
Redefining Mōhiniyāṭṭam Pedagogy: Bridging Gaps & Shifting Paradigms

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Abstract

This paper examines the pedagogical limitations within the traditional instructional practices of Mōhiniyāṭṭam, a classical dance form originated from Kerala. It highlights the constraints posed by the historically authoritative teaching model, a teacher-centered approach that contrasts with student-centered learning. While this model has been crucial in preserving the authenticity and purity of the art form, it simultaneously limits students' creative exploration, personal innovation, and holistic growth, thus inadequately addressing the diverse needs of contemporary learners. This study emphasizes the need for Mōhiniyāṭṭam educators to balance content mastery with pedagogical competence, acknowledging that expertise in dance alone does not inherently equate to effective teaching. The lack of foundational knowledge in pedagogical principles, educational psychology, and instructional designs significantly impedes the holistic development of dance students. Moreover, the limited understanding of anatomy among dance educators compromises the effectiveness of skill acquisition and increases the risk of injury during instruction. The paper advocates for a modernization of teaching approaches and integration of pedagogical principles into the academic training curricula for dance educators. This shift in teaching approach is crucial not only for improving the quality of dance education but also for preserving the rich cultural heritage of Mōhiniyāṭṭam in a way that resonates with the evolving demands of modern learners and the global dance community.

Key words: Pedagogy, Mōhiniyāṭṭam, student-centred teaching, pedagogical-content knowledge

Introduction

Mōhiniyāṭṭam, a classical dance form originating from Kerala, India, embodies a rich cultural heritage and distinct aesthetic appeal rooted in the region's devotional and artistic traditions. Characterized by its graceful and fluid movements, Mōhiniyāṭṭam is noted for the gentle swaying of the torso, intricate footwork, nuanced hand gestures, and subtle facial expressions. This signature swaying movement resonates across various Kerala art forms, including Thiruvathirakkali¹, Kathakali², and Nangiyar Koothu³, drawing inspiration from the rhythm of Kerala's natural landscape, such as the swaying coconut palms and lush paddy fields. Mōhiniyāṭṭam music, typically composed in Carnatic or Sopanam⁴ genre is written in Malayalam. However, the older compositions were written in Manipravalam⁵, or Sanskrit, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the region at the time. The traditional attire of Mōhiniyāṭṭam—an off-white costume with golden borders—is inspired by the traditional attire of Kerala's Hindu community, specifically the settu mundu⁶. In its entirety, Mōhiniyāṭṭam is deeply embedded in Kerala's traditional culture and ethos, exemplifying the region's devotional, linguistic, and aesthetic values.

Despite being rooted in traditions, the history of Mōhiniyāṭṭam remains a subject of ongoing scholarly discussions even today. Although there are literature references to Mōhiniyāṭṭam dating back to the 18th century, none of them discuss the form, technique, or content. The lack of historical documentation and differences of opinion among scholars have caused a lot of confusion in the evolution of Mōhiniyāṭṭam (Prakash, 2024). It is intriguing to realise that Mōhiniyāṭṭam acquired a distinct grammar and form following the establishment of Kerala Kalamandalam. That way, the establishment of Kerala Kalamandalam represents an important turning point in the history of Mōhiniyāṭṭam, leading to the preservation and revival of the art form (Panikkar, 2017). Vallathol Narayana Menon established Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930 as part of the broader cultural renaissance of Kerala in the early twentieth century. During this period, there was a renewed interest throughout India in preserving and revitalising classical art forms that were on the verge of extinction. One such initiative, Kerala

¹ Thiruvathirakkali is a traditional dance form performed by women folks in Kerala

² Kathakali is a classical theatre of Kerala

³ Nangiyar Koothu is a ritualistic classical theatre form performed by women folks in Kerala ⁴Sopanam is a traditional classical music genre practiced in Kerala

⁵ Manipravalam is a hybrid language combines Sanskrit and Tamil/Malayalam

⁶Settu mundu is a traditional attire worn by Kerala Hindu women.

Kalamandalam, was part of the Indian Renaissance. Kalakshetra in Tamil Nadu and Rabindra Bharathi in West Bengal are two examples of similar initiatives.

When Vallathol institutionalised Mōhiniyāṭṭam, the whole idea was to resurrect this beautiful artwork from the social stigma that then existed and preserve it for the next generation. He encountered difficulties in locating both teachers and students who could impart and learn this art form effectively. Gradually, with the constant effort made by Vallathol, Mōhiniyāṭṭam started gaining its dignity back. Teachers and scholars collaborated to establish a form and structure for Mōhiniyāṭṭam. Slowly, a systematic training program for Mōhiniyāṭṭam got established in Kalamandalam, which eventually became Kalamandalam Bāṇī⁷(style). Traditional Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā⁸served as a strong foundation for the teaching method, which emphasised an authoritarian approach. Consequently, three other styles of Mōhiniyāṭṭam emerged, named after the person who established the style—they are Kalamandalam Kalyanikutti amma, Bharati Shivaji, and Dr. Kanak Rele. All four Mōhiniyāṭṭam schools have been successful in developing their own Aṭavu⁹systems and repertoires that are distinctive to them. Today, Mōhiniyāṭṭam has evolved into a globally practiced and performed dance form, recognized for its aesthetic excellence and cultural richness. Adding to its prestige, the Sangeet Natak Academy, the nodal agency for performing arts in India, officially recognized Mōhiniyāṭṭam as one of the eight classical dance forms of the country. This recognition has led to its integration into further institutionalizing the art form and ensuring its continued growth and preservation through formal education.

A critical analysis of current teaching practices in Mōhiniyāṭṭam Today many universities have introduced Mōhiniyāṭṭam as part of the academic UG and PG courses. Although the introduction of Mōhiniyāṭṭam, once considered a traditional practice, as an academic subject in universities was a revolutionary step, the teaching methods do not align with modern pedagogical standards. While the researcher acknowledges that Mōhiniyāṭṭam is a traditional art form, it is crucial to incorporate modern teaching techniques into the teaching of traditional art, especially in light of the global trend towards modern dance education. It is essential to draw inspiration from modern pedagogical tools and principles. The following observations have been made within the current approaches used in Mōhiniyāṭṭam teaching. Let us analyse some of the shortcomings in the current teaching approaches of Mohiniyattam.

⁷ Bāṇī is a distinctive style developed over a period

⁸ Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā is a traditional lineage denoting a succession of teachers and disciples

⁹ Aṭavu is a basic patterns or steps of dance

Mōhiniyāṭṭam is traditionally imparted through the *guruśiṣyaparamparā*, an educational system where the *Guru* (Teacher) provides personalized instruction to the *śiṣya-s* (disciples). This method emphasized an authoritarian approach to teaching, where the *guru* held absolute authority over the learning process. This method was characterized by the *guru* being the sole decision-maker, directing every aspect of the student's training. The authoritative nature of this approach means that the teacher controls what is taught, how it is taught, and the pace at which it is taught. The student's role was to follow the instructions meticulously, practice diligently, and absorb the knowledge imparted by the *guru* without questioning, but with deviation (Rajan, 2021). While the authoritarian style ensured that the teacher could maintain high standards and consistency in the process of learning, it also had inherent limitations. The rigid structure left little room for students to explore or experiment independently, potentially stifling creativity and personal expression. As underlined by the experts in pedagogy, such a teaching style would lead to frustration among teachers if students do not achieve immediate mastery of the subject matter (Rodrigues, 2017). The emphasis on perfecting ideal movement forms can result in learners adopting rigid behaviours and attitudes (Rodrigues, 2017). Over time, dancers who are immersed in this authoritative environment may develop fixed notions about how they should behave and perform, limiting their ability to innovate and adapt (Rodrigues, 2017).

Within the realm of Mōhiniyāṭṭam dance, it is common for students-turned-teachers to unquestioningly adhere to the instructional techniques imparted by their teachers. In general, dance teachers' pedagogical behaviour remains largely based on replicating previous teachers' behaviours (Rodrigues, 2017). Dance pedagogy has traditionally followed a transmission model of teaching, where the students learn by imitating specific movement vocabularies modelled by an expert teacher. This is the way many classroom teachers still feel most comfortable teaching dance, as it is the way they were taught (Anu Sööta, 2013). The novice dance teachers often replicate the behaviours and models of their past teachers due to the influence of previous teachers' beliefs, rules, ideologies, and the curriculum (Rodrigues, 2017). These teaching methods are acquired implicitly during their learning experience, regardless of their effectiveness in teaching (Rodrigues, 2017). This perpetuates traditional approaches without critical evaluation or adaptation to contemporary educational needs. As a result, innovative teaching methods and pedagogical advancements are stifled, and the cycle of unexamined practices continues.

A Mōhiniyāṭṭam dancer with exceptional performance abilities may lack the necessary expertise and pedagogical skills to succeed as a dance teacher. Mastery in performance skills does not automatically translate to effective teaching. For the dance teacher, knowing how to dance is important; but knowing how to teach dance is equally important (Gibbons, 2007). Today, the dance field tends to accept dance teachers whose pedagogical quality is solely based on their performance experience and professional reputation (Rodrigues, 2017). Without the pedagogical skills, even the most accomplished performer may struggle to guide students effectively, limiting their ability to inspire and cultivate the next generation of dancers. An effective dance teacher often shares with their students not only dance technique and artistry but general life lessons along with individual encouragement and support (Clark, 2024).

Dance teachers often prioritize 'what to teach' - the content knowledge such as techniques, vocabulary, skills, and choreography over 'how to teach,' which encompasses pedagogical knowledge and effective teaching methods (Gibbons, 2007). Traditionally, the focus on content was driven by the belief that teachers' effectiveness relies on their expertise in technical skills and dance forms. However, without equally emphasizing pedagogical skills, teachers may struggle to engage students, address diverse learning needs, and create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Pedagogy is a discipline that focuses on how best to teach (Warburton, 2019). It is the 'Art & Science of Teaching.' To become a successful dance teacher, one has to confront both issues of content and pedagogy simultaneously (Warburton, 2019). Balancing content and pedagogy ensure that dance education not only imparts essential skills but also fosters a deeper understanding, appreciation, and passion for dance among students. In 1986, the influential educational theorist, Lee Shulman, introduced the concept of "pedagogical content knowledge" (PCK), emphasizing that effective teaching requires more than just a deep understanding of subject matter. He argued that teachers need to integrate content knowledge with pedagogy, meaning they should understand how to present and explain the subject matter in ways that are accessible and engaging to students (Lee S Shulman, 1986). PCK is crucial for helping students grasp complex concepts, as it involves knowing the most effective ways to organize and represent content (Lee S Shulman, 1986).

Currently, there are no standardised and accredited training systems available to equip dance educators with the necessary pedagogical skills. Most teachers do not realise that acquiring pedagogical skills is a critical requirement for a dance teacher before beginning their teaching career. In the traditional teaching setup of Mōhiniyāṭṭam, no one acknowledged or comprehended the importance of integrating the knowledge of pedagogy into the training syllabus. Today there is a paradigm shift in the teaching approach of classical dance, as many universities have introduced dance as an academic subject, offering graduate and postgraduate courses in dance. It is interesting to note that dance teachers are not required to complete any accredited teacher training courses, whereas teachers in other academic subjects, including physical education, must complete B. Ed / B.P.Ed. and M. Ed / B.P.Ed. programs in order to teach in a school or university.

Mōhiniyāṭṭam currently lacks a systematic approach to teaching that accommodates the diverse needs of students based on their age and learning abilities. The current teaching approach tends to follow a one-size-fits-all methodology, which may not effectively address the varying physical and cognitive developmental stages of learners. Younger students might require a different pace and style of teaching compared to adults. The absence of age appropriate teaching methods can hinder the learning experience, potentially limiting the students' ability to fully grasp and excel the dance form.

Indian classical dance teachers often lack formal training in human anatomy, which can pose several challenges in their teaching practice. This gap in knowledge can impact various aspects of dance instruction and student development. The human body and all of its anatomical components are the dancer's instrument. Just as a trumpet player must understand how their trumpet produces and manipulates sound in order to make music, a dancer should have knowledge of the science behind how their body moves (Clark, 2024). Likewise, a trumpet instructor should have a deeper understanding of the mechanics of the instrument in order to educate and guide the student, a dancer must have enhanced knowledge of the musculoskeletal system and its movement in order to train dancers in technique and prevent injuries in their students (Clark, 2024). Without a solid understanding of human anatomy, dance teachers may unintentionally push students beyond their physical limits or instruct them in ways that increase the risk of injury. Movements that require high flexibility or strength can strain muscles and joints if not executed properly, leading to injuries such as sprains, strains, or more severe musculoskeletal issues. Teachers lacking anatomical knowledge might not be able to provide the most efficient techniques for

movement execution. Each student's body is unique, with different strengths, weaknesses, and limitations. Teachers without an understanding of anatomy may struggle to tailor their instruction to accommodate these individual differences, potentially hindering the students' progress and development. When injuries do occur, teachers without anatomical knowledge may not be able to offer appropriate advice on rehabilitation exercises or modifications to prevent further damage. These factors can have a detrimental effect on both the dancer's performance and overall quality of life.

Dance educators must integrate foundational pedagogical principles and learning theories from educational psychology. John Dewey's experiential learning promotes hands-on and reflective practices (Sikandar, 2015), while Jean Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory supports age-appropriate, cognitively engaging lessons (Liao, 2012). Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory highlights the need to address varied learning modalities, such as kinesthetic, spatial, and musical intelligence, which are especially relevant in dance (Harasymowycz, 2007). These approaches enable educators to craft innovative, student centered teaching methods that support holistic development. Incorporating Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset theory can be used as a motivational strategy, encouraging students to view effort as a path to mastery and mistakes as opportunities to grow. This mindset builds resilience and confidence, particularly in overcoming technical challenges. By praising persistence and effort rather than innate talent, educators foster a learning environment that enhances technical skills, builds self-esteem, and cultivates a lifelong passion for dance.

Finally, it is important that a dance teacher should be trained on designing structured lesson plans, syllabi, and curricula that ensures pedagogical clarity for both teachers and students. Structured approaches provide systematic guidance, clear objectives, and measurable outcomes. Furthermore, integrating feedback into traditional setups allows educators to evaluate their effectiveness, refine their teaching methods, and align with students' needs. By combining traditional wisdom with modern pedagogical frameworks, dance educators can create a balanced, engaging, and effective learning environment.

Conclusion

This study highlights the shortcomings in current pedagogical approaches in classical dance, particularly Mohiniyattam. It emphasizes creating an inclusive, student-centered environment that balances discipline with creativity, moving away from authoritarian methods that suppress individuality. Collaborative learning, inquiry-based exploration, open communication, constructive feedback, and lesson plans tailored to diverse learning styles can foster a supportive and engaging atmosphere. The integration of foundational pedagogical principles and contemporary learning theories into classical dance education, particularly Mohiniyattam, can revolutionize traditional teaching methods. By embracing inclusive, student-centered strategies that balance discipline with creativity, educators can nurture individuality while preserving the integrity of classical dance forms. Implementing experiential learning, tailoring lessons to diverse cognitive and learning styles, fostering a growth mindset, and maintaining structured yet flexible syllabi ensures a comprehensive approach to teaching. Such methodologies not only enhance technical proficiency and artistic expression but also empower students with resilience, confidence, and a lifelong passion for dance. This holistic pedagogical framework bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, ensuring the continued evolution and relevance of classical dance in contemporary times.

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