

The Concept of Aharya Abhinaya and Its Influence on Bharathnatyam

Kavitha Sanjay
Research scholar
Mangalyatan University

Dr Arkadev Bhattacharya
Orcid id-0009-0008-9392-7652

ABSTRACT

Aharya Abhinaya is one of the four modes of expression identified in Bharata's Natyashastra, together with Angika, Vachika and Sattvika Abhinaya. Although it is frequently reduced to costume and ornamentation, its classical scope includes make-up, bodily colouring, jewellery, garments, hairstyles, stage properties, scenic construction and the visual representation of human, divine and non-human characters. This paper examines the concept of Aharya Abhinaya and analyses its aesthetic, kinetic, narrative and cultural influence on Bharathnatyam. The study employs a qualitative and interpretative research design based on classical treatises and critical scholarship on Bharatanatyam's historical reconstruction, institutionalisation and global circulation. The analysis shows that costume pleats and borders clarify movement geometry, make-up increases expressive visibility, jewellery and hairstyles establish cultural identity, and stage properties support character recognition. It also demonstrates that the contemporary Bharathnatyam costume is not an entirely unchanged ancient form but the result of interactions among textual theory, regional material culture, twentieth-century revival, proscenium requirements and global performance conditions. Effective Aharya must therefore maintain character appropriateness, physical compatibility, perceptual clarity, cultural responsibility and thematic coherence.

Keywords: Aharya Abhinaya, Bharathnatyam, costume, ornamentation, make-up, visual aesthetics, characterisation, Indian classical dance.

Date of Submission: 16-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 29-09-2026

I. Introduction

Bharathnatyam, more commonly transliterated in academic literature as Bharatanatyam, is a composite performance tradition in which movement, rhythm, music, poetry, gesture, emotion and visual design operate together. Its expressive effectiveness cannot be understood solely through bodily technique or facial expression because the performing body is always framed by costume, make-up, jewellery, colour, lighting and stage space. These visual elements influence how the audience recognises characters, interprets situations and perceives the formal structure of movement.

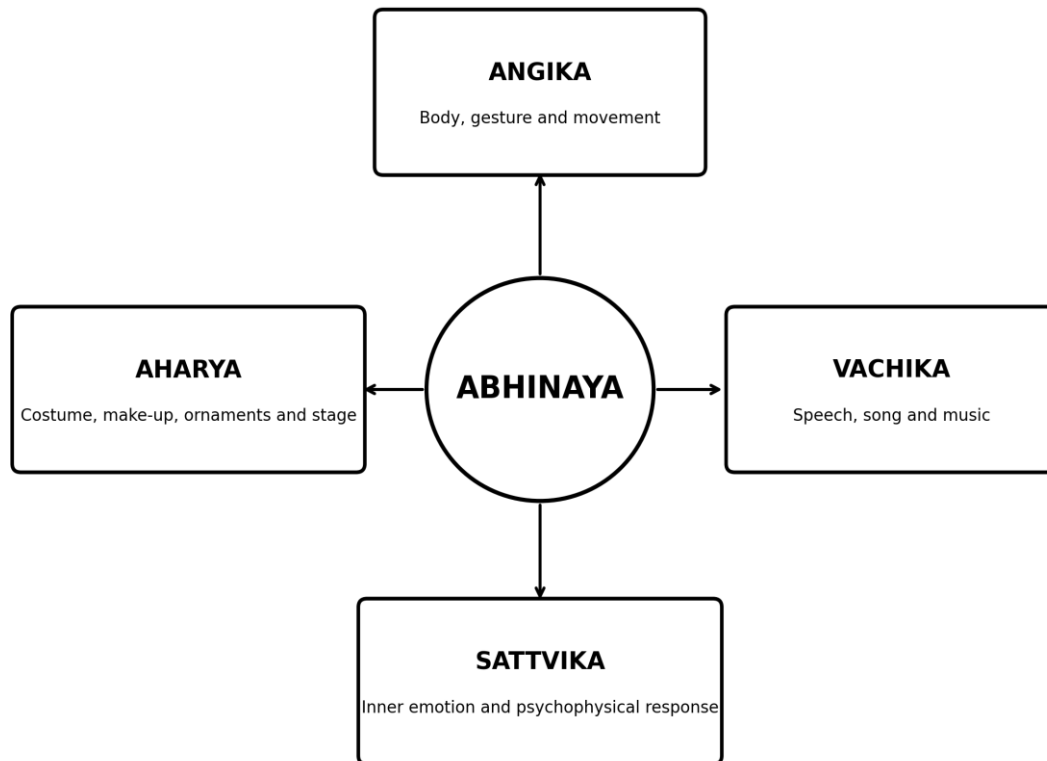
The concept of Abhinaya refers to the process through which meaning is carried or led towards the spectator. Classical Indian dramaturgy identifies four interdependent modes: Angika, expression through the body; Vachika, expression through speech, song and musical articulation; Aharya, expression through external and visual representation; and Sattvika, expression arising from internal psychological and emotional states. Aharya must therefore be understood as a constituent mode of communication rather than as an optional embellishment.

Bharata discusses Aharya Abhinaya as part of Nepathya Karma or backstage preparation. Its classical field includes Pustarachana, the construction of symbolic objects and stage properties; Alankarana, the use of clothing, jewellery and garlands; Angarachana, make-up and bodily colouring; and Sajiva, the visual representation or stage appearance of living beings. These categories demonstrate that Aharya extends beyond the dancer's costume to the total visible organisation of a performance.

In contemporary Bharathnatyam practice, however, Aharya is often discussed mainly in terms of silk costumes, colour combinations, temple jewellery and facial make-up. Such a limited approach overlooks the relationship between visual design and bodily execution. A costume may appear attractive while preventing the dancer from maintaining a secure araimandi. Heavy jewellery may disturb balance, and poorly designed pleats

may conceal the geometry of the lower body. Similarly, excessive lighting or projection may attract attention away from the performer's expressions.

The modern visual image of Bharathnatyam is also historically produced. The transformation of South Indian dance during the twentieth century involved the relocation of performances from hereditary, courtly and private contexts to cultural institutions and proscenium stages. This process influenced pedagogy, repertoire, public respectability and visual presentation. The present paper therefore examines how Aharya Abhinaya influences Bharathnatyam at interconnected aesthetic, kinetic, narrative, perceptual and cultural levels.



Meaning is communicated through the coordinated operation of all four modes.

Figure 1. The four interdependent modes of Abhinaya. Source: Author's conceptualisation based on classical performance theory.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Classical foundations

Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* provides the principal theoretical foundation for the study of Abhinaya, theatrical production, costume, make-up, ornaments, stage properties and character representation. The text treats performance as a coordinated artistic system in which the body, voice, psychological state and external appearance must support a unified dramatic intention.

The discussion of Aharya is particularly significant because it connects garments, ornaments, colours and hairstyles with character, social status, age, region and dramatic condition. The classical emphasis is not on splendour alone. Functional suitability is equally important, as excessive weight or inappropriate construction can produce fatigue and interfere with performance.

Nandikeshvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* provides a complementary framework. Although it concentrates primarily on bodily gestures, postures, glances and hand movements, it situates Aharya within the fourfold structure of expressive communication. Vatsyayan (1968), Bose (1991) and Mehta (1995) further demonstrate that dance, theatre, visual symbolism and bodily technique must be interpreted as parts of an integrated aesthetic system.

2.2 Historical studies of Bharathnatyam

Kothari's documentation of Bharatanatyam technique and recital practice provides an important account of the dance form's modern visual identity. Srinivasan (1985) examines the relationship between the social reform of the Devadasi institution and the revival of South Indian dance, showing that the rejection of hereditary performers occurred alongside the reorganisation of their artistic knowledge within elite cultural institutions.

Meduri (1988) questions the assumption that Bharatanatyam possesses a single, timeless identity. Allen (1997) similarly analyses the twentieth-century rewriting of South Indian dance through renaming, relocation, reconstruction and the entry of new social groups into the field. Gaston (1996), O'Shea (2007) and Soneji (2012) extend this discussion by examining theatricalisation, global circulation, cultural ownership and historical memory.

2.3 Contemporary studies and research gap

Meduri (2004) examines Bharatanatyam as a global dance form and identifies tensions among textual authority, institutional pedagogy, local practice and transnational circulation. Niyanthari (2023) traces changes in Bharatanatyam attire from regional and ethnic practices to global performance culture, while Niyanthri's doctoral research documents Aharya before and after the twentieth-century revival.

Existing studies have made important contributions to classical theory, revival history and costume transformation. Nevertheless, Aharya is still often treated as a descriptive catalogue of garments and ornaments. Less attention has been given to its simultaneous influence on bodily mechanics, visual perception, characterisation, emotional interpretation and stage technology. The present study addresses this gap by analysing Aharya as an integrated expressive system.

III. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the classical meaning and components of Aharya Abhinaya.
- To analyse the influence of costume, jewellery, make-up and hairstyling on Bharathnatyam.
- To investigate how Aharya contributes to movement visibility, characterisation and narrative communication.
- To study the relationship between Aharya, bhava and rasa.
- To trace the historical transformation of Bharathnatyam's visual presentation.
- To evaluate the opportunities and challenges created by contemporary stage technologies.

IV. Research Methodology

The research employs a qualitative, descriptive and interpretative design. It is a conceptual study based on textual and thematic analysis rather than an experimental investigation. Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* and Nandikeshvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* constitute the primary theoretical sources. Secondary sources include books, peer-reviewed articles and doctoral research concerning Indian performance theory, Bharathnatyam aesthetics, hereditary performance traditions, twentieth-century revival, costume history and globalisation.

The selected literature was examined through the themes of external representation, movement compatibility, expressive visibility, character communication, historical transformation, cultural identity and contemporary scenography. Classical texts are not treated as rigid costume manuals for present-day performers; instead, their principles are interpreted in relation to historically changing stage environments.

V. The Concept of Aharya Abhinaya

Aharya may be understood as the visible transformation through which a performer assumes a dramatic or representational identity. It assists the audience in distinguishing the performer as an individual from the character being represented. In classical theory, this transformation is achieved through four principal components.

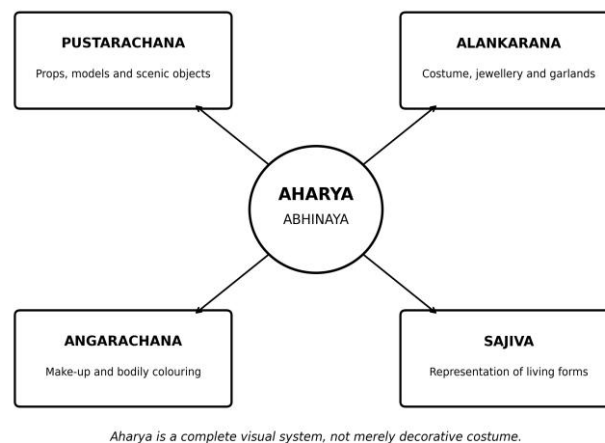


Figure 2. Principal components of Aharya Abhinaya. Source: Author's conceptualisation.

5.1 Pustarachana

Pustarachana refers to the creation of models, objects and material representations used in theatrical performance. Classical examples include mountains, vehicles, weapons, palaces, animals and other objects required by the dramatic narrative. Bharathnatyam solo recitals usually employ limited physical scenery because characters and locations can be suggested through gesture and movement. Nevertheless, properties remain important in dance dramas and thematic productions. A flute may signify Krishna, a bow may identify Rama, a trident may represent Shiva, and a lamp may create a ritual environment. The value of a property depends upon its necessity and physical manageability.

5.2 Alankarana

Alankarana includes garments, ornaments, garlands and decorative accessories. Classical theory requires external appearance to correspond with the role, region, age, emotional situation and social position of the character. In Bharathnatyam, Alankarana commonly includes the stitched or specially draped costume, front pleated fan, contrasting borders, waist belt, necklaces, arm ornaments, earrings, head jewellery, flowers and ankle bells. These elements form the most recognisable public image of the dance, but their effectiveness depends on coordination, scale and proportion.

5.3 Angarachana

Angarachana refers to make-up, bodily colouring and the visual modification of physical appearance. In contemporary Bharathnatyam, make-up increases the visibility of the eyes and eyebrows, clarifies the movement of the lips and facial muscles, and prevents facial features from becoming indistinct under stage lighting. Colour applied to the fingertips and feet may similarly highlight hand gestures and rhythmic footwork. Its purpose is perceptual amplification rather than cosmetic display.

5.4 Sajiva

Sajiva concerns the appearance or representation of living beings on stage. In Bharathnatyam, animals, birds, serpents, divine figures and mythical beings are generally represented through the dancer's body. A feather, crown, mask or symbolic fabric may assist identification, but the transformation remains incomplete without appropriate posture, gait, gesture, gaze and emotional attitude. Aharya initiates recognition, while Angika and Sattvika Abhinaya make the character theatrically convincing.

Table 1. Classical components and Bharathnatyam applications of Aharya Abhinaya

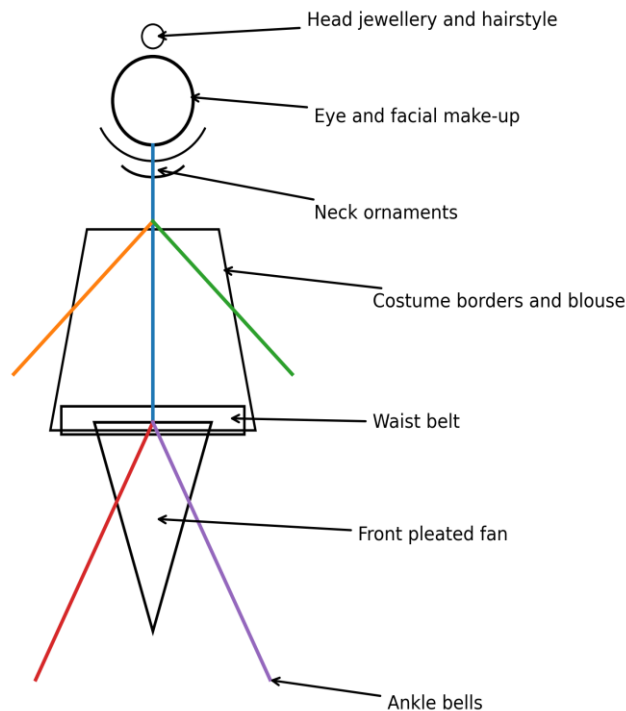
Component	Classical scope	Bharathnatyam application	Principal function
Pustarachana	Models, scenery and artificial objects	Flute, bow, lamp, platform and symbolic scenery	Establishes object, location or situation
Alankarana	Garments, ornaments and garlands	Costume, fan, jewellery, flowers and ankle bells	Creates identity and frames movement
Angarachana	Make-up and bodily colouring	Eye, eyebrow, lip, hand and foot enhancement	Improves expressive visibility
Sajiva	Representation of living beings	Human, divine, animal and mythical characterisation	Supports dramatic transformation

VI. Influence of Aharya Abhinaya on Bharathnatyam

6.1 Formation of visual identity

Aharya gives Bharathnatyam a distinctive visual identity. The pleated fan, temple-style jewellery, flowers, braided hairstyle, waist belt and facial make-up allow spectators to recognise the dance form before the first movement is performed. This recognisability creates continuity among performers, institutions and audiences. However, recognisability should not be confused with historical immutability, because materials, stitching methods and accessories have changed across time and performance contexts.

Visual Anatomy of Bharathnatyam Aharya



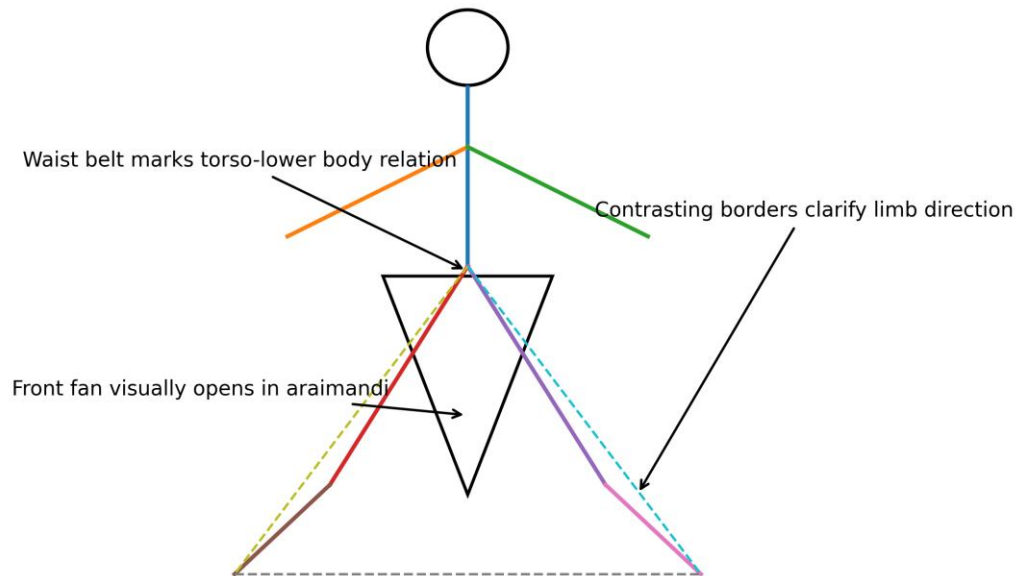
Each element frames the body and affects visibility, balance and movement.

Figure 3. Visual anatomy of Bharathnatyam Aharya and its principal stage functions. Source: Author's illustration.

6.2 Influence on movement geometry

Bharathnatyam technique is characterised by articulated lines, symmetrical arrangements, rhythmic footwork and bent-knee postures. Costume strongly influences how these forms are perceived. The front fan becomes fully visible in araimandi and emphasises the triangular relationship among the knees, hips and torso. Contrasting borders clarify the direction of the arms and legs, while the waist belt visually separates upper-body expression from lower-body rhythmic activity.

Aharya and the Geometry of Movement



Aharya makes the geometric structure of movement more legible to the audience.

Figure 4. Relationship between costume construction and movement geometry in araimandi. Source: Author's illustration.

6.3 Influence on physical execution

Aharya affects what the dancer is physically able to perform. Costume weight, fabric stiffness, jewellery placement and fastening systems influence balance, flexibility, endurance and safety. Heavy head ornaments may disturb turns; necklaces may strike the body during energetic sequences; tight stitching may restrict breathing; and unsuitable lower garments may prevent adequate knee and hip flexion. The most effective costume is therefore not the most elaborate, but the one that supports movement without sacrificing visual meaning.

6.4 Clarification of facial expression

Facial expression is fundamental to Bharathnatyam, particularly in padams, javalis, varnams and narrative compositions. Stage distance and illumination may reduce the visibility of natural facial features. Make-up functions as a perceptual amplifier by defining the eyes, eyebrows and lips. It enables the audience to observe changes in direction, emotional intensity and interpersonal relationship. Excessive contouring, however, can create an inflexible mask and weaken subtle emotional transitions.

6.5 Characterisation and narrative communication

A solo Bharathnatyam dancer may portray several characters within a single composition. Character transformation primarily occurs through posture, gesture, gaze and emotional attitude, yet Aharya provides visual support. A crown may indicate royalty, a peacock feather may suggest Krishna, a trident may identify Shiva, and a particular fabric or ornament may distinguish a divine figure from a human character. Visual signs must remain culturally and narratively appropriate.

6.6 Relationship with bhava and rasa

Aharya does not independently create rasa. The audience's aesthetic experience emerges through the interaction of movement, music, poetic meaning, emotional interpretation and visual presentation. Aharya provides the visual environment in which bhava becomes perceptible. A restrained palette may support a contemplative composition, while brighter visual organisation may suit festive or heroic content. Elaborate Aharya cannot compensate for weak technique or superficial interpretation.

6.7 Cultural symbolism and regional identity

Bharathnatyam Aharya draws substantially from the textile, jewellery and visual traditions of South India. Silk fabrics, contrasting borders, flowers, waist ornaments and head jewellery establish an association with Tamil cultural aesthetics. These elements preserve cultural memory, but standardisation can conceal differences among hereditary lineages, teachers and institutional traditions. Cultural responsibility therefore requires historical awareness rather than mechanical replication.

6.8 Historical standardisation and globalisation

The relocation of Bharathnatyam to urban concert halls encouraged costumes and make-up that could be clearly seen from a distance. Stitched garments offered consistency, security and portability, while coordinated jewellery and hairstyles produced a recognisable stage image. Global circulation later encouraged lighter fabrics, adaptable construction and adjustments for new lighting systems and audiences. Globalisation has therefore involved negotiation between inherited signs and changing performance conditions rather than the simple disappearance of tradition.

Historical Transformation of Bharathnatyam Aharya



The modern visual form emerged through continuity, adaptation and institutional change.

Figure 5. Historical transformation of Bharathnatyam Aharya from hereditary contexts to global and digital stages. Source: Author's synthesis.

6.9 Lighting and digital stage design

Modern lighting, projection, video and digital scenography have expanded the practical scope of Aharya. Lighting can direct attention, establish spatial divisions, alter costume colour and support emotional atmosphere. Projection can create symbolic environments without large physical scenery. These tools are effective only when they support the live performer; technologically dominant spectacle may flatten bodily visibility and interrupt emotional continuity.

6.10 Aharya in solo and group choreography

The requirements of solo and group Bharathnatyam differ. In solo performance, Aharya may emphasise individuality and rapid role transformation. In group choreography, costume colour and design may create visual unity or distinguish character groups. Uniformity can strengthen symmetry, but it may also reduce narrative differentiation. Aharya must therefore correspond with spatial arrangement, movement pattern and dramatic structure.

Table 2. Major areas of influence, contributions and associated risks

Area of influence	Positive contribution	Potential risk	Required balance
Visual identity	Creates recognisable cultural and performance identity	Rigid standardisation may conceal historical diversity	Continuity with informed variation
Movement	Clarifies line, symmetry and araimandi geometry	Heavy or rigid materials may restrict technique	Visibility with kinetic freedom
Expression	Enhances eyes, lips, hands and feet	Exaggeration may flatten subtle bhava	Amplification without masking

Area of influence	Positive contribution	Potential risk	Required balance
Characterisation	Supports rapid recognition of roles and situations	Decorative stereotypes may reduce complexity	Contextual and narrative accuracy
Stage technology	Expands spatial and symbolic possibilities	Spectacle may overpower the dancer	Technological coherence with choreography

VII. Discussion

The findings indicate that Aharya Abhinaya performs four major functions in Bharathnatyam: semiotic, kinetic, perceptual and cultural. Its semiotic function is evident in the way costume, ornaments, colour and properties operate as signs. Its kinetic function concerns the material relationship between costume and bodily movement. Its perceptual function lies in making expression and movement visible, while its cultural function emerges through associations with South Indian textiles, jewellery, iconography and stage traditions.

The analysis further demonstrates that authenticity should not be defined as resistance to all innovation. The modern Bharathnatyam costume itself emerged through adaptation and historical reconstruction. The more relevant question is whether a visual choice is historically informed, physically appropriate and artistically coherent. An innovative costume may remain faithful to the conceptual purpose of Aharya when it facilitates movement, supports characterisation and respects cultural meaning. Conversely, a supposedly traditional costume may be unsuccessful if it restricts technique or functions only as visual display.

Aharya is therefore most effective when each visual decision has a clear dramaturgical purpose. Costume, make-up, properties and lighting should operate as extensions of the expressive body rather than as independent attractions. The dancer remains the central source of meaning, and Aharya strengthens performance only when it sharpens the audience's perception of movement, character and emotion.

Integrated Influence of Aharya Abhinaya on Bharathnatyam

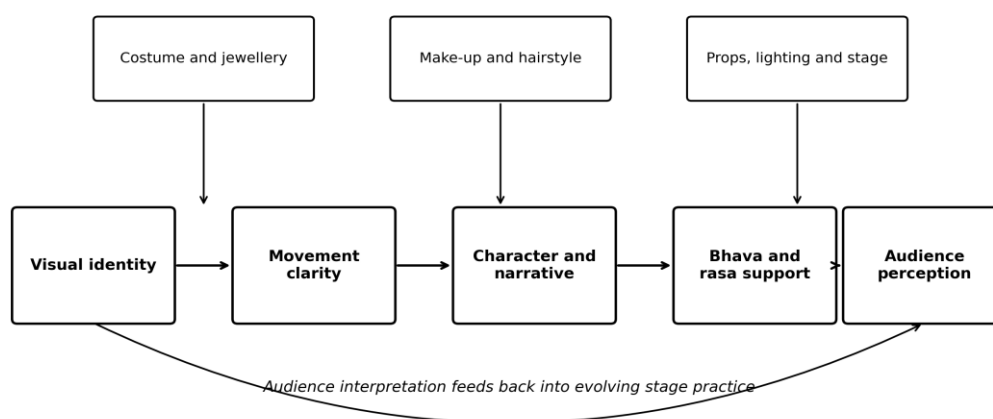


Figure 6. Integrated influence of Aharya Abhinaya on Bharathnatyam performance and audience perception.
Source: Author's conceptual framework.

VIII. Evaluation Framework for Effective Aharya

The following framework may assist dancers, teachers, choreographers, costume designers and stage practitioners in evaluating visual choices before performance.

Criterion	Guiding question	Observable indicator	Principal risk
Character appropriateness	Does the visual design correspond with the role and situation?	Clear identification without unnecessary explanation	Cultural or historical inconsistency
Kinetic compatibility	Can the dancer execute the choreography freely and safely?	Stable jewellery, unrestricted joints and secure costume	Reduced mobility, fatigue or imbalance
Perceptual clarity	Are gesture, posture and facial expression visible?	Legible eyes, hands, feet and body lines	Visual obscurity or exaggeration

Criterion	Guiding question	Observable indicator	Principal risk
Cultural responsibility	Are visual symbols used with contextual understanding?	Historically informed and respectful usage	Stereotyping or decorative appropriation
Thematic coherence	Do costume, props, lighting and choreography form a unified idea?	Consistent visual logic across the production	Fragmented or distracting spectacle
Proportionality	Does Aharya support rather than dominate the performer?	The dancer remains the principal focus	Ornamentation overpowers performance

IX. Implications for Practice and Pedagogy

Aharya should be taught as an integral component of Bharathnatyam theory and practice. Students should learn not only the names of ornaments but also their relationship with anatomy, movement, character and stage visibility. Costume trials should be conducted during rehearsals so that the fan, jewellery, fabric and fastening systems can be assessed under actual movement conditions.

Training should also include historical awareness. Students need to understand that the present stitched costume represents an influential stage convention rather than the only possible form of authentic Aharya. Choreographers, costume designers and lighting designers should collaborate from the beginning of a production so that visual design develops from the interpretative requirements of the composition.

X. Limitations and Future Research

The study is based on textual and historical interpretation and does not include interviews, biomechanical measurements or experimental audience-response data. Future research may compare Aharya practices across different Bharathnatyam banis, document hereditary and institutional lineages, measure the influence of costume weight on fatigue and movement, and examine the effect of camera framing on Aharya in digital performances.

Research on sustainable textiles, ergonomic costume design and audience interpretation would further strengthen the relationship between classical theory, performance history and contemporary production practice.

XI. Conclusion

Aharya Abhinaya occupies a central position in the theoretical and practical structure of Bharathnatyam. Its classical meaning extends beyond costume and jewellery to include make-up, body colouring, stage properties, scenic construction and the visual representation of characters. It is therefore a comprehensive system of external expression.

Its influence is aesthetic as well as functional. Costume pleats and contrasting borders clarify movement geometry; jewellery frames the body; make-up increases expressive visibility; properties facilitate narrative recognition; and lighting establishes the visual environment of performance. Aharya also affects the dancer physically because garment construction, fabric weight and ornament placement influence mobility, endurance, balance and safety.

The modern appearance of Bharathnatyam should be understood as the product of continuity and transformation. Classical principles, South Indian material culture, twentieth-century revival, institutional teaching, theatrical requirements and global circulation have all shaped its visual identity. Tradition and innovation need not be treated as opposites. Innovation becomes meaningful when it is culturally informed, compatible with movement and relevant to the performance theme.

Ultimately, Aharya achieves its purpose when it allows the audience to perceive character, movement and emotional intention more clearly. It should neither remain a superficial accessory nor dominate the performer as independent spectacle. In its most effective form, Aharya becomes inseparable from the expressive body and strengthens the total communicative power of Bharathnatyam.

References

- [1]. Allen, M. H. (1997). Rewriting the script for South Indian dance. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 41(3), 63–100. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146609>
- [2]. Bharata Muni. (1951–1961). *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A treatise on Hindu dramaturgy and histrionics* (M. M. Ghosh, Trans.; Vols. 1–2). Asiatic Society.
- [3]. Bose, M. (1991). *Movement and mimesis: The idea of dance in the Sanskrit tradition*. Kluwer Academic Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-3594-8>
- [4]. Coomaraswamy, A. K., & Duggirala, G. K. (Trans.). (1917). *The mirror of gesture: Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikeshvara*. Harvard University Press.
- [5]. Gaston, A.-M. (1996). *Bharata Nāṭyam: From temple to theatre*. Manohar Publishers and Distributors.
- [6]. Kothari, S. (Ed.). (1979). *Bharatanatyam: Indian classical dance art*. Marg Publications.
- [7]. Meduri, A. (1988). Bharatanatyam—What are you? *Asian Theatre Journal*, 5(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1124019>
- [8]. Meduri, A. (2004). Bharatanatyam as a global dance: Some issues in research, teaching, and practice. *Dance Research Journal*, 36(2), 11–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20444589>

- [9]. Mehta, T. (1995). Sanskrit play production in ancient India. Motilal Banarsidass.
- [10]. Niyanthari, M. (2023). Designing of attire in Bharatanatyam: A journey from ethnic to global culture. IIS University Journal of Arts, 11(3), 175–184.
- [11]. Niyanthri, M. (2024). Aharya Abhinaya in text and practice: A study of Bharatanatyam Aharya pre- and post-revival period [Doctoral dissertation, University of Hyderabad]. Shodhganga.
- [12]. O'Shea, J. (2007). At home in the world: Bharata Natyam on the global stage. Wesleyan University Press.
- [13]. Soneji, D. (2012). Unfinished gestures: Devadasis, memory, and modernity in South India. University of Chicago Press.
- [14]. Srinivasan, A. (1985). Reform and revival: The Devadasi and her dance. Economic and Political Weekly, 20(44), 1869–1876.
- [15]. Vatsyayan, K. (1968). Classical Indian dance in literature and the arts. Sangeet Natak Akademi.