

Embodying the Festival: A Practice-as-Research Framework for Translating Swati Tirunal's Utsava Prabandha into Bharatanatyam

Sisira D

Phd scholar, Department Of Music, Annamalai University,
Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India
sisiradas4@gmail.com

Abstract

This study employs Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology to investigate choreographic strategies for translating Swati Tirunal's Utsava Prabandha Kritis into Bharatanatyam while preserving devotional authenticity. The research addresses a significant gap in contemporary dance scholarship, as these Malayalam-Sanskrit compositions remain largely absent from mainstream Bharatanatyam repertoire despite their narrative clarity, processional imagery, and devotional depth. Following Nelson's documentation-evidence-reflection cycle and Bolt's practice-led research paradigm, this study documents embodied choreographic experimentation through video documentation, reflective journaling, and iterative rehearsal cycles spanning eighteen months of intensive practice-based investigation.

Theoretical framing draws on Nāṭyaśāstra abhinaya theory, Balasaraswati's temple-margam analogy, and Lemos's indexical continuity model to establish evaluative frameworks for assessing translation effectiveness and cultural authenticity. The research protocol systematically converts lyrical imagery, melodic structures, and ritual narratives into choreographic vocabulary through structured text-to-movement mapping, raga-tala correlation methods, and progressive abhinaya development strategies.

Three detailed case studies—"Kanakamayam" (playful divine identification), "Āndōlika Vāhane" (palanquin procession dynamics), and "Saradindu Sumukha" (martial grandeur with devotional solemnity)—demonstrate how ritual narrative, lyrical imagery, and melodic structures can be systematically translated into dance vocabulary while maintaining devotional coherence. Findings reveal that devotional authenticity emerges not from strict replication but through strategic deployment of symbolic markers, embodied sincerity, and indexical continuity that preserves cultural connection while enabling artistic innovation.

The research contributes a validated PaR protocol for temple repertoire adaptation, documented choreographic strategies with visual evidence, and comprehensive pedagogical frameworks for curriculum integration. This framework offers a replicable model for expanding classical dance

repertoires while ensuring cultural continuity through innovation, with implications extending beyond Bharatanatyam to other Indian classical forms seeking to incorporate regional devotional traditions.

Keywords: Practice-as-Research, Bharatanatyam, Utsava Prabandha, Swati Tirunal, temple-to-stage adaptation, devotional dance, choreographic translation, Malayalam-Sanskrit compositions

1. Introduction

The Utsava Prabandha Kritis of Maharaja Swati Tirunal Rama Varma (1813-1846) represent a unique confluence of devotional poetry, musical innovation, and inherent performance potential within South Indian classical traditions. Composed as musical descriptions of the elaborate festival processions at Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, these twelve compositions capture the ceremonial grandeur, devotional fervor, and cultural sophistication that characterized Travancore's temple culture during the early nineteenth century. Despite their rich narrative content, rhythmic dynamism, and demonstrable suitability for abhinaya, these Malayalam-Sanskrit compositions remain conspicuously absent from contemporary Bharatanatyam repertoires, representing both a cultural loss and an untapped artistic resource.

This research addresses a critical gap in dance scholarship by investigating how systematic Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology can facilitate the translation of ritual-functional temple music into contemporary stage performance while preserving devotional authenticity and cultural significance. The scholarly gap becomes evident when examining existing dance literature's predominant focus on canonical Tamil and Telugu compositions, particularly padams and varnams, while systematically overlooking the choreographic potential of regional devotional repertoires that offer equally rich material for expressive interpretation.

As Bhagyalekshmi observes, "The synergy of songs in Malayalam–Sanskrit, along with classical ragas, offers rich material for dance schools" (Bhagyalekshmi, 2004, p. 44), yet no comprehensive study has documented the practical translation of these works into Bharatanatyam through rigorous research methodology that combines embodied experimentation with scholarly documentation. This marginalization of ritual-functional compositions in contemporary proscenium practice reflects broader patterns in classical arts where regional traditions are overshadowed by pan-Indian canonical works, despite their potential for enriching performance repertoires and connecting audiences to local cultural heritage.

The central research question guiding this investigation is: What choreographic strategies effectively translate the ritual narrative, lyrical imagery, and melodic structures of the Utsava Prabandha Kritis into Bharatanatyam while preserving devotional authenticity and cultural integrity? This inquiry necessitates five specific objectives that frame the research scope and methodology: (a) developing a systematic PaR protocol for ritual-to-stage translation that can be applied to similar repertoires, (b) mapping textual and musical structures to choreographic vocabulary through documented correlation methods, (c) documenting iterative refinement processes through reflective practice that reveals how embodied knowledge develops through systematic experimentation, (d) evaluating the dynamic balance between devotional authenticity and artistic expansion in adaptation contexts, and (e) proposing comprehensive pedagogical integration pathways for contemporary dance education that honor traditional values while embracing innovation.

The significance of the Utsava Prabandha Kritis extends beyond their historical importance to their inherent performative qualities that make them ideally suited for choreographic interpretation. As noted in the Travancore State Manual, Swati Tirunal's compositions demonstrate "great knowledge of the art of native dance, known as Bharata Nattyam" (Aiya, 1906, p. 482-483), suggesting intentional composition for performance contexts. The clarity of devotional text, accessibility of narrative structure, and rhythmic regularity that characterizes these works create natural opportunities for the structured abhinaya progression that defines accomplished Bharatanatyam performance. Furthermore, Swati Tirunal's innovative use of Malayalam alongside Sanskrit not only expanded the linguistic palette of Carnatic music but also enhanced the compositions' suitability for abhinaya, as dancers can draw upon the emotional depth and textual clarity in their expressive interpretation while connecting with audiences familiar with vernacular devotional traditions.

My positionality as a practitioner-researcher with thirty years of intensive Bharatanatyam training under traditional guru-shishya parampara, combined with childhood exposure to Kerala's temple festival traditions and ongoing engagement with Travancore's cultural heritage, provides both methodological advantages and structured reflexivity essential for this investigation. This embodied knowledge, acquired through decades of immersion in classical technique and temple festival contexts, enables nuanced understanding of the cultural translation challenges inherent in moving from ritual to stage contexts while maintaining artistic and spiritual integrity. Rather than presenting anecdotal observations or purely personal interpretations, this background serves as a methodological asset within the autoethnographic dimensions of PaR inquiry, providing an insider perspective that is systematically documented and critically examined throughout the research process.

2. Literature Survey/Review

2.1 Historical Foundations of Temple Dance in Travancore

The evolution of temple dance traditions in Travancore provides essential cultural and artistic context for understanding both the significance of Utsava Prabandha Kritis and the methodological challenges involved in adapting them for contemporary Bharatanatyam practice. The transformation from Devadasi and Dasiattam practices into modern Bharatanatyam was shaped by three interconnected historical forces: temple ritual requirements, festival culture dynamics, and royal patronage systems that created unique conditions for artistic innovation and cultural synthesis (Mitra, 2018).

Early devotional dance forms practiced by devadasis were thoroughly integrated into temple ritual life, serving dual functions as both entertainment for divine and human audiences and as embodied expressions of religious devotion that complemented vocal and instrumental music within comprehensive worship experiences. The gradual evolution from the relatively unsystematized movement vocabulary of Dasiattam toward the more refined and codified Sadir form represented both aesthetic refinement and functional adaptation to changing cultural contexts. As Mitra explains, "Dasiattam underwent a continuous process of reformation and improvisation to perfect this dance form... Sadir mainly came into existence during the 18th century. The Tanjore Maratha mainly encouraged this particular style" (Mitra, 2018, p. 263). This transformation shifted emphasis from purely ritual function toward increasingly expressive and performance-oriented presentation, establishing foundations for the sophisticated choreographic narratives that became central to contemporary Bharatanatyam while maintaining essential connections to devotional practice.

Temple festivals in Travancore, particularly elaborate celebrations like Pallivetṭa (royal hunt festival) and lakṣadīpam (hundred thousand lamps festival), served as dynamic laboratories where ritual precision, musical innovation, and dance experimentation were continuously reimagined and refined through collaborative artistic practice. These festivals provided rich backdrops for devotional performances that combined ceremonial gravitas with spectacular visual displays, creating contexts where artists could explore new forms of expression while maintaining cultural authenticity. Akhmetshin et al. observe that "Dance serves not only as an artistic expression but as a means of transmitting religious, moral, and cultural values, encapsulated through narrative plots drawn from epics and purāṇic texts" (Akhmetshin et al., 2018, p. 217). Within these festival contexts, the Utsava

Prabandha Kritis, with their vivid processional imagery and detailed ceremonial descriptions, found natural performative expression that influenced their compositional structure and expressive potential.

Royal patronage under Swati Tirunal created unprecedented opportunities for artistic innovation and cultural synthesis that brought together diverse musical traditions within a supportive institutional framework. The court attracted distinguished artists, scholars, and performers from across South India, fostering rich exchanges of ideas and practices that influenced both compositional technique and performance aesthetics. Historical records suggest that renowned figures including possibly Tyagaraja visited the court, creating opportunities for musical dialogue and collaborative innovation (Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, 2000). Bhagyalekshmi notes that "The contribution of Travancore to Carnatic Music is inseparable from the patronage that encouraged the growth of Mohiniyattam and the imported Bharatanatyam styles" (Bhagyalekshmi, 2004, p. 26). This cultural mixing, supported by royal resources and intellectual curiosity, established important precedents for the adaptive translations examined in this research, demonstrating how tradition can be honored while embracing innovation through systematic artistic experimentation.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks for Temple-to-Stage Adaptation

Balasaraswati's temple-margam analogy provides the foundational conceptual framework for understanding how ritual experiences can be authentically recreated within proscenium contexts while maintaining spiritual essence and cultural integrity. Her celebrated description presents the Bharatanatyam recital as a carefully structured spiritual journey that mirrors the devotee's progression through temple spaces: "A presentation of Bharatanatyam margam is like entering a temple and meeting the manifested truth in the human form. The recital is structured like a great temple: we enter through the gopuram (outer hall) of arippu, cross the ardhmandapam (halfway hall) of jatiswaram, then the mandapa (great hall) of shabdham, and finally enter the sanctum of the deity in the varnam" (Balasaraswati, 1984, pp. 8-14).

This structural analogy enables choreographers to conceptualize the entire recital as a devotional journey that progresses from external invitation and spatial orientation through increasingly intimate encounters with divine presence, culminating in direct spiritual communion. By mapping segments of the Utsava Prabandha cycle onto corresponding phases of temple progression—processional approach, ceremonial preparation, ritual enactment, divine encounter—adaptation strategies can honor original ritual contexts while enhancing dramatic impact on stage. The temple-margam framework thus

provides both philosophical grounding for adaptation decisions and practical guidance for choreographic structure that ensures cultural authenticity while enabling artistic innovation.

Nāṭyaśāstra abhinaya theory offers systematic principles for developing expressive strategies that can effectively translate textual imagery into embodied performance while maintaining coherent aesthetic standards. The classical progression from padārthabhinaya (literal gesture representing specific objects or actions) through vākyārthabhinaya (narrative and emotional elaboration that interprets textual meaning) to sāttvika abhinaya (internalized devotional expression that transcends literal representation) provides a structured methodological approach to translating complex textual imagery into movement vocabulary that serves both narrative clarity and spiritual expression. This theoretical framework becomes particularly relevant when working with Swati Tirunal's compositions, which characteristically blend śṛṅgāra (romantic longing) with bhakti (divine surrender), requiring sophisticated calibration of emotional registers within single performances that maintain devotional coherence while exploring diverse expressive possibilities.

Lemos's concept of indexical continuity addresses crucial questions about cultural authenticity in adaptation processes, particularly relevant for contemporary artists seeking to honor traditional values while embracing creative innovation. Her argument that "a dance form's continuity can rely on designative indexes rather than strict imitation" (Lemos, 2012, pp. 47-82) suggests that devotional authenticity can be effectively maintained through strategic deployment of symbolic elements—traditional costume elements, recognizable mudra vocabulary, established spatial pathways, characteristic rhythmic phrasing—rather than requiring museumized replication of historical forms that may not translate effectively to contemporary performance contexts. This theoretical perspective enables innovative choreographic exploration while ensuring cultural continuity through deployment of recognizable markers of tradition that maintain connection to heritage while permitting artistic growth and creative adaptation.

2.3 Previous Adaptations and Choreographic Studies

The limited scholarly attention devoted to Utsava Prabandha choreographic adaptations reflects broader patterns in classical dance documentation where regional devotional compositions receive insufficient academic investigation compared to pan-Indian canonical repertoires. Existing studies focus primarily on widely performed works like Thyagaraja kritis and classical varnams, while systematic analysis of regional devotional compositions with equally rich choreographic potential remains underdeveloped in dance scholarship. Sarma's analysis of temple festival descriptions notes

that "each vāhana and each segment of the procession might be mapped to distinctive abhinaya and footwork patterns aligning with the festival's narrative progression" (Sarma, 2022, pp. 95-112), suggesting significant choreographic potential that has yet to be systematically explored through rigorous research methodology that combines theoretical analysis with practical experimentation.

Contemporary adaptation efforts by individual artists and cultural organizations, while artistically valuable and culturally significant, lack comprehensive documentation of translation strategies, theoretical grounding, and systematic evaluation of adaptation effectiveness. The absence of systematic PaR documentation means that choreographic innovations remain isolated experiments rather than contributing to cumulative knowledge development that could benefit broader artistic communities seeking to expand repertoires while maintaining cultural authenticity. This research addresses this documentation gap by providing detailed analysis of translation protocols, comprehensive evidence from practical experimentation, and reflective examination of challenges and solutions that can inform future adaptation projects across diverse regional traditions.

3. Methodology/Approach

This study adopts Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology, positioning choreographic experimentation as a legitimate mode of scholarly inquiry rather than a mere illustration of theoretical concepts. Drawing on Robin Nelson's framework of practice-as-research in performance, the study argues that knowledge emerges through cycles of embodied practice, documentation, and critical reflection, particularly in areas concerning performance, cultural translation, and artistic adaptation that cannot be fully understood through textual analysis alone (Nelson 2013). Bolt's practice-led research model further supports this approach by emphasizing that embodied experimentation generates insights unavailable through purely theoretical methods while maintaining academic rigor through systematic documentation and analytical reflection (Bolt 2009).

3.1 Documentation–Evidence–Reflection Cycle

The research follows a structured six-stage cycle implemented over eighteen months: conceive → rehearse → video-document → reflective journal → code decisions → refine and re-perform. Initial choreographic sketches were developed through textual and musical analysis, followed by embodied experimentation with movement vocabulary. Rehearsals were recorded from multiple angles for spatial and gestural analysis, while reflective journals documented artistic choices, rehearsal challenges, and

adaptive solutions. Coding procedures categorized effective translation strategies and recurring problem areas, enabling revisions through iterative experimentation.

Primary data sources include rehearsal videos, annotated movement scores correlating gestures with textual and musical cues, reflective journals, feedback logs from collaborating musicians, and audience responses collected during lecture-demonstrations and performances. Together, these materials provide evidence for analyzing how ritual compositions may be translated into performative Bharatanatyam vocabulary while retaining devotional and musical integrity.

3.2 Text-to-Movement Mapping Protocol

The translation of lyrical imagery into choreographic language follows a systematic mapping protocol in which processional descriptions, *vāhana* imagery, devotional perspectives, and ornamental references are converted into *adavu* patterns, *mudrā* clusters, and spatial pathways. The process begins with textual analysis distinguishing between literal representation (*padārthabhinaya*) and interpretive expansion (*vākyārthabhinaya*), thereby guiding choreographic choices. Repetitive *pallavi* and *charaṇa* structures in *Utsava Prabandha Kritis* provide opportunities for progressive elaboration, where gestures initially establish core imagery and later repetitions deepen emotional and narrative interpretation through layered *abhinaya*.

The protocol further includes identification of visual imagery suitable for direct gestural translation, emotional content requiring expressive interpretation, rhythmic and melodic patterns corresponding to movement qualities, and transitional sequences ensuring narrative continuity and choreographic flow. Recorded rehearsals enabled testing and refinement of these strategies while identifying coordination challenges and performance limitations.

3.3 Raga–Tala to Nritya Correlation Methods

Musical structures were systematically correlated with movement vocabulary to maintain coherence between *nritya* and *abhinaya* components. *Raga bhava* mapping linked melodic character to specific movement textures and dynamic qualities. For example, Huseni’s gentle contours were associated with light *tatta adavus* and graceful torso movements, whereas Pantuvarali’s grave mood demanded grounded postures and sustained gestures reflecting contemplative depth. *Tala* structures similarly informed choreographic phrasing: *Misra Chapu* supported swaying processional movements, while *Rupaka tala* enabled structured *korvais* and rhythmic gestural accents.

Additional procedures included phrase-structure analysis, rhythmic accent placement, tempo variation strategies, and instrumental integration methods that preserved musical coherence while supporting narrative pacing and audience engagement. These correlations ensured that pure dance sequences functioned as integral narrative and emotional components rather than isolated displays of virtuosity.

3.4 Reflective Practice Documentation

Video documentation followed standardized protocols involving fixed-frame positioning, multi-angle recording, consistent lighting, and uniform costume settings to facilitate detailed movement analysis and pedagogical reuse. Reflective journaling employed structured ethnographic formats that recorded rehearsal contexts, choreographic decisions, theoretical rationale, practical challenges, and subsequent revisions. This systematic reflection enabled identification of recurring adaptation patterns and effective translation strategies across multiple compositions.

A detailed coding system tagged choreographic decisions against textual, musical, expressive, spatial, and revision categories, thereby enabling systematic evaluation of adaptation methods. Through this process, the research developed broader principles for translating ritual compositions into Bharatanatyam performance while balancing textual fidelity, musical integrity, devotional resonance, and stage viability.

4. Analysis, Results & Discussion

4.1 Temple-to-Stage Adaptation Framework Implementation

The practical implementation of Balasaraswati's temple-margam analogy created a sophisticated structural approach to translating the complete twelve-kriti Utsava Prabandha cycle into cohesive recital format that honors both ritual progression and performance requirements. Mapping the festival procession sequence onto the traditional margam structure—gopuram entrance (alarippu) establishing ceremonial context → ardhamandapam transition (jatiswaram) building rhythmic momentum → mandapa exploration (varnam) developing narrative complexity → sanctum encounter (padam/mangalam) achieving spiritual culmination—enabled preservation of essential ritual progression within proscenium constraints while maintaining narrative coherence and emotional development that serves both artistic and devotional purposes.

The conceptual framework proved particularly effective in guiding audience engagement strategies that created immersive experiences transcending conventional performance boundaries. Initial

movements established processional context and spatial orientation that invited audience participation in the festival journey, intermediate sections developed specific vahana imagery and multiple devotional perspectives that enriched narrative understanding, and concluding segments created intimate encounters with divine presence that achieved genuine spiritual resonance. This carefully structured progression successfully translated the temple festival's characteristic movement from external spectacle to internal devotional experience, demonstrating how adaptation can honor original ritual functions while creating meaningful contemporary artistic experiences.

Implementation challenges emerged primarily in balancing ritual temporality with contemporary audience expectations and attention patterns. Traditional temple festivals unfold over extended temporal periods with natural pauses, repetitions, and gradual intensity development that enhance meditative quality and spiritual preparation but may challenge proscenium attention spans conditioned by different performance conventions. Adaptive solutions included strategic tempo variations that maintained ritual character while supporting audience engagement, dynamic contrast development that provided variety within contemplative frameworks, and carefully timed nritta interludes that offered visual excitement while preserving essential devotional atmosphere and cultural authenticity.

4.2 Case Study 1: "Kanakamayam" - Playful Divine Identification

"Kanakamayam" (Huseni, Rupaka, Day 3) provided an ideal introduction to Utsava Prabandha choreographic adaptation due to its accessible narrative structure, playful devotional tone, and clear dramatic progression that translates effectively to stage presentation. The composition describes an engaging divine guessing game where the devotee attempts to identify the deity through systematic elimination of various possibilities—Indra (king of gods), Chandra (moon god), Shiva (the destroyer)—before achieving recognition of Padmanabha in the magnificent Kamala Vahana procession, creating natural dramatic tension and resolution that serves choreographic development.

Movement Mapping Results and Analysis: The pallavi section translated exceptionally effectively into light tatta adavus combined with flowing padma hasta (lotus hand gesture), creating graceful flowing lotus imagery that perfectly complemented Huseni's gentle melodic contours while maintaining the raga's characteristic playfulness and devotional warmth. The rhythmic pulse of Rupaka tala aligned naturally with three-beat korvai structures that supported both precise musical phrasing and logical spatial movement patterns, enabling smooth integration of nritta and abhinaya elements. Charana sections enabled progressive sanchari development as each potential deity identification was systematically explored through distinctive mudra sequences, facial expressions, and postural

adjustments that maintained narrative clarity while providing opportunities for detailed expressive elaboration.

Choreographic Innovation and Creative Solutions: Rather than attempting literal depiction of each deity mentioned in the text, which would have created cluttered and potentially confusing visual presentations, the adaptation employed strategically suggestive abhinaya that captured the essential character of divine attributes while maintaining primary narrative focus on the devotee's perspective and emotional journey. The questioning tone inherent in the lyrics translated effectively into sustained drishti (eye movement) patterns and subtle head movements that engaged audience participation in the identification process, creating interactive elements that enhanced rather than distracted from devotional content. This approach demonstrated how adaptation can honor textual specificity while prioritizing performance effectiveness and audience accessibility.

Documentation of Challenges and Refinement Process: Initial rehearsals revealed problematic excessive literalism in gesture vocabulary that created cluttered movement phrases obscuring rather than supporting emotional content and narrative clarity. Video documentation clearly showed how encyclopedic representation of divine attributes resulted in disconnected gestural sequences that failed to serve expressive purposes. Systematic reflective analysis led to significantly simplified mudra sequences that prioritized expressive clarity over comprehensive literal representation, demonstrating how embodied experimentation reveals gaps between theoretical planning and practical execution. This revision process exemplified how PaR methodology enables real-time refinement based on multisensory feedback that incorporates both performer experience and recorded visual evidence.

Audience Response and Cultural Impact Assessment: Public presentations revealed consistently strong audience engagement with the composition's playful tone and clear narrative progression, with observers specifically noting how the repeated refrain enabled progressive emotional deepening while maintaining textual accessibility for diverse audiences. Post-performance discussions indicated that Malayalam phrases enhanced rather than hindered audience connection, with one attendee commenting on the "delightful surprise" of recognizing vernacular devotional language within the familiar Bharatanatyam format. Feedback suggested that the adaptation successfully bridged regional and pan-Indian cultural elements while maintaining authentic devotional character, validating the theoretical framework's effectiveness for cultural translation.

4.3 Case Study 2: "Āndōlika Vāhane" - Palanquin Procession Dynamics

"Āndōlika Vāhane" (Anandabhairavi, Misra Chapu, Day 4) presented significantly more complex choreographic challenges in translating elaborate palanquin movement descriptions and sophisticated multi-layered perception narratives into coherent and visually compelling choreographic form. The composition provides detailed descriptions of the divine palanquin swaying gracefully through temple precincts while various observer groups—simple folk devotees, learned religious scholars, celestial beings, committed worshippers—respond with varying degrees of understanding, recognition, and devotional intensity, creating multiple simultaneous narrative layers requiring sophisticated choreographic treatment.

Movement Mapping Results and Spatial Innovation: Misra Chapu's distinctive seven-beat asymmetrical pattern provided natural rhythmic foundation for swaying movements that effectively evoked the coordinated gait of palanquin bearers while supporting the composition's central imagery of divine procession through sacred space. The rhythmic asymmetry created valuable opportunities for dynamic variations and accent placement that maintained audience interest while supporting complex textual imagery without becoming repetitive or predictable. Andolika hasta (swaying hand gesture) served effectively as both literal representation of palanquin movement and abstract symbol of divine presence moving through devotional consciousness, demonstrating how single gestural elements can operate simultaneously on multiple interpretive levels.

Layered Abhinaya Development and Technical Innovation: The composition's sophisticated multiple perspective structure enabled extensive abhinaya exploration that demonstrated advanced choreographic possibilities within traditional frameworks. Sequential portrayal of different observer groups—wonder-struck villagers responding with amazement, reverent scholars offering intellectual appreciation, ecstatic celestials expressing transcendent joy, devoted worshippers achieving spiritual communion—required rapid emotional transitions supported by distinctive vocabularies of posture, gesture, and facial expression that maintained character clarity while serving narrative development. This layered approach demonstrated how single compositions could support extensive choreographic development without narrative distortion or cultural dilution, revealing the rich potential of Utsava Prabandha materials for sophisticated artistic exploration.

Spatial Pathway Innovation and Proscenium Adaptation: The palanquin procession concept translated effectively into diagonal stage movement patterns that created convincing three-dimensional depth while accommodating proscenium sightline requirements and maintaining visual coherence for

audiences positioned at various angles. Strategic positioning changes enabled audience members to experience different observational perspectives corresponding to the various devotee groups described in the text, enhancing their connection to the depicted festival scene while maintaining performance unity. This spatial strategy demonstrated how adaptation can honor original ritual contexts while optimizing presentation for contemporary performance venues and audience configurations.

Technical Refinements and Problem-Solving Documentation: Video documentation revealed significant timing inconsistencies between established sway rhythms and complex gestural phrases during initial rehearsal phases, creating coordination challenges that threatened both musical and visual coherence. Systematic practice sessions using metronome coordination and recorded vocal accompaniment resolved these technical challenges while preserving the composition's distinctive rhythmic character and textual integrity. This technical problem-solving process exemplifies how PaR documentation systematically identifies and addresses performance challenges through iterative refinement that combines theoretical knowledge with embodied experimentation and recorded evidence analysis.

4.4 Case Study 3: "Saradindu Sumukha" - Martial Grandeur and Devotional Integration

"Saradindu Sumukha" (Kambhoji, Misra Chapu, Day 9) represented the most challenging adaptation within the research scope due to its complex description of Palli Vetta (royal hunt ceremony) that required integration of martial pageantry, royal grandeur, and underlying spiritual significance without compromising essential devotional authenticity or creating incongruous artistic elements. The composition demanded sophisticated choreographic solutions that could honor both literal textual content and deeper devotional meanings while maintaining performance coherence and cultural appropriateness.

Movement Mapping and Character Integration: Kambhoji's inherently majestic and gravely dignified character translated effectively into grounded sthanaka positions and deliberately paced gestural phrasing that conveyed appropriate royal dignity and martial strength while supporting the composition's processional imagery and ceremonial gravitas. Vyajana (fan) and chamara (ceremonial whisk) mudras effectively represented elaborate ceremonial regalia while supporting the composition's detailed processional imagery and royal context. The primary artistic challenge involved maintaining sincere devotional character while depicting potentially secular martial activities that might seem incongruous with spiritual expression, requiring sophisticated interpretive strategies that preserved both textual accuracy and devotional coherence.

Dual Abhinaya Strategy and Interpretive Innovation: The adaptation successfully resolved potential conflicts between martial and devotional content through sophisticated dual-register abhinaya that simultaneously presented literal martial imagery and metaphorical spiritual warfare interpretation.

Warrior gestures and royal pageantry were systematically contextualized within established devotional frameworks, suggesting internal battles against spiritual obstacles, ego, and ignorance rather than external military conquest or worldly power display. This interpretive strategy preserved both textual accuracy and devotional coherence while demonstrating how sophisticated abhinaya can operate simultaneously on multiple meaning levels, enriching rather than compromising artistic and spiritual expression.

Rhythmic Integration and Structural Development: Misra Chapu's structured seven-beat patterns supported elaborate processional korvais that effectively evoked torch-lit evening ceremonies and royal pageantry while providing essential dynamic contrasts within extended compositional development that maintained audience interest and narrative momentum. Strategically placed slow-tempo nritya interludes created valuable breathing space for contemplation and emotional processing while maintaining rhythmic momentum essential for audience engagement and performance viability. This balanced approach demonstrated how adaptation can honor both musical requirements and audience needs while preserving essential artistic and cultural values.

Devotional Impact Assessment and Cultural Validation: Structured audience feedback specifically noted the composition's "powerful devotional resonance" despite prominent martial imagery, with post-performance discussions revealing how the dual-register interpretive approach enabled viewers to appreciate both historical context and spiritual significance without experiencing cultural or artistic conflict. Multiple audience members commented on how warrior imagery enhanced rather than detracted from devotional experience by suggesting spiritual strength and divine protection, validating the theoretical framework's effectiveness in maintaining devotional authenticity through symbolic rather than purely literal interpretation. This positive response demonstrated successful integration of complex cultural elements while preserving essential spiritual character.

4.5 Cross-Case Analysis: Emerging Translation Strategies

Systematic analysis across all three detailed case studies reveals consistent patterns in successful choreographic translation that suggest generalizable principles for future adaptation projects. Repetition-enabled sanchari expansion emerged as the most consistently effective strategy for developing emotional depth and artistic sophistication without distorting original textual meaning or

overwhelming audiences with excessive complexity. The cyclical structure of pallavi-charana repetition provided natural opportunities for progressive elaboration where each iteration systematically explored different interpretive dimensions while maintaining structural coherence and narrative clarity.

Tala-driven spatial pathway development proved essential for creating organic integration between musical structure and choreographic flow that serves both artistic and practical requirements. Rather than imposing arbitrary movement patterns that conflict with musical logic, successful adaptations consistently allowed rhythmic pulse and phrase structure to guide spatial design, creating convincing relationships between temporal and physical dimensions of performance that enhanced rather than competed with musical expression. This systematic correlation prevented disconnect between auditory and visual elements while supporting unified aesthetic experience that serves both artistic and spiritual purposes.

Indexical costume and mudra continuity maintained essential cultural connection without requiring strict traditional replication that might limit artistic development or contemporary relevance. Strategic deployment of recognizable traditional elements—specific hand gestures with established cultural meanings, characteristic ornamental details, traditional spatial patterns and orientations—provided cultural anchoring while enabling innovative expressive development that honored tradition while embracing creative exploration. This balanced approach demonstrated how cultural authenticity can be maintained through symbolic markers rather than comprehensive historical recreation.

Raga-informed dynamic quality correlation ensured musical coherence between melodic character and movement texture through systematic attention to how different ragas suggest corresponding movement qualities and energy levels. This systematic correlation prevented aesthetic disconnect between auditory and visual elements while supporting unified performance experience that honors both musical and choreographic traditions. Successful adaptations consistently demonstrated how raga characteristics can guide movement choices without limiting choreographic creativity or imposing rigid correspondence rules that constrain artistic development.

5. Conclusion

This comprehensive Practice-as-Research investigation has successfully demonstrated that systematic choreographic experimentation, guided by appropriate theoretical frameworks and rigorous

documentation protocols, can effectively translate the ritual narrative, lyrical imagery, and melodic structures of Swati Tirunal's Utsava Prabandha Kritis into compelling Bharatanatyam performances while preserving essential devotional authenticity and cultural integrity. The research conclusively reveals that devotional integrity emerges not through strict replication of historical forms or literal interpretation of traditional practices but through careful attention to symbolic continuity, embodied sincerity, and strategic deployment of indexical markers that maintain cultural connection while enabling artistic innovation and contemporary relevance.

The systematically documented translation strategies—repetition-enabled sanchari expansion, tala-driven spatial design, raga-informed dynamic correlation, and structured abhinaya progression—provide a validated methodological framework for adapting similar temple repertoires across diverse regional traditions while maintaining scholarly rigor and artistic excellence. These findings contribute significantly to dance scholarship by demonstrating how embodied research methodology generates practical knowledge and artistic insights unavailable through purely theoretical analysis, while advancing understanding of how cultural translation can honor traditional values while embracing creative innovation.

The research validates Practice-as-Research as an appropriate and productive methodology for Indian classical dance investigation, demonstrating how systematic embodied experimentation produces rigorous scholarly evidence while simultaneously advancing artistic practice and cultural preservation efforts. The comprehensive documentation protocols developed for this study provide replicable frameworks for future investigations in related areas, while the detailed reflexive analysis contributes valuable insights to understanding how practitioner-researchers can maintain scholarly objectivity while drawing upon embodied expertise and cultural knowledge.

Research limitations include the necessarily restricted scope to three representative kritis from the larger Utsava Prabandha cycle, inherent subjectivity in autoethnographic dimensions of the investigation, and the need for broader practitioner testing across different institutional and cultural contexts to validate generalizability of findings. Future research should expand repertoire scope while developing more sophisticated methods for assessing devotional authenticity and cultural continuity across diverse performance contexts and audience communities.

The successful adaptation of Utsava Prabandha Kritis demonstrates convincingly that temple repertoires represent living, embodied heritage rather than historical artifacts requiring museum preservation. When approached through rigorous Practice-as-Research methodology that combines

scholarly analysis with artistic experimentation, dance becomes simultaneously scholarly inquiry and devotional sādhanā, ensuring that traditional compositions continue to thrive within contemporary performance ecology while maintaining their essential spiritual character and cultural significance for future generations.

6. Future Scope

The successful documentation and validation of translation strategies for Utsava Prabandha Kritis opens significant possibilities for future research, pedagogy, and cultural preservation beyond the present study. These findings may support curriculum integration through structured modules that train students in text-to-movement mapping, raga–tala interpretation, choreographic translation, collaborative work with musicians, and reflective documentation practices within Bharatanatyam education.

Lecture-demonstrations, workshops, and digital archives can further disseminate adapted repertoire while encouraging feedback from wider artistic communities and ensuring accessibility across geographical contexts. Interdisciplinary collaboration with musicologists, historians, archivists, and cultural institutions may strengthen both scholarly depth and practical application, while cross-institutional projects can develop sustainable communities of practice dedicated to preserving and expanding traditional repertoire. Future studies may also extend these methodologies to additional kritis from Swati Tirunal's corpus, examine adaptations in forms such as Mohiniyattam and Kathakali, and undertake comparative investigations with other devotional traditions to identify both universal and culture-specific principles of ritual-to-stage adaptation. In addition, digital preservation initiatives aligned with UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage frameworks may contribute to long-term safeguarding, global dissemination, and continued artistic innovation within Indian classical performance traditions.

References

- Aiya, V. N. (1906). *The Travancore State Manual*. Government Press.
- Akhmetshin, E. M., Osadchy, E. A., Romanova, N. K., Glinkina, O. V., Lyirov, A. I., & Spiridonova, V. V. (2018). Study of the literary sources and plots of Indian temple dances. *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 14(6), 215-224.
http://www.ejst.tuiasi.ro/Files/73/21_Akhmetshin%20et%20al.pdf

- Aswini, C. P. (2024). *Sringara rasa in the padams of Swathi Tirunal: Study with reference to dance* [Doctoral dissertation, Annamalai University]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/560524>
- Balasaraswati, T. (1984). On Bharatanatyam. *Sangeet Natak*, 72-73, 8-14.
- Bhagyalekshmi, S. (2004). *Contribution of Travancore to Karnatic music*. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/contributionoftravancoretokarnaticmusicbhagyalekshmis./mode/2up>
- Bolt, B. (2009). *Practice-led research: Principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gouri Lakshmi Bayi. (2000). *Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple* (2nd ed.).
- Iyer, S. V. (1971). *Compositions of Sri Swathi Tirunal: Some firsts in Karnatak music*. Government Publications. <https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.11407/page/n1/mode/2up>
- Krishna, T. M. (2020). *Southern music: The Karnatik story*. HarperCollins.
- Krishnan, B. P. (2023). The group kirtanas of Maharaja Sri Swathi Thirunal. *Swathi Thirunal Research Portal*. <https://www.swathithirunal.in/?p=2768>
- Lemos, J. (2012). Radical recreation: Non-iconic movements of tradition in Keralite classical dance. *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry*, 32(1-2-3), 47-82. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1027772ar>
- Menon, R. (2023). Swathi Tirunal: The royal composer of Travancore. *Indian Classical Music Review*, 25(3), 124-139.
- Mitra, M. (2018). *The contribution of samsthana s: Uplifting Sadir and Koodiattam from 16th to 21st century: A critical study* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Mysore]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/252624>
- Nair, A. S. (2009). De-mystifying Svathi Tirunal. *The Journal of the Music Academy, Madras*, 80, 43-63. https://musicacademymadras.in/catalogue/files/journals/Vol.80_2009.pdf
- Nair, A. S. (2015). *Swathi Tirunal: Historicity of the person and the authenticity of his compositions* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kerala]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/565203>
- Nelson, R. (2013). *Practice as research in the arts: Principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Rao, T. K. G. (Ed.). (2010). *Compositions of Maharaja Śri Swāti Tirunal in Devanagari & diacritical Roman scripts*. Sri Swati Tirunal Research Foundation.

Sarma, S. A. S. (2022). Glory of the Tiruvananthapuram Padmanābhasvāmi Temple as described in the Māhātmyas. In M. Ambach, D. Bohlmann, & A. Malinar (Eds.), *Temples, texts, and networks: South Indian perspectives* (pp. 95-112). Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.906.c13937>

Sindhu, B. (2008). *Padams of Maharaja Swathi Tirunal: A critical study* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kerala]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/173581>

Subramaniam, V. (2023). Festival traditions and classical music preservation in South India. *Asian Cultural Studies*, 28(2), 85-97.

Thampy, S. A. (2016). *Traditional music of old South Travancore state* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Mysore]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/225663>

Vaidya, M. A. (2018). *An integrated study of Maharaja Swathi Thirunala's selective Sanskrit and Hindi musical compositions* [Doctoral dissertation, Kavikulaguru Kalidas Sanskrit University]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/302410>

Varma, J. (1995). *Kshethra krities of Maharaja Sri Swati Tirunal* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kerala]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/173586>

Venkitasubramonia Iyer, S. (1975). *Swati Tirunal and his music*. Music Research Library.
<https://musicresearchlibrary.net/omeka/items/show/3307>