

Exploration of the Choreographic Approaches of Padmashri K. N. Dandāyudhapāṇi Pillai Through the Artistic Lens of Guru Bhanumati

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Abstract

This study explores the unique choreographic approaches of Padmashri K. N. Dandāyudhapāṇi Pillai (KND), an eminent composer, choreographer, and teacher, through the artistic lens of Guru Bhanumati, one of his disciples. Using qualitative and analytical methods, the research identifies distinctive adavus, compositional styles, and choreographic innovations that characterize KND's *bāni* (style). It further examines how Guru Bhanumati adapted his choreographies for group dynamics while preserving the integrity of his tradition. The findings highlight the innovative execution of *jathis*, *navarāgamālika varnams*, and *pañcaratna tillanas*, alongside the challenges posed by limited documentation and reliance on oral traditions. This research contributes to understanding the pedagogical, aesthetic, and performative dimensions of KND's legacy and its transmission through discipleship.

Introduction

Padmashri K. N. Dandāyudhapāṇi Pillai (1921–1971), born in Karaikal, remains a towering figure in the history of Bharatanatyam. A composer, choreographer, teacher, and founder of Natya Kalalayam, Pillai was also a member of the orchestra at the Kalakshetra Foundation and the author of *Adalaisai Amudam*. His contribution spans solo choreography, pedagogy, and compositions for cinema, including the international film *The River*. Recognized with the Padmashri in 1971, he has been hailed as an *uttama vāggeyakāra* (a supreme composer of both *dhātu* and *mātu*) (Ramani, 2022).

Disciples and contemporaries emphasized KND's distinctive style. Guru Uma Anand described his compositions as simple yet deeply evocative, offering scope for *abhinaya*. Guru Usha Srinivasan highlighted his dramatic pauses, diagonal placements, and rhythmic build-ups, while Vyjayantimala Bali recalled his intricate *korvais* interwoven with *kaarvais*. Guru Bhanumati herself stressed the importance of retaining the guru's choreography as a cornerstone of *parampara*.

This paper investigates his choreographic approaches through the interpretative lens of Guru Bhanumati, who studied under him and carried forward his legacy by adapting his works to group performances. The scope

includes identifying exclusive adavus within his bāni and analyzing choreographic structures in compositions such as Alaripu, Jatiswaram, Padavarnam, and Tillana.

Review of literature:

- “Natyakala Chakravarthi K N Dandāyudhapāṇi Pillai” by Smt.Subatra Dandayudhapani and Dr Uma Anand: This is a work which unfurls the life and contributions of Sri KND to the field of Dance. The author brings in a detailed qualitative study of various contributions of Sri KND through scripting, notations and meaning of the lyrics.
- “When music and dance blend in the rhythmic harmony- K N Dandayudhapani Pillai”, Dance Dancers and Musicians, Chennai, Dr.V.Raghavan centre for Performing arts by Smt.Nandini Ramani: This is a work that brings an overview of contributions of Sri KND to the field of dance as a Guru, choreographer, and a composer.

Methodology

-  The study employs a qualitative and analytical methodology. Primary data are drawn from oral traditions transmitted by disciples, particularly Guru Bhanumati, while secondary references include scholarly documentation and published works on KND’s life and artistry. The analysis focuses on pedagogical innovations, compositional features, and choreographic adaptations.

Analysis

- ❖ **Pedagogical Contributions: Adavu System**
Sri. KND emphasized strong foundational training, devising a system of 120 adavus (Anand, 2011). Notable innovations included variations in tattadavu, mandi adavu, and tatti nāttadavu. He developed intricate korvai adavus that blended sequences such as tatttu, nātu, kudittu, nade, and utplavana. His pedagogy expanded the possibilities of rhythm and movement, ensuring both precision and dynamism.
- ❖ **Musical and choreographic approach:**
- ❖ **Tishra Alaripu:** In the Tishra Alaripu, Sri K. N. Dandāyudhapāṇi Pillai demonstrates his choreographic ingenuity by extending the conventional framework of the *Alaripu* through the following incorporations:

- **Integration of Āgamic principles:** Elements drawn from ritualistic temple traditions are woven into the fabric of nṛtta, thereby bridging devotional practice and performance aesthetics.
- **Aṣṭadīkpaḷaka Vandana:** Invocation of the guardians of the eight directions, lending a cosmological dimension to the piece.
- **Ṣoḍaśopacāra:** Inclusion of the sixteen traditional offerings (*upacāras*) typically performed in temple worship, aligning the choreography with ritual structures.
- **Devatā Namaskāra:** Salutations to deities, reinforcing the devotional ethos while enhancing the spiritual gravitas of the performance.
- Being bound to the traditional format of an Alaripu, Sri. KND brings in his creative genius in the Tishra Alaripu by interspersing the essence of Agamas (ritualistic traditions in a temple) into the structure and beauty of Nṛtta through the inclusion of Ashtadīkpaḷaka vandana, shodashopachara and devata namaskara.

Jatiswaram: Sri K. N. Dandāyudhapāṇi Pillai's Kalyani Jatiswaram exemplifies a refined application of his pedagogical and choreographic principles through the following features:

- The composition reflects an extension of his training methodology, where precision in *jathi* construction is seamlessly integrated with the chosen *adavus*.
- The opening *jathi* transitions smoothly into *adavus* that are carefully aligned with the lyrical and melodic contours of *Kalyani rāga*.
- A deliberate escalation of tempo in the *caraṇam* section creates rhythmic dynamism while sustaining aesthetic balance.
- Intricate and synchronized footwork accentuates the musical phrases, underscoring the depth of rhythmic exploration.
- Purity of body lines, clarity in posture, and precision in execution amplify the visual appeal, ensuring that technique complements musicality.

Together, these elements situate the *Kalyani Jatiswaram* as both a pedagogical model and a choreographic masterpiece, showcasing the confluence of discipline, musical sensibility, and aesthetic sophistication.

- ❖ **Navarāgamālika varnam** : KND's choreographic style was marked by musical sophistication and rhythmic intricacy.

- The Navarāgamālika varnam exemplifies his creative use of nine ragas as lakṣaṇārtha in the composition, with chitteswara passages echoing ragas in descending order.
- In Chitteswara, Glimpses of the Ragas of the Poorvaardha are tailored in descending order.(TodiMohana-Vasanta- Devamanohari)
- Grandeur of the Trikaala Jathi
- Jathi 2: Syncopated start of the Mukhtaya.
- Jathi 3: Yedauppu has been filled, exclusive use of Sankeerna nade.
- Improvising Anupallavi in accordance with the Vyabhicharis of the Nayika by Guru Bhanumati

❖ **The Pañcaratna tillana:** The pañcaratna tillana is another example that stands as an example for Sri KND's musical and choreographic mastery.

- Firstly, adaptation of five ragas (Hindola, Mohana, Vasanta, Kānada, and Kalyani) justifies its diversified artistry musically.
- *The charana Sahitya has been dedicated to Lord Nataraja*
- The musical richness of this master piece attains a visually beautification through innovative adavu patterns set within the traditional format of a Tillana.
- In addition to this, Guru Bhanumati's adaptations for group performances preserved the choreographic essence while enhancing visual impact. Sahitya Adapted to group by Guru Sheela Chandrasekhar.

Findings

1. Pedagogical Innovations: Inclusion of variations in adavus reinforced a systematic training method.
2. Rhythmic Intricacy: Jathi compositions revealed complexity and inventiveness, demanding both technical and expressive skill.
3. Musicality: Compositions displayed deep musical sensibility, integrating ragas and rhythmic structures seamlessly.

4. Adaptive Choreography: Guru Bhanumati expanded his works for group contexts while remaining faithful to his framework.

Limitations

- ❖ Lack of documentation in dancer's perspective
- ❖ Data has been relied on teachings of Oral tradition
- ❖ Objectivity in analysis has been limited as it has been based on experiences of his disciples (Subjective).
- ❖ Scope has been restricted only to the compositions learnt by Guru Bhanumati
- ❖ Accessibility to Video references of Sri KND's dance ballets and above mentioned compositions.

Conclusion Padmashri K. N. Dandāyudhapāṇi Pillai's contributions as a composer and choreographer reveal a unique synthesis of tradition and innovation. His pedagogical systems, rhythmic explorations, and choreographic ingenuity enriched Bharatanatyam's repertoire. Through disciples like Guru Bhanumati, his legacy continues to thrive, reflecting both fidelity to parampara and adaptability to evolving performance contexts. Further research into documented and archival materials may broaden understanding of his influence on contemporary dance practice.

References

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