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Divya Hoskere

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FEATURE ARTICLE



Learning the 108 *Karanas*: Toward Embodied Practice and Pedagogical Renewal in Bharatanātyam

Divya Hoskere, MA, PhD ^{a,b}

^aFaculty of Management, Law, Humanities & Social Sciences, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, KA, India; ^bMusic Brain and Creativity Initiative, School of Humanities, National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru, India

ABSTRACT

Learning the 108 *karanas*, codified dance units from the ancient text *Nāṭyaśāstra*, offers new possibilities for embodied training, creative exploration, and pedagogical renewal in Bharatanātyam. As a Bharatanātyam dancer, I engage these possibilities through a practice-as-research (PaR) lens. Structured training in *karanas* revealed significant pedagogical potential: enhancing kinesthetic alignment, enabling both expressive and abstract choreography, and fostering aesthetic integrity. Through embodied inquiry and critical analysis of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, I examine how *karanas*, often excluded from mainstream curriculum in India, can complement *aḍavu*-based pedagogy and support a more holistic and responsive Bharatanātyam education. This study contributes to ongoing conversations in dance education by centering practitioner experience as a site of pedagogical innovation in Indian classical dance.

KEYWORDS

Karanas; Bharatanātyam pedagogy; practice-as-research; choreography; pedagogy

Introduction

Reconsidering Bharatanātyam Pedagogy through the *Karanas*

Bharatanātyam,¹ as practiced today, is both a continuation and reconstruction of *Sadīr*, the hereditary temple dance of South India's *devadāsīs*.² While the ecosystem of *Sadīr* emerged from ritualistic Hindu temple traditions, its movement vocabulary, like that of many Indian performance forms, drew from ancient dance practices documented in classical treatises describing movement forms closely resembling both *Sadīr* and contemporary *Bharatanātyam*.

The foundational vocabulary of Bharatanātyam, namely, the *aḍavus* (basic dance steps), as danced today, have been traced by some scholars to the *karanas*: 108 codified movement units described in the ancient text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*³ (Ganser 2022; Raghavan 2004; Subrahmanyam 2003a). The *karanas* are well documented both textually and sculpturally, with frozen moments of nearly all of the 108 movements depicted in temple reliefs across South and Southeast Asia.⁴

Yet, despite their historical prominence, the *karanas* remain a site of interpretive complexity in contemporary Bharatanātyam pedagogy and practice. In my experience, current training systems emphasize *aḍavu*-based instruction, which, while effective in building rhythmic and stylistic fluency, often overlooks

integrated movement training that connects full-body coordination with expressive and structural detail. Moreover, *aḍavu* pedagogy tends to treat *nṛtta* (abstract movement) and *abhinaya* (expressive communication) as distinct domains, rather than as interrelated aspects of a unified movement system. As a result, I developed precision without cultivating the kinesthetic awareness or expressive versatility that the *karanas*, perhaps, had the potential to offer.

To address these pedagogical gaps, I turned to the 108 *Nāṭyaśāstra karanas*. The *karanas* practiced today are the reconstruction and revival efforts of renowned danseuse Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam. Through performance, pedagogy, detailed documentaries (Balakrishnan 2010; Subrahmanyam 2022), scholarly writing (Subrahmanyam 1979; 2003a), and even designing sculptures (Ramani 2018; Subrahmanyam 2004), she has disseminated comprehensive knowledge of the *karanas*. She named her practice *Bharatanṛtyam*, blending the classical *mārga* (codified technique of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*) with the *deśi* (regional tradition) of Bharatanātyam (Khanna 2019; Kothari 1982).

Subrahmanyam's work remains the only comprehensive reconstruction of the 108 *Nāṭyaśāstra karanas* (Ganesh 2003). Broader debates on reconstruction recognize that such revivals are inevitably shaped by interpretive choices (Franko 1989), which in this case combine analysis of texts, sculptural evidence, and embodied experimentation. While some researchers

have previously explored *karaṇas* as static poses or acrobatic sequences, these efforts do not systematically reconstruct the codified 108 *karaṇa* movements, nor do they integrate textual, sculptural, and performative analysis in a coherent framework (Royo 2004).

Today, *karaṇas* are typically learned from teachers who have received specific training in Subrahmanyam's methodology. Although the *karaṇas* have been reconstructed and are available to dancers today, few Bharatanāṭyam educators actively teach them, and most dancers pursue this vocabulary outside their primary training. I am one such dancer: *a Bharatanāṭyam practitioner who has learned the karaṇas*. Embodied in this statement is a seemingly artificial pedagogical divide that my dancing body rejects. It does not experience the *karaṇas* as foreign insertions into my Bharatanāṭyam training, but as part of a holistic engagement with movement. Why, then, does the divide persist?

Their marginal position in mainstream pedagogy is shaped not by lack of relevance, but by their omission from institutionalized training models during postcolonial revival efforts (Balakrishnan 2010). As Subrahmanyam notes, the *karaṇas* had already fallen out of practice long before this revival, which meant revivalist codifications had little precedent for their inclusion. It was only with her subsequent reconstruction that the *karaṇas* began to recenter contemporary practice. This dynamic echoes Chakravorty's (1998, 119) observation that, "dance became removed from the lived experiences of ordinary people and became textualized and canonized in the guise of authoritative knowledge." In this context, my embodied experience of learning the *karaṇas* not only challenges their exclusion from institutional pedagogy but also suggests their potential relevance for contemporary Bharatanāṭyam training.

The present study does not focus on the historiography of the *karaṇas*. Instead, it examines, through an embodied lens, the experiences of a Bharatanāṭyam dancer engaging with the *karaṇas* to integrate practitioner/learner insight into evolving pedagogical approaches within the form. Alongside my own journey, I include responses from ten Bharatanāṭyam professionals who have engaged with the *karaṇas*, which help situate these reflections within the larger community of contemporary practice.

While most training systems continue to center *adāvas*, my recent engagement with the *karaṇas* revealed their value as an advanced framework for integrating expressive detail, kinesthetic awareness, and internal rhythm. Is their absence merely an inherited circumstance or does it constrain the range of pedagogical tools

available to educators and practitioners today? What might be gained by reintegrating the *karaṇas* into contemporary practice at advanced stages of Bharatanāṭyam training?

Rather than replacing existing structures, the *karaṇas* offer an opportunity to expand the pedagogical and aesthetic horizons of Bharatanāṭyam—broadening how movement is taught, embodied, and creatively interpreted. This perspective encourages educators to revisit movement vocabularies not as fixed rulebooks, but as evolving frameworks shaped by embodied inquiry.

Method

Tracing Experience

This study explores the embodied experience of *karaṇas* within contemporary Bharatanāṭyam practice using a practice-as-research (PaR) framework (Nelson 2022). As a mode of inquiry in which artistic practice serves as both method and outcome, PaR enables an exploration of how knowledge is generated through doing. It investigates how engaging with the *karaṇas* has informed my approach to learning, reshaped choreographic thinking, and challenged assumptions embedded in conventional dance training.

This study draws on over two decades of Bharatanāṭyam training under Sri. P. Praveen Kumar and my ongoing practice as a professional performer, choreographer, and researcher. Within this background, I undertook six months of focused study to learn the 108 *karaṇas* under Smt. Nirupama Rajendra, followed by another six months of choreographic integration, reflective studio exploration, and continued refinement. My positionality is shaped by a hybrid context: rooted in lineage-based pedagogy yet framed by an institutional research environment, which informs my interpretation of the *karaṇas* as both technical material and pedagogical resource.

The process of inquiry in this study combines sustained physical practice, reflective journaling, and studio experimentation. A phenomenological lens (Dufrenne 1973) informs my reflection on how meaning emerges through movement: how specific moments of learning generated shifts in perception, altered habitual technique and shaped the unique aesthetic experience of the *karaṇas*.

Hermeneutics (Chari 1993; Gadamer 1975) supports my interpretive engagement with classical texts such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, allowing me to explore how embodied understanding intersects with codified knowledge. In addition, I invited ten Bharatanāṭyam professionals to share their experiences of learning *karaṇas*; selected

responses are woven into the analysis and the full set of responses is available upon request.⁵

Through this multi-pronged approach, the dancing self becomes a site of inquiry—where learning, memory, technique, and meaning intersect. The combination of movement-based exploration and critical reflection enables a dialogic process between theory and practice, text and body, tradition and contemporary pedagogy.

What is a *Karāṇa*?

To understand the pedagogical potential of the *karāṇas*, we must first revisit their foundational definitions—both textual and embodied.

In Sanskrit, *karāṇa* denotes an action or “the most efficient means of accomplishing an act” (Abhyankar 1961, 100). However, in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* it takes on a specific meaning and is defined as: *hastapādasamāyogo nṛttasya karāṇam bhavet*—“the coming together of the hands and feet in dance constitutes a *karāṇa*” ([NS 4.30] Ghosh 2002, 48).⁶

While this definition may initially seem to emphasize physical aspects of movement, in practice, a *karāṇa* has revealed itself to me as both discipline and freedom: a versatile movement that hones the dancing body even as it molds itself into any choreographic need. In another instance, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* states, *nṛttāṅgahārasampannā rasabhāva kriyātmikā*, meaning, “the dance (*nṛtta*) of the *āṅgahāras* (a combination of the *karāṇas*) has *bhāva* (emotion) and *rasa* (aesthetic experience) as its soul” ([NS 1.44–45] Unni 2019, 384–385). Abhinavagupta, the seminal commentator on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, clarifies this understanding in his exegesis. He distinguishes *karāṇas* from ordinary physical action, emphasizing their structured, intentional transitions that are aesthetically driven rather than purely functional (Ganser 2022).

In my practice of Bharatanāṭyam, the two concepts of *bhāva* and *rasa*, as articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, find their most direct application in the choreography of *abhinaya*, or expressive communication. Similarly, I have found that the *karāṇas* lend themselves to this application: the sheer expanse of their technique and pedagogy offers, to me as a choreographer, a means of integrating dance technique with emotive content in an almost seamless manner.

In seeking to understand *what is a karāṇa*, I have found that a hermeneutic approach (Chari 1993), which reads the *Nāṭyaśāstra* not in isolation but through the lens of embodied practice, significantly enriches one’s understanding of the *karāṇa*. The textual definitions and philosophical principles can appear opaque or reductive when read in a purely literal mode. However, when correlated with lived experience, the meanings

encoded in these texts, many of which emerge from embodied knowledge, reveal themselves with far greater texture and applicability. This dialogic interplay between text and practice appears essential to interpreting traditions such as the *karāṇa*, which are as much performative as they are textual.

Moreover, in expanding the conceptual scope of what constitutes a *karāṇa* beyond the classical treatise, contemporary scholarship (Iyer 1996; Subrahmanyam 2003a) provides insights into its broader intercultural resonance. Researchers have drawn compelling parallels between the *karāṇas* and movement vocabularies found across a wide range of dance traditions in India, as well as in South and Southeast Asia (Iyer 2000). These parallels, whether in codified gesture, transitional movement structures, or ritualized performance, suggest that the *karāṇa* is not a static historical artifact but a culturally adaptable movement vocabulary that can be recontextualized within diverse performative and pedagogical frameworks.

Karāṇas: A Pedagogical Study

A Journey through the *Karāṇa* Class

To further investigate how the theoretical concepts of *karāṇa* translate into practice, I draw on my experience within the *karāṇa* class. Generally, classical dance classes in India begin with a prayer to the deity of dance—Śiva or Natarāja.⁷ However, in the *karāṇa* class, I found that the two prayers selected by Subrahmanyam during reconstruction served as pedagogical frames, embedding philosophical context into the learning process.

The first prayer establishes the origin and credits the source, reciting the very first verse of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*: “With a bow to the creator and Śiva I shall begin my exploration of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as was explained by Brahma” ([NS 1.1] Ghosh 2002, 1). The first chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* explains the origin of dance,⁸ highlighting key facts to ground our practice. Beginning the class with this story and verse reinforced the idea that the practice being passed on to me embodies the historical lessons, rooted in the origin story as explored in the text.

The story recounts how the gods approached the creator, Brahma, seeking relief from the chaos of the world. In response, they requested an audiovisual form (*drśyam śravyam ca*)—a pastime capable of distracting the mind (*krīḍanīyakam*) that combined all knowledge (*sarvaśāstrasampannam*) and entertainment, accessible to all castes (*sārvavarnīkam*) that would give them respite from the world. Thus, in response to their plea, Lord Brahma created the

Nāṭyaveda from which arose the dance tradition of the *karāṇas*. This narrative frames *karāṇa* training as both embodied knowledge and inclusive artistic engagement.

This principle of inclusivity was evident in the urban Indian classroom I observed and participated in, where students from diverse backgrounds engaged fully with *karāṇa* training. My experience as a Gen Z practitioner-scholar suggests that, in contemporary urban contexts, these ideals can be actively realized. While dance scholarship has noted issues of social hierarchy in post-revival history (Bannerji 2021; Meduri 1988), caste and religion were neither observable nor relevant in this modern Indian setting, and both students and teacher engaged with the training purely as practice. Hermeneutically, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s philosophy of *sārvavarṇikam* ("inclusive of all castes") can serve as an active guiding principle; any practice that restricts access or rigidly defines its boundaries contradicts the very essence of accessibility in the *nāṭya* tradition.⁹

The second prayer taught in the *karāṇa* class articulated a pedagogical and cosmological genealogy of the *karāṇas*. The prayer begins with Brahma, the creator who extracted all knowledge from the four *vedas* to create the *nāṭyaveda*, which has within it the dance of the *karāṇas*; followed by Maheśvara, who is said to have first danced the *karāṇas*; Viṣṇu, associated with bringing in the four *vṛttis* (styles of dance-theater); sage Tāṇḍu, who received the movements from Śiva and transmitted them to Bharata; Bharata, who codified them in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*; and Abhinavagupta, who offered a sophisticated philosophical interpretation of the text. The lineage concludes with the contemporary guru(s), who transmit(s) this knowledge to present-day students.

While these figures belong to a theistic and mytho-historical framework, for a student-practitioner like myself, the verse functioned more as a cartography of transmission than a doctrinal account. Familiar with the semiotics and symbolism associated with these figures in the Hindu cultural milieu, I understood the verse as offering not only historical depth but also a heuristic model for perceiving the *karāṇas* as a tradition shaped through layered pedagogical interventions. This framing shifted how I related to the pedagogy, contextualizing it within a living lineage of embodied knowledge. *I am not engaged in the preservation of a pure tradition; instead, my practice participates in the continual movement of knowledge across time and context.*

Karāṇas and Kinesthetic Awareness

Following the opening prayers, I was introduced to foundational exercises. Like many *karāṇa* practitioners, I was trained initially in the *adavu*-based system. My

limbs and reflexes were conditioned to respond to a specific vocabulary and rhythm, and my early understanding of form and aesthetics was shaped within that structure. It was only much later, when I began exploring new themes and choreographing independently, that I recognized the limitations of this framework—not because it lacked complexity, but because it was partial.

This perspective is echoed by other practitioners. As one respondent explained, "I find these vocabularies are crucial for me to keep the dance evolving and vibrant. Non-*adavu* vocabularies like *karāṇas* and *cāris* [coordinated lower body movements] offer a different lens to approach movement, which are complementary to Bharatanāṭyam, as an extension of it."

The structured, multi-layered methodology for learning the *karāṇas*, as outlined in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and reconstructed by Subrahmanyam, facilitates a systematic training of the entire body (Subrahmanyam 2003a). This pedagogical approach unfolds across five progressive levels: *vyāyāmas* (isolated exercises for each limb), *sthānas* (static postures), *cāris* (coordinated lower-body movements), *nṛttahastas* (hand and upper body movements), and *karāṇas* (integrated full-body movements).¹⁰ Such a progression exemplifies key principles of motor learning and progressive skill development discussed in contemporary pedagogical literature, where layered, task-specific training is considered essential for cultivating integrated bodily coordination and movement efficiency (Chepko and Doan 2015; Mainwaring and Krasnow 2010).

Imbibing this logical breakdown of movement into the most minute levels like different parts of the leg—thighs, knees, shanks, foot, toes, sole—or different parts of the head—eyes, lips, nose, cheeks, etc.—deepened my bodily awareness and transformed my daily practice. As Kirk (2014) suggests, integrating anatomical knowledge with somatic-based explorations can help students access their kinesthetic sense more consciously and effectively, allowing for a deeper awareness of how they initiate, control, and experience movement. Practitioners also highlight this integrative quality of the *karāṇas*. As one respondent observed, "They allow for a more holistic, body-integrated practice and give us the creative flexibility to respond to music, meaning, and context in richer ways. In teaching, I see them as tools to help dancers become more aware of their movements, and more versatile in their art."

Such an analytically rigorous pedagogical method can only be understood through direct, immersive training. Gibbons (2007, 5) notes that, "often, dance teachers practice 'inadvertent teaching'; that is, teaching as one

was taught without questioning method and content.” In *karāṇa* training, however, such unexamined transmission proves insufficient. This raises a critical question: To what extent must a *karāṇa* teacher be a deeply embodied practitioner themselves?

My *karāṇas* teacher, Smt. Nirupama Rajendra, having closely observed and analyzed her own *karāṇa* practice, was able to correct subtle aspects of my execution that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. I observed that the *karāṇa* pedagogy encouraged the teacher to act not merely as an instructor but as an experienced guide speaking from within the performer’s body. As discussed by Mainwaring and Krasnow (2010), in dance education, a skilled teacher nurtures the learner not just by correcting posture and technique, but also by explaining principles of good alignment—an approach that arises primarily from embodied experience.

In the pedagogy of the *karāṇas*, the concept of good alignment is referred to as *saṁsthāva*, the aesthetic alignment of the limbs in the execution of movement. It was one of the first concepts introduced to me in the *karāṇa* class and gradually became a key parameter for assessing the visual aesthetics of the movements. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *saṁsthāva* is attained when the shoulder, elbows, and hips are aligned ([NS 11.89–92] Ghosh 2002). Banerjee (2005), drawing on Sarangadeva’s writings, where the theories of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are extensively discussed, describes *rekḥā* as the imaginary line of movement that satisfies both the eye and the mind, forming a visual and psychological aesthetic. Orienting oneself to embody such alignment fosters internal responsiveness and promotes self-correction.

I recall an instance from class where my teacher discussed the center of gravity in the *tribhāṅgī* stance (posture with three deflections in the body at the head, waist, and knees). She explained that unlike *araimandī* (half-sitting posture central to Bharatanāṭyam practice), which maintains a central balance, the decrease in height in *tribhāṅgī* results not from an equal distribution of weight but from a lateral shift onto one side—something extremely contrary to what the Bharatanāṭyam body is typically trained for. This shift allows for fluidity where the ball-and-socket joint rotates freely, enabling controlled variations in range. When I center myself in *araimandī* before transitioning to *tribhāṅgī*, I inadvertently restrict this flow, risking jerky movements. While this may go unnoticed in a static pose, it becomes unsuitable for movement sequences. A soft flow of the waist emerged only when the joint remained free and the muscles actively controlled. If my teacher had simply passed on these movements without first embodying and analyzing them herself, the subtleties of their aesthetic potential might have been lost.

After months of practice, I increasingly understood what my teacher meant by “Don’t center yourself”—realizing how unnecessary tension was limiting my movement. I observed this most clearly while executing *karāṇas* involving *baddha* and *samotsarita mattallī cārīs*, particularly in the *Cinna/nivṛtta* waist movements and the *vaiśṇava* stance.¹¹

In my experience, embodying instruction, especially in the execution of the *karāṇas*, requires not just consistent practice over time but also self-analysis from the student. Mandala (2024), drawing from the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*¹² and her own approach to learning and teaching *Bharatanṛtyam*, emphasizes the importance of valuing not only the known—the form and the text—but also what emerges through a dialogic, reflective relationship between teacher and student. She argues that this process of questioning and introspection transforms performance into a deeper engagement with movement, ultimately leading to the experience of *rasa*.

Reflecting on their experience of *karāṇa* training, another respondent noted:

The biggest challenge has been training my body to focus on the subtle micro-movements, and then integrating them smoothly into a larger movement vocabulary. In my earlier [Bharatanāṭyam] training, clarity in footwork and hand gestures were the primary focus. But with the *karāṇas*, every part of the body participates with clarity and fluidity. [For example], the neck & eye movements with respect to how your torso and hip move, etc. Finding that seamlessness, without making it look too rigid or mechanical, continues to be a learning curve.

Perhaps it is this absence of embodied awareness that contributed to the historical rejection of hip movements in modern India’s Bharatanāṭyam—a restriction that lingers despite the fading of the Victorian gaze. Chatterjea (1996, 75) notes that training in Indian classical dance seldom encouraged dancers to “think in terms of muscularity, weight shift, energy manipulation, or finding their center”; by contrast, my *karāṇa* classes explicitly foregrounded such analytical exploration of the body. Integrating this kind of reasoning into the practice of traditional movements like the *karāṇas* therefore proves essential not only for their effective transmission and evolution but also for liberating Bharatanāṭyam from inherited constraints that may have limited its pedagogy and expressive scope.

While performing *karāṇa* movements with anatomical awareness, I found it drew my attention inward, causing an introspective engagement with the mind and body; yet, its visual design remained unmistakably performative, directed outward toward the viewer. This duality of inward stillness and outward activity

highlights not only a fundamental aesthetic principle at play in the *karaṇas* but also a framework for understanding their representational capacity, which I explore in the following section. Beyond anatomical clarity and somatic presence, the *karaṇas* also support a deeper aesthetic sensitivity that bridges form and feeling—particularly in how they resist the binary of abstract and expressive movement.

Karaṇas and Representational Aesthetics

Drawing on my experience as a dancer and choreographer, I explore how the pedagogical methodology of the *karaṇas* develops not only technique but also the dancer's ability to craft poetic meaning through movement.

This approach, as interpreted by Subrahmanyam through a close reading of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, recognizes that *expressivity is not an afterthought* but integral to the technical system. Each of the foundational building blocks of the *karaṇa* movements (*vyāyāmas*, *cārīs*, *sthānas*) is followed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by suggestions for expressive application. For instance, the verse describing one of the thirteen head exercises, *dhutam* (involving turning the head slowly from right to left), states: “the *dhutam* movement is applicable in unwillingness, sadness, astonishment, confidence, looking sideways, emptiness, and forbidding” ([NS 8.22] Ghosh 2002, 151).¹³ The aerial *cārīs* are described as suited “for the release of weapons like an arrow and the thunderbolt (*vajra*)” ([NS 11.46] Ghosh 2002, 201). Similarly, *Vaiśākha sthāna* (stance where the feet are three spans apart pointing sideways) is said to be used “in riding horses, in exercise, exiting from any place, mimicking large birds, practicing archery, and in the *recakas* (embellishments) of the feet” ([NS 11.65–66] Ghosh 2002, 202).

In her reconstruction of the 37th *karaṇa*, *Vaiśākharēcitam*, Subrahmanyam draws directly on this interpretive alignment: she employs the *Vaiśākha* stance in movement to evoke the act of riding a vehicle—a function referenced not only in the *sthānaka* description but also in Abhinavagupta's commentary on the *karaṇa* (Subrahmanyam 2022). These correlations between expressive meaning and technical form further reinforce that the components of the *karaṇas* are not neutral building blocks but elements within an integrated system of aesthetic embodiment and *rasa*.

A practitioner similarly noted the dramaturgic utility of *karaṇas* for role-specific moments: “I tried a few *karaṇas* while showing the entry of the demon character *Pūtanā*,” observing that this exploration “urged me to learn more on the application of it and delve deeper into the text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.”

In contemporary Bharatanāṭyam pedagogy, limb movements like *Nāṭyaśāstra's* *vyāyāmas* (exercises) are often drawn from the *Abhinayadarpaṇa*, a later and more narrowly focused text than the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Ghosh 2002; Vatsyayan 1992). These exercises are intended primarily for *abhinaya* (expressive movement) and are typically taught as distinct from the *nṛtta* vocabulary developed through *aḍavu*-based training. If we understand the *karaṇas* as integrated systems of movement, comprising elements that are both technical and expressive, then the rigid binary between *nṛtta* and *abhinaya* in modern Bharatanāṭyam appears less as an inherent tradition and more as a construct shaped by selective interpretation and pedagogical omission. As (Ganesh 2022) argues, the truest aesthetic experience in classical Indian performance is not conveyed through codified symbols alone, but through a resonance that engages both performer and connoisseur (*sahṛdaya*)¹⁴ in a shared poetic perception—a resonance of *rasa* that the *karaṇas* make possible.

Karaṇas in Choreographic Practice

The expressive and structural capacities of the *karaṇas* were activated through both classroom training and choreographic experimentation. These capacities were not incidental but deeply rooted in how the *karaṇas* were conceived. While Sage Bharata, in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, elaborates primarily on the technique of the *karaṇas*, it is Abhinavagupta's commentary that offers insight into their choreographic applications. Subrahmanyam, in her extensive work on the subject, refers to this commentary and highlights Abhinavagupta's assertion that the *karaṇas* serve as both *bhāvāśraya* (abodes of emotional expression) and *rasāśraya* (abodes of aesthetic experience) (Subrahmanyam 2003a). Furthermore, several ancient Sanskrit poets, such as Raghavabhaṭṭa in his commentary on Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* (Kale 1969) and Rājasekhara in his dramatic work *Bālarāmāyaṇa* (Rai 2011), consistently reference the application of *karaṇas* as dramatic elements, indicating their integration into the practice of theatrical performance.

Subrahmanyam emphasizes the role of *karaṇas* in enabling *vākyārthābhinaya*, the expression of meaning that transcends a literal, word-for-word rendering of the lyric. In each class, as I trained in various components—*vyāyāma*, *cāri*, *nṛttahasta*, *sthānaka*, and *karaṇa*—my teacher would consistently demonstrate their expressive potential through creative examples beyond those mentioned in the text. A particularly vivid instance of this was during the learning of the 35th *karaṇa* *bhujangatrastarecitam*. With just a small tweak to the movement,

she depicted, in one body and one motion, *Ardhanārīśvara*—not as half-male/half-female, but as two complete wholes, Śiva and Pārvati, coming together to sustain the universe. This example crystallized for me how a single, well-understood movement could carry layered narrative meaning without needing to step into literal gesture or mime, an insight that transformed how I approached choreography.

Santhanam and Ganesh (2008) have extensively researched and documented the *Karāṇa Vinīyōga Mālīkā*, a comprehensive video archive demonstrating how each of the 108 *karāṇas* can be applied to a range of stories, characters, and themes. This body of work exemplifies the expressive and choreographic potential of the *karāṇas* and has served as an invaluable resource in my own choreographic explorations that seek to incorporate *karāṇas* as aesthetic devices.

In working with the *karāṇas*, I found them to be remarkably versatile—there are 108 *karāṇas*, each with multiple variants, allowing them to seamlessly adapt to various narrative and non-narrative contexts. For instance, in one choreographic experiment, I used a sequence of *karāṇas* to visually depict my imagination of sound waves emanating from a flute and forming a melody (Hoskere 2025b). The series began with *Bhramarakam* (38), a whirling movement that evokes circular motion to show the melody enveloping the protagonist, followed by *Ākṣiptam* (55), which transitions fluidly from air to ground like a high to a low note. Next came *Vinivṛttam* (62), incorporating a graceful turn on the knees with a wave of low notes, culminating in *Ḍolāpādam* (60), where the foot sways left and right in the air like oscillating notes. Composing this sequence helped me understand the *karāṇas* not as fixed aesthetic units, but as kinetic metaphors and tools for abstract storytelling that emerge through the dancer's own sensorial and imaginative engagement.

This sequence, though abstract in execution, conveyed some semi-representational imagery, embodying both the fluidity and resonance of sound. While proper representational dance (*abhinaya*) or mime frames this section of the choreography, using *karāṇas* allowed for an easy transition into creative visual expressions of poetic interpretations, abstract ideas, and imaginative movement. In doing so, I was able to merge abstract movement with expressive storytelling, enriching the emotional and visual coherence of the performance. Moreover, the kinesthetic experience of dancing the *karāṇas* added a final layer of enjoyment for me as a performer—one that emerged from both representation and a felt fullness of the movement.

Such an interplay between embodied awareness and expressive potential finds resonance in broader modern pedagogical frameworks. Olsen (1991) emphasizes

experiential learning by integrating storytelling with practical exercises and movement explorations, enhancing bodily awareness and deepening expressive potential. Similarly, Green (2002) highlights how embodied pedagogy in US dance education extends beyond technical precision to cultivate movement as a communicative practice—an approach that aligns closely with the pedagogical ethos of the *karāṇas*.

As Mullis (2006, 107) argues, “We must critically evaluate a disembodied account of aesthetic production since it disregards the many possible avenues of aesthetic cultivation that capitalize on the expressive capabilities of the human body.” While many dance techniques allow for expressive interpretation, *karāṇa* pedagogy offers a distinct framework in which technical codification and expressive meaning are taught in tandem, shaping not just the body, but the aesthetic imagination of the student. Given that Bharatanāṭyam places equal emphasis on emotion and technique, integrating aspects of the *karāṇa* pedagogy can greatly benefit both choreographers and performers.

Spiritual Dimensions of Karāṇa Practice

Learning the *karāṇas* was demanding; yet, I experienced a newfound sense of freedom in my body. As my training progressed, I began to recognize a distinctive dimension that, for me, set the *karāṇas* apart from other dance vocabularies I had encountered. They were not merely codified steps but practices of internal realignment—perceptual, somatic, and spiritual.

I realized that technical precision alone did not bring out the aesthetic fullness of the *karāṇas*; something intangible was missing. A presence was demanded of its performer—one that added beauty beyond physical correctness. As Dewey (1934, 38) writes in *Art as Experience*, “It is possible to be efficient in action and yet not have a conscious experience.” Technical efficiency in dance can lead to automaticity. While such automaticity may be necessary at certain stages of training, it is not the final goal. A deeper point must be reached, where movement emerges from an aesthetic-spiritual integration that reveals beauty beyond form.

The *karāṇas* demanded precisely this presence. Beyond perfect execution, they required an attentiveness that animated the form from within. This attentiveness is not only technical or somatic; it can also evoke *rasa*, particularly *śānta rasa*—a tranquil, contemplative sentiment (Raghavan 2004) associated with the *Ānanda Tāṇḍava* (blissful dance) of Śiva (Coomaraswamy 1957), the origin of these movements.

Subrahmanyam (2003b, 301) encapsulates this experience redefining the *karāṇa* as “*ātmakāya*

samāyogo nṛttasya karaṇam bhavet—“the unison of the soul and body in dance is the *karaṇa*.” Such a unison has remained a central pursuit in my practice. It constitutes an intangible yet deeply embodied experience, and in moments when I was unable to access or sustain this alignment, the experience of dancing the *karaṇa* felt perceptually incomplete; technically correct, yet lacking in fullness of expression. To me, this alignment is what completes the aesthetic experience of dancing a *karaṇa*, where technical mastery and the capacity for *rasa* become inseparable.

To seek such alignment, practitioners use yoga as a supplementary practice to Bharatanāṭyam. Johar (2019, 340), on his practice of Bharatanāṭyam notes,

Given the possibility that we might have lost a critical transformative element in dance due to its defensive-reconstruction, Yoga offers me the belief and the conviction to experiment with my dance in order to find ways to reinstate a similar process of “being-in-the-moment” in dance.

In my own experience, however, the *karaṇas* themselves helped bridge this gap. They foster not only mind-body-spirit integration but also operate as codified, performative movements within a classical aesthetic system.

The parallels between the *karaṇas* and yoga have been drawn by Subrahmanyam, who draws from her embodied experience to highlight their shared emphasis on internal alignment and breath-based awareness (Balakrishnan 2010). More recently, Ganser (2023) has explored this parallel theoretically, suggesting that the physical execution of the *karaṇas* can be understood as an intersection of the aesthetic and the spiritual.

Practitioners echo this perspective; as one respondent who practices both *karaṇas* and yoga noted, “*Karaṇas* and yoga *āsanas* were strikingly similar. Though the final postures looked similar, *karaṇas* had a beautiful movement before getting to the posture.”

A potential for presence—what Johar (2019, 340) calls a process of “being-in-the-moment”—is not limited to somatic awareness alone. I began to observe it in how the *karaṇas* reshaped my relationship to rhythm, particularly in moments where the frameworks of conventional Bharatanāṭyam felt limiting. My Bharatanāṭyam teacher, Sri P. Praveen Kumar, would often encourage us to think beyond conventional pedagogy and established patterns to explore non-rhythmic movements. The movements of the *karaṇas* support such an approach, allowing for a more fluid and intuitive response to non-rhythmic music.

Panikkar (2013, 38) in his reflection on the rhythm of being, observes: “The difficulty of experiencing pure rhythm is due to our distracted life, either haunted by

the past or worried about the future. In this condition, we can hardly experience the present, much less enjoy it.”

Rhythm in dance, I believe, follows a similar truth. When rhythm becomes an overbearing force, we either find ourselves chasing time or fleeing from it. Yet, just as rhythm is inherent to life, so too is the ability to surrender to the present moment. In my experience, the *karaṇas* cultivate this awareness, allowing movement to arise from an embodied state of presence. This is made possible by two key aspects of their pedagogical design: (1) their relative independence from rigid rhythmic structures, and (2) their kinesthetic alignment with the body’s natural mechanics, resonating with yoga and other somatic practices.

I have found that the pedagogical system of the *karaṇas* enables each limb to execute movement at any speed, with or without a fixed rhythm, and across any spatial range. Subrahmanyam’s performance of the *Jatāyu Mokṣam* episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* to Tchaikovsky’s music demonstrates how the *karaṇas* support such expressive adaptability across diverse rhythmic and spatial structures (Ganesh and Bharadwaj 2023; *The Times of India* 1987). The remarkable flexibility and curvilinearity of the *karaṇas* therefore enable dancers to negotiate time and space not as fixed constraints, but as flexible, expressive dimensions.

As I progressed, I developed an internal rhythm—fluid, adaptive, and curvilinear. This shift felt like uncovering a missing piece in my Bharatanāṭyam training. It allowed me to move with both freedom and clarity, even in the absence of overt rhythmic structure. In a short video experiment (Hoskere 2025a) I explore this interplay by dancing the *karaṇas* to music both with and without rhythm—embodying a dialogue between structure, freedom, and presence.

Practitioners describe a similar process of organic integration. One respondent noted, “After learning [the] *karaṇas*, [they] became an unconscious integration. I do not feel the need to think about choreographing to insert *karaṇas*; I see the *karaṇa* movement in the music itself.”

Subrahmanyam (2003a, 90) describes the experience of dancing the *karaṇas* as a state of “action in inaction,” echoing the philosophical teaching in the *Bhagavad Gītā* of detached yet mindful action. She characterizes the *karaṇas* as “physical representations of metaphysical and spiritual perceptions” (90), a characterization that, as a practitioner, resonates with my own meditative experience of these movements.

Students of *Bharatanāṭyam* often echo this perspective. Mandala (2020, 14), for instance reflecting on her practice as a *Bharatanāṭyam* dancer and teacher, writes:

“Spirituality, by virtue of its individual and experiential nature, has a place within the field of somatics. This connection between somatics and spirituality was immediately evident in my phenomenological investigations.”

In this light, the *karanas* offer a pathway through which movement cultivates presence and invites a mode of embodied spiritual inquiry. This perspective offers a transformative potential for contemporary Bharatanāṭyam pedagogy—one that moves beyond formal structure toward embodied experience.

Conclusion

Karanas as Companions in Contemporary Practice

This study set out to examine how learning the 108 *karanas* through a structured, embodied, and reflective process can reshape a dancer’s understanding of Bharatanāṭyam. The pedagogical method reconstructed by Subrahmanyam, when experienced firsthand, reveals a coherence and rigor that addresses several limitations of conventional *adavu*-based training. Taken together, these two systems offer a more holistic and integrated approach to Bharatanāṭyam pedagogy.

The layered design of the *karanas* promotes not only technical precision but also embodied anatomical awareness. My experience suggests that such structured training helps recognize posture, cultivates kinesthetic sensitivity, and fosters responsiveness to internal cues—while retaining aesthetic richness and performative clarity. The holistic aesthetic vision embedded in their design trickles down into every layer of the *karana* pedagogy, aligning closely with codified concepts such as *rasa* and *bhāva*. The inherent adaptability of the *karanas* enables poetic interpretation through movement without compromising structural integrity, making the *karanas* valuable for both abstract and narrative choreography. Their choreographic flexibility, therefore, is not a contemporary innovation but intrinsic to their original design.

The heightened bodily awareness cultivated through *karana* training led organically to moments of meditative presence. These experiences were not the result of explicit spiritual instruction, but emerged from the kinesthetic demands of the form itself. The inward attentiveness required for execution created conditions for an immersive aesthetic experience—quiet and clarifying, like the internal clarity often associated with yogic states. This reveals a unique dimension of *rasa* in dance that is inwardly experienced, becoming evident in the *karanas*. Subrahmanyam (2003b, 299–300) terms this as *nṛttarasa*, “an outcome of an enjoyment of the

inner self in a state of monism with the art.” Given that the *karanas* are traditionally understood to have originated from Śiva’s cosmic dance, as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it is perhaps fitting that they carry traces of this transcendence.

Navigating the *karanas* through both scholarly interpretation and embodied rehearsal revealed that their relevance to contemporary Bharatanāṭyam is not contingent on revivalist narratives. Their value lies not in their antiquity but in their capacity to support advanced teaching, deeper embodiment, and more expansive choreographic possibilities. As one respondent noted in relation to *karana* training, “To make students understand that Bharatanāṭyam pedagogy consists of all types of allied vocabularies is something I’m striving for. To create an open-minded environment to welcome new things and master them (or practice them) is very important.” If these movements have remained peripheral, it is not due to any limitation in their design but due to curricular decisions shaped by history, habit, or institutional inertia.

What this journey has shown is that the *karanas* are not an optional overlay on existing technique, but a foundational resource for rethinking how we train, what we value in movement, and how dance knowledge is transmitted. To engage with them seriously is not to return to the past; it is to imagine new futures for Bharatanāṭyam practice, grounded in awareness, adaptability, and aesthetic integrity.

Notes

1. While I use the term Bharatanāṭyam in this work due to its widespread usage, I acknowledge that its commonly accepted meaning does not always reflect its literal, practical, or historical connotations.
2. The term *devadāsī* (Skt. *deva* “god” + *dāsī* “female servant”) referred to hereditary women performers attached to temples in South India, where they undertook ritual service, music, and dance. Within the cultural framework they were often associated with the concept of *nityasumangali* (“ever-auspicious woman”). In the late colonial period, however, reformist and anti-*nautch* campaigns reframed the institution under the charge of “sacred prostitution,” leading to its eventual abolition through legal reform. See Kersenboom (1987), *Nityasumangali: Devadāsī Tradition in South India*, for a detailed account of their history and cultural significance.
3. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the earliest Indian treatise on the practice and theory of performing arts attributed to sage Bharata (Dace 1963; Ghosh 2002; Unni 2019; Vatsyayan 1995).
4. For sketches and sculpture-based indices, see Naidu, Naidu, and Pantulu (1936). For a detailed analysis of

karana-based sculptures outside India, see Iyer (1996).

5. Informed consent was obtained through an online form at the start of the survey. The consent statement explained that participation was voluntary, that respondents could skip questions or withdraw at any time, and that their responses would be kept confidential. It also noted that their words could be used in academic writing or presentations.
6. All citations to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (NS) refer to chapter and verse (or passage) numbers. Translations cited are Ghosh (2002) and Unni (2019). For example, chapter 1, verse 1, page 1 from Ghosh (2002) would appear as [NS 1.1]Ghosh 2002, 1).
7. The first verse of the *Abhinayadarpanam* is taught as the invocation in Bharatanāṭyam classes (Ghosh 1957).
8. I take the liberty here of using the term “dance” rather than *nāṭya*. *Nāṭya* refers to an all-encompassing performing art form that includes dance, music, drama, sculpture, painting, and more. In the Indian context, dance and drama have never been regarded as entirely separate entities. While structural differences exist, the underlying philosophical aesthetics of contemporary dance remain closely aligned with those of *nāṭya*.
9. A more elaborate philosophical discourse on the nature of performance emerges from the complete origin story, though a detailed examination lies beyond the scope of this discussion. See Bharadwaj (2016), “The Story of the Origin of *Nāṭyaśāstra*.”
10. Chapter 8 describes 13 gestures of the head, 8 eye movements, 9 ways of moving the eyelids, 7 ways of moving the eyebrows, and other detailed descriptions of facial and limb movements. The text also describes movements of the chest, torso, stomach, waist, thighs, shanks, and feet in Chapter 10. Chapter 11 delineates 6 male stances and 3 female stances and introduces *cāri* movements, which combine the lower body’s hip, thigh, and foot movements, further split into aerial and grounded variations. Chapter 9 covers hand gestures, including 24 single-hand gestures, 13 double-hand gestures, and 30 hand movements for nonrepresentational dance (*nṛttahastas*).
11. *Cāri* number 8 (Baddha) is used in *karana* number 1 (Talapuṣpapuṭam) 3 (Valitōrukam) 4 (Apaviddham) 20 (Ākṣiptarecitam) 21 (Vikṣiptākṣiptakam) 54 (Uromaṇḍalam) 72 (Parivṛttam) 85 (Nitambam). *Cāri* 15 (samotsarita mattalli) is used in *karana*s 27 (Mattalli) 28 (ardhamattalli) 54 (Uromaṇḍalam). Waist movements (kaṭibheda) 1 & 2 (Cinna & nivṛtta) are used in *karana*s 16 (Kaṭichinnam) 45 (Cinnam) (Subrahmanyam 2003b).
12. The *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* is an ancient Sanskrit text from the Indian philosophical tradition that discusses the nature of the self and ultimate reality (Sastri 1903).
13. It must be noted that these examples are suggestive rather than exhaustive, as indicated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In chapter 6, Bharata states, “I am not able by any means to exhaust all the topics about drama; for knowledge, and arts and crafts connected with it are respectively manifold and endless in number” ([NS 6.6]Ghosh 2002, 100). This acknowledgment foregrounds the importance of lived

experience, observation, and evolving artistic practice as essential complements to textual authority in the study of performance.

14. *Sahṛdaya*, literally “of the same heart,” refers to a sensitive and attuned viewer who experiences *rasa* through inner resonance with the performance (Hiriyanna 1954).

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ORCID

Divya Hoskere MA, PhD  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-3240-5581>

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