

SUB: PERFORMING ARTS (DANCE/THEATER)

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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 20

A FEW PROMINENT GURUS POST INDEPENDENCE

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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 20
A Few Prominent Gurus
Post Independence



PAPER: 3

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

Module 20 A Few Prominent Gurus Post Independence

This was an important period in development of dance like Bharatanatyam, when most star proponents came centre stage as dance had moved from village to big city and stage to films. Dancers, who had learnt from traditional masters, started reaching out and teaching and thus a whole spinoff in fortune and fame of Bharatanatyam came about. These were the first generation star dancers and also later, star gurus, as they taught or inspired many and thus the art of Bharatanatyam became a household art.

K.N. DANDAYUTHAPANI PILLAI / के.एन.दंडायूद्धपाणी पिल्लई (1921-1974) hailed from a highly acclaimed traditional family of musicians from Tanjore. His parents were Natesa Pillai and Subbamma. He started his initial training in music from his father at the age of seven. From his grandfather Ramakrishna Pillai he learnt the nuances of dance for which he had natural talent and ability. He worked as a dance instructor in Kalakshetra under Rukmini Devi, and also on the research aspects of Bharatanatyam. He was particularly renowned for the production of dance dramas. Some of the popular ones are: *Chitrambala Kuravanji* / चित्रंबल कुरवंजी also published as a book, *Krishna Tulabaram* / क्रिष्ण तुलाबरम, *Silapadigaram* / शीलपदिकारम, *Sri*

Andal / श्री आंडाल for Vyjayanthimala Bali and troupe, *Sivagamiyin Sabatham / सिवागामिर्यी सबथम* for Chandrakantha and troupe, *Padmavathy Srinivasa Kalyanam / पद्मावती श्रीनिवास कल्याणं* for Rajasulochana troupe, *Kaveri Thanda Kalai Chelvi / कावेरी ठंडा कलाई चेल्वी* for Jayalalitha troupe, *Kumbesar Kuravanji / कुम्बेसर कुर्वजी*. He choreographed dance sequences for several films, which won him name and fame. Particularly praiseworthy was the Hollywood film *The River* in which he composed the music, rendered the song himself and choreographed the dance. In 1971, he was the first Bharatanatyam guru to receive the title of 'Padmasri' from the President of India. He started Natya Kalalayam and served as its director. Students from different strata of society and difference parts of the world were admitted here. Some of the prominent students of Dandayuthapani Pillai were: Vyjayanthimala, Manjula, Srividya, Latha, Jayalalitha, Chandrakantha, Rajasulochana, Sheela Pathy, Yamini K, Geetha, Kausalya, Uma, Vidya, Padmini, Radha, Priyadarshini, Anuradha, Sarojini (Srilanka), Jaya Gowri, Gayatri (Coimbatore), Suganthi S (Malaysia), Rani Williams (Singapore), Vasantha Daniel (Sri Lanka), Suryakala.¹

VAITHEESWARANKOIL SETHURAMAN MUTHUSWAMI PILLAI / वैथीस्वरणकोईल सेतुरामन मुथुस्वामी पिल्लई (1921 - 1992) hailed from a family of musicians, dancers and nattuvanars. His grandmother Vaalambal was a dancer, his mother Sethuramu Ammal, an accomplished musician. After his mother's death, he and his sister were put under the custody of her uncle nattuvanar Vaitheeswarankoil Meenakshisundaram Pillai, so young Muthuswami became an apprentice at a tender age. He also had brush with

several branches of music and his early grounding in the melodic and rhythmic aspects of music was to stand him in good stead when he choreographed and introduced new items in dance later in his career. Muthuswami picked up knowledge watching his guardian and other nattuvanars while they taught their pupils and conducted recitals. With banning of dance within temples, Muthuswami was 15 when he and his sister moved to Chennai with their guardian. When his sister passed away aged 14, he soon branched out on his own, finally deciding to take up dance as a profession. He went to Mayavaram and became the pupil of Kattumannarkoil Muthukumara Pillai for the next 5 years, undergoing endless hours of dance and exercise under his guru's watchful eyes. The stress on clarity of line coupled with lissom grace that was to become his norm was the consequence of this phase of training. After his marriage to Valambal, he accepted the invitation to teach at Nrityodaya, Chennai. In its performing wing Natana Kala Seva, he was plunged into a maelstrom of different styles of music and dance, watching and observing masters create and perform. He imbibed the most attractive features of styles other than his own. Soon, Muthuswami Pillai gained a foothold in films as a dance director. From mid 1940s to mid 1960s he had a fairly successful career in films that brought him prosperity and fame. For nearly 7 to 9 years, Muthuswami trained sisters Sayee and Subbulakshmi in-between his film assignments. Vyjayanthimala, Lalitha, Padmini, Ragini, BS Saroja, Yogam, Mangalam, Rhadha, L Vijayalakshmi, Sayee and Subbulakshmi were trained by him for film dances.²

After the decline of Bharatanatyam in films, performances also were few in the 1960s and 70s. Since he was staying in a lodge (surrounded

by artistes), no new students approached him for training. But soon, he got a French student Verushka and then started a long line of students from France who came to India with the sole purpose of learning from Muthuswami Pillai. He started creating new *adavus* and movements day by day with each pupil until the repertoire had a new flavour hitherto unknown. Most took Indian names like Malavika, Shakuntala, Maithreyee Alamelu, Padmavati, Kunti, Kalpana etc. even after they returned to France and opened their own dance schools. Then Prathibha Prahlad and Malavika Sarukkai learnt some items from him. His most famous disciple from France is Dominique Delorme. He was the first Bharatanataym guru and first person from Tamil soil to be awarded the *Chevalier des Arts et des Letters* from France. Moulded in tradition, he had a strikingly modern perspective in Bharatanatyam. Knowing to speak or understand only his mother tongue Tamil, he had nearly all his students from France. Unsought by disciples of his native land, he was one guru who appealed most to the western mind.³

In 1945, when the alien rule was in its dying embers, our country at the threshold of Independence and Bombay, the dynamic centre of Indian resurgence, was pulsating with pride everything that was nationalistic, be it social, political, economic or cultural. In such atmosphere was founded the Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatanatya Kala Mandir in Bombay by GURU A. T GOVINDRAJ PILLAI / ए.टी. गोविन्दराज पिल्लई, assisted and enthused by his wife Karunambal. He has amassed huge knowledge in Bharatanatyam technique from the vast treasures of his father-in-law Kuppiyah Pillai's erudite scholarship. His legacy is continued by his son Guru Vasant Kumar. The success of this venture led to the migration of Kuppiyah Pillai and family from

Thanjavur to Bombay. Starting with just four students, the Kala Mandir, in course of time, grew into a large banyan tree, with sons GURU T.K. MAHALINGAM PILLAI AND GURU K. KALYANASUNDARAM adding their mite.⁴

The Rajarajeswari Gurus have an illustrious lineage of ancestors dating back to more than two centuries. Venkatakrishna Nattuvanar was patronised by the Maratha Serfoji II of Thanjavur. The second generation of Veeraswamy Nattuvanar and his sister Chinnaappa Ammal were followed by the renowned Panchapakesa Nattuvanar who was the *Samasthana Vidwan* of Thanjavur and Ramanathapuram courts. He was also honoured by the royal houses of Baroda and Mysore. An adept in abhinaya he is credited with compiling in Tamil the *Abhinaya Navaneetham*, a monumental treatise on abhinaya, a practical guide specially on Hastabhinaya. His only son KUPPIAH PILLAI was the prime architect of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir, regarded today as an institution par excellence for Bharatanatyam. His *Kamala Chakram*, a lotus wheeled compendium depicting the *matra*-based complex 108 *talas*, besides the popular 35 ones, is invaluable to all students of music and dance. Not resting on its oars, the institution has trained the current generation of gurus, G. Vasant Kumar, M. Vishwanath and K. Harikrishna who have already proved their mettle to carry on the parampara tradition. The gurus of Rajarajeswari have blazed new trails in adapting the training to the needs of changing times, inculcating gurukula norms in institutional coaching and giving a new facade to presentational format. The gurus have been adept in adapting polyglot lyrics to Bharatanatyam so as to instil national integration in true sense. The versatility of the gurus shines through

the dance dramas, the ballets, the ekaharya depictions they have choreographed, in all of which, the aesthetic grace of the Thanjavur bani glows unalloyed.⁵

Had it not been for two devadasis who came as “dowry” when a Tanjore princess married the royalty of Baroda, Bharatanatyam would have never reached north and west and rest of India a century ago. The story of Baroda’s connection with Bharatanatyam begins in 1883, when the young, handsome Maharaja of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad III, married a beautiful princess of Tanjore called Chimnabai. As part of her dowry, the princess brought a troupe of dancers and musicians. In this troupe were two dancers – Gaura, or GOWRIAMMAL / गोवरिअम्माल, whose mother was Kammu Amma, a Tanjore court dancer, and BHANUMATHI / भानुमथि, a devadasi from Kumbakonam. Two nattuvanars Vadivelu and Sabhapati - father and son - accompanied the dancers. Gaura stayed on but Bhanumati returned to Kumbakonam and another dancer KANTHIMATI / कान्तिमती came as her replacement. Gaura was a fine dancer and composer. She came to Baroda when still young and lived in a three-storeyed mansion with other palace entertainers. Gaura had three sons and a daughter. Her sons trained as nattuvanars and eventually accompanied her. She taught Bharatanatyam to her daughter Chandra amma, who also later danced in the palace till her marriage. Chandra was educated and could speak nine languages! One of Gaura’s sons Tulasidas also learnt Bharatanatyam from her. Gaura was a court dancer for 32 years. Kanthimati danced for 35 years. Gaura amma died in 1940 (by other account in 1941). Kanthimati died in 1953. Chandra amma, Gaura’s daughter died in

1983. By then Bharatanatyam had not only established itself, but entrenched itself in all over India. When Baroda became part of India upon independence, the royalty gifted many buildings to be used as various faculties and departments to become India's first university - the Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU), initiated in 1949-50.⁶

MSU was the first university to offer dance at the graduate level in 1949. MOHAN KHOKAR was appointed as the first head of the department of dance. His term saw the employment of several artistes settled in Baroda, such as KUBERNATH TANJORKER (son of devadasi Kanthimati), and visits by eminent scholars like E Krishna Iyer.⁷ The revered guru Kubernath Tanjorkar, hailing from family with traditional links with music and dance, contributed greatly to creating a strong base of practical training in the department along with Smt. Uma Dutta of Kalakshetra. The Department has base of Kalakshetra School. SMT. ANJALI MERH nee Hora, one of the early batch disciples of Smt. Rukmini Devi at Kalakshetra, became the Head of the Dance Department. She further solidified the Kalakshetra School. Her productions of the dance-drama-s in Gujarati like *Shri Chandramauliswara Kuravanji* / श्री चंद्रमौलिस्वर कुरवंजी , *Natir-Puja* / नटीर-पूजा, *Radha nu Shamanu* / राधा नु शमणु, *Buddha-Charitra* / बुद्ध चरित्र added a new dimension to Bharatanatyam, creating the Gujarati school of Bharatanatyam. The crowning glory was her writing, setting music and choreography of the whole *Margam* in Gujarati. Baroda not only brought Bharatanatyam to the North, but has given a solid base for its spread in Northern regions of India. Her students of merit are Menaka Thakr, Parul Shah, Sandhya Mungar and many more spread over many countries.

As Baroda with its connections with Tanjore had come under the sway of the Maratha rulers, there developed in Bombay a 'Marathi school of Bharatanatyam' represented by ACHARYA PARVATHI KUMAR, who tried to use Hindustani music with Bharatanatyam compositions to make the classical dance more accessible to non-Tamilians. He composed *padams* in Marathi and his pupils Nana Kasar and Sucheta Chapekar carried on his work.⁸

In the past two centuries (19th and 20th), Mysore has produced many illustrious dance teachers like Muguru Subanna, Amritappa, Dasappa, Bangalore Kittappa, Kolar Puttappa, and great dancers like Amritamma, Coimbatore Tayi, Nagaratnamma, the incomparable Jatti Tayamma and her disciple Venkatalakshamma. Alongside the palace dancers existed the temple dancers or devadasis like Rangamma, and Jeejamma - a veritable galaxy of dancers with high standards of technical excellence and profound scholarship. In the present day, in Karnataka or elsewhere, there are innumerable schools of Bharatanatyam that teach the Pandanallur, Kanjeevaram, Madras, Kalakshetra and Mysore styles without controversy or questioning.⁹

Guru H.R. Keshava Murthy founded Keshava Nritya Shala in 1949 in Bangalore. He directed more than 30 dance dramas like *Sri Krishna Tulabhara* / कृष्ण तुलाभार, *Kaveri Vaibhava* / कावेरी वैभव, *Jatayu Moksha* / जटायु मोक्ष, *Mohini Bhasmasura* / मोहिनी भस्मासुर, *Parvati Koravanji* / पार्वती कुरवंजी, *Tirukana Kanasu* / तिरुकाना कानसू to name a few. His son / disciple BK Shyam Prakash is the Founder Director of Samskruthi Bhavan, Keshava College of Music and Dance (Affiliated to Bangalore University) & Keshava Samskruthi Sabha.

GURU NARMADA (1942 – 2007) trained initially under V.S. Kaushik in the Thanjavur style, and then from the legendary K.P. Kittappa Pillai for 18 years. Narmada started her dance school Shakuntala Nruthyala named after her mother in 1978 in Bangalore. Inspiring her students to be creative using a particular adavu without sacrificing classicism was a notable factor in her teaching. She has trained some of the finest Bharatanatyam dancers such as Lakshmi Gopalswamy, Manju Bhargavi, Sathyanarayana Raju, Nirupama Rajendra, Malathi Iyengar, P Praveen Kumar and Anuradha Vikranth.

LEELA RAMANATHAN (1927 – 2015) founded Meenakshi Sundaram Centre for Performing Arts in 1972 in Bangalore. She was a prolific writer and researcher in classical Indian dance forms with over 800 articles to her credit.

LALITHA SRINIVASAN, initially a student of Guru Keshavamurthy, later specialised in abhinaya under Dr. K. Venkatalakshamma. She has also learnt the Muguru style under Jejamma, thus a blend of several teachers' styles. She heads the Nupura School of Bharatanatyam (Bangalore) founded in 1978. She has to her credit numerous dance ballets like *Chitrangadha / चित्रान्गदा*, *Sri Krishna Parijatha / श्री कृष्ण पारिजात*, *Lasyotsava / लास्योत्सव*, *Prem Bhakti Mukti / प्रेम भक्ति मुक्ति*, *Koushika Sukritam / कौशिक सुकृतं*, *Gowdara Malli / गोव्दारा मल्लि*, *Deva Kannika / देव कनिका*, *Anveshane / अन्वेशने* and *Nisha Vibhrama / निशा विभ्रम* etc. and is especially lauded for her innovative works like *Anga Bhava / अंग भाव*, *Kavya Nritya / काव्य नृत्य*, *Sulalitha Nritya / सुललिता न्रित्य* which is a revival of a 16th century dance form – the *Suladi / सुलादी* and *Nisha Vibhrama / निशा वि भ्रम*.¹⁰

RAM GOPAL (1912-2003) was the first shining star of Bharatanatyam who changed his costumes and helped many learn the style. Hailed as the Nijinski of India, he was born and raised in Bangalore where a strong Mysore school of Bharatanatyam existed. Ram Gopal however, learned from Guru Muthukumaran Pillai of Kattumannarkoil as well as from Guru Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. Ram Gopal's statuesque body and regal persona made his dance spectacular and won Bharatanatyam a wide appeal not only in India but internationally. What his contemporary Uday Shankar (1900-77) did for contemporary dance, Ram Gopal achieved for the classical style. He partnered several dancers and in the process gave their careers a boost. Chief among his partners were Tara Chaudhary, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Lilavati Hager and Kumudini Lakhia. Ram Gopal's dancing career was just decades long but his reputation far outlasted his active innings.¹¹

T. BALASARASWATI (1918-84) is celebrated for helping continue the pristine art of devadasis. She hailed from the devadasi community herself. More than her technique it was her abhinaya that was celebrated. The quality of the music that she used for dance 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. Under her demanding guru N Kandappa (1899-1941) who represented the best of the Thanjavur Quartet, she flowered into a great dancer. His early death left her without a perfectionist task master 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. While several learnt from her it was her daughter Lakshmi Knight who continued her legacy.¹² Now Aniruddha Knight, the son of Lakshmi is carrying on the family legacy.

RUKMINI DEVI ARUNDALE (1904 -84) was born into a family of scholars and educationists and was exposed to the best of the East and the West. She learned ballet from Cleo Nordi, a soloist from Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova's group. When confronted with the question why she did not learn her own Indian classical dances, she changed course. She came under the tutelage of Mylapore Gowri Amma. When she set up Kalakshetra she engaged Guru Muthukumaran Pillai as a teacher and after he left, Guru Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. Rukmini Devi represented a class and a caste (Brahmin) which had shunned the arts, especially dance, considering it polluted by the devadasis. When she first took to Bharatanatyam, she became a pariah among the Brahmins. But later the Brahmins extolled her rebellion as a watershed event and hailed her as the saviour of a moribund form. Her dancing career was not long because she set up Kalakshetra and was busy running it. But her school helped promote Bharatanatyam by training many dancers and initiating dance dramas. With her death in 1984, the institution lost its guiding spirit.¹³

MRINALINI SARABHAI (born 1919) learnt Bharatanatyam from Guru Muthukumaran Pillai and later from Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. She learnt Kathakali too from Chatuni Panickar. She partnered the famous Ram Gopal and danced into the limelight. She came from a family of freedom fighters and educationists and married nuclear scientist Vikram Sarabhai. In Ahmedabad she started a dance

academy called Darpana. It was at that time the only outpost for classical dance in the region. Mrinalini also undertook creative and innovative works in Bharatanatyam. She remains a significant link with the past. Her talented daughter Mallika is also a dancer.¹⁴ Mallika's son Revanta is making a name for himself in the dance field.

KALANIDHI NARAYANAN (born 1930) was among the first Brahmin girls to take to Bharatanatyam in the footsteps of Rukmini Devi Arundale. Guru Kannappa Mudualiar (brother-in-law of Ellappa Pillai) of Kanchipuram trained her. She learnt *abhinaya* from the devadasi of the Mylapore temple, Gowri Amma and later from Chinnayya Naidu, renowned for his abhinaya skills and was also associated with Balasaraswati. Kalanidhi was the rising star, but stopped dancing after the death of her husband, as was customary in Brahmin families. She returned to the stage after a hiatus of 30 years in 1973 and has since then trained many students in *abhinaya*. Vani Ganapathi, Janak Khendry, Malavika Sarukkai, Priyadarsini Govind and Bragha Bessell are some of her well known students of abhinaya.¹⁵

M.K. SAROJA (born 1931) was adopted by Guru Muthukumaran Pillai and showered with all his blessings and art. Belonging neither to the devadasi community nor to the Brahmin caste, this Mudaliar talent was spotted by Ram Gopal and attained early fame as 'Baby Saroja.' She also acted in mythological Tamil films. Hailed as the critics delight by E. Krishna Iyer and Prof. Sambhamoorthy, she was one of the top five dancers in the 1940s through 1960s. Saroja married renowned dance scholar and historian Prof. Mohan Khokar. She remained an active performer and taught items to dancers like

Indrani Rahman, Yamini Krishnamurthy and Kiran Segal. Saroja's principal disciple Vidya continued her work. Shanti, Sylvie, Vani, Ambika, Jyothi (all French) show the stamp of her grooming. M.K. Saroja remains the sole representative of her guru's style.¹⁶

KAMALA LAKSHMAN (born 1935) won popular appeal through cinema. Taught initially in the Guru Muthukumaran Pillai parampara, she was later influenced by Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. Her titillating numbers like the Snake Dance won her mass appeal and she remained an important dancer in the 1960s. She married well known cartoonist R.K. Lakshman but separated from him after a few years, remarried and moved to the U.S.A. She played a key role in packaging Bharatanatyam for the common man through her dances for the silver screen. Many continue to be besotted by her screen image, such was her elfin charm. Unfortunately she has no students of merit.¹⁷

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