



London Contemporary  
Dance School

## **London Contemporary Dance School**

### ***BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance: South Asian Dance Strand***

### **Outline Syllabus – *Bharata Natyam***

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on behalf of Akādemi

# London Contemporary Dance School

## ***BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance: South Asian Dance Strand***

### **Outline Syllabus - Bharata Natyam**

#### **Background / Context**

This Outline Syllabus for Bharata Natyam was written in 2004 by dance artist Stella Uppal Subbiah and edited by Rachel Elliott, Senior Education Officer at Akādemi. Its purpose is to guide the development of the new *South Asian Dance Strand* as part of the *BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance* at London Contemporary Dance School. This work was funded by a Research & Development grant from Arts Council England, awarded to Akādemi to facilitate the development of higher education level study of South Asian dance in the UK.

#### **Overall principles**

Please note: The terminology used in Bharata Natyam is in Sanskrit and Tamil. The closest and simplest English translation and transliteration has been used for the traditional terms. Sometimes a single Sanskrit or Tamil word conveys a whole subtle concept that cannot be easily reduced to one or two words. There are several possible translations and transliterations used by dancers when speaking or writing in English. In this syllabus non-English words are written with capital letters. The initials 'BN' have been used at times as an acronym for Bharata Natyam.

#### **Introduction**

Bharata Natyam is a Classical dance style danced by both men and women. It originated in the temples of South India and its history can be traced back 2000 years.

Bharata Natyam shares in common, with other Classical South Asian dance styles, the theoretical framework laid out in the Natya Shastra. This includes the Nartan Bheda, the three main aspects of dance: **Nritta**, **Nritya** and **Natya**:

- Nritta - non-narrative or 'pure' dance: rhythmic and decorative movement of the body and feet coordinated with hand gestures;
- Nritya - expressive dance: the portrayal of ideas, stories and feelings - a combination of pure dance and interpretative dance;
- Natya – dance-drama or interpretative dance: the presentation of a character or characters by a solo dancer or group.

It also includes the concept of **Abhinaya** of which there are four main categories of expression:

- Angika – bodily expression; ‘Ang’ means a limb or part of the body;
- Vachika – vocal expression (singing and spoken word); the use of proper pronunciation and modulation of the voice;
- Aharya – expression through costumes, make-up, props and colours;
- Sattvika– emotional expression, the representation of psychic conditions.

The notes that follow give detail on the terms, vocabulary and structures that are specific to the form of Bharata Natyam. Subtle variations exist in the different styles of BN, but these are not discussed here.

## **Basic Stance, Use of the Body and Space**

Bharata Natyam features a strong geometric use of limbs and developed sense of symmetry. Dancers work with an understanding and sense of projection through personal and general space and work in all levels. In the correct execution of all Bharata Natyam movements, there should be a sense of lift and elongation through the spine and active engagement of core abdominal muscles.

Bharata Natyam is performed in bare feet. All parts of the foot are used and articulated. Dynamic flat-foot strikes of the floor and placing of heels are strongly featured.

Aramandi is the fundamental position from which the Bharata Natyam dancer moves: the spine is held vertically, heels are close together (3 fingers-width apart), legs turned out from the hips, (so that the toes point out towards the sides) and the knees bent (similar to a demi-plié in Classical Ballet).

Murumandi is the deeper ‘squatting’ position with the heels lifted (similar to a grand plie in Classical Ballet).

Natyarambhan is the basic starting position for the arms, in which they are dynamically extended out to the sides at shoulder height.

Bharata Natyam analyses the body into the following three groups:

- Anga – the major limbs/parts of the body: head, hands, chest, sides, waist and feet;
- Pratyanga – the minor limbs/parts of the body: shoulders, shoulder-blades, arms, back, abdomen, thighs and lower leg;
- Upanga – the features: eyes, eyebrows, eyeballs, cheeks, nose, jaws, lips, teeth, tongue, chin and face, it also includes other small areas of the body including heels, ankles, toes and fingers.

## Hand Gestures

Bharata Natyam uses Mudras or Hastas (hand gestures) to tell stories and show feelings. There are 52 basic single-handed and double-handed gestures. These are usually learned in the form of a Sloka (chant). Although each Mudra has a name, their usage may be much broader.

It is not the hands alone which tell the story or express an emotion, but the way the dancer uses his or her whole body. The Mudras are like the letters of an alphabet. A dancer also learns Viniyoga, or ways of using each Mudra, which can be likened to words. How the 'sentences' or dance sequences are constructed depends on the skills of the poet / songwriter, the choreographer and the performer.

## Important Concepts

**Rasa and Bhava** are key concepts in Bharata Natyam.

**Rasa** literally means 'flavour': it can be translated as sentiment or aesthetic experience. There are nine Rasas in Classical dance.

- Srīngara – the Erotic
- Hasya – the Comic
- Raudra – the Furious
- Karuna – the Pathetic (sad)
- Veera – the Heroic
- Bhayanaka – the Fearful
- Bibhatsa – the Odious
- Adbhuta – the Wondrous
- Shanta – the Tranquil

**Bhava** is the expression of emotion.

- Alambana Vibhava - is the fundamental cause, e.g. the hero or heroine
- Udīpena Vibhava – is that which enhances the fundamental cause e.g. environment, beauty.  
Within Bhava there are 3 main categories of the 49 emotions:
  - Sthayi – constant emotional state
  - Sanchari – transitory emotional state
  - Satvika – physical manifestations of emotion (e.g. heart beat, goose bumps, sweating etc)

## Nayaka and Nayaki

The concept of Nayaka refers to the 'hero' (of which there are four main types) or male qualities.

Nayaki refers to the 'heroine' (of which there are 8 types) or female qualities.

## Musical accompaniment

Bharata Natyam is usually performed to Carnatic (South Indian Classical) music played by a vocalist and a drummer playing a Mridangam (double-headed drum).

The music comprises instrumental sections, songs, slokas and solkuttu.

- Songs contain words and Swaras or notes from the Sargam or melodic scale. (The basic Sargam is: Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa).
- Slokas are chants or verses, usually from a philosophical or sacred text.
- Solkuttu are spoken syllables.

A Natuvanar traditionally accompanies the teaching of Bharata Natyam on the Natuvangam (small cymbals).

## Rhythm and Speed

Speaking or thinking one of the five Jathis (rhythmic patterns) which are written below, helps a dancer to keep to a particular rhythm, especially when learning or practising something new. Changing the rhythms, influences the quality of the movement.

*Ta ki ta* (3 beats)

*Ta ka dhi mi* (4)

*Ta ka, ta kit a* (5)

*Ta ka ta, ta ka dhi mi* (7)

*Ta ka dhi mi, ta ka, ta ki ta* (9)

Adavus (steps) are performed in different Laya (speeds). Each tempo is mathematically related to the starting speed and must fit within the Tala (rhythmic cycle).

Practical and theoretical study of Tala Dasa Prana (the 10 different elements of Tala) is important for the Bharata Natyam dancer.

## Basic Structure of a typical Bharata Natyam dance class

The basic structure is typically as follows:

- Opening salutation in words and gestures
- General warm-up and body conditioning exercises
- Form-specific warm-up exercises
- Sequences and compositional studies with form-specific movement material
- Cool down and stretches
- Closing chants

## **Maargam - The Bharata Natyam Repertoire**

The shape or form of Bharata Natyam follows particular geometric, mathematical and philosophical guidelines. These are tools rather than rigid or restrictive rules and once learned properly, allow the artist to create within a safe and structured framework.

Bharata Natyam dancers are expected to learn a repertoire of items, known as a Maargam. Usually a Maargam is between one and a half and two and a half hours in length, with individual items lasting from 5 to 45 minutes. There are many dances within each category, defined by the Raga (melody and song) and the Tala (rhythm).

By studying and performing a Maargam, a dancer learns about the dance form. During a dancer's lifetime, he or she will learn many Maargams as well as participate in dance-dramas and dance pieces which use the principles and framework without strictly following the set structures.

The structure of the traditional Maargam is:

1. Alarippu - invocatory dance and opening;
2. Jatiswaram - introduction to pure dance;
3. Shabdham - introduction to Abhinaya – expressive dance;
4. Varnam - the main piece, containing all the elements of BN which could take the form of a Padvarnam or Tanvarnam) or Swarajati (performed in place of Varnam);
5. Padam – a pure Abhinaya piece;
6. Kirtanam - combines Abhinaya and dance, usually in Bhakti Rasa, are also performed in music concerts;
7. Javali – interpretation of a verse, light in nature;
8. Ashtapadhi – performed to love poems from the Geeta Govinda;
9. Tillana - virtuoso pure dance.

## **Guest tutors / additional input / resources**

Students will require the input of an Mridangam player at least twice per month and a Carnatic vocalist at least once per month, to ensure students can perform to the traditional accompaniments.

Students will also require specialist teaching in Carnatic music.

The Bharata Natyam tutor will use Natuvangam (small cymbals) when teaching.

## Bharata Natyam - Year One Course

### Overall Aims:

- To consolidate the three main aspects of BN technique;
- To deconstruct, analyse and build on prior learning;
- To establish a common approach to technique from students of diverse stylistic backgrounds and experience.

### Body Conditioning

Appropriate warm-up exercises to ensure that the body is prepared for the demands of BN. These will include yoga exercises.

### Nritta (Pure / Non-narrative dance)

- Recapping and improving technique in the main movement vocabulary: Mandalas (stance/posture), Chari (walks), Bhramari (turns), Plavanam (jumps).
- A range of Adavus (sequences of steps) will be performed in different rhythms (Tala) and all the speeds (Laya).
  1. Tatta adavu – striking the floor in Aramandi position (variations x 8)
  2. Natta adavu – extending legs and feet away from the centre (“ x 8)
  3. Ta tai tai ta – travelling using a 3-dimensional use of space (“ x 4)
  4. Tai hat tai – introducing specific movements of toes and heels (“ x 4)
  5. Tai ya tai yi – sliding / gliding with slight elevation (“ x 4)
  6. Tat tai tam – travelling sequence including jumps and turns, using different levels in space (“ x 6)
  7. Tat tai ta ha – stationary but using jumps, heel and toes movements, forcing the arms through space (“ x 4)
  8. Mandi adavu – movements at floor level including slides and jumps (“ x 4)
  9. Sharkal – sliding and using different levels (“ x 2)
  10. Dhit tainta ta tai – jumps, speed, levels, turns (“ x 2)
  11. Tai tai tat ta – walk, centre and heels (features Ekal, a percussive movement of the diaphragm) (“ x 3)
  12. Ta hat jham tavita – combination of all the movement vocabulary (“ x 2)
  13. Ta dhing gi na tom – ending phrase (“ x 1)
  14. Kita taka tari kita tom – ending phrase (“ x 1)
- Work with the main core Jathis (rhythmic patterns) x 5.
- Be able to independently execute a 2-minute continuous movement phrase.
- Learn to notate the Tala Dasa Prana (this will be taught by a musician) which will lay the foundations for learning dance notation in years 2 & 3.

### **Nritya** (Interpretive / Expressive dance)

Work in this aspect will include:

- Viniyogas (exercises) to increase mobility and expressiveness of the neck, eyes and head and expand understanding and execution of the usages of the movements.
- Head movements.
- Details of single-handed and double-handed Mudras (gestures) and their main usages.
- Deva Hastas (gods and goddesses and universal principles)
- Avtara Hasta (10 incarnations)
- Bandhava (family relationships)
- Planets
- Jati Hastas (different castes / roles in society)

### **Natya** (Dance-drama)

- Ensure thorough understanding of the key concepts of: Bhava and Rasa, through analysing existing pieces of expressive work from the repertoire including Padam and Javali.
- Deconstruct and analyse dramatic pieces already learnt prior to study at LCDS, for example the Geeta Govinda or Ashtapadi.
- Consolidate portrayal of character.
- Students will be set reading, watch videos (especially of work by Rukmini Devi) and, where possible, see live productions and discuss. They will be encouraged to see Kathak, BN and contemporary dance work which features dramatic / narrative content as well as work at the Royal National Theatre and other leading theatre companies.
- Introduce drama and character from a key Classical play – Ramayana.

### **Abhinaya**

The main aspects of Abhinaya will be integral to the study of:

Nritta, (Angika, Vachika and Satvika)

Nritya (Vachika and Satvika) and

Natya (Angika, Vachika and Satvika).

Aharya will be taught by understanding the geographical and historical framework relevant to BN in comparison to the other Classical South Asian Dance forms. This will include the significance and meaning of costuming, ornamental weapons, make-up, props and colours as well as an awareness of hairstyles and masks.

### **Repertoire / Composition**

Students will study existing pieces of work from the Maargam for example, Alarippu, Jatiswaram and Shabdham. They will compare and deconstruct versions learnt prior to study at LCDS and will be introduced to a fresh version.

### **Improvisation** (will be introduced in Year 2)

## Theory

- Ensure thorough knowledge of the four other major forms of South Asian Classical Dance: Kathak, Odissi, Kathakali and Manipuri.
- Study the biography of Rukmini Devi (a leading BN pioneer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).
- Increase awareness of the historical framework that led to the creation of the traditional repertoire including study of the Tanjore Quartet.
- Study the significance of Nataraja's form and the place where Nataraja danced.
- Introduce basic notation – which involves writing the rhythmic structure of the music and drawing simple stick diagrams of body positions.
- Study Tala Dasa Prana (10 different elements of Tala).

## References

- **Cooraswamy, A** *The Mirror of Gesture: Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikeshwar*, Munshiram Manoharlal, India, 1917, 1970, 1982
- **Ghosh, Dr M**, *Nandikesvara's Abinayadarpanam - A Manual of Gesture and Posture used in Ancient Indian Dance and Drama*, India, Sri Moni Sanyal for the Manisha Granthalaya Private Limited, 3rd edition, 4th print, 1989
- **Samba Murthy, P**, *History of Indian Music, Volume 1*, The Indian Music Publishing, India,
- **Samson, L**, *Rhythm in Joy: Classical Indian Dance Traditions*, Lustre Press Pvt Ltd, 1987
- **Spear, P** *A History of India Vol 1 & 2*, Penguin Books , 1965, 1987

## **Bharata Natyam - Year Two Course**

### **Main Aims:**

- Further consolidate the three main aspects of BN technique and Abhinaya;
- Develop increased dynamics, speed, clarity and endurance of execution.

### **Body Conditioning**

- Appropriate warm-up exercises to ensure and reinforce physical accuracy of key postures
- Develop a more sophisticated awareness of breath control and ensure correct usage

### **Nritta**

- Complete learning of all the possible variations of the 14 Adavus (these are shown in brackets on the year one syllabus)
- Increase awareness of use of the arms
- Ensure detailed knowledge of Jathis and speeds
- Deepen the understanding of transitions (flow and dynamics)
- Increase understanding of the logic of physical phrasing
- Increase spatial awareness (3D use of space)
- Improve physical execution of steps, jumps and turns
- Be able to independently execute a 5 – 7 minute continuous movement phrase
- Study the different types of Nritta:
  - 1) Shudha Nrittam – dance performed only to Solukkatu or Tirmanam (drum syllables) e.g. Alarippu;
  - 2) Gan Vadya Tal Anusari Nrittam – dance performed to songs without text. The dance follows the dynamics of the notes;
  - 3) Nir Geet Nrittam – dance in silence or to a drone;
  - 4) Geet Vadi Abhinaya Anusari Nrittam – dance following the Abhinaya (overall meaning or emotional content) of the song. This type of Nritta serves as an introduction to Abhinaya.

### **Nritya**

- Introduction and study of new pieces of work from the repertoire: Varnam and Padam (the heart of Abhinaya)
- Complete the study of all usages of Mudras
- Deepen the study of Rasa and Bhava, Nayaka and Nayaki (in connection with the Maargam and dance-dramas)

### **Natya**

- Study and compare the portrayal of characters by a soloist (as in the Maargam) and by the members of a group of dancers (dance-drama)

- Study and compare dramatic work in another major South Asian Classical Dance form (Kathak)
- Introduce drama and character from another key Classical play (Shakuntalam by Kalidasa)
- Study the different types of Tandava and Lasya, (as in Shankuntalam)

### **Abhinaya**

- Study a Padam in depth (a solely Abhinaya piece)
- Ensure depth of understanding and use of Rasa and Bhava
- Study the portrayal of love in BN – compare a piece based on Sringara (erotic love) with a piece based on divine / spiritual love
- Contrast the use of Natya Dharmi (dance-based mime) with Loka Dharmi (mime based on a literal portrayal from everyday life)
- Learn and understand traditional texts that accompany the Maargam and assimilate and physicalise the layers of meaning (these texts may be in Telegu, Kannada or Hindi in addition to Sanskrit or Tamil)
- Understand the appropriate use of music to complement the meaning of the dance, which informs musical and verbal choices and how they relate to the portrayal of character and emotion
- Ensure ability to accurately recite Tirmanam (drum syllables)

### **Repertoire / Composition**

- Continue to polish performance of traditional pieces from the Maargam
- Students will complete short choreographic studies within clear and strong boundaries, such as following the structure of an Alarippu. They will be expected to apply BN principles and choreographic principles studied in Choreography classes and combine the different techniques intelligently. This will enable students and tutor to check depth of assimilation of BN principles.
- Analyse the work of different choreographers

### **Improvisation**

Students will be asked to:

- Improvise movements within the BN vocabulary to a traditional text or poem and a modern text or poem
- Improvise around a theme or subject such as love or sadness
- Demonstrate understanding of the principles of BN

### **Practical work with a choreographer**

- Participate in workshops from leading BN tutors / choreographers from India and other parts of the world
- Benefit from Akādemi's visiting artists' programme

## Theory

- Study the biographies of Kshetrajna, Jaya Deva & Balasaraswati – key historical BN artists
- Music - study the Raga Lakshana – i.e. the different qualities of the 72 Melkarta Ragas
- Study the key Gods and Goddesses portrayed in Bharata Natyam
- Continue and consolidate work on Notation

## References

- **Coomaraswamy, A**, *The Dance of Shiva*, India, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1970, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1982
- **Howse, J and Hancock**, *Dance Technique and Injury Prevention*. London, A & C Black, 1998
- **Samba Murthy, P**, *History of Indian Music, Volume 2*, The Indian Music Publishing, India
- **Thappar, R**, *History of India, Volumes I, II & III*,  
• *History of South India Vols 1 - 4* , Oxford University Press, 1955
  
- Refer to studies of Tamil Literature by **Subramium, Dr. P**
- Modern English translations of ancient Indian texts

## **Bharata Natyam - Year Three Course**

### **Main Aims:**

- Develop a true understanding of BN in order to produce a high quality of work irrespective of style
- Achieve the ability to dance in a synthesis of Contemporary dance / BN without losing the integrity of either form

### **Body Conditioning**

Work with an in-depth physical understanding.

### **Nritta**

- Polish competence in the technique to a professional level
- Students have the ability to absorb and reproduce complex sequences which the teacher improvises on the spot
- Be able to independently execute a 10 – 12 minutes of continuous movement sequences

### **Nritta, Nritya, Natya, Abhinaya & repertoire - MAARGAM**

Students will work towards performing a complete Maargam of 1 hour 10 minutes in duration for assessment by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study. This will demonstrate their competence and professional level of skill in all these areas. They should be able to perform all the Abhinaya pieces of the Maargam. They should have the ability to convey a strong sense of performance in all aspects.

### **Composition**

- Continue, deepen and extend the work begun in Year 2
- Students should have the opportunity to perform dances from the Maargam and contrast these with their own work following the same rules and principles (introduced in Year 2)
- Choreograph sequences in the different types of Nritta

### **Improvisation**

Continue, deepen and extend the work begun in Year 2

### **Practical work with a choreographer/s**

As in year 2, plus students should experience a placement with a UK-based Bharata Natyam dance company

## Theory

- Study examples of Tamil literature and Indian theatre such as Dasrupaka

## References

- **Appa Rao, PSR and Sri Rama Sastry, P**, *A Monograph of Bharata's Naatya Saastra (Indian Dramatology)*, Naatya Maalaa Publishers, 1967
- **Samba Murthy, P**, *History of Indian Music, Volume 3*, The Indian Music Publishing, India
- **Singha, R**, *Indian dances: their history and growth*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967
- **Vatsyayan, K**, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1968, 1974

## Basic Glossary – Bharata Natyam

Abhinaya	expression
Abhinaya Darpanam	ancient treatise on the art of dancing by Nandikeshwara
Adavus	dance steps
Aharya	expression through costume, make-up, props etc
Anga	major limb / area of the body
Angika	expression through the body
Bhava	expression of emotion
Hasta	hand gestures
Jhati	rhythmic pattern
Laya	speed
Maargam	traditional solo repertoire
Mudras	hand gestures
Natuvangam	small cymbals
Natuvanar	person who plays the above instrument to accompany the dancer
Natya	dance-drama
Natya Shastra	the major source book from C4th BC – C4th AD
Nayaka	hero
Nayaki	heroine
Nritta	non-narrative or 'pure' dance
Nritya	expressive dance
Pratyanga	minor limb or area of the body
Raga	melodic scale
Rasa	sentiments
Sloka	chants or verses (usually from sacred / philosophical texts)
Slokuttu	spoken syllables
Tala	rhythmic cycle of a fixed number of beats
Tirmanam	drum syllables
Upanga	the features / small areas of the body
Vachika	expression through speech or song
Viniyoga	ways of using hand, head and eye movements