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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 14 THANJAVUR BANI

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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 14
Thanjavur Bani



PAPER: 3

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

Module 14 Thanjavur Bani

The cultural and political capital of Tamil land is Tanjore, variously called as Thanjavur / तंजावुर. It is also the rice bowl of the region, providing food and sustenance for millions. Thanjavur *bani* / बानी is so-called because it hails from the region wherein were based four brothers Chinniah, Ponniah, Sivanandam and Vadivelu forming the Tanjore Quartet. They were court musicians under Maratha ruler Serfoji II (1798-1832). Their descendants and marriage alliances led to creation of what is called Thanjavur *bani* of which Pandanallur is but a popular branch.

Bharatanatyam is an ocean; *banis* are streams or rivulets that flow into that sea of ocean. *Banis* are not independent of the form itself but either enhance it or identify it. While zealous students nowadays tom-tom their gurus and *banis*, each vying to highlight their own, the pioneering gurus themselves had no point of view on such *banis* and freely gave and took from each other. These first generation gurus did not need such nomenclature because their main aim was to establish the art form long neglected and sidelined; win new adherents and they were not interested in turfs. They were the originators and creators of these *banis* and wisely knew that art was bigger than individuals.

The four brothers collectively heralded and shaped what was perhaps the most glorious flowering of the dance form that was then called Sadir / सदिर or Chinna Melam / चिन्नमेलम. Each of the brothers was an undisputed musical genius; between them they made definitive moves to codify the dance, to develop a pedagogy starting with the basic *adavus* and culminating in the concert repertoire, to bind the temple performance of dance to *agamic* ritual.¹

The celebrated brothers were born into a nattuvanar / नट्टुवनार (choreographer and composer) family and were educated in music by the great saint poet Muthuswami Dikshitar, one of the members of the Trinity of Carnatic music. The four brothers flourished under royal patronage and went on to become court musicians at various South Indian courts. Chinniah / चिन्नेय्या (1802-1856) took Bharatanatyam to Wodeyar court at Karnataka, Ponniah / पोन्नेहा (1804-1864) and Sivanandam / शिवानंदम (1808-1863) stayed on in Tanjore under Maratha patronage and Vadivelu / वडीवेलु (1810-1845) modified the violin for use in Carnatic music which accompanies the dance.

Vadivelu introduced and popularised violin in Carnatic music concerts along with Baluswami Dikshitar / बालुस्वामी दीक्षितार. He was also responsible, along with Swati Tirunal / स्वातितिरुनाल, the Maharaja of Travancore, for the popularization of Mohiniattam providing opportunities to women dancers. Until then Kathakali, the male preserve, dominated the dance scene in Kerala. The brothers

composed a large number of *varnams* and *kritis*, including the Navaratnamala / नवरत्नमाला, a tribute to their guru. Dikshitar called Vadivelu an *ekasandhagrahi* / एकसंधगृही - one who had the ability to reproduce a song after hearing it only once.²

The Tanjore Quartet codified the basic Bharatanatyam *adavus* (dance units), designed the *margam*, (the configuration of the contemporary Bharatanatyam performance from *alarippu* to *tillana*) appropriate for the concert stage. The brothers composed an impressive number of *alarippus*, *jatiswarams*, *kavutuvams*, *sabdams*, *varnams*, *padams*, *javalis*, *kirtanais* and *tillanas* and brought artistic changes and innovations of matchless exquisiteness to the tradition. Their masterpieces of compositions are unparalleled and honored in the world of classical music and dance.³

Margam evolved by the Quartet in a structured manner introduced *nritta* and *nritya*, including *abhinaya*, to make the transition from one to the other easy and smooth for the artiste and the viewer alike. It was the standard fare offered by dancers till about the third quarter of the last century after its great revival in the earlier quarter. Its heyday was reached during the 25 years after Independence when great gurus like Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai / पंडनल्लुर मीनाक्षी सुन्दरम पिल्लई, Kattumannarkoil Muthukumara Pillai / कट्टुमन्नारकोईल मुथुकुमार पिल्लई, Tiruvidaimarudur Kuppiah Pillai / तिरुविदेमारुदुर कुप्पाईआह पिल्लई and Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai / वज्हुवूर रामैया पिल्लई strode the field like giants and groomed many students who later became international stars.⁴

It must be emphasized that the Thanjavur *bani* is unique within the Isai Vellalar / इसाई वेल्लालर community as it did not have any hereditary dancers, only musicians. Until recently, it has not had any hereditary dancers (devadasis) in their family tree. It also did not allow until 19th century, its women to have professional artistic status in public domain. It is the male members of this group who are associated with music and teaching dance. This feature makes it uniquely different from all others at that time. Which means, while they could be gifted and perform on family occasions, they were not public performers.⁵

In the 20th century this *bani* got two streams represented by two popular heads: Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and Pichaiyya Pillai / पीचेय्या पिल्लाई. One stayed in Pandanallur and briefly in Madras, one in Tanjore. One (Meenakshi Sundaram) became hereditary and one not (Pichayya).

Thanjavur K.P. Kittappa / के.पी. कितप्पा (1913 – 1999) and his brother K.P. Sivanandam / शिवानंदम, direct descendants of the Thanjavur Quartet are the sons of Ponniah Pillai, a great scholar in music and dance. Credit goes to them for reviving rare dance forms that used to be performed as part of temple rituals and worship. Vyjayantimala Bali brought out the book *Tanjai Nalvarin Adi Sangita Bharata Kala Manjari* / तंजाई नालवारिन आदी संगीतभरत कला मंजरी that has musical dance compositions that have not been accessible to the general public so far. She delved into a treasure-house of rare Bharatanatyam dance by the Thanjavur Quartet.

Says Vyjayantimala: “As their disciple, I am keenly interested in maintaining the pure and pristine form of Bharatanatyam and strictly adhering to the Thanjavur *bani*. My grandmother the late Yadugiri Devi / यदुगिरी देवी was instrumental in getting the book *Adi Bharata Kala Manjari* published by my dance academy in 1964. Some of the ancient musical dance compositions such as Nava Sandhi Kavuthuvams / नवसन्धि कौतुवम, Panchi Murthy / पंचीमूर्ति Kavuthuvams, Prabandhams, Gitam, Tayam and Sooladi found place in the book, edited by Kittappa Pillai and Sivanandam. Their family had carefully preserved the texts with *sahitya*, *swara* and *tala* and also maintained the musical traditions. Now some of the beautiful pieces have been revived and compiled by Chinniah Sivakumar, son of Sivanandam. The new publication contains some valuable and rare compositions including *jatiswarams*, *tana varnams*, *pada varnams* and *thillana*. This will be an invaluable work of art, which brings alive the rich and glorious traditional compositions of ancient times.”⁶

Trained as a musician, a vocalist and mridangist, according to the time-honoured custom of his family, and son of the remarkable musician-scholar Ponniah Pillai, Kittappa braved parental disapproval to take up the dance teacher’s tap-stick. One could see why he had to: he was a born choreographer. “A dance teacher must have eyes,” he often said. He had a singularly far-seeing pair. He revived his family’s old repertoire and composed new pieces for his students, always observant, always able to tell exactly what movements would suit each one, and what each one’s emotional bent was. The complex rhythms of the Pandanallur style were as simple under his management, and as natural as the beating of one’s heart. He was generous to his students, and unlike some gurus, did not object to

their working with other teachers. His son Chandrasekhar, inherits and passes on this tradition, working at Tiruvarur and Chennai.⁷

In Kittappa Pillai's choreography, music comes first. He seemed to see the visual along with the music. So, whenever he choreographed a dance pattern into a musical structure, it blended perfectly into it. He did not advocate unnecessary *brigas* or the twisting of words in singing. His *sangatis* / संगति in *varnams* and *padams* gave utmost importance to the words and its emotional content. His musical renderings for dance may sound a little too simple but in combination with dance choreography his music takes on quite another hue. Guru Kittappa's choreography of *adavus* was always in *madhyama kalam*. Sometimes, he combined it with the *sollus* in a faster tempo. His *jatis* never seem complicated but when one starts reciting them with the *talam*, one realizes the clever weave of the *pancha jatis* and the *karvais*. His philosophy of Bharatanatyam was that "dance should be beautiful to see and to listen."⁸

In the present day, many of the *theermanams* / तीरमानम or rhythmical sequences that are performed in pure dance numbers have their origin in one way or other from Kittappa's chorographical collections either inherited or embellished by Kittappa himself. Several unique features of the exquisite dance compositions of the Tanjore Quartet are based solely on the fact that the composers of these were endowed with excellent skills in the theory and practice of music and dance and different languages.⁹

Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir in Mumbai has been propagating the tenets of the Thanjavur style. It was founded in 1945 by A.T. Govindaraja Pillai / ऐ.टी.गोविन्दराज पिल्लई (1914-1984)

assisted by his wife Karunambal/करुनाम्बल. The success of this venture led to the migration of Govindaraja Pillai's father-in-law T.P. Kuppiah Pillai / टी.पी.कुप्पया पिल्लई and family from Thanjavur to Bombay. Starting with just 4 students, the institution grew in course of time into a banyan tree with sons T.K. Mahalingam Pillai / टी.के.गोविन्दराज पिल्लई (1916-2002) and K. Kalyanasundaram / के कल्याणसुन्दरम (b 1932) contributing their individual brilliance. The Rajarajeswari gurus have an illustrious lineage of ancestors dating back to more than three centuries. Venkatakrishna / वेंकटक्रिष्ण Nattuvanar enjoyed the patronage of the Maratha ruler Serfoji II of Thanjavur. The second generation of Veeraswamy / वीरास्वामी Nattuvanar and his sister Chinnappa Ammal / चिन्नाप्पा अम्मल were followed by the renowned Panchapakesa / पञ्चपाकेस Nattuvanar (1845-1902) who was the *samastha vidwan* of Thanjavur and Ramanathapuram courts. Panchapakesa Nattuvanar was also honored by the royal houses of Baroda and Mysore. He is credited with compiling *Abhinaya Navaneetham* / अभिनय नव नीथम, a monumental treatise on *abhinaya* and a practical guide especially to *hastabhinaya* based on Nandikeswara's *Abhinaya Darpanam*. His only son Kuppiah Pillai (1887-1981), the prime architect of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir is credited with reviving ancient *kavuthuvams*, especially the Navasandhi Kavuthuvams in the early 1940s. His 'Kamala Chakram / कमला चक्रम,' a lotus wheeled compendium depicting the *matra* based complex 108 *talas*, besides the popular 35 *talas*, is invaluable to all students of music and dance.

His son-in-law A.T. Govindaraja Pillai, sons T.K. Mahalingam Pillai, T.K. Maruthappa Pillai (1920-1969), K. Kalyanasundaram, daughter Karunambal and daughter-in-law Mythil Kalyanasundaram have helped the institution to blossom into what it is today.¹⁰

The versatility of the gurus shines through the dance dramas and the *ekaharya* / एकआहार्य depictions they have choreographed, in all of which the aesthetic grace of the Thanjavur *bani* catches the eye. The geometric exactitude in the way the limbs are aligned gives the *adavus* the distinctive aesthetic touch. The symmetry and grace in the movements with the body in the centre makes for delightful viewing. There is no ungainly bending or overstretching of any part of the body at any time. The head and hand movements are marked by alluring grace with neither stiffness in movement nor slackness. The large variety of *adavus* ensures that the *tillanas*, *jatiswarams* etc. have *korvais* that are not repetitive in nature. In every *korvai* or different *nritta hastas* are employed to make for interesting viewing. The *jatis* are *jati*, short and crisp employing several permutations and combinations of *jatis* interwoven so cleverly that the layman does not realize the extent of complication in the calculation. Relaxed presentation as opposed to frenzied execution of *jatis* is characteristic of this *bani*. Mridanga *jatis* are aligned with the *sollukattus* and not the other way round. The gurus of this school believe that power below the waist and grace above it is the essence of good *nritta*.¹¹

Guru Kalyanasundaram was among the first to introduce musical preludes in *padams* and *javalis* to establish the story line. This helped city audiences of places like Bombay with no base for Tamil culture in the 60s to come closer to the art form. *Abhinaya* is subtle. The gurus

strongly believe that it is the duty of the dancer to suggest and the audience to imagine it. Guru Mahalingam Pillai, who has himself written beautiful *padams*, was against over-dramatization. The repertoire of this school covers the whole gamut of the *margam*, thematic dancing and group productions. Emphasis is on singing with *bhava* and clarity of *sahitya*. The nattuvarars of these *bani* are also accomplished musicians and can sing along while wielding the cymbals. Guru Maruthappa / मरुथप्पा Pillai was an excellent choreographer and a respected mridanga vidwan. Guru Govindaraja Pillai besides being a *nadaswaram vidwan* was an excellent *sangeetha vidwan* too. His brief raga essays before each dance item elicited praise from musicians of repute and created the right ambience for exposition by the dancer. Guru Kalyanasundaram is known for his flair for composing and setting to music several new pieces for dance.¹² Some of Kalyanasundaram's prominent disciples include Malavika Sarukkai, Sudha Chandrasekhar, Vani Ganapathy, Lata Pada, Preeti Warriar, Sunitha Pillai, Viji Prakash, Gowri Rao and Padmaja Suresh. Mostly Bombay talents of that period.

Kandappa Pillai / कंडप्पा पिल्लई's (1899 – 1941) second wife was the granddaughter of Ponniah Pillai of the Thanjavur Quartet and the childhood playmate of Dhanammal's daughter Lakshmiratnam. Kandappa's ancestors had been in the service of Thanjavur court during the 17th century, moved to Thirunelveli during the 18th century and returned to Thanjavur around 1800. Kandappa's father Nellaiappa / नेलईअप्पा Nattuvanar trained dancers of an earlier generation. He taught music to Jayammal and Lakshmiratnam but not to his son Kandappa who learnt nattuvangam from his paternal grandfather Kannuswami Nattuvanar of Baroda and from his uncle K.

Ponniah. Kandappa's rhythmic compositions for dance reflect an adherence to principles of structure that set him apart among his relatives who also represented the Thanjavur nattuvanar family tradition.¹³

From Thanjavur to George Town (Chennai) came Guru Kandappa Pillai in the early 20th century with a lineage to boast of. His tutelage of Bala, grand-daughter of Veena Dhanammal helped her art and his own outreach. He went to teach so far as Almora when Uday Shankar started his dance Studio there. Thus a guru from Thanjavur taught in the Himalayas! Kandappa's *jatis* were tight and taut and Bala represented the slow flowering of these. At Almora, the guru found the food and cold climate a detriment to his overall health and soon returned to Madras.

Guru Ellappa / एलप्पा Pillai came from Kanchipuram, and honed his skills with Kandappa. His home in Mambalam attracted the likes of Ram Gopal, the internationally famous dancer, and a host of French girls who made Madras their dance-home. He was a skillful teacher and a great singer. Thanjavur was actually the source from where almost all the dance gurus came. They were teachers of the new urban elite of Madras, which included many film stars. Some gurus were more famous because they were in great demand to direct dance scenes in Tamil films.¹⁴

Tanjore Quartet being the founders musically, one family that made dance prominent, other than non-hereditary mentioned (Pichayya) was Tanjore Balasaraswati / ताजोर बालासरस्वती (1918 – 1984). Bala was a seventh generation descendant of the musician and dancer Papammal from the 18th century Thanjavur court. Hailing from the

devadasi community, Bala is celebrated for helping continue the pristine art of the devadasis. More than her technique, it was her *abhinaya* that was celebrated. The quality of the music that she used was exceptional. This was not surprising because she was the granddaughter of the legendary veena player Dhanammal. Balasaraswati's whole family was accomplished in music and dance. Jayammal, Balasaraswati's mother, who sang for Bala's performances, was the daughter of the legendary 'Veena' Dhanammal. A trained singer, Bala sang for her daughter Lakshmi Knight's dance performances in later years. Under her demanding guru N. Kandappa, a sixth generation nattuvanar of the Thanjavur Chinniah line who represented the best of the Tanjore Quartet, she flowered into a great dancer. His early death left her without a perfectionist taskmaster but by then the West had discovered her and soon she was lauded at home too. Till her death, Bala remained an important link to the devadasi tradition.¹⁵

Vocalists T. Brinda and T. Mukta were daughters of Kamakshi Ammal and granddaughters of Veena Dhanammal. They were cousins of Bala, whose younger brothers T. Viswanathan (flautist) and T. Ranganathan (mridangist) were also prominent performers and music teachers in India and the United States. As an accompanist to his sister Bala in her recitals, Viswa made valuable contribution to dance music. Film maker Satyajit Ray first saw Balasaraswati in 1935 when he was 14 years old and she was 17. He wanted to make a film on her in 1966 but the project worked out only a decade later. Balasaraswati is listed among 'America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: The First 100' for being a veritable ambassador for Bharatanatyam outside India. While several learnt from her, it is her

daughter Lakshmi Knight who continued her legacy. Lakshmi died in December 2001.

Aniruddha Knight, the heir to the artistic legacy of both T. Balasaraswati and Veena Dhanammal, is the ninth generation of performers in his family. His training began at a very young age, allowing him to absorb his family's innate musicality in dance and receive his family's vast repertoire in its entirety. Aniruddha began his career as a vocalist for his mother Lakshmi Knight during the 1990s.

Aniruddha suffered being who he is since early childhood. Tamil Nadu being so caste oriented in art, he was singled out because he was the great Bala's grandson, and Lakshmi's son. He was shy and his fancy upbringing in USA did not help. When he first appeared on stage as a lanky teenager in kurta pyjama some 15 years ago, many wrote him off. He dealt with that, he dealt with the death of his mother at a young age and he dealt with all barbs and digs. Today, he is among the best male solo Bharatanatyam dancers. Aniruddha learnt music in two different ways - music for the sake of music and music for dance, and the two are different. In fact, he is among the very few if not the only one who can sing too and knows music as well as he knows dance.

Entranced by Vyjayanthimala's dance, Narthaki Nataraj went to Thanjavur to seek training under Guru Kittappa Pillai, but had to wait for a year before he accepted her as a disciple. It was he who named her 'Narthaki.' Narthaki Nataraj stayed with Kittappa Pillai for 15 years and is now one of the foremost performers of the Thanjavur bani. In 2000, she started Valliambalam School of Dance in Chennai. She specializes in rare and ancient Tamil compositions,

Thevaram, Thiruppugazh and Thiruvagasam. She has a huge collection of rare Tamil books which she refers to when working on dance productions. She also presents women oriented themes.

Guru Acharya Parvatikumar, who had done exhaustive study of King Sarfoji's contribution. He created the Nirupana-s and put them in dance shape. The first Nirupana was taught to Smt Parul Shashtry, Smt Sucheta Chapekar and others in due course. Sucheta Chapekar was inspired by her Guru's research and made a presentation of the hereto unknown Marathi compositions of the Tanjore Maratha rulers (17th to 19th century). She also unearthed some rare Marathi, Hindi and Sanskrit compositions of King Shahaji from the hidden treasures of Saraswati Mahal Library of Tanjavur with guidance from Dr. V. Raghavan and her Guru Kittappa Pillai.

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