Indian Classical Dance

।। गुरू मंत्र ।।

गुरूर्ब्रह्मा गुरूर्विष्णु: गुरूदेवो महेश्वर: ।
गुरू: साक्षात्परब्रह्मा तस्मै श्री गुरूवेनम: ।।

Indian classical dance, or **Shastriya Nritya**, is an umbrella term for various performance arts rooted in religious Hindu musical theatrestyles, whose theory and practice can be traced to the Sanskrit text *Natya Shastra.*

The number of recognized classical dances range from eight to more, depending on the source and scholar. The Sangeet Natak Akademi recognizes eight – Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali, Sattriya, Manipuri and Mohiniyattam. Scholars such as Drid Williams add Chhau, Yakshagana and Bhagavata Mela to the list. The Culture Ministry of the Government of India includes Chhau in its classical list. These dances are traditionally regional, all of them include music and recitation in local language or Sanskrit, and they represent a unity of core ideas in a diversity of styles, costumes and expression. Indian classical dance is made from India and classical dance is played by various actors.

Texts and roots

The *Natya Shastra* is the foundational treatise for classical dances of India, and this text is attributed to the ancient scholar Bharata Muni. Its first complete compilation is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE. The most studied version of the Natya Shastra text consists of about 6000 verses structured into 36 chapters. The text, states Natalia Lidova, describes the theory of Tāṇḍava dance (Shiva), the theory of rasa, of bhāva, expression, gestures, acting techniques, basic steps, standing postures – all of which are part of Indian classical dances. Dance and performance arts, states this ancient text, are a form of expression of spiritual ideas, virtues and the essence of scriptures.

Dance forms

- The Natya Shastra mentions four *Pravrittis* (traditions, genres) of ancient dance-drama in vogue when it was composed – *Avanti* (Ujjain, central), *Dakshinatya* (south), *Panchali*(north, west) and *Odra-Magadhi* (Odisha-Bihar-Bengal, east).

- Sources differ in their list of Indian classical dance forms. Encyclopædia Britannica mentions six dances. The Sangeet Natak Akademi has given recognition to nine Indian dances. The Indian government's Ministry of Culture includes eleven dance forms. Scholars such as Drid Williams and others include Chhau, Yaksagana and Bhagavata Melato the eight classical Indian dances in the Sangeet Natak Akademi list.

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The classical dance forms recognised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Ministry of Culture are:

- Bharatanatyam, from Tamil Nadu
- Kathak, from Northern and Western India
- Kathakali, from Kerala
- Kuchipudi, from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana
- Odissi, from Odisha
- Sattriya, from Assam
- Manipuri, from Manipur
- Mohiniyattam, from Kerala
- Chhau, from Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha
- Oyilattam, from Tamil Nadu

Bharatanatyam

- **Bharatanatyam** also historically called **Sadir**, is a major genre of Indian classical dance that originated in Tamil Nadu. Traditionally, Bharatanatyam has been a solo dance that was performed exclusively by women, and it expressed South Indian religious themes and spiritual ideas, particularly of Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism.

- Bharatanatyam's theoretical foundations trace to the ancient Sanskrit text by Bharata Muni, *Natya Shastra*, its existence by 2nd century CE is noted in the ancient Tamil epic *Silappatikaram*, while temple sculptures of 6th to 9th century CE suggest it was a well refined performance art by mid 1st millennium CE. Bharatanatyam may be the oldest classical dance tradition of India.

History of Bharatanatyam

The theoretical foundations of Bharatanatyam are found in *Natya Shastra*, the ancient Hindu text of performance arts. *Natya Shastra* is attributed to the ancient scholar Bharata Muni, and its first complete compilation is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE. The most studied version of the Natya Shastra text consists of about 6000 verses structured into 36 chapters. The text, states Natalia Lidova, describes the theory of Tāṇḍava dance (Shiva), the theory of rasa, of bhāva, expression, gestures, acting techniques, basic steps, standing postures – all of which are part of Indian classical dances. Dance and performance arts, states this ancient text, are a form of expression of spiritual ideas, virtues and the essence of scriptures.

More direct historical references to Bharatnatyam is found in the Tamil epics *Silappatikaram* (2nd century CE) and *Manimegalai*(6th century). The ancient text *Silappatikaram*, includes a story of a dancing girl named Madhavi; it describes the dance training regimen called *Arangatrau Kathai* of Madhavi in verses 113 through 159. The carvings in Kanchipuram's Shiva temple that have been dated to 6th to 9th century CE suggest Bharatanatyam was a well developed performance art by about the mid 1st millennium CE.

- A famous example of illustrative sculpture is in the southern gateway of the Chidambaram temple (~12th century) dedicated to Hindu god Shiva, where 108 poses of the Bharatnatyam, that are also described as karanas in the *Natya Shastra*, are carved in stone.
- Many of the ancient Shiva sculptures in Hindu temples are same as the Bharata Natyam dance poses. For example, the Cave 1 of Badami cave temples, dated to 7th-century, portrays the Tandava-dancing Shiva as Nataraja. The image, 5 feet (1.5 m) tall, has 18 arms in a form that expresses the dance positions arranged in a geometric pattern. The arms of Shiva express mudras (symbolic hand gestures), that are found in Bharatanatyam.
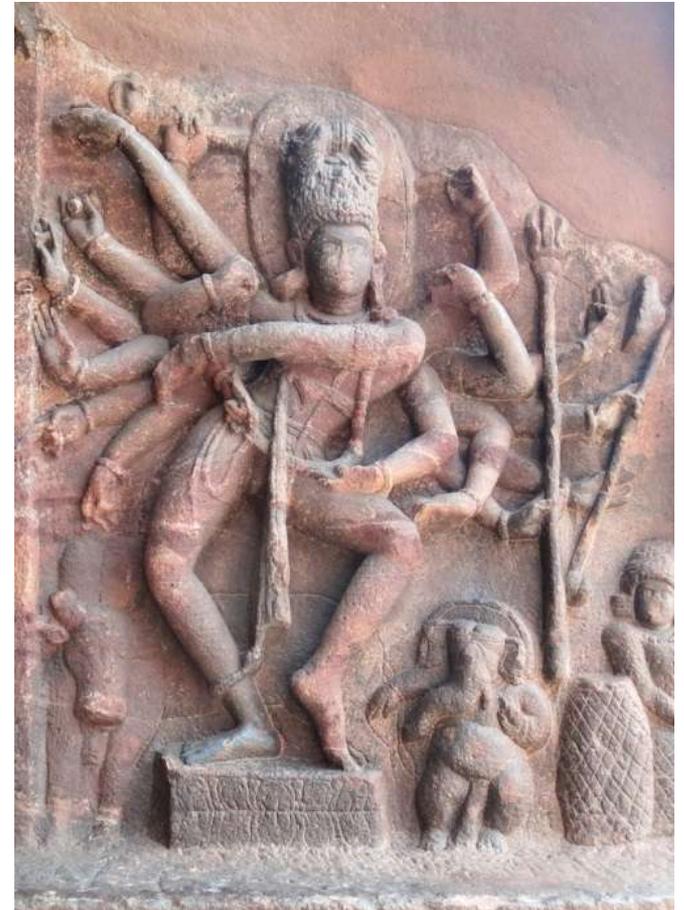
Repertoire

- Bharatanatyam requires expression, posture and rhythm.
- Bharata Natyam is traditionally a team performance art that consists of a female solo dancer, accompanied by musicians and one or more singers. The theory behind the musical notes, vocal performance and the dance movement trace back to the ancient *Natya Shastra*, and many Sanskrit and Tamil texts such as the *Abhinaya Darpana*.
- The solo artist (*ekaharya*) in Bharatanatyam is dressed in a colorful Sari, adorned with jewelry who presents a dance synchronized with Indian classical music. Her hand and facial gestures are codified sign language that recite a legend, spiritual ideas or a religious prayer derived from Hindu Vedic scriptures, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas and historic drama texts. The dancer deploys turns or specific body movements to mark punctuations in the story or the entry of a different character in the play or legend being acted out through dance (*Abhinaya*). The footwork, body language, postures, musical notes, the tones of the vocalist, aesthetics and costumes integrate to express and communicate the underlying text.
- In modern adaptations, Bharata Natyam dance troupes may involve many dancers which play specific characters of a story, creatively choreographed to ease the interpretation and expand the experience by the audience.
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The repertoire of Bharatanatyam, like all major classical Indian dance forms, follows the three categories of performance in the *Natya Shastra*.

1. *Nritta* (Nirutham)
2. *Nritya* (Niruthiyam)
3. *Natya* (Natyam)

Nritta (Nirutham)

The *Nritta* performance is abstract, fast and rhythmic aspect of the dance. The viewer is presented with pure movement in Bharatanatyam, wherein the emphasis is the beauty in motion, form, speed, range and pattern. This part of the repertoire has no interpretative aspect, no telling of story. It is a technical performance, and aims to engage the senses (prakriti) of the audience.

Nritya (Niruthiyam)

- The *Nritya* is slower and expressive aspect of the dance that attempts to communicate feelings, storyline particularly with spiritual themes in Hindu dance traditions. In a *nritya*, the dance-acting expands to include silent expression of words through gestures and body motion set to musical notes. The actor articulates a legend or a spiritual message. This part of a Bharatanatyam repertoire is more than sensory enjoyment, it aims to engage the emotions and mind of the viewer.

Natya (Natyam)

The *Natyam* is a play, typically a team performance, but can be acted out by a solo performer where the dancer uses certain standardized body movements to indicate a new character in the underlying story. A *Natya* incorporates the elements of a *Nritya*.[

Sequence

The traditional Bharatanatyam performance follows a seven-part order of presentation. This set is called *margam*.

Alarippu

- The presentation begins with a rhythmic invocation (*vandana*) called the **Alaripu**. It is a pure dance, which combines a thank you and benediction for blessings from the gods and goddesses, the guru and the gathered performance team. It also serves as a preliminary warm up dance, without melody, to enable to dancer to loosen her body, journey away from distractions and towards single-minded focus.

Jatiswaram

The next stage of the performance adds melody to the movement of *Alarippu*, and this is called **Jatiswaram**. The dance remains a prelim technical performance (*nritta*), pure in form and without any expressed words. The drums set the beat, of any Carnatic music *raga* (melody). She performs a sequence (*Korvai*) to the rhythm of the beat, presenting to the audience the unity of music, rhythm and movements.

Shabdam

The performance sequence then adds *Shabdam* (expressed words). The solo dancer, the vocalist(s) and the musical team, in this stage of the production, present short compositions, with words and meaning, in a spectrum of moods.

Varnam

The *Varnam* part of Bharatanatyam emphasizes expressive dance.

The performance thereafter evolves into the ***Varnam*** stage. This marks the arrival into the sanctum sanctorum core of the performance. It is the longest section and the *nritya*. A traditional Varnam may be as long as 30-45 minutes or sometimes an hour. Varnam offer huge scope for improvisation and an experienced dancer can stretch the Varnam to a desirable length. The artist presents the play or the main composition, reveling in all her movements, silently communicating the text through codified gestures and footwork, harmoniously with the music, rhythmically punctuated. The dancer performs complicated moves, such as expressing a verse at two speeds. Her hands and body tell a story, whether of love and longing, or of a battle between the good and the evil, as the musicians envelop her with musical notes and tones that set the appropriate mood.

Padam

The ***Padam*** is next. This is the stage of reverence, of simplicity, of *abhinaya* (expression) of the solemn spiritual message or devotional religious prayer (bhakti). The music is lighter, the chant intimate, the dance emotional. The choreography attempts to express *rasa* (emotional taste) and a mood, while the recital may include items such as a keertanam (expressing devotion), a *javali* (expressing divine love) or something else.

Thillana

The performance sequence ends with a ***Tillana***, the climax. It closes out the *nritya* portion, the movements exit the temple of expressive dance, returning to the *nritta* style, where a series of pure movement and music are rhythmically performed. Therewith the performance ends.

Shlokam or Mangalam

The seventh and final item in the sequence can be either a **Shlokam** or a **Mangalam**. The dancer calls for blessings on the people all around.

The overall sequence of Bharatanatyam, states Balasaraswati, thus moves from "mere meter; then melody and meter; continuing with music, meaning and meter; its expansion in the centerpiece of the varnam; thereafter, music and meaning without meter; (...) a non-metrical song at the end. We see a most wonderful completeness and symmetry in this art".

Attire

The attires of a Bharatanatyam dancer resembles a Tamil Hindu's bridal dress. It consists of a tailor fitted brilliantly colored Sari, with a special pleated cloth stitched that falls in front and opens like a hand fan when she flexes her knees or performs footwork. The Sari is worn in a special way, wrapping the back and body contour tightly, past one shoulder and its end then held by a jewelry belt at the waist. She is typically adorned with jewelry, outlining her head or hair, on ear, nose and neck. Her face has conventional makeup, eyes lined and ringed by collyrium which help viewers see her eye expressions. To her ankles, she wraps one or more leather anklets [Ghungroos]. Her hair is tied up in the traditional way, often braided in with fragrant flowers (*veni* or *gajra*).

The fingers and feet outlines may be partially colored red with kumkum powder, a costume tradition that helps the audience more easily view her hand gestures.
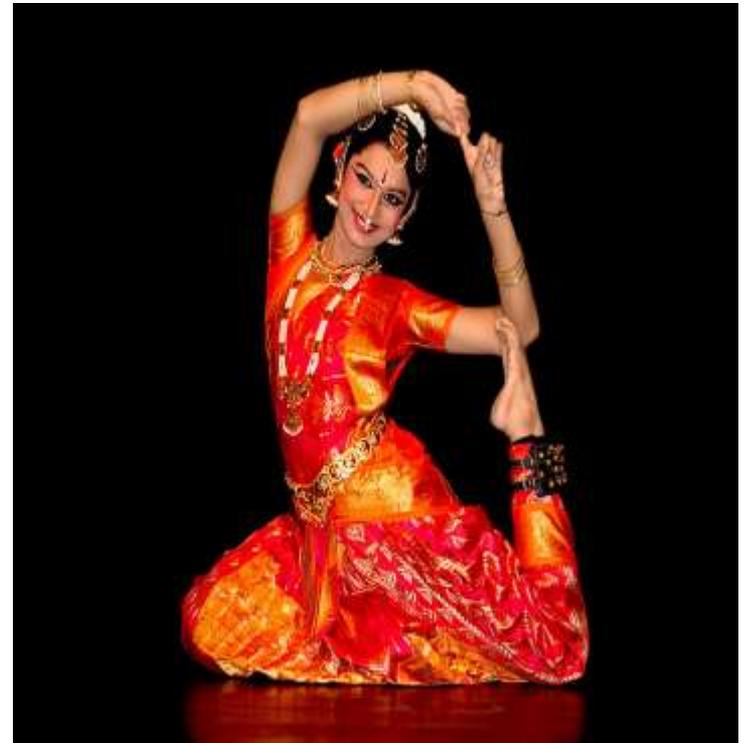
Symbolism

Bharatanatyam, like all classical dances of India, is steeped in symbolism both in its *abhinaya* (acting) and its goals. The roots of *abhinaya* are found in the *Natyashastra* text which defines drama in verse 6.10 as that which aesthetically arouses joy in the spectator, through the medium of actor's art of communication, that helps connect and transport the individual into a super sensual inner state of being. A performance art, asserts *Natyashastra*, connects the artists and the audience through *abhinaya* (literally, "carrying to the spectators"), that is applying body-speech-mind and scene, wherein the actors communicate to the audience, through song and music. Drama in this ancient Sanskrit text, thus is an art to engage every aspect of life, in order to glorify and gift a state of joyful consciousness.

Example *mudras* – gestures as symbols in Bharatanatyam.

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