

Repositories of Performing Bodies and the Performance Archive: Devadasis in Tamil Nadu

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The presence and gradual disappearance of devadasi women from the public sphere were the products of a reform movement embroiled in nationalist politics, negotiated by issues of gender, religion, and caste. The absence of devadasi women occurred simultaneously with the emergence of new identities like icai velalars in the political sphere, and new art forms like Bharatanatyam. To investigate the uniquely shifting position of women in the devadasi community in 20th century national politics, their history is analysed through the archives residing in their performance, their bodies, aesthetics, and memories. Such a study expands the ambit of understanding of the devadasi identity and brings their occupational experience as performers to the forefront.

Keywords: Performance archive, Devadasi, Bharatanatyam, 20th Century, Religious reform

Methodological Note

This study aims to explore new implications of the developments in the dance form, earlier known as *Sadir*—present day Bharatanatyam—through the employment of theories regarding the ‘performance archive’ and performance studies. The re-imagination of *sadir*, which transformed the dance space in modern India, was constantly in dialogue with historical conceptions of origins and tradition, and further aimed to define a new value of culture in the global landscape. The objectives and contradictions within this process are analysed through a study of the performance, its performers, as well as a critique of the archive that is aimed to be produced.

Though performance, in its ephemerality, and the archive, in its stable, eternal capacity, are generally seen to be oppositional, they are intimately related and concerned with one another. The archive is no longer a place of physical storage or written documents, but rather is expanded into popular memory. This retention plays a role in its historicity and politics by way of visibility and

erasure. The archive doesn't simply exist; rather, it is constructed by, and for, interests in mediums beyond print. The perspectives and details that remain uncaptured in the written material continue to manifest themselves through performance—not only the repertoire, but beyond that into the performers, their circumstances, visibility, their relation with the state and economy, and presentation. Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade underline Dwight Conquergood's criticism of the "hegemony of the academic text as the conventional outcome of performance research, and calls for the acknowledgement of performance as a form of scholarly representation that can bring the performance paradigm much further by thinking of performance "as a complement, alternative, supplement, and critique of inscribed texts".¹

Diana Taylor justifies this interest in the history and visibility of the performance through the question that she poses: "Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?"² Further clarification is required here regarding the terminology of '*sadir*' or '*dasiattam*.' Bharatanatyam and *Sadir* are generally considered to be sequential products of South Indian dance, with the former being an attempt, in the 20th century, to produce a secular version that was sequestered from the temple/ritual associations of the latter. Though the term Bharatanatyam arose in 1932-33 and the Devadasi Bill was passed in 1947, there was no concrete definition or consensus amongst artists on what the new dance form must be. In the coming years, there were competing interpretations of the form, as well as concerns about the degradation of the quality of the dance. Due to this ambiguous definition, the term *sadir* is used sparingly, instead preferring to distinguish between the performers—as devadasis/hereditary dancers and non-hereditary dancers. Consequently, the term Bharatanatyam is retained, not as referring to the exact imagination of Rukmini Devi Arundale, but instead simply to the product of the entire reform movement as it exists in popular imagination today.

¹ Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade. "Introduction: The Archive in Performance Studies," in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* ed. Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013): 9-34.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

Introduction

Reform on the eve of colonial India was bathed in contested narratives of a nation in the making, negotiating the lines between religion and gender. The birth of Bharatanatyam and its recreation in the hands of Rukmini Devi Arundale have received significant critique and contestation, often platforming issues of caste and the experiences of the women of the Devadasi community. Resolutions, constitutional legislations, memorandums, and court proceedings, capture their history through written archives to trace the socio-political interests leading to the eventual abolition of the ritual practice in 1947. Histories of communities across Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh came forth in varied attempts to define and position themselves in the emerging political landscape. The radical existence of a community of women in non-conjugal relationships, where matriliney was observed as the norm, and negotiated through professional obligation to religious (and by extension, caste observing) institutions, determined the unique debates that took place.

Individuals like Muthulakshmi Reddy, belonging to a 'dual lineage,' proposed legislation advocating for the ban. Simultaneously, national leaders like Gandhi articulated critiques consistent with their ideas of immorality and reform. At the same time voices from Brahmin communities emerged from both sides—abolitionist and anti-abolitionist. Men associated with devadasi communities, fashioned as a new caste of "*icai vaelalar*" musician-artists, began to advocate for abolition and criminalisation of devadasi lifestyles as well.³ To capture such nuances, derived primarily from and extended through the existence of devadasis as an integral part of South India's religious and artistic history, this study has extended investigation to the performance archives contained within their bodies, as nautch girls. Performance itself serves as an alternative archive, where the understanding extends beyond the textual sources. Issues of caste and gender remain at the forefront, and so does the prevalence of written sources. However, they are appended by analyses of memory, music, the body, and performance to expand on the artistic implications of a brand new, yet colonially tainted nationality.

³ Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 147.

As the presence of devadasis declined in temples, courts, salons, and even cinema, their departure signified the crystallisation of a new ideation of gender, morality, and caste, which continues to make itself visible today. Rukmini Devi Arundale's 'reformation' of Bharatanatyam, as it is understood in the common lexicon, is one in a long line of events that obscure the chronological considerations that devadasis maintain with modernity. Indeed, even in the present day, Bharatanatyam contends with issues of tradition and an immemorial repertoire considered untouched. Arundale, for one, harkened back to the temple as the primary site for dance as a cumulative practice of spirituality, Puranic scriptures, and worship, regardless of the historical evidence present, while attempting to expand the ambit of instruction that she provided at Kalakshetra.⁴

The practice of the "nautch girl," which is often traced back to the Sangam Age (c. 300 BCE – 300 CE),⁵ was accused of falling into "civilisational degeneration" in modern times and was equated with prostitution. The following "reform" hinged upon a simplistic and puritanical recreation of Bharatanatyam as part of an ahistorical Hindu legacy, which sought to erase the numerous influences that had enabled devadasis to move beyond temple spaces, further implicating state and caste interests.

The Court, Temple, and Beyond

The term devadasi was used to refer to a vague, yet charged, identity of women who were dedicated to temples and sexually exploited and in dire need of immediate reform and rescue. A closer look at the terminology provides nuance to their identity and questions the historical depth often attributed to the devadasi community. Concubinage, prostitution, temple dedication, and dance all "collapsed"⁶ into the term devadasi. According to Davesh Soneji, the devadasi only coherently comes to be during the Nayaka period, asserting that "a critical reading of courtesan dance, however, can only

⁴ Gillian McCann, "Performing Gender, Class and Nation: Rukmini Devi Arundale and the Impact of Kalakshetra," *South Asia Research* 39 no. 3S (September 2019): 61-79.

⁵ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

begin with the Telugu-speaking Nayaka courts at Tanjore and Madurai in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”⁷

Furthermore, the focus on the temple as the site of said exploitation is revealed to be a modern insertion in responses to discussions surrounding moral depravity in 20th century Madras. The temple, thus, emerges as a unique location, emblematic of Tamil antiquity and the relationship between the state and religion struggling with modernity. In fact, modern awareness continues to portray South Indian architecture as a primary associate of Bharatanatyam,⁸ and the opportunity to perform in temples is seen as a ‘return to roots.’ Lastly, the texts, musical genres, aesthetic practices, and patron relations associated with the devadasi could only be traced as far back as the Nayaka period. Therefore, to understand the term devadasi, its origins and functions, we must limit the temporal scope of wide, open-ended concepts like dance or temples and focus on colonial Tanjore.

Labour Economies and Obligations

Courtly orders decreed in 19th century Tanjore operated in a number of ways that curtailed and defined the role of women as part of a larger system representing gender under colonial scrutiny, in a state relieved of all administrative control of the kingdom (save for the Tanjore Fort itself). The Social hierarchisation of women delineated their roles, responsibilities, and privileges, informing us about various expectations held of women who were visibly associated with the state. Concubines housed in *Mahals* and *Vilasams* were adorned with titles such as *bai* or *ammal*, and their relationship with the king was often defined through rituals like “sword marriages” (*katti kalayanam*).⁹ Far from being considered a disgrace to the courts, they enjoyed a number of opportunities and freedoms which legitimised their relationship with the administration.

⁷ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 30.

⁸ “The Hindu philosophy of the cosmic man and its religious relationship with the Dravidian architecture of Tamil Nadu is the starting point of the discussion of a south Indian aesthetic... The culmination of this research aims to reinstate the importance of architecture as a cultural nexus in order to restring a fragmented dance, community and cultural identity.” see Kavitha Jayakrishnan, “Dancing architecture: The Parallel Evolution of Bharatanatyam and South Indian architecture,” (PhD Thesis, University of Waterloo, Ontario, 2011), 5.

⁹ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 34.

What is perhaps more interesting, however, are the limitations placed on the lives and practices of these women. A set of Maratha court records—known as the *Modi records*,¹⁰ describes the restrictions that were placed on their bodies in terms of behaviour and dressing. They were, thus, subjected to various codified expectations which emerged in a number of princely states under the strict eye of the colonial empire. It is demonstrated that these women were closely associated with the courts as well, rather than with just the temple in an exclusive manner.

One of the reasons behind this assumption of temple bondage is the controversial *pottukkattual* ritual. Devadasi communities were accused of dedicating young women under the age of consent, en masse, through this ritual, understood as ‘marriage to god.’ The implication of institutionalised child marriage in light of 20th century social reform is clear, revealing the moral anxieties these accusations hoped to evoke amongst the people. Women who underwent the ritual were often invited to perform in temples, courts, festivals, and other spaces. The *pottukkattual* ritual permitted the individual to take part in daily rituals of temples, however it was seldom considered necessary for courtesans to undergo it, and a large number of them never did. In effect, the ritual often took place in the homes of devadasis.¹¹ Concepts of “theogamy” and temple dedication overly simplify and corrupt the idea of such communities. No doubt they engaged in non-conjugal activities, finding expression and power in a sexual economy that was patriarchal in nature. But such oversimplifications distort the women’s image, often reducing their lifestyle to being depraved and subjugated. As Nrithya Pillai outlines:

This marking as an artist also **allowed these women to liaise with powerful men**. Is that prostitution? I don’t think so. In fact, I think it **was much better than the exclusively caste endogamous and oppressive marriages that women from all communities were subjected to around this time**. Women have been oppressed by men for long, **but women from courtesan castes enjoyed freedoms that**

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

were often not even afforded to upper-caste women.¹² (emphasis added)

It is counter-intuitive to define the *pottukkattual* in terms of a “sexual bondage” to the temple. These ideas of temple attachments find no mention in the Modi records and, in some instances, the *pottukkattual* was similar to the “sword marriages” of concubines to Maratha kings, in that devadasis were wedded to an aspect of the deity, Murugan’s spear, rather than the deity himself.

What was more defined, however, was the professional relationship some of these women held with the court and elsewhere. These women had to obtain permission from the court administration to perform beyond their expected locations, and were even punished in cases of transgression.¹³ The court held up these expectations as part of the professional affiliation that they shared with performers, involving economic remuneration. This value extended to the devadasis and their patrons outside the courts as well. Devadasis were generally instructed to select patrons based on social and economic status. Accounts range from warnings against associating with patrons of lower caste than themselves, to restrictions limiting them solely to Brahmin patrons.¹⁴ This is not only indicative of the position of the patron themselves, but also the status to be preserved by the devadasi.

Anne-Marie Gaston describes that dealings with the “lowest castes” were, indeed, frowned upon enough for her to be tried by a Panchayat. Similarly, association with “a *Mohammadan*, a blacksmith, a goldsmith, or a *chetti*, a *nokkam*, or any man of low caste” was punishable with penalties and/or fines.¹⁵ She further mentions that “it was necessary to be careful where one

¹² Aditi Mruti, “Tell Me More: Talking Caste Dynamics in Bharatanatyam With Nrithya Pillai,” *The Swaddle*, April 17, 2021, accessed November 30, 2025, www.theswaddle.com/tell-me-more-talking-caste-dynamics-in-bharatanatyam-with-nrithya-pillai.

¹³ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 40.

¹⁴ “All handsome girls are trained to dance and sing and are keeps of brahmins”: Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), 41.

¹⁵ The occupations and names are probably in reference to castes. It must also be noted that such restrictions were not absolute and could be overlooked by way of exceedingly wealthy patrons – “Money could overcome some of the taboos. Muslim officers paid “lavishly for their entertainment”” see Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 41

performed,"¹⁶ thus suggesting that beyond an unsuitable patron, the act of even performing in the home of such an individual could invite punishment. Here the location—the stage, temple or court—holds significance to the dance and body of the performer themselves whose art cannot be alienated from its physical context.¹⁷

Such specifics illustrate the similarities to caste hierarchies and better place the status of the devadasi in a larger societal network. The devadasi mentioned above was given the opportunity to 'purify' herself by drinking the '*panchagavyam*,' in the same manner as an upper caste person would after some interaction or contact with a lower caste.¹⁸ Such intricacies in the workings of devadasis help us understand their status within society, in addition to the treatment meted out to them. The observation of purification rituals demonstrates that besides the patron, the body of the devadasi herself, her status, location, and access were to be managed and preserved as well. The *Modi records* include examples of women who were promised rewards or compensation,¹⁹ and many women often appealed to have their children go through the *pottukkattual* in order to induct them into the courtly economy. These transactions point towards a distinct relationship with bodily labour, be it through dance or sexual activity, rather than religious degeneration expressed only within the temple.

"God Save the King" and Hindustani for the Devadasi

The nature of bodily labour extracted from these women makes it clear that they functioned along professional and, by extension, artistic lines through their dance. The idea of the dancer-courtesan has found pan-Indian recognition. Its aesthetics have found celebration in certain genres of Hindi cinema, like *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972), and *Umrao Jaan* (1981). While the socio-economic relations that constrained these women are often the

¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷ A.P. Rajaram, "From Oblivion to Acceptance: Sadir Dancer Muthukannammal's Presence as a Challenge to Representations" in *Performance Making and the Archive*, ed. Ashutosh Potdar, Sharmistha Saha (New York: Routledge, 2023), 71-82.

¹⁸ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 42.

¹⁹ "The record states that she is to be given one kalam of paddy every month and one-and-a-half handfuls of cooked rice a day." see Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 41.

topic of discussion, their performances, too, reveal much about their lives and practices. As mentioned earlier, the new courtly practices of the Tanjore court were negotiated keeping in mind colonial audiences, be it immediate or as part of “global circuits of culture.”²⁰ Western music was entertained in the courts of King Serfoji, and English artists were invited and paid to perform. The *Modi records* refer to a wide variety of instruments being manufactured in Tanjore itself as it immersed itself within a syncretic culture of its own creation. What is unique, however, is its penetration into the sphere of dance. “Social dancing,” like the waltz, was carried out in the courts, and even devadasis danced to English songs such as “God Save the King” under the instruction and training of European musicians.²¹

More significant, perhaps, was the presence of Hindustani music in the same spheres. Artists from Gwalior were invited and kept on the payroll of the palace to exclusively teach and train dancers of the court. Musical forms like dhrupad, khyal, tappa find mention in records. The entry of North Indian courtesans probably followed the musicians. Paintings even show South Indian *dasis* adorned in saris and jewellery alongside North Indian courtesans in Mughal attire. It is possible that a similar courtesan culture observed in the northern regions made assimilation easier. The integration of what would be considered an “alien” aesthetic into the colonial, westernised, courtly economy of dancer-courtesans shatters the idea of an untouched and isolated institution which had fallen into ruin.

The dance performed by the devadasis was, hence, part of a wider range of aesthetics which found state patronage in light of colonial and global considerations, as well as collaboration and integration of musical forms like Hindustani. When it came time to ‘reform’ the art of the devadasis in the creation of Bharatanatyam, such influences were all but rejected in Rukmini Devi Arundale’s mission, as she “always emphasised on the spiritual message.”²² McCann explains how this larger mission aligned with colonial periodisation and “leapfrogged” European or Muslim influence in the interest of “retrieving the so-called golden age often associated with the Vedic

²⁰ Ibid., 29.

²¹ Ibid., 54.

²² McCann, “Performing Gender, Class and Nation,” 67S.

period."²³ Decades later, these influences have been ejected from the popular conception of the artform, its public performance and perhaps even from the imaginations of artists themselves.

Music, Lyric, and Eroticism: Interpreting Performance

The Tanjore Quartet comprised four brothers, musicians of the Tanjore court, who were celebrated as radical innovators. They have also been mentioned in contemporary Bharatanatyam compositions, choreographies, and performances. The creation of the *margam*, for example, a seven-step sequence carried out in solo performance to this day (*alarippu-jatisvaram-sabdam-varnam-padam-tillana-sloka*), is generally credited to the Quartet.²⁴ Their work can be seen as a collaboration with pre-existing dance and aesthetic cultures. Additionally, they also exercised significant power by appointing and training dancers for events like the *Carapentira Pupala Kuravañci*, an annual programme at the Tanjore court.²⁵ The dance and music culture had primarily revolved around lyrical poetry. These songs are traced to the Telugu genre known as Padam, which was often peppered with eroticism. This often-found innovations through new works in praise of the king and other forms of composition that were used for staging the competency of the king, perhaps in light of his "hollow" rule. The interpretation of the lyrics by the dancers further expressed this aesthetic sensibility that was often scorned upon. This dance presented in the court was not linear in its storytelling; instead, it was often cyclical. This resulted in the *abhinaya* of the dancer gaining prominence through gestures, movements, expressions, and attitudes, and it was eventually brought to the forefront of performances.

Characters in these songs, often dedicated to kings (such as 17th century King Sahaji) and deities (such as Siva-Tyagaraja), were themselves courtesans, or at least maintained a vital role in the tales being conveyed or performed. Therefore, not only did these songs maintain the "depraved" identity of the dancers through their art, but they also situated them permanently within the realm of courtly culture. Courtesans also indulged in writing, often creating

²³ Ibid., 61S-79S.

²⁴ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 58.

²⁵ Ibid., 61.

celebrated works of their respective periods.²⁶ These songs are often erotic and represent not just desire present amongst such communities, but also the artistic ability to articulate such feelings without the fear of state retribution. Soneji laments the lack of details in records regarding the sexual activity of courtesans, claiming that only “personal narratives and ethnography”²⁷ could address the gap. In this regard, perhaps the self-written music of devadasis can inform us, even if the material is representational and artistic.

Upon the death of Sivaji in 1855, the English East India Company was prepared to dismantle the already weakened throne of the Raja. Despite being retained in the hands of Queen Victoria, state patronage for dance and music declined significantly. The year 1887 witnessed one of the last courtesan dances performed in Tanjore Palace. As a result, Tanjore witnessed a large-scale migration of artists over a long period of time, who moved to Madras. Their identity as ‘nautch girls’ provided them with opportunities in Madras, in what Soneji calls ‘salon dance/performances,’²⁸ and in the new industry of cinema.

Bhakti and Sringara Rasa

The eroticism that constituted a major part of this musical corpus was not simply in service of a personal corruption at the hands of the devadasi, as is implied by abolitionists. Besides finding roots in the literary genre of Telugu Padam, eroticism also relates to the much older concepts of the bhakti and the *navarasa*, specifically *sringara rasa*. Bhakti, often translated as devotion, is seen across all the classical Hindu performing arts, argued to be their “raison d’être.”²⁹ This bhakti is expressed through the *navarasa* (nine rasas) originally conceptualised in the *Natyashastra*, a treatise on performing arts and theory written by Bharata Muni. Of the *navarasa*, *sringara rasa* occupies a unique position when considered in light of the role of eroticism in dance.

²⁶ “...works by Ramabhadramba and Rangajamma, for example, are considered among the crowning literary pieces from this [Nayaka] period...” Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Ibid., 38.

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁹ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 87.

Sringara rasa, that is romance, attraction, and love can serve as a metaphor for the pursuit of the divine. This divinity may then be represented by an earthly avatar of the deity within the narrative, or be transposed onto the kingly patron who was often named after gods themselves.

Human love, physical passion, became the perfect analogy for divine love, the spiritual passion. As secular language was used to describe religious love, so too was religious language used to describe secular love.

The supreme Bhagavan (God) took on the form of a lover so that the devotee could gain access to the sacred, the infinite, and eternal through expression rather than suppression of earthly desires.³⁰

Sringara rasa, thus, stood as a physical manifestation of the quest and union with the divine by utilising accessible and observable states of the lover. The rasa may take on psychological states based on either the presence or absence (or separation, called *viraha*) of the lover. Through bhakti, the conceptual existence of the divine is brought into the physical realm and tied to the most personal aspects of romance. Since the divine may never be tangibly experienced, the *sringara rasa* is said to reach its peak at times of separation.³¹

Since the kingly patron and the divine find simultaneous reference, there is an obvious collapse of this purely virtual image of the divine. This invited critiques regarding the far more literal meaning of expressing *sringara rasa*, with Rukmini Devi Arundale possibly mounting the most scathing condemnation. To Arundale, the references made to the patron within music and dance defined the acceptability of the exercise, and she challenged the equal reverence that was shown to him and the deity, abstracted through performance.³² Along with this came a broader disagreement in the manner in which bhakti was to be depicted in dance. On the other hand, devadasis like T Balasaraswati argued for *sringara rasa* as a legitimate form of bhakti. She insisted that the *sringara rasas* were supreme in *abhinaya*, and yet, never 'carnal.'

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 89.

³² Ibid., 90.

Sringara stands supreme in the range of emotions. No other emotion is better capable of reflecting the mystic union of the human with the divine, I say this with deep personal experience of dancing to many great devotional songs which have had no element of sringara in them. Devotional songs are of course necessary. However, sringara is the cardinal emotion (Balasaraswati in Sruti 1984, March).³³

Gaston broadly interpreted Balasaraswati's argument as follows: "I would suggest that she felt the erotic, in the context of the dance, to be without connotations of sexual arousal, but merely to be a vehicle by which extreme emotion could be projected. This is at the heart of bhakti."³⁴ The public arguments and debates between these two personalities are often used to epitomise the difference of opinion. Rukmini Devi Arundale and T. Balasaraswati both represented their dance philosophy, one as a Brahmin and the other as a devadasi, and both contested the dance language in a transitional phase. For Arundale, reference to bhakti and sringara rasa was represented by conventional devotion to the divine which did not make use of sexual metaphors or erotic gestures. Inherent in this critique is the idea that devotion could never contain a sexual or erotic aspect and that these were corruptions of the original ideal, what she called the "true spirit"³⁵ of the dance. This applied further to the concept of the *navarasas*, which, for her, must also have been similarly "pure" and "devotional," devoid of sexual connotation. Her student, S. Sarada notes: "Rukmini Devi's dance repertoire was unique and varied ... She expressed the Sringara-Rasa—the emotion of love fully, but in its most refined form, without any trace of vulgarity."³⁶

While Arundale and many practitioners, to this day, would see this edit to the repertoire as purely emancipatory to the dancer, there is still the complication regarding the audience. Dissolution of the patron and by extension, the patron's will, does not erase the implicit expectations that the incoming audience would carry. Here we are forced to contend with the logic of a "neoliberal" free market where individual choice and liberty reign supreme without critically acknowledging the hidden, decentralised yet strict

³³ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 93.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

expectations held by upper-class/caste audience members. Even where dance is public, free and supported through government funding or grants, the art continues to be tied to the will of a dominant few, represented by the intellectual class, the state or the wealthy elite.

This contradiction of bodily liberty in dance is easily seen when one considers that a dancer simply *cannot* perform an erotic version of Bharatanatyam, even if she wishes to do so. This calls into question the position of those principles that denied the presence of sexual and erotic material, as well as their motives and their effective dominance in the public space today, ranging across various aspects of social life. They further expand into sociological concepts of purity, and the dichotomy between the sacred and profane. It is this form of practice that we witness today in public performances of Bharatanatyam, where there is a general audience rather than one patron who is to be satisfied. However, not all non-hereditary dancers rallied behind Arundale, nor hereditary dancers behind Balasaraswati. A male non-hereditary dancer, Ram Gopal, who gained international fame, provided a different idea of tradition through temple sculpture: "I am going to follow the bronzes in the temple. I have a beautiful figure. Rukmini Devi used to say, "where do you get the ideas of dancing naked?" and I would say, "where did you get the idea of going inside the temple with your eyes closed? Look at those bronzes, Siva is almost naked."³⁷

Conversely, a former devadasi, K. Bhanumati appreciated the new refashioning of the dance by Arundale, supported the reforms, and wholeheartedly sanctioned the new Bharatanatyam.³⁸ There was considerable variety in opinions, though it is clear which representation of dance gained dominance.

Incomplete Reform in the Political Sphere

Decades later, the work of Muthulakshmi Reddy pioneered legislative intervention in the lives of devadasis. Reddy was a revolutionary presence in the 20th century national movement, and was the first female doctor in her presidency, going on to implement a number of social health programmes that

³⁷ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 94.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

focused on women. She was also part of the Madras Legislative Assembly and a prominent voice in the All India Women's Conference. However, it was her dual identity as the daughter of a Brahmin father and a devadasi mother which situated her uniquely within such activities, legitimising her 'interference.' In 1927, through a resolution, Reddy recommended that the government "undertake legislation to put a stop to the practice of dedication of young girls and young women to Hindu temples for immoral purposes" ³⁹(a claim we have already explored), which was met with immediate protests from devadasis. The resolution would eventually take the form of a legal bill, implemented in 1947 and titled "Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947," criminalising the lifestyle of devadasis. Though the Act would eventually leave women from devadasi communities disenfranchised (in a number of ways), it is important to investigate the various stakeholders and motivations that led to the 1927 proposal, as well as the journey and implications of the 1947 implementation.

To begin with, Reddy's intervention was generally feminist in nature and centred on women across a number of social issues she raised her voice against—age of consent, female education, medical aid, etc. In fact, part of Reddy's initial suggestion (later modified) was the enfranchisement of women through *inams*—tax free lands on the basis of their association with temples to all devadasis—who would no longer be able to perform.⁴⁰ However, Reddy was not alone in such interventions and had to contend with her role within the Congress Party, as well as her association with the Theosophical Society headed by Annie Besant, the ideology of which would further influence Rukmini Devi Arundale in her refashioning of Bharatanatyam.

The idea of "pure virgins" residing in the temple and gaining education and training in religious and spiritual matters, an idea borrowed from the European concept of Catholic nuns, was transposed upon the devadasi.⁴¹ Here, leaders like Besant and Reddy parrot Orientalist imaginations, as coined by Edward Said,⁴² of a golden era. We witness the attempt to recreate a pure devadasi of ancient India, who is undeniably punctured with European

³⁹ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴² Edward Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1 (1977): 162-206.

models of morality and chastity accorded to women. In their modern corruption, devadasis were fashioned as a caste for prostitutes and sanctioned by custom, and the public presence of young daughters of devadasis was protested. By letting the 'native opinion/feeling' take precedence, the government repeatedly emboldened voices who referred to devadasi daughters as 'wicked girls.' In reference to the admission of a devadasi girl to school, W. Robinson says "A girl of this class, even before attaining the age of puberty, is a prostitute."⁴³

The question, therefore, centred on how such women were to be reformed and integrated. The resounding solution provided by the patriarchal, nationalist leadership was marriage. If devadasis were primarily identified through their non-conjugal relations, their depravity could only find solace in the institution of marriage (essentially conjugal monogamy). Though Reddy derides the necessity of marriage and its gendered inequality, the only alternative she is willing to approve of is celibacy. The only avenue, therefore, for devadasis to 'reclaim' their identities and be brought into a system defined through citizenship, awarding them rights, access to social programmes, etc. was to assimilate into the structure of the family.

Mahatma Gandhi embodied many such ideals, and his assessment of devadasis vehemently rejected their legitimacy, both in their lifestyle as well as their pleas. Gandhi viewed devadasis as leading a depraved and diseased existence, in need of "rehabilitation", and ignored their voices. Such opinions are remarkably consistent with his articulation of the role of women in the public sphere. Though often praised for making space for women in the national movement, he also maintained strict expectations, as Arundhati Roy explains: "Gandhi did indeed make the space for women to participate in the national movement. But those women had to be virtuous; they had to, so to speak, bear "marks" upon their person that would "sterilise the sinner's eye." They had to be obedient women who never challenged the traditional structures of patriarchy."⁴⁴

⁴³ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 118.

⁴⁴ See Arundhati Roy, *The Doctor and the Saint: The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate: Caste, Race and Annihilation of Caste*, (Penguin Random House India, 2019), 64; and B. R. Ambedkar, Arundhati Roy, S. Anand, *The Annihilation Caste: The Critical Annotated Edition* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2014), 80-81.

His insistence upon maintaining a stringent definition of acceptable womanhood denied women their individuality and meant that the absorption of devadasis could never occur on their own terms. This was only possible within the status quo of the patriarchal family structure, which had yet to face a challenge. To be clear, not all reformists harped on marriage as a means of reform or emancipation. To E. V. Ramasamy, also known as Periyar, devadasis represented the prevalence of subjugation of lower-caste women at the hands and fancies of upper-caste men. More broadly the Self-Respect Movement sought to dispel concepts of *pativrata* (husband dedication) and *karpu* (chastity), which it perceived as implicit in the reproduction of caste purity.⁴⁵ Though he is unable to recognise the result of erasing the unique rights enjoyed by devadasis, he never upholds or celebrates the chastity of women, nor does he expect them to enter marriage as a fix.⁴⁶

Abolitionist and anti-abolitionist views were held not only by political leaders, however, and devadasis also articulated their demands through petitions, letters, and organisations like the Madras Devadasi Association. They openly questioned the efficacy of the resolution, criticised the support of men from their own communities, and developed a language that placed them, their issues and identity within the political and religious milieu of the time. In a letter written by two devadasis, Duraikkannu and Parvati, they address and explain the religious sanctions provided to their practice. References to deities, tradition, and customs were made in an effort to appeal to the valorisation of the religious past of India, which was occurring throughout the early 20th century. It ends by questioning how the abolition of their practice could erase prostitution when the Indian Penal Code itself could not.⁴⁷

Repeated attempts were made to harken back to the golden era of Hindu civilisation—drawing on Tamil epics like *Manimekalai*, devotional music, and religious legitimacy provided to their lifestyle—while simultaneously recognising the modern nature of the state they resided in. Reform for the devadasis was not limited to resisting abolition; it also aimed to couch itself in the sea of religious reform and revival taking place before independence was achieved in 1947. One plea requests the state to embrace the devadasis: “Give

⁴⁵ Karthick Ram Manoharan, “An Enduring Idea,” *Frontline*, October 31, 2025, 14.

⁴⁶ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 140.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

us education, religious, literary, and artistic. Education will dispel ignorance and we will occupy once again the same rank which we held in the national life of the past.”⁴⁸

The early 20th century political sphere witnessed the performance of the devadasi identity both on and off the stage. Along the lines of Anjali Arondekar’s study, communities repeatedly engage in reimagining their histories under colonial oversight in the hopes of influencing policy which in the process alters the archive produced.⁴⁹ The articulation of these communities was restricted to the sensibilities of the era, negotiated by the political narratives that were emerging within the newly formed nation-state. Concepts of sexual freedom could never find utterance in an environment that demanded a specific femininity to survive the political onslaught represented by “reform.”

The issue of ‘reform’ amongst sex workers continues to demand a similar representation of femininity, and criticises their existence as ‘fallen’ women. However, contemporary conversations around sex work are able to openly discuss their demands and question the assumptions held regarding sexual morality, equal access to sexuality, the relevance of family, and even theoretical frameworks like “*The Whore and the Madonna*.” An excerpt from the *Sex Workers Manifesto* maintains delicate nuance, exploring a wide range of ideas to voice their demands and rights:

The young men who look for sexual initiation, the married men who seek the company of ‘other’ women, the migrant labourers separated from their wives who try to find warmth and companionship in the red light area can not all be dismissed as wicked and perverted. To do that will amount to dismissing a whole history of human search for desire, intimacy and need. Such dismissal creates an unfulfilled demand for sexual pleasure, the burden of which though shared by men and women alike, ultimately weighs more heavily on women.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 125.

⁴⁹ Anjali Arondekar, *Abundance: Sexuality’s History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 41.

⁵⁰ “Sex Workers’ Manifesto: First National Conference of Sex Workers in India, 1997” *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* (DMSC), NSWP, accessed November 11, 2025,

In the end, devadasis were unable to convincingly define their existence within the patriarchal structure of colonial, and later, independent India. They were unable to maintain their lifestyles and, due to the non-conjugal nature of their relations, they were unable to claim hereditary property belonging to their partners or stand as equal heirs for the same. At the same time, men associated with the devadasi communities were able to develop different identities through their association with music and politics.⁵¹ The unequal effects of “reform” for men and women of the same community, and the failures of this reform in the new nation, require nuanced analysis to understand the unique manner in which politicians, like former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi, and their caste identities were understood in society.

Recreating the Performance and Establishing the Archive

Another dimension that informed Rukmini Devi Arundale’s new ideation was the historicity of this art. As mentioned above, for Arundale, Bharatanatyam was intrinsically tied to the Hindu temple—not just its geographical site, but its iconography, its religiosity, and its associations with caste as well. This harkening back to the past was not infrequent during the national movement, and periodisation posited many ancient Indian practices, values, cultures as the height of Indian civilisation.⁵² In Arundale’s conceptualisation, we see the crystallisation of not just community identity but the art form itself by way of relation. Though she repeatedly called for the revival of a “Golden Age” in dance, she also consciously made interpretations and additions. She “had to

<https://www.nswp.org/resource/member-publications/sex-workers-manifesto-first-national-conference-sex-workers-india>

⁵¹ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 145.

⁵² This framework was not just limited to those who wished to foreground the Hindu or Aryan supremacy. E.g. “Writing-in the latter half of the nineteenth century Phule argued that the original inhabitants of India were the Adivasis, among whom he included the Shudras, Ati Shudras and Dalits, all of whom were descendants of heroic peoples led by the Daitya king, Bali.” As is the same for theories which argue for Dravidian presence across the subcontinent, including Indus Valley Civilisation, before the coming of Aryans. – Romila Thapar, *Which Of Us Are Aryans?* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2019), 49.

try to make something new - not with the idea of making it look new, but with the idea of making it look old."⁵³

The new Bharatanatyam costume was similarly made with influences from the Hindu temple, "in the spirit of what our people wore thousands of years ago."⁵⁴ What she may mean by "our people" is up for debate here, but it is clear that Rukmini Devi was conscious of her interpretive alteration without knowledge of what the original art form actually was. Thus, every new addition was not simply a change or innovation she proposed as an artist. Rather, it seemed to be a definition of what the art form supposedly was. This compromise is somewhat understandable, considering that performance is "ephemeral," and that it is impossible to accurately recreate the art as it was. Thus, "performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."⁵⁵

As Peggy Phelan outlines here, besides the performance itself, attempts to document and archive the form would fall short of the original. Though this strict classification of the ephemerality and its juxtaposition with the unchanging, static archive have been questioned by scholars as of late, it helps us identify the inherent ahistoric attempts to reliably recreate the choreography (and values, aesthetics, and philosophies) of ancient, or even early modern, forms of the dance. With no authoritative truth present, each change or alteration played a role in how the art form would be recognised in independent India in its capacity as an "unchanged and original" dance. Here, more than Devi's writings, philosophies, and values, her performance itself began to produce an archive of Bharatanatyam. It is, therefore, proposed that through her claim of precedence and association with the "true spirit" of the art at every turn, Devi aimed to produce a fresh archive; as Jacques Derrida

⁵³ Hari Krishnan, Davesh Soneji, Nrithya Pillai, "Caste, Class, Aesthetics, and the Making of Modern Bharatanatyam Dance," *Music and Dance as Everyday South Asia*, (2024): 209-228.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 219

⁵⁵ Laura Luise Schultz, "The Archive is Here and Now: Reframing Political Events as Theatre," in *Performing Archives—Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen, Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), 199-217.

puts it: “the first archivist establishes.”⁵⁶ She says, “I had definitely decided that the dance was essentially spiritual and I **could not accept that which had gone away from the true spirit of Bharata Natyam.**”⁵⁷ [emphasis added]

Rukmini Devi Arundale’s project, though embroiled in the past, was essentially concerned with the future of the dance. Gaston articulates a widespread attitude towards this project at the time. It was felt that “though the art itself was admirable, it was in the wrong hands when dominated by a community tainted by the associations that surrounded the hereditary professionals.”⁵⁸ As with colonial periodisation, formulation of frameworks related to the past aim to inform attitudes and tentative policies for the near future. This project, when extended to performance, accomplished the same effect as an archive. Derrida underlines how “one associates the archive with repetition, and repetition with the past. But it is the future that is at issue here, and the archive is an irreducible experience of the future.”⁵⁹

Though theory on performance studies and performance archives, especially dance, was generally written in the 20th century with respect to the rise of digital archives, some inferences are applicable to the manner in which Bharatanatyam was repackaged for its new audience. As Sarah Whatley, in her attempts to create a digital archive of dance, notes: “Perhaps because the creation of digital dance archives is a relatively new phenomenon, archival practices are now intervening in the processes of dance creation and reception rather than always following after the dance is over.”⁶⁰ Of course, considerations of the audience are always an intrinsic part of how a performance is conceived and showcased, but here we may note the intervention of the archive itself in the performance-making practice. Display

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida. *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*, Trans. by Eric Prenowitz (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 55.

⁵⁷ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 91.

⁵⁸ E. Krishna Iyer writes, in the context of a Brahmin couple being trained: “For once in his life he [P.S. Minakshisundaram] has been fortunate in entrusting his art in the hands of a proper and intelligent couple. Their charm, chasteness and dignity remind us of the spiritual associations.”

⁵⁹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 68.

⁶⁰ Sarah Whatley, “Dance Encounters Online: Digital Archives and Performance” in *Performing Archives—Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen, Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), 163-178

of *sringara rasa* was not just left out of non-hereditary dance repertoires as a matter of taste and values; it was also established that hereditary dancers simply had a natural calling to it, which they themselves lacked. P. S. Minakshisundaram, a hereditary dance teacher, when tasked with training a Brahmin dance couple (U. S. Krishna Rao and Chandrabhaga Devi), resorted to teaching a different repertoire, one which was considered more “acceptable,” keeping in mind their persons.

In the 1940s, Minakshisundaram mentions, “*I have not taught you what I teach to the devadasis.*” He continued, “*This Bharata Natyam must spread all over the world and bring glory to our motherland.*”⁶¹ It is clear that in the process of its reconfiguration, Bharatanatyam was seen as an opportunity to showcase the new art form as a defining marker of Indian culture to a global audience when taught to dancers of higher social status. This expectation was inherent during the training (hence before being performed), which altered not just choreographies but lyrics as well, in the interest of being received well abroad as the image of a new nation. Exaggerations or ‘purification’ of the repertoire were carried out to accommodate popular sensibilities as well as a new projection of the self. The new imagination of Bharatanatyam was directed towards a different audience, one quite distinct from that which the devadasis had catered to.

In 2009-10, Tracy C. Davis and Barnaby King attempted to recreate Charles Matthew’s *Trip to America* - a solo performance, from textual sources and illustrations in order to understand the content and intentions of his work.⁶² They faced a number of challenges in attempting to recreate movement, vocal specifics, prop usage, and transitions, often having to resort to inventing new material altogether. Similar to oral histories that are reproduced over time and intimately altered through each reproduction, the ephemerality of dance denies us any true claim over the original. Allegedly racist representations in Matthew’s work were re-evaluated, keeping in mind the social milieu he

⁶¹ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 91. [It was Rao himself who noted these last words of his master.]

⁶² Tracy C. Davis, Barnaby King, “Performance, Again: Resuscitating the Repertoire” in *Performing Archives—Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen, Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), 179-198.

belonged to, and whether his performances were indeed ‘interpretable’ as racist to their audience.

Later, the team worried whether their performance could “offend contemporary ethical sensibilities if performed uncritically.” On the other hand, they also note that “toning down 1820s fun to meet modern standards would potentially misrepresent historical evidence,” thus illustrating a major dilemma. They outline some of the shortcomings, as well as concerns, that one must contend with in attempting to comprehend a performance which has passed, such as “the movement between historiographic inquiry and performance ethnography as sometimes distinct and sometimes convergent methodologies, awkwardly introducing ethical questions of representation on top of the problems of historical accuracy.”⁶³

Here, Bharatanatyam must contend with its eroticism being discarded as a matter of conscious pruning. If so, then it classifies itself as explicitly ahistorical and ‘non-untouched,’ since *sringara rasa* is taken to be essential to the art. In addition, the very identity of the dance itself was changed, as hereditary dancers now constitute a minority of those performing today. To be sure, the devadasis, along with other kinds of artists, represented an alternate vision of the art form, one which had evolved over centuries but made no claim of being ‘original’ or unchanged. Contrary to popular belief, there was indeed a period of transition, from devadasi’s dance as it had been to the Bharatanatyam that is widely practised today. T. Balasaraswati herself performed from 1925 to 1984,⁶⁴ presumably in her own interpretation, and discussions and contentions surrounding the ‘revival’ of Bharatanatyam continued at least until 1985.

Challenges and Alternatives to the Archive

Devadasis like Balasaraswati were not the only ones to challenge Bharatanatyam’s new repertoire. Various other dancers, such as Ram Gopal discussed above, presented arguments against Rukmini Devi’s conception, despite being a non-hereditary dancer himself. While the presence of artistic interpretation is hardly surprising, what stands out is just how widely known

⁶³ Ibid., 180.

⁶⁴ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 90.

these dancers were on an international scale. Ram Gopal, and before him Uday Shankar, were based in Europe and were often placed beside prominent Western artists as equals.⁶⁵ The concern shown before for international audiences by Rao, for which the repertoire was so consciously edited, doesn't seem to be visible here in the same capacity. These dancers though, ever so prominent, did not align with the other strains of dance which would come to take hold in India in the coming years.

Chandralekha is another prominent dancer who attempted to reformulate the dance. Her work does not directly converse with the issue of devadasis, or with Arundale, but makes use of a number of philosophical and historical influences to attempt a re-imagining of the dance. She is documented in much more detail through her performances, documentaries, videos of performances, and discussions on her process and inspirations. Her documentary "*Sharira – Chandralekha's Explorations in Dance*" was made with Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) and aired on Doordarshan,⁶⁶ suggesting some level of acceptance or, at the very least, indifference towards her interpretation within society and state. She is associated with both Bharatanatyam, in which she was originally trained, as well as contemporary dance, for which she is better known.⁶⁷ Her position is occasionally interpreted as a 'break' with tradition or the traditional repertoire, placing her in the camp which claims that "Bharatanatyam in its present form is no longer relevant to modern Indian society."⁶⁸ However, Chandralekha exhibits yet another claim to dance and performance history and is better defined as someone in conversation with tradition, rather than one who rejects it in an outright fashion. Overall, her work can be categorised as reinterpretations and reimagining of not just choreography or repertoire but performance, movement, and the body itself. Many of her pieces are based on the experiences of women within patriarchal systems, but beyond the content of the dance, the philosophy informing it draws heavily from aesthetics and knowledge systems of India. Her centrality of the body is derived from ancient

⁶⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁶ "*Sharira – Chandralekha's Explorations in Dance*," directed by Ein Lall, PSBT India, 2003, video, 29:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyXh_5dT0zw.

⁶⁷ Ananya Chatterjea, "Chandralekha: Negotiating the Female Body and Movement in Cultural/Political Signification," *Dance Research Journal* 30 no.1 (1998): 25-33.

⁶⁸ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 99.

texts, where she contests pre-existing readings to reclaim a meaning that was supposedly always present. To her, the Vedas “had always known about the body as the starting point of life” and the *Natyashastra* was “a very modern text”⁶⁹ for its centralisation of the body. She further draws extensively on Tantra philosophy, Yoga, and Chakras, yet avoids delving into divine associations, keeping her reasoning well-understood and legible, even if not agreeable. Chatterjea locates her attempts within a “resistive postmodernism,” one which “is concerned with critical deconstruction of tradition,” and unconcerned with locating a singular truth but rather imaginatively exploring history through the lens of the body.⁷⁰

It should be kept in mind that the character of Chandralekha’s work was not arrived at only through literature; it is as much practically realised as it is literarily. For example, she is known to revisit traditional concepts like the *nayika* (the traditional heroine), *saustabha* (purity of line), and eye gestures such as *sachi* (sideways glance) in her own manner.⁷¹ However, it is the texts that allow us to examine the historical associations her dance exhibits without divine or mystic associations that have the potential to shroud the origins of her work. The archive on Chandralekha’s dance, as well as the philosophy which informs it, gives a deeper look into her decisions of inclusion and exclusion within her performance.

Contemporary Presence of Bharatanatyam

The 20th century re-creation of devadasi dance led to a change in the demographic that was expected to perform. Bharatanatyam was formulated as part of a larger mission of nation-building, and eventually, ‘nonhereditary’ Brahmin women came to primarily practice the art, serving as its patrons, instead of temples or courts. McCann notes that ballet, a form which had inspired Arundale, had similarly become a marker of middle-class status in Europe and North America. Both Bharatanatyam and ballet constituted the highest form of classical art in their respective societies and were considered appropriate and sophisticated pursuits for daughters of middle-class

⁶⁹ Chatterjea, “Chandralekha,” 392.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

families.⁷² Both were patronised by the elite and government-led institutions, and performed free of charge in public venues after years of training. This new form of the dance was brought out of the spheres of the state and the temple, by way of its new performers—caste Hindus—ultimately transforming its meaning and function. Dance, specifically Bharatanatyam, had been reconstituted into an activity performed primarily by upper/middle class women as a hobby rather than a professional undertaking. Kalakshetra, founded in 1936, which gained recognition from the Parliament in 1993 as an “Institute of National Importance”⁷³ and support from the Ministry of Culture, came to provide a holistic and gendered education rather than the training required to pursue the art; one in which “young women emerging from Kalakshetra were meant to be attractive, trained in the ethos and habitus of upper-class life, signalling middle-class housewifely respectability.”⁷⁴

By exchanging the barriers of entry and the very definition of dance” in the public eye, Bharatanatyam has redefined the art as one belonging to the private sphere. The express goal of the reform, in fact, had been to split the devadasi from temple institutions and define her through individual citizenship in the new nation.⁷⁵ Previous hereditary restrictions which defined inculcation, training, and performance were dissolved, and today “anyone” can perform or teach Bharatanatyam. However, this participation still hinges on the socio-economic status of the individual. As Gaston states, “This profession, which was once defined by community association, is now based on economics. There is no central professional body which confers on an individual the right to perform or teach dance.”⁷⁶ Therefore, the ‘release’ of Bharatanatyam from the confines of the temple, rests on the same arguments as the *laissez-faire*, free-market economy, which claims to provide free access

⁷² McCann, “Performing Gender, Class and Nation,” 69.

⁷³ Kalakshetra, *Kalakshetra Brochure* (Chennai: Kalakshetra Foundation, 2020) accessed December 30, 2025, <https://kalkbuckmedi21.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/pdf/tour/KF-Brochure-Apr-2020.pdf>.

⁷⁴ McCann, “Performing Gender, Class and Nation,” 73.

⁷⁵ “*The Heavens would not fall and morality would in no way be jeopardised, if one or two cases of very good art is reluctantly tolerated in exceptional instances without the associated vice-as a matter of temporary evil necessary, pending the coming up of better persons*” Krishna Iyer regarding the participation of devadasi women and subsequent introduction of caste elites into the art form. see E. Krishna Iyer, “A Reply to Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy,” *Madras Mail*, December 17, 1932.

⁷⁶ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 61.

but is ultimately defined by unacknowledged pre-existing conditions like economic status. This barrier to access is one of the primary issues regarding disenfranchisement, and conveniently chooses to disregard the implications of dance as an art form existing within the modern, capitalist nation-state.

While the contemporary Bharatanatyam dancer does not need to attract patrons, one is still required to attract patronage—be that through invitation to perform, grants, government sponsorships, etc. Today, there are only a few professionals who are able to support themselves solely through dance. Dancers must, therefore, maintain other sources of income to continue dancing; in fact, this part-time circumstance of dancers is pointed out as a display of dedication to the art and the larger values of the individual.

Beyond the professional sphere, however, dance also exists as a way of socialisation and education of young girls in Hindu mythology, on which performances are generally based, and in “traditional social values.” The sites where Bharatanatyam is performed also outline its function—as a “transnational literacy tool”⁷⁷ in international and diasporic circuits or as personal, artistic endeavours limited to elite cultural organisations like ‘sabhas’ in cities. By the 1980s, there were references to husbands who sought this association with dance and wished to have a link with this “glamorous way of life,” and supposedly made these women “candidates for sophisticated society.”⁷⁸ All this culminates within Bharatanatyam itself, often existing as a social accomplishment rather than a profession. Indeed, studies have traced parallels between the *arangetram*, the first solo debut performance of a dancer, and Brahmin coming-of-age ceremonies. Gaston notes how videos of *arangetrams* are often shown to marriage prospects.⁷⁹

In some ways, Bharatanatyam continues to maintain the centrality of the performer—now simply occupied by upper-caste, non-hereditary women who were able to perform freely without sacrificing “honour.” Women from hereditary families continue to perform, however small in number, embodying the political implication of their existence within the art form.

⁷⁷ Kalpana Mukunda Iyengar, “Bharatanatyam and Transnational Literacy through Socio-Cultural Pedagogy,” *Journal of Humanities And Social Science* 19, no. 10 (2014): 50-59.

⁷⁸ Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 72.

⁷⁹ McCann, “Performing Gender, Class, and Nation,” 72.

Nrithya Pillai for example states: “To my mind, my very presence, my body, my aesthetics, and my reclamation of who I am question and complicate this “clean” history of Bharatanatyam.”⁸⁰ We see here that even without the existence of the devadasi community—which unabashedly expressed erotic desire, matriliney, and non-conjugal relationships—the individual, be it through lineage, identity, or ideology can maintain a critical lens. In line with this, McCann describes in her study the experience of a young dancer from Los Angeles and her dissonance between the art she performed and the life she lived. She adds, “the panellist was particularly uncomfortable with being expected to depict coy maidens and pining heroines, roles she felt did not relate to her lived reality as a modern woman.”⁸¹

Similarly, contemporary productions of Bharatanatyam occasionally explore innovative, modern feminist themes of resistance and violence, as seen in *Our Voice* presented by Natya Vriksha Dance Collective.⁸² *And She Spoke*, directed by Vaibhav Arekar and Sushant Jadhav, explores the lives of “ordinary, contemporary women” and centres on forms of storytelling that break free from the conventional repertoire.⁸³ Rama Vaidyanathan’s piece *Shaktya*, portrays women “who altered the course of history”⁸⁴ and “manifested the presence of the Goddess.”⁸⁵ The Spanda Dance Company performs abstract and symbolic group choreographies “...without the need to convert all storytelling into a male-female construct and breaking from the frontal, made-for-the-proscenium stage presentations...” while still retaining the ‘vocabulary’ of Bharatanatyam.⁸⁶ Even performances based on older, traditional

⁸⁰ Pillai, “Caste, Class, Aesthetics,” 209.

⁸¹ McCann, “Performing Gender, Class, and Nation,” 61S.

⁸² Sachitra Kalra, “Bharatanatyam dancer Geeta Chandran presents *Our Voice* in New Delhi,” *Hindustan Times*, October 8, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/htcity/htcity-delhi-connection/bharatanatyam-dancer-geeta-chandran-presents-our-voice-in-new-delhi-101728375954268.html>.

⁸³ Yadavi Shakti Menon, “Report – ‘And She Spoke’ *Narthaki*, July 10, 2024, <https://narthaki.com/info/rev24/rev3159.html>.

⁸⁴ Anita Vallabh, “Indo-American Arts Council’s Erasing Borders Dance Festival 2025,” *Narthaki*, September 27, 2025, <https://narthaki.com/info/rev25/rev3497.html>.

⁸⁵ Rama Vaidyanathan (@ramavaidyanathan), “*Shaktya* Performance Announcement,” Instagram photo, September 26, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DPDWXDlja9w/?hl=en&img_index=3.

⁸⁶ Spanda Dance Company, “*Dance Compositions*,” accessed December 30, 2025, <https://spandadance.com/dance-compositions.php>

choreographies and Puranic myths are navigated by the performer's choice in picking pieces which foreground women, their desire, sexuality and are often critical of patriarchal, orthodox assumptions.

Rukmini Devi Arundale's conception of Bharatanatyam was not isolated from the histories and even performative aesthetics which defined dance for the devadasis. Her presence as a performer, in her body, gender, class, and caste determined not only which concepts would be integrated into her new repertoire, but also the movements she would be willing to perform. Arundale's choices had long been controversial, and when inquired upon why she excluded the erotic elements from her dance, she answered as follows:

You don't merely teach with what you know, but you also teach with what you are... She wants to know when I said that certain aspects of *sringara rasa* (the aesthetic expression of erotic love) should not be danced to... She says, "can't it be done with dignity and grace?" Of course it can be done... **I don't say that for a person like her, she may be able to make it so delicate...** she is accustomed to doing it in a particular way. But ... for me, it's a temperamental difference. **I would not be able to do it.**⁸⁷ [emphasis added]

As Hari Krishnan and Davesh Soneji put it, "Arundale's body just cannot bring itself to do what the courtesan's body did," as she maintains that one "teaches with what you are."⁸⁸ The performer is not simply a result of the music, lyric, and choreography but is continually redefined through their body and social status, which are ever-subject to change as we have observed.

Conclusion

The journey of the devadasi across colonial India and into the independent state bears the common fact of an abundance of written material, as is the case with many colonial subjects and concepts. The written archive is rich in investigations into the lives of devadasis, and debates and discussions surrounding the draft legislation are well documented and remain available

⁸⁷ Krishnan, Soneji, and Pillai, "Caste, Class, Aesthetics, and the Making of Modern Bharatanatyam Dance." 222.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

for research to this day. However, performance archives represent the past in a different manner, stimulating a unique interpretation of their material. Through musical tradition and influence, lyric and literary forms, aesthetic considerations, and professional obligations, we uncover new relations and influences which moulded the art form. Through the 'revival' of what we know as Bharatanatyam today, we further investigate the implications of altering, eschewing, and reforming an art form by way of its relationship to particular communities, its repute, and its value as seen and understood by various stakeholders. The ephemerality of performance is repeatedly unsettled by the presence of the archive, yet at the same time, the existing material also makes clear the fallacy of a true 'revival,' along with its subsequent shortcomings and inaccuracies.

Today, the history of the devadasi is constantly referenced by hereditary and non-hereditary dancers alike. It is clear that we have yet to establish a concrete, uniform, and satisfactory repertoire, and the presence of hereditary dancers repeatedly disturbs the 'reformed' art form. While contemporary attempts at developing and 'progressing' the art form look towards making the art applicable to present circumstances of womanhood, sexuality, desire, and sexual violence, another strand continues to question and criticise the reform and 'democratisation' that took place in the 20th century (not to suggest they are mutually exclusive). As Nrithya Pillai points out:

If reform and reinvention were supposed to be about the democratization of the art, show us women from hereditary and other oppressed communities who are now successful performers?... it is obvious that the first step in decolonizing must be an attempt to repopulate the dance community with dancers from other castes...⁸⁹

The archive, therefore, eschews not just performance aspects and interpretations, but indeed communities of people themselves. The performance cannot be separated from the fact of the body, where it lies and what it proclaims. At the same time, attempts made by various dancers, academics, teachers aim to include and broaden the scope for the art form. Nrithya Pillai, a hereditary dancer, singer, writer; Swarnamalya Ganesh, a

⁸⁹ The Swaddle, "Tell Me More."

dancer-historian⁹⁰; and Narthaki Nataraj,⁹¹ a dancer who proudly displays their transgender identity, are just a few of the dancers who represent this long-standing effort. Performance, viewed through its dance and music repertoire, may form a concrete archive similar to conventional written sources. However, as demonstrated here, *performance archives* through the body and its memory, positioning archiving as an embodied practice rather than a textual one. They provide an opportunity to reassess interests amongst communities once thought to be lost. Their contemporary existence can be investigated through historical developments, while acknowledging their unique circumstances. There are some developments with regard to this, especially legislations like the Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2025, which aims to replace the earlier Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition and Dedication) Act, 1982. The new Act gives freedom to omit the father's name in government documents, as well as recognition of the father, (potentially) through DNA testing,⁹² providing relief to the community.

We can see that the devadasi is scarcely outside the public's imagination, and continues to find mention even in legislation. On one hand political, social, and economic relief will allow the community to voice its own interests on its own terms. On the other hand, analyses of performance, in addition to the archive being formulated, aim to illuminate the circumstances of their disenfranchisement and investigate the intimate and 'seamless' conversation between history and how communities imagine themselves and their art. If accurate reconstruction of performances past is impossible, then what are the shortcomings of doing so, and furthermore, what are the nuances of imaginatively reconstructing performance? What are the claims involved in each, of truth and imagined tradition, what purposes do they serve, and how

⁹⁰ Anuradha Vellat, "Bharatanatyam is an inherently inclusive art': Swarnamalya Ganesh," *The Hindu*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/bharatanatyam-is-an-inherently-inclusive-art-swarnamalya-ganesh/article8561657.ece>.

⁹¹ Sudarshan Ramabadrán, "Dr Narthaki Nataraj; India's transgender icon and soft power ambassador," *Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/the-vantage-viewpoint/dr-narthaki-nataraj-indias-transgender-icon-and-soft-power-ambassador/>.

⁹² The Hindu Bureau, "Cabinet Clears Karnataka Devadasi Bill for Rehabilitation, 17 Other Legislations." *The Hindu*, www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/cabinet-clears-karnataka-devadasi-bill-for-rehabilitation-17-other-legislations/article69905610.ece

can recognition of the impossibility of recreation inform future endeavours? Consequently, how can acknowledgement of the performance of identities often for the purposes of the archive, to attract intervention, provide clarity to their unique interests?⁹³ Interrogating these subtractions and re-inviting excluded influences through this critique foregrounds larger questions of access in the contemporary dance space. Here, the venues, the audiences, the economic structures, and social expectations all construct unique caste and class barriers where only a few bodies are invited to perform, where, even after induction, further expectations are placed upon their bodies.

In conclusion, an effort to historically analyse the presence and absence of aspects of performance reveals much about the performers themselves—about where they stand today and what they stood to gain through developments which are more recent than we often assume. Theoretical considerations, such as the impossibility of fully recovering the past nature of artworks, are not too dissimilar from concerns raised by historian Keith Jenkins about the inherent variability of sources⁹⁴—save for the invitation of performance as a valid source, along with its nuances and challenges. Practical analyses⁹⁵ aid and further strengthen these arguments about how archives record, remember, and reconstruct the past, shaping our perceptions, prejudices, and performances going forward.

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⁹³ Arondekar, “Abundance,” 41.

⁹⁴ Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking history* (London: Routledge, 1991), 14.

⁹⁵ Such as PaR - Performance as Research. “Approaches like Performance as Research (PaR) further integrate the creation of a performance into the ‘scholarly process’ thus activating “a mutual response between doing and knowing in the scholarly process.” See, Davis, and King, “Performance, Again.”

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