

*R*AGAMALA
• DANCE COMPANY •

RANEE AND APARNA RAMASWAMY
CO-ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

BHARATANATYAM STUDY GUIDE



ABOUT RAGAMALA DANCE COMPANY

Ragamala Dance Company was founded in 1992 by Ranee Ramaswamy, and is currently under the leadership of Artistic Directors Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy and Choreographic Associate Ashwini Ramaswamy (mother and daughters).

As first generation Indian-American artists, Ranee and Aparna's aesthetic is deeply influenced by their cultural hybridity. Thematically, they explore the myth and spirituality of their Indian heritage in order to engage with what they see as the dynamic tension between the historical, the ancestral, and the personal. They approach the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam as a living, breathing language with which to speak about the contemporary human experience.

Described as "the standard bearer of a singularly successful kind of hybridity" (*The Huffington Post*), Ragamala's work has been commissioned by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, the Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College, the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts at Cal State Northridge, Northrop at the University of Minnesota, the Walker Art Center, Lincoln Center Out of Doors, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, the Krannert Center for Performing Arts at the University of Illinois, the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), Opening Nights Performing Arts at Florida State University, the Jay and Susie Gogue Performing Arts Center at Auburn University, Meany Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Washington, and the American Dance Festival; and developed in residence at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC), the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center (Italy), the Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College, the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), an NPN residency at The Yard and a forthcoming residency at the Bogliasco Foundation Center (Italy).

Ragamala tours extensively, highlighted by the Kennedy Center (Washington, D.C.), Joyce Theater (New York), Lincoln Center (New York), Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (MA), Harris Theater for Music and Dance (Chicago, IL), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), American Dance Festival (Durham, NC), Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, International Festival of Arts & Ideas (New Haven, CT), Cal Performances (Berkeley), the Music Center (Los Angeles, CA), University Musical Society at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI), Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), Just Festival (Edinburgh, U.K.), Bali Arts Festival (Indonesia), Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India), and National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India), among others.



ABOUT BHARATANATYAM

BHARATANATYAM (BAH-rah-tah-NAT-yam)

Bha (*Bhava*) - expression
Ra (*Raga*) - melody
Ta (*Talam*) - rhythm
Natyam - dance

The Indian dance system is the oldest and most comprehensive in the world, and Bharatanatyam is amongst the oldest of its classical forms. Originating in the ancient temples of South India more than 2,000 years ago, Bharatanatyam has come down through the centuries, integrating elements of music, theater, poetry, sculpture, and literature.

Bharatanatyam is traditionally a solo dance form. It is a blend of two aspects:

Nritta is “pure” dance. It uses a vocabulary of movements to create complex rhythmic patterns and intricate dances.

Abhinaya is the art of expression, it uses the entire body, which includes 25 single-handed and 28 double-handed gestures, body movements, stances and rhythmic walking. As the dancer interprets selected poetry, song or lyrics, she adds appropriate emotional outpourings and subtle and varied facial expressions resulting in an expressive story telling experience.

Some things to look out for include:

Arai Mandi — bent-kneel, “half-sitting” position

Arambasthanam — beginning arm position

Attami — subtle side-to-side movement of the head, used as ornamentation

Ulukku Nadai — a stylized, lilting walk



Bharatanatyam is an extremely disciplined art form. Made up of structured set of steps, postures, gestures and rules, it sets up a dance vocabulary. Once the grammar and idiom of the language is studied deeply, and absorbed it offers a beautiful language to the practitioner that can be used in creative ways. Just like a poet can use language to write his or her own poetry, a choreographer can use the Bharatanatyam vocabulary creatively in his or her own dances. This makes Bharatanatyam a perfect medium for personal expression.

ABOUT BHARATANATYAM

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THE HASTAS

Hand gestures are very important in Bharatanatyam. They are called *hastas* or *mudras*. In pure dance, hand gestures are used to complement the body movements. In expressive dance, they are used like sign language to tell a story.

There are 28 single-handed gestures and 24 double-handed gestures. Each one can mean many different things, depending on how it is held around the body, the way the dancer moves, and what facial expressions are used. Some important hand gestures are:



Patakam



Tirupatakam

Patakam can be used to show a group of people, the sky, a book, a sword, a door, or a mirror.

Tirupatakam can be used to show a crown, a temple, the branch of a tree, a mountain, sandals, or an alligator.



Katakamukham



Katrimukham

Katakamukham can be used to show a woman, birds, or braiding hair.

Katrimukham can be used to show eyes, tomorrow, confusion, evil, lightning, or a vine.



Alapadmam



Hamsasyam

Alapadmam can be used to show a flower, a glass, the moon, a mountain, beauty, joy, or love.

Hamsasyam can be used to show an elephant, time, plucking flowers, perfect, life, or putting on earrings.



Simhamukham



Shikaram

Simhamukham is used to show the face of an animal, for example a lion, a dog, or a deer.

Shakatam is used to show a demon.

Dolam is used to show femininity and grace.

Shikaram can be used to show a man, a bow, or hugging.

Mayuram can be used to show a peacock or a feather.



Mayuram

GETTING READY FOR A PERFORMANCE

COSTUME

A classical dance costume reflects the history and tradition of the region from where the dance originated. Tamil Nadu, the region where Bharatanatyam originated, features a costume made of colorful silk fabric containing borders embroidered with fine gold thread.

There are two styles of Bharatanatyam costumes known as the pant-style costume (pant costume) and the saree costume (skirt costume).

The pant-style costume consists of five parts:

- (1) **Blouse:** The top part of the costume with the sleeves.
- (2) **Davani:** The part that wraps around the blouse.
- (3) **Pleats:** The fan-like piece that is attached to both legs of the pants.
- (4) **Seat:** The part that hugs the pants and the fan at the hip area.
- (5) **Pants**

The saree costume consists of five parts:

- (1) **Blouse:** Same as above.
- (2) **Davani:** Same as above.
- (3) **Skirt**
- (4) **Pleats:** A long fan that hangs from the waist alongside the left leg.
- (5) **Fan:** A small fan that is tied around the waist.

MAKE UP

Eyes: To accentuate and elongate the eyes, a dancer uses black eyeliner and applies it in thick layers around the curves of the eyes.

Cheek Bones: To define the facial features, red blush is used to accentuate the cheeks.

Lips: Dark-colored shades of lipstick such as maroon complete the overall facial appearance of the dancer.

Pottu: Dot on the forehead

JEWELRY & ACCESSORIES

South Indian dance jewelry is called "Temple Jewelry." It is traditionally made of rubies, gold, and pearls. These days, many dancers wear costume jewelry, which is made of silver coated with gold and artificial gems.

The jewelry comes in nine parts:

- (1) **Chutti:** The head piece
- (2) **Sun and moon:** The jewels that are attached on the top of the head on each side of the chutti
- (3) **Necklace**
- (4) **Mattal:** The jewels that are attached to the earrings and run over the ears
- (5) **Earrings**
- (6) **Jimiki:** The dangling jewels of the earrings
- (7) **Mukuthi:** Side nose ring
- (8) **Bullaku:** Center nose ring
- (9) **Bangles:** Gold bracelets

OTHER ACCESSORIES

- (1) **Flowers:** Flowers decorate the hair of a dancer. They may be real flowers or fake flowers made of soft paper in colors of orange and white.
- (2) **Belt:** A belt is worn to define the hip of a dancer.
- (3) **Bells:** Like tap dancers wearing tap shoes, a Bharatanatyam dancer wears bells to accentuate the rhythm of the music. They are generally made of brass and leather.

PAINTED FEET & FINGERTIPS

Red dye known as *alta* is used to paint the fingertips of the hands and toes of the feet to resemble *henna*. The red color accentuates the hand gestures and foot movements of the dancer.

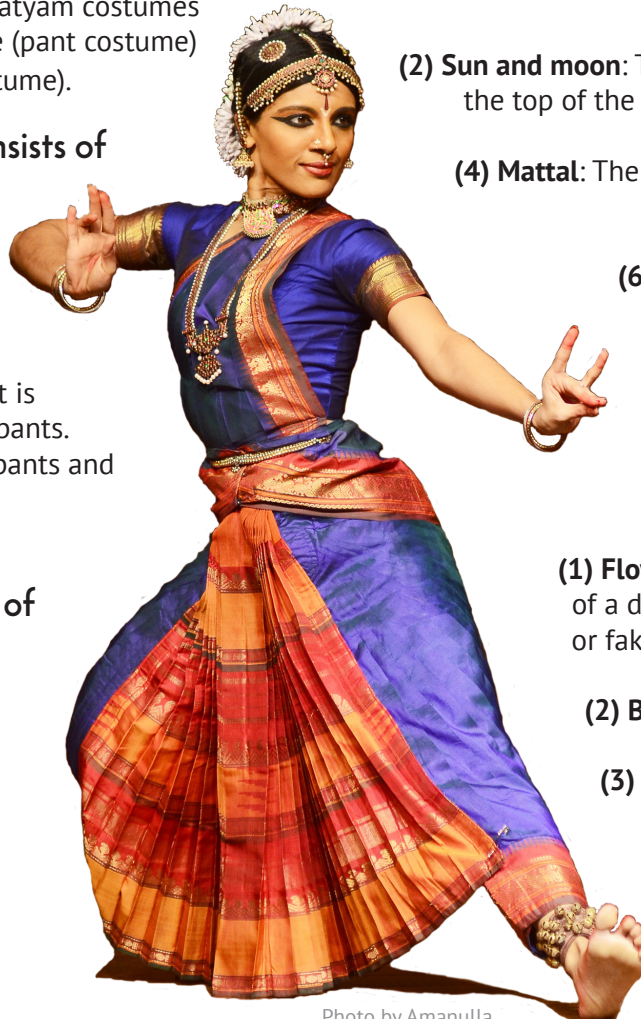


Photo by Amanulla