



THE IMPORTANCE OF ADAVUS IN BHARATANATYAM – THE FOUNDATION OF TECHNIQUE AND DISCIPLINE.

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Abstract

Bharatanatyam is an ancient Indian classical dance form that was formerly known as Sadhir.. During the twentieth century, it came to be known as Bharatanatyam. This dance form is a harmonious blend of abhinaya (expression), thalam (rhythm), music, spirituality, and movement. Among these elements, movement plays a vital role. The basic movements of Bharatanatyam are known as adavus. The execution of adavus requires the coordinated use of the hands, feet, and the entire body. Adavus form the foundation of Bharatanatyam training and are the first lessons taught to every student. They are not only essential for beginners but must also be practised consistently throughout a dancer's artistic journey. This article explores the concept and importance of adavus, their historical significance, and their physical and artistic benefits.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, Adavus, Araimandi, Classical Dance, History, Thalam, Techniques

Introduction

Bharatanatyam is not merely a classical dance form; it is a powerful medium of expression that integrates movement, music, rhythm, spirituality, and literature. Originating in the temples of South India, Bharatanatyam has undergone several stages of transformation and refinement over the centuries (Vatsyayan, 1977). Today, it is recognised globally as one of India's most celebrated classical dance traditions.

Every Bharatanatyam dancer begins their training with adavus. Regardless of whether a student starts learning at the age of five or fifty, no one begins directly with repertoire items such as Alarippu, Jatiswaram, Shabdham, or Varnam. Adavus form the foundation of Bharatanatyam and must be mastered before progressing to these compositions. Learning adavus is essential because every dance item is built upon them. A sequence of adavus is combined to form a korvai, which serves as the structural basis of Bharatanatyam choreography. Through regular practice, the body gradually adapts to increasingly complex movements, develops strength and endurance, and gains better coordination and balance. This systematic training prepares the dancer both physically and mentally for the demands of performance. Bharatanatyam is a physically demanding art form that requires discipline, dedication, and consistent practice. Therefore, understanding and mastering adavus is the first and most important step in a dancer's journey toward technical excellence and artistic expression.

Historical Significance

The history of Bharatanatyam can be traced back to approximately 200 BCE (Vatsyayan, 1977). Several ancient literary and theoretical texts, such as the Silappathikaram, Natyashastra, Abhinaya Darpanam, and Tholkappiyam, discuss various aspects of dance, including techniques, gestures, movements, and performance traditions.

Bharatanatyam has undergone several stages of evolution, from being performed in temples to becoming a prominent stage art in sabhas. Throughout its journey, the art form was patronised by many kings and was refined and preserved through the dedicated efforts of numerous artists, gurus, and devotees.

The adavu system was later codified and systematised by the four brothers of Thanjavur, popularly known as the Tanjore Quartet. Over the centuries, this tradition has continued to flourish through the hereditary guru sishya system. Distinguished gurus further refined the adavu system and developed practical teaching methods that continue to form the foundation of Bharatanatyam training today.

Adavu

An adavu is a basic movement in Bharatanatyam that involves the coordination of the hands, feet, body movements, and rhythm. In the execution of adavus, various hastas (hand gestures) and bhedas (movements of the head, neck, and eyes) are used (Nandikeshvara, 1975). Every adavu consists of coordinated footwork, proper body alignment, hand movements, controlled movements of the drishti (eyes), greeva (neck), and shiras (head), along with spatial awareness. Above all, maintaining the correct tala (rhythm) is the most important aspect of performing an adavu.

The Tanjore Quartet Chinnaiya, Ponnaiya, Sivanandam, and Vadivelu were four brothers who systematised the Margam of Bharatanatyam (Kothari, 1979). Among them, Ponnayya is widely credited with systematising the adavu technique into a structured method of teaching. The adavus were grouped into ten categories, comprising approximately 120 variations.

The ten major groups of adavus are:

1. Thattadavu
2. Nattadavu
3. Kudhithu Mettadavu
4. Mettadavu
5. Nadai Adavu
6. Jathi Adavu
7. Thatti Mettu Adavu
8. Mei Adavu
9. Arudhi Adavu
10. Mudivu Adavu

The order and nomenclature of these adavu groups vary from one bani (style) to another. Similarly, slight differences can be observed in their execution across different schools of Bharatanatyam. Training begins with Thattadavu, which introduces beginners to the basic movements and rhythmic coordination. As students progress from one group of adavus to the next, the complexity and intensity of the movements gradually increase, preparing them for advanced levels of Bharatanatyam training.

Techniques

Although everything is explained theoretically in the ancient texts, it has to be applied practically through the body with consistent practice and hard work. Even simple movements require precision in every posture, foot placement, and arm extension. The first and foremost important aspect is maintaining the correct araimandi (half-seated position), in which the spine must be kept straight. Araimandi is the most important posture in Bharatanatyam, as many movements are performed in this position. It demands considerable strength in the thighs and core muscles. Every movement should be coordinated with Thalam, and symmetrical body movements are essential for proper execution. To perform advanced choreography, a dancer must first master the adavus. Even though the theoretical aspects are well documented, it is not easy to translate them into physical movements. Therefore, it is important to understand and learn the techniques correctly. Consistent practice and proper execution are the keys to mastering Bharatanatyam.

Thalam

The next and most important aspect is Thalam. Even if we learn the theories, practise the techniques, and execute the movements correctly, performing them in the correct Thalam is essential. Dancing without Thalam is like a human body without a heartbeat. It gives life, structure, and rhythm to every movement.

During adavu training, beginners are first introduced to basic Thalams such as Adi and Rupakam. Later, they are introduced to the five gatis through Pancha nadai. Once a dancer masters the adavus, Thalams, jathis, and jaathis, they can practise adavus in different Thalams by applying various jathis and jaathis. This provides a strong foundation for learning advanced repertoire such as Jathiswaram, Varnam, and Thillana.

Thalam plays a major role in the execution of adavus. Although beginner-friendly Thalams are introduced during the initial stages of training, understanding and performing them correctly can be challenging for some children. Mastering Thalam requires patience, consistent practice, and effective teaching techniques.

Benefits of Adavu Practice

Adavu practice is one of the most important aspects of Bharatanatyam training. Even accomplished artists begin their daily practice or prepare for a performance by practising adavus. It serves as a warm-up while also strengthening and refining their technique. Every adavu requires precision, balance, coordination, and proper body control.

Bharatanatyam is an endurance-based dance form, and endurance can only be developed through regular practice of adavus in different speeds. Adavu practice not only builds stamina but also strengthens the thighs, calves, ankles, and core muscles. Overall body strength is equally important for executing movements with stability and ease. Each adavu contributes differently to the physical development of a dancer. For example, Kudhithu mettadavu helps strengthen the thigh and calf muscles, while Sarukal adavu strengthens the inner thigh and core muscles. A strong core is essential in Bharatanatyam, as it provides stability and control during movement. Flexibility and mobility also play an important role in achieving and maintaining a proper araimandi posture. Many dancers initially struggle to attain a correct araimandi because it requires adequate mobility in the hip and lower body joints. Regular adavu practice gradually improves flexibility, mobility, endurance, and overall body alignment.

Adavu practice also develops concentration, as dancers must focus on multiple aspects simultaneously, including footwork, hand movements, body posture, and Thalam. It enhances spatial awareness and provides greater control over the body. One of the greatest benefits of regular adavu practice is the development of muscle memory. Even if a dancer feels that an adavu has been forgotten, the body often remembers the movement through continuous practice. During a performance, the dancer does not have to consciously think about every movement; instead, the body executes them naturally with confidence and precision. Continuous adavu practice improves strength, stamina, and endurance,

enabling dancers to perform for longer durations without losing balance or energy. Adavus are not merely physical exercises; they also include abhinaya and should be practised with equal attention, involvement, and sincerity. Consistent practice of adavus not only strengthens the body but also nurtures artistic growth, leading every dancer towards a fulfilling artistic journey.

The Role of Adavus in Bharatanatyam Repertoire

Every Bharatanatyam item is choreographed using a combination of adavus and abhinaya. In items such as Alarippu, Jathiswaram, and Thillana, adavus play a major role, whereas in Shabdham, Varnam, and Keerthanam, both adavus and abhinaya are equally important. Without mastering the adavus, a dancer cannot perform any repertoire with proper technique and confidence. Adavus are combined to form korvais, and these korvais are beautifully choreographed into different Bharatanatyam items (Kothari, 1979). A dancer with a strong foundation in adavu practice can learn even difficult choreography with greater ease. It enables them to understand movement patterns more quickly, learn choreography faster, and improve the overall quality of their performance.

The endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, and mobility developed through regular adavu practice support dancers throughout their repertoire learning and stage performances. Adavus not only train the body and mind but also prepare dancers for every stage of their Bharatanatyam journey. They remain an essential part of learning, performing, and growing as a Bharatanatyam artist.

Adavus - Beyond Technique

Adavus extend far beyond being merely a practice or the basic movements of Bharatanatyam. They are the foundation of Bharatanatyam and play a vital role in strengthening both the body and the mind. Although adavus are introduced at the beginning of a dancer's training, they remain an essential part of practice throughout the dancer's artistic journey. Just as we never forget the alphabet even after becoming fluent in reading and writing a language, dancers never leave behind their adavus, regardless of their level of experience. Every accomplished Bharatanatyam artist continues to practise adavus regularly to maintain technique, precision, and confidence.

Practising adavus every day develops patience, perseverance, concentration, and self-discipline. During practice and performance, the mind and body work together in perfect coordination, enabling dancers to perform with greater control and confidence. Thus, adavus are not merely technical exercises but a lifelong discipline that supports the physical, mental, and artistic growth of every Bharatanatyam dancer.

Conclusion

Adavus are not merely exercises that can be performed without emotion. They are expressive movements that give life to Bharatanatyam, transforming physical actions into dance. Through regular practice, adavus help dancers improve their technique and gradually overcome their physical limitations. Adavus are not only about learning movements; they also represent a philosophy of learning. They teach patience, perseverance, humility, self-discipline, and continuous self-improvement through constant repetition and dedicated practice. Practising adavus is like moulding the body for a beautiful artistic journey.

Just as it is essential for an instrumentalist to maintain and tune their instrument regularly, it is equally important for a Bharatanatyam dancer to practise adavus consistently to maintain their technique and performance quality. Therefore, skipping adavu practice, whether while learning or teaching, is not advisable. It is encouraging to see that, even today, Bharatanatyam institutions and gurus continue to preserve and teach the tradition of adavus through different banis. This continuity ensures that the rich legacy of Bharatanatyam is passed on to future generations while retaining its strong technical and artistic foundation.

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