

Chapter 10: Dance and Theater

Summary

South Asia has many ways to tell a story with the body. This chapter starts with the Natya Shastra, an old Sanskrit handbook on performance, and two of its big ideas: rasa (the feeling an audience tastes) and mudra (hand gestures that work like words). It then tours the eight classical dances that India's national academy recognizes, from Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu to Sattriya in Assam, and shows how to tell them apart. Finally it widens the circle to folk dances and theater across the region, including Garba, Bhangra, Attan, Kandyan dance, Bhutan's masked dances and shadow puppetry.

Concepts Covered

1. Natya Shastra
2. Rasa
3. Mudra
4. Classical Dance
5. Bharatanatyam
6. Kathak
7. Odissi
8. Kathakali
9. Kuchipudi

10. Manipuri Dance
11. Mohiniyattam
12. Sattriya
13. Folk Dance
14. Garba
15. Kandyan Dance
16. Attan
17. Shadow Puppetry

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?**, for the map and the eight countries.
- **Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia**, because many dances tell stories from Hindu, Buddhist and other traditions.
- **Chapter 7: Festivals Through the Year**, since many folk dances belong to festivals such as Navaratri and Vaisakhi.
- **Chapter 9: Music**, for raga, tala and the drums that dancers move to.

Let's dance!



Hi, I'm Mora! Maybe you've been dragged onto the floor at a wedding, or watched a cousin's dance recital, or seen a viral Bhangra video and wondered where it came from. This chapter helps you see what is happening when a South Asian dancer moves, so the next time you watch, you can read the story, not just the costume. Every tradition has a story. Let's find it!

10.1 "Great Bharatanatyam, Arjun!"

It's culture night at Prairie Ridge High School, the first big event of the new South Asian Student Association. The cafeteria has been turned into a stage with string lights and a borrowed speaker. Zara Hossain is running the slideshow. Ben Lindqvist is in charge of snacks, which means he has already eaten half of them.

Their friend Arjun Reddy steps out in a bright silk costume with a pleated fan at the front, bells around his ankles, and his eyes lined in black. For eight minutes he stamps out fast rhythms, freezes into poses like a temple statue, and acts out a whole story with his face and hands. Near the end, he jumps onto the rim of a brass plate and keeps dancing on it. The room goes wild.

Afterward, Ben finds him by the water fountain. "Dude. Great Bharatanatyam!"

Arjun laughs so hard he has to sit down. "It's Kuchipudi! My family is from Hyderabad. Kuchipudi comes from a village in Andhra Pradesh. Bharatanatyam is from Tamil Nadu."

Ben looks at Zara for help. Zara shrugs. She has seen both at weddings and festivals, and honestly, she isn't sure she could tell them apart either. Both have bells, both have hand gestures, both have that bent-knee stance. So what makes one dance different from another, and who decides which ones count as "classical"?

10.2 Dance as a Language

Before learning any names, think about how you already "read" people's bodies. A referee's arm signals tell you a foul happened. A friend's raised eyebrow says "really?" without a word. American Sign Language turns hand

shapes into full sentences. And a good actor can make you cry without saying anything.

Many South Asian dance traditions combine all of these at once. A dancer might:

- keep a **beat** with the feet, like a drummer,
- make **hand shapes** that stand for a lotus, a bird, a king or the moon,
- use the **face and eyes** to show feelings such as love, anger or wonder,
- and **act out a story**, often from an epic like the Ramayana or Mahabharata, or a poem about Krishna.

Teachers often break a performance into three layers, using Sanskrit words:

Layer	What it means	Example
<i>Nritta</i> (pure dance)	Rhythm and shapes with no story, like a drum solo for the body	A fast run of footwork that lands exactly on the last beat
<i>Nritya</i> (expressive dance)	Movement that carries meaning through gestures and the face	Hands become a blooming lotus while the face shows delight
<i>Natya</i> (drama)	Acting a full story with characters	One dancer plays both a worried mother and her mischievous child

Once you can spot these three layers, you can start to see what a dancer is doing even if you've never seen that style before.

10.3 The Natya Shastra: An Old Handbook for the Stage

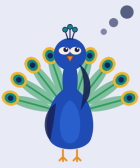
Where did these ideas come from? Many dancers trace them to one famous text.

The **Natya Shastra** (नाट्य शास्त्र, *NAHT-yuh SHAHS-truh*), "treatise on drama," is a Sanskrit handbook on the performing arts. Tradition credits it to a sage named Bharata. Nobody knows exactly when it was written. Scholars think it grew over a long time, and most place its first complete version somewhere between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, though estimates range more widely, from about 500 BCE to 500 CE.

It is a big book: about 6,000 verses in 36 chapters. It covers playwriting, stage building, acting, makeup, costumes, body movement, hand gestures and music. Think of it as a drama-class textbook, a choreography manual and a music theory guide rolled into one. Later writers added their own books on top of it. One of the most used by dancers today is the *Abhinaya Darpana* ("Mirror of Gesture"), credited to a writer named Nandikeshvara, which describes hand gestures in detail.

In April 2025, UNESCO added manuscripts of the Natya Shastra, together with the Bhagavad Gita, to its Memory of the World Register, a list of documents considered important to all of humanity.

Old text, living art



The Natya Shastra is old, but no dance today is a frozen copy of it. Each classical style took its present shape much later, often in the last few hundred years, and teachers keep changing it. A good question to ask any dancer is: "Which parts come from the old books, and which parts did your own teachers create?"

10.4 Rasa: The Flavor of a Performance

Have you ever left a movie feeling a mood you couldn't shake, like the warm glow after a happy ending or the shivers after a scary scene? The Natya Shastra has a word for that.

Rasa (रस, *RUH-suh*) literally means "juice," "taste" or "essence." In the arts, a rasa is the emotional flavor that a performance creates in the audience. The idea is that the performer shows a feeling (called a *bhava*), and a sensitive audience member "tastes" it as a rasa. In Sanskrit, an ideal audience member is called a *sahridaya*, "one who has heart."

The Natya Shastra lists eight rasas. Later thinkers argued for centuries about adding a ninth, *shanta* (peace), and it was eventually widely accepted. That's why dancers often talk about the *navarasa*, the "nine rasas."

Rasa	Feeling	A dancer might show it by...
Shringara	Love, beauty	Soft eyes, a shy smile, a gentle tilt of the head

Rasa	Feeling	A dancer might show it by...
Hasya	Laughter, comedy	Playful eyebrows, a cheeky grin
Karuna	Sorrow, compassion	Drooping shoulders, eyes filling with tears
Raudra	Fury	Wide eyes, flaring nostrils, sharp stamps
Vira	Heroism, courage	Tall posture, firm gaze, strong steps
Bhayanaka	Fear	Darting eyes, shrinking back
Bibhatsa	Disgust	Turning away, wrinkling the nose
Adbhuta	Wonder, amazement	Wide-open eyes, raised brows, an open mouth
Shanta (added later)	Peace, calm	Stillness, a soft and even face

Rasa isn't only for dance. The same idea shaped music, poetry, painting and sculpture in South Asia.

10.5 Mudra: Speaking with Your Hands

If rasa is the feeling, mudras are a big part of the vocabulary.

A **mudra** (मुद्रा, *MOO-druh*) is a hand gesture with a set shape and set meanings. In Hindi the word can also mean a seal or a stamp, which fits: each mudra "stamps" an idea into the air. Dancers also use the Sanskrit word *hasta*, "hand." The *Abhinaya Darpana* describes 28 single-hand gestures (*asamyuta hasta*) and about two dozen two-hand gestures (*samyuta hasta*; versions of the text count 23 or 24), and teachers add many more.

A single mudra can mean many different things, depending on where the hand is, how it moves, and what the face is doing. It works like a word with several meanings, where context tells you which one is meant. Here are six of the first single-hand mudras that students learn, with a few of the meanings listed in a 1917 English translation of the *Abhinaya Darpana*:

Mudra	Name means	Hand shape	A few meanings
Pataka	Flag	Fingers straight and pressed together, thumb bent in	Clouds, forest, waves, a blessing, saying "Go!"
Tripataka	Three parts of the flag	Like Pataka, but the ring finger is bent	A crown, a tree, an arrow, a lamp's flame
Ardhapataka	Half flag	Like Tripataka, with the little finger also bent	Young leaves, a knife, a tower, a riverbank

Mudra	Name means	Hand shape	A few meanings
Kartarimukha	Scissors face	First two fingers spread like scissor blades, the others folded	Separation, lightning, the corner of the eye
Mayura	Peacock	Ring finger touches the thumb tip, the other fingers up	A peacock's beak, wiping away tears, putting a mark on the forehead
Alapadma	Full-bloomed lotus	All fingers spread and curved, like a flower opening	A blooming lotus, the full moon, a mirror, praise

Teachers and styles describe some of these shapes a little differently, so don't worry if your cousin's dance teacher holds Kartarimukha a bit differently from the drawing in the MicroSim.

Mudras aren't only for dance. You'll also see hand gestures in Hindu and Buddhist statues and paintings, such as an open palm raised to mean "do not fear." Dancers, sculptors and painters shared much of this visual language. ([Chapter 11](#) looks at the sculpture and painting side.)

10.6 What Makes a Dance "Classical"?

Now back to Ben's question: what does "classical" mean?

In this book, **Classical Dance** means a dance tradition with a long, written theory behind it (usually traced to the Natya Shastra), a fixed technique that takes years of training with a teacher, a set order of pieces in a performance, and official recognition as a classical art. It's similar to how people use "classical" for Western ballet or for Carnatic and Hindustani music: it describes a trained, codified art form, not something better than other dance.

So who decides which dances count? In India, the main official body is the **Sangeet Natak Akademi**, the national academy of music, dance and drama, set up in 1953. It recognizes eight classical dances:

1. Bharatanatyam
2. Kathak
3. Kuchipudi
4. Odissi
5. Kathakali
6. Sattriya
7. Manipuri
8. Mohiniyattam

Sattriya was the most recent addition. The Akademi recognized it on 15 November 2000.

Is it eight, nine or more?



Be careful with "India has eight classical dances." That's the Sangeet Natak Akademi's list, but India's Ministry of Culture also lists Chhau, a masked dance from eastern India, which makes nine, and some lists add more. Scholars disagree too, so the honest answer is "eight, according to the national academy."

Chhau comes from eastern India and has three main styles, named after the places they grew up: Seraikella, Purulia and Mayurbhanj. It mixes dance with martial-arts moves and is traditionally taught to men. The Seraikella and Purulia styles use masks. UNESCO added Chhau to its list of the world's intangible cultural heritage in 2010.

Other countries draw the line differently. In Bangladesh, *Banglapedia* (the national encyclopedia) says classical dance there mainly means Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Odissi and Manipuri, learned from teachers of those schools. In Sri Lanka, the Kandyan dance tradition has its own long training and rules, even though it isn't on India's list.

10.7 A Tour of the Eight Classical Dances

Here's a quick guide to all eight. Use it like a field guide: notice where each comes from, what the dancers wear, and one or two things that make it easy to spot.

Dance	Home region (today)	Easy-to-spot features
Bharatanatyam	Tamil Nadu	Half-sitting bent-knee stance, crisp geometric lines, fan-

Dance	Home region (today)	Easy-to-spot features
		pleated costume
Kathak	North India, also Pakistan and Bangladesh	Straight legs, fast spins, hundreds of ankle bells, footwork "conversations" with the tabla
Odissi	Odisha	S-shaped <i>tribhangi</i> pose, square <i>chauka</i> stance, silver jewelry
Kathakali	Kerala	Painted green faces, huge skirts and crowns, all-night dance-dramas
Kuchipudi	Andhra Pradesh	Dance-drama roots, quick leaps, dancing on the rim of a brass plate
Manipuri Dance	Manipur, also Sylhet (Bangladesh)	Soft rounded moves, no stamping, stiff barrel-shaped mirrored skirt
Mohiniyattam	Kerala	Gentle swaying, white-and-gold sari, a hair bun to one side
Sattriya	Assam	Born in monasteries, played with the <i>khol</i> drum, Krishna stories

Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam (பரதநாட்டியம், *BHUUH-ruh-tuh-NAHT-yum*) comes from Tamil Nadu in southern India. Its older name was *Sadir*. For centuries the dance was closely linked to Hindu temples and royal courts in the Tamil region. Later, four musicians and teachers known as the Thanjavur Quartet organized much of the order of pieces still used today.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, colonial officials, missionaries and some Indian reformers attacked temple dance, and it nearly disappeared. In the 1930s, revivalists including Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer helped bring it to concert stages under a new name, Bharatanatyam, in 1932.

You can spot Bharatanatyam by its *aramandi*, a half-sitting position with bent knees turned out, a steady upper body, and sharp, geometric arm lines. The dancer usually performs solo for up to two hours, with a singer, drummer and a *nattuvanar* (conductor) keeping the rhythm with small cymbals.

Kathak

Kathak (*KUH-thuk*) comes from northern India. Its name comes from *katha*, the Sanskrit word for "story," and it grew from traveling storytellers who acted out tales, especially about Krishna. Later it was also danced in royal courts, including Mughal courts and the court of Awadh in Lucknow, where Persian poetry and music shaped it. That double history, in temples and storytelling on one side and Muslim-ruled courts on the other, is part of why Kathak is danced today in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Kathak dancers keep their legs straight and wear ankle bells called *ghungroo*, sometimes with more than a hundred bells on each ankle. Footwork patterns called *tatkar* trade rhythms with the tabla player, and dancers finish phrases with dizzying spins. Different schools, called *gharanas*, are named after cities such as Jaipur, Lucknow and Banaras (Varanasi).

Odissi

Odissi (*oh-DIS-ee*) comes from Odisha on India's east coast. Dancing figures carved on the walls of Odisha's old temples, such as the Sun Temple at Konark, show poses that dancers still use. Like Bharatanatyam, Odissi was attacked under colonial rule and rebuilt in the twentieth century.

Look for two poses. The *chauka* is a strong, square stance with bent knees. The *tribhangi* ("three bends") curves the body into an S-shape at the neck, waist and knee, like a statue come to life. Many pieces are devotional poems about Jagannath (a form of Vishnu) and Krishna, especially from the twelfth-century Sanskrit poem *Gita Govinda*.

Kathakali

Kathakali (കഥകളി, *KUH-thuh-kuh-lee*), "story play," comes from Kerala in southwest India. It developed from older temple and folk arts and took its full form a few centuries ago. Unlike most classical dances, it grew up mainly in the courts and theaters of local kings.

Kathakali is easy to recognize. Performers wear thick makeup, giant skirts and tall crowns, and the makeup color tells you who a character is. *Pacha* (green) faces with bright red lips are noble heroes and gods such as Krishna and Rama. *Kathi* ("knife") faces, green with red marks, are proud or villainous characters, and *kari* (black) is for demons and forest beings. Performances were traditionally all-night shows by male actors, with the story sung by vocalists while the actors "speak" only through mudras, eyes and face.

Kerala is also home to **Kutiyattam**, a form of Sanskrit theater that UNESCO describes as one of India's oldest living theater traditions. Male actors traditionally performed it in special theaters inside Hindu temples, and a full performance can last up to 40 days. UNESCO first recognized it in 2001.

Kuchipudi

Kuchipudi (కూచిపూడి, *KOO-chee-POO-dee*) is named after a village in Andhra Pradesh. As Arjun said, it's from the Telugu-speaking region. It began as a dance-drama performed by troupes of men from the village, who played every role. Tradition credits a seventeenth-century devotee named Siddhendra Yogi with shaping it. In the twentieth century it also became a solo dance, often performed by women.

Kuchipudi shares a lot with Bharatanatyam, which is why Ben mixed them up. Both use a bent-knee stance, mudras and Carnatic music. But Kuchipudi tends to be faster and bouncier, with more leaps and a strong acting side, and the songs are usually in Telugu. Its best-known feature is the *tarangam*, where the dancer performs on the rim of a brass plate, sometimes balancing a pot of water on the head.

Manipuri Dance

Manipuri Dance comes from Manipur in northeastern India, where it is part of the culture of the Meitei people. The best-known form is the *Raas Leela*, dances about Krishna and Radha. A Meitei king, Bhagyachandra (who ruled 1759 to 1798), is credited with organizing the style and designing its famous costume.

Manipuri movement is soft and rounded, with no hard stamping, and the dancers' faces stay calm and gentle. Women playing the *gopis* (cowherd girls who love Krishna) wear the *potloi*, a stiff, barrel-shaped skirt decorated with mirrors and embroidery that makes them look as if they're floating. Manipuri is also danced in Bangladesh, especially in Sylhet. In 1919 the poet Rabindranath Tagore saw a Manipuri performance in Sylhet and later brought Manipuri teachers to his school at Shantiniketan, which helped make the dance known across Bengal.

Mohiniyattam

Mohiniyattam (*mo-hi-nee-YAHT-tum*) is Kerala's second classical dance. It is named after Mohini, the enchanting female form of the Hindu god Vishnu. Mohiniyattam is traditionally a solo dance by women. Its movements sway gently from side to side, a little like palm trees in the breeze or waves on the backwaters, and it uses the soft, graceful style that the Natya Shastra calls *lasya*. Dancers wear an ivory-white sari with a gold border, and a round hair bun worn to one side.

In the 1930s, laws against temple dancing and colonial-era prejudice pushed Mohiniyattam almost out of sight. The Malayalam poet Vallathol Narayana Menon led its revival and founded the Kerala Kalamandalam, a school for Kerala's performing arts.

Sattriya

Sattriya (*SUT-tree-yuh*) comes from Assam in northeastern India. It began in the *sattras*, Vaishnava (Krishna-worshipping) monasteries founded after the teacher, poet and playwright Srimanta Sankardev in the 1400s and 1500s. Sankardev wrote short dance-dramas, and for centuries male monks called *bhokots* performed them as part of worship.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Sattriya moved from the monasteries to public stages, and women began to perform it too. Its music features the *khol*, a two-headed clay drum played with the fingers, along with cymbals. When the Sangeet Natak Akademi recognized it in 2000, it became the eighth classical dance on the list.

10.8 Folk Dance: Dance for Everyone

Classical dance usually needs years of lessons, but most dancing in South Asia doesn't. A **folk dance** is a dance that grows out of a community's everyday life: harvests, weddings, festivals, worship and seasons. Anyone in the community can join. The steps are passed on by watching and doing rather than from textbooks, and they change from village to village.

"Folk" doesn't mean simple or less skilled. Bhangra dancers and Garba circles can be fiercely athletic and complex. The difference is about who dances, where and how the dance is learned, not about quality.

Garba (India)

Garba (ગરબા, *GUR-bah*) comes from Gujarat in western India. It's danced during **Navaratri**, the "nine nights" festival honoring the Hindu goddess (see [Chapter 7](#)). Traditionally, dancers move counterclockwise in circles around a clay pot with holes in it and a lamp burning inside, or around an image of the goddess Amba. The circle starts slowly with clapping and singing, then speeds up into fast, whirling steps. A related dance, *dandiya raas*, uses pairs of decorated sticks that dancers clack together.

In 2023, UNESCO added Garba of Gujarat to its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Today Garba nights draw huge crowds in Indian cities and in diaspora communities, and many community and campus Garba nights in North America welcome anyone who wants to join the circle.

Bhangra and Luddi (India and Pakistan)

Bhangra comes from Punjab, a region split between India and Pakistan in 1947 (see [Chapter 4](#)). It began with farmers celebrating the harvest, especially around the spring festival of Vaisakhi. Dancers leap, kick and pump their shoulders with raised arms to the heavy beat of the *dhol*, a big two-headed drum, while singers shout short verses called *boliyan*. Bhangra

today has grown into a whole music genre and a competitive college sport in the UK, US and Canada.

Luddi is another Punjabi folk dance, danced on both sides of the border. Men and women dance it in circles at weddings and celebrations, clapping, snapping their fingers and doing half-turns.

Attan (Afghanistan and Pakistan)

Attan (اتڼ, *uh-TUN*) is a Pashtun circle dance and is widely called the national dance of Afghanistan. Pashtuns in Pakistan dance it too, and other Afghan communities have taken it up. Dancers move in a big circle around the drummer, clapping and spinning, with the *dhol* starting slow and building to a fast finish. A performance can last from about 5 to 30 minutes. Historically it was danced before battles to build courage. Today it's most often seen at weddings and celebrations, including in Afghan communities around the world.

Different regions have their own versions, such as Kabuli and Kandahari styles. In northwestern Pakistan, the *Khattak* dance, a fast sword-and-handkerchief version danced by men of the Khattak tribe, is a famous relative of Attan.

Kandyan Dance (Sri Lanka)

Kandyan Dance comes from the hill country around Kandy in Sri Lanka's central highlands. In Sinhala it's called *Uda Rata Natum*, "up-country dance." Legend traces it to a healing ritual called the *Kohomba Kankariya*, and for generations its dancers served the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy and performed in the city's great yearly procession, the *Perahera*.

Kandyan dancers are known for high leaps, fast spins and strong, athletic footwork. The most famous costume is the *ves*, with a shining metal

headdress, a beaded net over the chest and rattling anklets. The music is mostly drumming, led by the *geta bera*, the main drum of Kandyan dance, though some pieces also have sung verses. There are 18 classic *vannam*, solo dances that each describe an animal or idea, such as the elephant, the monkey or the eagle. Traditionally only men trained in the dance, but today many schools teach women too. Kandyan dance is one of the strongest symbols of Sri Lankan culture, at home and in the diaspora.

More dances across the region

- **Bhutan:** Buddhist monasteries hold festivals with *cham*, masked dances that teach moral lessons and honor Buddhist teachers. One of them, the *Drametse Ngacham* ("mask dance of the drums from Drametse"), features sixteen masked men and ten musicians. UNESCO first recognized it in 2005.
- **Nepal:** In the Kathmandu Valley, Newar communities perform the *Lakhey* dance at festivals. A dancer in a fierce mask with fangs and a long mane of hair plays a forest demon who became a protector of the town.
- **The Maldives:** *Boduberu* ("big drum") is the Maldives' best-known music and dance. About 20 performers, including drummers and a lead singer, start slow and build to a frenzied finish while one or two dancers move to the beat.
- **Bangladesh:** Besides Manipuri in Sylhet, Bangladesh has many folk dances and a famous folk theater, *jatra*, described in the next section.

10.9 Theater and Shadow Puppetry

Many South Asian dance forms are really dance-drama. The same region also has theater traditions where acting, singing and puppetry come first.

Jatra (যাত্রা, *JAH-trah*), "journey," is a lively folk theater of Bengal, performed in Bangladesh and in India's West Bengal, Odisha and Assam. It goes back at least to the 1500s, when it grew out of devotional plays about Krishna. Jatra was traditionally played on open ground with the audience all around, and it mixed songs, dances, loud dialogue and comic characters. Over time it took up history, social issues and, in the twentieth century, patriotic themes. Jatra troupes still tour villages and towns today.

Yakshagana from coastal Karnataka is an all-night dance-drama with huge headdresses, painted faces and a lead singer who narrates the story. Like many strong traditions, it isn't on any official "classical" list.

Shadow Puppetry is a form of storytelling in which flat cut-out figures are held between a light and a thin cloth screen, so the audience sees moving shadows. South India has several shadow puppet traditions, and they share a word for leather:

Tradition	Where	What the name means
<i>Tholu bommalata</i>	Andhra Pradesh	"Dance of leather dolls" (Telugu)
<i>Togalu gombeyaata</i>	Karnataka	"Play of leather dolls" (Kannada)
<i>Tholpavakoothu</i>	Kerala and Tamil Nadu	"Leather doll play" (Malayalam and Tamil)

The puppets are cut from animal hide, scraped so thin that light shines through, and painted in bright colors, so the shadows glow with color. Puppeteers sit behind the screen, move the jointed puppets with sticks, sing and speak all the voices, and often perform stories from the Ramayana all

night. In Kerala, *Tholpavakoothu* is performed in temples of the goddess Bhadrakali, and a full Ramayana cycle can run for weeks of night-long shows. Many historians think South Asian shadow theater influenced shadow puppet traditions in Southeast Asia, though how and when are still debated.

Whose Story?

Who gets to say which dances are "classical"? India's Sangeet Natak Akademi lists eight, India's Ministry of Culture adds Chhau, and dancers in West Bengal and elsewhere have argued for other styles to join the list. In Bangladesh, the national encyclopedia uses "classical dance" mainly for styles such as Kathak and Manipuri that Bengali dancers learned from teachers of those schools, while Sri Lankans see Kandyan dance as their own classical tradition with its own rules. Historians also tell the revival story of the 1930s in different ways. Some celebrate the revivalists who saved Bharatanatyam and Odissi from colonial attacks. Others point out that the hereditary women performers who had kept these dances alive for generations were often pushed aside in the process.

10.10 Dance Today

A week after culture night, Arjun is teaching Ben the basic Kuchipudi stance in the school hallway. Ben's knees are shaking. "How long did you have to practice this?"

"Eight years," Arjun says. "And I still have a teacher." He shows Ben a Pataka hand, then turns it into a wave rolling across the sea.

Many classical dancers study for years before a first full-length solo recital, which in Bharatanatyam is called an *arangetram*.

At the same time, dance keeps changing. Film songs from Mumbai (formerly Bombay), Lahore, Dhaka and Chennai mix classical gestures, folk steps and hip-hop. College teams compete in Bhangra, Garba-Raas and "fusion" contests. Kandyan dancers perform at Sri Lankan community events abroad, and Afghan families dance Attan at weddings far from Afghanistan. "Bollywood dance" (popular film dance from India's Hindi film industry) is its own fun, mixed style. It borrows from many traditions, but it isn't the same as any one classical dance.

How to watch a dance like an expert

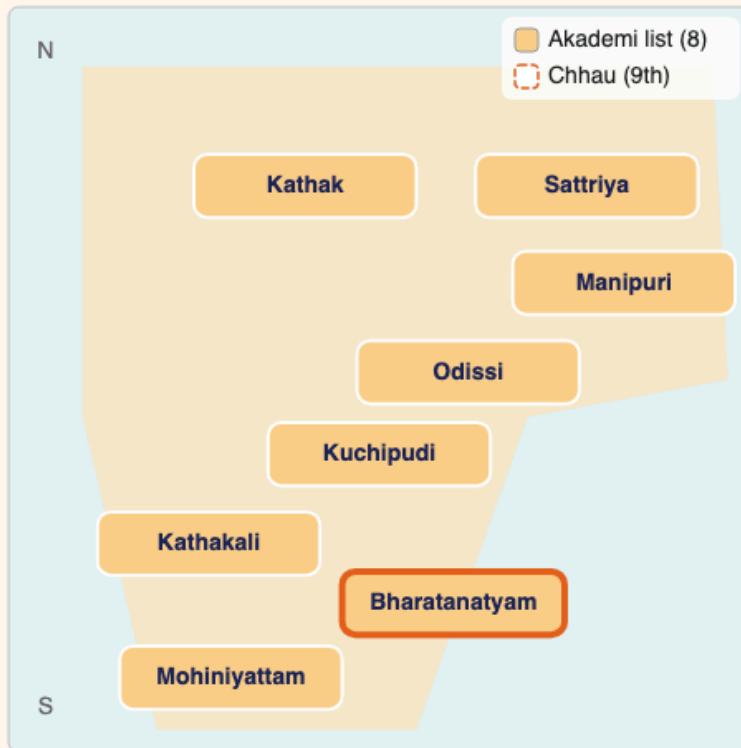


Next time you watch a performance, ask three questions: Is this pure rhythm (*nritya*), expression (*nritya*) or drama (*natya*)? Which rasa is the dancer showing right now? And what is that hand saying? You'll notice far more than before.

Diagram: Classical Dance Map

Classical Dance Map

Click a tile to see where a dance comes from and how to spot it.



Bharatanatyam

Classical: Sangeet Natak Akademi list of eight

Region: Tamil Nadu (south India)

Spot it: Half-sitting bent-knee stance (aramandi), steady torso, sharp geometric lines. Renamed from Sadir in 1932.

Costume: Silk sari-style costume with a pleated fan that opens when the knees bend; ankle bells.

Beyond India

Kandyan

Sri Lanka

Attan

Afghanistan

Bhangra

Punjab

Manipuri

Bangladesh

Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders.

Dance map

Hand gestures

Bharatanatyam

☐ Show Chhau (Ministry of Culture list)

[Back to Classical Dance Map Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch10-classical-dance-map/main.html>

Open the Classical Dance Map fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Classical Dance Map

sim-id: ch10-classical-dance-map

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: distinguish

Learning Objective: The learner will distinguish the eight classical dances recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi by home region, key movement features and costume, and identify six basic single-hand mudras and their meanings.

Canvas: responsive width; 680 px drawing area plus 120 px control area.

Controls: "Dance map" and "Hand gestures" buttons, a menu of dances or mudras, a "Show Chhau (Ministry of Culture list)" checkbox; click or tap any tile or hand.

Behavior: The map view shows schematic region tiles (no borders) for the eight classical dances in roughly their home regions, plus a "Beyond India" row with Kandyen dance (Sri Lanka), Attan (Afghanistan and Pakistan), Bhangra and Luddi (Punjab, India and Pakistan) and Manipuri in Sylhet (Bangladesh). Selecting a tile shows the region, key features and costume. The checkbox adds Chhau as a dashed tile to show the eight-versus-nine debate. The hand gestures view draws six single-hand mudras with simple shapes; selecting one shows its name, meaning of the name and several meanings. The caption "Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders." is drawn inside the drawing area.

Start in the **Dance map** view. Click each of the eight classical tiles and read the panel. Try to find one feature for each dance that would help you tell it apart from its neighbors, especially the two Kerala dances (Kathakali and Mohiniyattam) and the two southern dances Ben confused (Bharatanatyam

and Kuchipudi). Then tick the Chhau checkbox and notice how the "official" list changes depending on who is counting.

Next, switch to **Hand gestures**. Look at how each mudra is built from the one before it: Pataka, then bend one finger for Tripataka, then another for Ardhapataka. Try making each shape with your own hand as you read its meanings. Notice that one shape can mean very different things, like Pataka meaning both "clouds" and "Go!"

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about dance in their life: dances at weddings and festivals, whether anyone in the family learned a classical dance, and folk dances from their village, town or region. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Ask if they have any old photos or videos of a wedding, festival or recital, and look at them together. Ask permission before taking notes or recording.

Questions to ask

1. What is the first dance you remember seeing or doing, and where were you?
2. What dances happened at weddings, festivals or religious events in your family or community?

3. Did you or anyone in the family learn a classical dance? What was the teacher like, and how long did it take?
4. Was there a folk dance special to your village, town or region? Can you show me a step?
5. How has dancing at weddings or festivals changed since you were young, or since moving to a new country?
6. Is there a dance, song or step you hope I'll learn and keep?

Listen for: names of classical styles such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak or Kandyen Dance; folk dances such as Garba, Bhangra or Attan; and any mention of hand gestures (Mudra) or the feelings a dance should bring out (Rasa).

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

Your turn: compare two answers

Compare your elder's memories with a friend's interview. Did one family talk mostly about classical dance and the other about folk dance at weddings? List two things that were the same and two that were different, and connect one of them to this chapter's idea that "folk" is about who dances and how it's learned, not about skill.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: All Indian dance is basically Bollywood dance.

Reality: Bollywood dance is a modern, mixed film style. South Asia has many separate classical dances, such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi, plus

hundreds of folk dances, each with its own steps, music and history. Film choreographers borrow from them, but they are not the same thing.

Myth: Classical dance is only religious.

Reality: Many classical pieces tell religious stories, but dancers also perform pure rhythm pieces, love poetry, court traditions (Kathak grew up partly in Mughal and Awadh courts) and modern themes. Dancers of many faiths learn and perform these styles.

Myth: There is one official list of classical dances.

Reality: India's Sangeet Natak Akademi recognizes eight, the Ministry of Culture also lists Chhau, and scholars and other countries draw the line differently. It's more accurate to say "eight, according to the Sangeet Natak Akademi."

Myth: Folk dances are just simple party dances.

Reality: "Folk" describes how a dance is passed on, through community life rather than formal schools. Folk dances such as Bhangra and Attan can be highly athletic and skilled, and UNESCO has listed some, such as Garba, as world heritage.

Myth: Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi are the same dance.

Reality: They're related and share some technique, but Bharatanatyam comes from Tamil Nadu and is usually performed as a solo with Tamil and other songs, while Kuchipudi comes from Andhra Pradesh, grew out of Telugu dance-drama, and is known for leaps, acting and the brass-plate *tarangam*.

Check Yourself

? 1. What is the Natya Shastra, and roughly when was it compiled? ✓

It is a Sanskrit handbook on the performing arts, credited to the sage Bharata. Most scholars date its first complete version to between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, though estimates range wider.

? 2. What is rasa? Give two examples. ✓

Rasa is the emotional "flavor" a performance creates in the audience. Examples include shringara (love), karuna (sorrow), vira (heroism) and adbhuta (wonder).

? 3. How many classical dances does the Sangeet Natak Akademi recognize, and which was added most recently? ✓

Eight. Sattriya, from Assam, was the most recent, recognized in 2000.

? 4. Name one way to tell Kathakali apart from Mohiniyattam, even though both come from Kerala. ✓

Kathakali uses heavy painted makeup, huge costumes and crowns, and was traditionally performed by men in all-night dance-dramas. Mohiniyattam is a gentle, swaying solo dance traditionally performed by women in a white-and-gold sari.

? 5. What makes shadow puppetry work, and where in South Asia is it found? ✓

Flat, see-through leather puppets are held between a light and a cloth screen, so the audience sees colored shadows. Traditions include Tholu bommalata in Andhra Pradesh, Togalu gombeyaata in Karnataka and Tholpavakoothu in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Exercises

Remember

1. List the eight classical dances recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the home state of each.

Answer ✓

Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu), Kathak (North India, such as Uttar Pradesh), Odissi (Odisha), Kathakali (Kerala), Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh), Manipuri (Manipur), Mohiniyattam (Kerala), Sattriya (Assam).

2. Name the folk or regional dance from each place: Gujarat, Punjab, Kandy (Sri Lanka), and the Pashtun regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Answer ✓

Gujarat: Garba. Punjab: Bhangra (or Luddi). Kandy: Kandyan dance. Pashtun regions: Attan.

Understand

1. Explain the difference between *nritya*, *nritya* and *natya* in your own words.

Answer

Nritya is pure rhythm and movement with no story. Nritya adds meaning through gestures and facial expression. Natya is full drama, with characters and a story acted out.

2. Explain why a single mudra, such as Pataka, can mean many different things.

Answer

A mudra works like a word with several meanings. Where the hand is held, how it moves, and what the face shows tell the audience which meaning is intended. Pataka can be clouds, a wave or "Go!" depending on context.

Apply

1. Use the Classical Dance Map. Choose two dances from different regions and write a short "how to tell them apart" guide for a friend, using region, movement and costume. *Hint: the info panel has all three.*
2. Watch a short performance clip chosen by your teacher or club leader. Identify one moment of *nritya*, one of *nritya*, and the main rasa the dancer seems to show. *Hint: look at the face during the expressive part.*

Analyze

1. Compare how Bharatanatyam and Kathak were each shaped by the places where they were performed (temples, courts, concert stages). How do those places show up in the dance today? *Hint: think about Mughal and Awadh courts, temple sculpture and the 1930s revival.*
2. The Sangeet Natak Akademi lists eight classical dances, while the Ministry of Culture includes Chhau. Analyze what criteria might lead two official bodies to different lists. *Hint: think about written theory, training, history and who is on the committee.*

Evaluate

1. Some people say folk dances should be put on official "classical" lists so they get more funding and respect. Others say this would change them. Which side do you find more convincing, and why? *Hint: use Garba, Yakshagana or shadow puppetry as an example.*
2. Ben says, "Bollywood dance is fake Indian dance." Evaluate his claim using what you learned about how dance traditions mix and change. *Hint: a fair answer looks at what film dance borrows and what makes it different.*

Create

1. Choreograph a 30-second "mudra story" using at least four of the six mudras in this chapter. Write out the story, the mudra for each moment and the rasa you want the audience to feel. *Hint: Pataka can be waves, Alapadma the moon.*
2. Design a one-page program for your club's culture night that introduces three dances from at least three different South Asian countries, with two

sentences on each that would help a newcomer like Ben enjoy them. *Hint: include one classical and one folk dance.*

Key Takeaways

- The Natya Shastra, a Sanskrit handbook credited to Bharata and usually dated between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, gave South Asian performing arts many of their core ideas.
- Rasa is the emotional flavor a performance creates; the Natya Shastra lists eight, and a ninth, shanta (peace), was added later.
- Mudras are hand gestures with set shapes and many meanings; context tells the audience which meaning is intended.
- India's Sangeet Natak Akademi recognizes eight classical dances: Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali, Sattriya, Manipuri and Mohiniyattam. Other bodies and countries draw the list differently.
- Folk dances, such as Garba, Bhangra, Luddi, Attan and Kandyan dance, grow from community life and can be just as skilled as classical forms.
- Theater and shadow puppetry, from Bengal's jatra to South India's leather puppets, tell epic and everyday stories across the region.
- Dance in South Asia and its diaspora keeps changing, mixing classical, folk, film and global styles.

You can read a dance now!



You can now tell a Kuchipudi dancer from a Bharatanatyam dancer, and you know what their hands and faces are saying. Next, in Chapter 11, we look at the art that stays still: temples, mosques, paintings and the kolam patterns drawn fresh on doorsteps every morning.

Quiz: Dance and Theater

Test your understanding of Chapter 10. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

What is the Natya Shastra?

- A. A Mughal court history that describes Kathak performances
- B. A Sanskrit handbook on the performing arts, credited to the sage Bharata
- C. A list of classical dances published by the Sangeet Natak Akademi
- D. A Tamil epic poem about a dancer

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. The Natya Shastra is a Sanskrit treatise on drama, dance and music, traditionally credited to Bharata and usually dated between about 200 BCE and 200 CE. It is much older than the Sangeet Natak Akademi's list, which dates from modern India.

Concept Tested: Natya Shastra **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

How many classical dances does India's Sangeet Natak Akademi recognize?

- A. Six

- B. Nine
- C. Twelve
- D. Eight

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. The Akademi recognizes eight: Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali, Sattriya, Manipuri and Mohiniyattam. Nine is a common mix-up because India's Ministry of Culture also lists Chhau.

Concept Tested: Classical Dance **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

Which dance is widely called the national dance of Afghanistan?

- A. Attan
- B. Bhangra
- C. Kandyan dance
- D. Garba

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Attan is a Pashtun circle dance danced around a dhol drummer, and Pashtuns in Pakistan dance it too. Bhangra is a Punjabi harvest dance, Kandyan dance is from Sri Lanka, and Garba is from Gujarat.

Concept Tested: Attan **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

In the Natya Shastra's theory of rasa, what is a rasa?

- A. A hand gesture with a fixed meaning
- B. The rhythm cycle a drummer keeps
- C. The emotional flavor that a performance creates in the audience
- D. A costume worn only for religious stories

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Rasa, literally "juice" or "taste," is the feeling the audience experiences, such as love, wonder or sorrow. A fixed hand gesture is a mudra, not a rasa.

Concept Tested: Rasa **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Why can a single mudra, such as Pataka, stand for clouds in one moment and the word "Go!" in another?

- A. Because its meaning depends on context: where the hand moves and what the face shows
- B. Because each dance style gives every mudra exactly one meaning
- C. Because the audience is expected to guess randomly
- D. Because Pataka is only decorative and has no real meaning

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Like a word with several meanings, a mudra's meaning comes from context, including its position, movement and the dancer's expression. The idea that each mudra has only one meaning is a common misunderstanding.

Concept Tested: Mudra **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Which statement best explains the difference between folk dance and classical dance, as this chapter describes it?

- A. Folk dances are always simpler and less skilled than classical dances.
- B. Classical dances are never performed at festivals.
- C. Folk dances come only from India, while classical dances come from all eight countries.
- D. Folk dances grow out of community life and are learned by joining in, while classical dances follow a codified technique learned over years with a teacher.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. The difference is about how a dance is learned and who dances it, not about skill. Option A is the misconception the chapter corrects: Bhangra and Attan can be highly athletic and complex.

Concept Tested: Folk Dance **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

At a culture night, a dancer from Andhra Pradesh performs fast footwork, acts out a story in Telugu songs, and ends by dancing on the rim of a brass plate. Which dance is this most likely to be?

- A. Bharatanatyam
- B. Kuchipudi
- C. Odissi
- D. Manipuri Dance

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Kuchipudi comes from Andhra Pradesh, uses Telugu songs, and is famous for the brass-plate *tarangam*. Bharatanatyam is the most likely mix-up because the two share a bent-knee stance and mudras, but it comes from Tamil Nadu.

Concept Tested: Kuchipudi **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

Your club wants to show one dance that uses green painted faces for heroes, huge skirts and crowns, and all-night storytelling. Which dance should you look for?

- A. Mohiniyattam
- B. Sattriya
- C. Kathakali
- D. Kathak

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Kathakali, from Kerala, uses color-coded makeup such as green *pacha* faces for noble heroes. Mohiniyattam also comes from Kerala, but it is a gentle solo dance with natural makeup and a white-and-gold sari.

Concept Tested: Kathakali **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

Kathak is danced today in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Which part of its history best explains this?

- A. It grew from storytellers and was also danced in royal courts across northern India, including Mughal and Awadh courts.
- B. It was invented in the twentieth century for film.
- C. It began in Buddhist monasteries in Bhutan.
- D. It was created by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1953.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Kathak's roots in traveling storytellers and in courts across northern India, including Muslim-ruled courts, made it part of the shared culture of a region now divided among several countries. The Akademi recognized Kathak; it did not create it.

Concept Tested: Kathak **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

The Sangeet Natak Akademi lists eight classical dances, India's Ministry of Culture also lists Chhau, and Bangladesh's national encyclopedia names its own set. What is the best conclusion?

- A. Only one of these lists can be correct, so the others are mistakes.
- B. Chhau must be older than the eight Akademi dances.
- C. Lists made in Bangladesh do not count because the dances are from India.
- D. "Classical" is a label that institutions apply using their own criteria, so the list depends on who is counting.

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. Different bodies use different criteria and serve different communities, which is why the chapter says "eight, according to the Sangeet Natak Akademi." Option A assumes there is one true list, which is the misconception the chapter warns against.

Concept Tested: Classical Dance **Bloom's Level:** Analyze