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Bharatanatyam

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Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam is a classical dance of Tamil Nadu. It grew in temples, where women called devadasis danced for the deity. It was once called Sadir. In 1932 it got its present name. Then Rukmini Devi Arundale took it to the stage and founded Kalakshetra in 1936.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Home**Temples of Tamil Nadu.

02 **Old name**Sadir. Renamed in 1932.

03 **Revival**Kalakshetra, 6 January 1936.

04 **Three parts**Nritta, nritya and natya.

Where Bharatanatyam came from

1 Temple dance of Tamil Nadu

1.1 What is Bharatanatyam?

This dance comes from Tamil Nadu. It is one of the eight classical dance forms of India. One government magazine calls it a dance form more than 2000 years old.



A Bharatanatyam performance at the Khajuraho Dance Festival, 2026. Photo by WarmaFiesta, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

1.2 Who first danced it in temples?

Women called devadasis danced it in temples. A devadasi was a woman who gave her life to the service of a temple. She was thought of as married to the temple deity. Her dance was one of the offerings made to the god.

1.3 How big was this tradition?

In Chola times, the Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur is believed to have had up to 400 temple dancers. They lived in the temple towns. This shows how central dance was to temple life.

1.4 What was the dance called then?

It was called Sadir. Sadir was the dance as devadasis practised it. Their daily work kept Sadir alive over the years.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Devadasis were women who dedicated their lives to a temple. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Sadir was the original name of Bharatanatyam. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: publicationsdivision.nic.in; asia-archive.si.edu; timesofindia.indiatimes.com

2 The 108 karanas

2.1 Which old text does the dance follow?

Bharatanatyam links back to the Natya Shastra. This is an ancient text on the art of performance. It describes 108 positions of Shiva’s dance of triumph. Each position is called a karana.

2.2 Can we still see these karanas?

Yes. Images of these positions still exist on temples of Tamil Nadu. A dancer can stand in front of a temple wall and see the same poses carved in stone.

> 12. **Think it through:** Why do the carvings matter? See answer ↓

2.3 Where does Shiva come in?

Shiva's victorious dance is called the tandava. A Bharatanatyam dancer can take these postures on stage. Read the Tandava article for the full story.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: The 108 karanas are described in the Natya Shastra. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Ban, revival and the law

3 Ban, stigma, new name

3.1 What did the British think of temple dance?

British rulers looked at temple dance with suspicion. In the early twentieth century it was banned. The dance came to carry a stigma. It was linked to the devadasi system, which many people wanted to end.

3.2 Who wanted to save the dance?

E. Krishna Iyer did. He agreed that the abusive devadasi system had to end. But he feared for the dance itself. He said the art reached beyond that system. He wrote against the move in the press.

3.3 How did the name change?

Krishna Iyer was at the head of the Music Academy. He passed a resolution there in 1932. It gave the old Sadir a new name, Bharatanatyam. The new name removed the stigma and gave the dance a fresh start.

3.4 Did the idea work?

Yes. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who led the move against the devadasi system, later said Krishna Iyer was the reason Bharatanatyam became an art of every household. The Sangeet Natak Akademi also honours him for his part in the revival.

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: The 1932 resolution that named Bharatanatyam was passed at the Music Academy. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Rukmini Devi Arundale passed the 1932 resolution. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: sangeetnatak.gov.in

4 Rukmini Devi and Kalakshetra

4.1 How did Rukmini Devi begin?

In 1927 her brothers took her to see a sadir show. She said it opened a new world of rhythm and meaning. She chose to learn the art. Her guru was Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

4.2 When did she first dance in public?

Her first performance was at the Diamond Jubilee of the Theosophical Society in 1935. Some people threatened to boycott the show. She went ahead. She was the first dancer from outside the professional class to dance in public.

4.3 What did she found?

In August 1935 she, her husband George Arundale and her brother met friends to plan an arts centre. On 6 January 1936 it opened inside the Theosophical Society campus at Adyar, Chennai. It was first called the International Centre for Arts. It later became Kalakshetra.



Twenty-five years from a sadir show to Parliament.

Original diagram. Dates from the sources listed under each card.

Key dates in the revival of Bharatanatyam.

4.4 What did she change in the dance?

She gave special attention to the music, the choice of songs, the costumes and the stage. These changes helped turn temple dance into a modern stage art.

4.5 What honours did she receive?

She was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1952. The Press Information Bureau calls her the first woman to be nominated to it. In 1956 she received the Padma Bhushan. Read her full story in Rukmini Devi Arundale: Reviving Bharatanatyam.

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Kalakshetra was founded on 6 January 1936 at Adyar, Chennai. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: Rukmini Devi was the first woman to be nominated to the Rajya Sabha. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: kalakshetra.in; sangeetnatak.gov.in; cms.rajyasabha.nic.in; pib.gov.in

5 The 1947 law on devadasis

5.1 What did the law do?

The state passed the Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act in 1947. It declared the dedication of a woman as a devadasi unlawful and void. This held even if she agreed to it.

5.2 Why was it passed?

The Act said that the practice led many of the women to a life of prostitution. It said it was necessary to put an end to it.

5.3 Why does this link to dance?

The law ended dedication, not dance. The art lived on and moved to the stage. Reformers helped girls from many homes learn it. Mrinalini Sarabhai is one dancer who helped take it out of the devadasi closet.

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: The 1947 Act made dedication of a woman as a devadasi unlawful. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indiankanoon.org; indianexpress.com

The three parts of a dance

6 Nritta, nritya and natya

6.1 What are the three parts of a dance?

Dance teachers split the art into three parts. These are nritta, nritya and natya. The easy way to remember them is steps, steps plus feeling, and a full play.

Nritta, nritya, natya

Word	What it means	Easy memory line
Nritta	Dance with movements only. No story or feeling is shown.	Pure steps
Nritya	Dance that also tells a story or shows a mood, with rasa and bhava.	Steps plus feeling
Natya	A dance drama. All parts of the show join to tell a full story.	A whole play

Source: NCERT, which quotes the Abhinaya Darpana.

6.2 Which book gives these definitions?

These definitions come from the Abhinaya Darpana. It is a text that classical dancers widely follow. They are not stated as the Natya Shastra's own.

> 13. **Think it through:** Which part has no story? See answer ↓

Quick check 9. True or false: Nritta shows an emotion or a story. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 10. True or false: Natya is a dance drama that tells a full story. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: ncert.nic.in

Exam Practice

7 How do exams test this?

7.1 What traps repeat?

- **Sadir or Bharatanatyam?** Sadir is the old name. The new name came in 1932.
- **Who renamed it?** E. Krishna Iyer pushed the 1932 resolution. Do not credit Rukmini Devi.
- **Who founded Kalakshetra?** Rukmini Devi Arundale, in 1936.
- **Which dancer, which institute?** Match the dancer to the place she founded.

Who did what?

Person	Role	Key year
E. Krishna Iyer	Reformer. Pushed the Music Academy resolution that named the dance Bharatanatyam.	1932

Person	Role	Key year
Rukmini Devi Arundale	Dancer and institution builder. Founded Kalakshetra.	1936
Muthulakshmi Reddy	Led the move to end the devadasi system.	1930s
Mrinalini Sarabhai	Dancer. Set up Darpana with her husband.	1949

Sources: Times of India, Kalakshetra, Indian Express.

7.2 How did SSC CGL test this?

The 2024 paper named a dancer and asked which institute she founded. Mrinalini Sarabhai was a Bharatanatyam and Kathakali dancer. She and her husband set up Darpana in 1949. She had learnt Bharatanatyam from Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai.

Asked before

PYQ 1 · SSC CGL 2024, General Awareness, Q25

Which of the following institutes was founded by Mrinalini Sarabhai who was a Bharatanatyam and Kathakali dancer?

(a) Sri Thyagaraja College of Music and Dance
(b) Nrityanjali Institute of Performing Arts
(c) Darpana Academy of Performing Arts
(d) Nalanda Nritya Kala Mahavidyalaya

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Quick check 11. True or false: Mrinalini Sarabhai founded the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: darpana.com

Remember this

- **Home:** Temples of Tamil Nadu, danced by devadasis.
- **Old name:** Sadir. New name Bharatanatyam, chosen in 1932 at the Music Academy.
- **Reformer:** E. Krishna Iyer pushed the name. Rukmini Devi Arundale built Kalakshetra on 6 January 1936.
- **Three parts:** Nritta (steps), nritya (steps plus feeling), natya (a play).

Explain it back: Say why the dance fell into disrepute, and who saved it.

Practice MCQs

1. Bharatanatyam, one of the oldest Indian classical dance forms, originated as a temple dance in which region?

A. Kerala

B. Tamil Nadu

C. Assam

D. Punjab

See answer ↓

2. What was Bharatanatyam originally called, before its 1932 renaming?

A. Odra Nritya

B. Chhau

C. Sadir

D. Mohiniyattam

See answer ↓

3. In January 1936, Rukmini Devi Arundale founded which academy of dance and music, in Adyar, Chennai?

A. Kalakshetra

B. Sangeet Natak Akademi

C. Gandharva Mahavidyalaya

D. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan

See answer ↓

4. Who was the first woman to be nominated as a member of the Rajya Sabha?

A. Sucheta Kriplani

B. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

C. Rukmini Devi Arundale

D. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

See answer ↓

5. Which of the following institutes was founded by Mrinalini Sarabhai who was a Bharatanatyam and Kathakali dancer? (SSC CGL 2024, Tier-I, General Awareness, 12 Sep Shift 2, Q25)

A. Darpana Academy of Performing Arts

B. Sri Thyagaraja College of Music and Dance

C. Nrityanjali Institute of Performing Arts

D. Nalanda Nritya Kala Mahavidyalaya

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The correct answer is **Tamil Nadu**. Bharatanatyam is an old dance form of Tamil Nadu. It grew in temples, where devadasis danced as an offering to the deity. Kerala, Punjab and Assam have their own dance forms. Memory hook: Bharatanatyam means Tamil Nadu temples. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The correct answer is **Sadir**. Sadir was the dance as devadasis practised it. In 1932 the Music Academy passed a resolution that gave it the name Bharatanatyam. The other three are different dance forms. Memory hook: Sadir became Bharatanatyam in 1932. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The correct answer is **Kalakshetra**. Rukmini Devi Arundale founded it on 6 January 1936. It was first called the International Centre for Arts. It stood in the Theosophical Society campus at Adyar, Chennai. Memory hook: 1936, Adyar, Kalakshetra. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** The correct answer is **Rukmini Devi Arundale**. She was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1952. The Press Information Bureau calls her the first woman to be nominated to it. The other three were also well-known women, but not for this first. Memory hook: the dancer who became a nominated MP. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The correct answer is **Darpana Academy of Performing Arts**. Mrinalini Sarabhai and her husband Vikram Sarabhai set it up in 1949 in Ahmedabad. She had learnt Bharatanatyam from Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. Memory hook: Mrinalini means Darpana. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** They danced as one of the offerings to the deity. ↑ 1
2. **True.** It was the dance as devadasis practised it, before the 1932 renaming. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The text lists 108 positions of Shiva's dance. ↑ 3
4. **True.** E. Krishna Iyer was behind it. ↑ 4
5. **False.** Krishna Iyer did. Rukmini Devi's big step came later, with Kalakshetra in 1936. ↑ 5
6. **True.** It was first called the International Centre for Arts. ↑ 6
7. **True.** She was nominated in 1952. ↑ 7
8. **True.** The Act called it unlawful and void. ↑ 8

9. **False.** Nritta is movement without any specific emotive content or narrative. ↑ 9
10. **True.** All parts of the performance join together to tell it. ↑ 10
11. **True.** She and her husband Vikram Sarabhai set it up in 1949. ↑ 11
12. **Think it through.** Dance leaves no object behind. A carved pose is a record that the pose was known and respected. That is why temple walls help us understand old dance. ↑ 12
13. **Think it through.** Nritta. It is pure movement. Nritya and natya both carry meaning, one through feeling and the other through a full story. ↑ 13

Previous year answers

1. **(c) Darpana Academy of Performing Arts** Darpana was set up in Ahmedabad in 1949.

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