

Evolution and Degeneration of Indian Classical Dance: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

The trends in Indian classical dance reveal that its structure is highly disorganized. Indian classical dance is a constantly evolving field that dominates opportunities and ideological grounds. Dance genres are the most exemplary manifestations of human aesthetic originality and freedom and dancers usually fail to achieve respect and equality as a result of the reformation of expressing diverse roles. Leela Samson, a dance critic, stated until the early 20th century, the dance was a vital part of temple ritual. A period of degeneration, however, set in during British rule. “The British anti-notch campaign was encouraging a reform of Indian society. The origins of the Jogini can be traced back to mediaeval South India. Regarded as temple property, the major responsibility of a Jogini — also known as a 'devadasi' — would be to participate in cultural activities pertaining to the shrine. Dance degenerated from being a heavenly creation to being disrepute and then regained its respect. Mughal India was awash with courtesans in both Hindu and Muslim courts.

Finally, in Indian writing, the fictional representation of dance and the dancer reflects the art's and the artist's constant progress. Dance education in universities throughout India and around the world is enhancing awareness about the value of Indian dance in culture

KEYWORDS: Classical dance, aesthetic originality, anti-notch campaign, Jogini, Devadasi, Dance education

INTRODUCTION

A look at the trends in Indian classical dance reveals the subject's disorganized structure. The ever-expanding eco-system of classical dance includes government-sponsored official festivals by renowned dancers and smaller shows at local temples and community centres where dancers use these social platforms to share their work. In addition, neighbourhood lessons are held in improvised venues where Indian traditional dance is performed. But are only cosmopolitan spaces suitable for the development of Indian classical dance? What about smaller spaces and lesser-known platforms?

Indian classical dance is a constantly evolving field that dominates opportunities and ideological grounds. Two news pieces both about dance and the spaces it inhabits have been lingering for sometime: A Kathak dancer in Uttar Pradesh was allegedly barred from performing a Sufi piece adapted to a *qawwali* at a government occasion, and the Kalakshetra Foundation cancelled TM Krishna's book, '*Manu dharma*'s release, citing the book's 'political' contents — the fact that the mridangam was in fact made from cow-hide.

What is the identity of Indian classical dance, and what is the Indian identity that classical dance propagates? Are we preoccupied with oppressive sentiments of minority voices or subaltern dance themes and subaltern dancers attempting to find their way into classical dance, even mainstream performing arts?

As we approach 2023, the aim is that Indian classical dance will learn to use the term “Indian” more responsibly. To reject the Brahminical refashioning which began in the 1920s and accept and absorb and celebrate interpretations of classical dance histories modified from popular motifs in Hindu Mythology that remained silent in historical records for proscenium stage.

Dance genres are the most exemplary manifestations of human aesthetic originality and freedom and dancers usually fail to achieve respect and equality as a result of the reformation of expressing diverse roles. It takes us to the male Mohiniattam dancer from Kerala, who attempted suicide due to alleged discrimination based on his Dalit status, exacerbated by the widespread belief that *Mohiniattam* is only performed by women who lack of professional chances.

There is hope, and many dancers remained committed to the art form as a sacred act for God while presenting an inclusive social and secular perspective. Every creative dancer’s dance journey is to experiment with the body to its ultimate and give the ultimate medium of communication by merging dance forms, styles, methodologies and to develop schools and academies. It is necessary to reject the epistemic violence, to use a term coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, of censoring disadvantaged voices while also removing urban groups that have cultivated an almost deliberate ignorance in the audience of the oppressed performing artists.

Leela Samson, a dance critic, and biographer stated: Until the early 20th century, the dance was a vital part of temple ritual. It is customary for the local ruler or chief priest to maintain and patronize the temple. A period of degeneration, however, set in during British rule. “The British anti-notch campaign was encouraging a reform of Indian society, at the same time contributed to demarcating the boundaries of British colonial society. In the discourses of the campaign, the British were portrayed as indifferent observers of notch, but even as such, were committed to address the problem, since as representatives of the empire, it was conceptualized as a personal and national duty to set an example to Indian society by avoiding notch parties. However, closer study reveals that the campaign demands were already ambiguous, and suggest, that the British support of the anti-notch campaign had more complex motivations than the moral uplift of Indian society”.¹

Although the initiation of the anti-notch campaign was the combined effort of British and Indian reform supporters, to avoid the moral, sexual and cultural contaminations of native society, there were other internal tensions of Indian society. The colonial elite have been policing and negotiating the boundaries of acceptable behaviour by segregating professional dancers from the elite, both from Indian and British. The notch woman was represented as the embodiment of Oriental eroticism and a bazaar spectacle, but alarmingly, she could transgress colonial boundaries. Indians were depicted as non-thinkers who fail to notice the indecency of notch. The secluded Indian wives were characterized by body idleness, and the notch women were described as over sexualized, whereas the British women were portrayed as guarding the morality of the European male, and colonial boundaries. At the same time, gender constructions of the campaign were permeated by interpretations of the body as reflecting morality, sexuality and as signifying nation and race. The British reformers depicted the inferiority of Indian males and Indian society, by attributing dangerous and debilitating sexualities as rooted in the national and racial consciousness.

The British anti-dance campaign is a particular example of Ann Stoler's postcolonial theory, in terms of the metropole and the colonies sharing the dialectics of exclusion and inclusion (Stoler and Cooper 1997). The British discourses attempting to prove that the notch was a social ill and their "participation in the anti-notch campaign can be interpreted as an act of negotiating the boundaries of the British colonial community".ⁱⁱ Many other sources suggest that it was not a realistic representation.

The origins of the Jogini can be traced back to mediaeval South India. Regarded as temple property, the major responsibility of a Jogini — also known as a 'devadasi' — would be to participate in cultural activities pertaining to the shrine. Toward the conclusion of this period, a divide developed between the 'clean' and 'unclean' castes, and each group began to play specific functions.

The British encountered this segmented type of Jogini practise in the nineteenth century. Some abolitionists attempted to free the Jogini from servitude by passing laws such as the Madras Act V of 1929. While there was achievement in changing the rights of the Jogini from the 'clean' castes, the Jogini from the 'unclean' castes were frequently driven into the sexual exploitation that the Jogini are identified with today.

The Indian movement had a long history, culminating in the Madras Devadasi (temple dancer) Act of 1947, which abolished temple dancer communities (Parker 1998:627). However, the temple dancing tradition in South India was close to extinction by this time (Srinivasan 1988:197). Actual laws prohibiting religious and non-religious dancers were in place in Calcutta, Madras, Mysore, and Bombay as early as the 1920s and 1930s (Whitehead 1995:51).

The campaign was approached primarily from the standpoint of the restoration and revival of dance traditions, notably the Devadasi (temple dance) heritage. The distinct religious and social roles of the Indian temple dancer community offered an evaluation of the Devadasi institution in South India. To govern the prostitutes, the devadasis and courtesans were subjected to the adoption of Victorian medical and sanitary procedures. Philippa Levine(2004:191-193) reads the ban on the devadasi system as a ban on commercial sexuality and agrees with former scholarship, that temple dancing was a deeply misunderstood local tradition, identified by the British simply as temple prostitution". [https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2013/varga_zsuzsanna.pdf]

The word "nautch" failed to differentiate between religious and non-religious dancers, ignored regional variation and the class background of the entertainers (Jagpal 2009:269), it was interchangeably used for the tawaifs, muslim courtesans in Northern India. These *Bhavins*, *Muralis*, *Jogtins* and others seem to be considered a lower order of being than the *devadasi* or the nautch-girl; but under whatever name these women pass, and however much the details of custom among them may differ, *the principle is the same in all, immorality under the shelter of religion and custom.* (Fuller 1900:125, emphasis in the original).

Mughal India was awash with courtesans in both Hindu and Muslim courts. In Umrao Jan Ada, we can observe the decline of courtesans from the 1840s to the 1920s. The training and the professional standards of the dancers varied greatly: some women could be nautch women only in name, and provide sex work instead of cultural embellishments, while others could be in a position to choose their partners, or relied more on their dancing and singing talents. Ethnographic reconstructions suggest that high-class courtesans took pride in their artistic merits, and were accustomed to the high admiration of Indian society (Chatterjee 1992:21).

Dance degenerated from being a heavenly creation (as recorded in epics and Sanskrit plays) to being disreputable (Buddhist, Colonial era, and it was not taught from foreigners abolition of Devadasi

system), then regained its respect (with Pro-Art progressive efforts) and earned the position of high-art, before being converted into a commodity, a show. The historical events of the anti-naught movement, pro-naught movement, restoration of dignity to dance form, and dancers in independent India demonstrate how the position of dance and dancers is improving.

Many dedicated dancers other than higher caste brahmins were denied the opportunity to participate owing to their caste or disappeared after the Devadasi system was abolished. It was reformers like Amrit Srinivasa who helped the Devadasi society and profession gain prominence.

As the British pushed Devadasis to the margins of society, a new generation of dancers devised counter-narratives and dance forms to purify traditional dance forms while also striving to validate the historical narrative and recast along the lines of Natya Sastra. Dance was a social, cultural, and ritual practise in India's original indigenous societies. Men dominated dance during the Vedic, Pre-Vedic, and Epic periods. Indian dance was a synthesis of tradition and individual perspectives from pre-Vedic times to the rise and fall of Buddhism, from the Golden Age of the Guptas to Hindu-Muslim relations, and from the Bhakti movement and European colonisation to the Hindu and Muslim Renaissance of the nineteenth century.

With the loss of support, several female dancers rose to prominence, such as Begum Sumroo, or became campaigners, such as Sukanya Rehman, to promote dance as a sacred practice. In contrast, others turned into exponential dancers like Kelucharan, Uday Shankar, and famed devadasi dancers such as Rukmini Arundale, courtesans such as Umrao Jan Ada intriguing stories and dancer authors such as SriVidya Natarajan. Indeed, Mahesh Dattani's *Dance like a Man* and Mukundan's portrayal of male dancers' struggles in a world of art that women once dominated investigate the problem of how a man's typical inhibitions towards dance affect family relationships.

Dance Like a Man, a drama, depicts Jairaj's difficulties to pursue dance as a vocation and restore the art's respect to traditional artists. Under pressure from his father, a 'progressive' man of position, he foregoes his ambitions to become a man' instead of relying on his wife and daughter to help him accomplish his objectives.

M. Mukundan's novella *Dance*, the second text, tells the story of Agni or Baleshan, a kalarippayattu dancer, and his struggle to discover himself via his craft. His father chastises him for being a 'good for nothing' adolescent with no job. As a result, Kalari is unable to produce a living. So he travels to Europe, joins Rudolf's troupe, studies western dance, perfects his craft, and becomes well-known throughout Europe. The fictional image of dance and the dancer in Indian writing reflects the art's and the artist's ongoing evolution. The current work intends to investigate these representations.

If this is so, we acknowledge that in the early twentieth century, dancer writers such as Rukmini Devi Arundale, Kelucharan Mohapatra, and Srividya Natarajan came forward to purify classical dance forms with their dance narratives set up institutions to promote the pure form of performing arts.

As a result of historical revisionism and Sanskritization, the devadasi system was destroyed. The Hindu temple dancer was portrayed as a "prostitute" by the reformers, but Srividya Natarajan's *The Undoing Dance* reverses the devadasi and devadasi tradition. *Undoing Dance* is a fictional story about four generations of dancers from the Kalyanikkarai devadasi family.

Uday Shankar's attempt to perform traditional Indian dance on stage in style recognized in Europe was a historical milestone. Indeed Kelucharan Mohapatra and Uday Shankar transcended their time's and space's gender dancing styles, literature, and ideology. The biography of 'Uday Shankar' resonates with

Indian artists performing and establishing themselves abroad. To Keucharan, dance represented an old culture, a philosophy, and a value system, not simply any ordinary dancing body.

Mukundan's dance book is a lighthearted analysis of dance as a method of self-expression and an attempt to reconcile a disappearing art form with modern dance. The book entertains in a way that allows dancing to be learned at any age. It is a form of self-expression to attempt to revive the dying art of 'kalarippayattu,' or to merge it with modern dance. The only message of a dance narrative of M Mukundan's Malayalam novel *Nruttam*, that dance crosses nations and love.

Finally, in Indian writing, the fictional representation of dance and the dancer reflects the art's and the artist's constant progress. These representations are attempted using the proposed methodology. The study looks at how dance and the dancer are portrayed in literature, how an audience's craft is portrayed and perceived, and the socio-political setting in which they thrived or died.

Regardless of class, caste, or gender, a diverse range of approaches in Indian scriptures represent the traditional viewpoint that dance is an expression of beauty, order, transcendence, freedom, joy, and touch with the universe. As a result, the study focuses on how these elements are depicted in literature. How has dance and the dancer been portrayed in Indian writing to reflect the attitudes, perspectives, and shifting positions of writers/society?

The goal is to represent patriarchal standards, socio-cultural transformations, norms, and deep-seated casteism in artist community campaigns, publications, reforms, and revivals that have kept the dance and performer alive. Artists, on the other hand, do not succumb to the whims of time. As a result, this paper examines literature that describes various male and female performing artists including art forms. This paper presents female artists, such as devadasis, maharis, courtesans, and prostitutes, break down societal barriers and enhance their positions in comparison to male performers, as depicted in the scriptures, and the modifications that changed their status.

Dance is a form of communication that stems from a dancer's strong desire to connect with others. "Dance as an art form will never die," Ellis adds, "but it will always resurrect." It always grows from the people's spirits, not just as an art form but also as a communal rite. When the dance is recognized as a type of soul-driven communication, it gains a level of significance that is not typically connected with dancing as a form of entertainment. As a result, dancing as an art form or a dancer should not be overlooked or underestimated. To be sure, dancing is a way for people of all ages and places to communicate their needs and desires to thrive, express deep emotions, and genuinely live.

Dance has a significant influence on people's attitudes, behaviours, and values in Indian culture. Dance builds bridge across cultural boundaries because it primarily concerns the human body, which all humans share. Despite the fact that we all originate from diverse origins and cultures, the human body is the one thing that everyone on the planet has in common. Even if we don't share the same cultural ideas or even speak the same language, we may communicate cross-culturally through dancing (via our body motions). "...movement is a response to how a person perceives and thinks about their surroundings and what is happening inside that environment".ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, dance is a reflection of what is going within a specific context that reflects a cultural merging and progress toward a more multicultural world. All of these new cultures are being reflected and developed through these fusion dances, which also bring people from diverse cultures closer together and provide a common basis for communication. Dance will continue to evolve and reflect this diversity and fusion as our globe continues to develop and different cultures come into contact with one another. "In a world where people of different cultures are becoming increasingly exposed to one another through technology and immigration, different forms of dance are

constantly being created that reflect this fusion of these different cultures. Therefore, dance is a powerful reflection of the cultural changes that are taking place in our world".^{iv}

Dance education in universities throughout India and around the world, including dance colleges, is enhancing awareness about the value of Indian dance in culture, in addition to dance as a vocation to increase employability. Today, there is a solid demand for incorporating a dance curriculum already taught in universities throughout India. Dance instruction is provided at the following universities with the following goals:

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