Performing Arts of Tamil Nadu – Bharatanatyam, Tamil Isai, Therukoothu, Karagattam, Silambam, Folk Arts and Cultural Institutions | TNPSC Notes

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The arts of Tamil Nadu are rooted in the "Muthamizh" tradition of **iyal, isai and nadagam** (literature, music and drama). Alongside the classical dance **Bharatanatyam** (earlier "Sadir"), pann-based **Tamil Isai** and Carnatic music, the State is known for folk arts such as **Therukoothu, Karagattam, Kavadi Attam, Mayilattam, Oyilattam, Poikkal Kuthirai Attam, Kummi, Paraiattam, Villupattu and Bommalattam**, and for the martial art **Silambam**. Historical evidence for them runs from the Silappathikaram to temple sculpture and inscriptions.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. They serve the topic "Tamil culture and arts" in the unit on **History, Culture, Heritage and Socio-Political Movements of Tamil Nadu** and the Indian culture (arts and dances) portion. For the background of temple art see the Pallava art and Nayak period notes.

Arts of Tamil Nadu at a Glance

Type	Examples
Classical dance	Bharatanatyam; Bhagavata Mela (Melattur – a Telugu dance-drama tradition); Kuravanji dance-dramas
Music	Tamil Isai (pann tradition), Carnatic music, the Odhuvar tradition of Thevaram, Nadaswaram–Thavil temple music
Folk theatre	Therukoothu (Kattaikkoothu), Villupattu, Bommalattam
Folk dance	Karagattam, Kavadi Attam, Mayilattam, Oyilattam, Poikkal Kuthirai Attam, Kummi, Kolattam, Paraiattam, Puliyattam
Martial arts	Silambam (staff fighting), Varma Kalai
Early evidence	Silappathikaram (Arangetru Kathai, Kadalaadu Kathai), the Kudumiyanmalai music inscription, the 108 karana sculptures on the Chidambaram gopurams

Bharatanatyam

- **Origin:** its forerunner is **Sadir** (Dasi Attam), the temple and court dance tradition; it embodies the karanas and abhinaya principles of Bharata's **Natya Shastra**. The gopurams of the Chidambaram Nataraja temple carry sculptures of the **108 karanas** of the Natya Shastra.

- **Thanjavur Quartet:** Chinnaiah, Ponniah, Sivanandam and Vadivelu – brothers at the court of the Thanjavur Maratha ruler **Serfoji II**; they systematised today's Bharatanatyam recital sequence (margam).
- **Margam (recital sequence):** Alarippu, Jathiswaram, Shabdam, Varnam, Padam, Thillana.
- **20th-century revival:** E. Krishna Iyer and **Rukmini Devi Arundale** revived it as a stage art; Rukmini Devi founded **Kalakshetra** at Adyar, Chennai in 1936 (the Kalakshetra Foundation became an institution of national importance under a 1993 Act). **T. Balasaraswati** was the leading artist of the hereditary tradition.
- **Social-reform background:** the **Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947** ended the dedication of women to temples as devadasis – Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar played key roles in the struggle for it.

Tamil Isai – from the Pann Tradition to the Tamil Isai Movement

- **Pann:** the raga of ancient Tamil music was called "pann"; the Thevaram is sung in panns.
- **Seven notes (old Tamil names):** kural, thuththam, kaikkilai, uzhai, ili, vilari, thaaram – found in the Silappathikaram and its commentaries.
- **Yazh:** the main stringed instrument of the Sangam age; **Swami Vipulananda** studied it in "**Yazh Nool**" (1947).
- **Kudumiyanmalai music inscription** (Pudukkottai district): an important Pallava-period inscription on Indian music.
- **Abraham Pandithar:** of Thanjavur; "**Karunamirtha Sagaram**" (1917) – a study of Tamil music.
- **Tamil trinity (Tamil Moovar):** Muthu Thandavar, Arunachala Kavirayar ("Rama Nataka Keerthanai") and Marimutha Pillai – Tamil composers of kirtanas before the Carnatic trinity.
- **Carnatic trinity:** Thyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri – all three were born at **Thiruvarur**; the **Thyagaraja Aradhana** is held every year at Thiruvaiyaru.
- **Tamil Isai movement:** a movement of the 1940s demanding a proper place for Tamil songs in concerts; **Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar** founded the **Tamil Isai Sangam** in Chennai in 1943.
- The **Music Academy, Chennai** was founded in 1928; the Margazhi music season (December Season) is world-famous.

Folk Arts

Art	Nature
Therukoothu (Kattaikkoothu)	All-night open-air theatre, mostly on Mahabharata themes; linked with Draupadi Amman festivals; widespread in northern Tamil Nadu; the Kattiyakaran links the story
Karagattam	Dance balancing a decorated karagam (pot) on the head; linked with Mariamman worship; accompanied by Naiyandi Melam
Kavadi Attam	Dance carrying the kavadi on the shoulder in Murugan worship
Mayilattam	Dance in a peacock costume; linked with Murugan worship
Oyilattam	Men dance in a line in unison waving handkerchiefs; common in the southern districts

Poikkal Kuthirai Attam	Dance on wooden stilts inside a dummy-horse frame
Kummi, Kolattam	Kummi – women clap and dance in a circle; Kolattam – dance striking sticks
Paraiattam (Thappattam)	Dance while playing the parai drum, an ancient Tamil instrument
Puliyattam	Tiger dance in tiger costume at festivals
Villupattu	Storytelling with music by striking the string of a large bow; common in southern Tamil Nadu
Bommalattam	Puppet theatre using string puppets

Silambam and Other Traditional Arts

- **Silambam:** the Tamil martial art of the long bamboo staff; footwork (adimurai) and whirling strokes are its features; today it is also a competitive sport taught in schools and colleges.
- **Varma Kalai:** a martial and healing tradition based on vital points (varmams) of the body – linked with Siddha medicine; common in southern Tamil Nadu.
- **Kuravanji:** a dance-drama form centred on a Kurathi (fortune-teller); Thirikooda Rasappa Kavirayar's **Thirukutrala Kuravanji** is the best known.
- **Bhagavata Mela:** a Telugu dance-drama tradition performed at Melattur and other villages of Thanjavur district – patronised in the Nayak and Maratha periods.

The Silappathikaram – a Treasury of the Arts

- **Arangetru Kathai:** Madhavi's dance debut; it describes the measurements of the stage and the qualifications of the dance master, music master, poet and the players of the thannumai (drum), flute and yazh.
- **Kadalaadu Kathai:** the **eleven dances** (pathinoradal) performed by Madhavi.
- **Aaychiyar Kuravai, Kundrak Kuravai, Vettuva Vari:** early evidence of folk song-and-dance forms.
- Hence the Silappathikaram is called the "**Muthamizh epic**".

Tamil Nadu Angle – Institutions and Festivals

Institution / festival	Details
Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram	Gives the "**Kalaimamani**" award to artists
Department of Art and Culture, Government of Tamil Nadu	Government music colleges, district arts councils, support for folk artists
Tamil Nadu Dr. J. Jayalalithaa Music and Fine Arts University	Chennai – State university for music, dance and fine arts
Kalakshetra Foundation	Adyar, Chennai – 1936; institution of national importance (1993 Act)

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Natyanjali	Dance festival at the Chidambaram Nataraja temple around Maha Shivaratri
Mamallapuram Dance Festival	Tamil Nadu Tourism – December–January, against the backdrop of the Shore Temple
Thyagaraja Aradhana	Thiruvaiyaru – music festival in memory of Thyagaraja
Chennai Margazhi music season	Sabhas including the Music Academy (1928) and the Tamil Isai Sangam (1943)

- **Challenges:** low incomes of folk artists, falling interest among the young, and poor documentation.
- **Way forward:** registration with artists' welfare boards, pensions, arts in the school curriculum, digital archives, and links with tourism.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

From Sadir to Bharatanatyam – change and social background (about 150–250 words)

- **Introduction:** Sadir, the temple and court tradition; the Natya Shastra; 108 karanas at Chidambaram.
- **Systematisation:** Thanjavur Quartet – Serfoji II; the margam.
- **Reform:** opposition to the devadasi system; the 1947 Act; Muthulakshmi Reddy, Moovalur Ramamirtham.
- **Revival:** E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi (Kalakshetra 1936), Balasaraswati.
- **Debate:** an answer may also note criticism that the hereditary artist community lost its place.
- **Conclusion:** today a global Indian classical dance.

Folk arts of Tamil Nadu – significance and protection (about 150 words)

- Types: Therukoothu, Karagam, Oyil, Parai, Villupattu, Bommalattam.
- Role: religious festivals, social cohesion, oral history, awareness campaigns.
- Challenges: income, falling interest, poor documentation.
- Way forward: Kalaimamani, welfare boards, school education, tourism links, digital archives.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Kalakshetra (1936)	Rukmini Devi Arundale
Tamil Isai Sangam (1943)	Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar
Yazh Nool (1947)	Swami Vipulananda
Karunamirtha Sagaram (1917)	Abraham Pandithar
Thanjavur Quartet	Court of Serfoji II
Therukoothu	Mahabharata stories – Kattiyakaran

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Common Mistakes to Avoid

- The Carnatic trinity (Thyagaraja, Dikshitar, Syama Sastri) and the Tamil trinity (Muthu Thandavar, Arunachala Kavirayar, Marimutha Pillai) are different groups.
- Kalakshetra 1936; Music Academy 1928; Tamil Isai Sangam 1943 – do not mix up the years.
- The Thanjavur Quartet belonged to the court of Serfoji II (Maratha), not a Nayak court.
- Bhagavata Mela is a Telugu dance-drama; Therukoothu is Tamil folk theatre.
- The Kalaimamani award is given by the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram, not by the (Central) Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Key Terms – Tamil / English (for the bilingual paper)

தமிழ்	English
முத்தமிழ் (இயல், இசை, நாடகம்)	Three branches of Tamil (literature, music, drama)
பண்	Ancient Tamil melodic mode (raga)
சதிர்	Sadir – earlier form of Bharatanatyam
மார்க்கம்	Margam – Bharatanatyam recital sequence
கரணம்	Karana – unit of dance movement
நாட்டுப்புறக் கலை	Folk art
கட்டியக்காரன்	Narrator-jester of Therukoothu
தற்காப்புக் கலை	Martial art

Quick Revision Table

Year / period	Event
Post-Sangam age	Silappathikaram – Arangetru Kathai, the eleven dances
Pallava period	Kudumiyanmalai music inscription
Early 19th century	Thanjavur Quartet at the court of Serfoji II; the Bharatanatyam margam
1917	Abraham Pandithar – Karunamirtha Sagaram
1928	Music Academy, Chennai
1936	Rukmini Devi Arundale – Kalakshetra
1943	Tamil Isai Sangam – Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar
1947	Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act; Vipulananda's Yazh Nool
1993	Kalakshetra Foundation Act – institution of national importance

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Earlier name of Bharatanatyam – Sadir (Dasi Attam).
- Thanjavur Quartet – Chinnaiah, Ponniah, Sivanandam, Vadivelu – Serfoji II.
- Margam – Alarippu, Jathiswaram, Shabdam, Varnam, Padam, Thillana.
- Kalakshetra – Rukmini Devi Arundale – 1936 – Adyar.
- Chidambaram gopurams – 108 karana sculptures.
- Seven notes: kural, thuththam, kaikkilai, uzhai, ili, vilari, thaaram.
- Tamil trinity – Muthu Thandavar, Arunachala Kavirayar, Marimutha Pillai.
- Birthplace of the Carnatic trinity – Thiruvarur; Thyagaraja Aradhana – Thiruvaiyaru.
- Tamil Isai Sangam – 1943 – Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar.
- Yazh Nool – Vipulananda; Karunamirtha Sagaram – Abraham Pandithar.
- Therukoothu – Mahabharata – Kattiyakaran; Karagattam – Mariamman.
- Kalaimamani – Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the earlier form of Bharatanatyam?

Sadir (Dasi Attam), danced in temples and courts, was the forerunner of Bharatanatyam. The Thanjavur Quartet at the court of the Thanjavur Maratha ruler Serfoji II systematised its recital sequence, and in the 20th century E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale revived it as a stage art.

What was the Tamil Isai movement?

A movement of the 1940s demanding that Tamil songs get a proper place in concerts alongside Telugu and Sanskrit compositions. Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar led it by founding the Tamil Isai Sangam in Chennai in 1943.

What is Therukoothu?

Therukoothu (Kattaikkoothu) is an all-night open-air Tamil folk theatre. It mostly presents Mahabharata stories during Draupadi Amman temple festivals; the Kattiyakaran links the story with humour. It is widespread in northern Tamil Nadu.

Who gives the Kalaimamani award?

The Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram of the Government of Tamil Nadu gives the Kalaimamani award to outstanding artists in literature, music, drama, dance and folk arts.

Why is the Silappathikaram important for the history of the arts?

The Arangetru Kathai describes the stage measurements and the qualifications of artists, the Kadalaadu Kathai lists Madhavi's eleven dances, and parts such as the Aaychiyar Kuravai, Kundrak Kuravai and Vettuva Vari describe folk song and dance. It is therefore a primary source on early Tamil music and dance.

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Practice questions

1. What was the earlier form of Bharatanatyam called?

A. Sadir
B. Kuchipudi
C. Kathakali
D. Yakshagana

2. At whose court were the Thanjavur Quartet?

A. Raghunatha Nayak
B. Serfoji II
C. Rajaraja I
D. Thirumalai Nayak

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3. Who founded Kalakshetra?

A. T. Balasaraswati
B. E. Krishna Iyer
C. Rukmini Devi Arundale
D. Muthulakshmi Reddy

4. In which year was Kalakshetra founded?

A. 1928
B. 1936
C. 1943
D. 1947

5. Who founded the Tamil Isai Sangam?

A. Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar
B. Abraham Pandithar
C. Swami Vipulananda
D. Maraimalai Adigal

6. Who wrote the "Yazh Nool"?

A. Abraham Pandithar
B. Swami Vipulananda
C. Arunachala Kavirayar
D. Muthu Thandavar

7. Who wrote "Karunamirtha Sagaram", a study of Tamil music?

A. Marimutha Pillai
B. Vipulananda
C. Abraham Pandithar
D. Thyagaraja

8. Who is NOT one of the Tamil trinity (Tamil Moovar)?

A. Muthu Thandavar
B. Arunachala Kavirayar
C. Marimutha Pillai
D. Syama Sastri

9. Where were all three of the Carnatic trinity born?

A. Thiruvarur
B. Thanjavur
C. Thiruvaiyaru
D. Sirkazhi

10. Which is the first of the seven old Tamil notes?

A. Thaaram
B. Kural
C. Ili
D. Vilari

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11. Which temple has sculptures of the 108 karanas of the Natya Shastra on its gopurams?

A. Madurai Meenakshi
B. Srirangam Ranganatha
C. Chidambaram Nataraja
D. Kanchi Kailasanatha

12. Which part of the Silappathikaram describes Madhavi's eleven dances?

A. Arangetru Kathai
B. Aaychiyar Kuravai
C. Vazhakkurai Kathai
D. Kadalaadu Kathai

13. Therukoothu mostly presents stories from which source?

A. The Mahabharata
B. Sangam akam poems
C. Thirukkural
D. Only the Periya Puranam

14. Karagattam is mostly linked with the worship of which deity?

A. Murugan
B. Mariamman
C. Ayyanar
D. Thirumal

15. Which body gives the Kalaimamani award?

A. Sangeet Natak Akademi
B. Music Academy
C. Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram
D. Kalakshetra

16. Which village is famous for the Bhagavata Mela dance-drama?

A. Thiruvaiyaru
B. Mamallapuram
C. Kutralam
D. Melattur

17. Who wrote the Thirukutrala Kuravanji?

A. Thirikooda Rasappa Kavirayar
B. Arunachala Kavirayar
C. Kumaraguruparar
D. Bharathiyar

18. In which year was the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act passed?

A. 1929
B. 1936
C. 1947
D. 1956

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19. Where is the Natyanjali festival held?

A. Mamallapuram
B. Thanjavur
C. Chidambaram
D. Madurai

20. Which item usually ends the Bharatanatyam margam?

A. Alarippu
B. Varnam
C. Padam
D. Thillana

Answers with explanations

1. A) Sadir – Sadir (Dasi Attam).

2. B) Serfoji II – Serfoji II, the Thanjavur Maratha ruler.

3. C) Rukmini Devi Arundale – Rukmini Devi Arundale, 1936, Adyar.

4. B) 1936 – 1936; Music Academy 1928; Tamil Isai Sangam 1943.

5. A) Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar – Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar, 1943, Chennai.

6. B) Swami Vipulananda – Swami Vipulananda, 1947.

7. C) Abraham Pandithar – Abraham Pandithar, 1917, Thanjavur.

8. D) Syama Sastri – Syama Sastri belongs to the Carnatic trinity.

9. A) Thiruvarur – Thiruvarur; the Thyagaraja Aradhana is at Thiruvaiyaru.

10. B) Kural – Kural, thuththam, kaikkilai, uzhai, ili, vilari, thaaram.

11. C) Chidambaram Nataraja – The gopurams of the Chidambaram Nataraja temple.

12. D) Kadalaadu Kathai – Kadalaadu Kathai; Arangetru Kathai covers the debut and stage.

13. A) The Mahabharata – The Mahabharata – Draupadi Amman festivals.

14. B) Mariamman – Mariamman; Kavadi and Mayilattam – Murugan.

15. C) Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram – Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram (State Government).

16. D) Melattur – Melattur, Thanjavur district – Telugu dance-drama.

17. A) Thirikooda Rasappa Kavirayar – Thirikooda Rasappa Kavirayar.

18. C) 1947 – 1947.

19. C) Chidambaram – Chidambaram Nataraja temple – around Maha Shivaratri.

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20. D) Thillana – It begins with Alarippu and ends with Thillana.

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