

## Role of Mridangam in Bharatanatyam Dance Performances: An Analysis

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### Abstract

*Mridangam, the jack wood; cylindrical-shaped, double-headed, membraneous South Indian drum has been the primary percussion instrument for Bharatanatyam dance programs besides Carnatic music concerts for a very long time. In this paper, the role of the Mridangist, which is to keep the rhythm in place through accompaniment, has been briefly explained for “items” like Pushpanjali, Sabdam, Padavarnam, Padam, Ragamalika, and Tillana etc., in general however in the case of Alarippu and Jatiswaram, how the mridangist shows his Manodharmam (order of the mind), within the boundaries, has been analyzed and explained for study. In the case of Alarippu, the mridangist plays a combination of chatusra (quartet) in Madhyama (Medium) speed while maintaining the same gathi (gait) of the talam (time measure) and in the other case of Jatiswaram, where the mridangist plays Misra (septuplets) gathi (gait) while keeping the basic chatusra gathi (quartet).*

**Keywords:** Bharatanatyam, Arudhi, Theermanam, Jathi, Nattuvanar.

**Introduction:** “Sruti Matā and Laya Pithā” so go the famous proverb in Indian musical parlance which means melody and rhythm are equated to Mother and Father<sup>1</sup> as we need both of them. Melody and, rhythm are sine-quo-none of any form of music, vocal/instrumental and dance. What cannot be spoken in words is expressed through a visual medium called Dance and Bharatanatyam is one among them, a traditional dance form in Southern India. In this context it is necessary to mention the names of noted personalities like E.Krishna Iyer, Dr.V. Raghavan and Rukmini Devi Arundale who had different views on the origin of the word “Bharatanatyam” at a different point in time and have contributed enormously for this art. However, Bharatanatyam dance has been in existence since the 12th Century according to Octogenarian Musicologist Dr.B M Sundaram<sup>2</sup>. Dance is a mime and demonstration of any story is through hand gestures, footwork and facial expressions.

<sup>1</sup> Janet Sturman, The Sage International Encyclopedia of Music and Culture, Sage publications,2019,page-230

<sup>2</sup> B M Sundaram, Chinna Melam, Madras Musings dated 30<sup>th</sup> April 2016 accessed the website on 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2021

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A Bharatanatyam program can be Solo or group with pre-recorded music or with live music. However, in case of live musicians, the Nattuvanar-the Guru of the dancer/free-lance, guides the dancer/s with every step with the Nattuva talam (hand cymbals). Next, we have the Vocalist and the Mridangam with additional musicians like Flute, Violin, and Veena.

The traditional repertoire of Bharatanatyam dance performances consist of items like Pushpanjali, Alarippu, Jatiswaram, Sabdam, Padavarnam, Padam, Ragamalika, and Tillana, which was the brainchild of the Tanjore Quartette-Chinniah, Ponniah, Vadivelu, and Sivanandam (1<sup>st</sup> half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>3</sup>. How the Mridangam accompanies the “items” especially Alarippu and Jatiswaram and others in general and its importance and contribution has been the objective of this study.

The mridangam accompaniment is discussed under two heads:

a) General and b) Specific

a) General

A standardized Carnatic music concert will have the center stage vocal/instrumental with violin for melody and mridangam with ghatam/kanjira/morsing (if required) for rhythm. The role of the percussion is to maintain the rhythm, complement the main performer and to embellish the concert, even without rehearsals and unknown musicians, yet becomes a success. There are no hard and fast rules in the manner of accompaniment and the Mridangist is at liberty to use their Manodharmam (self-creativity) as long as it can synchronize with music. Whereas in Bharatanatyam, the scope is limited as the movements are pre-determined and the mridangist needs to restrain his playing with dance, music and talam (hand gestures). In order to achieve this, rehearsals become important for better coordination and execution. Since the mridangist needs to observe the facial expressions and footwork of the dancer, on stage, he sits diagonally (on the side of the wings), then the Nattuvanar, the vocalist, the violin, and the flute are behind. The difference between carnatic music concert and dance is the Rehearsal. This is part and parcel of any dance form with live music and not pre-recorded. In rehearsals, each “item” about repetitions, footwork, music, interlude, pause, etc. is decided in advance. Besides being practice sessions, they are brainstorming sessions plus knowledge enhancer/exchange amongst the musicians. Rehearsals serve two purposes. Firstly, the dancer gets a good grip and confidence over each item and secondly, she/he can understand the perspective of the musicians which goes a long way in improving future performances. The mridangist does multi-tasking of observing the footwork, memorize the strokes to play, where to give “effects “(which may be expressions of sounds of thunder, emotions of anger, the flow of water, etc), the talam of the nattuvanar, and the music of the vocalist and other accompaniments. The success of a dance show depends upon how it is well-rehearsed with better coordination amongst supporting musicians. Besides, vocal and other supporting

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<sup>3</sup> T S Parthasarathy, Dances of India-Bharatanatyam,, Journal of the Music Academy, Madras, Vol.63, page-138,1992

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instruments, Mridangam, in particular, play a major role. Notwithstanding the limitations in Manodharmam (self-improvisation) playing, the mridangist showcases his creativity.

Another very important aspect in mridangam accompaniment is the replication of the jathi-s. The Jati-s recited by the Nattuvanar cannot be reproduced on the mridangam unless memorized and practiced.

Playing appropriate arudhis/ Theermanam (short ending patterns and terminating portions) is a vital part in mridangam accompaniment. Since the avarthanam (Tala cycle) is pre-determined, it needs execution with precision.

b) Specific: Role of Mridangam vis-a-vis the traditional items:

1. Pushpanjali<sup>4</sup>- It is a Sanskrit word meaning Pushpa (flower) and Anjali (offering) which means offering flowers with folded hands to God, the Guru, and the audience. This is an opening piece with the first entry of the dancer on stage; the mridangam player sets the stage for the next item.
2. Alarippu- is a Tamil word that means flowering. This is an invocatory rhythmic item consisting of three speeds Vilambita (slow), Madhyama (medium), and Duritha (fast). This consists of various solkattu-s (rhythmic syllables) recited by the Nattuvanar (Dance director on stage) with Nattuvangam (hand cymbals), and the mridangist need to synchronize with the footwork of the dancer. Common Alarippu is in Adi talam (8 beat cycle) and Tisra Eka talam or short Rupaka (3 beat cycle). A Youtube recording<sup>5</sup> of Alarippu in short Rupakam(3 beat cycle) is given in Table A below:

**Table A: Short Rupaka Talam-3 Beat Cycle:**

Sr.no	Nattuvanar	Start	I <sub>3</sub>		
			Tha	Thai	Thaiyum
			Thath	Tham	Kitathaka
1	Nattuvanar, Dancer and Mridangam	Vilambita	Tha	Am	Thith
			Tham	-	_____ kitathaka
			Tha	i	Thath
			Tha	i	_____ kitathaka

<sup>4</sup> <https://indianculture.gov.in/stories/sadir-attam-bharatanatyam> accessed the website on 9th October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> [https://youtu.be/rVR0zjs\\_ces?t=167-starts](https://youtu.be/rVR0zjs_ces?t=167-starts) at 2.47 secs to 2.49 secs-Tisra Alarippu of Kalakshetra Foundation uploaded by Ms. Ranjani Bhagawan dated 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2017.

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2	Nattuvanar, Dancer	Madhyama	Tham	Thith tham	kitathaka
			Thai	Thath thai	kitathaka
			Tham	Thith tham	kitathaka
			Tham	Thith tham	kitathaka
	Mridangam*		Thangu tha	-th thi ki	na thom
			1 2 3, 1	2 3 4 5	6 7 8 9
3	Nattuvanar, Dancer and mridangam	Duritha	1 2 3, 1	2 3, 1 2	3, 1 2 3,*
			Tham thi	Tham tha	i thathai
			Tham thi	Tham tha	i thathai
			Tham thi	Tham tha	i thathai
			Tham thi	Tham tha	i thathai

\*In sr.no.2-The beat is in a cycle of chatusra-quartet 4 x 3=12, whereas the mridangist plays as 3+9=12

3. **Jatiswaram**-It is a Sanskrit word meaning Jati (rhythmic syllables like Tha, Thaka, and Thakita) patterns and Swara-s (musical notes). There is no Lyrics/Sahitya and 3 or 4 sections with different Swara patterns and rhythmic syllables and has only Pallavi (beginning section). This is also called Swara Pallavi. A Youtube recording<sup>6</sup> of this item is given in Table-B below where the mridangist plays Misra (septuplets) while maintaining the chatusra (quartet) gathi (gait).

**Table B: Adi Talam-16 Beat Cycle- Two Kalai (Double Beat)**

		I <sub>4</sub> *				O**		O		
Sr no		Col.1	Col.2	Col.3	Col.4	Col.5	Col.6	Col.7	Col.8	Sum*** Aksharam
1	Talam	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	4 x 16 =64
	Vocal	S , , , , , , ,	, , , , S N	D D P P	M G R R	S, , , , , , ,	, , , , S R	S P M D	P M P D	

<sup>6</sup> <https://youtu.be/6aWlw5wQEdY>- starts at 0.00 secs to 0.38 secs-Youtube video recording of Arabhi Raga Jatiswaram by Kalakshetra Keerthi Sooraj uploaded on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

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2	Nattuvanar, Dancer	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	4 x 16 =64
	Mridangam	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 (1 2 3 4 5 6 7)**	(1 2 3 4 5 6 7) (1 2 3 4 5 6 7)	(1 2 3 4 5 6 7) (1 2 3 4 5 6 7)	(1 2 3 4 5 6 7) (1 2 3 4 5 6 7)	(1 2 3 4 5 6 7) (1 2 3 4 5 6 7)	(1 2 3 4 5 6 7) (1 2 3 4 5 6 7)	
3	Vocal, Dancer	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	4 x 16 =64
	Nattuvanar	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	Thalang a thaka thiku	Thaka Thathin ginatho m*****	
	Mridangam	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4	Thalang a thaka thiku	Thaka Thathin ginatho m	
4	Nattuvanar (reciting Jathi), Dancer & Mridangam	Thaku thanaku thaka	Thana ku kina ka thaka	Thakita jam thakita	Jum jum tha	Thaku thana ku thaka	Thana ku kina ka thaka	Thakita jum thakita	Jam jum thai	4 x 16 =64
		Thaku thanaku thaka	Thana ku kina ka thaka	Thath tha jum thaka	Thiku kita thaka tharikita thom	Thath tha jum thaka	Thiku kita thaka tharikit a thom	Thath tha jum thaka	Thiku kita thaka tharikita thom	

\* A Laghu consists of 4 Kriya-s (hand gestures) with a Beat followed by three fingers counting starting from Little finger, Ring finger and Middle Finger in an 8 beat cycle (In 16 beat cycle it is doubled).

\*\*A Drutham consists of 2 beats- Beat and reversal of palm (double in 16 beat cycles).

\*\*\*Aksharam-Micro beat.

\*\*\*\*In sr.no.2, col.3 the mridangam changes the Chatusra (four) gathi (gait) to Misra (seven) gathi.

\*\*\*\*\* In col.7 and 8, the “cue” to the jathi (rhythmic pattern) is given.

4. Shabdham-It is in Sanskrit meaning “Word” making a story This is the first dance item in praise of the deities and is generally composed in Misra Chapu talam (7 uneven beat cycles) and Ragam Kambodhi or Ragamalika (garland of Raga-s). This is the start of

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lyrics and the mridangist needs to observe the hand gestures and footwork of the dancer and play.

5. **Varnam**-It's a Sanskrit word meaning color/description. Generally, Pada (Sahitya related) varnams are used in dance. This is the most challenging and, central piece in Bharatanatyam performance as it includes Hand gestures, footwork and facial expressions. A Varnam consists of two parts-first part- Pallavi (first section), Anu Pallavi (second section), Mukthayi swarams(decorative musical notes) and the corresponding sahitya/lyrics) and second part Charanam(third section), Chittaswarams(preset musical notes) and the lyrics part. Dancers exhibit their skill in Varnam in Trikala (three speeds) Jathi-s. Jathi is a rhythmic pattern in which the dancer shows his/her skill of footwork through them. It can be simple or complex depending upon the grip over laya and flexibility of the dancer. Generally, the "cue" for the start of a jathi is by reciting the rhythmic syllables "Thalanga thaka thiku thaka thathinginathom" in Adi talam- an 8 beat cycle. "According to Nellai D Kannan, noted Bharatanatyam dance mridangist, Mridangam player should maintain the beauty of the solkattu-s (rhythmic syllables) while playing".<sup>7</sup>. While it is challenging for the mridangist, he needs to be alert in playing the appropriate arudhi-stress point in talam (for example if we take Adi talam, the stress point would be start of Drutham) which synchronizes with Nattuvanar and dancer and the number of "repetitions" either the Pallavi/Anu Pallavi/Charanam with appropriate arudhis (short-ending phrases) and Theermanam (terminating phrases) enabling the dancer to go to the next section. The Jati-s needs memorization for better execution.
6. **Padam**-means word/poetry. The compositions of Padam are very slow in tempo focuses on Abhinaya, based on Sringara Rasa or love, showing the relationship between Nayaka (hero) and Nayika (heroine). The mridangam playing is soft and moves with the facial expressions of the dancer and the vocal, maintaining the mood.
7. **Keertanam**-It is a combination of Abhinaya and pure movements and is Bhakti (devotion) oriented. Melody is very important in Keertanam playing with the use of "Gumki" (a special effect that sounds like cuckooing) on the left side of the mridangam. The mridangam follows the lyrics and gives pause (if any portion needs elaboration/explanation) whenever required.
8. **Javali** -A faster tempo compared to Padam. This is purely Abhinaya oriented where the dancer can show different emotions like anger, humor, etc. It is lewd poetry. Here the mridangist follows the dancer's movements and facial expressions.
9. **Thillana**- Concluding item in Bharatanatyam recital. It is mostly an Nritta piece with a small line in praise of God at the end. Thillana depicts the most intricate rhythmic patterns in the whole dance recital<sup>8</sup>. This is a very vibrant piece and the mridangist needs to make it sound more energetic with different rhythmic patterns so that it will be a Grand finale.

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<sup>7</sup> The Hindu, Friday Review, Playing the mridangam for bharatanatyam dated 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016

8. <https://docplayer.net/32454675-Basic-theory-theory-and-technique-of-bharatanatyam-are-based-on-the-literal-works-natyasatram-and-abhinaya-darpanam.html> accessed the website on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2021

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Apart from what has been stated above, other items like Kauthuvam, Ashtapadi, Bhajan are also included in a Bharatanatyam repertoire at present and the mridangist needs to accompany them depending upon the tempo of the song, mood, and facial expressions of the dancer.

**Observations and Findings:**

From the foregoing analysis, it can be seen that accompanying for Bharatanatyam recitals is not an easy task and is very challenging and the mridangist plays a major role in the success of the dance program.

**Present scenario:**

At present, Dancers are using Prerecorded instead of “Live” music because of lack of financial support, non-availability of musicians for rehearsals, and other factors. This affects the income of professional mridangam players in reality. Bharatanatyam has become an expensive affair and many prefer group performances instead of solo, as costs can be shared. Even, studio recording of new items, involve huge cost and one has to be satisfied with repeating same “items” again and again.

**Conclusion:**

In carnatic music world, mridangam artistes’ playing for dance are branded as “Dance mridangam players” nevertheless their role is so much important is what we studied and understood. They can still improvise within the limited opportunities. Bharatanatyam is still in demand across the globe and there are many “takers” for mridangam to accompany this form of dance despite the limited scope for improvisation. With adequate grants from govt, financial support from corporate sponsors and well-wishers, both the art of mridangam and bharatanatyam can evolve.

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