



## Mohiniyattam Dance

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*A nritta pose in Soochi mudra, adopted by Mohini, the enchantress in enticing Bhasmasura*

### Mohiniyattam Dance

Mohiniyattam literally interpreted as the dance of '**Mohini**', the celestial enchantress of the Hindu mythology, is the **classical solo dance form of Kerala**.

According to a Puranic story, Lord Vishnu took on the guise of a '**Mohini**' to seduce the Asuras, both in connection with churning of the ocean and episode of the slaying of *Bhasmasura*.

The delicate body movements and subtle facial expressions are more feminine in nature and therefore are ideally suited for performance by women.

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*Honey bee sucking nectar from a flower, in Katakamukha and Mukura mudra*

References of Mohiniyattam can be found in the texts **Vyavaharamala** written in 1709 by Mazhamagalam Narayanan Namputiri and in Ghoshayatra, written later by great poet Kunjan Nambiar.

This dance form of Kerala was structured into the present day classical format by the Travancore Kings, Maharaja KartikaTirunal and his successor Maharaja Swati Tirunal (18th -19th century C.E.).



*The lotus flower in Urnanabha mudra*

Mohiniyattam as seen today has evolved through a long process of evolution. It traces its origin to the temples of Kerala.

Though the exact period of its origin is not known, there are evidences to prove the existence of a community of female temple dancers who assisted the temple rituals by adding expressive gestures to the mantras chanted by the temple priests.

The dancers were called by different names during different periods of time.

They were called as TaiNangai or Nangachi (one with beautiful hand), Dasi (servant), Tevitichi or Deva-Adi-Achi (the one who served at the feet of the Lord), Koothachi (who performed koothu or dance).

Their dances were known as 'Nangai Natakam, Dasiyattam, Tevitichiyattam, etc.

The Nangiars, who are the women folk of Nambiar community, still follow a strict code of dance, performed in a small performing space, within the temple precincts, as practised in the olden times.



*Namaskar pose in Anjali Mudra*

Some scholars opine that around 19th century C.E, the Perumaals, rulers from Tamilnadu, ruled the Chera Empire, with their capital in Tiruvanchikulam (presently Kodungallur, Kerala).

These rulers brought along with them fine dancers who were settled in temples that were constructed in different parts of the capital.

Their dance was called as '*Dasiyattam*'. The existence of *Dasiyattam* is further corroborated in the epic '*Cilappatikaram*', written by the Chera Prince Illango Adikkalin 2nd-5th century C.E.

With the fall of the Chera Empire or the Perumal regime and the subsequent socio-economic changes, these *Dasis* were forced to come out of the temple precincts.

Few united with the Nangiars, who lived and performed in the temples of other regions of Kerala and

enhanced the Nangiar Koothu.

There were the others who entertained the rich feudal chiefs and warlords. This caused a serious degradation of Dasiyattam which led to its downfall and final eclipse.



*Karuna-Rasa in Hamsasya mudra*



*Bird on a branch, in Sukatunda mudra*

*Dasiyattam* was revived with the able efforts of the Tanjore Quartets (Ponnayya, Chinnayya, Sivananda and Vadivelu).

They were the *Nattuvanar-s* (the dance teachers) who also structured the present day Bharatanatyam.

One of the Tanjore brothers 'Vadivelu' along with a Devadasi 'Sugandhavalli' found refuge in the court of Maharaja Swati Tirunal.

Swati Tirunal, who ascended the throne when he was barely 16 years old in 1829, promoted all fine arts, particularly music and dancing. During his reign there was a flow of artists and scholars from all parts of India to Travancore, the region of the Kerala Maharajas. It was during that time, Swati along with his court musicians (Kilimanoor Vidwan Koyil Tampuran and IrayimmanTampi) was engaged in developing Mohiniyattam.

Vadivelu structured Mohiniyattam with a proper repertoire that included *Chollukettu* (the first invocatory item in Mohiniyattam), *Jatiswaram*, *Padavarnam*, *Padam* and *Tillana*. The dance was then performed by the Devadasi Sugandhavalli.

Swati himself composed *Padams* in Malayalam, Telugu and Sanskrit which dancers eagerly embraced.



*Kamadeva in Hamsapaksha and Pataka Mudra*



*A nritta pose with Sikhara hasta (Balarama Bharatam)*

However, the early and untimely demise of this royal patron marked the beginning of another dark period for this dance, primarily because of the lack of royal patronage by the succeeding King.

Mohiniyattam got a new lease of life with the arduous efforts of *Mahakavi* Vallatol, a poet laureate of Kerala and Mukundaraja, another connoisseur of art.

The poet succeeded in giving it the dignity of a distinct classical solo style. In 1930, Vallatol established the Kerala Kalamandalam, a pioneer institute for imparting training in art forms of Kerala with *Nattuvanar*, Guru Krishna Panikker and Kalyani Amma, as the first regular teachers of Mohiniyattam. Their disciples Thankamani Gopinath, Chinnamu Amma and Kalyani Kutty Amma, became the torch bearers of this enchanting dance style.

The teaching methodology adopted movements that had the refined features of the dance while deleting the obscene and indecorous movements.

### Salient Features of Mohiniyattam Dance

Mohiniyattam is characterized by graceful, swaying body movements with no abrupt jerks or sudden leaps. It belongs to the *lasya* style which is feminine, tender and graceful.

The movements are emphasized by the glides and the up and down movement on toes, like the waves of the sea and the swaying of the coconut, palm trees and the paddy fields.



*Sthanakas (Basic foot positions) in Agratala Sanchara*



*Sthanakas (Basic foot positions) in Trayasra*

The foot work is not terse and is rendered softly. Importance is given to the hand gestures and Mukhabhinaya with subtle facial expressions.

Movements have been borrowed from Nangiar Koothu and female folk dances Kaikottikali and the Tiruvatirakali.



*Nritta in Tripataka mudra*

Mohiniyattam lays emphasis on acting. The dancer identifies herself with the character and sentiments existing in the compositions like the Padams and Pada Varnams which give ample opportunity for facial expressions.



*Pataka and Kataka mudra*



*Ardhachandra mudra*

The hand gestures, 24 in number, are mainly adopted from Hastalakshana Deepika, a text followed by Kathakali. Few are also borrowed from NatyaShastra, AbhinayaDarpana and Balarambharatam.

The gestures and facial expressions are closer to the natural (gramya) and the realistic (lokadharmi) than to the dramatic or rigidly conventional (natyadharmi).

The traditional repertoire includes Chollukettu, Jatiswaram, Padavarnam, Padam, Tillana and Slokam.

Besides these Pandattam and Omanatinkal (lullaby), introduced by Vallatol are also popular and are often included in a recital.

Most of the compositions included in the repertoire have been composed by Swati Tirunal which emphasizes the Sahitya Bhava i.e. the literary content.

These are portrayed through appropriate hand and facial expressions that include the nine sentiments.



*Bhayanaka Rasa*

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Ministry of Culture, Government of India  
15-A, Sector - 7, Dwarka, New Delhi - 110075

Telephone:(011) 25088638, 25309300 Fax: 91-11-25088637, E-mail:- [dir\[dot\]cctr\[at\]nic\[dot\]in](mailto:dir@cctr[at]nic[dot]in)

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