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PAPER 3

**DETAIL STUDY OF BHARATANATYAM,
DEVADASIS-NATTUVANAR, NRITYA AND
NRITTA, DIFFERENT BANI-S, PRESENT
STATUS, INSTITUTIONS, ARTISTS**



PAPER 3

MODULE 12

BANI-S (SCHOOLS) OF BHARATANATYAM

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PAPER 3 - DETAIL STUDY OF BHARATANATYAM, DEVADASIS-NATTUVANAR, NRITYA AND NRITTA, DIFFERENT BANI-S, PRESENT STATUS, INSTITUTIONS, ARTISTS

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Paper 3
Module 12
Bani-s (Schools)
Of Bharatanatyam



PAPER: 3

Detail Study Of Bharatanatyam, Devadasis-Natuvnar, Nritya And Nritta, Different Bani-s, Present Status, Institutions, Artists

Module 12 Bani-s (Schools) Of Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam, like any classical form, has evolved over centuries. It is akin to an ocean that surrounds India, called Bay of Bengal in Bengal but in Kanyakumari the same ocean is the Indian Ocean! So, while the form, its language, musical mode and overall appearance is one, on closer examination each guru or region brought in special features or characteristics, leading it to be named after that village (like Pandanallur or Kattumannarkoil) or school name (Kalakshetra, Kalamandalam).

While many gurus and dancers, musicians and teachers contributed to its enrichment, some made it to distinct style or banis, called schools in English. The word does not mean school as in studying but School as in different stream. What makes a stream? Clear distinctive features and some marked characteristics like stylization. For example, when we talk of Kalakshetra style or school, or *bani*, it means certain angularity and firmness. It means doing Bharatanatyam in a manner that others don't, thus making it same form but different from others.

In Bharatanatyam, *banis* or schools arose in the last century due to mainly four reasons or circumstances: First, individual villages where gurus hailed from or resided. Two, ambitious and powerful lobbies of students and parents, who were well-connected to promote one

guru over another. Three, clear stylized differences of torso, hand movements and posture. And lastly, the number of students, i.e. popularity.

“The importance of the *bani* / बानी in which a dancer is trained, the dance ‘lineage’ that one inherits from one’s gurus is a vital factor in shaping one’s creative growth. A dancer may be exceptionally talented and the guru may be totally painstaking. But if the *bani* or *vazhi* / वज्ही to which one belongs is impoverished, flawed or shallow, one’s artistic evolution may well be stunted. The qualities that make each *bani* distinct from the other, stem from the individualistic manner in which the dance alphabets are woven together, the specific ways in which the technical dimensions are interpreted and not in the least, from the aesthetic principles, ideals, perceptions and artistic vision of the gurus, who shaped their *banis* and directed their evolution. The dance *bani* is like a vast, majestic banyan tree. The gurus are the branches that send down many roots, so that the tree grows and spreads, vital and vibrant,” says Alarmel Valli.¹

We have 4 or 5 main *banis* starting with fountainhead Tanjore (Thanjavur), the cultural capital of Tamilnadu. The word Thanjavur Quartet refers to the four brothers – Ponniah (1804-1864), Chinnayya (1802-1856), Vadivelu (1810-1845) and Sivanandam (1808-1863) – who served the Tanjore court of Maharaja Serfojis, Maratha kings who ruled south India. To this lineage, came many musicians and dancers like Nayana, Dhanammal and Balasaraswati.

Born into a nattuvanar family, the Quartet learnt music from the great saint poet Muthuswami Dikshitar. They were court composers in the early 1800s and went on to adorn various royal courts of south

India. The brothers set the margam pattern (from Alarippu / अलारिप्पू to Tillana / तिल्लाना) and gave a chiseled structure to Sadir dance appropriate for the concert stage. They composed an impressive number of *alarippus*, *jatiswarams* / जतिस्वरम, *kautuvams* / कौतुवं, *sabdams* / शब्दम, *varnams* / वर्णम, *padams* / पदम्, *javalis* / जावली, *kirtanais* / कीर्तने and *tillanas* / तिल्लाना and brought remarkable artistic changes and innovations to the tradition. The Quartet's *sringara rasa* / श्रींगार रस based dance compositions constitute the majority of dance compositions used even today.

Thanjavur Kittappa Pillai / तंजावुर किट्टप्पा पिल्लई (1913 – 1999) was a descendant of the Thanjavur Quartet and many present day dancers take immense pride in calling themselves his disciples. He had his lessons in music from Natesa Sastry / नटेशशास्त्री and later from his father K. Ponniah Pillai. He learnt dance from his maternal grandfather Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai.

The Thanjavur *bani* ideally treats dance like visual music. A relaxed attitude makes it possible to execute adavus in a leisurely tempo involving a full body swing with curves which bring out the true grandeur of this *bani*. Kittappa Pillai had a special method of composing *jathis*. His *sancharis* / संचारी came more through his musical expression than through body language. The musical variations which he developed had a special audio visual quality which is very essential in the rendering of a dance composition. He always took into account the rhythmic aspect of words present in a lyric. Kittappa had an impeccable sense of *laya* and his kalapramana never wavered even a bit during the course of a composition. His choreography of adavus was always in *madhyama kalam* / मध्यम

कालम. Sometimes he combined it with *sollus* in a faster tempo. His *sollus* form a beautiful dialogue with the *adavu* patterns. His *jathis*, especially in the *varnam*, were never too long except for the first *trikala jathi*. His *jathis* never sound complicated but when one starts reciting them with the *talam* / तालम, one realizes the clever weave of the *pancha jatis* / पंच जाती and the *korvais* / कोरवै. For him dance should be beautiful to see and to listen.²

Although *Kandappa Pillai* came from the same family, he departed from the traditional *Thanjavur* style in a few ways. He implemented certain stylistic changes which emphasized the role of music and rhythm in a performance. For example, during *jathis/theermanams* / तीर्मानम, the singers continue singing and instrumentalists continue playing the melody, while the *nattuvanar* / नट्टुवनार recites the *sollukattu* / सोल्लुकत्तु.³ some notable practitioners of *Thanjavur* style are *Kanchipuram Ellappa Pillai*, *Vyjayanthimala Bali*, *Sucheta Chapekar*, *Sudharani Raghupathy*, *Padmini Rao*, *Narthaki Nataraj*, *Srividya Natarajan* and *Hari Krishnan*.

Pandanallur, another important village arose in prominence due to many great gurus like *Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai* (1869 – 1954) who hailed, married, lived and taught there but for brief spells in *Madras* city. Many first generation star dancers (*Ram Gopal*, *Mrinalini Sarabhai*, *U.S. Krishna Rao*) went to this village to learn. The *Pandanallur* style of *Bharatanatyam* has a rich and diverse *adavu* vocabulary, complex rhythmic permutations, emphasis on symmetry and harmony, intense musicality, purity and precision of line and shunning of anything pretentious or gimmicky.

In the evocation of mood and metaphor, the emphasis was on *natyadharmi* / नाट्यधर्मी rather than *lokadharmi* / लोकधर्मी, on lyricism and understatement rather than on overt drama. The *kulukku nadai* / कुलुक्कू नडै (lilting gait), was a consistent element in all the *abhinaya* segments, a sort of substratum layer, over which the *abhinaya* was constructed. Clarity of *hastas* and the wide sweep of the arms while performing *abhinaya* were also key characteristics. Meandering digressions in the name of *sancharis* were anathema for these gurus. In their interpretation of *padams* and *javalis*, vulgarity in any form was eschewed. The focus was always on content rather than packaging. Unwanted prolonged poses and acrobatic renderings of *nritta* were innovations eschewed by the Pandanallur gurus.⁴

Veteran gurus Chockalingam Pillai (Periya Vadyar) and Subbaraya Pillai (Chinna Vadyar) laid stress on *anga suddham* / अंग शुधम and *aramandi* / अरैमंडी. Even at age 75, Chockalingam Pillai's dedication was such that he guided not only advanced students but also beginners, teaching for hours. *Tala* was marked by *thattu kazhi* / तट्टूकज्ही more often than finger counting. Beauty in *azhutham* / अज्हुथं and fluidity in forcefulness were among the Pandanallur ideals. Covering the stage was important too, with supple, graceful movements, not too many leaps. To relax and smile was a must.⁵

The Pandanallur gurus favored the Margam / मार्गम format over thematic presentations and a gentler approach to footwork. Some prominent teachers/performers of the Pandanallur / पंडनल्लुर style are Pandanallur Jayalakshmi / जयलक्ष्मी, Sabaranjitam / सबरंजितम,

Pandanallur Pandian / पांडियन, Alarmel Valli / अलरमेल वल्ली ,
Meenakshi Chitharanjan / मिनाक्षी चितरंजन, etc.

In Kattumannarkoil / कत्तुमन्नकोइल and Chidambaram, another giant guru Muthukumara Pillai (1874 – 1960) lived and taught there including mentoring boys from other *bani*s like Dandayuthapani Pillai (known for laya intricacies and introduction of lengthier jathis), and Ramaiah Pillai who branched off to create the Vazuvuhoor bani. Muthukumara Pillai also taught in many cities like Chennai, Bangalore and Ahmedabad but spent the last 10 years of his life in his hometown.

“Although I learnt from Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, he could not stand and show all the postures. Thus I benefitted from learning from Muthukumaran Pillai, who even at 70, could stand and show each posture,” said Rukmini Devi.⁶ Kumari Kamala (Laxman) who originally trained under Muthukumara Pillai and later with Ramaiah Pillai, maintained that her *adavus* were all Kattumannar Muthukumara style and only her items were taught by Ramaiah Pillai.

Rukmini Devi pointed out in her SNA monograph of 1964 that, “Muthukumara Pillai’s system of *adavus* was somewhat different from the Pandanallur style. The fundamental difference was that in his style, there was more footwork and less *utplavanas* / उत्प्लवन. In Pandanallur, the body had to lean forward from the waist upward. Guru Muthukumara Pillai did not like this. He preferred an erect posture to keep the spine straight. His *abhinaya* was more detailed and he followed the *sastras*. Muthukumara style was very pure, with

clear arm movements which were firm without being rigid and soft and rounded without being sloppy.”

“He wanted clean lines – no dazzle and no hurly-burly. He wanted dance to look smooth, not jerky. His dance was the mirror image of the man – always calm and composed. He wanted the movements to appear firm and effortless. In *nritta*, he insisted that the termination of one *adavu* and the beginning of the next should be marked by a subtle overlapping, giving the suggestion of continuity,” observed Mohan Khokar in his monograph in 1964.⁷ Some of his famous disciples include Ram Gopal, Mrinalini Sarabhai, M.K. Selvamani, M.K. Saroja, Nala Najan, Janak Kendry and Rukmini Devi.

Vazhuvoor *bani* / वाज्हुवूर बानी created by Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai (1910 – 1979) is more feminine emphasizing *lasya* / लास्य over *tandavam* / तांडवं. Most traditional performances begin with a Thodaya Mangalam in praise of Gnana Sabesa, the reigning deity of Vazhuvoor town. Vazhuvoorar would infuse life in a *jati* with nine beats. So the *jatis* were very fast and all the three speeds would be performed. He also emphasized *sollukattu* to create a powerful effect. With regard to *abhinaya*, Vazhuvoorar incorporated a lot of storytelling. He did not like to repeat the same movements as in some other *banis*. The Vazhuvoor *bani* adopts more rigorous *adavus*. Then arm movements stretch all the way down to touch the toe. He added a lot of poses to aesthetically transit between *jathis*, rather than letting the dancer stand there with arms at the waist, breathing heavily. His approach to *abhinaya* was very much in *natyadharmi* style. He followed everything prescribed in the *Natya Shastra* / नाट्य

शास्त्र, *javalis* and *padams* are taught to only those above 18 years of age.⁸

In the Vazhuvoor style of Bharatanatyam, static postures are inserted, most often in the *tillana*, to break the monotony and to add variety of rhythms; the *adavus* flow smoothly, with rare abrupt movements, and deep sitting positions. The dancer's body from the waist up is slightly bent forward, the *jatis* have more *korvais* and leaps are introduced into every *jati*. Some prominent gurus of the Vazhuvoor style are Swamimalai K Rajaratnam Pillai and KJ Sarasa, performers are Kamala Lakshman, Rhadha, Chitra Visweswaran, Priyadarsini Govind, Ramya Ramnarayan, Vidya Subramanian, Sandhya Sree Athmakuri.

Mysore, under royal patronage partook of another *bani*, more circular for court dancing and some key gurus like Venkatalakshamma, Nagamani, and C. Radhakrishna got associated with it. The *sadir* of the Thanjavur Quartet got assimilated into the already existing mode of dancing in Mysore as Chinnayya lived at the court of Mysore for a while. Therefore, most of the Bharatanatyam items performed were of the Thanjavur Quartet. But the *abhinaya* numbers showing the lyrical beauty of great composers were different, innumerable and special. Even in the *adavus*, the lyrical beauty of movement can be seen. The Mysore *bani* was known for flowery hand gestures using *alapadmas* / अलपद्म and more than geometrical and linear ones like *pataka* / पताक and *tripataka* / त्रिपताक *katakamukha* / कटकामुख. Historically, it was a king of Ganga dynasty who had won over Orissa in the 12th century. Jayadeva lived in the court of Ganga king Lakshmana Sena. Hence, the Mysore dancers

rendered *ashtapadis* / अष्टपदी and *slokas* / श्लोक of Gita Govinda / गीत गोविंद much before anyone else did. There are a lot of similarities in hand gestures and movements between Mysore style of *abhinaya* and Odissi *abhinaya*. The *tribangi* / त्रिभंगी is also employed to enhance the beauty of rendering in the Mysore school. ⁹

Jatti Thayamma was a great *abhinaya* artist. Her disciple K Venkatalakshamma was the only court dancer of Mysore who did not belong to the devadasi community. She belonged to the Lambani community. She was appointed as court dancer of the Mysore court when she was 22 years old. She retired from that post when she was 55 years of age. C. Radhakrishna and his disciples like Padmini Shreedhar, Pulakeshi Kasturi and Veena Sridhar carry on the style in India while D Keshava, disciple of Venkatalakshamma, propagates his art in Switzerland along with his dancing family.

A disciple of Kandappa, a sixth generation nattuvanar of Thanjavur Chinnayya line, T. Balasaraswati believed deeply in the margam based performance of the Thanjavur Quartet which she said involved the right order and sequence for this art, revealing the spiritual through the corporeal. In this style, *nritta* is disciplined within the prescribed *adavu* / आडवु groups. Rhythmical segments have a simple setup yet are innately rigorous in nature. There are no glamorous movements or glossy poses. In *nritta*, dancer is to be serene and not smile broadly to retain the seriousness that goes with the tradition.

Angasuddham / अङ्गशुद्धम, neat *araimandi* / अरैमंडी, with the back upright and not protruding, clear *hastapada* distribution, well defined *adavu* structures, *kalapramana suddham*, rhythmic patterns

that contain intricate *laya* / लय nuances without outward display, *nattuvangam* / नट्टुवंगम technique that is devoid of any show and magic and the clarity and completion of *adavus* with firm stamping, each one landing with precision, are all important features of this tradition. The linking of *adavu* patterns with musical segments forms a lively coordination. *Abhinaya* here was musically visualized. Leisurely singing, *sangati* oriented or *raga* elongations blending with the hand and the eyes that follow to create a wholesome picture with an innate beauty were hallmarks of this technique. Nuances of *abhinaya* are couched in subtlety and dignity; even in the depiction of *sringara*, the force of the feeling is intent within while the dancer's outward display is subdued to suit the stage. Depiction of role reversal in episodic narration is not employed.¹⁰ Bala's grandson Aniruddha Knight is carrying on the family legacy. Smt. Medha Yodh of LA, Nandini Ramani and her sister Priyamvada are Bala's foremost disciples. Their disciple, New York based dancer Jaan Freeman is propagating the Bala style in the US.

Rukmini Devi (1908 - 1984), the founder of Kalakshetra in Chennai, created the Kalakshetra style that is a simplified form based on Pandanallur and to some extent, Thanjavur *bani*. Kalakshetra is combination of several masters like first guru Muthukumaran Pillai, then Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai – all gurus who taught there and then some pioneering Kathakali gurus came too, who gave it exaggerated eyebrow and eye movements and *hastas*.

Rukmini Devi did not change the actual itemization of a Bharatanatyam recital because she wholly believed in the progress of items as laid down by the Thanjavur Quartet. Apart from existing

items, she incorporated Thyagaraja *kritis* and Gopalakrishna Bharati's verses into her repertoire. A major change Rukmini Devi incorporated in the dance was in *aharya abhinaya* or expression in costumes, stage and décor. She studied the scriptures for reference to the attire of the dancer and the bas reliefs on temple walls to see how the dancers were draped. She was the first to use dark blue curtains as a backdrop instead of the painted sceneries that were popular. She was the first to move the musicians to a seated position upstage to the right of the dancer from where they could view the dancer and the audience could also view them. While the Pandanallur bani is perhaps the most demanding, the Kalakshetra *bani* goes a step further with its emphasis on correct technique.¹¹

Kalakshetra style's salient features are its linear and geometric movements, there is minimal *lasya* and a virtual absence of *rechakas*, and there is less emphasis on overly *sringara*-based items. The movements are stiff and controlled. It is specifically suited for group performances.

Rukmini Devi's treatment of the *mudras* / मुद्रा, the body positions and movements used to enhance their message, the tremendous expansion of basic movement vocabulary according to the system of 'unfolding', in increasingly difficult and variegated patterns, the use of stage, the specific use of the spine, the tautness of form, the delicacy of expression - all these may be attributed to her vision, intuition and sensitivity. She renewed, she changed, she added, she composed and created movements till then not seen on stage in such dimension, so that today the young dancer has a vocabulary far richer than her predecessor. The Kalakshetra *bani* was a natural evolution – a linguistic expression translated into movement out of Rukmini Devi's desire to express herself in a richer medium.¹²

Famous Kalakshetra gurus include Peria Sarada, Chinna Sarada, Smt Anjali Merh, VP Dhananjayan and Shanta, Balagopal, A Janardhanan, Jayalakshmi, CV Chandrasekar, Savitri Jagannath Rao, Neila Sathyalingam, Narasimhachari and Vasanthalakshmi, Leela Samson to name a few.

Bharatanrithyam propagated by Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam can be described as the confluence of the *marga* technique of the *Natya Shastra* and *desi* technique of present Bharatanatyam. She synthesized the *karanas* into the existing system of Bharatanatyam, thus creating a unique style. The neat straight lines and angularity of the Bharatanatyam adavus combined with curvaceous hip movements, serpentine arm movements, leaps and extended throw of the legs of the *karanas* of *Natya Shastra* became the characteristic features of her style of dance. She christened her style as Bharata Nrithyam as what was performed was *nrityam* (dance) and not *natyam* (drama).¹³

Melattur / **मैलात्तुर** style was created by Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer, who revived Shudda Nrittam and Perani (dancing on clay pots). His style eschews items praising living patrons (thus most of the Thanjavur Quartet repertoire) and encourages dancers to stamp the floor softly, with a complex variety of sounds produced by ankle bells. There is emphasis on *sringara bhakti*. His student Revathi Ramachandran is the torchbearer of this style.

Many further schools of styles came from the main tributaries like smaller rivers flowing out of one big river, Ganga. These can be called by their provenance, like Mumbai, Baroda, Pune, since they use local

languages and poets as materials. Thus while schools are many, mother source is same ocean of Bharatanatyam.

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