



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 3.4 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Religious Foundations of Indian Classical Dance Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi

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Abstract

Indian classical dance is deeply rooted in religious traditions, where performance is conceived as a spiritual offering and a medium of devotion. This study explores the religious foundations of Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi, three major classical dance forms that originated within temple traditions and evolved as expressions of worship. Bharatanatyam, from Tamil Nadu, is associated with Lord Shiva as Nataraja and emphasizes divine storytelling through *mudras* and *abhinaya*. Kathak, emerging in North Indian temples, began as the narrative art of *kathakars* who depicted episodes from the epics and Krishna Leela, reflecting the influence of the Bhakti movement. Odissi, from Odisha, is closely tied to the Jagannath temple and inspired by Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, performed as ritual service to the deity. Despite regional variations, these forms share a sacred foundation where dance embodies devotion, mythology, and philosophy, highlighting the inseparable link between religion, art, and culture in India.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Religious Foundations, Indian Classical Dance

Introduction

The religious foundations of Indian classical dance are deeply interwoven with the spiritual, cultural, and philosophical ethos of the subcontinent, where performance is not merely an artistic endeavor but a sacred act of devotion. Rooted in the Natya Shastra of Bharata, which envisions dance as a divine creation gifted by Brahma for the moral and spiritual upliftment of humanity, Indian classical dance evolved primarily within temple spaces as a medium of worship, storytelling, and communion with the divine. Among its diverse forms, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi stand out as living traditions that exemplify the sacred union of art and religion. Bharatanatyam, emerging from the temples of Tamil Nadu, is steeped in the worship of Lord Shiva as Nataraja, embodying cosmic rhythm and spiritual surrender, while its *abhinaya* and *mudras* narrate mythological tales rooted in Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Kathak, originating in the temples of North India, began as a devotional storytelling tradition by *kathakars* who narrated episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Krishna Leela, reflecting the influence of the Bhakti movement; though later reshaped by Mughal court patronage, its religious essence remains centered on the divine love of Krishna and Radha. Odissi, the classical dance of Odisha, is intimately linked with the Jagannath cult and the Mahari tradition of temple dancers who offered their art as service to Lord Jagannath; its repertoire draws heavily from Jayadeva's *Gita*



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Govinda, expressing the devotional surrender of the soul to the divine. Despite their regional differences, these three traditions share common religious foundations: the use of dance as a spiritual offering, the embodiment of gods and goddesses through stylized movement, and the portrayal of epic and Puranic narratives as acts of devotion. The temple, as the original stage, endowed these forms with sanctity, and even in their contemporary theatrical expressions, the sacred undercurrent remains intact. Thus, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi not only preserve India's rich artistic heritage but also serve as profound vehicles of religious philosophy, reaffirming the inseparability of spirituality and aesthetics in Indian culture. This study of their religious foundations highlights how classical dance continues to bridge ritual, devotion, and artistic expression, offering timeless insight into India's civilizational spirit.

Brief History of Indian Classical Dance as a Spiritual and Cultural Tradition

Indian classical dance holds a unique place in the cultural and spiritual heritage of the subcontinent, where art has traditionally been inseparable from religion, philosophy, and social life. The origins of this tradition are traced to Bharata's *Natya Shastra* (circa 200 BCE–200 CE), a comprehensive treatise on dramaturgy, which describes dance (*nritta*), drama (*natya*), and expression (*abhinaya*) as divine creations meant to educate, entertain, and uplift society by blending beauty with morality. According to mythology, Lord Brahma created *natya* as the “fifth Veda” to make spiritual knowledge accessible to all, and thus dance became a vehicle of cosmic order (*rita*) and spiritual realization. In its earliest forms, classical dance evolved as ritual worship within temples, where performance was offered to deities as an act of devotion, with the dancer's body symbolizing the medium through which divine presence was invoked. The devadasi tradition in South India, the *mahari* tradition in Odisha, and the temple storytellers of North India demonstrate how dance was institutionalized as a sacred duty. Over centuries, classical dance developed into distinct styles such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, and Sattriya, each rooted in regional cultures yet unified by religious symbolism and spiritual expression. Bharatanatyam, the oldest surviving dance, emerged in Tamil temples as a ritual to Lord Shiva and Vishnu, symbolizing devotion through geometric precision, *mudras*, and *abhinaya*. Kathak, initially a temple storytelling art of North India, conveyed episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Krishna Leela before adapting to Mughal aesthetics while retaining its devotional essence. Odissi, shaped in the Jagannath temples of Odisha, flourished as ritual service inspired by Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. In all these forms, mythology, epics, and *puranic* themes were expressed through movement, rhythm, and gesture, reflecting the union of art and religion. Even during periods of political upheaval, such as the decline of temple patronage and the rise of colonial restrictions, Indian classical dance survived by adapting to court traditions and later by reemerging in the modern era as a symbol of national identity and cultural pride. Today, though performed globally on stage, these dance forms



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continue to embody their sacred origins, with gestures, music, and narratives still rooted in devotion, spiritual symbolism, and mythological storytelling. Thus, the brief history of Indian classical dance reveals its enduring role not just as an art form but as a spiritual practice, cultural expression, and philosophical journey, preserving India's ancient ideals of harmony between the divine and the aesthetic.

Role of Dance in Temples and Rituals in Ancient India

In ancient India, dance was not merely a form of entertainment but a sacred act deeply rooted in religious philosophy and ritual practice, serving as an essential bridge between the human and the divine. Temples, as the central institutions of cultural and spiritual life, became the original performance spaces where dance functioned as an offering to the gods, a form of prayer, and a re-enactment of mythological narratives. According to the *Natya Shastra*, dance was regarded as a divine creation bestowed by Brahma to teach morality and devotion, and it was believed that every movement, gesture (*mudra*), and expression (*abhinaya*) carried symbolic meaning, making the performance a ritual in itself. Dancers, often belonging to traditions such as the devadasis in South India and the maharis in Odisha, were dedicated to temple service, where their role was to embody devotion through the medium of the body, offering dance as a form of *seva* (service) to deities like Lord Shiva, Vishnu, and Jagannath. Performances were synchronized with daily temple rituals, festivals, and seasonal celebrations, reinforcing the cosmic order (*rta*) and sustaining the cycle of worship. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, Bharatanatyam was performed before the deity as an act of surrender and spiritual communion, representing stories of Shiva as Nataraja or Vishnu in his many incarnations. In Odisha, Odissi evolved within the Jagannath temple tradition, where dancers enacted Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* to express the soul's yearning for divine union. In North India, early forms of Kathak were performed by temple storytellers (*kathakars*), who combined narrative, music, and movement to bring alive episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Krishna Leela, thus transforming dance into a medium of religious education. Beyond storytelling, dance in temples was also cosmological, with the dancer's circular movements symbolizing the universe, the rhythms echoing cosmic cycles, and the gestures enacting eternal truths of dharma and devotion. The temple courtyard and sanctum served as sacred stages, where every performance was seen as a ritual offering rather than artistic display, sanctified by the presence of the deity and the participation of devotees. Over time, dance became an integral part of temple festivals, processions, and daily worship, reinforcing the intertwining of art, spirituality, and community life. Even when political and social changes, such as the decline of temple patronage under colonial rule, disrupted these practices, the sacred association of dance with ritual remained embedded in cultural memory. Thus, in ancient India, the role of dance in temples and rituals went far beyond performance, embodying a spiritual



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philosophy where movement was worship, rhythm was devotion, and art was a pathway to the divine.

Dance as a Medium of Devotion (Bhakti), Storytelling, and Religious Expression

In the cultural and spiritual history of India, dance has always transcended the boundaries of entertainment to become a profound medium of devotion, storytelling, and religious expression, embodying the essence of the *bhakti* tradition that flourished across centuries. From the earliest times, dance was seen as a divine gift, a sacred language through which the soul could communicate with the divine, and this sacredness was institutionalized within temples, rituals, and festivals. The *bhakti* movement, which emphasized personal devotion to a chosen deity through love, surrender, and artistic expression, gave dance a central role as a visible act of worship. Dancers became devotees who enacted the cosmic play of gods and goddesses through body movements, *mudras* (hand gestures), and *abhinaya* (expressive storytelling), making every performance an offering to the deity and an act of spiritual surrender. In Bharatanatyam, the dancer's performance often depicts Shiva as Nataraja, Vishnu's incarnations, or tales of Krishna, embodying devotional love and surrender to the divine through intricate gestures and rhythmic precision. In Kathak, the narrative tradition of *kathakars* evolved into devotional storytelling centered on Krishna and Radha, where rhythmic footwork, spins, and emotive expressions conveyed the divine *leela* (play) of the deity, blending poetry, music, and gesture into an immersive devotional experience. Similarly, Odissi emerged as an act of service in the Jagannath temple of Odisha, where the *maharis* dedicated their dance to Lord Jagannath, particularly through interpretations of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, which expressed the soul's longing for union with the divine in deeply lyrical and symbolic forms. Beyond specific traditions, dance functioned as religious storytelling, dramatizing episodes from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Puranas*, thereby making complex philosophical ideas accessible to devotees, many of whom were illiterate. Through this embodied narrative, dance became a visual scripture, where mythology, ethical teachings, and spiritual values were transmitted across generations. Religious expression through dance also symbolized cosmic truths: the dancer's body became a microcosm of the universe, rhythms echoed cosmic cycles, and performances aligned with rituals that reinforced harmony between the divine and the human. Festivals, temple rituals, and community gatherings provided platforms where dance sanctified collective devotion, ensuring that spirituality was not abstract but lived, experienced, and celebrated. Even as these traditions evolved into performance arts on stage in the modern period, the *bhakti* element remains central, with dancers continuing to portray devotion, surrender, and mythological storytelling as inseparable parts of their art. Thus, dance in India stands as a powerful cultural and spiritual force, where devotion finds form in movement, religious narratives come alive in performance, and artistic beauty merges seamlessly with divine worship.



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Religious Foundations of Indian Classical Dance

1. The Connection between Natya Shastra and the Divine Origin of Dance

The Natya Shastra, composed by Bharata around 200 BCE–200 CE, is the foundational text for Indian performing arts and provides the philosophical and religious basis for classical dance. It describes *natya* (the combined art of dance, drama, and music) as a divine creation of Lord Brahma, who drew elements from the four Vedas to create a “fifth Veda” that could teach dharma (righteousness) in an accessible form. Unlike the Vedas restricted to certain castes, *natya* was intended for all people, combining instruction with enjoyment. In this vision, dance was not merely entertainment but a spiritual discipline and cosmic activity. Every movement, gesture (*mudra*), and expression (*abhinaya*) was infused with symbolic meaning, reflecting cosmic truths and human emotions. Thus, the Natya Shastra elevated dance into a sacred language of the gods, where performers enacted divine stories, upheld moral values, and recreated the rhythm of the universe. This divine sanction explains why classical dance became inseparably linked with temples, rituals, and devotion, establishing its sacred origins and spiritual legitimacy in Indian culture.

2. Dance as a Form of Offering to Deities

From its earliest history, dance was performed as an act of devotional offering in temples, where the dancer's body and movement became instruments of worship. Among the many deities, Lord Shiva as Nataraja holds a preeminent position, embodying the cosmic dance (*tandava*) that symbolizes creation, preservation, and dissolution of the universe. Bharatanatyam, rooted in Tamil temples, reflects this symbolism, with each performance seen as an offering to Shiva or Vishnu. Similarly, Lord Krishna is celebrated as the eternal dancer, whose playful *rasleelas* with Radha and the gopis are enacted in Kathak and Odissi traditions, symbolizing divine love and the soul's yearning for union. In Odisha, Odissi developed as a ritual service to Lord Jagannath, with *maharis* (female temple dancers) offering daily and festival dances in the sanctum, especially performances of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. In all these traditions, dance was consecrated as *seva* (service), performed not for human spectators but as a direct offering to the deity. This ritualized role blurred the boundary between art and worship, sanctifying dance as a sacred practice where movement itself was prayer, rhythm became mantra, and the stage was transformed into a temple space.

3. The Role of Dance in the Bhakti Movement and Temple Traditions

The Bhakti Movement (7th–17th centuries) profoundly expanded the religious role of dance by emphasizing personal devotion, emotional surrender, and artistic expression as means of connecting with God. Saints and poets across India composed devotional hymns celebrating Shiva, Vishnu, and especially Krishna, and dancers brought these songs to life through expressive storytelling. Bharatanatyam dancers portrayed episodes from the *Ramayana*,



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Mahabharata, and Puranic lore, embodying themes of devotion, sacrifice, and divine grace. Kathak evolved from temple storytelling into a highly expressive form of devotional art, dramatizing Krishna's childhood pranks, Radha's longing, and the transcendental joy of *rasleela*. Odissi became a lyrical expression of love and surrender through its close connection with the *Gita Govinda*, dramatizing the soul's passionate yearning for divine union. Temple dancers, whether devadasis in Tamil Nadu or maharis in Odisha, were seen not merely as artists but as devotees consecrated to temple service, and their performances were integrated into daily rituals, annual festivals, and sacred processions. Even after the decline of temple patronage during colonial rule, the devotional spirit of dance survived, carried forward by performers who preserved its sacred essence. Thus, the Bhakti tradition and temple practices ensured that dance remained a powerful medium of religious expression, combining aesthetics with spirituality and uniting performer, audience, and deity in shared devotion.

Bharatanatyam

- **Origin in Tamil Nadu Temples**

Bharatanatyam, considered the oldest of the Indian classical dance forms, traces its origin to the ancient temples of Tamil Nadu, where it was performed as an integral part of religious rituals and spiritual practices. Rooted in the prescriptions of the *Natya Shastra*, this dance evolved as a form of worship offered in temple sanctums, where movement, rhythm, and expression were regarded as sacred acts rather than entertainment. In its earliest phase, Bharatanatyam was performed exclusively within the temple space by women dedicated to the deity, and every performance was seen as a symbolic act of communion between the human and the divine. The art form embodied the cultural philosophy that dance was not separate from religion but was itself a means of spiritual elevation, a ritual that sanctified the performer, the temple, and the devotees. Over centuries, Bharatanatyam became central to temple festivals, daily worship, and seasonal celebrations, sustaining its identity as a spiritual practice before evolving into a stage art in the modern era.

- **Association with Lord Shiva (Nataraja) and the Devadasi Tradition**

The religious essence of Bharatanatyam is most clearly expressed in its association with Lord Shiva as Nataraja, the cosmic dancer whose *tandava* represents creation, preservation, and dissolution of the universe. Every Bharatanatyam performance is believed to echo the divine dance of Nataraja, with gestures, rhythms, and postures symbolizing cosmic balance. This connection with Shiva elevated the dance form to a cosmic philosophy in motion, reinforcing its role as a sacred offering rather than an aesthetic display. Equally significant is the devadasi tradition, in which women, known as "servants of God," were dedicated to temple service and performed Bharatanatyam as a ritual act before the deity. The devadasis were custodians of this art, transmitting its repertoire, discipline, and spiritual meaning across generations. While the



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institution of devadasis declined under colonial rule and social reforms, their role ensured the survival of Bharatanatyam's religious roots, which continue to inform its practice even today.

- **Use of Mudras and Abhinaya to Narrate Devotional Stories**

A defining feature of Bharatanatyam is its sophisticated system of mudras (hand gestures) and abhinaya (expressive storytelling), through which performers narrate mythological episodes and devotional themes. The *hasta mudras* symbolize objects, deities, emotions, and actions, while facial expressions convey the emotional essence (*rasa*) of the narrative. Together, these elements transform Bharatanatyam into a visual scripture, where stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and devotional hymns are enacted for the spiritual edification of the audience. Devotional compositions such as the *varnam*, *padam*, and *kirtanam* allow the dancer to portray the devotee's surrender to the divine, often depicting the cosmic dance of Shiva, the incarnations of Vishnu, or the playful leelas of Krishna. In this way, Bharatanatyam embodies the essence of bhakti, where the dancer becomes both storyteller and devotee, using the body and expression as instruments of worship. Thus, Bharatanatyam continues to stand as a profound blend of art and spirituality, a timeless offering where movement, rhythm, and expression converge in devotion.

Kathak

- **Origin in North India as a Temple Storytelling Dance (Kathakar – Storytellers)**

Kathak, one of the eight classical dance forms of India, traces its roots to North India, where it originated as a form of storytelling in temples performed by wandering bards known as *kathakars*. The word *Kathak* itself is derived from the Sanskrit word *katha*, meaning “story,” and *kathakar*, meaning “storyteller.” In its earliest form, Kathak was not just dance but a narrative art where music, gestures, and expressions combined to bring alive the stories of gods, epics, and sacred lore. The *kathakars* narrated episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas, often focusing on tales of divine intervention and moral values, using movement and rhythm to make spiritual teachings accessible to common people. Performed in temple courtyards and village gatherings, these presentations functioned as a form of religious education through performance, ensuring that mythology and dharma reached both the literate and illiterate. Thus, Kathak began its journey as a temple-centered devotional practice deeply rooted in oral traditions and ritual performance.

- **Transformation through Bhakti Poetry of Krishna-Radha**

With the spread of the Bhakti movement between the 7th and 17th centuries, Kathak underwent a profound transformation, embracing devotional poetry as its central theme. Poets such as Surdas, Mirabai, Vidyapati, and Jayadeva composed verses celebrating the divine love between Krishna and Radha, and Kathak dancers brought these compositions to life through expressive storytelling (*abhinaya*). The *rasleela* of Krishna became the heart of Kathak, where rhythmic footwork, graceful spins, and emotive gestures depicted the joyous play, divine love, and



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mystical union of the human soul with God. This period emphasized *bhakti rasa*, or the emotional essence of devotion, making Kathak not only an art form but a spiritual experience for both performer and audience. By dramatizing the intimate bond between Krishna and Radha, Kathak embodied the Bhakti ideal of surrender, longing, and divine union, ensuring that the art form retained its religious core even as it evolved aesthetically.

- **Later Adaptation in Mughal Courts, Yet Retaining Devotional Roots**

During the medieval period, Kathak experienced significant changes under the patronage of the Mughal courts, particularly in cities such as Lucknow, Jaipur, and Delhi. Court culture emphasized refinement, grace, and aesthetic display, and Kathak absorbed Persian and Central Asian influences, including intricate footwork, delicate spins (*chakkars*), and subtle expressions. Themes of romance, courtly elegance, and abstract rhythmic patterns were incorporated, transforming Kathak into a sophisticated performance art admired for its virtuosity and elegance. However, despite this secular and courtly adaptation, Kathak never lost its devotional roots. The spiritual essence of Krishna *leela* and Bhakti poetry continued to shape its repertoire, and many performances still carried mythological and devotional undertones. Even in Mughal courts, where secular entertainment flourished, Kathak retained its foundation in storytelling and spiritual expression. Today, Kathak embodies this dual legacy—devotional depth from its temple origins and aesthetic brilliance from its courtly refinement—making it both a sacred art form and a versatile cultural expression.

Odissi

- **Origin in Odisha Temples, Especially Jagannath Temple of Puri**

Odissi, one of the oldest surviving classical dance forms of India, originated in the sacred temples of Odisha, with its strongest roots in the famous Jagannath Temple of Puri. From its inception, Odissi was conceived as a devotional offering, performed as part of daily rituals and annual festivals within the temple complex. Sculptures on temple walls, particularly those of Konark, Jagannath, and Mukteswar temples, vividly depict dancers in fluid poses (*tribhangi* and *chowka*), confirming Odissi's antiquity and its close association with temple worship. Unlike secular entertainment, Odissi was fundamentally ritualistic, performed in sanctified spaces before the deity, making it a form of living prayer expressed through movement. The dance, with its graceful curves, lyrical expressions, and rhythmic patterns, became an essential medium of worship, reinforcing the philosophy that art and religion were inseparable in the cultural life of Odisha.

- **Performance as Mahari Tradition (Female Temple Dancers)**

Central to Odissi's early history was the **Mahari tradition**, where women dedicated to temple service performed ritual dances as offerings to Lord Jagannath. These women, much like the devadasis of South India, were considered spiritually wedded to the deity and devoted their lives



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to serving him through dance and song. The Maharis performed both daily rituals and elaborate festival ceremonies, enacting mythological stories and devotional themes that glorified Jagannath and other forms of Vishnu. Their performances were seen not as entertainment but as acts of *seva* (service), where the dancer's body became an instrument of spiritual surrender. The Mahari tradition emphasized chastity, devotion, and ritual purity, which sanctified their role within the temple community. Although the system declined with colonial interference and social reforms, the essence of the Mahari performances—the sacredness of dance as divine service—remains embedded in Odissi's spiritual character, preserving its unique temple-centered identity.

- **Deep Link with Vaishnavism and Gita Govinda Compositions of Jayadeva**

Odissi's repertoire has always been deeply intertwined with Vaishnavism, particularly through the devotional compositions of the 12th-century poet Jayadeva. His masterpiece, the *Gita Govinda*, which describes the passionate love between Krishna and Radha, became the central text for Odissi performances within the Jagannath temple. Maharis and later *gotipuas* (young boys trained to perform in feminine roles) enacted these lyrical poems through expressive gestures (*mudras*) and facial expressions (*abhinaya*), giving visual form to the soul's yearning for union with the divine. The *Gita Govinda* was not only sung during temple rituals but also danced, transforming poetry into embodied devotion. This connection with Vaishnavism ensured that Odissi retained its bhakti-centered philosophy, where each movement symbolized surrender, love, and divine union. The distinctive postures of Odissi, its intricate footwork, and emotive storytelling continue to embody this devotional essence, making it both a spiritual practice and a cultural treasure. Thus, Odissi stands as a dance form where temple ritual, devotional poetry, and artistic expression converge, carrying forward its centuries-old legacy of religious devotion through performance.

Conclusion

The religious foundations of Indian classical dance, particularly Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi, reveal that these art forms are far more than aesthetic practices; they are sacred traditions that embody India's spiritual and cultural ethos. Rooted in the prescriptions of the Natya Shastra, which defines dance as a divine creation intended to guide humanity toward moral and spiritual upliftment, these forms developed within temple rituals as offerings to the gods and mediums of devotion. Bharatanatyam, flourishing in the temples of Tamil Nadu, reflects the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva as Nataraja and preserves the sanctity of the devadasi tradition, where dance was performed as an act of worship. Kathak, though later refined in Mughal courts, originated with temple storytellers (*kathakars*) and was deeply shaped by the Bhakti movement, especially through poetic expressions of Krishna and Radha's divine love. Odissi, nurtured in the Jagannath temple of Puri, exemplifies temple-centered devotion through the Mahari tradition and the lyrical spirituality of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. Despite differences in regional styles and historical



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evolution, these three classical dances share an enduring religious foundation: the use of the human body as a vessel of worship, the narration of mythological and devotional stories through *mudras* and *abhinaya*, and the sanctification of performance as prayer. Even as these traditions have transitioned from temple sanctums to global stages, they continue to embody the essence of bhakti, ritual, and cosmic symbolism, affirming the inseparability of art and spirituality in Indian culture. Thus, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi stand as timeless testimonies to India's civilizational vision, where dance is not merely performance but a profound act of religious expression, uniting the sacred and the aesthetic in a celebration of divine truth.

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