritual sacrifice. Bharatanatyam moved from temple courtyards to auditoriums and eventually to movie screens with the introduction of contemporary media. Classical dance has long been used as a visual and narrative device in Tamil cinema, in particular. The 1998 film *Jeans*, directed by S. Shankar, who is renowned for his ostentatious imagery and narratives fueled by technology, offers a hybrid depiction of Bharatanatyam that combines spectacle and tradition.

The film's famous scene, "*Kannodu Kanbathellam*," which was choreographed by Raju Sundaram and starred Aishwarya Rai, is a notable example of how camera movement, editing, and special effects are used to reimagine classical dance. The present research article explores the ways in which these cinematic techniques impact Bharatanatyam's authenticity, beauty, and audience perception. It makes the case that this portrayal represents a change in the way that classical dance is seen through the prism of contemporary film, acting as both a means of cultural preservation and a form of commercialization.

## Literature Review

Reviewing the previous literature is an important aspect of research. The following are the literature pieces related to the research. In Indian visual culture, the relationship between classical dance and film has emerged as a crucial topic for interdisciplinary study, particularly in the domains of performance studies, media studies, and cultural studies. With its adaptation in popular media, especially Tamil cinema, Bharatanatyam, a traditional Indian dance style with roots in temple rites and the Devadasi tradition, has experienced a number of changes. According to scholars like Janet O'Shea (2007) and Avanthi Meduri (1996), Bharatanatyam was once connected to places of worship, but during the 20th-century revival, it was reframed by modernist and nationalist goals. Through cinematic reinterpretations, these recontextualizations persist into the twenty-first century.

Dance in Indian cinema is a subject of academic inquiry regarding cultural, narrative, and aesthetic significance. Rachel Dwyer perceived dance sequences in films are not mere entertainment but as cultural markers that connect tradition and modernity. Cinema an aesthetic apparatus such as camera movement, shot composition, editing rhythms, visual effects, lighting schemes, and mise-en-scene. Prasad's ideology of the Hindi film is a key text in Indian film studies that analyse the historical function of ideological negotiation and social discourse in the era after Independence. This book explores how cinematic conventions narrative structure and genre formations in Hindi cinema. Indicate and replicate an occasionally contend dominant ideology specifically those involving modernity, nationalism, statehood and gender. Through the visual language of movement and costume, dance is commonly used in Tamil films to create cultural identity, particularly feminine identity (Prasad, 1998). In film, Bharatanatyam is frequently stylized, hybridized, and reframed in fanciful or digital contexts that push its traditional limits.

One notable example of how Bharatanatyam is reframed through high-production cinematographic techniques is the 1998 Tamil film *Jeans*, which was directed by S. Shankar. The movie combines innovative choreography, elaborate set design, computer-generated imagery, and classical dance. According to academics like Sundar Kaali (2005), Bharatanatyam in *Jeans* serves as both a spectacle and a narrative device, especially during the famous "*Kannodu Kaanbadhellam*" scene. Bharatanatyam can operate outside of its conventional narrative and ritualistic frameworks thanks to the beautiful cinematography in these scenes, which include slow motion, aerial shots, digital transitions, and exotic backgrounds. The dance is frequently placed in a global or virtual context by the visual construction, which distances it from its religious or cultural roots.

P. Kirshnamurthy (2012) and Susan Leigh Foster (2003) are two theorists who have studied how dance on screen alters kinesthetic expression and bodily presence. They contend that viewers' perceptions of conventional movement vocabularies are altered by the film medium. The viewer's experience of Bharatanatyam is transformed from one of ritual appreciation to visual consumption in *Jeans*, as the framing and editing produce a cinematic rhythm that superimposes the *nritta* (pure dance) elements with a cinematic temporality.

Additionally, Indian dance in movies frequently functions as a location of fantasy and nationalist imagination, according to film scholar Lalitha Gopalan (2002). *Jeans* reinforces both cultural heritage and futuristic spectacle by positioning Bharatanatyam as both an art form and a flexible cinematic element within this framework. This dual role highlights the movie's larger thematic exploration of Indianness, technology, and global identity. While a lot of research has been done on dance in Indian cinema, not as much has been done on how cinematography artistically reimagines traditional forms such as Bharatanatyam. By using a formalist and cultural perspective to analyse *Jeans*, this paper aims to close that gap. It makes the case that the film is a prime example of how the artistic decisions made in cinematography—framing, spatial

dynamics, colour grading, and visual rhythm—help to dissect and reinterpret Bharatanatyam in ways that are both novel and contentious.

## Research Design

The qualitative research approach used in this study has its roots in performance analysis, cultural theory, and film studies. S. Shankar's 1998 Tamil film *Jeans* serves as the main source, with supplementary information drawn from academic works on dance in movies, film reviews, and interviews. In order to analyse the cinematographic techniques used to depict Bharatanatyam, the study is organized around an intensive reading of the dance sequences, particularly the "*Kannodu Kaanbadhellam*" performance.

Film studies, performance theory, and cultural studies are some of the interdisciplinary tools used in this qualitative study. The Tamil movie *Jeans* serves as the main source of analysis, with special attention paid to the well-known dance scene "*Kannodu Kaanbadhellam*." Critical evaluations, scholarly works on Indian cinema and Bharatanatyam, and theoretical books on visual culture and performance are examples of secondary sources. With an emphasis on essential components like mise-en-scène, choreography, costumes, lighting, camera movement, editing, and digital effects, and the analysis is organized thematically. The function of each of these elements in redefining Bharatanatyam in the context of film is investigated.

## Problem Statement

Popular Tamil cinema usually portrays Bharatanatyam in ways that deviate from its traditional narrative and performative context, despite the fact that it is deeply embedded in Indian classical and cultural traditions. Instead of being presented as a lived or sacred art form, Bharatanatyam is presented in films like *Jeans* as a stylized and digitalized spectacle for cinematic consumption. The problem is that by repackaging dance in ways that undermine its cultural and spiritual authenticity, these cinematic depictions have the power to alter viewers' perceptions of the art form. Furthermore, by aestheticizing the female dancer under a patriarchal visual regime and perpetuating gendered stereotypes, these representations usually aid in the commodification of classical heritage.

## Research Gap

Although Bharatanatyam has been examined in the contexts of gender and performance, there is a dearth of thorough research that examines:

1. The way that Bharatanatyam, cinematography, and aesthetic language are all combined in Tamil cinema.
2. How digital humanities tools can be used to analyse how classical arts are portrayed and adapted in movies.
3. How gender representation and cultural authenticity are affected by the visual stylization and digitization of Bharatanatyam.
4. The lack of in-depth case studies on Tamil commercial films like *Jeans* that blend traditional aesthetics with global appeal.

## Aesthetic Language in Cinematography

Cinematographers use lighting, colour schemes, camera movement, composition, and symbolic imagery as visual grammar to convey meaning. This is known as aesthetic language in cinematography. In Indian cinema, dance sequences frequently serve as the main attraction. An example of this is the song "*Kannodu Kaanbadhellam*" from *Jeans*, which uses Bharatanatyam as a semiotic system in addition to a performance. The female lead, played by Aishwarya Rai, performs Bharatanatyam on ornate sets that resemble temples and mythological heavens, intercut with digital effects and cinematic framing.

# Bharatanatyam and Film Adaptation

Bharatanatyam is based on Tamil Nadu temple traditions and is characterized by natya (drama), rasas (emotions), and mudras (hand gestures). This grammar is used in *Jeans*' choreography, but it is modified for the film's visual appeal. The stylized movements are timed to slow motion, camera panning, and fast cuts, bringing classical dance into line with the visual spectacle of film. Although visually striking, this adaptation calls into question commodification and authenticity.

## Feminine Aesthetic and the Male Gaze

The male gaze and the feminine aesthetic are reflected in *Jeans*' depiction of Bharatanatyam, which idealizes the feminine divine. By using gestures and costumes that evoke *Meenakshi*, *Radha*, and *Lakshmi*. *Aishwarya Rai* is depicted as a goddess-like figure. Laura Mulvey's idea of the "male gaze," in which the female body is ornamented for aesthetic reasons, is consistent with this presentation. Here, Bharatanatyam serves as a vehicle for objectification as well as a declaration of cultural purity.

## Research Aim

The purpose of this research is to examine how the Tamil film *Jeans* (1998) uses the aesthetic language of cinematography to visually reimagine and represent Bharatanatyam, a traditional Indian dance, and how this cinematic reinterpretation helps to preserve and transform traditional dance in modern media.

## Research Objectives

1. To examine the visual framing, costume, choreography, and mise-en-scène of *Jeans*' artistic representation of Bharatanatyam.
2. To determine the cinematic methods that take Bharatanatyam beyond the realm of conventional stage performances.
3. To look at how *Jeans* uses its narrative and visual language to place Bharatanatyam in a globalized setting.
4. To look into how editing and technology can be used to mediate classical dance for a large audience.
5. To examine how the movie balances pop culture modernity with classical heritage.

## Research Methodology

This qualitative study uses an interdisciplinary approach that blends cultural studies, dance theory, and film analysis. By analyzing camera angles, shot composition, mise-en-scène, costume, and post-production techniques, it focuses on the visual grammar of Bharatanatyam as it is depicted in *Jeans*. The main analytical framework incorporates ideas from Foucauldian discourse analysis, Mulvey's feminist film theory, and dance semiotics.

The song sequence "*Kannodu Kanbathellam*," which acts as the main analytical unit, is the main subject of the analysis. The study examines how cinematic tools edit, fragment, or magnify Bharatanatyam's codified expressions through a close reading of this sequence. For a comparative contextual foundation, earlier Tamil films such as *Thillana Mohanambal* and *Salangai Oli* are also cited.

**Digital Humanities Tools:** This study uses digital humanities methods to analyse the sequence:

**Video Annotation:** Using tools like ELAN to tag mudras, facial expressions, and transitions.

**Metadata Tagging:** Classifying visual motifs (e.g., temple architecture, divine symbols) for thematic mapping.

**Comparative Visual Analysis:** Comparing *Jeans* with classical dance recordings to examine stylization. These methods allow for a layered reading that combines visual aesthetics with cultural interpretation.

## Analysis

Recomposition of the Classical Body Visually because the dancer's body is viewed frontally in traditional Bharatanatyam, the audience can read the adavus (basic steps), abhinaya (facial expressions), and mudras (hand gestures) holistically. But in *Jeans*, the camera regularly zooms, tilts, pans, and frames the dancer from unusual perspectives, breaking down and reassembling the traditional body. In addition to making the form more aesthetically pleasing, this visual fragmentation removes it from its original context.

While jump cuts and digital effects add a rhythm that is foreign to Bharatanatyam's laya (temporal framework), slow-motion scenes exaggerate particular gestures, limiting the expressive potential of the hands or eyes. Through editing, the performance is changed from a devotional or narrative dance piece to a collage of impressions that resembles a music video. The dance's natural flow and temporal integrity are jeopardized.

**Spiritual Experience vs. Cinematic Extravaganza** The song sequence is set against lavish backgrounds, complemented by computer-generated imagery featuring mythological allusions, temple architecture, and cosmic symbols. Although these components seek to evoke the sacredness of Bharatanatyam, they also aid in its commercialization. Wearing ostentatious costumes, *Aishwarya Rai* executes stylized and accelerated Bharatanatyam-inspired movements that are intended more for visual spectacle than for conventional storytelling.

Important questions are brought up by this recontextualization: Is it possible for spiritual art forms to endure when transformed into a cinematic spectacle? Is Bharatanatyam being experienced by the audience, or is it a cinematic fantasy based on its imagery? Does the dance form's film adaptation liberate or constrain it?

**Translation of Culture and Aesthetics Worldwide** India's official Oscar entry, *Jeans*, was designed to appeal to a worldwide audience. Thus, the dance routine turns into a cultural export, with Bharatanatyam acting as an exotic component as well as an identity marker. De-emphasizing the performance's cultural specificity and emphasizing its visual and performative appeal makes it acceptable to audiences around the world. However, this worldwide style runs the risk of simplifying Bharatanatyam's intricacy. In favour of an internationalized, consumable visual code, its roots in bhakti (devotion), rasa (aesthetic flavour), and Natya (drama) are minimized. As a result, the movie contributes to a broader discussion about cultural globalization and how traditional art forms are modified to fit the needs of the market.

**Cultural Memory and Technological Mediation** the dance in *Jeans* symbolizes a change in the way that cultural memory is experienced and preserved. Bharatanatyam is reconstituted as an audio-visual archive in place of direct pedagogy and oral transmission. It is maintained by repeated viewing, editing, and remastering rather than by practice. In an era of technological reproduction, this calls into question the stability and malleability of tradition. Furthermore, in this mediated form, the director's and choreographer's roles become crucial. The camera, not the dancer, is in charge of the gaze. The filmmaker now has more control over how Bharatanatyam is viewed than the performer did. The Foucauldian change in power relations from embodied knowledge to mediated representation is best illustrated by this transition

## Discussion

According to the study, *Jeans* plays a role in both the aesthetic and cultural transformation of Bharatanatyam in addition to increasing its visibility. The dance is now a modular aesthetic component in a broader visual narrative rather than a devotional ritualistic performance. This creates new opportunities for creativity, but it also brings up issues of context, authenticity, and cultural deterioration.

According to the analysis, the film democratizes classical dance and makes it available to a wider audience, but it also lessens the form's cultural significance and ritualistic purpose. In the digital age, this tension is essential to Bharatanatyam's modern identity. Furthermore, the way that spirituality and spectacle interact shows how popular film can both honour and reimagine traditional art.

Even though *Jeans* is primarily known as a commercial romantic drama, it is one of Tamil cinema's most visually ambitious depictions of Bharatanatyam. Aishwarya Rai performs Bharatanatyam in *Jeans* in the song "*Kannodu Kaanbadhellam*," which features a surreal setting with mirror images and dramatic lighting. Instead of just filming the dance, the camera moves in time with the movements circles the dancer and provides close-ups that highlight facial expressions and mudras. The conventional audience-dancer dynamic is changed by this cinematic intervention, which produces an emotionally compelling and approachable visual spectacle. Although the colour scheme, makeup, and jewellery are exaggerated for the screen, the dance costume is based on traditional Bharatanatyam clothing, creating a familiar yet fantastical visual. The use of computer-generated imagery and editing effects, which place the dance in a mythic, hyperreal setting, intensifies this stylization even more.

These depictions balance commodification and preservation. On the one hand, the movie introduces Bharatanatyam to a large audience, which might encourage people to take an interest in the classical arts. However, the dance form is reduced to an aesthetic motif in a romantic story, abstracted from its religious and cultural context. Nonetheless, another way to interpret this recontextualization is as a type of cultural hybridity. Bharatanatyam is transformed into a fluid, dynamic, and modern-responsive symbol of Indian identity in *Jeans*' globalized cinematic language. It presents a dynamic, modernized vision of tradition.

## Conclusion

As a result, an important turning point in the film's depiction of Bharatanatyam is *Jeans*. Bharatanatyam is redefined, reimagined, and recontextualized through the artistic prism of cinematography. According to this study, these kinds of cinematic interactions present both opportunities for cultural revitalization and preservation challenges. The way that artists, filmmakers, and viewers strike a balance between tradition and innovation will determine how classical forms develop as they continue to converge with contemporary media. The aim and objective of the research accomplished the purpose of the present research. Because of its ability to reach large audiences, the cinematic medium has the potential to both democratize and skew traditional art forms. The onus rests on deliberate creative decisions that embrace the potential for aesthetic growth while upholding the integrity of the form. We are prompted to consider our responsibilities as cultural consumers, curators, and interpreters as we reinterpret Bharatanatyam through the lens of film.

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