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CONFERENCE PAPER

SACRED SOUND AND THE STAGE: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ECOLOGY OF MUSIC IN BHARATA NATYAM

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Abstract

Bharata Natyam, one of India's foremost classical dance traditions, is intrinsically inseparable from its musical foundation. The vadyavrinde (orchestra), comprising the nattuvanar, vocalist, mridangist, violinist, and other accompanists, forms the structural and aesthetic core of performance. However, the role of music in Bharata Natyam has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a sacred, patronage-based system within temple and court traditions to a contemporary, market-driven performance economy. This paper examines the historical and economic evolution of music in Bharata Natyam, with particular focus on the shifting dynamics between dancers and musicians. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted in Mumbai and Chennai between 2024 and 2026, as well as published scholarship and practitioner discourse, the study analyses how the financial burden of performance production has increasingly shifted to the dancer. At the same time, musicians operate within a demand-driven professional framework shaped by scarcity, geography, and reputation. The paper argues that live music remains indispensable to the creative and improvisational potential of Bharata Natyam, despite its rising costs. By situating musical accompaniment within broader discussions of cultural economy and sustainability, this study highlights the need for new support systems that balance artistic integrity with economic viability.

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Introduction:-

Bharata Natyam is widely regarded as a visual embodiment of music, wherein movement becomes a corporeal translation of rāga, tāla, and sāhitya. Rooted in the conceptual framework of gīta, vādyā, and nr̥tya as articulated in the Nāṭyaśāstra, the form exemplifies the inseparable unity of music and dance. Historically situated within temple ecosystems, Bharata Natyam (formerly Sadir) functioned as a ritual offering sustained by systems of patronage. However, the transition of the form from temple to proscenium stage in the twentieth century led to a fundamental restructuring of its socio-economic framework.

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The decline of institutional patronage necessitated the emergence of a new performance economy, wherein the dancer assumed the roles of performer, organizer, and financial patron (O'Shea). The present study investigates this transformation through the lens of musical accompaniment, with particular emphasis on the economic implications of engaging the vadyavrinḍa. The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in Mumbai and Chennai between 2024 and 2026, including practitioner interviews and performance observations.

Music and Dance in the Temple Ecosystem:-

The origins of Bharata Natyam lie in the sacred precincts of Tamil Nadu's temples, where performance was embedded within ritual practice. The devadasi tradition positioned dance and music as forms of upāsana, supported by temple authorities and royal patronage. The distinction between Periya Melam and Chinna Melam reflects the structured integration of music within this ecosystem. While the former accompanied temple processions with instruments such as nādasvaram and tavil, the latter provided intimate accompaniment for dance performances within temple interiors. Musicians were not external hires but integral members of a sustained cultural system. This patronage-based model ensured economic stability and artistic continuity, enabling rigorous training and intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

The Shift to the Proscenium Stage:-

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the decline of the devadasi system due to colonial and social reform movements. The subsequent revival of Bharata Natyam, led by figures such as Rukmini Devi Arundale, repositioned the art form within a modern, secular framework. The transition from temple to stage resulted in a process of decontextualization. Performance shifted from ritual offering to aesthetic presentation before a seated audience. The spatial, functional, and economic relationships between dancer and musician were consequently redefined. Music, once embedded within ritual structures, became a professionalized component of staged performance, subject to new economic and logistical considerations.

Performance Economy in Contemporary Bharata Natyam:-

The dismantling of traditional patronage systems placed the financial responsibility for performance production upon the dancer or the student's family. Bharata Natyam practitioners, particularly in urban centers, now operate within a privatized economy where all aspects of production must be self-funded.

This includes:

- Musician remuneration
- Venue and production costs
- Costumes and aesthetics
- Rehearsal logistics



The economic burden is particularly evident in the engagement of the vadyavrinda, whose fees constitute a significant portion of total expenditure.

Table 1: Indicative Musician Remuneration for Bharata Natyam Performances (Mumbai Context)

Category	Minimum Fee (INR)	Maximum Fee (INR)	Typical Duration
Vocalist	8,000	25,000	30–90 minutes
Mridangam	8,000	25,000	30–90 minutes
Violin / Flute	6,000	15,000	Full performance
Full Orchestra (Standard)	40,000	1,25,000	2–2.5 hours
Arangetram Orchestra	50,000	1,50,000+	Multiple sessions

Source: Author’s fieldwork interviews and participant observation (2024–2026).

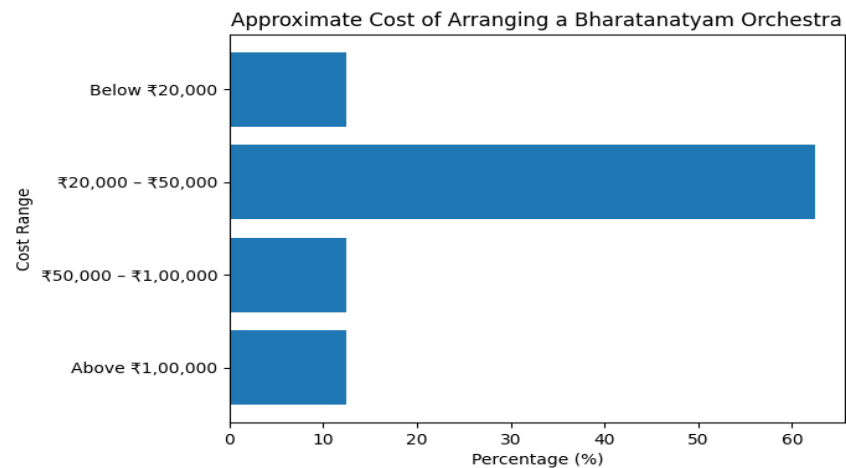


Fig.1: Approximate cost of arranging a Bharata Natyam orchestra.

While Table 1 presents the actual remuneration structure of musicians based on field observations, the survey data reflects cost estimates primarily reported by a middle-income practitioner group. This divergence indicates that perceived costs are shaped by the economic capacity, performance scale, and demographic context of respondents, thereby highlighting the need to interpret economic data within the framework of practitioner diversity in the Bharatanatyam ecosystem. At the same time, the data demonstrates a structured remuneration system influenced by artistic reputation, demand, and geographical factors, wherein musician-related expenses—particularly for arangetrams—can range from approximately ₹80,000 to ₹1,50,000 or more, significantly contributing to the overall escalation of production costs.As noted in contemporary media analysis, such performances have increasingly become financially intensive, often placing significant strain on families (Heble).

Musicians and Artistic Necessity:-

Despite their financial implications, musicians remain indispensable to the artistic integrity of Bharata Natyam. Live music facilitates improvisation, responsiveness, and dynamic interaction between dancer and accompanist. As noted

by Prasanna Kasthuri, an accomplished exponent of Bharata Natyam and Kathak and a celebrated performer known for a 24-hour uninterrupted dance marathon in 1986: “Live music can explore the unimaginable length of creativity... Musicians are not bane; they are expensive but very useful” (Kasthuri). This perspective underscores the essential role of musicians not merely as accompanists but as co-creators within the performance.

Geographical Factors and Economic Variation

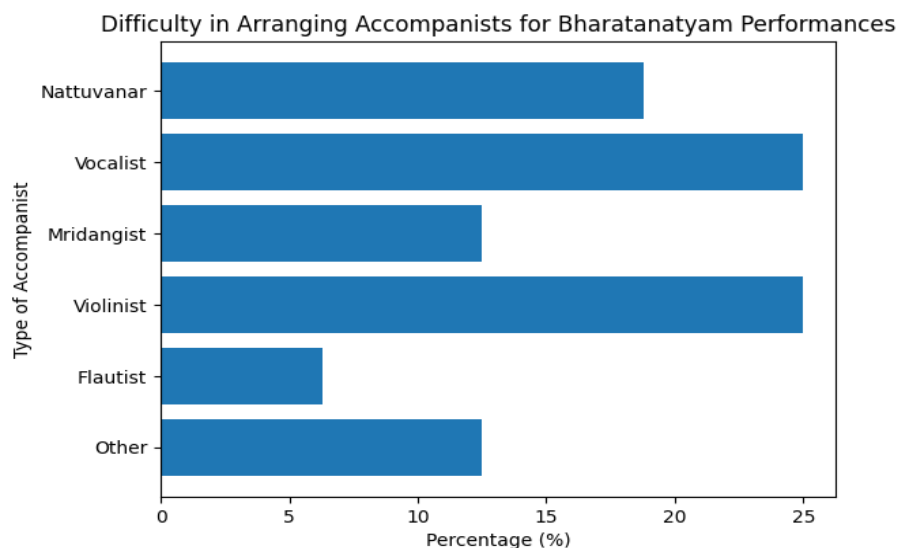


Fig. 2: Difficulty in Arranging accompaniments for the Bharata Natyam Performances.

The economics of Bharata Natyam are significantly influenced by geography. In Chennai, the abundance of trained musicians creates a competitive environment that moderates remuneration. According to Meera Srinivasan, even senior artists may receive modest compensation in large festivals (Srinivasan).

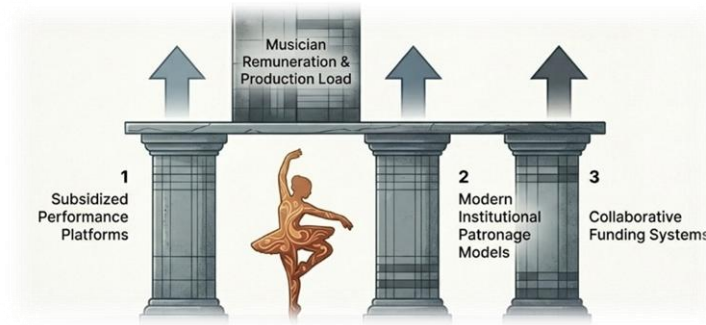
In contrast, cities such as Mumbai exhibit scarcity-driven dynamics. Limited availability of accompanists results in:

- Higher fees
- Advanced booking cycles
- Increased reliance on imported musicians

These disparities illustrate how cultural displacement affects both artistic practice and economic structures.

Live and Recorded Music in Bharata Natyam:-

The increasing use of recorded music reflects an economic response to rising costs. However, this shift has significant aesthetic implications. While recorded music offers logistical convenience and affordability, it limits improvisational flexibility and diminishes the interactive dimension of performance. Live music, by contrast, enables a dynamic exchange between dancer and musician, reinforcing its indispensability despite financial challenges.

Sustainability and Future Directions:-

The contemporary Bharata Natyam ecosystem reveals a reversal of traditional patronage structures. The dancer assumes financial responsibility, while musicians operate within a demand-driven professional framework.

This creates a tension between:

- Artistic authenticity (requiring live music)
- Economic sustainability (limiting its feasibility)

Addressing this tension requires institutional and structural interventions, including:

- Subsidized performance platforms
- Institutional patronage models
- Collaborative funding systems

Such measures are essential to ensure the long-term sustainability of the art form.

Conclusion:-

The evolution of music in Bharata Natyam reflects broader transformations within Indian classical arts. From temple-based patronage to contemporary market-driven systems, the art form has adapted to changing socio-economic realities. Music remains central to its identity, functioning as both an aesthetic and economic foundation. However, the current model places disproportionate financial responsibility on dancers, raising concerns about accessibility and sustainability. The future of Bharata Natyam depends on developing balanced frameworks that recognize the indispensable role of musicians while addressing the economic challenges faced by performers. Sustaining the art form requires not only preserving its aesthetic traditions but also reimagining its economic structures for contemporary contexts.

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