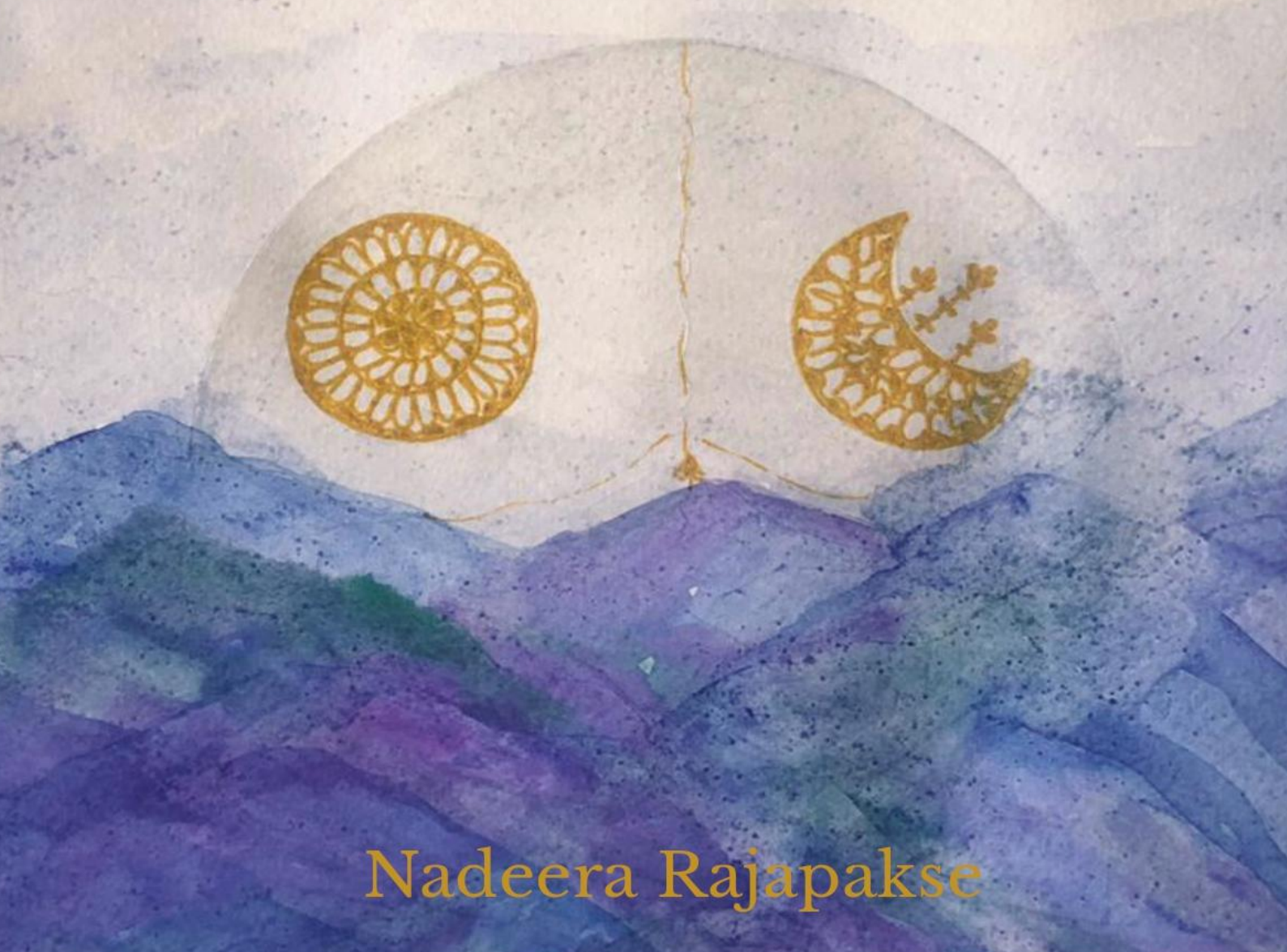
INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES

Dancing against Purity

Devadasis and the Art of Blurred Boundaries



Nadeera Rajapakse

Dancing Against Purity

Devadasis and the Art of Blurred Boundaries

Nadeera Rajapakse

International Centre for Ethnic Studies

2026

Dancing Against Purity
Devadasis and the Art of Blurred Boundaries

2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka
E-mail : admin@ices.lk
URL : www.ices.lk

ISBN: 978-624-5502-47-9

The printing of this book was supported by funding from the Department of Languages and Cultures of École Polytechnique, Palaiseau (France).

Cover art: Hiranthi Dodanwela
Cover design: Panchala Prasad

In Sangam poetry the landscape of Kurinji mountains, blue at midnight, is the *tinai* associated with *sambhoga sringara*, erotic love. The two pieces of head jewellery, Suryan and Chandran, represent the ideal balance between masculinity and femininity, day and night, beauty and power.

Dancing Against Purity

Devadasis and the Art of Blurred Boundaries

Nadeera Rajapakse[*]

[*] Nadeera Rajapakse is an assistant professor at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne**,** where she teaches history of economic thought and English for economics. She is a member of the research department PHARE (Philosophy, History and Analysis of Economic Representation).

Drawing on frameworks such as Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, she has studied how concepts of migration and mobility are represented within economic thought and how these representations influence the lived experiences of migrant workers, especially women. She situates economic phenomena within broader cultural and historical contexts, exploring how labour, value, and identity are negotiated and contested.

Acknowledgements

I thank Mario Gomez for agreeing to the very first idea of the book. I also extend my thanks to Antoine Guibal, Director of the Department of Languages and Cultures at Ecole Polytechnique, Palaiseau, for providing funds to print the book, and to Daniel Argeles and Anne-Sophie de Groer, for giving practical and far-sighted pointers.

I am grateful for the continuous support from Professor Eric Meyer, who provided guidance, feedback and also introduced me to specialists on the topic. Thank you to Professor Tiziana Leucci for her in-depth reading and expert comments, and for sharing her experience; to Professor Osmund Bopearachchi for stimulating comments and important criticisms; to Professor Anne Viguier for asking challenging questions that shaped my arguments.

Invaluable discussions with Jyotsna Liyanaratne, Laurie Breban, Radhika Hettiarachchi, Ariane Dupont-Durand, Venuri Perera, Chandri Peris, Delon Madavan on various related topics seeped into this book in all sorts of ways.

I acknowledge with much appreciation the influence of Oosha Saravanamuttu, who made emotion more important than purity in dance, Wayne Byars, who makes philosophy more important than purity, and Dimitra Karagiannopoulou, Anne-Marie Laffont, Yvonne Meyer – who together, have made dance one of my most demanding and fulfilling pursuits.

Thank you Hiranthi for the work of art and for blurring boundaries between imagination and execution, Lise and Julie for providing the first drafts, and Uvini for proofreading and layout design.

For their unconditional support, I am grateful to Yasmin, also to my *gama* (Thara, Sanithri and Erangee), and Pia, who nourish me intellectually and emotionally.

And my gratitude to Lise and Julie, who inspire me, challenge me, and ask many questions, including the question “who is going to read this?”, to which their father promptly supplied an answer.

Foreword

Dancing Against Purity: Devadasis and the Art of Blurred Boundaries is an important contribution to the history, sociology and aesthetics of South Indian dance. It is based on an exhaustive use of secondary sources, all of which are not easily accessible, and its author goes beyond factual description to raise theoretical issues. Nadeera Rajapakse and the ICES press must be thanked for its publication which will be quite useful for South Asian readers, and especially to Sri Lankan readers who are not familiar with the subject. From the historical point of view, it shows how a pre-colonial practice grounded on a mix of Hindu temple ceremonies/performances and South Indian princely court culture has been reinterpreted and betrayed, first under the British rule, then in the context of the Indian national movement. The European view, informed by Christian missionaries, missed the aesthetic dimension of the art of the temple dancers to focus on its social/moral characteristics, which it condemned as uncivilized, impure, akin to prostitution, just as it brought discredit upon other aspects of the Indian culture which it could not understand. It also missed the complexity of the 'devadasi' identity which is well analysed in this book. The next turn was for the emerging European-educated Indian elite aiming at restoration of the nation's self-respect and dignity, to purify and rehabilitate the 'devadasi', and reversing the hierarchical order, to reinvent dance as a high caste/class and pure art under the name of Bharata Natyam. The book rightly stresses an aspect that is generally forgotten, the agency of the devadasi themselves contesting the paternalism of the reformers, who tried to impose patriarchal norms upon a female culture. In its last pages, the author enlarges the geographical scope of her study to connect the concept of authenticity at work in modern Sri Lankan culture with the concept of purity developed by South Indian reformers, a theme which could be explored by further research.

Eric P. Meyer

Emeritus Professor of South Asian History

INALCO, Paris

Preface

The research for this book began with the reading I needed for one of my courses at École Polytechnique in Palaiseau, where I draw on the economic history of India to foster conversations about identities through multiple lenses, one of them being dance. Tracing the histories and identities of *devadasis* and dancers, and studying the techniques and codification of Bharatanatyam, became foundational steps in a wider inquiry. My own training in Bharatanatyam deepened this engagement, allowing embodied practice to inform historical and conceptual reflection.

Gradually, other strands of knowledge began to converge: mathematics and *kolam*; *vastuvidya* (the science of architecture); yoga and Ayurveda; Vedic, Dravidian, Buddhist and other cosmologies; the accounts of foreign travellers to India alongside local historiographies. Across these domains, questions of gender surfaced persistently, in the archives, in my research, and in my teaching. With that came the idea that notions of purity, whether attached to identity (caste, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc.), or to tradition and the category of the "classical", need to be questioned, sometimes resisted. This book is an attempt to connect these dots, to bring these threads into conversation, and to think across disciplines and boundaries.

Contents

Introduction

"Don't talk of love, don't say how much, show me".[1] Eliza Doolittle tells the eager Freddie in *My Fair Lady,* a challenge, *devadasi*s could easily and eloquently meet. They expressed love in all forms, between gods, between humans, between humans and gods, with dance as one of the most effective mediums. Even today, most Bollywood-style Indian films opt for dance sequences to depict love scenes. It is precisely this expressive capacity, and its subsequent recoding, that form the point of departure for this book.

Focusing on *devadasi*s, their dance and its transformation into Bharatanatyam, I discuss the ethics-aesthetics nexus associated with the practice. This leads me to explore the complex and often contradictory processes through which the identity of the *devadasi* was transformed, even as her artistic practice, *sadir*, a solo temple dance, was "purified" into the modern, national form of Bharatanatyam. In the process, it erased the identities of the original performers, appropriated their art, and redefined the dancing female body through new regimes of caste, gender, and morality.

As many scholars have shown, the term *devadasi* defies simple definition. It is not a fixed identity but a fluid and contested category that, over centuries, encompassed temple women, court dancers, concubines, ritual specialists, cultural custodians, and performing artists. The relatively recent Marathi court records from Tanjore (between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), for instance, do not even contain the term, reflecting instead a slippage between figures such as *rajakiya vadava* (court courtesans) and *nartaki* (dancers)[2]. This ambiguity is precisely what made the *devadasi* both powerful and vulnerable: she defied norms of purity and domesticity, yet occupied key religious and aesthetic roles within temple and courtly life.

The ethics-aesthetics nexus that underscores my argument is derived from this ambiguity. On the one hand, the *devadasis*' position outside marriage makes it difficult

[1] Lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner of the musical *My Fair Lady,* with music by Frederick Loewe, based on George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play *Pygmalion.*

[2] Soneji, Davesh. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

to assign them to a clear conjugal role, creating, therefore, an ethical question. On the other hand, there are also aesthetic concerns raised by the variety of artistic styles and their evolving techniques over time. I discuss ethics by first examining how notions of purity translated into contested aesthetic practices, delineating hierarchies in terms of taste habits of the nation[3]. Then I examine how it affected identity issues, in other words, questioned citizenship and belonging in relation to the modern nation-state. In my analysis, purity thus connects technique (high vs low culture) with identity concerns (belonging), categories which obviously overlap.

My discussion lies at the boundaries shared by multiple disciplines of history, anthropology, gender studies and dance studies. The enquiry I undertake is based on secondary data sources, including books, journals, online sources, websites, etc. As an exploratory study, this book provides neither new historical nor archival facts about *devadasis*. Instead, it is entirely dependent on the research of others and seeks primarily to reframe these key issues related to *devadasi* identities.

Leslie Orr has noted that many scholars have referred to *devadasi*s with "abstract, overarching conceptions such as *sakti* or auspiciousness",[4] while Davesh Soneji has focused on the "historical and regional variations in the activities and circumstances of [these] women", thus bringing out the "individuality of temple women".[5] In this book, I try to decipher the abstract notion of purity from the historiography on *devadasis*. My intention is not to define purity but to connect the use of notions of purity to study how it applies here, to tease out the corresponding ideas, consequences and social prescriptions that surround *devadasis*. "Bodies become boundaries"[6] and here, the *devadasi*'s body serves as the primary site for observing the inscription and resistance of national, caste, and gender identities.

Taken together, the works of Amrit Srinivasan (1984, 1985), Saskia Kersenboom (1984, 1987, 2003), Janaki Nair (1994), Janet O'Shea (2007), Davesh Soneji (2010), Mytheli

[3] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 4.

[4] Orr, Leslie C. *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[5] Soneji, Davesh. *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.

[6] Yuval-Davis, Nira and Marcel Stoetzler, "Imagined boundaries and borders. A gendered gaze." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9 (329), 2002. DOI: 10.1177/1350506802009003378.

Sreenivas (2011), Annie Devenish (2014), Tiziana Leucci (2013, 2017, 2020), Nrithya Pillai (2022), Rumya S. Putcha (2023), and other scholars map a shared terrain of inquiry into identity, revival, cultural appropriation, and the politics of nation-building. I am deeply indebted to these authors, whose invaluable analyses provide the conceptual and historical foundations for the discussion that follows.

The first chapter traces the *devadasi* tradition through its plural histories, showing how hereditary women held artistic, ritual, and social authority that resists singular categorisation. Building on this historical foundation, chapter 2 then turns to the colonial and nationalist reforms that recast *devadasis* as immoral subjects, producing legal abolition while provoking various forms of resistance and negotiation. Chapter 3 next explores how the shift from *sadir* to Bharatanatyam depended on aesthetic purification, textualisation, and the erasure of hereditary practices. From there, chapter 4 moves to the reconfiguration of citizenship, gender norms, and inheritance under ideals of civic purity and respectability. The final chapter extends these themes transnationally by examining other examples in India and Sri Lanka together, where cultural legitimacy and women's respectability converge.

Chapter 1 – Plural histories and layered identities

The history of the *devadasi* tradition reflects an intricate evolution of social, aesthetic, and ritual roles across centuries in South India. While no explicit reference to *devadasis* can be traced prior to the eleventh century, when a Chola temple inscription mentions the "women of the temple", the section that follows brings together earlier and more diffuse allusions to women associated with temples. Most of these references emerge from the southern regions of India, particularly Tamil and Telugu-speaking areas, though they are not confined to them. This synthesis draws on sources that are sometimes indirect or geographically distant, with the aim of sketching a broader landscape of practices related to *devadasis*. The term *devadasi* is used as an analytical category, rather than as a stable or continuous social institution across historical periods, while the earlier references are examined as historically distinct antecedent practices, not as evidence of a unified or continuous "*devadasi* system", as in the later colonial sense.

1.1 Historical origins and their cultural contexts

In their general role of women dedicated to the temple, *devadasi*s helped to transmit the teachings of the *Vedas* and *Agamic* knowledge, key components of Hindu philosophy and practice[7], to the lay. While priests deciphered and spread the sacred by focusing on the written word, *devadasis* relied on oral and performative traditions, probably with greater outreach. Dance was an important form of transmission, and the art of the *devadasis* may have served a fundamental educational and spiritual purpose in spreading the knowledge of Vedic scriptures. *Devadasis* not only participated in ritual worship but also served as custodians and transmitters of ancient knowledge, making complex theological and philosophical ideas accessible to broader, often illiterate, temple-going communities. Their art, the dance known as *sadir*, formed part of a broader ensemble that included *nagaswaram,* instrumental music and *nattuvangam*, dance-conducting.

[7] Vedic sources are often considered as scriptures providing the canons for Hindu philosophy, while Agamic texts relate to specific sects, for example Saivagam, relating to Saivism (the following of Shiva), which form the basis for local ritual practice (Kersenboom, Saskia. *Nityasumangali. Towards the Semiosis of the Devadasi Tradition of South India*, May 18, 1984, PhD Dissertation, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands; Srinivasan, Amrit. "Temple Women in South India: The Traditional Community of the *Devadasi*s." *Man* 19, no. 4 (1984): 760–777).

The earliest origins are frequently attributed to the Tamil Sangam period (conventionally dated to c. 300 BCE–300 CE), even as the chronology of the Sangam corpus and the nature of these early practices remain uncertain. Possible predecessors of *devadasis* included the *virali,* bards, and *pattini,* female dancers, who performed song and dance in royal courts, charged with maintaining divine harmony[8]. During this period, these women were highly respected, holding sufficient status to act as both patrons and recipients of temple endowments. Sangam literature, which dealt more with the direct experience of life than with metaphysical enquiry, provided the cultural context for the later significance of their *nityasumangali* (eternally auspicious) status.

According to Sangam sources, among the energies that needed channelling in human bodies, were sexual urges, which could be controlled through conjugal union aimed at procreation.[9] Hence, the importance of marriage and child-bearing. It followed that a husband's death conferred misfortune onto widows, so much so that it amounted to a form of social death, alienation and exclusion from society. The *devadasi* was considered to be devoted not to a mortal being, as in a conjugal union, but to the gods[10], therefore remaining forever auspicious. Further, in their complete submission to the gods, they were believed to wield full "control [over] their natural human impulses, their five senses"[11]. I will return to the concept of auspiciousness as it applied to women in the subsequent chapters.

[8] Kersenboom, Saskia. *Nityasumangali*, 1984.

[9] Kersenboom's 1984 thesis explains the significance of the *nityasumangali* ritual. The Sangam literature alludes to the destructive force of sexual urges as one that needs to be controlled, by establishing harmony between men and women and by consecrating their sexual union in marriage towards the life- sustaining acts of conjugal union and procreation. This ensured spiritual and physical harmony, which required maintaining a balance between the heating and cooling processes of life. Sexual union within a marriage was considered the solution to the danger of untamed sexual passion, a source of heat. Hence, the term *sumangali* was used to describe an auspicious woman, who is in a respectable conjugal union with her husband. Since the *devadasi* is "married" to the deity, who is immortal, she becomes *nityasumangali*, i.e., ever auspicious (Kersenboom, *Ibidem*, 21).

[10] "The wearing of toe-rings marks the married status of women whose husband is alive. Such women are called sumangalis 'auspicious females'. At the event of the demise of the husband, his widow will have to remove her toe-rings. In the case of the *devadasi,* this very 'unlucky' sign will never have to be employed as she is married to an immortal, divine husband" (Kersenboom, *Ibid.,* 13).

[11] *Ibidem*.

In the *Tolkappiyam* on Tamil grammar, from the Sangam corpus, poetry was divided into two main categories, *agam* and *puram*. *Agam* dealt with sentiments, feelings and the inner world of people. *Puram* looked at the outside world of human, political, and social behaviour.[12] Many sub- categories of poetic expressions followed from *agam*, which were incorporated in the style of *sadir* and *devadasi* dance.

The *Cilappatikaram* (*The Tale of the Anklet*), recognised as one of the first Tamil epics, is a late bardic work generally dated between 450 and 800 CE. The subsequent epic, the *Manimekalai* (*The Jewel Belt*), is considered its sequel. Both stories involve poetry, music and dance, kings, queens, and courtesans. *Matavi*, the courtesan of *Cilappatikaram*, is often considered as the predecessor of the later *devadasi* figure, while references to temple dancers and rituals from *Manimekalai* are cited as historical and religious justifications of *devadasi* roles.

More explanation regarding the term *courtesan* is necessary here, as it appears repeatedly in this book and is often historically entangled with the figure of the *devadasi*. Soneji reconceptualises the *devadasi*-courtesan to move beyond reductive labels (like "temple dancer"), presenting her instead as a professional artist shaped by specific social and economic arrangements, especially within artistic guilds (*melams*).[13] Kersenboom uses the Sanskrit term *ganika* to denote the courtesan as separate from the temple, distinguishing her from women primarily attached to temple service,[14] while Leucci, identifies the *Rajadasi,* "servants of the king", as elite court artists possessing high social status and significant economic autonomy.[15] From a broader sociological perspective, Ramberg conceptualises the courtesan as a legally and socially recognised "non-wife" category that existed outside the constraints of normative marriage.[16] Putcha traces the figure of the "mythical courtesan" as the aestheticised "primordial Indian woman," reanimated in modernity through the

[12] Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali, 13.*

[13] Soneji, Unfinished Gestures.

[14] Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali*.

[15] Leucci, Tiziana. "De la 'danseuse de temple' des voyageurs et missionnaires à la 'bayadère' des philosophes et artistes des Lumières." In *L'Inde des Lumières*, edited by Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Županov, 253-288. Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2013.

[16] Ramberg, Lucinda. "When the Devi Is Your Husband: Sacred Marriage and Sexual Economy in South India." Feminist Studies 37, no. 1 (2011): 28-6.

cinematic historical *bhogam* i.e., a foundational cultural principle of pleasure. Rather than adopting a single definition, I leave it as a composite framework.[17]

Having outlined the courtesan as a fluid and overlapping social category through modern scholarly interpretations, we can return to earlier textual traditions in which such figures were first imagined, regulated, and aestheticised. The early common era produced normative works like *shastras,* the systems of codified knowledge or foundational texts, notably the *Artha Shastra*[18], pertaining to statecraft*, Natya Shastra*[19], to theatre and mimesis, and *Kamasutra*,[20] to emotional and sexual fulfilment. These texts contain traditional understandings of *dharma*, which refers to duty, order, morality, and justice, and which upholds a cosmological vision.[21] In addition, Kalidasa's dramas and poetry of the fourth and fifth centuries CE, among other literary works, contributed to shaping the aesthetic sensibilities surrounding dance. These textual sources provide some of the earliest insights with regard to *devadasis*.

Turning next to the broader context, the *devadasi* traditions can be situated within the religious, cultural, and aesthetic transformations that accompanied the Bhakti movement and the flowering of temple architecture across India. By the fifth century CE, the ascetic influences of Jain and Buddhist teachings were waning, following the surge of a form of Hindu ritual worship, fused with Dravidian and Sanskritic cultures.[22]

---

[17] Putcha, Rumya S. *The Dancer's Voice: Performance and Womanhood in Transnational India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023.

[18] The *Artha Shastra* is a Sanskrit treatise pertaining to statecraft. Believed to have been compiled by Kautilya in the fourth century BC, it is a text that focuses on political organisation, economic policy, and military strategy.

[19] The *Naṭya Shastra* is a comprehensive Sanskrit treatise considered as the common root for all classical dance forms in India. Believed to have been written by Bharatmuni (or Bharata) sometime between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century CE, it is a foundational, normative text pertaining to theatre and mimesis.

[20] *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*. Translated by Sir Richard Burton and F.F. Arbuthnot. Edited by John Muirhead-Gould, London: Panther Books, 1963.

[21] Soneji, Davesh. *Unfinished Gestures*.

[22] In the words of Kersenboom "A joint enterprise of both Dravidian Tamil population and the Indo-Aryan Brahmins. The result was a flexible blend of the two cultures which is called Hinduism. It combines the passionate temperament of the Tamils with the ritual-cosmic base provided by Aryan, Sanskrit-based culture", Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali*, 42.

The Bhakti movement, literally meaning devotion, emphasised an intimate, personal relationship between devotee and deity. It opened avenues of worship to people across caste lines, already blurred under the influence of Buddhism. In particular, it allowed everyone to participate in acts of service to the divine. These acts ranged from temple construction and renovation, cleaning sacred spaces, weaving garlands, lighting lamps, singing hymns, and performing devotional dances.

Under the Brahmanical Guptas (third to sixth centuries CE) and the Pallava – Pandya dynasties in the south (550-850 CE), previously prevalent Vedic sacrifices performed on temporary brick altars, gave way to rituals involving intricately carved images. Rather than praying to the earlier Vedic celestial divinities, tangible deities, especially Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi (the Great Goddess), became the objects of devotion to be worshipped on earth. The gods were embodied as idols, enshrined in temples, so that worshippers could journey to their sides. Above all, the statues of the gods shared the "noiseless lingua franca of the gestures"[23], the *mudras*, of the *devadasis*. More about the gestures later.

Such practices naturally created a demand for temples, stimulating a wave of construction from the fifth century CE onwards. This led to the architectural achievements such as Aihole in Karnataka, Kailasa near Ellora, Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram and Konark in Odisha. The immense temple complex built in Tanjore, the capital of the Chola empire in the tenth century, carried the inscription, one of the first, about *devadasis*.

More precisely, the Brhadisvara temple in Tanjore displays King Rajaraja Chola's eleventh-century inscription, mentioning 400 "women of the temple quarter" (*talicceri pentukal*) who possessed considerable wealth, evidenced by their sizeable donations to temples. Nair further confirms that by the twelfth century, "the temple complex came increasingly to resemble the king's court, and the *devadasi*'s relation to the deity approximated the courtesan's relation to the king." The *devadasi* "gradually became

[23] Dalrymple, William. *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*. Bloomsbury, 2025, 164.

the custodian of the arts of singing and dancing".[24] Their role was thereby formalised by the fusion of Tamil and Sanskrit traditions.

Temple architecture was thus an integral part of these developments, embodying religious devotion as well as the social and erotic imagination of the time. A characteristic feature of sculpture from this era was the *mithuna* motif: figures of lovers locked in embrace. Temples such as Konark, Khajuraho, and Viratesvara at Sohagpur are adorned with carvings that draw directly from the *Kamasutra*, celebrating human intimacy as a cosmic and sacred act. Gods too "were physical and physically gorgeous. Their sensuality is understood as an aspect of their perfection. These were gods that you could desire and fall in love with; and many devotees did just that".[25] Such imagery adorned temples patronised by both Saiva and Vaisnava rulers, affirming the sensual as integral to the spiritual. Fittingly, a king's accomplishments during this period were measured according to his ostentatious feminine entourage; the terrestrial and celestial females considered as signs of wealth, as icons of lustre and royal glory.[26]

Another crucial dimension of this context was Tantrism, believed to have originated around the fifth century CE and which gained prominence during the early medieval period. The tantric and mother-goddess cults, rooted in the social and political formations of medieval society, became significant forces in shaping religious life. In Tantric worship, goddess Devi or Shakti, Shiva's companion, who gives him his power, holds a central position. The sexual union of the divine couple is seen as the very symbol of life.[27] While Tantra is often associated with later Hinduism, evidence of Tantric practices among Hindus, Jains and Buddhists can be traced to these earlier centuries. The sensual and the sacred became further strengthened by this spiritual current, along with the body and the cosmos, worldviews that informed the aesthetic imagination of the age.

---

[24] Nair, Janaki. "Prostitution and the State in Colonial Mysore." In *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in India*, 77–105. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994, 3159.

[25] Dalrymple, *The Golden Road*, 166.

[26] Leucci, Tiziana. "Au royaume de l'amour, les courtisanes sont reines." *Raja-maṇḍala*. Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2020.

[27] Viguier, Anne. *Brève Histoire de l'Inde : Du Pays des Mille Dieux à la puissance mondiale*. Flammarion, 2023.

The evolving intersections of luxury, sensuality, and art of the Gupta period, provide essential background for understanding *devadasi* practices. Archaeological and literary sources attest to a period of remarkable prosperity, where the urban elite led lives of refinement and indulgence. The sensuous and voluptuous became hallmarks not only of art but also of literature. Plays and narratives from the era vividly depict the lives of courtesans, their lavish surroundings, their artistic accomplishments, and their patronage by both state and aristocracy. The cultural centrality of such women, whose artistry bridged the worlds of pleasure, devotion, and performance, is evoked in works such as the *Kamasutra,* and *Sakuntala,* a play by Kalidasa. *Sakuntala* is widely regarded as a foundational source of the symbolic archetype through which "respectable" femininity has been defined, a theme I will examine later.[28]

Across these periods, references to women performing ritual and artistic duties in temples can be read as antecedents to practices that were later more clearly articulated and named as *devadasi* practices. To better understand these traditions, they must be approached not merely as a social institution, but as a form of cultural synthesis. Their practices stood at the confluence of faith, power, and performance, where devotion was expressed through the body, and the sacred and the erotic coexisted in intricate harmony.

Within religious frameworks that emphasised intense devotion and passionate *pujas* as pathways to salvation, distinct from Jain and Buddhist traditions of renunciation, the role of these women was pivotal. During the medieval period, particularly under the Chola dynasty (c. 850–1279 CE), distinctions emerged between court dancers and temple dancers, with epigraphic records documenting their substantial donations to

[28] Satchidanandan explains that Romila Thapar traces the global recognition of Sakuntala as an "Oriental masterpiece" to a specific Western perception of the Indian woman as "weak, innocent and vulnerable" (Satchidanandan, K. "REFLECTIONS: The Folk and the Classical: Interrogating the Boundaries." Indian Literature 54, no. 1 (255) (January/February 2010), 7).

temples and attesting to the wealth they accumulated.[29] It is also during this period, according to Kersenboom, that the term *devadasi* first appears in the sources.[30]

During the Vijayanagar period (fourteenth and sixteenth centuries), political anxieties related to the presence of Muslim rulers in the North led to the emergence of a distinct, self-conscious form of Hinduism. This was characterised by growing rigidity with regard to caste distinctions, though the women in temples were still granted privileges similar to those of artisan castes. Further polarisation between North and South India, increasingly marked by the religions of their rulers, created a specific Carnatic style of music and dance in the South.

The Nayaka rulers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who emerged after breaking away from the Vijayanagar kingdom, and governed roughly twenty polities across South India, played a crucial role in shaping the aesthetic foundations of *devadasi* traditions. Among them were the patrons renowned for the monumental temple construction, most notably the Meenakshi Amman Temple, as well as the Tanjore Nayakas, who fostered artistic and literary enterprises. Their rule consolidated the *devadasi*'s dual presence within both temple ritual and courtly erotic culture.

Critical scholarship suggests that the recognisable figure of the *Devadasi*-courtesan emerged more clearly during this period. This identity was marked by complex investments in temple ritual, elite, erotic culture, and matrifocal kinship structures. Pleasure, *bhoga* mentioned earlier, was a constitutive element of the courtly culture of this period. Poets such as Ksetrayya (fl. seventeenth century) composed *padams* under the patronage of King Vijayaraghava Nayaka (r. 1634–1673), expressing female desire and fully eroticised aesthetics, exploring the sensuous play between the divine and the human.

[29] "In South India, inscriptions (temple inscriptions in particular) found at several different locations, dating especially from the tenth to the seventeenth century, record donations of land and other wealth by women, mainly but not only as widows. In Andhra Pradesh, Talbot (1991: 321-3) found that 14.8 per cent of the 391 individual donations to major and minor temples between AD 1175-1435 were by women, and 23 per cent of these gifts from women were of land. In Tamil Nadu as well, women were important donors to temples in the early medieval period (Mukund 1992). Although, as may be expected, a large percentage of women donors came from royal families, a significant percentage did not" (Bina Agarwal. *A field of one's own. Gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press. 1994, 94).

[30] For a list of extensive terminology for the temple dancer during the Chola period, see Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali*.

The subsequent Maratha Tanjore period (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) can be described distinctly by its focus on hybridity, codification, and modernisation. While the Vijayanagar empire was characterised by its vast economic resources and its strength as an imperial structure that united the entire South, the Tanjore rulers had to contend with internal and external rivals, competing for cultural, religious and economic interests. In addition, there were continuous attempts by Muslim rulers to conquer the South, as well as avid endeavours by newly arriving European traders to obtain exclusive privileges. The Tanjore courts, shaped by a hybrid culture of indigenous literary practices, Muslim influence, and European Enlightenment ideas, were sites of cultural innovation and political spectacle, particularly under rulers like Serfoji II (d. 1832) where they became centres of sophisticated aesthetic experimentation.

Further, aesthetic practice was shaped by the fusion of court and temple performances. In these courts, *devadasis* were not merely tolerated but actively celebrated as bearers of cultural capital. *Devadasis*' performances were vital to the court, where they were showcased in ceremonies of display. This enabled Tanjore rulers to present themselves as sovereigns who, despite the gradual erosion of their political power under British rule, continued to act as discerning, modern patrons of the arts.

It was also here that the Tanjore Quartet (brothers Chinniah, Ponniah, Vadivelu, and Sivanandam) formalised the *margam*, which literally translates to the term the 'path', and defined the essential structure of the modern Bharatanatyam recital. This aesthetic restructuring represented a significant transition from female-centred, matrilineal art to a structure codified by male custodians, a shift that we will return to later.

On the whole, the cultural and historical forces driving the *devadasi* practices can be located within the temperament of the mythical poesis and drama of these cultural rites.[31] Imagination, poetic sentiment, and theatrical performance underscore the rituals and customs associated with *devadasis*. Therefore, the arts could hardly be relegated to the stage, i.e., separated from ordinary social life. In the living traditions surrounding the *devadasis*, almost every facet of life is touched by what Kersenboom calls the ""drama of tradition", which is 'played' by and for the members of the

[31] Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali*.

traditional society".[32] *Devadasi*s can then be understood as players in this setting. "All the world's a stage", indeed, if one gives a different twist to another famous bard's words![33] What emerges from these histories is not a singular origin story, but the recognition of the plural, layered, and often contradictory histories that inform their identities.[34]

1.2 Matrifocal economies and non-conjugality

Devadasis occupied positions of considerable esteem at the various moments in South Indian history mentioned previously: in the Sangam period, when they were both patrons and recipients of temple endowments; under the Cholas, whose ritual synthesis of Tamil and Sanskrit traditions formalised their role; and during the Vijayanagar period, when their repertoire flourished with new musical and dance compositions. Leucci reveals the strong connection between courtesans and kings, and how the former played a role in legitimising royal authority.[35]

Their *nityasumangali*, eternally auspicious status rooted in service to the deity, let us recall, was significant. This sacred standing granted them additional privileges. Unlike most women constrained by conjugal and patrifocal kinship norms, *devadasis* lived within matrilineal or quasi-matrifocal households, where lineage and inheritance passed through the female line. They received land grants called *inams*, a source of income, among other accrued privileges.[36] They were entitled to the income arising from their lands, and enjoyed an inheritance right over this income.

---

[32] Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali*, 40.

[33] Shakespeare, William. *As you like it* (Act II), London: Penguin Classics, 2015.

[34] Combing through the various epigraphical and literary texts, Leucci singles out the paradox embedded in their identity, where *devadasis* are defined as "deities' daughters", "deities' devotees / servants" or "deities' courtesans". Then later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, she notes the emergence of the concept of "deities' wives": Leucci, Tiziana. "Au royaume de l'amour, les courtisanes sont reines." Raja-maṇḍala. Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2020.

[35] Leucci, Tiziana. *De la 'danseuse de temple'*, 2013.

[36] Sreenivas explains the system of property rights "temple economy. *Inam* grants represented one of three main systems of landholding in colonial Madras Presidency. Some agricultural land was held as a *zamindari* estate—typically comprising many villages—by landlords who were responsible for paying land revenue to the colonial state. Other land was held under *ryotwari* tenure, that is, owned by peasant proprietors who were individually responsible for paying land revenue. By contrast, land held by *inamdars* was tax free or tax reduced, and in exchange for this privilege, the titleholders were expected

Generally speaking, *devadasis* could inherit their biological or adoptive mother's property, perform her funeral rites, and transmit wealth and responsibilities to their daughters, ensuring continuity and security within the maternal household. The biological father's role was inconsequential, and they were neither concerned with nor involved in performing their funeral duties. *Devadasis*' legal rights entitled them to adopt daughters and pass property on to their female descendants. Sons, when born, perpetuated their mother's lineage rather than that of an absent or unnamed father. In this sense, *devadasi* practices subverted patriarchal descent and granted women legal and ritual authority within their families, an unusual privilege in South Asia's largely male-dominated inheritance systems.

More specifically, however, the conditions attached to these rights came with varying degrees of constraints. The inheritance right to land and its derived income, was granted only as long as the *devadasi* provided a female heir to the temple as the next *devadasi*. Further, the heir had to be a minor when she was dedicated to the temple. For this, the *devadasi* was allowed to adopt a girl child under the Hindu law, which other women were not allowed to do.[37]

Young girls were dedicated to temples through rituals known as *pottukattutal* (tying of the pendant) or *katti kalyanam* (dagger marriage). These rituals of dedication have often been misinterpreted as "marriages to the deity." However, as Srinivasan[38] and Soneji[39] point out, these formalities were less theological than economic and social rites of passage, marking a woman's entry into an alternative, nonconjugal lifestyle. The "dagger marriage," for instance, could have symbolised not spiritual union but a form of social recognition, signifying a woman's official status and entitlement to property, artistic labour, and protection within temple or courtly economies. These ceremonies

to perform some form of service, often to temples. In the case of *devadasi*s, *inams* were typically linked to ritual and artistic temple service", Sreenivas, Mytheli. "Creating Conjugal Subjects: *Devadasi*s and the Politics of Marriage in Colonial Madras Presidency." *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 1, 2011, 83.

[37] Anandhi. S. "Representing Devadasis: 'Dasigal Mosavalai' as a Radical Text". *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 11/12, 1991, 740.

[38] Srinivasan, Amrit. "Reform and Revival: The *Devadasi* and Her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (1985): 1869–1876.

[39] Soneji, *Bharatanatyam*.

served as prestigious acknowledgments of skill and devotion, aligning the *devadasi* with both ritual and aesthetic power.

Devadasis' ritual and social status cannot be described in singular terms and is subject to much debate. On the one hand, they enjoyed an ambiguous form of autonomy. Freed from the obligations of patriarchal marriage, *devadasis* were not bound to one man, nor subject to eventual restrictive widowhood. Their relationships with royal patrons or upper-caste men were nonconjugal and nonprocreative, negotiated within frameworks of patronage and, most times, respect rather than dependence. Symbolically, they were considered to be eternally auspicious, as I have explained. Moreover, in the past, their close association with the king was also an explanatory dimension of their auspicious status, arising from the political: love and politics going hand-in-hand, while also operating as manifestations of wealth and glory. From these perspectives, their sexual and ritual status was atypical: powerful and independent to some extent, embodying a symbolic and practical autonomy denied to ordinary married women.[40]

Agarwal, in her study on women's land-ownership and rights in India and Sri Lanka, mentions inscriptions and archival sources that provide evidence of women owning, donating, and inheriting land in pre-colonial India, and still emphasises that such cases must be read as exceptions rather than norms.[41] These instances frequently ran against *shastric* injunctions, which overwhelmingly privileged patrilineal transmission of property and curtailed women's independent rights over immovable wealth. When this admittedly sparse evidence is weighed as a whole, it suggests that among patrilineal Hindu communities, particularly in south and west India, a limited number of women, often from elite or ritually distinct backgrounds, did possess landed property. Yet even in these relatively favourable regions, there is little evidence that Hindu women commonly held land or enjoyed inheritance rights comparable to men. It is within this

[40] In the *Laws* of Manu, V, 152, in the section entitled purification, it is stated that women have no independence at all and are tied to their male kin at all stages of their lives: "147. By a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. 148. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Manu, and Johann Georg Bühler (translator). *The laws of Manu*. "The sacred Books of the East, XXV". Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886, 195).

[41] Agarwal, *A field of one's own*.

landscape that *devadasis* emerge as pronounced outliers and their documented property ownership under Hindu law appears as a departure from *shastric* norms.[42]

In addition to ritual and economic privileges, many *devadasi*s enjoyed literary and intellectual prominence. Numerous were those who were literate, multilingual, and highly educated, contributing to the literary and artistic worlds of their time. Women like Ramabhadramba, consort of King Raghunatha Nayaka, wrote the Sanskrit epic *Raghunathabhyudaya*, while Rangajamma wrote Telugu dramas in the *yaksagana* tradition.[43] Their compositions demonstrate not only literary sophistication but also the integration of women's artistic voices into royal and devotional narratives, affirming the *devadasis*' role as intellectual transmitters.

In death, *devadasis* were accorded exceptional ritual honour and social respect. At the time of their funerals, temple flowers, garlands, and sandal paste were sent from the deity's shrine; in some temples, the sacred kitchen fire was used to light their pyres, and the deity observed a day of ritual mourning by suspending worship. The funeral bier of a *devadasi* would pause at the temple threshold, a privilege marking her lifelong service to the divine.[44] These gestures of institutional reverence seemed to acknowledge her role as both servant and representative of the deity.

Culturally, *devadasis* inhabited a world of opulence and artistry shaped by sensuality, Bhakti devotion, and courtly aesthetics. Their training was rigorous and refined, preserved in aesthetic genealogies tracing back to the eighteenth and nineteenth-

[42] Agarwal argues that Muslim women's inheritance rights in South Asia were shaped by a persistent gap between Islamic scriptural law and local customary practice. While the Koran explicitly granted women legal rights to inherit immovable property—albeit in unequal shares relative to men—these provisions were frequently modified, diluted, or overridden by regional customs. In much of the subcontinent, Muslim communities adopted patrilineal norms akin to those of neighbouring Hindu societies, limiting women's access to land to conditional or life interests, particularly in the presence of male heirs. At the same time, notable exceptions existed: in parts of southwest India, matrilineal or bilateral practices enabled women to inherit and control landed property, sometimes formalised through dowry. Beyond inheritance, elite and professional Muslim women also acquired land through mechanisms such as waqf endowments, royal grants, and patronage, including among successful courtesans and performers whose wealth passed through female lines. Taken together, Agarwal shows that although Islamic law provided a stronger formal basis for women's property rights than many Hindu legal regimes, in practice, control over land across South Asia largely remained male-dominated, punctuated by regional and social outliers rather than systemic equality (*A field of one's own*, 98).

[43] Soneji, *Bharatanatyam,* footnote 31.

[44] Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali.*

century Maratha courts of Tanjore. Within these royal settings, their performances were an integral part of temple and court life. The combination of artistic mastery and ritual service positioned them as bearers of classical knowledge and custodians of heritage long before colonial and nationalist narratives reduced them to mere victims or (im)moral performers.

In social terms, *devadasi* communities represented parallel, female-centred worlds, where the birth of a daughter was celebrated, and a woman's identity was not defined by marital status. Their social existence thus revealed an alternative model of womanhood, economically secure, intellectually cultivated, ritually honoured, and sexually autonomous.

From these perspectives, exploitation – whether sexual or religious, cannot be the only lens through which to describe *devadasi* practices. They also appear to belong to complex social orders that provided women with rights, respect, and recognition within the constraints of their time. Their worlds brought art and devotion together, sanctified sexuality, and allowed women, through their bodies and art, to negotiate power, property, and prestige in ways that challenged the dominant patriarchal structures of Indian society.

Yet, on the other hand, these advantages came at a cost. Economic security was attainable only insofar as women remained *devadasis* and actively perpetuated the system. The moment a *devadasi* sought to withdraw from this structure, by refusing to initiate another minor into the system, she simultaneously forfeited her livelihood.[45] The *devadasis*' ambiguous sexual position, non-conjugal, often publicly linked to powerful men, rendered them both fascinating and threatening to existing and later moral orders. Nair explains that *devadasis* "despite their relative autonomy nevertheless remained dependent on that triad of men within the political economy of the temple, the priest, guru and patron".[46] The rituals such as *pottukattutal* may, in fact, have functioned as lifecycle markers inscribing, most often restricting, women

[45] Anandhi. S. *Representing Devadasis*, 740

[46] Nair, *Prostitution and the State*, 3160.

into a unique socio-economic system, different to the Brahminical ideals of domestic femininity.

Likewise, the ritual status *devadasis* enjoyed did not necessarily translate into any definite social status. Even within their own communities, *devadasis* were sometimes considered as impure women, a view their opponents adopted and instrumentalised. Within the *devadasi* practices, however, a plurality of experiences persisted. Not all women were dedicated to temples; not all were courtesans. Some were patrons, in that they commanded and supervised ritual performance; others were performers; many were both. Not all *devadasi*s had equal access to the economic and symbolic resources associated with temples and rulers; even in the precolonial era, dedicated women formed a heterogeneous category marked by differences in wealth and privilege.

1.3 From contested castes to the *Devadasi* label

This brings us to another facet of the plural identities of the *devadasis,* caste. We have seen that with the Bhakti movement and the rejuvenated blend of Hinduism, combining Tamil and Brahmin customs alongside devotional movements, caste differences withstood rigid stratification. Later, the Vijanayagar period and its concern with keeping Muslim influence at bay, resulted in a more narrowly constructed form of Hinduism, with increasing caste distinction. Disputes regarding social rights and economic privileges also caused caste categories to become more apparent and fixed. Highest- ranked Brahmins occupied important administrative and political positions at the court of Vijayanagara rulers and determined the structure of and ensuing privileges granted to other social groups.

Scholars concur that no single caste could be associated with *devadasi*s.[47] Similarly, in Kersenboom's study of *devadasi*s, the association with a distinct caste is not proven for any of the related terms: *Devadasi*, *ganika* (secular courtesan), etc.[48] As *devadasi*s themselves have clarified, there existed a distinct way of life or professional ethic (*vrtti*,

[47] Srinivasan, *Reform and Revival*; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*; Sreenivas, *Creating Conjugal Subjects;* Nair, *Prostitution and the State*.

[48] Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali*.

murai), but not a *devadasi jati*.[49] Certain local communities, such as the *melakkarar* and *nayanakkarar* groups, were closely associated with *devadasi*s, and ensured that professional rights were restricted to their members. *Jati* and *varna* were vernacular terms describing pre-colonial social groupings, signifying greater fluidity than the later term "caste", borrowed from the Portuguese.[50] While the role was hereditary, it did not automatically confer professional entitlement without appropriate training and qualification.

Training began after the ritual initiation, the previously described *pottukatukal*, dedication ceremony. This further consolidated hereditary belonging, conferring legitimacy and recognition to the *devadasi*. Training required a formal apprenticeship under a teacher, the *nattuvanar*. *Devadasis* and the *nattuvanavars* can be situated in the larger ensemble that constituted the three forms of art: *Sadir* (dance), *nagaswaram* (instrumental music) and *nattuvangam* (dance-conducting), which were then divided into two categories: "the *periamelam* (in Tamil literature 'big drum') and the *cinnamelam* ('small drum')".[51] The *periamelam* and *cinnamelam* ensembles represented two distinct hereditary specialisations within the temple performance community, structured along lines of gender, ritual function, and lineage. The *periamelam* was centred on the male *nagaswaram* virtuoso, while the *cinnamelam* combined the *devadasi* and her male *guru* or *nattuvanar*. Entry into each professional group was carefully regulated by a combination of natural and cultural criteria that ensured the reproduction of these divisions across generations.

Devadasis' dance education culminated in a public demonstration of artistic mastery to assume their place within the profession. Two ceremonies then, marked the *devadasi's* career: the *pottukatukal*, the dedication ceremony, took place before her artistic training, which, in fact, commenced only after this ritualistic ceremony; and then the first ceremonial public performance of an accomplished, properly-trained dancer. In Bharatanatyam later, the *arangetram* can be seen as a distant echo of the

[49] Srinivasan*, Reform and Revival*, 1869–1876.

[50] Samarendra, Padmanabh. "Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol xlvI no 33 (2011): 51-58.

[51] Srinivasan, *Ibidem*, 1871.

second ceremony of older times, although of course, by then, the first ceremony, the dedication ceremony, had ceased.

Through these interlocking mechanisms of gender, inheritance, ritual, and training, the *melam* ensembles evolved into distinct hereditary communities, each maintaining its identity and privileges within the broader structure of temple service.[52] The criteria of selection for a girl to be dedicated as a *devadasi* were very strict, based on specific skills, which meant that not everyone was fit to be trained as a dancer. The main criterion for becoming a *devadasi*, therefore, was not caste, but her skills and abilities, combined with the distinctive rituals, which, nonetheless, limited the number of persons who qualified for the role.

What stands out with regard to the social order around the *devadasis* is that the sexual division of labour was organised around professional tasks and not domestic duties. Most notably, *devadasis* were spared domestic obligations.[53] Their social relations with the men who surrounded them, the *melakkarars*, the *nayanakkarars* and the *nattuvanars*, were mostly professional; sexual conduct between them being prohibited.[54] Theirs was certainly an unusual household and cultural tradition which, nevertheless, was perceived and perpetuated naturally by its women until such time as the reform.

These layered traditions are further complicated by the ambiguities that persist in historical records. Even in the nineteenth century Tanjore courts, for instance, practices of polygamy and concubinage coexisted, often blurring the lines between royal consorts, courtesans, and women of the *devadasi* communities, confusion that has long contributed to mythic and moralised representations of their sexuality and social position.[55]

[52] Srinivasan, *Reform and Revival*.

[53] *Ibidem*.

[54] Anandhi, S. *Representing Devadasis*, 739.

[55] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 48.

Ramberg asserts that prior to colonial enumeration and identification, the multitude of different terms associated with *devadasi*s would have been clearly identifiable across India: "Multiple non-wife, precolonial categories, such as *veshya, sule, kanki, basavi, murli, jogini, concubine,* and *courtesan,* were socially and legally recognised in precolonial contexts across the Indian subcontinent".[56] As indicated above, *devadasis'* experiences varied widely based on region, caste, period, and personal circumstance. There is, therefore, no unified *Devadasi* institution traceable through inscriptions or literary sources. What exists instead is a palimpsest of roles, identities, and meanings that resist the homogenising impulse of later colonial and nationalist historiographies.

It was the colonial project of formalising marriage and instituting the category of the prostitute that played a central role in collapsing distinctions between *devadasi*s and prostitutes. Simultaneously, it transformed these diverse forms of female performance and ritual service into a single, standardised social type, the *Devadasi*. Through what Levine terms "Orientalist sociologies," colonial administrators, missionaries, and legal reformers catalogued sexualised practices as empirical "actualities" to be contained within hierarchical taxonomies.[57] The very term *Devadasi,* rarely encountered in precolonial literary or inscriptional sources, was retrospectively constituted as a pan-Indian institution through such imperial knowledge production.[58]

The tendency to converge plural *Devadasi* identities into a single narrative ~~of decline~~ reinforces a problematic genealogy. Across much of Southern India, localised forms of ritual dedication persist, such as the offering of Dalit (low-caste) girls as *jogatis* to goddesses like Renuka–Yellamma–Maariyammaa.[59] Regional variations of this

---

[56] Ramberg, *When the Devi Is Your Husband*, 44.

[57] Levine, Philippa. *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*. New York: Routledge, 2000, 8-11.

[58] Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God*, 5-8.

[59] "For the Dalit ("outcaste") women that my research in the South Indian state of Karnataka has focused on, marriage is not to men but to a devi (goddess). When they are "given," or dedicated by their families, to the devi Yellamma, they become her wives. By virtue of this dedication, they become responsible for the worship (seva) of Yellamma; they become her priests (pujaris). In turn, Yellamma provides for them. As several dedicated women put it to me, "She is my husband, she takes care [of me]" Ramberg, *When the Devi is Your Husband*, 28.

practice include the dedication of girls as *matammas* or *matanngis* to the goddess Gangamma in Tirupati, or to village deities in the Villupuram and North Arcot districts of Tamil Nadu.[60] Yet many of these practices are rooted in Dalit ritual contexts whose histories remain largely unrecorded and, to a considerable extent, irretrievable. Consequently, the lives and traditions of Dalit women known as *jogatis* are habitually discussed through the homogenising lens of the "South Indian *Devadasi*," a transregional construct that misleadingly associates them with upper-caste temples, with their idealised notion of sacred sexuality.[61]

These sweeping narratives of both the colonial and later nationalist projects sought to forge genealogical continuities among historically distinct groups of women and to posit a temple-centred origin for South Indian performing arts, a claim that cannot withstand critical historiographical scrutiny. In doing so, they not only erased the heterogeneity of Dalit ritual worlds but also appropriated their lived experiences into the temple narrative of *devadasi* historiography.[62]

Acknowledging the complexity of the *devadasi* identity is essential in order to understand how reform movements would later approach the figure of the *devadasi* not as a subject with a plural past, but as a problem to be solved. Colonial administration first sought to justify reform through scriptural authority, on the grounds that it violated *shastric, i.e.*, normative textual injunctions. However, the texts did not support their claims. On the contrary, *Agamiks,* ritual specialists (who consulted both Shaivite and Vaishnava rituals), responded by citing the *Agamas* and *Dharmashastras,* moral codes, to affirm the legitimacy of *devadasi* service in temples. Deprived of scriptural backing, colonial officials rejected *Agamic* justifications as ambiguous, dismissing them as one among many interpretations of temple structure and ritual.

---

[60] Comparable customs also encompass the dedication of Dalit boys as ritual embodiments of the goddess's guardian *Poṭurāju*, and of transgender men as *jogappas* (Soneji, *Unfinished gestures*, 8).

[61] Soneji, *Ibidem*.

[62] As Soneji poignantly notes, such interpretive gestures amount to "telling them their own history," thereby reinscribing the very hierarchies and epistemic violence that render Dalit subjectivities invisible (*Unfinished Gestures,* 8–9).

The administration turned instead to a moral argument, portraying *devadasi*s as impure and morally fallen. As Nair notes, the trope of moral decay, rooted in long-standing upper-caste, male anxieties over female sexuality, was redeployed to justify administrative action. The colonial government thus recast its reform as a moral restoration: "Whatever may have been the original object of the institution of the *devadasis*, the state of immorality in which these people are now found appears to justify the action taken by the government in removing them from sacred institutions like temples".[63]

As British rule consolidated, royal and local patronage declined, leaving *devadasi*s increasingly vulnerable. By the early twentieth century, princely states such as Mysore began prohibiting their participation in temple rituals. This provoked resistance from the women themselves. Nair records that "the first spirited challenge to the new situation came from the twelve *devadasis* who worked for the Srikanteswara temple at Nanjangud," who submitted two petitions invoking the authority of the *Veda Bharata Shastra Agamashastra* and *sampradaya* (customary practices).[64] They reminded the sovereign of his duty to protect hereditary occupations such as theirs, noting that within these districts, Brahmins had various institutions providing support. For example, Brahmins were backed by religious institutions built around saints like *maths*, as well as *chattrams*, institutions administered by the king, possibly related to public or royal welfare. No such institutional backing existed for *devadasi*s, who had "only their artistic skills with which to render service to god and earn their livelihoods." Yet the king's power was constrained by colonial authority, and "the tremulous signatures of the *Devadasi* women" stood in stark contrast to the "typed government orders and clarifications in English". This contrast vividly captured the tension between "the prevailing notions of dharma, protected by the king," and "the modalities of modernity set in motion by his bureaucracy." [65]

[63] Nair, *Prostitution and the State,* 3161.

[64] Nair, *Ibidem*, 3161.

[65] *Ibidem,* 3160-3161.

As the colonial ban expanded, *devadasi*s found themselves subject to new regulations that linked property rights to celibacy, except for those who already held land titles. Temple lands could not be legally reclaimed unless their owners, here, the *devadasi*s, were no longer performing the services that had entitled them to those holdings. Yet their performances had ceased only because of the ban. Faced with this contradiction, the government's advocates proposed a purity-based workaround: grants could be revoked for "women who have not preserved their chastity and celibacy".[66] This redefinition of eligibility allowed the state to manage the crisis produced by its own disruption of local religious law, while still projecting an appearance of moral and legal order. The irony, of course, is that these women had been granted land and patronage precisely for services that combined artistic and sexual expertise.

Caught between *shastric* authority and modern legality, the colonial administration did not reject either system. Rather, it instrumentalised both, invoking religious orthodoxy when expedient, while embracing modern reformist rhetoric to rationalise exclusion. This strategic balancing act allowed the state to appear simultaneously as the protector of *dharma* and the agent of bureaucratic modernity.

[66] Nair, *Prostitution and the State*, 3161.

Chapter 2 – Reform and revival: Colonial regulation and nationalist reconfigurations

2.1 The moral reinvention of women's bodies

The genealogy of the *Devadasi* reform movement is intertwined with the colonial state's regulatory anxieties over sexuality, disease, and moral order. Khokar identifies one of the triggers as the 1906-07 international convention for the eradication of immoral traffic in women and children, which, when referred to India for endorsement, alerted the government "to the reality of the *Devadasi* evil".[67]

Even earlier, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, women's bodies had become the object of intensified colonial scrutiny, framed within an emerging nexus of public health and governance. The regulation of prostitution and venereal disease in India, mirroring metropolitan concerns in Britain, situated *devadasis* alongside prostitutes in administrative discourse. The state's surveillance of native women, particularly in relation to the perceived threat of sexual contagion, anchored *devadasis* within a wider colonial logic that conflated ritual and sexual transgression. Colonial deliberations on the "*Devadasi* question" were as much about managing disease and morality as about defining legitimate forms of womanhood.[68]

Consequently, the prostitute was defined in relation to "the medico-legal apparatuses of the colonial state"[69], removing from consideration the range of regionally and caste-specific categories attached to performative, ritual and labour practices, as well as to sexual economies. Legislation on contagious diseases became the primary, though not exclusive, means by which prostitution was controlled. The medical discourse exposed a clear bias: the prostitute was cast as the source of contagion rather than as one link in its chain. On this basis, authorities rationalised the suppression of prostitution as a means of eliminating disease.

---

[67] Khokar, Mohan. *A Momentous Transition*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1987.

[68] Soneji, U*nfinished Gestures*, 133.

[69] Ramberg, *When the Devi is Your Husband*, 44.

By the late nineteenth century, the moral panic, barely concealed behind the medical façade, soon surfaced and seeped into both colonial and nationalist discourses. In Nair's words, the "modernising process (…) signalled shifts in the definition of domestic and non-domestic sexuality".[70] *Devadasi*s came to represent "the symptomatic expression of India's moral lack".[71]

In early twentieth- century India, any woman whose performance, read public performance, was viewed as possibly, read probably, leading to sexual interaction was, by definition, perceived as a prostitute. In colonial discourse, prostitution or sex work was frequently equated with any form of nonconjugal sex. Thus, any woman performing in public could easily be accused of prostitution. Such a series of hasty amalgamations enabled the legal codification of the *devadasi* as a sex worker, which persists today.

At the turn of the twentieth century, reform became an arena of oscillating convergence between colonial humanitarianism and the various forms of Indian nationalism. While multiple strands of nationalism can be identified across history, ranging from Gandhi's, Tagore's or Nehru's perspectives to regional forms - such as Bengali and Dravidian nationalism -, each with its own divergences, evolving over time and across space, I set aside these distinctions to focus instead on their impacts on *devadasis* and their lived experiences.[72] Missionary and imperial interventions, especially those led by Christian women, recast *devadasis* as victims of civilizational depravity, echoing the earlier rhetoric surrounding *sati*, the sacrifice of a wife who immolates herself on her deceased husband's pyre.[73]

[70] She adds that this is because in all other domains the colonial modernisation process was in force: "On the other hand, the household, and specifically conjugality, increasingly became the only space where autonomy and self-rule could be preserved" Nair, *Prostitution and the State*, 3157.

[71] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 128.

[72] Anandhi describes those in favour of abolishing the devadasi system, led by Reddy, as "progressive" and those who opposed, especially S. Sathyamurthy of Madras Congress as "conservative" (*Representing Devadasis*, 740).

[73] Referring to the practice involving the voluntary sacrifice of a dedicated wife who immolates herself on her deceased husband's pyre, sati was associated with rigorous codes of conduct for elite women. For instance, Sulaks. an.āmbā Bāī and Rājasā Bāī, wives of King Pratāpasim.ha, committed sati in Tanjore (Soneji, *Ibidem*, 128). Practices like sati and widow remarriage were invoked as evidence of India's supposed moral failings, with women positioned as the terrain on which broader anxieties about tradition and culture were played out.

Indian reformers, in turn, adopted this vocabulary to refashion Hinduism as morally and spiritually salvageable. Social reformers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, like Kandukuri Viresalingam (who encouraged the education of women and the remarriage of widows) and his disciple Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu (who pushed for the eradication of untouchability and upliftment of the outcastes), invoked tropes of purity and contamination, modelling "purity pledges" after Western temperance movements.[74] The result was a widely accepted nationalist moral economy in which female sexuality had to be contained within conjugal domesticity, so that the modern Indian nation might emerge as morally coherent. We will see, however, that other ideas of nationalism, like those espoused within the Dravidian Self-Respect movement, opposed the Brahmin vision of social order and offered diverging views on women's roles in society. Led by social activist and architect of Dravidian politics, Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy, better-known as Periyar, the Self-Respect Movement attacked Brahmin and Hindu ideals of society, proposing, for instance, self-respect marriages across diverse castes, without the officiation of Brahmin priests. This had important consequences on prevailing norms and practices relating to widows, for example, and to women, in general.

Fear, panic, and then power over women's sexuality manifested itself in many ways. In her book *When I hit you*, Meena Kandasamy offers a passage that highlights how hair, sexuality, and female autonomy became sites of intense cultural anxiety, and how colonialism deepened these anxieties by attaching new, punitive meanings to women's bodies.[75] She reflects on the fact that hair has long carried fraught meanings: hair unbound and loose denoting sexually wanton women, even in the *Kamasutra*; unruly, untamed hair associated with women believed to be possessed under demonic influence. Conversely, the matted locks of women saints and the shaved heads of widows signify the renunciation of sexuality altogether. Women's hair, already a loaded symbol, then came under the colonial gaze.

[74] Soneji, *Ibidem,* 136.

[75] Kandasamy, Meera. *When I hit you*. Atlantic Books. 2018.

While analysing the reasons, Kandasamy notes that at a more surface level, the shift toward shorter, looser, or unbound hair came to be read as an imitation of European women, a deviation from traditional norms, an emblem of immodesty, and a marker of modernity gained at the expense of heritage. For some nationalists, it was even seen as a betrayal of the nation through mimicry of white femininity. Yet there is a lesser-known, and perhaps apocryphal, story that deepens this reading. British regiments were accompanied by Indian sex workers who, unlike *devadasis*, were officially registered by colonial authorities. In return for housing and guaranteed, albeit exclusive, clientele among soldiers, they were required to undergo routine checks for venereal disease. At a time when syphilis claimed more soldiers than the harsh climate, the women were barred from sexual contact with local men due to misguided fears of transmission.

According to the story, these women's long hair was routinely cut short so that colonial officers and sanitary inspectors could easily identify them in public spaces and prevent them from interacting with Indian men. Although this served the disciplinary needs of the colonial state, it had lasting social consequences: a woman with short, loose hair in the marketplace came to be identified as a prostitute serving the British. She was imagined as someone who slept with the enemy and facilitated the desires of the oppressor, and thus became an object of intense moral contempt.

Placing this narrative alongside the histories of *devadasis* throws important differences into relief. *Devadasi*s were not attached to British cantonments and could therefore be seen to have escaped colonial branding and containment. They occupied a socially ambiguous and culturally significant position that allowed them to move across the temple, court, and public spheres with a certain degree of autonomy. Their coiffure, jewellery, and aesthetics formed part of an elaborate artistic identity beyond the reach of the colonial system of policing. In fact, *devadasis* challenged the rigid binaries that the passage describes. Whereas the colonial regime imposed boundaries by literally cutting women down to a manageable form, *devadasis* often expanded the space available to women through their persona and their performance.

Thus, the passage indirectly illuminates the contrast between women whose sexuality was regulated through colonial biopolitics and those, like *devadasis*, whose social identities predated colonial categories and operated according to far more fluid cultural logics. After rendering cantonment women visible as "the enemy's women", colonial powers next targeted *devadasis,* as part of their process of absorbing unruly women into a regulated, respectable national body, which culminated in the abolition of *devadasi* practices.

The confrontation between British colonial governance and *devadasi* traditions did not occur in isolation; it was also shaped by European interpretations, which exerted a powerful influence on broader perceptions of *devadasis*, both inside and outside India. Leucci provides a detailed account of European encounters with *devadasis,* beginning with Marco Polo's reference at the end of the thirteenth century.[76] Around the sixteenth century, they were labelled *bayadères*, derived from the Portuguese *bailadeira*, meaning female dancer, a term which eventually spread across Europe. Early travellers like Pietro della Valle and Sir John Andrew Gallini admired their artistic mastery, expressive movement, and wealth, comparing their performances to forms from classical antiquity, yet struggled to situate their elevated ritual and courtly status in relation to European social categories.[77]

[76] Marco Polo's travel memoirs, transcribed by Rustichello de Pise, provided the first western literary entry for Indian temple dancers (Leucci, Tiziana. "De la 'danseuse de temple' des voyageurs et missionnaires à la 'bayadère' des philosophes et artistes des Lumières." In *L'Inde des Lumières*, edited by Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Županov, 253-288. Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2013*)*.

[77] Leucci describes Pietro Della Valle as a Roman gentleman and humanist who provided some of the most precise seventeenth-century ethnographic descriptions of South Indian ritual processions and choreography, frequently comparing them to classical Spartan and Roman forms. He travelled to India between India 1622–1626 and wrote *Vaggi di Pietro Della Valle il pellegrino, descritti da lui medesimo in lettere familiari all'erudito suo amico Mario Schipano, divisi in tre parti cioè: la Turchia, la Persia e l'India*. Turin/Brighton: Gancia, 1843. Gallini was an 18th-century choreographer and director of dances who praised the "eloquence of the body" in Indian dancers. He wrote *A Treatise on the Art of Dancing*. Londres: R. & J. Dodsley, 1762 (Leucci, *De la danseuse de temple*).

By the Enlightenment and colonial periods, this aesthetic curiosity hardened into a moralising discourse: missionaries like Abraham Rogerius denounced them as impure;[78] Enlightenment thinkers such as François Bernier portrayed them as victims of superstition, and philosophers like Raynal (and possibly Diderot) framed temples as "seminaries of voluptuousness."[79] Goethe and others of the Romantic era recast the dancer as a repentant, redeemable heroine.[80] These views propelled nineteenth-century colonial administrators to establish the stereotype of the sexually corrupt "temple prostitute."[81] Through these narratives, Europeans projected their own anxieties about gender, religion, and sexuality onto the *devadasis*, reshaping Indian social policy and entrenching an orientalist lens that continues to shadow contemporary understandings of the tradition.

This growing European moralising discourse, combined with Indian social reformist agendas, created a context in which legal and public campaigns against the *devadasi* systems gained traction. To understand how these discourses translated into concrete action, it is useful to summarise the timeline of legislative processes leading up to abolition. The Anti-Nautch campaign, begun in 1892 as a social reform movement targeting the South Indian dance tradition, set the ball rolling. Nautch was a derogatory

---

[78] Rogerius was a Dutch missionary whose work first introduced the "impudicity" (or lewdness) of temple dancers to a wide European audience, framing their status through a legend of divine testing and salvation provided by a Brahmin informant. *Le Théâtre de l'Idolatrie ou la porte ouverte, pour parvenir à la cognoissance du paganisme caché, et la vraye representation de la vie, des moeurs, de la religion, & du service divin des Bramines, qui demeurent sur les Costes de Chormandel, & aux Pays circonvoisins*. Translated by Thomas La Grue. Amsterdam: chez Jean Schipper, 1670. (*Ibidem*).

[79] Bernier was a French physician at the Mughal court (1658–1667) who adopted an anti-clerical lens to portray temple dancers as victims of superstitious religious manipulation and the "fourberies" (deceptions) of lustful Brahmin priests. *Voyages de François Bernier docteur en Medecine de la Faculté de Montpellier. Contenant la Description des Etats du Grand Mogol, de l'Hindousthan, du Royaume de Kachemire, & c.* Tome II. Amsterdam: Paul Marret Marchant Librairie, 1699. Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal published *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements & du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*. Critical edition by Anthony Strugnell et al. Paris: Centre international d'étude du XVIIIe siècle, 2010. Leucci describes him as being part of the Enlightenment philosophers who critiqued colonial and religious authority by framing temple institutions as "seminaries of voluptuousness" where beautiful girls were trained for the exclusive pleasure of priests. Raynal collaborated with Denis Diderot, French Enlightenment thinker, and some specialists believe the relevant passage was likely written by the latter. (*Ibid.*).

[80] Johann Wolfgang Goethe was a Romantic poet whose celebrated ballad recast the Indian dancer as a tragic heroine who achieves redemption through self-sacrificing love and devotion, effectively uniting the figure of the *bayadère* with that of the *sati* (widow). *Der Gott und die Bajadere: Indische Legende*. 1797. (Italian translation in *Goethe J.W., Ballate*, translated by R. Fertonani, Milan: Garzanti, 1975) (*Ibid.*).

[81] *Ibid.*

term used by colonials, a corruption of the Hindi word *nach* associated with a broader category of dancing girls, especially in the North.[82] Initiated by educated elites and some Hindu reformers, the campaign sought to abolish all rituals of temple dedication. By the 1920s, it had become intertwined with the Dravidian Self-Respect movement. This public agitation effectively suppressed *sadir* in the Madras Presidency well before any legal intervention, while also paving the way for both abolitionist activism and a parallel revival, as we shall see.

Legislative efforts began with reformist groups attempting abolition through the Imperial Legislative Council in 1912. The central push came in 1927, when Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced a resolution calling for laws to prohibit the dedication of young women to temples. Despite organised resistance from *devadasis*, reform legislation proceeded: the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act (1929) freed *devadasis* from compulsory temple service. By 1930, the Government of Madras had declared dedication illegal, and parallel legislation, such as the Bombay *Devadasi*s Protection Act (1934), emerged elsewhere.

The abolition process stalled during the final years of the independence struggle, but resumed immediately after 1947. The Madras *Devadasi*s (Prevention of Dedication) Act was passed in December 1947 and came into force in January 1948, criminalising dedication rituals and, in practice, the hereditary profession itself. Subsequent measures extended the ban: Andhra Pradesh tightened restrictions in 1956 by outlawing public dancing by hereditary performers, and in 1988, the state passed a further *Devadasi*s Prohibition Act targeting remaining dedication practices among Dalit communities.

[82] "The women dancers who graced the courts of north and east India became popularly known as nautch dancers during the British rule. The performance events by these dancers (known as tawaifs in the royal courts of north India and baijis or nautch dancers in nineteenth-century Bengal) were popularly known as bai-nautch", Chakravorty, Pallabi. "Multiple Narratives of India"s Kathak Dance". *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1/2: 115-136, 2006, 116.

2.2 Respectability according to Indian nationalists

Let us focus on the legislative apex reached through the activism of Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a medical doctor, daughter of a Brahmin father and a *Devadasi* mother. Reddy's social position afforded her both access to the colonial legislature and a certain proximity, albeit equivocal, to the women she sought to reform. In 1927, she successfully urged the Madras government to legislate against the dedication of girls to temples, leading to the *Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act* of 1929. Her abolitionist discourse was framed through a language of civilisational purity, portraying the *Devadasi* as a "blot on Hindu civilisation" and romanticising an imagined past in which these women had once been "pure virgins" akin to Christian nuns.[83]

Muthulakshmi Reddy's project aimed at domesticating and containing *devadasis* within the norms of monogamous family life. Accordingly, she argued for their compulsory marriage, proposing that men willing to marry them be incentivised through employment and other material benefits.[84]

A number of *devadasis*, such as Yamini Purnatilakam and Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, aligned with the abolitionist cause, advocating for rehabilitation through education and moral uplift. At the same time, they added to the diversity of the discourse, sometimes breaking away from the mainstream position.

This was the case of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, who began by supporting Reddy in her abolitionist activism, and then embraced the Self-Respect movement, which she ultimately left to join the DMK.[85] She wrote a semi-autobiographical novel, titled *Dasigal Mosavalai Allathu Math Petra Minor* ('The Treacherous Web of *Devadasi*s or The Minor Grown Wise'), which deals with the debasing aspects of

[83] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 136-142.

[84] Anandhi, *Representing Devadasis*, 740.

[85] Anandhi explains that "Ramamirtham finally quit the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1949 to join the Dravida Mun- netra Kazhagam founded by C N Annadurai and few others. Her decision to leave the Dravidar Kazhagam was based on her opposition to E V Ramasamy Naicker's late marriage with a young political lieutenant of his, Manniammai." *Ibidem*, 743.

devadasi lives.[86] Her novel presents a plurality of *devadasi* voices, resisting the tendency to stereotype them into essentialist categories that serve to articulate agendas other than their lived realities.[87]

In this climate, Gandhi, as a key figure of the nationalist movement, maintained a stance that was characteristically ambivalent. While he denounced the *Devadasi* institution as "immoral traffic"[88], he simultaneously sought to reintegrate its women through the imposition of marital symbols such as the *tali*, reinscribing patriarchal respectability as the route to moral salvation. His vision of women's reform was thus contradictory, prioritising discipline. He valorised purity and domestic virtue while rejecting female autonomy in matters of sexuality.[89] The distinction drawn between respectable and disrespectable female sexuality, was nonetheless consonant to a large extent with dominant nationalist discourse especially in the period of Gandhian nationalism.[90]

---

[86] In her preface to the novel, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar wrote, "Our women have been suppressed in all spheres. The legitimisation of the suppression given through religion and 'shastras' is evident in the manner in which women have been assigned the role of prostitutes. Through Pottaruppu Sangam, I have propagated the anti-devadasi message for which among the devadasi community itself there were opposition. Prominent religious heads, devadasi agents, reform leaders-everybody openly opposed my stand. . . Then I decided that it is easy to oppose imperialism and Brahminism, but not the devadasis" Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, *Dasigal Mosavalai Allathu Math Petra Minor*, Madras, 1936, p 1-5 quoted in Anandhi, *Representing Devadasis*, 745.

[87] "All these different voices of the devadasis and non-devadasi women (supplemented by that of reformed men) coalesce into a very political social reform conference at the end of the novel which calls for a thorough overhauling of the system. They, as women call into question Brahminism, Hinduism and class inequity as a way of resolving their problems. The centrality of 'dasis' at the beginning of the novel is displaced at the end by the centrality of women as such, with 'dasis' being a section of women", *Ibidem*.

[88] Quoted by Roebert, Donovan. "Some Thoughts on the 'Momentous Transition' of South Indian Dance from the Hands of the Hereditary Artists to Those of the 'Better People'." 29 October 2021. Available at: https://pictorialindiandance.wordpress.com/2021/10/29/some-thoughts-on-the-momentous-transition-of-south-indian-dance-from-the-hands-of-the-hereditary-artists-to-those-of-the-better-people/.

[89] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*.

[90] Nair, *Prostitution and the State*.

By the time of the *Bombay Devadasis Protection Act* (1934) and the *Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act* (1947), the colonial moral schema had been seamlessly absorbed into postcolonial legislation. These laws reclassified *devadasis* as sex workers, stripping them of legal rights to property and livelihood, and severing their ties to temple and courtly institutions.

Reform, while purporting to elevate women, redefined the boundaries of respectable womanhood, transferring the *Devadasi*'s embodied autonomy and artistic capital to the domain of upper-caste, middle-class femininity, epitomised in Rukmini Devi Arundale's "purified" Bharatanatyam. After witnessing a ballet performance by Anna Pavlova in 1928, Arundale developed an interest in dance and began training in Western ballet. Pavlova, however, persuaded her that her true vocation lay in the promotion of Indian dance forms, particularly Bharatanatyam.

Arundale learnt traditional dance from hereditary dancer, Mylapore Gauri Ammal and later from Meenakshisundaram Pillai, of the traditional Pandanallur style of *Sadir*. In 1936, she founded the International Academy of the Arts, which came to be known as Kalakshetra, where Gauri Ammal was invited to teach. Institutions like this took on the universalisation of the dance, eventually dislodging it from the hereditary systems that had sustained it. The shadow of the *Devadasi* stigma had to be suppressed even while the project of cultural transmission continued.[91]

Reform, therefore, brought about an epistemic reordering, consolidating caste, gender, and class hierarchies under the moralising shadow of both empire and nation. In Srinivasan's words: "the reformers presented the Hindu temple dancer as a 'prostitute' in order to do away with her, the revivalists presented her as a 'nun' in order to incarnate her afresh".[92] [93]

[91] Roebert shares Arundale's tribute to Gauri Ammal in 1971 as an "uncomfortable awareness of the debt owed to the hereditary dancers": "To a certain extent, all her pupils have benefited from her. Yet there was something they did not capture. A particular posture of the body, a dignity of movement combined with grace and expressiveness of face which had an element of surprise all the time. These were some of the special features of her dance. Perhaps this comes from someone who has inherited by birth the quality which others are not able to have", Robert, *Some Thoughts on the 'Momentous Transition*, 2021.

[92] Srinivasan, *Reform and Revival*, 1869.

2.3 Various voices of reform and of resistance

The reformist field was far from monolithic. The various debates on the abolition are summarised by Anandhi: "To sum up, though the 'conservatives' on the one hand, and the 'progressives' and the caste associations on the other, took diametrically opposite positions on the question of devadasi abolition, all their discourses shared a common feature: their real concern, while they spoke about devadasis, was not devadasis, but issues other than devadasis, and devadasis were a mere trope for them to address these other issues. In talking of devadasis, the 'conservatives' really spoke of indigenous culture, the 'progressives' spoke of how Hindu womanhood should be, and the caste associations spoke of caste honour. Thus, the debate as a whole denied the devadasis their role as subjects and, thus, their own consciousness."[94]

Next, reformist measures did not go unopposed. Many *devadasis* resisted, contesting the paternalism of reformers and defending their professional autonomy as artists. The petition circulated in 1929 by the Madras Presidency *Devadasi*s' Association opposing the abolition put forward the argument that *devadasis* were both critical to Hindu tradition and vital to an Indian national future. Its authors identified *devadasis* as the true guardians of the Hindu religion. For Sreenivas, this petition can be interpreted as a "unique although marginalised intervention in the *Devadasi* debates.[95]

Eschewing the simple solution of transforming *devadasis* into wives, B. Varalakshmamma, a *devadasi*, questioned the limits of conjugality as a site of reform. She emphasised the need to provide other means for *devadasis* to support themselves, including similar demands of employment and eligibility to those made by lower-caste movements. Sreenivas describes her efforts as standing "apart from the conjugal politics of the women's movement" because she called for education and job

[93] "This discourse foregrounds the millennia-old "philosophical" character of the tradition by referring exclusively to ancient Sanskrit treatises and by insisting on the added measure of "spirituality" that the practice of this dance is said to provide—once confined to the secrecy of temples. Yet, when it comes to the "sacred dancers," the most common narrative favours a "decadentist" scenario according to which they were originally pure and chaste, performing solely before the gods; this Brahmanical golden age is then said to have given way to a degeneration of the tradition under the influence of rulers, in which these devoted artists became venal prostitutes catering to royal lust" (translation mine, Leucci, *La danse en Inde du sud*, 154).

[94] Anandhi, *Representing Devadasis,* 741.

[95] Sreenivas, *Creating Conjugal Subjects*, 78.

opportunities to replace their existing skills, thus prioritising *devadasis'* economic autonomy, rather than marital monogamy.[96] Reddy dismissed these dissenting voices on the grounds that "exceptions do not make a rule", insisting on the urgency of saving the *devadasis*.[97] For Soneji, her attitude revealed the extent to which reformers internalised colonial hierarchies of knowledge and respectability.[98]

Among *devadasis*, dissenting views on the abolition depended, partly, on how they believed their economic autonomy would be affected. Logically, those who supported the abolition and integration into the system of conjugal marriages, felt they were being economically exploited. For example, "(...) Dasi Ranganayagi Ammal from Mayuram and Padmavathi Ammal from Tirunelveli claimed that the men of their community used to exploit them by living on the earnings of 'dasi' mothers and sisters".[99] On the contrary, opponents feared the loss of their wealth, as in the case of Duraikkannu, to whom I will return later. With these general divergences in mind, we can address, more specifically, its effect on dance.

[96] Sreenivas, *Creating Conjugal Subjects*, 78.

[97] Roebert, *Some Thoughts*.

[98] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 141.

[99] Anandhi, *Representing Devadasis,* 746.

In the 1930s, the transition was also riven by a conflict between social reformers and art enthusiasts. Srinivasan describes the first as linked to the anti-nautch campaign, and the second group as influenced by the Theosophical movement.[100] The Theosophists contributed to the nationalisation of Indian art and life by idealising dance as India's ancient spiritual heritage.[101] Since most reformers sought the total abolition of *Devadasi* systems through legislation, they had no qualms in seeing the art perish along with the systems. For Reddy and others, no art, however great, could be encouraged at the expense of the universally recognised principles of social purity. On the other side, dancer and Madras advocate E. Krishna Iyer, with several others, claimed that the art form needed to be saved from extinction, even if social reform were needed[102]. Iyer and the Madras Music Academy called for the art to be separated from the temple practice and established as a secular art on the public proscenium stage**.**

Subsequently, revivalists like Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale proceeded to save the art form by ensuring its performance by better persons: girls and women not belonging to the hereditary community. The process of transferring the dance to mostly upper-class girls (outside the hereditary community) was ultimately achieved through institutions like Kalakshetra, which became the chief instrument for this transition.

The *devadasi*'s symbolic and material autonomy, her freedom from conjugal roles, her matrilineal rights, and her aesthetic authority posed a challenge to both colonial and nationalist imaginaries of womanhood. It warrants emphasis that the impulse to erase, purify, or rehabilitate her cannot be divorced from broader anxieties about sexuality, caste mobility, and gendered power. The emergent system of public education, for instance, reinforced caste and gendered exclusions by delegating the question of

---

[100] Srinivasan, *Reform and Revival*.

[101] The Theosophical movement, founded by Madame H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel H. S. Olcott, was a significant cultural and political force in South India, particularly during the late colonial period, characterised by its spiritual goals and its influence on Indian nationalism and the arts, especially on the revival movement that transformed *sadir* into *Bharatanatyam*. The Theosophical Society supplied the necessary funds and organisation to support Rukmini Arundale, an eminent Theosophist herself, as the champion for India's renaissance in the arts, specifically *Bharatanatyam*.

[102] The controversy between the two groups was published in in the Madras papers, notably The Madras Mail and The Hindu in December 1932 (Khokar, *A Momentous Transition*).

devadasi children's admission to "local boards," effectively legitimising discrimination under the guise of respecting "native feeling".[103]

The project of transforming *sadir* into Bharatanatyam, which I will discuss next, was inseparable from this impulse: an attempt to sanitise the dance form by removing it from the hands and bodies, and souls, of its original performers and re-scripting it as a vessel of national purity.

[103] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 133.

Chapter 3 – Aesthetics of purity: From *Sadir* to Bharatanatyam

It is debatable as to whether *sadir* was actually alluded to in *Natya Shastra* (the treatise on theatre / mimesis of around 300 CE). According to Spivak, whose foundational essay*, Can the Subaltern Speak?* provides a critical framework for understanding the "epistemic erasures" and representational dilemmas faced by marginalised groups like the *devadasis,* there is no mention of temple-dancing in this early text.[104] Nevertheless, it does make an interesting distinction between the improper and proper use of the signification-representing body, in consecrated lust and in the consolidation of attraction, respectively. Of import to this discussion, however, is the fact that *shastric* justifications were made during the purification process and later became conventional knowledge in the history of Bharatanatyam.

To delve into the transformation of the dance form, let us recall Sangam poetry, which provides the aesthetic and emotional structures of the foundations of *devadasi* dances. The two categories of *agam* and *puram* are further articulated with the concept of *tinai*, an intricate system linking human emotion to specific landscapes, colours, and social activities. They describe a large array of details concerning nature, time, and other elements, enabling the poets to illustrate the physical and emotional state of the heroine or hero in their poems. For example, the emotion of erotic love, *sambhoga sringara,* corresponds to the Kurinji landscape of the mountains, conventionally imagined at midnight in the cold, dewy season. On the other hand, feelings of waiting and longing are associated with the Mullai landscape of the forest, and are set in the rainy season and in the evening**.** Landscapes, seasons, and hours are used as aesthetic correlates of emotional experience.[105]

[104] Landry, D and Gerald Maclean, eds. *The Spivak Reader. Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. NewYork: Routledge, 1996.

[105] Jacob, Animol and Saritha Sivadas. "The Soundscape of Sangam: Musical traditions and their social significance with special reference to pathittupathu". *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 5, no. 1 (January 2024): 3120–3124.

Bharatanatyam was shaped by the three forms of dance: the purely technical dance (*nritta*), which stands apart from mimed dance (*nritya*), which in turn deploys facial and gestual expression (*abhinaya*). *Abhinaya* is inspired by the emotion arising from the musical melody (*raga*) in combination with *tinai*, and serves as a medium that links the artist and the audience. With this understanding of the emotional and aesthetic landscapes, we can examine how sexual purity unfolded.

3.1 Sexual purity

The twentieth- century reconfiguration of *devadasi* performances into Bharatanatyam marked a radical rupture. As mentioned earlier, the revival of Indian dance was simultaneously an act of appropriation and purification. Hereditary women performers were displaced by a new class of urban, Brahmin women who sought to rescue the dance from its perceived moral decline. Following from the previous chapter, it is clear that this narrative of revival depended upon recasting the nineteenth century as a period of "degeneration," preceded by an imagined golden age when dance existed purely in the service of Hindu devotion.[106]

A telling episode involves Rukmini Devi Arundale. In Tanjore at the Brhadisvara temple, she witnessed a performance of the *Carapentira Pupala Kuravanci* by *devadasis*, living proponents of the earlier tradition. Arundale found the work "artless and low," for it praised a mortal rather than a god. It made her resolve to "recapture its glory."[107] She subsequently choreographed a new version, the *Tirukkurrala Kuravanci*, reoriented toward the god Shiva and purged of erotic content. Presented in Madras in 1944, her sanitised re-creation encapsulated the moralising impulse that would define the modern form.

The purificatory project was underwritten, I have affirmed, by the broader colonial and nationalist discourse that conflated the *Devadasi*'s aesthetic and sexual autonomy with prostitution. Accompanying the prostitution ban was the expulsion of the erotic, the *sringara rasa* that once animated the dance repertoire. *Rasa*, as referred to in *Natya Shastra*, can be explained as the essence of a work of art; its emotion, in both spiritual

[106] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 69.

[107] Roebert, Donavan, *A momentous transition*.

and aesthetic dimensions.[108] *Padam* poetry, like those of Ksetrayya, composed under the patronage of the Nayaka courts, explored desire and the sensuous play between the divine and the human. These compositions imagined womanhood in complex, self-aware, and eroticised terms.[109] Leucci points to textual evidence of love and politics being intertwined: erotic games, amorous relationships full of diplomatic manoeuvres, conquest strategies, betrayals and lies, citing passages from *Manimekali* and *Kamasutra*.[110] These inherent erotic dimensions needed to be removed from the purified dance style.

An evocative comparison provided by Kersenboom of Arundale and Balasaraswati, a dancer from the hereditary community, brings out the resulting effect of the dance form after its erotic dimension had been removed. "It must have been somewhere in 1978 when T. Sankaran, a musician with a *devadasi* background, told me a bittersweet joke: 'You see, when my cousin T. Balasaraswati danced, people said that they experienced *sringara bhakti*; when Rukmini Devi danced they said they experienced *agarbhakti*'".[111] The latter describes the incense stick, a perfunctory ritual accessory, while the former, as we know, relates to sensual, erotic enjoyment. In plain language: "'devotion through eros' was superseded by 'devotion through incense'".[112] I leave it to the reader's imagination to fully grasp the metaphor.

---

[108] The *Natya shastra* enumerates eight *rasas*: *śṛṅgāra (*the "erotic" rasa*), hāsya* (the rasa of comedy*),* karuṇa (the empathetic rasa)*, raudra* (the rasa of anger)*, vīra* (the heroic rasa)*, bhayānaka* (the rasa of fear), *bībhatsā* (the rasa of disgust), and *adbhuta* (the rasa of wonder). A ninth was added later*, santa*. This made it *nava rasa*, or the nine emotions. "Varying from philosopher to philosopher, the number of rasas could vary from one single rasa, like for example in the work of king Bhoja (1025-1055) who viewed śṛṅgāra (the rasa of love) as the base of all rasas, to an infinite number of rasas, as was the case in the work of Rudraṭa (c. 850) and Bhaṭṭa-Lollaṭa (c. 825)" (Groeneweg, Lara. "The position of rasa in dance in contemporary India". Doctoral dissertation, Ghent University. (2018). https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/508/225/RUG01-002508225_2018_0001_AC.pdf, 7). Groeneweg provides a more detailed analysis of the concept of rasa: "When analyzed internally, rasa is a representation of human behavior. The characters will express a certain basic emotion, and while analyzing it will be questioned whether this analysis is a good and convincing representation. Externally the emphasis is on the reaction of the audience to these representations. Rasa, as previously stated, depends on the perspective. Either rasa is a characteristic of the text, a characteristic of the audience, or is confined in the exchange between the two" (*Ibidem,* 63).

[109] Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali*, 44.

[110] Leucci*, Au royaume de l'amour*.

[111] Kersenboom, *Ibidem*, 60.

[112] *Ibidem*, 17.

What emerged, then, was a dance purified of its sensuality, its lineage disavowed, and its history rewritten. The *devadasi*'s erotic expressivity, once integral to the sacred and poetic imagination of South India, was reclassified as moral excess, expelled from the newly respectable national stage[113]. In this process, the *devadasi*'s body, previously seen as both sacred and sensual, was bifurcated: her expressive gestures were retained as aesthetic fragments, but her social presence as a desiring, autonomous woman was excised. This created a dancing body in which the affective and corporeal wholeness of *abhinaya* (gestural expression in dance) was dismantled. The dancer's erotic intelligence, once integral to her performance and personhood, was reclassified as vulgar. Sexual containment became the signifier of moral worth, aligning the new dancer with nationalist femininity and erasing the cultural legitimacy of erotic expression.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with *sringara* seen as a moral threat, the courtesan's salon, once considered a place of aesthetic refinement, was reimagined as the antithesis of the conjugal home. The *java.i*, a genre of Telugu and Kannada erotic lyrics, sharing some similarities with the older *padam* genre, was distinguished by its light-hearted, playful, and openly erotic style. Defying simple categorisation, it reflected the hybrid, cosmopolitan culture of colonial Madras, incorporating elements from Telugu poetry, Parsi theatrical styles, and even English phrases. Because of its erotic content and secular nature, it was often dismissed by cultural elites as an aesthetically degenerate form of expression.[114]

---

[113] Iyer, seeking to revive the dance without its problematic aspects, wrote in his book, *Personalities in Present Day Music (1933):* "… the art requires not only to be rejuvenated but also to be overhauled a little if it should have any real appeal these days. As it is, it is mostly confined to erotic songs … In addition to existing compositions of the desirable type, new compositions of good taste and quality may have to be brought out in 'rasas' other than 'sringara' as well …There is still something of a low atmosphere in a nautch performance in marriage and other private functions about which social reformers rightly complain. That is the very reason why the art should be taken out of private parties and given a respectable platform amidst respectable audiences when alone it can be shorn of its undesirable features. Above all, persons belonging to respectable classes must boldly take to it" (quoted in Roebek, *A momentous transition*).

[114] "An example of tailoring the courtesan heritage to the new 'spiritual' needs is seen in the varœam CÅmiyai aÍaittu vÅÊi, a major choreography in rÅga KamÅs and tÅla Ådi by Ponniah (1804–63). Musically, this varœam culminates in its last couplet. Compositions for dance are usually set to rakti rÅgas, that is, melodic types that create a maximum of sensuous, emotional affect, leading to an almost sure seductive effect. CÅmiyai aÍaittu vÅÊi is an eloquent example of the seductive forces that inhere within music. Today it is customary to dance abstract steps, set to the solfeggio syllables of the last couplet, and to finish the choreography on this abstract note. As far as I know, the poetry that breathes life into the tonal material is always deleted. However, its prosody and mimetic imagery take the musical beauty to unsurpassed height. Despite this artistic fact, today's artists fall silent at this very point. In

Another example of erasure is that of the book *Radhika Santwanam*, written by an eighteenth- century courtesan of the Tanjore court, Muddupalani, described as "a subversion of traditional erotic genres in that it centred on women's sexual pleasures".[115] The re-edition in 1910 by Bangalore Nagarathnamma, "herself a learned woman, renowned musician and courtesan and a Gayaka (a member of one of the endogamous groups from which *devadasis* were drawn)", was met with outrage; all copies were seized by colonial authorities.[116]

Then the ideological reconstitution of their image, was echoed in the populist and literary discourses of the time, which depicted *devadasis* as disease-bearing, manipulative seductresses threatening the moral hygiene of the city and the family. Popular Tamil literature of the 1930s and 1940s, such as K. Kurucamitas's *Taci Kankappattu* (1943), portrayed the *devadasi* as a "polluting" seductress responsible for disease and moral decay, warning men to "torture them and make sure they flee," and celebrating the "cleansing" of Madras from such "filth".[117]

Putcha's comparison of Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi reveals the difference created by the expression of sexual desire: "In 1986, *bharatanatyam* was well established as the classical dance of south India, if not India as a whole. *Kuchipudi,* in contrast, was not as well known in or outside of India. A common explanation I heard for why most young dancers began their training with *bharatanatyam* was that it, in comparison to *Kuchipudi,* possessed a well-articulated training system (also known as *adavu sampradayam).* Additionally, unlike *bharatanatyam, kuchipudi* required the ability to express sexual desire—something that could only be taught once a dancer was 'more mature. In other words, *bharatanatyam's* classicism was not only located in its codified pedagogical structure but also defined by how it managed and defined age-appropriate sexual expression in dance".[118] It is then no coincidence that

fact, most of them do not even know that the last movement contains lines of poetry" (Kersenboom, *Śṛṅgaranta: Eros Fragmented, in Music, Dance and the Art of Seduction*. Delft: Eburon, 2013, 18).

[115] Nair, *Prostitution and the State*, 3163.

[116] *Ibidem*, 3164.

[117] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 101.

[118] Putcha, Rumya S. *The Dancer's Voice: Performance and Womanhood in Transnational India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023, 73.

Bharatanatyam, and not Kuchipudi, was promoted as India's principal classical dance form.

The revival cultivated a hostile imaginary of the *Devadasi* as an unredeemable figure, whose only salvation lay in complete withdrawal from her art or conversion to domestic chastity. Ironically, sexual purity became both the requirement for and the reward of social respectability.

3.2 Cultural purity

The reinvention of Bharatanatyam in the early twentieth century coincided with the consolidation of what Soneji calls "the South Indian cultural bourgeoisie", among whom practitioners of Bharatanaṭyam in particular, assess the past in terms of [...] hierarchy of taste".[119] The bodily idioms of hereditary performance, "loose limbs, unstructured improvisation, explicit and excessive eroticism", were condemned as *paccai cinkaram*, or "raw eroticism," and therefore deemed "in bad taste." In contrast, the newly reconstituted Bharatanatyam was celebrated as embodying "antiquity and universality," aligning sacred devotion with a modern sense of discipline and decorum.[120]

The reconstitution of Carnatic music in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries parallels the cultural purification that reshaped Bharatanatyam. Hindustani music of North India, on the other hand, was considered less authentic, because it was seen as a syncretic mix of Persian, Muslim and other influences. In music, as in dance, "purity" was manufactured by anchoring practice in an imagined Hindu antiquity: composers were reread through Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy, their works treated as extensions of an ancient sacred canon, and the repertoire reframed as inherently religious and therefore legitimately classical.[121] As Brahmin musicians and institutions in Madras consolidated authority, they established a normative equation: Hindu,

[119] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 25.

[120] *Ibidem*. 40.

[121] Meduri, Avanthi explains how classical was also defined outside India: "Classical dance forms, including bharatanatyam and kathak, were displayed as Indian national forms in the international cultural exchange programs that India negotiated with the West in the 1960s", "The Transfiguration of Indian/Asian Dance in the United Kingdom: Contemporary "Bharatanatyam" in Global Contexts". *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2008, 289.

synonymous with Brahmin, in turn synonymous with classical, which rendered the musical tradition pure and culturally elevated. Modern scholarly methods were then mobilised to naturalise this lineage by linking contemporary practice to Sanskrit treatises and temple ritual, producing a vision of music as the uninterrupted expression of a timeless Hindu civilisation.

Even Tamil nationalist scholars, who rejected the Aryan lineage ascribed to Brahmins, ultimately pursued their own model of Hindu purity. They claimed a Dravidian antiquity for Carnatic music by linking it to the *Cilappattikaram* and by replacing Vedic sanctity with the Bhakti of the *Tevaram*. The *Tevaram* is a corpus of devotional Tamil hymns composed by the sixty-three Nayanars, mystical poet-saints of the Tamil Saiva tradition whose verses form part of the *Tirumurai* canon and continue to be ritually performed in temples by traditional singers known as *oduvars* (among whom the aforementioned Tanjore Quartet brothers).[122] By invoking these figures, whose statues conventionally encircle the deity Shiva within the inner sanctum of South Indian temples, revivalists constructed a direct lineage from contemporary Tamil religious music to the Nayanars, thereby asserting that the tradition's true origins were Tamil rather than Sanskritic. Despite their opposing political orientations, both Brahmin reformers and Tamil revivalists participated in the same purification project: securing classical status by aligning music with a purified, male-oriented Hindu past that excluded the contributions of women in this field.

More specifically to dance, the reinvention involved a reverse process: Sanskritisation. This purification process accentuated the gap between high and low cultures and operated on several levels: Linguistic, where Sanskrit came to be seen as the most culturally legitimate language; gender-related; caste-related; the latter two will be explored in subsequent chapters. In relation to language, a process of textualisation and codification ensued. As early as the Maratha courts of Tanjore, texts such as *Sangita Saramrta* (composed under King Tulaja I) had sought to reconcile local traditions with Sanskrit theory. In doing so, they replaced Tamil and Telugu terminologies for dance movements with Sanskrit equivalents, foreshadowing the

[122] Kersenboom, Saskia. "Marabu, the Inherent Flexibility of the Karnatak Tradition: The Example of Bharatanatyam." In *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India*, 217.

linguistic purification that would later define the classical canon. This codification of dance technique implied its conversion from lived practice into textual knowledge.

Secondly, the process resulted in the transfer of authority from hereditary women to hereditary male dance masters and scholars, the *nattuvanavars*. The four brothers of the Tanjore Quartet, Chinniah, Ponniah, Vadivelu, and Sivanandam, contributed towards systematising the dance into the sequence familiar today: *Alarippu*, *Jatiswaram*, *Sabdam*, *Padavarnam*, *Padam*, *Ragamalika*, and *Tillana*. Originally *Oduvars,* ritual singers, they had been brought to Tanjore to recite *Tevaram* hymns and conduct *nattuvangam* at the Brhadisvara temple. Under the tutelage of Muttuswami Dikshitar, a Brahmin composer who pioneered the syncretic "*nottusvaram"* genre by adapting Western marching band melodies into Sanskrit devotional hymns,[123] they mastered music and became fluent in Telugu and Sanskrit, composing in these languages as well as in Tamil.

It is important to note that before the Tanjore Quartet, other *nattuvanars* are mentioned and acclaimed in vernacular texts on dance, poetry and music. If the Tanjore Quartet came to be hailed in nationalist histories as innovators and reformers, with the brothers occupying "iconic status among traditional non-Brahmin musicians,"[124] it is also because the new generations of Brahmin dancers learned from *nattuvanars* from the Tanjore region, and the brothers made the most of their artistic lineage, despite it being a recent affiliation. They were relatively newcomers and relied on this strong, well-known pedigree to consolidate their artistic background. At the same time, their skills as masters and composers only reinforced their reputation.

Nevertheless, their fame rested "upon the reconfiguration of *Devadasi* dance thought to have occurred under their supervision." This shift replaced "lyric eroticism" with a new emphasis on "virtuosity, training, and presentation".[125] In other words, the bodily intelligence and sensual expressivity of women were subsumed into a systematised, male-authored pedagogy.

[123] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 184.

[124] Soneji, *Ibidem*, 77.

[125] *Ibidem.*

This broader logic of cultural purification became the template for dance revival, or more accurately, dance re-construction. By establishing classical art as that which emanates from a sanctified Hindu antiquity, whether Vedic-Sanskritic or Dravidian-Bhakti, revivalists were able to detach dance from its hereditary, often non-Brahmin and *devadasi* practitioners. Music and dance were thus simultaneously cleansed, classicised, and Brahminised, producing a new cultural order in which purity defined legitimacy.[126] In this manner, the sanskritisation of dance has made association with the *Natya Shastra* into a defining feature of what is considered classical dance, a view shared by academics, as well as practitioners. Classical dance is defined by using terminology believed to originate in the *Natya Shastra*.[127]

Yet, the hereditary legacy was not easy to dislodge. Dance revivalist E. Krishna Iyer's 1933 appraisal of the new students' inherited style noted that their art combined "appreciable *abhinaya* (expressive communication) and considerable foot work in *adavujathis*". He also observed that they displayed "variegated *adavujathis* in scintillating cascades" which were "vivacious in effect, though at times they are carried to excess".[128] This suggests that the hereditary style and its specific technical characteristics (extensive *adavujathis* and vivid *abhinaya*) which provided the foundation for the new art, were hard to remove.

[126] Chakravorty identifies three key factors that contributed to the success of the sanskritisation of dance. First, orientalist scholarship played a significant role: under its influence, linear historical narratives were traced back to Sanskrit texts, which orientalists regarded as the foundation of Indian culture. Second, these Sanskrit treatises, such as the Naṭyashastra in the context of dance, were taken up by Hindu nationalists as authoritative sources for constructing a continuous Indian history and cultural tradition, presented as a revival of the past. Third, by anchoring dance in these newly articulated Vedic "roots," it was redefined as a tradition with a Hindu Brahmanical identity, one that resonates with Indian audiences, including younger generations in contemporary India. Chakravorty, Pallabi. "Hegemony, Dance and Nation: The Construction of the Classical Dance in India." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 21 (2): 107–20. 1998.

[127] However, the notion of classical dance forms having their roots in the *Natya Shastra* is a recent construction, given that during the time the *Natya Shastra* was written, the division in classical dance and folk dance did not exist.

[128] Roebert, *A momentous transition*.

3.3 Institutionalising purity

In the institutional settings such as Arundale's Kalaksetra, the canon of Bharatanaṭyam was formalised around the cultural bourgeoisie mentioned above, also called Brahmin taste. It drew on a sensibility that favoured restraint, textual authority, and aesthetic refinement over improvisation and sensuality.[129] The dance was reframed as an athletic, disciplined art form demanding physical prowess and agility. Since the technique needed to be codified and standardised, it replaced the diversity of techniques and interpretative styles, with a single pedagogical uniformity, establishing a classical canon. Not only did this change the flexibility of dance interpretation, but it also required the formalisation of musical understanding: how a song should be interpreted through its lyrics and melody, and conformity to the definitive version of a particular *ragam* or *talam*. Earlier, there existed a plurality of variations and improvisations within any given *ragam*, without one being considered more legitimate than another. Leucci explains how Brahmin revivalists claimed that the only textual authority on classical technique was the *Natya Shastra*, whereas hereditary dancers looked to a multiplicity of sources and interpretations.[130]

From these Brahminical institutions then emerged the most polished, celebrated dancers. While a few non-Brahmin practitioners entered the field, their participation often reinforced rather than subverted this upper-caste aesthetic order, because they were the rare exceptions.[131] In place of the *devadasis*' expressive individuality and interpretive freedom emerged a vision of the dancer as chaste, pious, and contained, an emblem of cultural respectability.

[129] Leucci describes her experience at Kalakshetra in 1987 and how she was surprised that "none of them appears to express any individuality in their dance, as though all genuine sensitivity were eclipsed in favour of rigorous, mechanical steps, gestures, and facial expressions. These very expressions are so stereotyped that the performers seem almost interchangeable" (translation mine, *La danse en Inde du sud*, 140).

[130] Leucci, *La danse en Inde du sud*, 154.

[131] Pillai reveals the absence of real diversity of Bharatanatyam practitioners: "These tokenistic representations of diversity do not challenge the basic structures of power—the cultural spaces, critics, pedagogy, scholarly representation, institutions—that are still undoubtedly Brahminic and work to keep Brahmins at their centre", Pillai, N. "Re-Casteing the Narrative of Bharatanatyam." *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 9 (26 Feb. 2022).

Equally significant was the separation of voice and body. In traditional Indian performing arts, the difference between music and dance is almost non-existent, the art of dance being built on the art of music. Where distinctions exist, they highlight the intersections of the two. While the *devadasis*' art had united singing, dancing, and emotional expression, in the reconstituted Bharatanatyam, the dancer's body was disciplined to move in silence, the voice relegated to the accompanying singer.

In this process of stylistic transformation, the classical was set in opposition to the natural. Improvisation, spontaneity, and the interpretive play that once animated *sadir* gave way to rigid codification, although the movement terminology of Bharatanatyam today still bears the traces of *sadir*.[132] The previously-defined gestures, *mudras*, encode a spectrum of moods and devotional states, often directed toward divine figures. They are, as described earlier, strongly associated with the poetics of correspondence between nature, affect, and action, expressed by *tinai*. Yet *mudras*[133], once open to multiple meanings, where Krishna, for instance, could be imagined in many forms, were standardised as one correct technique.

The private setting was condemned in favour of the public.[134] Iyer believed that the "low atmosphere in a nautch performance in marriage and other private functions" drew the social reformers' objections. To make the dance respectable and "shorn of its undesirable features," it needed to be taken out of private parties and given a

[132] O'Shea, Janet. *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007. It is of note that whereas the newly constructed term bharatanatyam is derived from the Sanskrit root *nṛt*. and thus subscribes to the idea that this movement system may be referred to as "dance", its previous name *sadir* does not.

[133] Spivak interprets Mudras in terms of its cultural representation "One of the most cliché items routinely noticed in Indian classical dance is the *mudra*—or the range of expressive hand-head-eye gestures. The Sanskrit word *mudra* is also coin—a common concept-metaphor straddling the money-form and the simple semiotics of stylized gesture, capable of considerable elaboration, but incapable of incorporating contingency. It is also, characteristically, the word for engraving, imprint. It is not by chance, then, that it is through this already-in-place value-form that the expressive repertoire of the Hollywood musical rushes in, culture-marked with the proper name "India," ready for exchange" (Landry and Maclean, *The Spivak Reader*, 269).

[134] For Saxena, the public space was not synonymous with greater agency and autonomy: "coordination and confinement of women was not limited to the domestic sphere. Even the 'public sphere' was a confined space for women, be it in temples, in visual arts (representations), in performing arts (music and dance) and physical pleasure (prostitution). Women were given a secondary position even when their lives were not directly dominated by men. The public space offered to them by society was in strictly defined parameters" ("Ganikas in Early India: Its Genesis and Dimensions." *Social Scientist* 34, no. 11/12, 2006, 2).

"respectable platform amidst respectable audiences".[135] The proscenium stage thus gradually replaced the intimate salon.

The new revived Bharatanatyam eventually replaced all the other names that its roots were previously known by: *nautch, cinna melam, dasi attam,* and *sadir*. Diverse forms and corresponding identities were swept under one term. Names were also thus strategically deployed in the efforts aimed at divesting dance of its negative, impure associations. The analysis here confirms that the classical in the arts, here in dance, is not an inherent aesthetic quality rooted in ancient purity. It is, on the contrary, a modern cultural construction tied to caste authority and social control. Aesthetic reform also redefined the very terms of moral citizenship and national belonging, the subject of the next chapter.

[135] Roebert, *A momentous transition*.

Chapter 4 – Ethics of purity: Citizenship and the moral nation

4.1 Tightening caste identity

One of the most striking indicators of India's nation-building process was the flourishing of legislation devoted to defining citizenship. These laws spanned a broad spectrum, from regulating women's public performances to governing the very sexual desires those performances were thought to provoke. Perhaps the most insidious form of purity underpinning the dance revival was that of national belonging. The reimagined Bharatanatyam dancer was hailed as a symbol of Indian tradition and womanhood, a bearer of heritage, a daughter of the nation. Yet, the women who had once embodied this art were denied entry into that very nationalist modernity.[136] As highlighted earlier, reformers like Reddy sought to remake *devadasis* into respectable citizens, wives, mothers, and workers in socially sanctioned roles. But the vast majority of these women were excluded from such transformations, remaining on the margins of legal, economic, and civic life.

The caste issue discussed in chapter 1, resurfaces as one of the fundamental misconceptions in colonial research on *devadasis*: the misapplication of the term *caste* to describe the community, whereas only a distinct way of life stood out. While the role was hereditary, as pointed out, it did not automatically confer professional entitlement without the correct training and qualification. Various local communities (*melakkarar*, *nayanakkarar*, and *dasi* groups of the Tanjore district) were, indeed, closely associated with the *devadasis*. It was only in the aftermath of reform that these various service-based categories coalesced under the more prestigious caste label *isai vellalar*. The *isai vellalar* and the *devadasis* belonged to the same community but were not originally a caste, rather a group of artists. The former group adopted the caste title

[136] In explaining the significance of love in India, Leucci explains that there it engendered fear and trepidation: "In India today, "love" is often regarded as a powerful emotion—one, however, that individuals are expected to approach with caution, in contrast to the attachment that emerges from cohabitation after marriage. In other words, the feelings between spouses are understood as a consequence of marriage rather than its cause. The marital relationship is primarily framed in terms of respect and duty and should not be conflated with sensual desire, romantic feeling (*rati-bhava*), or its aesthetic representation (*śṛṅgāra-rasa*), so cherished in literature and the arts!" (Translation mine, *Au royaume de l'amour*, 2020).

to give themselves legitimacy, and to distance themselves from the social stigma attached to their earlier association with the *devadasis*.

This shift signified a transition from a differently organised occupational and ritual system centred on temple service to a politicised caste association. In turn, caste aligned itself with the cultural nationalism of regional non-Brahmin political movements such as the DK (Dravidar Kazhagam) and the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam)[137], thereby asserting political identity and social prestige.

Once caste was established, it led women from *Devadasi* lineages towards what Soneji calls the "borderlands of modern citizenship." They inherited not freedom but "the shame of not belonging", a legacy of reform's failure and its "subterfuges of respectability".[138] Large numbers of these women live in a kind of social and civil limbo. In Tamil-speaking regions, their caste identity as *isai vellalar* women cannot be publicly claimed without being interpreted as a euphemism for sexual transgression. As Soneji writes, "they are understood to embody a sexual 'abundance that is primarily met with suspicion'".[139] The Tamil terms *taci* or *tevatiyal*, - the first taken from the Sanskrit *dasi:* female devotee or servant, and *tevatiyal* meaning *"she at the feet of the deity", i.e.,* female devotee, servant -, continue to circulate as insults employed scornfully to define the *devadasi* as a "whore" by inscribing stigma into the quotidian lives of these women. Unlike the men of their communities, who used caste mobility to access education, patronage, and political representation, women remained largely excluded from both social and aesthetic citizenship. "Everyone seems to know who they were, and consequently, who they are".[140]

[137] The DMK was formed by C. N. Annadurai after he split from the DK. As regional political organisations, the DK and DMK played a significant role in reorganising social and cultural identities, especially following the abolition of the *devadasi* system. Both parties provided immense patronage to male performers (such as *nagaswaram* players), which favoured them financially (Sreenivas, *Creating Conjugal Subjects*; Soneji, *Bharatanatyam*).

[138] Soneji, *Bharatanatyam*, 39.

[139] *Ibidem*.

[140] *Ibidem*. 40.

For women within *devadasi* communities, the promise of reform yielded little material transformation. Women whose lives aligned with normative ideals of wifehood were selectively elevated as exemplary *devadasis* (most notably popular singer M. S. Subbulakshmi), while the majority remained excluded from incorporation into middle-class moral and social orders. Those who could not pass as reformed citizens were pushed into precarious forms of existence, some became commercial sex workers, others lived as second wives of civic elites, or entered early endogamous marriages driven by the social paranoia of respectability.

4.2 Creating the 'other'

The marginalisation of hereditary dance communities in favour of upper-caste Brahmin women began, as stated previously, with their exclusion from the status of legitimate dancers and culminated in the symbolic positioning of Brahmin performers as embodiments of the respectable nation. In Leucci's account of her experience as a foreigner learning dance in South India, she depicts how non-Brahmins, even if members of the hereditary community, were discriminated against, along with foreigners. "I, as a foreigner, and she, as a member of the hereditary community of artists, were discriminated against and humiliated as non-Brahmins, excluded from the world of reformed dance in Madras. The situation seems all the more absurd to me because, not long ago, this very Brahmin elite had expropriated these artists of their knowledge, depriving them of their means of livelihood, only to now reverse the roles by making them pay — "at their request," and with reluctance and disdain — for the very dance training that once belonged to them".[141]

The *devadasis* were pushed out by the new elite, who danced, differently, but not only. They "also earned doctorates in and on dance, constructed and reconstructed, and theorised on the data available in temple inscriptions, architecture, sculpture, libraries and fieldwork. The post-1947 period was one of intensive research, publication and

[141] Leucci, Tiziana, "La danse en Inde du sud, entre conflits générationnels, identitaires, de genre et de caste." *MUSIcultures* 44, no. 1: 134-162, 2017, 150 (translation mine).

hard work, propagating the traditional dance [...] under its new name *bharata natyam* as post-colonial, national heritage".[142]

The ideal woman, in the nationalist imaginary, the chaste, reproductive, and contained female citizen became the cornerstone of a moral polity, while the *devadasi* embodied its threatening excess. The inability of *devadasis* to be "fixed" within the dominant political frameworks of the time underscores their radical liminality. If citizenship was contingent on moral conformity and caste legibility, the *devadasi*, by virtue of her non-conjugal sexuality, matrilineal inheritance, ambiguous caste location and diverse cultural practices, fit into no clear-cut category.

O'Shea argues that the "*devadasis* were threatening to nationalists because their existence fit the British image of the sexually unrestrained, inferior 'native.'" In the nationalist demand for unity, "the *Devadasis* were threatening not just because they lived outside Victorian standards of womanhood, but also because they represented an uncomfortable diversity of cultural practices and origins".[143] The *devadasis* thus exemplified the other: the incomprehensible, unidentifiable, unclassifiable other. The very features that once granted them, to some extent, ritual authority, economic independence, embodied knowledge, and a complex relation to lineage, now became disqualifications from nationhood.

This political erasure mirrored the *devadasis*' social disenfranchisement: there existed "no real political, social, or aesthetic citizenship that *devadasis* can claim in the post-reform period".[144] In literary and aesthetic terms, too, this marginalisation took shape through erasure. Texts written in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu during the colonial period portrayed *vesyas,* courtesans or salon performers, whose artistry and social ambiguity unsettled later nationalist efforts to purify cultural origins. "These texts are not about the idealised '*Devadasi temple-woman*' retrieved by contemporary historians, but rather about the courtesans—professional dancing women." The

[142] Kersenboom, *Śṛṅgaranta,* 19.

[143] O'Shea, *At Home in the World*, 86-87.

[144] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 138.

stereotypes embedded in such literature "fuel the conscious exclusion of the history of salon performances from the writings of nationalist historians of dance".[145]

Devadasis and their practices appeared to be one of the focal points that determined how the outside world perceived India. As a result, the shift from a posture of fascination, bordering on abhorrence, to one of deference towards India viewed as the spiritual destination of the world, pivoted on the disciplining and fixing of the *devadasis*' dance. We have seen that this was achieved through stringent control over elements that were deemed morally unstable: *devadasis* were censored, suppressed, erased, while, an unambiguously moral and categorically spiritual version of Hinduism was simultaneously produced and proclaimed as authoritative.

The version of India projected onto the global stage frequently presents itself as timeless and continuous, as though cultural traditions have moved effortlessly from an ancient past into the present. Yet this appearance of continuity is anything but organic. What is offered as cultural inheritance is the outcome of deliberate endeavours that I have presented here: shaped by upper-caste authority, repeatedly edited in moments of disruption and reform, and disciplined through encounters with colonial moral regimes and, later, driven by the aesthetic and ethical expectations of various nationalist audiences.

Anti-abolitionist resistance movements were not potent enough to stall the process, mostly because they could not be reduced to a single ideological narrative. It was already noted that *devadasis* articulated anti-abolitionist politics that were both radical and sensitive to lived realities. Consequently, the diverse views could not be effectively incorporated into hegemonic ideological frameworks, such as Congress nationalism or the non-Brahmin movement, and they were gradually sidelined. The highly self-conscious definition of classical culture has been very exclusive and dismissive of these other realities and pluralities.

[145] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 138.

4.3 The outcome: from matrilineal to patrilineal, from female skill to male authority

In the aftermath of the reform and revival, gendered property relations were reconstituted and the political transfer of power from women to men was sanctioned. The moral project was accompanied by a mechanism for installing patrilineal authority where matrilineal rights had previously prevailed.

First, as mentioned earlier, it started with the textualisation and institutionalisation of dance by male custodians. Then, it spread to economic and legal rights: The most tangible record of dispossession is the alienation of land and the erosion of women's property rights. In 1929, the *Madras Hindu Religious Endowment (Amendment) Act* transformed the terms of *devadasis*' access to land grants. Nair highlights the connection between land rights and morality: "The modernising process that signalled shifts and changes in the position of women within families, and in definitions of domestic and non-domestic sexuality, especially as it was aligned with access of women to property within and beyond the family".[146] Despite reformist gestures, such as Muthulakshmi Reddy's interventions in the 1930s to enfranchise temple-linked land grants (*manyalu*) in women's names without making temple service compulsory, women benefited little. For many, it meant losing all their lands, houses, profession and customary rights, which had been granted to them in exchange for their services in the temple, without receiving any form of compensation from the temple, nor the State. If they got some control over property and income in the short term, the longer-term effect was to render *devadasi* property rights more similar to those of the majority of Hindu women.[147]

[146] Nair, *Prostitution and the State*, 3158.

[147] Sreenivas gives more details: "The situation of *devadasi*s who held the title to inam land—rather than just the rights to income—was somewhat different. Because the land was held in their name, albeit with the requirement to pay annual rents, these *devadasi*s could presumably pass on an inheritance to their heirs; their legal relationship to property appears more akin to ownership than to the dependency that characterized a "woman's estate." However, at the same time, the legislation decentered dedicated women from the ownership, control, and inheritance of property within families. Since *devadasi*s' ritual and artistic training was no longer necessary to maintain household income, the principle of inam enfranchisement introduced men into a line of property succession that had hitherto favored dedicated women. In practice, property was transferred to *devadasi*s' male kin in the wake of the new law" (*Creating Conjugal Subjects*, 86).

Legislative changes thus often facilitated, rather than prevented, the usurpation of *inam* and *manyalu* holdings once controlled by women.[148] Land grants were routinely appropriated by male relatives or temple officials. The rhetoric of rescue therefore, masked a general transfer of economic security from women to men.

The gendered nature of this transfer is visible in the political careers of men whose families sprang from *devadasi* lineages. Soneji points out that the meteoric rise of figures such as Muthuvel Karunanidhi, son of Anjukam Ammaiyar of a Tirukkuvalai *devadasi* household, testifies to a distinctly gendered success of reform: men were able to reinvent themselves as legitimate, powerful actors within the non-Brahmin polity, while the women of the same communities remained stigmatised and disenfranchised.[149]

Notably, the reform field was populated by men and male-led institutions who framed abolition as a means to install conjugality and patrilineal inheritance. While some defended concubinage as a legitimate cultural practice, others deployed nationalist rhetoric to condemn sexual vice and uphold Brahminical conjugality. "On the one hand, *devadasis* were by and large the mistresses of upper-caste elites, including Brahmins, and thus it is not at all surprising that Brahmin men would defend their own rights to this institutionalised form of concubinage by adopting an anti-abolition stance. On the other hand, some Brahmins (such as Viresalingam) were instrumental in pointing out the immorality of concubinage".[150] Both positions drew on nationalist idioms, but to different ends: one to defend male privilege, the other to justify a reordering of women's lives in service of patriarchal respectability.

However, paradoxically, some radical critics of the *devadasi* systems attacked the institution precisely because it enshrined the sexual privileges of upper-caste men. This was the case of Periyar. As mentioned earlier, Periyar's ideas were seen to promote women's independence and status, garnering many women supporters, including

[148] Sreenivas, *Ibidem*.

[149] Soneji, *Bharatanatyam,* 130.

[150] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 142.

devadasis.[151] Nevertheless, even Periyar's opposition to practices concerning *devadasis* did not translate into an unambiguous defence of women's land and property autonomy. Certainly, Periyar did not promote marriage as a solution for *devadasis,* even if his self-respect marriages, without Brahmin nor Hindu ceremonial rituals, removed some of the rigid norms. Nor did he ground his discourse in ideals of chastity. Yet, if we consider Soneji's views, Periyar's program ultimately "placed the control over women's sexuality securely within the boundaries of the [male, non-Brahmin] community".[152] In other words, even critiques that appeared emancipatory often reproduced male, though maybe not Brahmin, control over women's status and assets.

Here too, Gandhi's position exemplifies the paternalism that underwrote much reformist rhetoric. He exhorted communities to "find every dancing girl, and shame men into shunning the wrong they are doing,"[153] demanding their moral reformation rather than listening to their voices. He urged conversion to artisanal labour and the spinning of khadi, hand-spun fabric, as a means of "purification," framing rehabilitation not as social restitution but as penitential domestic labour: "The *Devadasi* class being small, it must not be a difficult matter to find five or six handicrafts for them… We require men and women—preferably women who been trained in these handicrafts and lead a pure life—to take up this cause of reformation of their fallen sisters".[154] Gandhi's rhetoric thus translated moral purification into an expectation of female domestic labour and economic dependence, another instrument for reinstating patriarchal control.

The hypocrisy of male reformers was laid bare by women within the affected communities. In 1927 T. Duraikkannu, secretary of the Madras *Devadasi* Association,

---

[151] In Periyar's model of society, gender relationships were separated from Brahminical patriarchy and women's rights over their physical, sexual and reproductive choices were celebrated. At a time when there was widespread condemnation of birth control, influenced by the views of leaders like Gandhi, Periyar advocated for women to be allowed access to birth control measures. Further, women were given the right to choose partners as well as divorce them and remarry; Widowhood was not penalised through religious beliefs. All in all, heterosexual partnerships were transformed by advocating for the erasure of gender hierarchies and roles; the sharing of domestic work, child-rearing were all paths to love through equality and service to society.

[152] Soneji*, Unfinished Gestures,* 155.

[153] *Ibidem*.

[154] Duraikkannu handbill, 1927; cited in Soneji, *Ibidem*, 139.

publicly accused the men claiming to support abolition, many of them members of the emergent *isai vellalar* identity, of self-interest: the bill to abolish *pottukkattu* "will put an end to the social practices and hereditary rights of our community," she warned, and argued that the agitation's male supporters sought above all "to inherit property".[155] Her indictment is stark: those who proclaimed reform as emancipation were often the very actors who stood to gain economically and politically from the removal of women's matrilineal rights.

The legislative and social outcomes confirm Duraikkannu's charge. Abolition and purification supplied the legal and ideological pretext for men to invent new caste designations, the previously noted *isai vellalar* in Tamil regions, *suryabalija* in Telugu areas, and thereby secure social mobility, state patronage, and political power. Meanwhile, the women who once held ritual and economic authority lost *inam* and *manyalu* entitlements, funeral prerogatives, and the ritual legitimacy that anchored their autonomy. Nair exposes how the fear felt by upper-caste men regarding economic entitlements cuts across several contentious issues, such as gender, caste, and land ownership: "The concern for the abolition of the *Devadasi* system was rooted in fears of female empowerment within the new colonial dispensation. Thus, it noted that some dancing girls of Madras were very rich, lived in large houses, kept carriages and paid large amounts of municipal taxes: this entitled them to vote in municipal committees. The paper suggested that these rights be withdrawn to reduce the embarrassment faced by respectable gentlemen who had to beg these "low women for their vote".[156]

Thus, the reform project, nominally about female upliftment and moral rehabilitation, functioned in practice as a patriarchal expropriation. When Hindu Law was amended in 1933 to finally expand women's rights, the primary beneficiaries were middle-class, upper-caste women whose sexuality had already been folded into the ideal of domestic, monogamous respectability. By framing women's property rights as anomalous whenever they were associated with non-patriarchal forms of marriage and family, the

[155] Duraikkannu handbill, 1927; cited in Soneji, *Ibidem*, 139.

[156] The paper she refers to is one that appeared in the Madras Press: "In 1891. however, the *Vrittanta Chintamani,* echoing the fears that were voiced in the Madras press", Nair, *Prostitution and the State*, 3159.

state was able to extend such rights only within the confines of the patriarchal household.[157]

Even today, in the transmission of Bharatanatyam, the guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) relationships persists[158] and sheds light on the multiple levels of appropriation of the dance form underlined here: from women to men, lower-caste to high caste, erotic to sanitised. Putcha points at the unequal relationship: "Brahmin men teaching young women about cultural history and fashioning the gendered body into a vessel through dance and music. Such pedagogy did not require knowledge or even skill, only authority, couched in the reverent tones of patriarchal casteism".[159]

By the early twentieth century, the same process unfolded across other popular arts. *Devadasi* women who had sustained performance traditions found new spaces in Tamil drama and early cinema. Almost all of the earliest female stars of Tamil cinema like T. R. Rajakumari, S. P. L. Dhanalakshmi, Tiruvelveli Papa, and others, came from *Devadasi* families.[160] Yet their visibility was short-lived: by the 1930s, they were displaced by upper-caste, specifically Brahmin women.

All this points to the irony that, on the critical question of the subordination of female sexuality, the interests of the empire and nation appear to converge. Putcha spares no words to call it: "So when and why did the affective expression for desire—eyes downcast, body language closed and self-doubting—become the standard? When and why did a woman's desire for pleasure transition from an explicit affective economy into merely a form of cinematic historicism? […] Put another way, *reform* and *revival* are polite terms that have masked the censorship and erasure of hereditary

---

[157] Nair*, Prostitution and the State,* 3165.

[158] This was endorsed by the state and the Ministry of Culture, promoting the *gurukul* method, which authorised males of traditional families to be the "true bearers of authentic Indian tradition." Chakravorty, *Multiple Narratives*, 119.

[159] Putcha, *The Dancer's Voice*, 93.

[160] Soneji, *Bharatanatyam,* 40.

performance cultures and in the process collapsed identifications of caste and gender".[161]

Spivak offers another lens through which to retrospectively examine the *Devadasi* traditions, that of class stratification, pointing to the exploitation of poor women. The practice of dedicating girls as *devadasis* has, in some cases, turned into a way for exploiters in the sex industry to recruit girls for prostitution. What was once a social or ritual tradition has been absorbed by the market, serving a capitalist profit. Next, the aesthetic revival can be described as an endeavour favouring elite culture, the classical dance forms that originally came from *devadasi* traditions, like Bharatanatyam – but also others that I will mention later - now performed by famous, middle- or upper-class superstars, in Spivak's works. These polished, "high culture" performances hide the fact that the original dances were more spontaneous and expressive, as we have discussed. Hence, the art has been turned into a cultural commodity for elite audiences. Finally, in films, the *devadasi* image and dance styles are used to sexualise and market women's bodies for mass entertainment, for popular culture.

Taken together, these interpretations show how the *devadasi* figure has been recreated across social classes, from poor women exploited for labour, to elite dancers celebrated as artists, to actresses objectified on screen. For Spivak debates about *devadasis* are deeply tied to class divisions among women, and to how dominant (often Western or urban) cultures represent and consume images of the "cultural other".[162]

In sum, tensions surrounding *devadasis* arose from questions of citizenship and belonging, as well as from class divisions. Whatever the analytical lens, the "woman question", - as Visweswaran has described "the range of issues concerning women which also read as references to the nation"[163] - remains a central concern. An ideal of women being the perfect balance between tradition and modernity was drawn, with the female Indian classical dancer portraying this balance, making her the ultimate

[161] "Brahmin men dictate how women's bodies should look and act. In the process, cisgender comportment becomes codified", Putcha, *Ibidem*, 93.

[162] Landry, D and Maclean, eds. *The Spivak Reader,* 264.

[163] Visweswaran adds "for example, British appeal to the degraded status of Indian women was one of the primary ways of legitimizing continued colonial presence", *Family Subjects: An Ethnography of the Women's Question in Indian Nationalism*, PhD thesis. Stanford University, 1990, 65.

symbol of the Indian nation state.[164] There is an undeniable gendered dimension in the imagining of borders and boundaries, and, consequently, modern nation-building depended on casting women as embodiments of respectability and purity.

[164] Chakravorty, *Hegemony, Dance and Nation*.

Chapter 5 – Chaste bodies and classical nations: Cultural contestations in Sri Lanka and India

This genealogy of Bharatanatyam is rooted in a larger context of cultural denial in the process of nationhood. It is this wider architecture of erasure and reinvention that I examine next, only in broad strokes, tracing its evolution through a few emblematic instances of cultural exclusion.

5.1 The aesthetics of exclusion

Accompanied by insistent, percussive drumming; by bold, grinding, earth-bound movements; by exaggerated facial intensities and a gaze that does not defer or look away, Koothu, as it is danced today, embodies an entirely different regime of bodily knowledge, one historically produced in rural caste margins and decisively excluded from the aesthetic field that later canonised Bharatanatyam.

Koothu is performed in South India, in rural areas, mostly by lower-caste members. Its roots are as ancient as those of *sadir*, with mention in Sangam poetry. The Tamil Lexicon defines Koothu variously as "dance," "dramatic performance," and "ludicrous or pantomimic action," reflecting the form's multivocality and its embeddedness within performance traditions that do not rely on written theory.[165] Koothu and other dance practices, like *Yaksagana*, and *Theyyam*, possess their own highly developed pedagogies, transmitted orally and through lived practice.

These may not conform to the formalised instructional structures associated with the "classical" arts, but they demand equal dedication, discipline, and intergenerational transmission. In these systems, art learning is inseparable from life learning: theory is embodied rather than textual, and performance structures, far from arbitrary, are well understood by practitioners and knowledgeable audiences (*rasikas*).

As noted in chapter 3, although the *Natya Shastra* is frequently invoked as textual authority in defining classical dance, this distinction is largely retrospective, since the

[165] University of Madras. *Tamil Lexicon*. Reprint edition. Madras: University of Madras, 1982, vol. 2:1071.

treatise itself does not differentiate between classical and folk forms. If Koothu is categorized as folk, it is less by intrinsic definition than by exclusion from the canon of the classical. Moreover, beyond the pronounced hierarchy produced by the "high" taste, discussed earlier, non-classical dance forms are further diminished as mere markers of geographic or regional identity. Such positioning carries less prestige among urban patrons of the arts and, consequently, justifies the allocation of fewer institutional and material resources.

In the view of the urban middle classes, responsibility for the decline of rural, folk theatre lies with the performers themselves. Early twentieth-century intellectuals commonly explained its diminished reputation through a cluster of social and cultural prejudices: the marginal caste and economic status of performers, their limited formal education, their supposed "immorality," and the belief that Tamil, as opposed to Sanskrit, was an unsuitable language for serious theatre and dance. Although this disdain for rural performance practices was most pronounced in the early decades of the twentieth century, it persists, more subtly, in the present.

Performers offer a very different perspective. They emphasise that the low social prestige attached to their art, and to the rural stage more broadly, has hindered attempts to secure recognition and to claim a dignified space within the competitive urban performing-arts landscape. For hereditary artists, Koothu carries specific meanings rooted in longstanding professional lineages and deep ties to village society. These associations are not necessarily acknowledged, let alone valued, by the urban arts establishment. Divergent understandings of the dance's identity and status float between practitioners and urban cultural gatekeepers, animating debates about legitimacy, and raising questions about who is permitted to define the form, content, and future of performance traditions.[166]

[166] Beginning in 1953, state-sponsored national cultural academies began to emerge. Among them was the Sangeet Natak Akademi, an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Culture. Subsequently, the central government in New Delhi assumed responsibility, via these institutions, for the protection, preservation, and promotion of India's "cultural heritage," while also playing a key role in presenting and exporting this heritage internationally. The social organization of music and dance fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Together, the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Ministry of Culture further encouraged the institutionalization of so-called "classical" dance forms.

5.2 The pure and the classical

Spivak would remind us that denial of the legitimacy of certain forms of dance is not accidental but the outcome of "sanctioned ignorance", a cultivated inability of the cultural elite to recognise the embodied epistemologies that subaltern performers articulate through their bodies.[167] Bharatanatyam's classicisation required precisely this disavowal: the erasure of dancing bodies that refused the sanitised, spiritualised respectability demanded by upper-caste nationalist aesthetics. In this sense, Koothu's loudness, groundedness, and direct, almost confrontational eye contact do not simply mark a stylistic difference; they mark the resistance of a performative lineage that is not allowed to speak as representative of Tamil culture.

In this respect, the difference between Koothu and Bharatanatyam is not only about movement: it is mostly about who is allowed to produce culture, whose bodies may be seen as bearers of heritage, and whose histories must be sanitised or silenced to secure the purity of the classical canon.

Numerous dance traditions across India were reshaped in similar ways. The *Dasiyattam* of Kerala, known for its fluid, expressive movement, was refashioned into Mohiniyattam, with reformers proclaiming its purity while disparaging its hereditary dancers as *thevidichis* (alias *devadasis*), a term whose contemporary meaning (prostitute) erases their devotional lineage.[168]

The effort to eliminate foreign influences is particularly evident in Kathak, which was deeply shaped by Islamic culture. Its origins were reimagined as belonging to a "mythical Brahmin Kathak caste."[169] Notably, Kathak was initially recast as a predominantly male practice. In redefining Kathak as a male Brahminical tradition, Islamic cultural elements and the vital contributions of *tawaifs,* mostly Muslim women trained in North Indian music and dance, were largely marginalised or erased. One

[167] Landry *et al.*, *The Spivak Reader*.

[168] Venu, G., and Nirmala Paniker. *Mohiniyattam*. Trivandrum: Natana Kairali, 1983.

[169] Chakravorty, *Multiple Narratives*, 118-120

clear example of this process is the removal of the Islamic *salami* (salute), which has been replaced in contemporary practice by the Hindu *bhumi pranam*, a ritual in which the dancer seeks forgiveness from the Earth for dancing upon it.[170]

In Kerala, Kunchan Nambiar's *Ottan Thullal,* originally created by drawing on subaltern ritual forms such as *Parayan Thullal*, *Pulayanattam*, and *Padayani*, was quickly reabsorbed into the temple sphere and reclassified as "classical." Even highly classicised traditions such as Kathakali contain substantial folk and ritual components that remain rarely acknowledged.

Across these cases, purification and classicisation operate through the same mechanisms that have been described so far. Respectability takes a distinct shape, conferring a huge responsibility on women to live up to their idealised image, as a metaphor of the nation.

5.3 Cultural authenticity in Sri Lanka

Cultural ripples spread across the Indian Ocean. The ideological drive to construct a definitive national cultural authenticity in Sri Lanka closely paralleled the South Indian struggle over what constituted legitimate art, a struggle grounded in the desire to purify tradition. Rambukwella observed the varying methods used by cultural figures to define national authenticity in Sri Lanka, particularly through differentiating between "high" and "low" culture.[171] In literature, for instance, Munidasa Cumaratunga's push for a "pure Sinhala" language sought to strip culture of its hybrid, multilingual past. Such projects claimed to recover indigenous authenticity but depended on disciplining and sanitising the improvisational textures of demotic performance. This high culture was challenged by writers like Martin Wickremasinghe, who argued that the aesthetic excellence and authenticity of Sinhala Buddhist art should be rooted not in Brahminical and Sanskritic dominance, but in a secularised poetics and the

[170] Chakravorty, *Multiple Narratives*, 118-120.

[171] Rambukwella, Harshana. *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity. A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism*. London: UCL Press, 2018.

sensibilities of the peasant, subaltern (*podu jana*) communities.[172] In this manner, the "low culture" - comprising the living, oral culture, containing legends, songs, and proverbs, and encompassing vibrant elements like Koothu, here too, and regional mother goddesses – was condemned by those seeking textual orthodoxy.

Rambukwella gives a similar account of the transformation in Sinhala theatre.[173] The postcolonial Sinhala theatrical canon, consolidated through Ediriweera Sarachchandra's "myth-inspired classical dramatic tradition," came to represent a vision of cultural purity grounded in Sanskritic classicism, pastoral imagination, and bourgeois nationalist aesthetics. Critics increasingly viewed this tradition as marked by classical elitism and social irrelevance, sustained by a fidelity to normative texts and a moralised Buddhist realist aesthetic that marginalised folk and popular forms. Within this framework, authenticity was defined through distance from the urban, the contemporary, and the socially heterogeneous, producing a narrowly curated model of Sinhala high culture.

From the 1960s onward, alternative groups such as Sugathapala de Silva's *Ape Kattiya* and Gamini Haththotuwegama's *Wayside and Open Theatre Group* articulated counter-aesthetic positions that redefined the terms of purity itself. Their work foregrounded an "earthy urban realism," non-institutional performance spaces, and performers drawn from working-class backgrounds, positioning contemporary social experience rather than mythic heritage as the locus of cultural relevance.[174] These movements rejected the canonical claim to purity not by abandoning authenticity but by relocating it in secularised poetics, critical reflection, and the lived realities of modern Sinhala subjectivity, thereby challenging the authority of the dominant classical tradition.

[172] Wickremasinghe, viewing Sanskrit aesthetics (like alamkaravada and rasavada) as mystified representations tied to the Hindu doctrine of the eternal soul (atmavada), countered it with a Buddhist realist aesthetics rooted in the denial of a soul (anatmavada), emphasising human experience and rational reflection over extravagance and divine fantasy (Uyangoda, Jayadeva. "The Empathic Sinhala Short Story: Gahaniyak by Martin Wickramasinghe". *Polity*, Volume 12 (2): 91-103, 2024).

[173] Rambukwella, *The Politics and Poetics*.

[174] *Ibidem*.

The classical purification project made inroads in Tamil-speaking communities as well, where its logic became explicitly caste-inflected. In the nineteenth century, Hindu reformists like Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879) attempted to align Tamil Saivism with Victorian Christian notions of respectability and civility. This required suppressing the region's indigenous performance traditions, particularly Koothu and ritual dances like Karagam, Kavadi, and Kambattam, which Navalar condemned as licentious, disorderly, and of "lesser value." [175] These forms drew on caste-diverse participation and ritual improvisation, the very kinds of embodied, hybrid cultural practices that marked local religious ecologies. Navalar's attempt to replace this "little tradition" with the textual purity of Saiva effectively erased performance genealogies that had flourished for centuries outside the bounds of elite control.

The politics of sexual, cultural, and civic purity converged once again, reshaping the field of female representation. Navalar's denigration of Kannaki, the heroine of the *Cilappatikaram*, reclassifying her as a "Jaina woman… even a demoness," aimed at delegitimising a lineage of uncontained feminine power.[176] Conversely, when Sinhala Buddhist nationalism appropriated Kannaki as the goddess Pattini, she was reoriented within a Buddhist moral universe that also subordinated non-Buddhist female vitality; the ferocious goddess Kali became Pattini's domesticated attendant.[177] These manoeuvres in various religions reveal the political labour purity performs: disciplining female potency into forms compatible with the dominant community's aesthetic and civic order.

Reed has shown how the cultural politics of Sinhala and Tamil rivalries made dance a focal point for the reification of ethnic identities. In state-sponsored dance seminars and programmes, and in dance history texts, for example, oppositional categories of Sinhala and Tamil are reinforced, despite the quite obvious resemblances between Kandyan dance and "its Tamil counterpart, Bharatanatyam".[178] These dynamics invite

[175] Thiruchandran, Selvy. *Caste and its multiple manifestations. A study of the Caste System in Northern Sri Lanka*. Sri Lanka: Baby Owl Press, 2021.

[176] *Ibidem.*

[177] Obeyesekere, Gananath. *The cult of the goddess Pattini*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

[178] Reed, Susan A. "The Politics and Poetics of Dance". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 27, 1998: 513.

a deeper engagement with questions of reinvention and purity with regard to dance in Sri Lanka, but I am intentionally setting that discussion aside for a future study.

Like in India, here too, female identities were at the heart of contradictions and complexities. De Alwis's work examines the example of the female frescoes of Sigiriya: "The Sigiriya paintings exemplify one such site/sight of ambiguity and tension—a battleground upon which notions of sexuality, morality, purity and race sparred and parried".[179] Just like Bharatanatyam was rediscovered as a pure and classical art form, from which the hereditary dancers themselves were eventually distanced, the Sigiriya frescoes were 'discovered' and 'authenticated', along with the ancient capitals and linked to the country's 'glorious past'.

To do this, it was first de-linked from any influence of or connection with Indian art of the time (Ajanta cave art), and then it was incorporated into the collective identity of the emerging nation-state's cultural heritage. Many of the differing interpretations by scholars on the significance of the frescoes centred nevertheless around female sensuality. Whether they were queens (H.P. Bell), apsaras (Coomaraswamy), personified clouds (Paranavitana), religious women (Raghavan), or temple dancers (Deraniyagala), their sensuality was problematic.[180]

Because the Sri Lankan nationalist project depended on controlling female morality and because it was built upon the puritanical discourse of its main proponents (foremost Anagarika Dharmapala), who distinguished a Protestant Buddhist ethic from the "loose sexual mores" of the West, the ideal female figure was drawn as chaste

[179] De Alwis, Malathi. "Sexuality in the Field of Vision. The discursive clothing of the Sigiriya frescoes". In Ruwanpura *et al* eds. *Her Smile Lingers. Malathi de Alwis. Selected Essays*. Colombo: ICES. 2022, 11.

[180] De Alwis provides the references to these scholars and their work on Sigiriya: Harry Charles Bell, "Interim Report on the Operations of the Archaeological Survey at Sigiriya in 1895", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, 14 (46): 56-60, "Archaeological Survey of Ceylon", *Annual Report*, 16, 1905; Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, New York: Pantheon Book, 1956 [1908], *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, New York: Dover Publications, 1965 [1927]; Senarat Paranavitana, "The Subject of the Sigiri Paintings", *Indian Antiqua: a volume of Oriental Studies*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, pp 264-69, 1947, "Sigiriya: The Abode of a God-King", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, 1: 148-157, 1950, *Sigiri Graffiti*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956, The Story of Sigiri, Colombo: Lake House, 1972; M.D. Raghavan, "The Sigiriya Frescoes", *Spolia Zeylanica*, 25(2): 65-72, 1948; P.E.P. Deraniyagala, "Some side-lights on the Sinhala Monastery-Fortress of Sihagiri", *Spolia Zeylanica*, 26(1), 1951; (*Ibidem)*.

and pure. "The glory of woman is in her chastity," claimed Dharmapala.[181] We see here too, how the dominant male nationalist discourse imposed domesticity and purity as ideals of femininity, depriving women of their complex and complete identities, although, as De Alwis enigmatically notes, the Sigiriya women's smiles linger on.[182]

[181] Guruge 1963, quoted in De Alwis, *Sexuality in the field of vision,* 26.

[182] *Ibidem*, 30.

Conclusion

As an economic historian examining dance and identities of hereditary performers, I situate this analysis within a broader understanding of development as a process shaped not only by wealth and income but equally by culture and forms of belonging. When separated from artistic and aesthetic life, development risks becoming ethically impoverished, ecologically and visually damaging, and ultimately incapable of sustaining the aesthetic, erotic, and cosmological dimensions of the human spirit. The discussion of *devadasis*, with its ethical and aesthetic implications, affirms the necessity of such a holistic understanding.

Accordingly, the purification of Bharatanatyam was not only an aesthetic project; it was an epistemic transformation shaped through the converging logics of sexual containment, caste identities, and nationalist respectability. Heralded as a cultural renaissance, it entailed a reordering of knowledge and power that disciplined women's bodies, erased histories of sensuality, and remade the dance in the image of upper-caste nationalism. Techniques of government à la Foucault[183] demanded that women embody the purity, domesticity, and spiritual restraint imagined by the emerging nation-state, with profound consequences for Bharatanatyam's expressive and erotic dimensions.

Devadasis stood out because they did not fit within existing social categories and because they embodied multiple, overlapping exceptions to them. They were women who could own and endow land, yet stood outside normative inheritance regimes; women whose lives were organised around artistic labour rather than conjugality; women who were publicly visible, mobile, and remunerated, in defiance of ideals of feminine seclusion; and women whose sensual, performative bodies directly contradicted normative prescriptions that sought to discipline female sexuality, kinship, and virtue. At the same time, they were women navigating freedoms within contexts that carried their own exploitative and oppressive undercurrents. On the whole, they were structurally disruptive figures whose very existence exposed the limits, contradictions, and exclusions of normative social and legal orders.

[183] Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer, 1982): 777–795.

Devadasis' liminality has global resonances. Like the courtesans of Europe or those of late nineteenth-century Shanghai, who resisted being legally collapsed into prostitution while their artistic and cultural labour was devalued, *devadasis* exemplified forms of femininity that exceeded domestic norms and unsettled patriarchal taxonomies. Their interventions reveal discursive and material shifts otherwise invisible in the archives of law, reform, and nationalism. Their claims directly contradicted the nationalist ideal of the pure, domesticated upper-caste wife. In this light, *Devadasi* identities render marginality visible as a site of knowledge and plurality.

In dance, the sensual and the emotional are not peripheral but integral to its expressive and metaphysical power. Histories of ritual dance show that feminine movements were grounded in women's bodily vitality, creative potency, and procreative force, energies that were neither trivial nor immoral but essential to social and spiritual life.[184] In addition, contemporary religious and moral frameworks have created, to a large extent, a division between the intellectual and the corporal, elevating abstraction, discipline, and cognitive mastery while disavowing embodied knowledge. *Devadasis*' practice stood in contrast to this separation. Knowledge, in fact, could be sourced as much from feelings, intuition and bodily experience as from rational analysis.[185]

[184] "This sensation of inner heat is easiest to perceive in women's dance movements that are smaller and more restrained; it is quite distinct from the warmth of aerobic exertion that results from the more energetic, athletically demanding movements of mixed or men's dances. Many participants liken it to the experience of kundalini or chi in yoga, t'ai chi, reiki, and other body-based meditative or healing disciplines. Interestingly, many folk dance styles lift and lower the heel in a way which stimulates the center of the ball of the foot, the acupressure point known in Chinese medicine as Kidney 1, or the Bubbling Spring. Considered to be the source of fertile, creative and sexual energy and our point of connection with the earth and with the ancestors, this point can be activated with shiatsu therapy or acupuncture to bring a sense of heat into the entire body. In my view, this energy or chi is the same as the radiant force illustrated and protected by the dances and costumes", Shannon, Laura "Women's Ritual Dances: An Ancient Source of Healing in Our Times". In *Dancing on the Earth: Women's Stories of Healing Through Dance*, edited by Johanna Leseho and Sandra McMaster. Findhorn Press, 2011, 148.

[185] Nawal El Saadawi has written in her novel, *Searching*, about a woman convinced that she has something to give to the world, but cannot find it: "She was all feelings, but how else does anything new begin? How did any discoverer who changed science or history begin? Doesn't it all begin with feelings? And what are feelings? An obscure idea, a mysterious movement in the brain cells. Yes" (Saadawi, Nawal and Shirley Eber. *Searching*. Zed Books, 1991, 103). Interestingly, a similar holistic vision is being embraced across domains such as medicine, health, and yoga.

Dance has never been a site of passive subjugation; it is equally a site of refusal. Koothu, for one, stands as a powerful counter-tradition: loud, unrestrained, energetically sensual, and defiantly visible. It confronts, at every level, the judgments that label certain movements as "vulgar," "unfeminine," or "not beautiful," and it resists the caste-bound injunction that lower-caste bodies remain hidden or muted.

The very effort to sanitise the dancing body has produced its own antithesis in forms that embraced precisely what the reformers condemned. This pattern is evident across our discussions of Bharatanatyam, the *devadasi* traditions, also broader literary and theatre contexts, where projects of purification have always been accompanied by less visible, though existing, pulsating, currents of resistance. It is also essential to bear in mind that Bharatanatyam is one among countless dances in India, - with their own multiple histories- and cannot be taken as the sole representation of Indian culture. Moreover, global communities, diasporic exchanges, and hybrid cultural formations continue to reshape and redefine what is understood as classical or traditional dance.

As a classical ballet teacher once said, "Dance is a language; when you say 'I love you', you must make the audience believe it". Love takes many forms, and deciding narrowly which forms are pure is only an act of suppression. Similarly, every dancer has a story, and that story is told through the full range of the body's expressive potential. Heeding Adichie's warning against the danger of the single story[186], this work has sought to illuminate the many narratives that surround *devadasis*, insisting on their plurality, and confronting the ideology of purity as a narrowing force that disciplines, erases, and rejects complexity.

[186] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of the Single Story", TED Talk, 2009. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg

Just as the dance derived its power from transgressing form, the *devadasis* themselves, who blurred boundaries, stand as vital exemplars in a world where borders are hardening around identities, nations, and even academic disciplines. In an era increasingly marked by cultural gatekeeping, purity politics, and nationalist retrenchment, the *devadasis*' capacity to inhabit multiple worlds at once reminds us of the creative, ethical, and political possibilities that emerge when boundaries are crossed rather than enforced. Their legacy challenges contemporary societies to imagine forms of belonging that are porous and resistant to respectability, yet full of dignity.

References

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. “The Danger of the Single Story”. TED Talk, 2009. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg

Agarwal, Bina. *A field of one’s own. Gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press. 1994.

Alter, Joseph S. “Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (1996): 45–66.

Alter, Joseph S. *Gandhi’s Body: An Interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi’s Ideas on Health and Sexuality*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000.

Alter, Joseph S. *Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

Anandhi, S. “Sexuality and Nation: ‘Ideal’ and ‘Other Woman in Nationalist Politics, Tamil Nadu, c. 1900–47.” *South Indian Studies* 4 (1997): 195–217.

Anandhi, S. “Representing Devadasis: 'Dasigal Mosavalai' as a Radical Text”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 11/12, (1991), pp. 739-746. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4397430.

Anil, C. “Muthulakshmi Reddy and the Politics of *Devadasi* Reform.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 52 (1997): 3319–3325.

Antharjanam, N. Saraswathy. “Tinai Concept: Aesthetics Of Ancient Tamil Poetics.” *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 8 (2022): 779-792.

Apeksha and Vijay Kumar. “A Narrative Contravention of the *Devadasi* Ritual: An Unconventional Journey from Approbation to Degradation.” *NIU International Journal of Human Rights* 8 (Nov. 2021).

Burton, Richard and F.F. Arbuthnot, translators. *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*. Edited by John Muirhead-Gould, London: Panther Books, 1963.

Caplan, Patricia. "Purity and Pollution: Gender and the Hindu Nation." In *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*, edited by Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako, 49–70. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Chakravarti, Uma. "Gender, Caste, and Labour: The Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood." *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 36 (2003): 3927–3936.

Chakravorty, Pallabi. "Multiple Narratives of India's Kathak Dance". *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. ½ (2006): 115-136.

Chakravorty, Pallabi. "Hegemony, Dance and Nation: The Construction of the Classical Dance in India." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 21 (2) (1998): 107–20.

Chawla, Anil. *Davadasis: Sinners or Sinned Against*. www.samarthabharat.com, 2002.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., and Gopala Kristnayya Duggirala. *The Mirror of Gesture: Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917.

Dalmia, Vasudha, and Heinrich von Stietencron, eds. *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997.

Dalrymple, William. *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World.* Bloomsbury, 2025.

Daugherty, Diane. “The Nangyar: Female Ritual Specialist of Kerala.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 54-67.

De Alwis, Malathi. “Sexuality in the Field of Vision. The discursive clothing of the Sigiriya frescoes”. In Ruwanpura *et al* eds. *Her Smile Lingers. Malathi de Alwis. Selected Essays*. Colombo: ICES. 2022.

De Alwis, Malathi. “The incorporation and transformation of a ‘Hindu’ goddess: the worship of Kannaki-Pattini in Sri Lanka.” *The South Asianist* 6, no. 1 (2018): 150-180.

Devenish, Annie. *Being, belonging and becoming: a study of gender in the making of post-colonial citizenship in India 1946-1961*. DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2014.

Gandhi, M. K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 82. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1942.

Gandhi, M. K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1963.

Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power”. *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 8, no. 4 (Summer, 1982): 777–795.

Ganser, Elisa. “From Text to Performance: On Multilingual Practices of South Indian Dance.” In *Linguistic and Textual Aspects of Multilingualism in South India and Sri Lanka*, edited by Giovanni Ciotti and Erin McCann, 563-623. Pondicherry: École française d’Extrême-Orient, Institut Français de Pondichéry, 2021.

Geetha, V. “Periyar, Women, and an Ethic of Citizenship.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 17 (1998): 9–15.

Groeneweg, Lara. “The position of rasa in dance in contemporary India.” Doctoral dissertation, Ghent University. (2018). https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/508/225/RUG01-002508225_2018_0001_AC.pdf

Hodges, Sarah. “Revolutionary Family Life and the Self Respect Movement in Tamil South India, 1926–49.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 39, no. 2 (2005): 251–277.

Jacob, Animol and Saritha Sivadas. “The Soundscape of Sangam: Musical traditions and their social significance with special reference to pathittupathu”. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 5, no. 1 (January 2024): 3120–3124.

Janardhanan, Arun. “A young dancer takes a hard look at Bharatanatyam’s burden of caste.” *The Indian Express*, February 17, 2020.

Kandasamy, Meera. *When I hit you*. Atlantic Books. 2018.

Kannabiran, Kalpana. “Law, Violence and the Cultural Politics of ‘Honour’.” In *Gender and Caste*, edited by Anupama Rao, 243–274. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995.

Katrak, Ketu H. *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Katrak, Ketu H. “Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women’s Texts.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (1992): 437–460.

Kersenboom, Saskia. “Marabu, the Inherent Flexibility of the Karnatak Tradition: The Example of Bharatanatyam.” In *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India*, eds Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2008): 198-223.

Kersenboom, Saskia. *NITYASUMANGALI towards the Semiosis of the Devadasi Tradition of South India*, May 18, 1984, PhD Dissertation, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Kersenboom, Saskia. *Nityasumaṅgali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.

Kersenboom, Saskia. *Śṛṅgaranta: Eros Fragmented*, in *Music, Dance and the Art of Seduction*. Delft: Eburon, 2013.

Khokar, Mohan. *A Momentous Transition*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1987.

Krishna, T. M. "'Classically Yours'." *Social Scientist* 44, no. 7/8 (July–August 2016): 3-25.

Lakshmi, C. S. "Bodies Called Women: Some Thoughts On Gender, Ethnicity and Nation." *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 46 (Nov. 15-21, 1997): 2953-2962.

Lal, Vinay. *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Landry, D and Gerald Maclean, eds. *The Spivak Reader. Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Leucci, Tiziana. "Au royaume de l'amour, les courtisanes sont reines." *Raja-maṇḍala*. Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2020.

Leucci, Tiziana. "De la 'danseuse de temple' des voyageurs et missionnaires à la 'bayadère' des philosophes et artistes des Lumières." In *L'Inde des Lumières*, edited by Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Županov, 253-288. Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2013.

Leucci, Tiziana. "La danse en Inde du sud, entre conflits générationnels, identitaires, de genre et de caste." *MUSIcultures* 44, no. 1 (2017): 134-162.

Levine, Philippa. *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Manu, Wendy Doniger, and Brian K. Smith, eds. *The Laws of Manu: With an Introduction and Notes*. Reprinted. Penguin Classics. Penguin Books India, 1991.

Meduri, Avanthi. "Bharatanatyam as a Global Dance: Some Issues in Research, Teaching, and Practice." *Dance Research Journal* 36, no. 2 (2008): 11–29.

Meduri, Avanthi. "The Transfiguration of Indian/Asian Dance in the United Kingdom: Contemporary "Bharatanatyam" in Global Contexts". *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (2008): 298-328. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27568455.

Meduri, Avanthi. "Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the *Devadasi* and Her Dance." PhD diss., New York University, 1996.

Mitra, Durba. *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Nair, Janaki. "Prostitution and the State in Colonial Mysore." In *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in India*, 77–105. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994.

Nair, Janaki. "The *Devadasi*, the Dharma and the State." *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no. 50 (Dec. 10, 1994): 3157-3167.

Obeyesekere, Gananath. *The cult of the goddess Pattini*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Oddie, Geoffrey A. "Social Protest in India: British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms, 1850–1900." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 16, no. 2 (1979): 139–155.

Orr, Leslie C. *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

O'Shea, Janet. *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

Pal, Rituparna. "I Left the Famous Dance Institute and Learnt to Love Bharatanatyam Again." *The Third Eye*. 14 April 2023. https://thethirdeyeportal.in/praxis/i-left-the-famous-dance-institute-and-learnt-to-love-bharatanatyam-again/

Parker, Andrew. *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Parthasarathy, R., trans., and with an Introduction and Postscript. *The tale of an anklet: an epic of South India. The Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Adigal*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Parthasarathy, T. S. "Bharatanatyam and allied Dances of South India." Carnatica.net. N.d.

Patel, Sujata. "On the Discourse of Purity." *Sociological Bulletin* 49, no. 2 (2000): 199–215.

Pillai, N. "Re-Casteing the Narrative of Bharatanatyam." *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 9 (26 Feb. 2022). https://www.epw.in/engage/article/re-casteing-narrative-bharatanatyam.

Prasad, Awadh Kishore. "ORIGIN OF THE *DEVADASI* SYSTEM." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 60 (1999): 129-136.

Putcha, Rumya S. *The Dancer's Voice: Performance and Womanhood in Transnational India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023.

Ramachendrier, T. *Report on the Temple Service Inam Lands*. Madras: Government Press, 1892.

Ramberg, Lucinda. "When the Devi Is Your Husband: Sacred Marriage and Sexual Economy in South India." *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 1 (2011): 28-6.

Rambukwella, Harshana. *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity. A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism*. London: UCL Press. 2018.

Redfield, Robert. *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*. University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Reed, Susan A. "The Politics and Poetics of Dance". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 27, (1998): 503-532. https://www.jstor.org/stable/223381

Richmond, Farley P. "The Rites of Passage and Kutiyattam." *Sangeet Natak* 50 (1978): 27-36.

Richmond, Farley P., and Yasmin Richmond. "The Multiple Dimensions of Time and Space in Kutiyattam, the Sanskrit Theatre of Kerala." *Asian Theatre Journal* 2, no. 1 (1985): 50-60.

Richmond, Farley P., Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

Roebert, Donovan. "Some Thoughts on the 'Momentous Transition' of South Indian Dance from the Hands of the Hereditary Artists to Those of the 'Better People'." 29 October 2021. Available at: https://pictorialindiandance.wordpress.com/2021/10/29/some-thoughts-on-the-momentous-transition-of-south-indian-dance-from-the-hands-of-the-hereditary-artists-to-those-of-the-better-people/

Saadawi, Nawal and Shirley Eber. *Searching*. Zed Books, 1991.

Sahgal, Smita. "The Mahabharata Conundrum: Querying Draupadi's Rights and Responsibilities." *NIU International Journal of Human Rights* 8 (Nov. 2021).

Sahoulamide, Feroz. *Dappan Koothu*. 2023.
https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/media/dLcaYdN

Saikia, Dimple. “Sattriya Dance: An Aesthetic Outlook”. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, January-June, 5(1) (2024): 63–71.

Samarendra, Padmanabh. “Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, xlvI (33) (2011): 51-58.

Satchidanandan, K. “REFLECTIONS: The Folk and the Classical: Interrogating the Boundaries.” *Indian Literature* 54, no. 1 (255) (January/February 2010): 6-12.

Satkunaratnam A. Staging War: Performing Bharata Natyam in Colombo, Sri Lanka. *Dance Research Journal*. 2013: 45(1):81-108. doi:10.1017/S0149767712000319.

Saxena, Monika. “Ganikas in Early India: Its Genesis and Dimensions.” *Social Scientist* 34, no. 11/12 (2006): 2-17.

Shannon, Laura “Women’s Ritual Dances: An Ancient Source of Healing in Our Times”. In *Dancing on the Earth: Women’s Stories of Healing Through Dance*, edited by Johanna Leseho and Sandra McMaster. Findhorn Press, 2011.

Soneji, Davesh. *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Soneji, Davesh. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Sonnerat, Pierre. *Nouveau voyage aux Indes orientales (1786-1813)*. Edited by Jean Deloche and Madeleine Lyo-Ty-Fane. Institut Français de Pondichéry, École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2010.

Spivak, Gayatri. C. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In C. Nelson, & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1988.

Sreenivas, Mytheli. “Creating Conjugal Subjects: *Devadasi*s and the Politics of Marriage in Colonial Madras Presidency.” *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 1 (2011): 63-9.
Sreenivas, Mytheli. *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Srinivasan, Amrit. “Reform and Revival: The *Devadasi* and Her Dance.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (1985): 1869–1876.

Srinivasan, Amrit. “Temple Women in South India: The Traditional Community of the *Devadasi*s.” *Man* 19, no. 4 (1984): 760–777.

Srilata, K. *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing Self–Respect History*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003.

Ta, Thanishka. “*Devadasi* System of Tamil Nadu and its Abolishment by Muthu Lakshmi Reddy.” *Jus Corpus Law Journal* 2, no. 4 (July 30, 2022).

Taranath, Anupama. “Erotics of the Literary Encounter: Reading Nineteenth-Century British and Indian Women’s Writing.” PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2000.

Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, eds. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, Volume 1. New York: Feminist Press, 1991.

Thiruchandran, Selvy. *Caste and its multiple manifestations. A study of the Caste System in Northern Sri Lanka*. Sri Lanka: Baby Owl Press, 2021.

University of Madras. *Tamil Lexicon*. Reprint edition. Madras: University of Madras, 1982.

Unni, N. P. *Sanskrit Dramas of Kulasekhara*. Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1977.

Uyangoda, Jayadeva. "The Empathic Sinhala Short Story: Gahaniyak by Martin Wickramasinghe". *Polity*, Volume 12 (2): 91-103, 2024.

Venu, G. *Production of a Play in Kutiyattam*. Trichur: Natana Kairali, 1989.

Venu, G., and Nirmala Paniker. *Mohiniyattam*. Trivandrum: Natana Kairali, 1983.

Viguier, Anne. *Brève Histoire de l'Inde: Du Pays des Mille Dieux à la puissance mondiale*. Flammarion, 2023.

Visweswaran, Kamala. *Family Subjects: An Ethnography of the Women's Question in Indian Nationalism*, PhD thesis. Stanford University, 1990.

Whitehead, Judy. "Brahmanical Patriarchy, Democratic Rights: Women and Cultural Nationalism in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 26 (1998): 1603–1612.

Yuval-Davis, Nira and Marcel Stoetzler, "Imagined boundaries and borders. A gendered gaze." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9 (329), 2002. DOI: 10.1177/1350506802009003378

Index

Dancing against Purity

Devadasis and the Art of Blurred Boundaries

Nadeera Rajapakse

This book explores how *Devadasi* dance traditions were transformed through caste reform, colonial morality, and nationalist revival into Bharatanatyam, creating a purified symbol of Indian culture.

Drawing on a multidisciplinary framework, the work explores the "ethics-aesthetics nexus" to illustrate how technical ideals of purity intersected with questions of citizenship and belonging.

Historically, *Devadasis* occupied fluid roles as temple ritualists and courtly artists within matrifocal structures that enabled economic autonomy and ritual authority. Colonial regulation and nationalist reform later recast these "non-wife" identities as immoral, facilitating a transfer of artistic capital from female hereditary practitioners to male authority, and imposing upper-caste domesticity.

Dancing Against Purity looks beyond the single story, highlighting the plural, layered histories, and invites readers to imagine forms of belonging that are as porous and transgressive as the women who once blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the sensual.

INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES