Memetic Disruption: How Internet Memes Challenge and Transform Traditional Power Hierarchies in the Guru-Shishya Relationship

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Abstract:

This paper examines how memes function as catalysts within the Indian classical dance community, challenging entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and authority in traditional guru-shishya pedagogical structures. Using humor and visual storytelling, memes created and circulated by anyone with access to digital platforms validate lived experiences of exclusion, foster solidarity among users, and offer an accessible yet subversive mode of resistance against pedagogical authority. Memes are treated here as participatory digital artifacts that reflect and critique the power dynamics embedded within Indian classical dance pedagogy. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about power relations between gurus and disciples, tradition, and critique—proposing memes as tools that both contest and reimagine modes of learning and belonging.

Keywords:

Indian classical dance, Guru-Shishya Parampara, Pedagogy, Memes, and Digital resistance.

Memes have been around longer than the digital age, but I recognize them in my research as powerful creative tools actively used in online cultures—as a means of imitation, critique, and even protest across various fields (Hartman et al. 68). However, memes have gained particular prominence at present in online social media cultures. Their expressive range is shaped by how they are published and circulated in digital spaces. This study deliberately focuses on the Instagram handle @cartoon_natyam, created by India-based movement artist Veena Basavarajaiah (Pulse).[1] As a dancer, I have followed this page for a considerable period, drawn to its cartoon-style illustrations, clever character names, and its ability to articulate what often remains unspoken within Indian classical dance spaces. The account uses humor and satire to highlight issues such as pedagogical hierarchies, institutional silences, favoritism, caste privilege, and financial gatekeeping.

My decision to center this particular meme account stems from lived familiarity—these memes resonate with the realities I have both witnessed and experienced in my own dance journey. Rather than rejecting tradition outright, the posts on @cartoon_natyam expose its contradictions and interrogate the normalized power structures embedded within classical dance pedagogy. In doing so, the memes become tools for critical engagement, community recognition, and epistemic resistance. Their use in this context is unconventional because they employ humor and visual storytelling to critique deeply entrenched issues—departing from the formal, often hierarchical methods of discussion within the dance community. By analyzing these memes, this study explores how Odissi dancers engage with and challenge pedagogical hierarchies across both offline and online spaces.

The digital presence of Cartoon Natyam connects with my lived experiences as an Odissi dancer for over 25 years. More importantly, it has linked me with a community of artists who creatively engage with longstanding issues in Indian classical dance pedagogy. This work emerges from my training within the guru-

1 To view the Instagram profile of Cartoon Natyam, visit: https://www.instagram.com/cartoon_natyam?igsh=NTc-4MTIwNjQ2YQ%3D%3D&utm_source=qr

shishya parampara (the Indian apprenticeship model) and the ongoing transformations in dance education through digital platforms such as Zoom classes, YouTube tutorials, and social media reels.

According to media studies scholar Limor Shifman, memes function as adaptable content that evolves through imitation, parody, and creative reinterpretation (Hartman et al. 68). This participatory nature—where users engage by creating multiple versions of memes or responding through likes, shares, and comments—allows memes to serve as tools for both humor and social critique. In the context of Indian classical dance, memes serve as an artistic response, providing dancers with a means to visualize and articulate their lived experiences, much like how drawing and artistic expression can help students engage with and construct meaning from texts (Hartman et al. 121). As Wilhelm argues, visualization "heighten[s] motivation, engagement, and enjoyment" while fostering deeper critical reflection (Hartman et al. 67). Similarly, the memes created by Cartoon Natyam act as a form of visual storytelling, allowing dancers to navigate complex power dynamics between gurus and students, gurus and curators, influential (in terms of economic status, social status, and caste and class) student families, pedagogical tensions, and structural hierarchies embedded in the traditional guru-shishya framework (Banerji et al.; Chatterjea; Prickett and Schippers).

Brief Historical Context

Odissi, a reconstructed classical dance form, emerged in the 20th century as part of a nationalist effort to codify regional dance traditions into 'classical.' Drawing from temple sculptures, Sanskrit treatises like the Natyashastra, and rituals such as the mahari and gotipua traditions, Odissi was shaped by both historical influences and modern interventions. While maharis, female temple dancers in the Jagannath cult, performed devotionally, the gotipuas—young boys trained in acrobatic and lyrical dance—became key influences on the contemporary Odissi repertoire (Banerji 8,12; Kothari & Patnaik).

This revival marked a significant shift, positioning Odissi not only as an artistic tradition but also as a political and cultural emblem. The mid-20th-century revival of Odissi was deeply tied to state-led cultural policies, where dance became a symbol of Odisha's heritage and India's postcolonial identity. However, this process reflected Hindu (religion) majoritarian impulses, privileging Sanskritized aesthetics—dance movements, themes, and narratives aligned with ancient Hindu scriptures—while marginalizing alternative histories and performers from non-dominant castes and communities. Institutionalization, led by male *gotipua* gurus, prioritized a refined aesthetic aligned with nationalist ideals, often at the expense of practitioners who did not fit this framework (Marglin & Thobani).

A significant consequence of the revival was the erasure of the *mahari* tradition. *Maharis* were stigmatized during British colonial rule due to Victorian perceptions of unmarried women in temple service (Banerji & Marglin). Nationalist reformers in the 20th century distanced Odissi from its *mahari* lineage, turning instead to the gotipua tradition—deemed more "respectable"—as a primary influence (Banerji; Marglin & Roy). This shift erased the contributions of female temple dancers and reinforced a hierarchical structure where male gurus became the primary custodians of Odissi's pedagogy. Moreover, the emphasis on Sanskrit texts and Brahminical narratives sidelined the influence of vernacular traditions (Banerji).

While *Bhakti* movements, which rejected caste hierarchies and embraced a more inclusive

approach to devotion, played a crucial role in shaping Odisha's cultural landscape, the reconstructed Odissi of the mid-20th century did not fully integrate these egalitarian aspects (Banerji). Instead, it reinforced existing caste hierarchies and male authority (Banerji 10, 11).

Guru-Shishya Parampara

While Odissi gained recognition as a classical art form, its reconstruction marginalized many of its historical practitioners and alternative narratives. The dominance of male gurus and the emphasis on Sanskritized aesthetics reflect broader patterns of cultural gatekeeping, dictating whose histories are preserved and whose are erased (Banerji). These historical hierarchies continue to shape Odissi's pedagogy today, particularly in the guru-shishya parampara, where power is determined by skill, seniority (years of training under one guru), social status, and personal relationships with the guru (Srinivasan et al.). In this system, questioning gurus is often discouraged, and access to knowledge is controlled through selective transmission, complicating the student's journey (Banerji 99; Banerji et al.; Chatterjea; Prickett; Schippers and Srinivasan et al.). The ambiguity in decision-making by the gurus further complicates the student's journey, as opportunities to perform or teach are distributed through mechanisms that remain largely unchallenged (Banerji et al.; Chatterjea ; Prickett ; Schippers and Srinivasan et al.). However, as Odissi moves from traditional in-person training to digital spaces, these dynamics have been reconfigured. While digital platforms offer new modes of access and critique, this paper does not propose a replacement for in-person training. Instead, it focuses on how memes—often circulated in these spaces—spotlight the exclusions and inequalities already embedded in classical training structures.

The digital realm challenges the guru's singular role as the primary gatekeeper of knowledge by introducing alternative sources of learning, such as online tutorials, workshops led by multiple instructors, and peer-to-peer exchanges. This decentralization of authority disrupts the exclusivity of guru-led training, raising questions about legitimacy, lineage, and authenticity in Odissi pedagogy.

My questioning of the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* is deeply personal, but it also speaks to broader concerns within dance pedagogy and education. My research approaches these structures critically, and I raise similar questions to those posed in the digital sphere through the production of memes. Who is recognized as an authority? How do power and access shape not just performance but the ways in which dance is learned and legitimized? These inquiries, whether presented through academic critique or humor, highlight the ongoing negotiation of hierarchy, tradition, and innovation in Odissi. Engagement with both traditional and digital Odissi training spaces, focusing specifically on the authority of the guru, the relationship between gurus and students, and the lack of dialogical learning. The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* enforces a hierarchical knowledge transmission system where learning flows in one direction, from guru to disciple, leaving little room for critical dialogue or collaborative exchange. This structure positions the guru as an unquestionable authority, limiting students' ability to engage meaningfully with their own learning process (Banerji et al.; Chatterjea; Prickett and Schippers).

To critically understand how memes function as both mirrors and interventions within the Odissi dance community, it is essential to consider how they communicate and circulate epistemic truths—truths that are felt but often left unsaid in traditional settings. These memes, through humor and visual storytelling, allow

practitioners to express lived experiences, structural critiques, and shared frustrations that may be difficult to voice within formal pedagogical hierarchies. As Shifman (2014) and Phillips (2015) argue, memes enable communities to articulate cultural knowledge and social critique in ways that are emotionally resonant and collectively validated.

Meme Analysis - Pedagogy, Power, and Epistemic Truths

Memes offer a powerful critique of the hierarchical and often opaque pedagogical structures in Indian classical dance communities. Through satire and visual storytelling, they expose how status, favoritism, caste privilege, and financial power shape learning experiences, performance opportunities, and institutional access. These biases are rarely named explicitly in dance classes, but they are deeply felt by many practitioners. In the meme format, such truths become both visible and shareable.

One meme asks, "A teacher in our institution is misbehaving with students. Where do I report this abuse?" (see figs 1 and 2) — a stark reminder of the lack of formal accountability or redressal mechanisms in many dance institutions. Here, humor does not deflect; instead, it confronts the silence surrounding abuse by mocking the very absence of a reporting system. This meme critiques not only individual behavior but also the structural culture of unchecked authority.

Another meme depicts a row of students whispering, "She got to perform because her parents sponsored the event." This points to how financial privilege becomes a gatekeeping mechanism in performance circuits, challenging the idealized notion of classical dance as a meritocracy (see figs. 3 and 4). The meme delivers a punchline that dancers relate to because it mirrors reality—an epistemological truth affirmed through collective recognition.

In another example, a tired dancer asks, "When do we get paid?" to which an organizer replies, "The exposure is your payment." This meme critiques the exploitation of dancers under the guise of visibility. It reflects how classical dance, while steeped in tradition, continues to operate within informal and exploitative labor systems—especially for younger or less established artists.

Memes such as these operate as epistemological dialogues. They either affirm known social truths, those lived but often unspoken, or challenge the dominant narratives that attempt to suppress dissent. The very act of laughing at these memes becomes an acknowledgement: "Yes, we know this happens." This laughter is not merely comedic; it is cathartic, communal, and often subversive.

Even though my own dance practice is rooted in embodied and pedagogical knowledge passed down through the *guru-shishya parampara*, I find that memes offer a parallel modality for critique. They help dancers, especially those without institutional power, to express frustration, build solidarity, and imagine alternative futures. The meme thus becomes a tool of passive resistance and a legitimate site of cultural critique. The normalization of biases such as favoritism, caste privilege, financial gatekeeping, and unchecked authority within classical dance pedagogy reflects broader systems of social exclusion. By exclusions I refer to socio-economic exclusion, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are excluded from full participation due to the financial costs of training or access to resources, cultural exclusion when students are unable to fully engage with the nuanced traditions and dialects specific to a particular dance style, particularly if they come from different regional or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, gendered exclusion may occur, especially within a patriarchal dance

Figure 1. *Where do I report abuse?" — Questioning the silence in classical institutions.*

Figure 2. *No official response — a structural absence of accountability.*

Figure 3. *"She got to perform…" — The politics of sponsorship and privilege.*
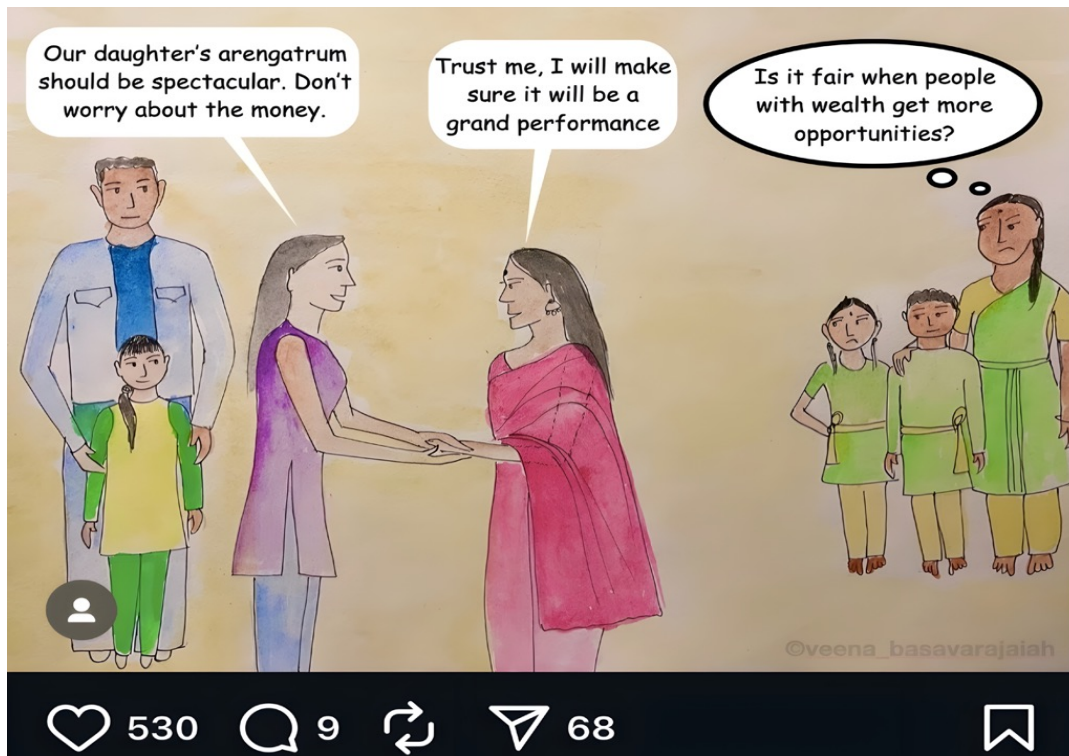

Figure 4 . *Favoritism disguised as merit in performance opportunities.*

community, where female dancers face limited access to advanced training or are subject to restrictive expectations regarding their bodies and performances. Memes such as those by Cartoon Natyam function as critical interventions, destabilizing these normalized hierarchies and fostering spaces for epistemological resistance and dialogue by encouraging practitioners to look beneath the surface of idealized pedagogical narratives and confront the hidden structures of power. Importantly, by circulating these critiques in humorous, visual formats, memes do not reject tradition outright but rather push it to evolve, expanding who gets to comment, critique, and reimagine the future of classical dance.

Looking 'beneath' through memes

Memes provide a means to interrogate these shifts by offering an accessible yet critical lens through which dancers can comment on emerging tensions. Through humor and satire, memes expose the contradictions between traditional notions of obedience and reverence toward the guru and the increasing agency of students who now have multiple learning pathways. They highlight frustrations with rigid hierarchies, the financial barriers to training, and the shifting power dynamics as dancers navigate both digital and in-person learning spaces.

While in-person immersive classes in Odissi remain deeply valuable due to the dance form's culturally embedded nature, my research explores the extent to which digital platforms can challenge or disrupt the steep hierarchies between gurus and disciples. Rather than positioning digital learning in opposition to traditional training, this paper situates meme culture as a parallel discourse, one that critiques entrenched hierarchies, not the medium of instruction itself.

The meme format, particularly through its use of juxtaposition and satire, creates space for nuanced thinking and discussion. As Patricia Dunn suggests, the act of placing ideas side by side forces a more discerning and critical representation of concepts, making memes an effective medium for engaging with the evolving landscape of Indian classical dance pedagogy (Hartman et al. 68).

Arabella Stanger's critique of dance pedagogy highlights the intricate relationships between performers, spectators, and the institutional structures that govern these practices. While dance has the potential to resist oppressive structures, Stanger notes that it can also perpetuate and legitimize systems of power, such as imperial, colonial, and white supremacist dynamics. This critique is particularly relevant to the *guru-shishya parampara*, which, despite its cultural and spiritual significance, can reinforce hierarchical power structures that perpetuate exclusion. These exclusions are compounded by how the *guru-shishya* system has been framed historically. As dance scholars like Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra argue, these exclusionary dynamics are not incidental but are deeply embedded in the epistemic foundations of traditional dance pedagogy. Stanger connects this to the work of Banerji and Mitra, who call for dance scholarship to "unravel and unsettle" the epistemes that uphold imperial, colonial, and white supremacist systems (Stanger 4). In the case of Odissi, this unraveling is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary reimagining of the foundational narratives of the dance form itself. The urgency of this unmasking and looking 'beneath' intensifies as digital platforms expand access to Odissi dance pedagogy (Stanger 6, 11 and 15). Banerji critiques how Odissi's dominant narratives exclude marginalized voices (Banerji). Both Banerji and Mitra call for a recasting of its pedagogical structures, arguing

that entrenched hierarchies within the *guru-shishya* framework constrain the potential for more inclusive, dynamic, and accessible ways of engaging with the form (Banerji et al.).

Drawing from Stanger, Banerji, and Mitra's work, it becomes clear that the transmission of knowledge in dance is a deeply political act. For the *guru-shishya* system to evolve, we must critically examine its foundational narratives of authority, power, and access. This requires a shift toward a more dialogical, reciprocal relationship between teacher and student, where respect, agency, and inclusivity are prioritized and rigid hierarchies are dismantled (Sen-Podstawska).

My work reflects these observations, particularly how digital memes act as an effective tool for passive resistance and a vehicle for critique. By using digital platforms like Instagram, memes written in English reach broader audiences in India and across the transnational diaspora and challenge traditional dance pedagogies. These memes, with their humorous cartoons and illustrations, serve as a subtle yet powerful critique of rigid structures of authority, refusing full transparency and inviting viewers to "unmask" the process of knowledge transmission. This is closely related to how the digital landscape fosters a space for agency and subversion, inviting alternative, community-rooted ways of engaging with pedagogy in Odissi and more broadly, within the Indian classical dance community.

Conclusion

Memes, in this context, function as vehicles of epistemic truth, truths grounded in lived experiences that are often silenced in formal pedagogical spaces. As Limor Shifman (2014) notes, memes circulate affective knowledge through humor, repetition, and recontextualization, enabling collective validation and resistance. Through meme culture, individuals express shared understandings of injustice, discrimination, and exclusion, thereby generating a "low-cost protest culture" that is both participatory and politically charged (Milner). Through digital sharing, these memes become part of a subversive protest repertoire, amplified by audience engagement via likes, shares, comments, and follower networks. These interactions not only validate the meme's critique but also help diffuse it across the community, reinforcing its relevance and broadening its impact. While the protest may be quiet in tone, it becomes widely visible and socially resonant, supporting a cultural shift without overtly challenging.

In this sense, my work highlights the agency that digital tools offer in reshaping traditional dance pedagogies. These memes, through their humor and visual appeal, underscore how digital spaces can be harnessed to question the legitimacy of traditional authority while creating new ways for practitioners to engage with and learn Odissi. Though subtle, this form of passive resistance plays a crucial role in challenging established power structures and encouraging a more inclusive, reflective learning environment in the digital age.

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