



Exploring Rare Bharatanatyam Padams in Thiruppugazh: A Study of Devotional Expression and Artistic Depth

K. Gajalakshmi

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Dance
Kalai Kaviri College of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the dynamic interplay between Bharatanatyam, a sophisticated classical dance form from South India, and Thiruppugazh hymns, composed by the Tamil poet-saint Arunagirinathar. Bharatanatyam embodies a convergence of technical skill, expressive storytelling, and deep emotional resonance, requiring extensive training in movements, rhythm, and musicality. The adaptation of Thiruppugazh hymns into Bharatanatyam padams introduces challenges related to maintaining the hymns' intricate rhythmic structures while emphasizing emotional depth and narrative expression. This study highlights five rare Thiruppugazh padams, exploring their themes of devotion, spiritual longing, and the complexities faced in their performance. Each padam allows dancers to delve into the emotional journeys of devotees, enhancing the richness of the Bharatanatyam repertoire. Through expressive gestures, facial expressions, and nuanced movements, dancers can embody the profound sentiments captured in Arunagirinathar's poetry, inviting audiences to engage deeply with the spiritual narratives. The successful integration of these hymns into Bharatanatyam not only preserves the cultural and spiritual essence of Tamil devotion but also revitalizes the art form, making it relevant for contemporary audiences. Ultimately, this exploration celebrates the transformative power of

dance and poetry, fostering a meaningful connection between performers and viewers.

INTRODUCTION

Bharatanatyam is a sophisticated classical dance form rooted in the cultural and spiritual traditions of South India. For professionals engaged in this art, it represents a unique convergence of expressive storytelling, intricate technical skill, and deep emotional resonance. It is characterized by its rigorous physicality, demanding a high level of control, flexibility, and precision from the dancer. Mastery of footwork, hand gestures, and facial expressions is essential, as these elements are crucial for conveying complex narratives and emotions.

The training process for Bharatanatyam practitioners is intense and multifaceted, often beginning at a young age. Dancers spend years honing their technique through disciplined practice of foundational movements, developing a nuanced understanding of rhythm, melody, and the emotive qualities inherent in the dance. This foundation is essential for interpreting and embodying the rich narratives drawn from mythology, spirituality, and human emotion that are central to Bharatanatyam.

In addition to technical proficiency, a deep engagement with the music, literature, and historical context of the pieces performed is vital. Dancers must possess an intimate knowledge of the musical framework, including the ragas and talas, as these elements dictate the timing and phrasing of movements. This understanding allows for a seamless interplay between the dancer and the musicians, enriching the overall performance experience. Bharatanatyam also invites innovation and personal expression.

Furthermore, the role of the dancer extends beyond performance; it encompasses being an educator, a cultural ambassador, and a storyteller. Professionals in Bharatanatyam are tasked with preserving and transmitting this rich art form to future generations. They often engage in teaching and mentoring, ensuring that the next generation understands the technical and cultural foundations of the dance while encouraging their creative expression.

Ultimately, Bharatanatyam serves as a profound means of cultural expression, reflecting the complexities of human experience through movement and emotion. For professionals, it is a lifelong journey of exploration, mastery, and dedication, where each performance becomes a unique dialogue between the dancer, the audience, and the rich tapestry of Indian culture and

spirituality.

THIRUPPUGAZH

Thiruppugazh is a revered collection of devotional hymns composed by the Tamil poet-saint Arunagirinathar in the 15th century. This significant body of work holds a prominent place in the spiritual and artistic landscape of South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where it is closely associated with the worship of Lord Murugan, the god of war and victory. The term "Thiruppugazh" translates to "holy glory" or "sacred praise," encapsulating the essence of Arunagirinathar's intent to glorify the divine through lyrical expression.

Arunagirinathar's life is filled with legend and mysticism. According to tradition, he was born into a Tamil family and initially led a life marked by indulgence and vice. The pivotal moment in his life came when he faced a near-fatal encounter with a tiger. This life-threatening experience instigated a profound transformation, prompting him to seek spiritual solace and redemption. During this quest, he became a devoted follower of Lord Murugan, composing the Thiruppugazh hymns that express his devotion and surrender to the deity.

The Thiruppugazh hymns are characterized by their lyrical beauty, intricate rhythmic structures, and vivid imagery. Composed in Tamil, the hymns employ various poetic forms, including complex meters and rhythmic patterns that enhance their musicality. The rich variety of talas used in these hymns contributes to their rhythmic complexity and makes them ideal for performance in classical music and dance. Arunagirinathar's verses are marked by a distinctive style that blends devotional fervour with philosophical depth, transforming personal devotion into universal themes of love, yearning, and the quest for the divine.

One of the special characteristics of Thiruppugazh is its intricate rhythmic framework, often employing unique and complex talas. Arunagirinathar's use of various rhythmic cycles allows for an engaging interplay between melody and rhythm. The compositions often feature a variety of rhythmic patterns, enhancing the musicality of the hymns. The most commonly used talas include Adi Tala, which consists of eight beats, and other less common talas that add to the diversity of the musical expression. This rhythmic richness invites musicians and dancers to interpret the hymns with creativity, ensuring that each performance can be unique and captivating.

The hymns frequently celebrate the beauty and majesty of Lord Murugan, depicting him as a



compassionate and benevolent deity. Arunagirinathar's vivid imagery brings the divine to life, portraying Murugan as a youthful warrior adorned with splendour, riding a peacock, and wielding a vel (spear). The poems are rich with metaphors and similes that evoke a sense of wonder and reverence, inviting listeners to immerse themselves in the experience of devotion. The depth of emotion expressed in these hymns resonates with devotees, as they articulate the joys and sorrows encountered on the spiritual journey.

Arunagirinathar's influence extends beyond poetry and performance. His work has inspired countless musicians, dancers, and artists, and his hymns continue to be performed in temples and cultural settings throughout Tamil Nadu and beyond. The enduring legacy of Thiruppugazh reflects its timeless appeal and its capacity to inspire devotion and artistic expression.

Another noteworthy aspect of Thiruppugazh is its accessibility to the general populace. By composing hymns in Tamil, Arunagirinathar made spiritual teachings available to common people, allowing them to engage with the divine through language and art. His use of the vernacular not only elevated the Tamil language as a medium of sacred expression but also paved the way for future generations of poets and writers to explore themes of spirituality and devotion.

In contemporary times, Thiruppugazh remains a vital part of Tamil cultural heritage. Scholars, musicians, and dancers continue to explore its depths, interpreting the hymns in innovative ways that resonate with modern audiences. The teachings of Arunagirinathar are particularly relevant today as they emphasize the importance of inner transformation and the quest for spiritual connection amid the challenges of contemporary life.

The themes of love, devotion, and spiritual longing encapsulated in Thiruppugazh serve as a guiding light for those seeking meaning and purpose. The hymns invite individuals to reflect on their spiritual journeys, fostering a sense of community and shared devotion among practitioners and devotees alike. The intricate rhythmic structures and melodic nuances further enrich the experience, allowing both performers and audiences to connect deeply with the devotional sentiments expressed in the hymns.

Thiruppugazh is a remarkable embodiment of the intersection of music, poetry, and spirituality. Arunagirinathar's lyrical brilliance and innovative use of rhythm and meter have left an indelible mark on Tamil literature, music, and dance. His work ensures that the sacred praise

celebrated in Thiruppugazh continues to inspire and uplift generations, fostering a deep connection between devotees and the divine essence of Tamil devotion. The hymns resonate through time, inviting all who encounter them to engage in the transformative power of devotion and the beauty of artistic expression.

This study explores the significance of five rare Thiruppugazh padams in Bharatanatyam, focusing on their themes, the challenges in adapting them, and their contribution to the bhakti (devotion) aspect of the art form.

PADAMS

Padams in Bharatanatyam are expressive dance pieces that emphasize emotional depth and storytelling. They are typically slower than other dance forms and focus on conveying themes of love, devotion, and spirituality. Each padam often draws from lyrical poetry that explores the relationship between the devotee and the divine, often highlighting narratives from Hindu mythology.

The core of a padam lies in its ability to showcase abhinaya, which is the art of expression. Dancers use a combination of facial expressions, hand gestures (mudras), and intricate movements to interpret the lyrics and convey complex emotions such as longing, joy, or sorrow. This expressive quality allows the audience to connect deeply with the performance on an emotional level.

Musically, padams are set to lyrical compositions that enhance the narrative, providing a melodic backdrop for the dance. The music is typically rich and emotive, complementing the dancer's movements and expressions. The pacing of padams allows for a more reflective and intimate performance, inviting both the dancer and the audience to engage with the underlying sentiments and stories being portrayed.

Padams are essential in showcasing a dancer's interpretive skills and emotional expressiveness. They are an opportunity for dancers to demonstrate technical proficiency while also connecting with the audience through the narrative's emotional core. Each performance of a padam can vary significantly based on the dancer's interpretation, making it a unique experience for the audience each time.

Padams represent a beautiful synthesis of music, poetry, and dance, embodying the richness of Indian classical art. They invite the audience to embark on an emotional journey, allowing both performer and viewer to experience the profound themes of love and spirituality embedded within the

dance form.

This study analyzed the lyrical themes, rhythm, and expressive potential of the selected padams, assessing their suitability for abhinaya and the challenges they present in terms of rhythm adaptation and emotional expression.

CHALLENGES IN PERFORMING THIRUPPUGAZH PADAMS

Adapting Rhythmic Structures

The first step in adapting Thiruppugazh hymns into Bharatanatyam padams involves addressing their original rhythmic complexity. Thiruppugazh hymns are composed in intricate meters (chandams), often featuring rapid tempos that emphasize rhythm over lyrical expression. To transform these hymns into padams, the rhythmic structure must be slowed down, allowing for a more measured interpretation suitable for Bharatanatyam.

This adaptation requires a deep understanding of both the original compositions and the requirements of padam performances. Musicians collaborating with dancers often modify the rhythm while ensuring that the lyrical beauty of the hymn remains intact. Slowing down the tempo facilitates a focus on abhinaya (expressive aspects), where the dancer can explore subtle facial expressions, hand gestures (mudras), and body movements that convey complex emotions.

Emphasizing Emotional Depth

Bharatanatyam padams are characterized by their emotional resonance, often exploring themes of love, devotion, and surrender. In adapting Thiruppugazh hymns, dancers must delve into the emotional narratives embedded within the lyrics. This requires interpreting the hymn's themes—such as devotion, longing, and spiritual guidance—in a manner that resonates with the audience.

For instance, a hymn like “Alaipayum Niyum Karai Kaattum Thunai” reflects the devotee's plea for guidance amid life's challenges. When performed as a padam, the dancer can depict the devotee's vulnerability and reliance on Murugan's protection. The ability to connect with the spiritual sentiment behind the hymn and express it through dance is paramount. The dancer must not only master the technical aspects of Bharatanatyam but also embody the emotional journey of the devotee, making the performance deeply engaging.

Complications in the Adaptation Process

One significant challenge in this adaptation process lies in balancing the original rhythmic complexity with the emotional interpretation required for a padam. While it is essential to preserve the hymn's lyrical beauty and rhythm, doing so without losing the emotive depth can be tricky. Dancers must navigate these complexities, ensuring that the rhythm remains fluid while still capturing the intricate feelings expressed in the hymn.

Additionally, the performer's mastery of both technical and expressive elements is critical. The dancer must exhibit a high level of proficiency in Bharatanatyam techniques while also connecting deeply with the devotional sentiments of the Thiruppugazh hymns. This blend of technical skill and emotional expressiveness makes the performance a rich and rewarding experience for both the dancer and the audience.

The exploration of rare Thiruppugazh padams in Bharatanatyam provides a meaningful connection between Arunagirinathar's devotional poetry and the expressive power of the dance form. Though less frequently performed, these compositions offer Bharatanatyam dancers a profound medium for exploring bhakti and spirituality, adding a unique devotional dimension to the performance. The blend of rhythmic complexity and emotional intensity makes these rare gems an invaluable part of the Bharatanatyam repertoire, preserving the divine essence of Tamil devotion through art.

In this article, there are five rare thiruppugazh songs which can be used as padham compositions in Bharatanatyam.

1. "Aananda Natanam Aaduvaar Thirukkoodam"

Theme and Lyrical Description: This hymn celebrates the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva, specifically the Ananda Tandavam, performed at Thillai (Chidambaram). Although Thiruppugazh predominantly venerates Lord Murugan, this composition is an exception, glorifying Murugan's father, Lord Shiva. The lyrics evoke powerful imagery of Shiva's ecstatic dance, symbolizing the unity of creation and destruction, and the energy of the universe in perpetual motion.

Relevance in Bharatanatyam: When adapted for Bharatanatyam, this padham allows the dancer to interpret Shiva's majestic cosmic dance. Through measured movements and elaborate abhinaya

(expression), the dancer portrays Shiva's dynamic form, capturing the grandeur of his tandavam. This performance would integrate slow, expansive gestures to express the vastness of Shiva's cosmic energy, allowing the dancer to convey the awe-inspiring magnitude of the Ananda Tandavam.

2. "Alaipayum Niyum Karai Kaattum Thunai"

Theme and Lyrical Description: This padham presents the devotee's plea for guidance, portraying life as a stormy ocean where Murugan is the sole guiding force. The lyrics metaphorically describe the challenges of life as waves crashing against the soul, with Murugan depicted as the only reliable source of refuge and direction. The hymn emphasizes Murugan's role as a protector and guide, reinforcing the devotee's dependence on his divine assistance to reach a safe shore.

Relevance in Bharatanatyam: In Bharatanatyam, this piece is ideal for expressing bhakti rasa (devotion). The dancer portrays a devotee in distress, emotionally appealing to Murugan for protection. Through subtle expressions and hand gestures (mudras), the dancer illustrates the devotee's sense of vulnerability and trust, showing how the devotee navigates the metaphorical storm of life with Murugan's guidance. This padham provides space for intimate, detailed expressions to embody the essence of spiritual reliance.

3. "Ezhil Aariya Mugathil"

Theme and Lyrical Description: This hymn offers a vivid portrayal of Lord Murugan's divine appearance, emphasizing his beauty and strength. The lyrics highlight details such as his radiant face, his peacock vehicle, and his symbolic vel (spear), which represents valor and protection. The hymn glorifies Murugan's physical form and his noble stance, creating a striking image of his youthful vigor and divine grace.

Relevance in Bharatanatyam: This padham allows Bharatanatyam dancers to depict Murugan as a heroic figure (nayaka). The dance interpretation focuses on expressing Murugan's charm, combining graceful, flowing movements to showcase his beauty, strength, and protective qualities. The performer uses abhinaya to convey Murugan's youthful divinity and physical magnificence, providing the audience with a detailed visual representation of his persona.

4. "Nada Vindri Nannalum Irangida Vendum"

Theme and Lyrical Description: This rare padham represents the devotee's humble plea for Murugan's grace and intervention. The lyrics convey the struggles and trials of worldly life, and the devotee's request for Murugan to help alleviate their suffering and guide them through. This hymn is a devotional outcry, asking Murugan to dispel illusions and protect the devotee from hardships.

Relevance in Bharatanatyam: This padham offers Bharatanatyam dancers a powerful medium for expressing the deep emotional journey of a soul seeking divine assistance. The dancer portrays the devotee's struggle and yearning, capturing the pathos of surrendering to Murugan's divine will. Through intense facial expressions and delicate hand gestures, the performer can embody the depth of the devotee's appeal for Murugan's intervention, making it an emotionally charged piece within the Bharatanatyam repertoire.

5. "Arivai Manam Kaattum Muruga"

Theme and Lyrical Description: In this hymn, Murugan is seen as the divine teacher and illuminator of the mind, dispelling ignorance and leading the devotee toward enlightenment. The lyrics reflect the devotee's desire for Murugan's guidance to overcome maya (illusion) and achieve spiritual knowledge. This composition portrays Murugan not only as a warrior but as a wise guru who reveals the true nature of existence to the seeker.

Relevance in Bharatanatyam: This padham provides Bharatanatyam dancers with an opportunity to portray Murugan's compassionate and guiding nature. The dancer illustrates the devotee's quest for wisdom, using a combination of refined expressions and symbolic mudra to depict Murugan's role as the teacher and the devotee's transformation through divine guidance. The performance brings out Murugan's role as the destroyer of ignorance, allowing the dancer to convey the devotee's spiritual journey toward enlightenment.

CONCLUSION

The adaptation of Thiruppugazh hymns into Bharatanatyam padams presents an exciting opportunity to explore the intersection of devotional poetry and classical dance. By modifying the rhythmic structures and emphasizing emotional depth, dancers can bring the spiritual narratives of these hymns to life. Despite the challenges associated with this adaptation—such as balancing rhythm



with emotion and mastering expressive nuances— performing Thiruppugazh padams enriches the Bharatanatyam repertoire. This fusion not only honors Arunagirinathar's poetic legacy but also allows dancers to connect more profoundly with the themes of devotion and spirituality, captivating audiences with the beauty and depth of Tamil devotional art.

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