

CHAPTER 3

A RESPECTABLE AESTHETIC: THE MAKING OF BHARATANATYAM

You say that the devadasis are bad people and affect the morality of the people who see them dancing. What about all those who practise **the art** of dance, those family women who dance for two hours sometimes practically naked? Are you improving the morality in Madras by allowing this art to be cultivated more and more by the so-called fashionable ladies right from A to Z?

--P. Natesan, Question to Legislative Assembly members, during the debate on the Devadasi Act, 1947.

Sir, you know there are many amateurs who are taking part in the art of Bharatanatyam. It has a peculiar feature in Tamil Nad and people coming from Tamil Nad are adepts in this art; I can tell you that our ancient culture had developed certain arts which even today western nations might very well envy. ... I am one of those who feel that this art should be developed and maintained in this land. It has been said that the Kalakshetra in Adyar and other institutions are doing excellent work in this direction.

--P. Subbarayan, (Speaker), Reply to P. Natesan's 'flippant remarks'; Legislative Assembly debate on the Devadasi Act, 1947.

Production produces not only an object for the subject but also a subject **for** the object.

-Marx, Grundrisse.

When the consensus that sustained sadir broke down, putting an end to the easy coexistence of eros and art, an 'aesthetic' of spiritual dance—and with it the very idea of an 'aesthetic' distinct from the traditions and techniques of the form—came into being. At the very moment that the magical, propitiatory, ritual, sacerdotal functions (taken both literally and symbolically) of the devadasi were rendered obsolete by a new moral order, the dance was hailed as 'divine,' 'revived' in accordance with this aesthetic, and assimilated into the projects of cultural nationalism. Cultural nation-building also provided an ethos and an audience for the reception of the transformed dance.

The Restoration and Recasting of Sadir:
Historical Developments of the 1920s and 1930s

Two major contestants emerged as spokespersons for the art of dance in the 1920s and '30s: the Music Academy of Madras, set up in 1928, and its dance-enthusiasts, E. Krishna Iyer and V. Raghavan, on one side; the Kalakshetra, established in 1935, and its founder, Rukmini Devi Arundale, on the other. A range of rhetorical styles and of cultural/artistic investments fed into the construction of bharatanatyam. depending on who was speaking/performing. The Music Academy consisted of largely male critics and scholars who, perhaps since they had no stake in performance themselves, were eager to create conditions under which the devadasis could once again appear on stage. Rukmini Devi, on the other hand, was a performer herself; she was interested primarily in legitimizing her own public appearance as a dancer, in the face of caste taboos, and not at all in

providing a platform to devadasi performers.

Muthulakshmi Reddi had spoken against nautch from the platform of science and **modernity--indisputably** gifts of the colonizer. The Music Academy stood for concern with the more or less practical and immediate need to save a dying Indian art form, and **Rukmini** Devi Arundale launched her campaign for the reclamation of sadir from the plank of Eternal Hindu values which were also, providentially, the very values that could provide against the crass materialism of the modern age. **Muthulakshmi's** version of the future opened out of a rejection of an undignified past; Rukmini Devi's out of a continuity with a (partly invented) spiritual tradition supposedly **millenia-old**; the Music Academy's out of a sense of the dance's 'belonging' to the devadasis.

This discrepancy in their motivations probably accounted for the initial antagonism between the two heroines of Madras nationalism, at a time when they literally lived next door to each other (Muthulakshmi boycotted **Rukmini's performances**); and between Rukmini Devi and the Academy. But the eventual achievement of neighbourly good relations all round is a familiar replay of the conflict and paradoxical coexistence in nationalist discourse of the 'traditional' and the 'modern.'

An interesting development took place between the dying out of sadir performances in temples, courts and private homes, around the 1920s, and the revival of this form with the organized institutional support of the Music Academy and the Kalakshetra in the 1930s. From the turn of the century onwards, when the anti-nautch campaign was making it impossible for most living devadasis to pursue their profession, dancers from Europe

and the United States were showing an intensified interest in Indian dance, or at any rate in their imagined versions of it. This '**orientalizing**' phase in the history of the art saw several attempts at '**recreation**' of the sadir style by Indians and visiting performers from abroad. The hybrid style which sprang up as a result had very little to do with the local traditions from which sadir had developed; at best, it presented the conventions of sadir or reconstructed movements from a study of sculpture in an entirely schematic way; at worst, it consisted of notable misapprehensions of the original form. This style, exemplified, for instance, by the dances choreographed by Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar and his partners, La Meri, Ram Gopal and others, was, however, the closest thing to an attempt at a 'modern' practice of dance in India. Though much of this work was an eroticized, ersatz version of typical '**Hindu**' themes, (Shankar's dance-dramas, choreographed largely in Europe, with European partners, were presented under the banner '**Hindu Dancers and Musicians**'), some of it was concerned, for instance, with the alienation that arose from technological change or with the cultural change that was a result of **colonization--themes** that would not have suggested themselves to the traditional dancer.

The tours by European and American performers, meanwhile, familiarized Indians with the tradition of half-borrowed, half-**improvised** oriental themes and movements in western ballet. European borrowings from '**Oriental**' themes and traditions in the nineteenth century included the Romantic Ballet's use of reconstructed Indian movements and stories in ballets like Le Dieu et La Bayadere, very popular in the 1830s, and Marius

Petipa's La Bayadere (1877). The bayadere was obviously a figure that could, by gesturing towards the exotic and stirringly romantic otherness of the East, provide **justification** for a range of classically unacceptable movements, thus allowing for the expansion of the technical vocabulary of the ballerina; she was also a pretext for the extension of the stage imagery of sexuality. Petipa was the first choreographer to actually replicate some movements from Indian dance forms, where his predecessors used mainly approximations to Indian costume. Interestingly, many of the movements devised for this ballet came in useful for the choreography of the classic Swan Lake.

When Anna Pavlova came to India in 1922, it was not surprising that she wanted to see and study Indian dancing, but her husband Victor Dandre records that their hosts in India were too embarrassed to present any sadir dancers. Pavlova, however, teamed up with the dancer Uday Shankar whom she later advised to reconstruct or learn the authentic classical dance of India.

Ruth St. Denis considered her performance tour in India in 1925-26 an opportunity to find authentic choreography to supplement the imagined version of 'Indian **dances**' that she had been performing since 1906. Among St. Denis's more popular 'barefoot **improvisations**' (she was resisting the balletic emphasis on points) were the dances called Nautch , Incense and Radha. A dance called Black and Gold Sari (1922) is reported to have caused riots when it was performed in India.

Though Uday Shankar did learn sadir from Kandappa Pillai of Kanchipuram, he, like many of his contemporaries (Ragini Devi, **Menaka**, La Meri, **Rangopal**) presented the hodge-podge of styles that went by the name of 'Oriental Dance.' Thus when **Rukmini**

Devi began to perform in 1936, the dominant and most visible dance form outside the sadir that was presented by the Music Academy was the result of an Orientalist **(mis)interpretation** of the themes and techniques of Kathak and sadir. This form was bound to have had an effect on **Rukmini** Devi's work, though her arrival on the scene and her greater claims to authenticity all but wiped out this form. For reasons I consider below, which had to do with the caste/gender position of Rukmini Devi and her disciples, the experiment with modernism that was an aspect of the 'Oriental **Dance**' came to an end with the discrediting of this mongrel form. It is difficult to assess the effects these orientalized versions of Indian dance may have had on the Indian cultural scene in the 1930s; the renewed interest in the art of sadir undoubtedly had something to do with the the brahmin intelligentsia's discovery of the possibilities of high classical European forms like ballet, and with the interest of foreign-returned Indians in Indian forms. Shankar's company, when it toured India in **1932**, was greeted with much enthusiasm by an audience that had lost touch with indigenous practice, and was intrigued by the **possibilities** of a '**respectable**' dance. Rukmini Devi, at any rate, was familiar with the dancing of Uday Shankar and Ram **Gopal**.

One lasting effect of the interactions between Oriental Dance and sadir was a **universalized** perception of dance that proved useful to Rukmini Devi and other brahmin exponents of bharatanatyam. The reviews and the fiction of the 1930s and 40s, for instance, registered the equations between the dance forms of the East and the West. For example, describing the abandoned dancing of the slum child in "No Anklet Bells For

Her," Manjeri Isvaran writes:

No ballerina that pirouetted on a stage that changed under changing lights and shadows, and an auditorium bewitched before her starry **eyes...**, no devadasi that did her natya in the temple in the presence of the decorated idol of god or goddess could have been so ecstatic as was this child of the gutters. (3)

The two situations and the emotions appropriate to them are made to look equivalent by careful juxtaposition. Difference is maintained in the different motivating factors (material ones in the case of ballet and spiritual ones in the case of sadir) and the two locales; but aesthetically, it is implied, the two styles merge in the body of the dancing child, and they have the same experiential weight. There are clear resonances with Rukmini Devi's 'humanist' understanding of dance as communicating across barriers, which was to become such a familiar theme for dancers that they were described, and projected themselves, as 'cultural ambassadors' in India's relationships with other nations.

Reform and the Arts

The devadasi was displaced from Indian public life in the course of a great upheaval in Indian history, a redefinition of the moral universe as well as a shift of political-judicial paradigms. The transformation of the moral universe so that sadir ceased to have social sanction was, as I have noted in the

last chapter, largely the work of **Christian** missionaries and of nationalist social reformers who took **their** cues, especially in matters related to gendering and **sexuality**, from the British middle class.

The shift in the juridical system was coeval with that in the religious/ethical system, and was what made the latter effective. The installation of a new legal structure based on private property in place of the older feudal structures of religious or secular patronage stripped the devadasi community of its actual social power. The intervention of the law also affected desire itself: following the attempts to prevent dedication and following the **identification** of the devadasi with the prostitute, the hitherto sanctioned sexual relationships with devadasis became available for public surveillance and censure. It was one of the exigencies of the nationalist movement, as I have suggested, that private morality had to mesh with politics. This was the key factor in the quest for political as well as cultural legitimacy, and it left no space for the devadasis. Their public visibility became a scandal, their sexual/social codes were outlawed, their property rights rendered invalid.

One consequence of the arrival of private property and its legal outwork, Gillian Rose suggests, is the conflict between this law and what is perceived as 'instinct' (defiance of the law, insubordinate drives). The sexuality of men, but to an infinitely greater degree, the sexuality of women, was recoded **as** transgressive: not merely transgressive when it crossed certain carefully marked boundaries of caste or community, but transgressive **in essence**. Thus the discourses that led to the

dismantling of the sadir tradition traded especially in the denunciation of the vulgarity, the bad femininity, the undesirable physicality of the devadasis. In this chapter I want to show how this conflict between '**vulgarity**' and public morality (with the gendered norms set in place by 'modernity') is played out at the level of the aesthetic.

The exigencies of creating the **episteme** of the national-modern inevitably had complex effects on the arts. The crucial substitution of royal/religious patronage with private funding or government sponsorship meant that the arts in general shifted the ground of their existence from the realm of the sacred to the realm of the secular. The order of cosmic time, in which the devadasi functioned, was not, however, thoroughly made over into the order of history; while history replaced cosmology as a **disciplinary/metaphysical** framework, and while 'religion' was ruled out, by constitutional decree, as a governing principle in the (secular) public sphere, it was still a dominant feature of the social imaginary. Indeed, to the extent that nationalism itself was vested with the emotive and sacred charge of making possible a "secular **transformation** of fatality into continuity, contingency into **meaning...**" (Anderson, 19), Mother India inherited the fantastic power to mobilize devotees that most Hindu gods and goddesses wielded. Thus, initially at least, as with the Bengal Renaissance or the Kalakshetra version of bharatanatyam, the arts did not quite shed their sacred aura: instead of serving the Hindu deities, they served the new gods of nation and of nationalism. Their sanctity and their significance now came from their imbrication in cultural nationalism, from their becoming signs of the continuity and

splendour of the 'Indian' heritage.

Different arts, however, were **transmogrified** in different ways to serve the ends of the nation. As the two competing discourses of nationalism and an internationalist modernism, available for the first time as part of the transition to modernity, exerted contrary pressures on the arts, the response of artists working with the visual media (painting, sculpture,, photography, cinema) diverged from that of performers of classical dance and music. If the visual arts embarked on a struggle to create a viable modernism that also held steady to national self-determination as a reference point, bharatanatyam and Carnatic music derived their legitimacy crucially from their continued association with the '**sacred**' values of Hinduism. An art that was **re-legitimized** as an emblem of preeminent spiritual achievement could not fully follow the logic of secularization. This however, does not mean that dance was **reimagined** entirely outside the context of the '**modern**': in fact the **undifferentiated** 'humanism' of Rukmini Devi's discursive interventions replicated the thrust towards indiscriminating '**modernization**' in the social reform movements: the one destroyed a dance form, as the other destroyed the conditions of its practice, by a process of normalization or over-generalization. However, though it was clear that the brahmin practice of the form necessitated radical changes, these changes were made in the name of a putative tradition many centuries old; indeed, **predating** the practice of the devadasis.

The preservation of bharatanatyam as a cultural relic entailed two claims on its behalf: antiquity and moral acceptability. While the form had to be celebrated as ageless,

it also had to disown its historical associations with female sexual availability and prostitution. If the nation was to have an 'unbroken heritage' of great artistic achievement it required the erasure from the art of the presence of the devadasis of recent memory, those embodiments of retrograde (lower caste?) sexuality, and purveyors of degenerate art. Predictably, certain aspects of the content of bharatanatyam--the artistic/erotic conventions of sringara, which called for the delineation of the **moods** of the lover--had to be carved out of the whole and discarded, or at least played down in the new version.

The **hegemonizing** (in terms of actual demography) of what used to be sadir by upper caste women added to the urgency of this call for correction. I would argue that the caste/gender composition of its performers, given the vital link between upper caste femininity and spirituality, was largely responsible for bharatanatyam's inability to make the leap--once it had abandoned the sadir tradition--towards either a secular modernism or avant-gardism. The Devadasi Act itself proscribed the performance of this form, as I have shown in the last chapter, **by certain castes**: the legislators were fully conscious of its new role as a symbol of cultural resurgence, and of the need for conservation. Written into the Act is a loophole for the brahmin takeover of sadir: it was all but declared a legitimate pursuit for 'respectable' women.

The rest of this chapter is concerned with the manoeuvres by which the upper caste appropriation of sadir was **managed--manoeuvres** carried out in discourse, in performance and on the body of the dancer. Extending the metaphor of the paradigm shift, I want to show how the idea of the 'aesthetic' as well as

an actual aesthetics replicated its logic in the realm of dance. The idea of the aesthetic had, here, the role that art critics have assigned to the categories of 'genius' or '**inspiration**' in the context of European Romantic art. Max Raphael, for example, points out that the **mystificatory** view of art, embodied in such terms as 'inspiration,' "is nothing but an illusion on the part of the most barren class of modern society, an illusion which rests upon the distinction that arose in the nineteenth century between socially mechanized production of material goods and individual craft production of spiritual goods."

For the same reasons that prevented brahmin women from experimenting with modernist innovation--their caste and gender **position--bharatanatyam** stopped short of becoming an individualized, 'romantic' practice. Being female itself meant that full individuation in the mode of the modern subject was impossible. Certainly, as women performers who were upholding caste morality and were, moreover, living down the unsavoury historical associations of the dance form, **Rukmini** Devi and her brahmin successors could not venture too far out of range of social or artistic conformity; the postures of romantic rebellion were not for them. Thus the renovated art form of bharatanatyam did not follow the trajectory of European art after the Industrial Revolution and its disenchanting sequels: instead of opposing the misunderstood, uncompromising, rebellious individual (male) artist to his social milieu, it projected the inspired, but **socially--and** this meant **familially--integrated** female artist as a role model. Thus in the writings I will consider below, Rukmini Devi constantly refers to the **female** artist as a mother. The upper caste female colonization

of bharatanatyam was also responsible, no doubt, for the fact that it did not exemplify what is clearly the obverse of romantic **individualism**: the commoditization of art. Bharatanatyam could not be refigured, then, as a practice meant for a market: as I shall argue below in the context of a fictional account of the revival of dance (Devi the Dancer) economic independence was not an attribute of the acceptable **feminine**.

A sustained movement to create a modern secular dance was thus delayed in South India until almost the 1960s or even beyond it: though choreographers like Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal had a certain degree of formal influence (even, perhaps, on **Kalakshetra** productions, since **Rukmini** Devi was aware of their work), choreographic initiatives built on a systematic rejection of 'tradition' had to wait for an iconoclast like Chandralekha, whose lifestyle also bespoke rejection of **brahminical-feminine** values.

'Pro-Art Progressives' and the Music Academy of Madras

A personage whose role in the remaking of sadir was arguably as important as Rukmini Devi's was E. Krishna Iyer, a well-known Madras lawyer and Secretary of the Madras Music Academy at the time of its foundation. Iyer's will to save the art from extinction was so strong that he performed bharatanatvam in female costume, besides helping promote devadasia who still professed the art.

His contribution was made largely in the years 1927-1936, though he continued to be active after this period; this was before **Rukmini** Devi and **Kalakshetra** moved into the spotlight. In

this section, I will consider this contribution in its theoretical and practical forms, along with the contribution of the institution Krishna Iyer helped found and worked with: the Madras Music Academy.

The idea of establishing the Music Academy was publicly **mooted** at the All India Music Conference held alongside the 1927 session of the Indian National Congress. A (largely brahmin) group of music and dance enthusiasts and scholars, E. Krishna Iyer prominent among them, turned this idea into reality within a year; in August 1928 the Music Academy was formally inaugurated. Krishna Iyer was one of its secretaries at its **inception**.

The Academy's aims were clearly specified: to promote the study and practice of classical music and dance, by the **establishment** of a library and music and dance schools, by the institution of scholarships and awards for performers and scholars, and by the organization of recitals and annual conferences to facilitate debate on music-related subjects. The Journal of the Music Academy. Madras. which commenced publication in 1930, sought to mould public opinion on these subjects and to create an informed audience, and was evidently one of the forces that created the conditions of possibility for **bharatanatyam**. It also made explicit the links between cultural nationalism and the classical arts in South India.

No attempt was made to disguise the hegemonic intentions of **the** Academy, of its annual conferences or of its journal. Indeed, the self-imposed task of educating the audience was seen **as** a laudable expression of the Academy's cultural nationalism: **'...it is high time,"** the report of the 1927 Music Conference

declares, "that an earnest attempt is made to improve the conditions around the national heritage of music" (Report of the All-India Music Conference 16). The national scale and self-consciousness of the standardizing operation it undertook was to distinguish the Academy from all other **sabhas**, which merely presented performers to audiences. Its association with debates on the national scene was also made through its early ties with the Congress (many of the Academy's sponsors, including T.T. **Krishnamachari**, occupied ministerial positions in post-Independence Congress governments) and with the activists of the Theosophical Society, including Annie Besant and, later, with Rukmini Devi Arundale. The inaugural issue of the Journal of the Music Academy had a message from one of the Vice Presidents of the Academy, Margaret Cousins, also an activist associated with the Theosophical Society, congratulating the Academy "on the way it is moulding public thought regarding the revival of Indian Music on a basis of **commonsense**, reform and popular **organisation**" (Cousins, "Cultural Nation Building" 75). Cousins found the Music Academy's cultural nationalism familiar enough, having lived through "an exactly similar revival of national art and arts-crafts in Ireland" (74) thirty years earlier.

The inaugural issue of the Journal also carried an article by Venkatarama Sarma of the Madras University, titled "Bharata Natya." This appears to be the earliest '**official**' use of the new name for sadir. The flexibility of the new usage may be inferred from the mutually contradictory definitions Sarma offers for it. He begins with a vague description of '**Bharata Natya**' as "an elaborately discriminative and expressive action, **which** creates a responsive feeling to the human sensation, and

the term is also applicable to the Science of Music, Scenic Art or Dramaturgy" (32); and goes on to identify its practice with the performances of the Chakkiars in Kerala. He then tries an etymological definition:

...it becomes obvious, that the word 'Bharata' holds two senses, the one is the name of a sage, and the other is, it seems to me, an imaginary ascription rendered by a process of syllabification, given by later authors and commentators, because every syllable of the word 'bha,' 'ra,' 'ta,' it is stated, denotes 'bhava,' 'raga,' and 'tala,' respectively. The latter explanation is plausible and quite relevant to the context, because the 'bhava,' the 'raga' and the 'tala' are inevitable to dancing. (32)

'Bharatam,' initially, simply meant 'actor'; later, significantly, it was a prefix regularly used by brahmins who taught dance or were dance scholars, or exponents of the harikatha tradition. The nomenclatural shift was an important move in the redefinition of the aesthetic of the dance. Renamed, bharatanatvam had none of the connotations of sadir. koothu. chinna melam, dasiattam or any of the names by which its association with the devadasis was made patent. What it acquired was a set of nationalist resonances, partly because the new name suggested a direct derivation from the 'Bharata' to whom the Natyasaatra is popularly ascribed, and partly because it sounded

like Bharat (as in compounds like 'Bharat **Mata**' etc.). The name proved so felicitous that several persons (including **Rukmini** Devi) claimed credit for thinking it up.

While the **brahminized** name was in all likelihood the Music Academy's contribution to the recovery of **sadir**, this institution certainly did not envisage a practice that by definition excluded the devadasis. Indeed, under E.Krishna Iyer's guidance, it promoted performances by them under its banner; called in speakers who made the point, at the annual conferences, that the dance should be restored to its former status **by its former practitioners**: honoured them as experts on music or dance. The year 1931 was a hopeful one for sadir performers, and there is a hopeful report in the Journal of the Music Academy which covers the most significant event of that year:

An entirely new note was struck this year with the Academy commencing its season with a Bharata **Natyam** performance by Kalyani Daughters of Tanjore. It has almost become a fashion nowadays to condemn the Indian nautch and look askance at it. In our view this condemnation is least deserved.... We are glad that the performance served as an eye opener to those who came to witness it. We hope that in the days to come public opinion will veer round and give unto Abhinaya its proper place. ("Bharatanatyam by Kalyani Daughters" 78)

The Music Academy, in fact, made its displeasure about social reform of the devadasi tradition explicit. As late as the year 1974, when the isai vellalar star Balasaraswati was made President of the Music Academy's annual conference, the report on the conference excoriates "[o]bscurantist Indian social reformers of the last century and the early decades of the current century [who] had sought to kill this art as it flourished mainly in the leading temples of India" ("The XLVIIth Madras Music Conference" 4). In 1932, E.Krishna Iyer and **Muthulakshmi** Reddi exchanged angry letters in the pages of The Hindu, with Krishna Iyer condemning **Reddi's** ill-considered canvassing for the Devadasi Bill.

The Music Academy featured several isai vellalar performers--both musicians and dancers--in its annual events, though the scholarly exposition of the techniques and sources of sadir was undertaken largely by brahmin enthusiasts like V. Raghavan and V.V. Narayana Iyengar. Mylapore Gowri **Ammal** performed sadir in 1932; in the same year, Veena **Dhanammal** gave a veena recital; in 1933, the year in which the isai vellalar musician Ponniah Pillai was made the President of the annual Music Conference, the Kalyani Daughters danced again; and Balasaraswati, **Varalakshmi** and Saranayaki were all featured in Academy **programmes**.

At the annual conference of 1933, a Mrs. Stan Harding urged that the Music Academy start a dance school with the assistance of isai vellalar teachers. She is reported as follows in the **Journal**:

If the art of dancing was to survive [she said], the artistes must first be suitably

rewarded and respected. As regards the ritual dance, she said that it was of vital importance that it should not be transplanted because it had struck roots deep already...the private life of the artists was not a concern of the public. The requirements of the art itself would make it imperative that the artiste should keep away from self-indulgences or excess, as a self-indulgent life is incompatible with the art.... Although there might be no living demonstrator of the art, it could still be preserved, by getting young pupils trained by the old teachers. The first thing necessary to keep up the art was to make the artistes independent in life so that they might be in a position to concentrate on the art. ("The Madras Music Conference, 1933" 120)

When the idea of building a dance school did materialize eventually, it was under the directorship of **Balasaraswati**, who had by this time embarked on a collaborative effort to produce a book on bharatanatyam with V. **Raghavan**. These collaborative efforts between devadasis and brahmins were a far cry from the rhetoric of purification and purging that surrounded **Rukmini Devi's** version of bharatanatyam, and that may still be found in the pages of souvenirs put out by Kalakshetra, and in the Klakahetra Quarterly:

By entering the shadowy world called the domain of the devadasi, she [Rukmini Devi] tore down an ugly visage putrefying the face of one of India's greatest arts--the dance. Impurities can creep into any profession, like corruption in business or politics. (Chattopadhaya 5)

Such rhetoric, however, prevailed over the milder arguments of the Music Academy in the changing political climate of the 1930s, and with the arrival of the brahmin dancers, around 1935, the space cleared by the Academy for the devadasis was swiftly occupied by the intelligentsia of Adyar.

**From Temple to Institute:
A Fictional Account of the Modernization of Sadi**

In 1937, a slim novel by a writer who called himself 'Deisvi' appeared on the Madras market. An unremarkable piece of writing on the whole, though enlivened by charmingly naive illustrations; and an uninspired title: Devi the Dancer. I glance at it here because it was one of a dozen or so attempts to narrativize an event that had captured the public imagination: the making of bharatanatyam.

Devi is born out of the union of a devadasi and a (brahmin) temple priest. Her messianic role in the cultural field is **Prefigured** in her miracle-birth: she is conceived as a result of Penances her mother undertakes in the temple, long after the couple has become resigned to barrenness. **Her mother, a dancer herself--but of indifferent mettle--cherishes ambitious plans for Devi's career** as a dancer.

Devi is taken to Madurai Mudaliar, a dedicated but embittered dance teacher who "in a life of three-score years ... [had] found not a single **Dasi-girl** who would learn the art for the art's sake, or evince an interest in its deeper realities" (7, emphasis mine). A sociological aside accounts for this evidence of the depravity of the dancing-girl community: "... **Dasis**, as a class, were gravitating towards the metropolis and were busy becoming permanent and exclusively kept mistresses of moneyed **men**"(7). Devi, of course, is an exception to this general process of degradation; when she does begin her training, after some intervening adventures, even Madurai Mudaliar, cynic though he has become, is astonished and enthusiastic. Devi, though tender in years, indubitably 'evinces an **interest**' in '**art** for the art's sake'--which taxes our credulity somewhat, since the particular ideological formation that goes with such aestheticism was being shaped by the brahmin dancers, not by Devi's community. When Devi is fifteen years old, the pottukattu (dedication rite) is arranged in the village temple. An old schoolmate of hers (Seenu), who has grown to manhood in the city, pays Devi a visit at this moment. Seenu's progressive notions and his romantic interest in Devi contribute to his regret that "so fair a maid should be destined to be knocked down to the highest bidder"(19). They discuss love. Seenu: "'**What** did your mother tell you about love, Deva? There used to be a tradition about the mothers of all young **dasis** initiating their young ones into the intricate art of **gold-digging**'"(22). Devi's answer has an unexpected dignity that **is** clearly to be attributed rather to her own charming innocence than to her mother's moral instruction: she has been taught, she

says, that "any man whom we receive with a full heart, who steps into our bedroom, ought to be loved and revered as a **husband**" (22).

Since Seenu has love and high ideals but no income, Devi is '**knocked down**' to Rao Saheb **Balasundaram** Chettiar, Honorary Presidency Magistrate for Madras. Though singled out from among Devi's suitors because of his reputation for princely living rather than for his **companionate** potential, the Chettiar turns out kind-hearted enough. Devi's comfortable and artistically productive life with him comes to an abrupt end, however, when he discovers her in flagrante delicto with Seenu, who has once again strayed into her life. She returns to her village in **disgrace**.

After a further series of adventures, Devi and Seenu are married. Flash forward: Devi has not only become a successful performer (a review says, "Devi the Dancer has divinity behind her") but has also started a dance institute called (alas, too predictably) '**Nataraja** Nilayam.'

Three things seem to me particularly interesting in this narrative: the writer's handling of the question of caste or birth; the role of money in the narrative; and the unspoken aesthetic assumptions that underlie Deisvi's treatment of the whole ethos of **nautch/bharatanatyam**.

To what caste does Devi belong? By customary usage, of course, she is a **devadasi**, being born to a **dasi**. But the author appears very keen that we have a more ambiguous sense than this of her origins. As miracle-baby, if not as daughter of a brahmin Priest, she has (it appears) some claim to honorary upper-caste status. Moreover, she is instinctively '**refined**'--i.e., upper-

caste--and is therefore throughout her childhood disturbed by the (equally 'natural'?) coarseness of her '**class**', especially as embodied in her mother. Instinct is at war with instruction in a dozen instances; and instinct dictates that she love art for its own sake, that she reject the 'gold-digging' aspirations of her kin, that she desire **companionate** marriage, that she be uninitiated in the art of (physical) love.

Devi's birth signifies that she is poised between the old and the new: as bearer of a caste-stigma, she conveniently points a moral about outdated practices like dedication; elevated into respectability by marriage (to a brahmin, a social reformer) and by the founding of an 'institute' (a far cry from the other kind of establishment, the one with the red light hanging over it, this 'institute') she becomes a sign of national cultural resurgence. The miracle-birth signifies, too, her links with the ancient forces of '**Indian** spirituality'; the up-to-date dance school denotes her links with the kind of modernity that would be approved according to the '**universal**' values set in place by the missionaries, the colonial government and the **nationalists**. Devi's art and life close the circle opened up, historically, by the Christian missionaries.

In nothing is Devi so at odds with her upbringing as in the **matter** of money. Money and the pursuit of it are identified, in this narrative, with the devadasis. They cultivate the art of 'gold-digging,' forsaking their real **vocation--dancing--for** comfortable concubinage. Devi's mother trains her daughter to perform with an eye always to the main chance; Devi's dasi friend, **Neela**, "a thoroughly sophisticated girl, typical of the vamping variety of the community," declares that relationships

mean nothing: "'It is cash that counts, **ultimately**'" (31). There is no suggestion of malice in the writer's portrayal of the **devadasis**. What comes through, however, is an unmistakable shift in the ideological resonances of money and property in relation to women. Economic **transactions**, according to the order Deisvi represents—the order that feels contempt for 'dasis as a **class**'--are to be kept far from two things: Love and Art. The labour of upper caste women, and therefore the cultural production of one who is moving into that stratum of **society**, as Devi is in this narrative, does not fit into the sphere of **exchange**; it is purely reproductive. Women may embody both Art and Love, as long as they are in a strictly penurious condition. The dancer shall perform not for the sake of an income or to maintain her hereditary rights; she shall perform '**for art's sake**.'

One idea that gestures towards the nascent aesthetic of bharatanatyam in the novel is the idea of '**art for art's sake**'. Obvious financial gain is the very antithesis of art; but art, according to the ideology of the middle class, does not need to have any other material purpose or context either. The institute in the city, along with the proscenium stage, is the new privileged locus of dance; with the progressive turn away from dedication comes an aesthetic that is metropolitan, even cosmopolitan. This aesthetic signals itself by the absence of a terminology: in the universal mode, in the **art-for-art's-sake mode**, there are no precise words for the technical achievement of the dancer or for the affective response her dance evokes, and feeling is encapsulated in words like '**divine**' or '**beautiful**.'

Devi the Dancer is interesting because it is a 'true story'. The event that the story dramatizes--the appearance of ihharatanatyam on the cultural landscape of the nation, after the eclipse of sadir, an event supervised by another 'Devi,' Rukmini Devi Arundale, three years before this book was published--is far more interesting than the rather pedestrian novel. But as I look at that event through the writings of its protagonists, I want to point out that the striking features were the same: a caste-question; a money-question; anaesthetic. Each of these is etched a little more clearly in real life than in fiction, each of these is resolved in the same fashion, and is part of the legacy of bharatanatvam today.

Rukmini Devi's story was, of course, the central 'real-life' story in the annals of bharatanatyam. the one that captured the public imagination. The heroine indubitably had a greater impact on the shape and content of bharatanatyam--the specifics of its practice, including stage-setting, costume and so on--than any other individual or institution; and I will return to the details of these contributions later in the chapter.

The Messiah and **Dance:**
Rukmini **Arundale** and Kalakshetra

1) Theosophy-Beauty-Dance:

The seed of the art-as-spiritual-exercise theme was planted in Rukmini Devi's imagination as she sat at Annie Besant's feet, in the groves of the Theosophical Society. It was one of the themes Besant herself introduced into the Society's agenda in Madras. A quick glance backwards, at the Society's agenda and at Besant's agenda as part of it, is in order here, to fill in the

background to **Rukmini Devi's aesthetics-as-politics.**

While the early Theosophical movement founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1837-1891) and Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907), which established its headquarters in Adyar, Madras, in 1878, was interested chiefly in promoting occultism and 'cosmic wisdom' without too much regard for national boundaries, Annie Besant formulated a more activist programme for Indian Theosophists when she became President of the Society in 1907. Theosophy was to help rescue India "from the materialism which was strangling her true life by the revival of ancient philosophical and scientific religions" (Besant, India 42). The renewal of India's spiritual life was to lead, among other things, to her freedom from the 'British yoke,' since the radicalised Theosophists **found**, says Besant, that "patriotism was aroused by pointing to the splendour of Indian religious and poetic literatures, and that 'religion must inspire nationality'"(43).

It must not be forgotten that Besant was a prime mover in the Home Rule movement, and, in the years preceding her Theosophical phase, a campaigner for women's suffrage in her own country. The significant positions occupied by women in the Theosophical **movement--some** of them already politically experienced in other struggles--probably accounted for the easy acceptance of these and other women as contributors to the nationalist **cause.**¹³ Besant's casual use of female images to underscore her point about the nation coming into its own is a **sign** of the pivotal roles played by women in **sustaining** Theosophical ideology: "Deep in the heart of India's daughters arose the Mother's Voice, calling on them to help her arise, and

be once more mistress in her own household" (**India** 205). The ideology in turn **endorse**d the efforts of women who participated in **cultural-nationalist** programmes, valuing these contributions equally **with** the contributions of people doing more straightforwardly political work. In this sense the Theosophical movement, though it used a vocabulary and a scale of values very far removed from those current feminism identifies with, anticipated the contemporary feminist concern with cultural production as a site of social change.

For the Theosophical Society in Annie **Besant's** time, putting together the fragments of India's racial memory was not just an assertion of internal historical continuities. Since the fundamental intention of the Society was still to "bind East and West together in partnership," resurgent India would also have to, ultimately, give an account of itself to the world at large. Whatever projects Theosophists took up in the fields of literature and art, they had to keep in mind this task of defining and projecting 'universal' **values--especially** universal spiritual values--towards an eventual renewal of the entire globe, through the universal dissemination of these values. This basic requirement had, as I will show, important consequences for the aesthetic that grew out of Theosophical doctrine.

In a pamphlet on "The Future Development of the Theosophical Society," G.S. Arundale (**Rukmini** Devi's husband) refers to four interpretations of Theosophy that had become current by his time: Blavatsky and Olcott's 'cosmic wisdom'; **Besant's** 'will and activity'; Leadbeater's '**larger science**' and **J. Krishnamurti's** '**individual** uniqueness **and** self-sufficiency' (2). The fifth interpretation, "Theosophy in its

aspect of Beauty, through the great arts," he says, is about to become the new focus of the movement in Madras. "The Beauty Aspect of Life will be much more definitely stressed," he declares (3). He names the person who will embody this aspect from that point onwards: **Rukmini** Devi.

Arundale's strenuous efforts to yoke Theosophy and Beauty together bespeak his awareness that Rukmini Devi's efforts were being made in a hostile environment. He ventures to think that "only those who are well acquainted with the science of Theosophy are in a position to perceive the nature of those essential principles of colour, of sound, and of form, which constitute the root-being of evolving life" ("The Future Development" 4). **Theosophy's** service to Beauty would be repaid with interest when "public work" on the fifth interpretation, to be undertaken by Rukmini Devi, began in earnest: "This will be a new form of that which is essentially Theosophical propaganda, a form so far neglected among us, to the very definite detriment of our work of winning the world to Theosophy" (7).

The Beauty Aspect, though it did not get special consideration before the advent of **Rukmini** Devi, was not altogether neglected by her predecessors. Besant herself encouraged the pursuit of the arts and Eleanor Elder made the first experiments, in the 1910s, with the actual bodying forth of Theosophical ideology in drama and dance. Elder, a member of the Theosophical Society and a friend and mentor of **Rukmini's**, was associated with a group called the Arts League of Service, which sought to make art accessible to the poor. Elder is a crucial figure in this history because besides directing performances at **Adyar** of a kind of hybrid 'Greek' dance, a la Duncan, she also

wrote what may be considered the manifesto of nationalist (artistic) reform of sadir.

Elder's experiments in choreography were carried out in the light of a firm conviction that the world in general was in the grip of a conflict between the 'vulgar' and 'ugly,' on the one hand, and Beauty on the other. It was the business of cultured people to tip the scales in favour of the former. No sphere was organised in such defiance of Beauty as that of the education of children; physical cultivation, in particular, was neglected: "Think of a world in which every child went through ... a school... where the art of expression in colour, sound, and form was taught as a matter of course; would the future generations be content with the ugly world most of us live in?" (Elder 13).

Elder drew on ideas about physical culture that were general Theosophical currency in **Besant's** time, and contributed in her turn to the **establishment** of the norms that moulded the aesthetic which went with Theosophical doctrine and influenced **Rukmini Devi**. These norms had to do with the physique of the dancer and with the artistic (or religious) aims of dance in **general**.

Elder's ideal of physical beauty may appear strange to a generation that has grown accustomed to muscle-bound male heroes. It required a genteel sort of cultivation of the body, with "no abnormal development of the muscles, or any straining of the laws of nature" (2). While undesirable and excessive musculature was associated in Elder's mind with the requirements of western ballet, underdevelopment was the besetting sin of the working-class body. The working-class, in Elder's opinion, believed that physical degeneration was good for the soul.

"Perhaps the appalling joy and pride taken in sickness and disease by the lower classes," she suggests, "is a relic of **this teaching**"(12).

Whatever Elder's precise standards of excellence for the human frame were, they precluded sympathy for the dance of the **devadasis**. When she turns her attention to Indian dance and considers the possibility of its revival, she deplores the practice of these '**vulgar**' representatives of the arts:

The remnants of the true art of the Natya Sastras are only to be seen in a debased form nowadays in the nautch, and here again it is becoming Westernised. It is a tragedy indeed that such an art should be allowed to die out and it is to be hoped that Indian artists . . . will come forward and take up the subject seriously before it is too late (27).

"It is not possible to go to the nautch for assistance in a revival of the old religious Natya of India," Elder states, "the system must be built up afresh" (27-28). She mentions the sources that will supply the material for this revival of dance: the sastras and sculpture, those symbols of the unbroken and '**pure**' tradition **Rukmini** Devi was to draw on in preference to the sampradaya (the living practice or traditions) of **sadir**. The **investigation** of Indian sculpture is to be undertaken on the lines of Isadora and Peter Duncan's quest for visual images in Greek sculpture. And the mention of the sastras leads, by an association by now almost natural, to the inevitable reference

to the ancient glory of the form: "...if we go to the Natya Sastras, we read there that dancing is of divine origin, and that in ancient days it was held to be akin to Yoga" (27).

Elder was conscious of clearing the path for the future reform of the dance. The **messiah**, the one who would actually take on this task, was yet to appear; but her pedigree, her strategies and her role in the freedom struggle were dimly presaged in the writing of the forerunner:

To create a system of Indian National Dance Drama from the study of these works [the sastras] and that of Indian sculpture and music, is a great work which awaits some skilled artist to take it up. It must be created by an Indian, and be truly expressive of Indian life and character; and it is now that it is needed, when fresh life is pouring into the Nation through its spiritual and educational awakening, and it may be through drama and this sacred art [that] India will find a means of delivering her message to the world. (28)

The hour produced the woman, and she did not make her advent without fanfare. Strikingly lovely in appearance and inclined to take her Theosophy very seriously, **Rukmini** Devi became synonymous with the cultural ambitions of the Society in Madras. Her mentors and friends could not speak of Beauty in the abstract any **more--could** not think about 'the Beauty Aspect'- without immediately invoking its **personification** in Rukmini

Devi. It was plain from the beginning that Beauty was to be her **portfolio:**

I make ... no apology for bearing what T regard as an entirely unbiassed, eager and most grateful testimony to the beauty which radiates from **Rukmini**, and I know that there are very many others whose testimony will be no less wholehearted. (Arundale, Fragment 30-31)

Thus George Arundale. A more detailed and exact description of this 'beauty' that emanated from Rukmini Devi is not forthcoming at this stage; indeed, this beauty never actually finds verbal correlatives in the writings of her followers, but an unspoken aesthetic comes to be associated with her presence and her performances as the years pass. The novelty of this aesthetic becomes obvious when one considers how much discursive **justification** it seemed to require.

The young star was carefully groomed to take over the Beauty department by George Arundale among others; but the most important influence was Annie Besant herself. In an interview given towards the end of her life, Rukmini Devi recalled **Besant's** charismatic presence: "She gave me the real understanding of India because at that time young people used to think that everything in the West was superior. She made me feel the other way. I discovered India partly through her." ("Rukmini Devi on Her Life and Art," 59). Elder's influence is also obvious in the actual moves Rukmini Devi made towards the renewal of sadir. And James **H.** Cousins, art historian and

theosophist, appears to have been the person who "mooted the idea that she start an institution, where Bharata Natya would be taught, in the purified and refined way in which she was presenting it **herself**" (Sarada, 37).

Rukmini studied the art of sadir from isai vellalar teachers including the redoubtable Pandanallur **Meenakshisundaram** Pillai and Mylapore Gowri **Ammal**, until she was prepared to perform in public. She appears to have presented recitals to small and intimate audiences to begin with. However, the fifth interpretation of Theosophy formally began, as George Arundale wrote, "in Adyar on March 15th 1936, when **Shrimati** Rukmini Devi gave a public Classical Recital of Indian Dancing before a very large and distinguished audience" ("The Future Development" 18).

For a brahmin woman to perform sadir in the 1930s was, of course, extravagantly daring. Before she could harness the prestige of her own caste position to the dance form, Rukmini and her supporters had to fight off the opinion that she was stooping, that she had lost caste. The sensation of incurring the wrath of the orthodox was not new to her: she had already been sufficiently **non-conformist** to marry a foreigner much older than herself, which had occasioned a minor scandal in her circles. The factors that worked immediately in her favour must be noted here; the rest of the story is about her gradual reshaping of the form itself until it has become, in the **Present**, quite the thing with which young brahmin girls occupy their time.

The factor that most obviously helped create support for Rukmini Devi's project was her position and her husband's in the **Theosophical** Society. As President of the Society after Besant's

death, and as a campaigner for India's spiritual regeneration and freedom, George Arundale had a fairly extensive and loyal following, especially among the brahmin intelligentsia. Sarada (an old associate of **Rukmini Devi's** and one of the older teachers at Kalakshetra) observes that many **brahmins** attended **Rukmini's** performances because George Arundale "had worked tirelessly for national education and India's liberation from the British" by spreading the message that "a revival of Bharatanatyam based on religion and spirituality would help the regeneration of India" (43-44).

At Rukmini Devi's debut, the changes on the 'religion and spirituality' theme were rung with a thoroughness truly befitting the place and the occasion. George Arundale asserted that such recitals would serve Theosophy: the "diamond of Theosophy" (it was the year of the Society's Diamond Jubilee) would shine in all its facets. Rukmini Devi herself pointed out that dance recitals would serve the Nation: "Unless India learns once more to reverence her own splendid standards in the Arts, neither will she be worthy of Swaraj, nor will she be able to take her rightful place among the nations of the world" ("Theosophy as Beauty" 27). The splendid standards, which had their place in religious life in antiquity, had--Rukmini Devi implied--all but been forgotten for centuries and were finally being reinstated:

In Ancient India, the Arts were
incarnations of Divine Truths. Inevitably,
as the centuries passed, the Arts have
tended to lose their link with their
ensouling realities, though by no means to

the same extent as has been the case **with**
 their western counterparts since western
 Arts lost their religious idealism.
 (Arundale, "The Future Development" 6)

The long historical interlude during which the devadasis considered themselves the 'guardians' of the arts does not, of course, bear mention in that sensitive situation; nor, in subsequent years, does the discourse widely associated with **Kalakshetra** and its graduates acknowledge the debt to these artistic predecessors.

George Arundale's eloquence on the occasions when Rukmini Devi performed (the Madras brahmin always had a weakness **for** English) was clearly a **crowd-pulling** feature. Among Sarada's memories of the bliss of that particular dawn, his '**chaste** English' as especially indelible.

Rukmini's caste position was undoubtedly a recommendation of her art. Reviews of and articles on her performances sometimes mentioned her caste and at other times made oblique or **metonymic** references to her 'culture and education'; but clearly the cultural capital she possessed, by birth, was being invested in the **transformation** of the dance. A review (in The Hindu) of the 1936 performance is a typical instance of the appreciation of this investment, and an early example of the confusion of aesthetic categories and caste position that was to be naturalized in bharatanatyam criticism:

The occasion was notable as marking the public debut of an educated and cultured lady outside the professional ranks, whose

disinterested love of a great **art** has led her to study its ... technique, and to attempt ... the difficult and delicate task of portraying emotions through gesture and expression.... (qtd. in Arundale, "The Future Development" 21-22)

A whole new vocabulary --of 'delicacy' and 'disinterested love of the **art'**--was in the making in this kind of criticism; a vocabulary which was clearly distinct from the one used to describe the sadir recitals of the now despised '**professional ranks,**' the devadasis. Evidently much could be overlooked, forgiven or reinterpreted in the public appearance of a brahmin woman who was, to put it crudely, not getting any money for her 'service.' As Margaret Cousins, theosophist and co-founder (with Besant) of the Women's India Association, expressed it:

The dance recitals of Shrimati **Rukmini** Devi of Madras are a spiritual experience. She is an exponent of genius of the ancient art of Bharata Natya and has made it her dedicated service of renascent India to restore the joy of the dancing God Nataraja to the life of the Indian people. Herself a Brahmin and the wife of the President of the Theosophical Society, a woman of much travel and culture, she has raised the whole atmosphere, environment and reputation of the public performance of music and dance by young **women.** (Indian Womanhood Today 107-08)

The worthy George **Arundale's** own review of **Rukmini's** maiden performance exemplifies, better than any other piece of writing, the peculiar running together of high seriousness and social snobbery that accompanied the **transmogrification** of **sadir**:

The theme of the dance recital was an emotional **interpretation** of the aspirational outpourings of the Soul, and an ecstatic **identification** of these with the very Soul of the Universe itself. . . . Every movement, every gesture, every pose, each song, expressed an aspect of such union so that the whole Dance became a symbol of a Soul's Awakening to its Divinity. . . . The Mayor of Madras, a number of His Majesty's Judges of the High Court, and many other leading citizens, both of Madras and other cities were present at the Recital. ("The Future Development" 19-20)

In the throes of passionate advocacy, Arundale is touchingly unconscious of the sublime absurdity of the fact that the '**Mayor of Madras**' found it convenient to witness and approve the 'Soul's Awakening.' In the subsequent discourse generated by the International Academy of the Arts (**Rukmini** Devi's 'institute'), soon to become Kalakshetra, the blending of paeans to divinity and attention to soul-making on the one hand with a finicky care for social status on the other becomes so standard that the bathos ceases to be noticeable. Dance is finding its place in **upper-caste** culture.

**Rukmini's Version of Bharatanatyam:
Theory and Practice**

It must be remembered that what appears on the surface to be a counter-campaign to the anti-nautch **movement--Rukmini Devi's** attempt to revive the dance--was actually founded on the same assumptions as those of the nationalist reformers. **The** manoeuvres that Rukmini Devi and E. Krishna Iyer (especially the former) went through in the course of harnessing sadir to nationalism are central to my study because they were most directly involved in the definition of both the new aesthetic and the subjectivity of the class/caste that was to inherit the colonizers' power. The vectors that converged to shape the aesthetic of bharatanatyam, and to create a discourse about it, included, then: 1) the vindication of 'national' culture, figured in Rukmini Devi's discourse as high art devoted to spiritual uplift; 2) the **transformation** of a sacred temple-based **pre-modern** art into a secular, modern one, at home on the proscenium stage; 3) and, of immediate import, the **justification** of the use of sadir for the education of upper-caste girls from 'respectable' families.

No less a personage than George Arundale held that "the art work of Rukmini Devi was for the welfare of India. The work would advance the emancipation of our Nation" (cited in Viswanathan 5). He asserts that she is "arousing India to a remembrance of her past greatness and is helping her to tread a new way of **unfoldment**" ("Introduction" 1). The affiliation with cultural **nationalism** is indicated by a two-step process. Firstly, India **is** unvaryingly represented as the birthplace **and** home of a '**pure**' **spirituality**, which extends into the **arts**:

"India is the very home of the great and spiritual" (Rukmini Devi, Woman as Artist 8); or: "We must show the spiritual aspect in the dance, because all our arts in India are spiritual, and if dance is not spiritual. it is not Art at all, and it is not Indian either" (Rukmini Devi, "On Understanding Bharata Natya" 25; emphasis added). Secondly, certain special people (brahmins, the elite, the 'pure') were privileged to embody this spirit of ancient India in the present, and the glorious task of restoring the (straying) arts to their former spiritually elevated status was rightfully theirs. And this task would help reeducate not only the nation, but entire continents, for "there is no barrier of nationality when greatness and beauty come into the world" (Rukmini Devi, The Message of Beauty 13-14).

The formless 'spirituality' Rukmini Devi was invoking obviously referred to an orientalist or Christian outsider's view of what a religious attitude ought to be rather than to any recognizable Hindu reality. The notion that the dance once represented, and ought once again to represent, asceticism and self-denial rather than eroticism or plenitude probably arose out of a European misunderstanding of the devadasi tradition that goes as far back as the thirteenth century A.D. In Marco Polo's description of his travels along the Coromandel coast, in 1298, he mentions the 'consecrated damsels' who dance in "certain abbeys," "before the idol[s] with great festivity." As Partha Mitter notes, this led to an illustration for Lie Livre Des Merveilles. called "Danse des Servantes ou Esclaves des Dieux," probably executed by the **Boucicault** Master in the early fifteenth century; in keeping with the convention of '**schematic**' Painting (with no attempt at realism or accuracy), the devadasis

were visually transformed into nuns, complete with head-dress (Mitter 3-4). Europeans travelling to India--and no doubt Annie Besant, who bequeathed to her followers a mythology of a pure and spiritual past for the devadasis, was one of **these--were** apt to arrive with somewhat confused images and expectations.

Whatever the origin of the myth of the devadasis' erstwhile asceticism, it led Rukmini Devi to announce imminent global transformation following the revival of the true and original spirit of bharatanatyam. Evidently, her 'art work' was no mundane activism; it was a crusade, a mission to the world, the dawn of a new era. So we understand from Rukmini Devi's account of the launching of Kalakshetra: "There was an atmosphere in those days... of a great pioneering spirit. There was a feeling that we were on the verge of some new revelation, some new spirit that was to be born again in the world" (**qtd. in Ramani, 11**). She has grandiose visions of what will come to pass: "We cannot fully react to beauty unless those who are leaders in the life of the nations react to art and appreciate art.... We must once more bring into the world the true religious spirit that goes hand in hand with art" (**The Message of Beauty 8**). She waxes poetic:

I hold that India can teach the world that the true Dance is an art which, like the white light of the Sun, draws into itself the rainbow of other arts, and which as an art can be one of the greatest achievements of humanity. (Dance and Music 8)

In brief, as George Arundale modestly put the case: "India, as

we not only hope and believe but are certain, will renew the world and Kalakshetra shall be a force in the renewal, not merely of India, but of the whole **world...**"

The consciousness of a '**renewal**' in the offing lends urgency to the project of reshaping the aesthetic of sadir. with two potential audiences in mind: the indigenous brahmin intelligentsia and the international constituency of Theosophists, connoisseurs and '**humanists**' of every stamp. In actuality, this audience was not very large, art being extraneous to bourgeois society in a way artists or craftspeople of an earlier age, sustained by the cosmic or ritual significance of their work, could scarcely have believed possible. The talking into being of bharatanatyam, in a language of interiority and inwardness ('spirituality,' 'art for art's sake') on the one hand, and of millenarian 'world-renewal' on the other, was at one level merely nervous compensation for the sheer **expendability** of this form. But the renovated verbalization of the ends of the dance form also signalled a fact about the new audience for the dance: the fact that it was a mixed or cosmopolitan audience.

The quest for a viable 'modernity' for art forms in general, as Geeta Kapur points out, led Indian artists to negotiate between the idea of national self-determination and the need to speak a universal or international artistic **language**.¹⁸ In **Rukmini** Devi's case, it is evident that such a negotiation was made doubly necessary, since in addition to a search for a 'modern' language of dance, she had put dance on the agenda of the Theosophical Society, which already had a Philosophical investment in a judicious admixture of nationalism

and internationalism.

I have mentioned, above, the lectures and sermons at the Theosophical Society (part of the '**theory**' in which **bharatanat,yam** grounded itself) that helped create an audience for the new aesthetic. What needs elaboration, however, is **Rukmini** Devi's own version of evangelical aesthetics, her contribution to the '**theory**' that framed the practice of the new style: a discourse touching on the interests that her two kinds of audience had in common, which served to align them with each other as putative consumers of **bharatanat,yam**. **Rukmini's** version of Beauty, though it does not deviate in any great measure from the well-established Theosophical pattern, demands closer analysis, since it is inextricable from her practice, and since it offers insights into her reasons for modifying specific aspects of **sadir**.

As I remarked in the context of Devi the Dancer, this aesthetic distinguishes itself by the singular inchoateness and **generality** of its terminology; words like '**Beauty**' or 'Spirituality' are flourished in the air without any clearly identifiable referents. The vocabulary that **Rukmini Devi's** adherents bequeathed to writers, performers and teachers is **mystically** evocative rather than **descriptive**; it is quite unlike the precise technical terms dance gurus of an older generation, for instance, used, in order to signal their demands to students, or to the vocabulary of everyday aesthetic enjoyment. For instance, in a statement such as the following: "In ancient India, as can be seen through a study of the classic books, the dance had the highest conception of beauty" (**Rukmini Devi**, Dance and Music 2), most elements are open to free interpretation,

since there is no attempt to specify any of them; how far back is 'ancient'? What are the names of the 'classic books'? What might the 'highest conception' represent? And 'beauty,' that trademark of Kalakshetra discourse--what are its actual visual or auditory **manifestations**?

"What is beauty?" Rukmini Devi asks, rhetorically, on another occasion. Is the word--one wonders--about to acquire material or conceptual content at last? The answer, as it turns out, leaves us no more enlightened than before: "It is the manifestation of the Divine...in all things" (The Message of Beauty 1). Confusion is further confounded: "We have to learn more and more of the beautiful Myriads of ugly things exist, but these will go as we learn to react to beauty perfectly" (8). Beauty is self-evident in this discourse; or, at any rate, the best people have **unmediated** access to it, and will educate the rest of the world.

Given that many Indian 'classic texts' tend to be exact in their descriptive detail, whether they are invoking conventional typologies or affective states, they are obviously not the sources of Rukmini's aesthetic jargon.¹⁹ Her terminology is puzzling, until one reflects that it is in fact the free-floating quality of such descriptions of the new aesthetic that helps decontextualize sadir, legitimizing its transfer from **locality-based** traditions into a universalist aesthetic paradigm (a section of the booklet The Message of Beauty to Civilization is subtitled "No Nationalism in Beauty"). The aesthetic of bharatanatyam, precisely because it is heralded by, and hedged around with, this abstract, universally resonant, inauthentic terminology, answers the call of modernity on the one hand

(since it was presumably made intelligible, by **non-referential, non-culture-specific** terms like 'beauty' or 'classic' to a mixed or even an exclusively international audience, not just, or not at all, to traditional connoisseurs) and of **nationalism** on the other (since India was to be identified with her spiritual/**mystical** past). As Amrit Srinivasan observes: "The re-classification of regional, artistic traditions within a unique **territorially-defined** framework of unity was now proposed in terms of spiritual and **civilisational** advantages of Indian and eastern philosophies and techniques" (1874).

The verbal **transformation** of the relevant aesthetic vocabulary had its parallel in a process of standardization which pieced **bharatanatyam** together out of fragments gathered from geographically scattered styles of dancing. Styles of sadir were defined according to locale (the Pandanallur style, the Vazhuvoor style, and so on); a rich variety of performing modes had acquired, by the nineteenth century, distinctive and **territory-specific** characteristics, some considered unique and some more prestigious than others.

The slow rhythms of **cross-fertilization** and exchange between these styles gave way, in the period of the brahmin takeover, to the abrupt disturbance and acceleration that **marked** the advent of the universal modern: grossly **undiscriminating** hands rummaged through finely nuanced regional forms, selecting a theme here and a movement there, to produce the hegemonic version of bharatanatyam. The paradoxical consequence of the collapsing into each other of different dance styles, and of the reshaping of the form, given the need to disavow of the violence of this process, is the protection of the new hybrid form **from**

'degenerative' influences that threaten its (postulated) purity and classicism. The museum of dance claims to house "the various dance and theatrical styles . . . as part of some long lost, common, pan-Indian tradition rather than as diverse expressive forms tied to unique systems of thought" (Puri 22).

The adaptation of sadir to serve Beauty and Nation exacted a price: its dissociation from the memory of its most recent **performers** and its teachers, the devadasis and the **nattuvanars**. Before sadir could enter upper-caste consciousness as a form fit for well-brought-up young women to practise, before it could be claimed as national heritage, it had to be washed clean of the stain of its association with the devadasis, a delicate operation. Rukmini Devi writes:

What I wanted to prove was that what was wrong was not the dance itself but the circumstances surrounding it and what people had done with it. So I tried in many ways to reform it, to clean it.... But when I say 'clean it,' I do not mean that the dance was **unclean**--I considered it like a great jewel which had been encrusted by dirt.... The only thing that was needed was to remove what did not belong to it, to reveal the beauty of the jewel **itself**.

(qtd. in **Ramani** 11)

When Rukmini Devi and her supporters had done with the form, both theoretically and practically, it was **transfigured**; the typical performer was no longer the '**professional**' from the

devadasi 'ranks,' but the 'artiste' of middle-class brahmin origins. The moves by which this was accomplished, considered below, may be seen as representing a ferociously focused attempt to put as much distance as possible, in every detail of its practice, between bharatanatyam and the devadasi tradition.

The practice of sadir involved the knitting together of a community-based organization, locality-based aesthetic codes, a ritually derived **semiosis**, and individual performing bodies and selves. The devadasis traced their personal and artistic ancestry back several generations through women relatives or male gurus: the genealogy or paramparai was a source of great pride to them. For instance, Balasaraswati, in her Presidential Address at the Music Academy in 1974, is at pains to acknowledge her lineage:

Although it is known to many that my grandmother's grandmother **Kamakshiammal** danced and sang at the court of Tanjore, it is important to point out that my great-grandmother **Sundarammal** was a musician, as were my grandmother **Dhanammal** and my mother, **Jayammal**. ("Presidential Address" 15)

The living traditions or sampradayam of sadir that had been handed down through the devadasis and their isai vellalar teachers was definitely not what **Rukmini** Devi wished to lay claim to. At the same time, there was no cachet in presenting bharatanatyam as a radically new art, since the proof of its antiquity was its highest recommendation. The tension between the claim to antiquity and the desire to blot out the isai

vellallar interlude led **Rukmini** and her adherents to make extraordinary claims for her own creative vision, which allowed her to be more traditional than the devadasis, while virtually eliding the large contributions made by nattuvanars like **Meenakshisundaram Pillai** and **Chockalingam Pillai**, **kathakali asans** like **Ambu Panikkar** and **Chandu Panikkar**, devadasi performers like **Gowri Ammal**, and members of traditional performing families like **Bharatam Natesa Iyer** to **Kalakshetra's** basic repertoire.

One way of disavowing the connection with the isai vellalar community was to claim that the repertoire was recreated directly from the sastras. Thus even as Rukmini Devi began to learn the art from an isai vellalar natyacharya--perhaps the greatest teacher in his generation, Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram **Pillai--she** was invoking the textual authority of the sastras for her practice, especially the authority of the 'Fifth Veda,' the Natyasastra which, she says, is like an ocean. To dance well it was not enough to learn the skills that the devadasis had mastered; the additional component of '**knowledge**' is required,

a knowledge not only of the books which in India are unique, but also a knowledge of great philosophies, literature, poetry, music and religion, a knowledge by which the mind transcends itself in the world of wisdom. When this is achieved, Bharata Natya is justified by the **dancer...the** dance becomes a Veda and the dancer a Yogi.

(Woman as Artist 6)

In an unprecedented move, dance becomes essentially an exercise of the mental faculties rather than a practice of the **body**. Mental training is traditionally the provenance of brahmin men; but this catholic mode of knowing, encompassing "great philosophies, literature, poetry, music and religion," was the peculiar territory of the **English-educated**, humanist, universal brahmin intellectual, a subject position open to female occupation by the mid twentieth century. This 'sanskritization' of the art was extended into other areas, with the privileging, at **Kalakshetra**, of practices like vegetarianism, puja on stage and so on.

Appealing to the authority of the Natyasastra led imperceptibly to the question of renaming the form. **Rukmini** Devi was anxious to claim credit for this stroke of genius, and some of her associates give it to her, in defiance of the evidence of the dates (see the section on the Music Academy above). Sarada notes in her documentary study of Kalakshetra that "[it] was Rukmini Devi who first called this dance Bharata Natya as it originated from the great sage Bharata" (43). Rukmini herself writes: "This name f sadir kutcheri] had its own associations because of which I preferred to call my recitals Bharata Natya recitals" ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 24).

Even the sastras were not, in this discourse, specific in their reference: a vague gesture towards the '**sacred** texts' usually sufficed to include all kinds of texts, whether mythological narratives or treatises on dance, dramaturgy, 'aesthetics' and ritual. If the word sastra denoted the Natyasastra, it would be easy to show how spurious the textual authority for '**spiritual**' dancing was; because while this text

specifies the details of **invocation**, realization and presentation of mythic narratives in the ritually appropriate framework, it does not make any claims for the spirituality of this exercise. It is, on the contrary, a wholly practical manual, concerned with effective dramaturgy (which is not, of course, to be interpreted as '**realism**,' but as successful enactment of the narrative, the bringing-into-being of its experience, which then enabled the enjoyment of rasa). As Angelika Heckel notes: "The relationship with the world and its history, and not with something other-worldly, is that in which and out of which theatre and rasa takes **place--according** to the description offered by the Natyashastra" (41).

Whatever the actual content of the word '**sastra**,' it served **Rukmini** Devi and her followers as a trope for the direct connection between the revived dance and antiquity, a connection, moreover, that bypassed the entire history of sadir. The manoeuvre is, of course, reminiscent of the **hypostatization** of the Vedic past, the Golden Age, by the Orientalists in India; the unspoken intention in this case was to legitimize a class's hegemonic power through a particular appropriation of that invented past. One of the effects of this understanding of the dance's history is the bharatanatyam dancer's peculiar inability to address the present in any way **in her dance**: unlike in the instance of, say, Indian painting, the very entry into modernity was achieved through a denial of that modernity, a disavowal of all historicity and an evocation of a timeless present that was never really there.²¹ The entry into modernity was to be effected, then, not through a consciousness of the historical development of the dance: but by the consciousness of its

historic (cultural) role in the present, as a component in the nationalist struggle. The project of dance, in this context, like that of the other arts, was to "[materialize]... the idea of a golden past and then [to induct] this into a national project" (Kapur, "Ravi **Varma**" 59).

The ideal ground on which to work this project was, of course, Hindu mythology; the product was the well-known dance-drama, a staple element of **Kalakshetra's** repertoire. The narrative drama fulfilled **cultural-nationalist** requirements excellently well: it 'brought alive' India's past in stage-events that aroused national pride (in the spiritual tradition it brought to mind) but, in the Kalakshetra version, also signalled its own modernity by an unprecedented smoothness of presentation. As George Arundale wrote: "We hope to encourage Indian artists to write plays embodying Indian themes, full of inspiration and beauty, and we shall hope to produce them on the most modern scientific principles of production" ("The Future Development" 38-39). The golden past and the **revolutionary** present were thus connected up not only by the appeal to high textuality, but also by this work of bodying forth mythological narratives in the new form--the dance-drama--adapted for the purpose. "According to Sarada Hoffman [an associate of **Rukmini's**], **Rukmini** Devi had a lot of young people to work with and she thought that, by involving them in artistic activity such as producing these elevating stories, the public could get some motivation, some inspiration to cultivate bhakti in their lives" (**Ramnarayan**, "Rukmini Devi" 32). A sample of the dance-dramas Kalakshetra produced after the Tirukutrala **Kuravanji** (1944), its first venture: Kalidasa's **Kumarasambhavam** (1947),

Seeta Swayamvaram (1954), Usha Parinayam (1959), Maha Pattabhishekam (1970).

The initial construction, at Kalakshetra, of a formal vehicle for **the** popularization of elevating mythological stories, is a typical instance of the interaction between **Rukmini's** school and traditional teachers of dance, and of the subsequent disavowal of this interaction in statements that attribute the success of the project almost entirely to Rukmini Devi. Discussions by Kalakshetra artistes of the influences under which the dance-dramas were produced frequently raise the question on which everything seems to hinge: who is to have the credit for these productions? The tension between ideology (**genius-at-work**, creation ex nihilo) and practice (first, reconstruction of what was available and then **transformation** of it in accordance with Rukmini Devi's notions of good taste), while it is belied by the bland **self-gratulation** of Kalakshetra veterans of this period, surfaces in the very persistence with which this question is addressed.

The antecedents of the celebrated Kalakshetra dance-dramas are probably to be sought in two phenomena: the amateur productions of the Theosophical Society, English plays on Indian themes performed for a cosmopolitan audience; and place-based traditions of mythological drama like the Bhagavata Mela tradition of Melattur. The broad vision that animated Rukmini Devi's dance-dramas may be traced back to the kind of west-influenced **subjectivity** that produced Bheeshma and Edwin Arnold's The Light of Asia in English for the **edification** of **the** Theosophists. Eleanor Elder's experiments, and her suggestion that it would be "through drama and this sacred art

[of dance] that India will find a means of delivering her message to the world" (28) hover in the background, as do Elder's injunctions on taste. The actual repertoire of movement, as anyone who has choreographed a dance would know, could not be conjured up out of the void: this, it would seem, was provided by the Nattuvanar teachers, the Kathakali performers, the Melattur artistes and other masters of already extant traditional modes of dramatic presentation and of gestural vocabularies. The records of the choreographing, especially, of the early dance-dramas of Kalakshetra obliquely suggest the centrality of the **contributions** by these teachers to **Rukmini Devi's** style.

But the very idea of 'choreography,' the individual's visualization of how a dramatic performance will look or be organized, is, of course, entirely new in Indian dance: traditional theatrical presentations developed partly through accretion, partly through the dictates of ritual enactment, and bore no signatures. What Rukmini Devi added to the material she gathered from these traditional sources was a sort of **rationalizing** vision. All those elements of the older styles that looked out of place on the proscenium stage were weeded out: acting in the round, with musicians walking behind the dancers, the lack of a fixed perspective that identified the space of 'the audience,' casual, informal and interrupted **presentations**. Costumes were redesigned according to the requirements of 'taste,' or to suit the bodies of individual **performers**; music was commissioned from expert vidwans like K. **Krishnamachariar, Papanasam Sivan**, Mysore Vasudevachariar and Tiger Varadachariar; the choreography was made more symmetrical

in its detail; the duration of each performance was cut down drastically. '**Taste**' was of the essence: there is nothing here of the narrative and visual mess, the garish costuming, the haphazard lighting, the random and **repeti'ive** movement, and all the other elements, anomalous to an eye accustomed to the finish of western ballet, that typified indigenous narrative theatre, whether it was the therukoothu or the bhagavata mela.

The art of '**polishing**' for a cosmopolitan audience productions that had existed in regionally defined forms for many decades was acquired at the Theosophical Society. **Rukmini** Devi, however, is canonized for far more than **co-ordinating** or adding finishing touches to the **Kalakshetra** dance-dramas. As Dr. James Cousins wrote in Swatantra in 1946, of the Kalakshetra production of Tirukutrala Kuravanji, its first dance-drama:

the rescuing from oblivion of a long forgotten work... would itself be an event of much importance to Tamil scholarship. But the artistic eye of **Srimati** Rukmini Devi saw the possibility of the revival of the forgotten dance-drama, not in the sense of putting new wine into old bottles, for no vestige of the exhilarating elements of music or dance remained; nor in the sense of putting old wine into new bottles for no modern dance or music had any affinity with the old Tamil verses. ... [But] the result has been a first class **demonstration** of what may be figuratively called artistic reincarnation, through which the spirit of

tradition finds new life. (qtd. in **Ramnarayan, "Rukmini Devi"** 27; emphasis mine)

The genre of dance-drama under discussion--the **Kuravanji form**--was part of a living tradition, which Rukmini herself had been introduced to in Thanjavur by **Meenakshisundaram Pillai**. While Rukmini probably deserves credit for bringing the form to the metropolis and to the proscenium stage, the claim that she virtually recreated it was untrue and arrogant; but such claims are frequently made, without any sign of embarrassment, by **Kalakshetra** acolytes. It was necessary to establish, for the sake of **Kalakshetra's** continued hegemony, that Rukmini Devi had a special ability to embody the 'spirit of tradition'; the operative word being, of course, 'spirit,' since there were rivals (like Balasaraswati or any of the isai vellalar teachers) with an infinitely more solid claim to embody its **form**. Thus Sarada Hoffman: "Rukmini Devi's dance-dramas are not traditional in any literal sense. They are traditional in that they carry the traditional spirit. We must give credit to her originality," (qtd. in Ramnarayan "Rukmini Devi" 28). It is instructive to contrast this talk of the 'spirit of **tradition**' with the more literalist and more concrete definition of the word by an isai vellalar teacher. Here is **Mahalingam Pillai**, asked by an interviewer what he thought of 'tradition':

Tradition has as much to do with maintaining the quality of the art-form as it has to do with its core values and substance. For example, in Bharatanatyam,

the upper torso should be kept in a static position, the body should not be subjected to undue movement, and the sthayi for abhinaya **should** be maintained.... (Krishna, 11).

The construction of a subsequent (projected) dance-drama in the bhagavata mela style hints at the multitude of never quite acknowledged contributors:

As a first step and as suggested by E. Krishna Iyer, **Rukmini** Devi invited **Balu** Bhagavatar, who was the leading performer of Bhagavata Mela... at Melattur and **Saliamangalam**... to come to Kalakshetra. Kalyani **Ammal**, daughter of **Bharatam** Natesa Iyer, one of the traditional Bhagavatars also came to help.... music for some [lyrics] was composed by Turayyur Rajagopala **Sarma**. Sarada herself put in a great effort But all aspects were guided and supervised by Rukmini Devi who herself introduced changes such as the cutting down of the number of **Tiraiseelai-s** or hand-held curtains used for the entrance of characters because they interfered with the smooth flow of dramatic presentation.

(**Ramnarayan**, " Rukmini Devi" 31)

Among the modernizing moves made in the interests of **taste'** was, crucially, the reinventing of the dance costume.

The old costumes carried the marks of the devadasi's history: they were sometimes in organza, sometimes in some other diaphanous material like muslin, and worn over (usually satin) pyjamas—accretions, no doubt, of a colonially dominated period. All this produced a look that was obviously not sufficiently indigenous. "The traditional costume seemed to me to be too much a mixture of styles" (Rukmini Devi, "Bharata Natya Sastra" 23). The upper caste body of the bharatanatyam dancer had to appear in attire that did not too closely resemble the devadasi's; yet it had to look 'Indian' in a general sort of way, and be made of authentic material. To find a design for the new costume, Rukmini Devi consulted temple sculpture. Presumably the models were some of the few sculpted female figures that were not semi-nude, since the result was a kind of pleated and shaped pyjama-cum-sari executed in Kanjeevaram silk.

Gendering the Dancer's Body:
Bharatanatyam as Hone Economics

The hidden agendas of Rukmini Devi's aesthetic discourse are, as I have noted, the suppression of the devadasi's role in dance history and the underwriting of brahmin authority in the sphere of culture. A particular kind of gendering was to help place the brahminical stamp on the practice of bharatanatyam; it would simultaneously assert the **caste-identification** and determine the aesthetic compulsions of the new form. The ideal female sensibility was defined in turn by these. Understandably, in the circumstances, the devadasi community was the great Other, the entity against which this definition took place: whatever that community represented, the femininity encoded in the dance was to represent its very antithesis.

I will return to the gendering of the dance and the dancer through the themes I had marked as significant while discussing Devi the Dancer: sexuality, money and the **aestheticism** of art for art's sake.

The devadasi's body was the focus of a particular conjunction of sexual desire, ritual functions, economic transactions and '**aesthetic**' codes--a conjunction which, as I pointed out in the last chapter, the modern upper caste sensibility simply could not stomach. Her body represented desire in two ways: firstly by being publicly visible as a vehicle of the dance; secondly by being privately available to a man, even if only one particular man, outside marriage. To be a woman, in the modern upper caste ideology, was to repudiate sexual desire, or at least to rewrite it as something **else**--God, Love, Companionship, Motherhood: "The **psychoanalyst** says that all love is **fundamentally** sex. Up to a point he or she is right, but has forgotten that all sex is **fundamentally**...the power of God in its physical **aspect**" (Rukmini Devi, My Theosophy 9). Rukmini Devi's attempt to erase the devadasi body from the nation's memory starts by emphasizing the norms for a correct (upper caste) female sexuality:

Woman needs to know the sacred place of sex. It is a vessel filled with divine life and she may bring down this divine life into ordinary life... It is not something to indulge in. It is something that we should approach with worship, and delicately. (The Message of Beauty 16)

Not only must women (**specifically**) deny, repress, or simply not have '**vulgar**' desires, they must in fact provide the counterweight to (untrammelled) male desire. This is their '**civilizing role**' in the world; and they fail in this role when they fail to understand that "sex is one of the greatest sacraments ... [that] is supremely a matter for reverence.... Irreverence and vulgarity in relation to sex are nothing short of blasphemy and degradation" (Woman as Artist 9-10).

Oddly enough, given her extensive meditations on the '**spirituality**' of bharatanatyam, Rukmini Devi familiarized her public with the courtly repertoire of sadir rather than its temple-based practice. The latter, though it included lyrics of an erotic nature, also embodied the ritual functions of dance as a way of bringing auspiciousness, warding off evil, or, on festival days, enacting an event of special mythic **significance**: functions irreducibly bound up with a **pre-modern**, culture-specific sense of the sacred that was not translatable into the nebulous language of 'spirituality,' and therefore of no particular value to Rukmini Devi's project. What she had to modify, then, was the stage-format given to sadir by the four brothers known as the Thanjavur Quartette. These brothers (Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, **Sivanandam** and Vadivelu, court **musicians** and dance teachers in the reign of the Maratha king Serfoji II [1798-1832]) had arranged the lyrics that made up a recital in a meaningful sequence (**from** Alarippu to Tillana) that allowed **for** the sustaining of audience interest as **well** as a full exposition of the dancer's abilities.

What then, was to be done with the erotics of the court-based repertoire--which placed Sringara or sexual love at the

centre of its aesthetic--traditionally presented with the devadasi's characteristic and unashamed candour in matters sexual? The emphasis on Sringara. Rukmini Devi admits, was embarrassing; therefore it entered the art--it must have 'crept in'--when the spiritual guardians of the art were not looking, i.e., when the devadasis had a monopoly on its **practice**. "I had definitely decided that the dance was essentially spiritual," Rukmini declares, "and I could not accept that it had gone away from the true spirit of Bharata Natya. In the Sanchari Bhava used in the varnams and padams there was much that was undesirable not only in the actual movements and hastas but even in the subtle abhinaya, eye movements, lip movements etc." ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 22).

Being the kind of woman she was, Rukmini Devi did not let embarrassment daunt her; she set about studiously 'cleaning' the art. The moves here were of three kinds: the replacement of Sringara with bhakti as the key emotion in **bharatanatyam**; the omission or **bowdlerization** of padams or varnams that delineated erotic relationships; and the **establishment** of protocols about what could be depicted on the stage, and how it could be depicted.

"It was not difficult for me to convince my teacher, Meenakshisundaram Pillai that I would not be able to learn such an aspect [sringara] and so my dance took another turn and I worked entirely for the **spiritualisation** of the art" ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 22). Sringara is not wrong in itself; but. it has to know its place, she says: "There are certain types of pada-s I have objected to. From one vidwan I learnt the old **padam** Tamarasaksha... the languishing nayika describes not only

her love, but the whole process of physical contact and in gestures at that! To depict such things is unthinkable to me..." (qtd. in **Ramnarayan**, "A Quest for Beauty" 73).

One may contrast all this soul-searching with the untroubled acceptance of Sringara by a performer in the devadasi tradition:

Sringara stands supreme in this range of emotions. No other emotion is capable of better 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 which gives fullest scope for artistic improvisation, branching off continually, as it does, into the portrayal of innumerable moods full of newness and nuance. (Balasaraswati, "On Bharatanatyam" 10, emphasis added)

Balasaraswati is not contesting the idea that Sringara is a **metaphoric** presentation of a relationship with the divine; what she **is** saying is that **sringara** offers the ideal thematic ground for the dancer's exploration and communication of her skill and emotive power, which is, in turn, crucial to the evocation of **awe** and pleasure in the audience. A dancer who has trained her body well and can make it express her dedication to the art,

Balasaraswati notes, "will feel no need to 'purify' any item in the traditional order of Bharatanatyam" ("On Bharatanatyam" 11).

Rukmini Devi objected particularly strongly to lyrics in which secular heroes and patrons figured: "I found the King described as if he were God.... As my heart went more towards the devotional aspect of the dance, I included in my programmes only those items that had a beautiful meaning and excelled from a musical point of view" ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 22). Patronage, of course, was part of the life-world of the devadasi; what was considered normal in her **repertoire--the** praise of a generous donor--came too close to expressing the economics of the devadasi tradition for **Rukmini's** taste. A great many old numbers had to be rewritten with offensive parts excised; and the pieces of choice for fresh choreography were, very often, bhakti-oriented lyrics by composers like Thyagaraja or **Muthuswami** Dikshitar, who had been conventionally thought of as part of the South Indian musical tradition, not the sadir tradition.

Certain movements had to be eliminated so that decorum could be maintained. Rukmini Devi was offended, for instance, by the fact that sadir performers gestured or pointed equally with both hands: she felt that the left hand, considered ashuddham (unclean) by the upper castes, ought not to be used. The centuries-old rule of symmetry in sadir was **sacrificed--the** indecorous left hand ceased to point. In general, the changeover from an aesthetics of enactment or allegory, as in the practice of sadir, to a pictorial aesthetic adapted to the proscenium stage harmonized with two other factors--the relatively asexual appearance of the dancer's full-face appearance and the iconic ('spiritual') value to be extracted from it, in the context of

nationalism--to produce choreography that emphasized a bland **frontality**.³⁰

The idea of the uncleanness of the left hand leads one to consider the obsessive sense of 'dirt,' associated in the modern brahmin's discourse with the devadasi. What was more disturbing than the mere sexual presence of the devadasi was the fact that this sexual presence was tied up with monetary transactions: between the dasi and the temple or king on the one hand and between the dasi and her private patron on the other. As a community-based practice, sadir was supported by complex social arrangements--such as the positioning of the women of the devadasi household vis-a-vis the families of gurus, and vis-a-vis their own taikizhavis or matriarchs; such as the provision of cooked food and housing by the temple and the royal patron; such as the administration of their lands by the temple, and the payment of allowances, that freed the dancers precisely from the domestic duties that **Rukmini** Devi so persistently associated with the image of Woman. Though the economic relation in each case was a feudal one, and therefore not obviously '**commercial**' in the (capitalist) sense of '**commoditized**,' it still stipulated the devadasi's body as essential to the transaction, as materially present dancer, as concubine or mistress. If the publicly visible body were not scandal enough, the introduction of money into the frame made it absolutely unbearable from the point of view of the different class/caste-position of the 'modern' subject.

In the last chapter, I touched upon the gendering of this **subject--on** the expectation that the woman would be characterized by the modest desire to fill and beautify the Home

while the sexually charged, conflict ridden World remained a male domain. The very appearance of women in public violates these codes; but the violation is more shocking when an income hinges **or**. it. And not only did the **devadasi, functioning withi**r. a problematic that could not recognize this violation, embody the physicality of sex; she actually sang and danced it. A **padam** like **Yarukkagilum bhayama**, for instance, is performed **from** the point of view of a woman who has found a rich and handsome patron; the town gossips about her, but she is defiant, attributing the malice to envy. If in this context the word for 'man' (**purushan**) might be interpreted as 'lord' or 'husband' (though one should remember that given who was performing this **padam--the devadasi--and** given that marriage was not especially liable to cause gossip in ordinary **circumstances**, it makes sense to read it as 'patron'), the lyrics of "**Kayyil panam illamal variro**" ('So you have come to me without money in your hands'; it ends: 'I must send you away **unsatisfied**') leave no room for ambiguity about the kind of relationship being described.

Significantly, the really **conservative** brahmin, whose position was exemplified to some extent by the Music Academy's activists or by Congress leaders like S. Satyamurthi, was not hostile to the presentation of erotic lyrics on the stage; only the **modernized** brahmin, conscious of living under western eyes, felt obliged to display his disgust. Brahmin composers of the nineteenth century, for instance, by no means thought it beneath their dignity to create lyrics for the **devadasi** dancers of their time: **Subbarama** Iyer, for instance, authored several well-known **padams**, including the controversial "**Kayyil panam illamal variro**." mentioned above; Mahavaidyanatha Sivan (1844-1893)

composed tillanas; and even at the beginning of this century, **Patnam Subramania** Iyer (1844-1902) was writing padams and javalis for the dance, including, famously, "Smarasundaranguni sariyevvare" for Veena **Dnanammal**. The Music Academy was also responsible for a renewal of interest in the sexually explicit padams of **Kshetraya** in the **1930s**.

What conservative brahmins might have thought of their own women performing dance at all, let alone to such lyrics, is a moot point. Rukmini Devi was breaking a **caste-specific** taboo on public appearance; obviously she had problems peculiar to both her caste and gender positions in performing bharatanatyam.

The shocked response of (modernized) upper caste audiences to the women's depiction of sexual desire may be explained in terms of the need to perpetuate certain useful social relations such as those that subordinated women to men. The woman who strayed from the reproductive sphere into the productive was inadequately feminine, was an outcaste by its standards. It may also be explained as a psychic phenomenon. Freud calls attention to the curiously anal imagery evoked by money (as in phrases like 'filthy **lucre**' or 'yellow dirt') and suggests that, to the unconscious, money is excrement. This equation is read historically by Norman O. Brown as a psychic **manifestation** of the Protestant ethic--he cites Martin Luther as the test case. The '**excremental** vision' of the devadasi practice would be a psychically appropriate **characteristic** of the class that was involved in **nation-building** in India; a class that, moreover, consciously modelled its ethics on those of evangelical Christians in India and in Britain. A puritanism that paralleled the puritanism of Protestants in Britain appears to have gone

into the making of the **'modern'** moral universe in India, under the influence of the missionaries.

The obsession with the diseased body of the prostitute, and the projection of this obsession onto the devadasi's body, as I observed in the last chapter, already characterized **Muthulakshmi Reddi's** discourse. The imagery of filth appears again in the writings of **C.R. Srinivasa Iyengar**, a brahmin critic who wrote a series of articles on dance in The Hindu, between 1929 and 1931, with a view to 'reviving and **elevating**' this art. "The once lofty and spiritual conceptions of love as between man and his ideal, have been dragged down into the filth and mud of carnal, sexual, unholy and unbridled passions," he writes, by "the **unmentionables**"(171). We have already noted **Rukmini Devi's** own images of dirt and cleaning: "What is worse in the world than vulgarity expressed in art? I am sorry that in modern times there exists so much vulgarity and ugliness alongside some very fine conceptions expressed in works of art" (The Message of Beauty 11). The casual evocation by the devadasi of the relation between the body and money was, in this upper caste, modern imaginary, literally unthinkable.

Thus one more barrier between the devadasi practice of dance and the brahmin one was the contrast between the economically viable organization of the former, and the amateur, strictly non-economic nature of the latter. Indeed, bharatanatyam was held up for commendation precisely **because**, as a financial proposition, it was a notable failure. Its lack of economic feasibility did not merely mean that it failed to find a place in the **'market'** for art; as a **domestic/feminine** practice (as opposed to the practice of arts dominated by male artists,

which could support the idea of commercial success) it had to be **by definition unproductive.**

One sign of the success of **Rukmini** Devi's strategies of **sanitization** was the virtual disappearance of the devadasi and the isai vellalar community from the practice and teaching of dance. This triumph is reflected in a statement by Rukmini Devi, quoted by Sarada:

One great new thing ... is the complete separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers. It is a well-known fact that they are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anyone else to conduct a dance performance. I have always had a determination that this must go. . . . Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent **dancers.**

(qtd. in Sarada, 50)

But like the repressed, the memory of the dasi's body returned to haunt bharatanatyam--a flaw inherent in the form itself, in the irreducible residue of physicality that remained in the dance. The simple fact of the dancer's physical presence on the stage, in public, could not be disguised. Much of **Rukmini's** troubled musing is about this taint, this '**coarseness**': "...the dance is an expression by the physical body... The weakness of the physical body is its coarseness and **vulgarity...**" (Dance and Music 5). Upper caste disapproval of any such appearance went very deep, and Rukmini Devi's reclamation of bharatanatyam was undoubtedly received by many critics as an outrageous and

disruptive act. The elaborate discursive strategies that pulled together the unfamiliar practice of the dance and the familiar jargon of brahmin asceticism must, then, be read in the context of a continuing search for **legitimacy**: "...for those who have a higher knowledge, the body can fulfil its highest **Dharma...** by giving through the very physical being itself an embodiment ... of Cosmic Being" (Dance and Music 5). The infringement of caste-**dharma** implicit in the practice of dance by brahmin women had to be covered over with the appeal to a higher dharma that charged the female body with divinity, with the dignity of a higher **purpose**.

These themes may be summed up in Rukmini Devi's own dicta for womankind from The Message of Beauty to Civilization. The task is to produce a prescription for normative womanhood; the tone is urgent, heroic. The 'women of the West,' doing, one presumes, unspeakably material things like earning a living, are the Other of 'real' womanhood:

The women of the West... do not
realize...what womanhood really is...If
 only woman knew what her own way is!
**What** is her place? Is it merely to be a
 copy of man? It is to be herself more than
 anything else, to be divine in her own
 being, to be a piece of art, not only an
 artist. For the true emotional spirit of
 art is one with the true emotional spirit
 of woman, and if these two can combine,
 whether in the home or in politics, ...even
 at a typewriter, then woman can be her real

self and express herself through all the graces of life, the beauties and refinements of life and the influence she can bring upon her surroundings. And that influence must be entirely cultural, entirely refined. (The Message of Beauty 14-15)

In setting up an opposition between the 'women of the West' and the heroically spiritual women of the East, Rukmini Devi was only extending a theme that had already been developed by her mentor Annie Besant.

"The spirit of Womanhood is the spirit of the artist," Rukmini Devi says in what promises to be an exciting manifesto or **justification** for women's **participation** in the arts. The explanation belies the promise of this grand statement. The real woman is ornamental, domestic (the working woman's typewriter is the ultimate symbol of horror) and modestly outside the productive sphere. Her proper task is the cultivation of graces and refinements that will make civilization itself tolerable--a kind of interior decoration on a cosmic scale. This task belongs to every woman, not just to artists or **writers--because** it is also woman's lot to be the '**Universal Mother**'--who, it turns out, has the same duties as the artist. "[Woman] must express the true life of the Divine Woman She must refine life. . . . Does woman realize that whether she is a mother or not Physically, she is the mother of the whole world? She must contribute this spirit of motherhood to the world in every department of life" (The Message of Beauty 15). Rukmini Devi, it **must** be remembered, was being groomed by the Theosophical

Society to take on the messianic role of World Mother, as J.Krishnamurti was prepared, some years earlier, to be the World Teacher.³⁷

The political **possibilities** opened up for both art and women by Rukmini Devi's figuring of art as nationalism were vitiated from the very beginning by the strategies she deployed for survival and **self-justification**. The question of women's possibly radical political participation was decisively resolved, in the **event--betrayed**, some would say--by its absorption into the 'inner' world that was an adjunct to the dominant nationalist struggle, and its gradual obliteration from the frame of the independent nation. As **transformation** of women's roles ceased to be a major issue under the new **dispensation**, their cultural space, increasingly defined by exclusively 'aesthetic' considerations, narrowed and lost its **significance**. The result is the position in which the dancer in the present finds herself: **commoditized**, subsidized, showcased on television, sent to festivals of India in sundry places, but ultimately disempowered except as a reference point for a nationally approved middle class femininity.

In the model of cultural nationalism set up by Rukmini Devi, art never becomes cultural production. It becomes, instead, a kind of special work women do to embellish the national domestic **establishment**. This drastically limited what could be done with the aesthetic she deployed. The sacred and social **justification** of the devadasi's performances, the cosmology and the aesthetics that supported this, no longer obtained in the regime of modernity; nor was any other **justification** sought or given. Rukmini Devi could not appeal to

either of the two kinds of investment modernity brought into play: the bourgeois-individualist, romantic, rebellious subject position could not be occupied because of the inherent conservatism of the revival she was responsible for; nor could an aesthetics of cognition, that went with **marxist** literary and artistic movements, be set in place, because making reference to the cognitively available features of the dancer's everyday life or even to national culture was incompatible with the amorphous pieties that justified the revival of dance.³⁸

Elizabeth Dempster writes, "dance is in the world, refers to that world, but also creates its own reality. It is not simply a reflection of a current social reality but can be a gesture towards some other; it is able to project other possibilities, alluding to a future, to a past, to another present" ("Profile: Russell Dumas" 48). Hobbled by the painful associations of its own tradition (and therefore unable to refer to its past) and by the sheer externality of art to bourgeois culture (which required elaborate **justification** of its mere existence in the present), the reinvented dance form was fated to lose such vitality as it briefly had under the influence of the **millenarian** enthusiasm of Theosophy. Grounded neither in **sadir's** aesthetic of identity and social assimilation nor in a romantic aesthetic of rejection and **separateness**, bharatanatyam in the form **Rukmini** Devi gave it quickly reached the end of its creative potential; it could no longer bring about a sense of its own 'truth,' Martin Heidegger's term for the effect of a successful work of art. The practice of dance, therefore, remains in this cosmetic limbo, an **advertisement** for the 'refinement' of national civilization, as may be inferred from

the fact that '**India**' is frequently represented iconically in travel brochures or on the covers of inflight magazines by a dancer in bharatanatyam costume. This conclusion is what makes it impossible to celebrate the pragmatism of **Rukmini's** invented tradition as Geeta Kapur celebrates the makeshift, non-metropolitan and workable aesthetics Third World artists generate for their unique purposes. The recognition of the poverty of the style, in the present, has triggered off researches into its history on the one hand and creative work that rejects the brahminical baggage on the other.

Since the nationalist struggle was the moment at which many kinds of modernity were defined, arts like bharatanatyam also became fossilized in narratives that were exclusively about 'our great tradition,' about 'eternal **India**,' about 'ancient Indian heritage.' The dance in India is so congealed in this alliance with the 'tradition' and the disabling aesthetic **(re)invented** by brahmin activists that it is hopelessly incapable of adapting itself to address the ethos of the modern.

The recovery of some of the power of a radical cultural practice (which bharatanatyam by brahmin girls in the 1930s and '40s undoubtedly was, in the context of prevailing cultural taboos) without necessarily celebrating its brahmin/bourgeois orientation is a difficult, and perhaps ultimately unrealizable project. There is no ready solution to this problem: one can only identify and name it, contributing **thus--one** hopes--to the creation of the critical conditions under which it can be resolved. I will return to this problem in the last chapter, laying out my personal--and very temporary--solution to it.

NOTES

1. European borrowings from Oriental traditions in the nineteenth century have to be placed in the context of European Romanticism and its **revolt** against the dry formal classicism of academic styles. 'Primitive cultures,' eastern civilizations and their art forms had tremendous appeal for artistes whose own cultural resources seemed tired and jaded. The East, to dancers (as to artists and writers of this period), **was** a bank of fresh and exotic themes and images that subverted what had become the empty virtuosity of classical ballet. Choreographers like Marius Petipa (**Le Dieu et La Bayadere**[1877]), composers like **Rimsky-Korsakov (Scheherezade** [1910]) and later, Igor Stravinsky (**Le Sacre du Printemps** [1913]); and dancers like Anna Pavlova and Isadora Duncan (who turned to a reconstructed 'Greek' dancing to counter what she saw as ballet's abuse of points) all looked to non-European sources for inspiration and visual vocabularies.

2. The **Everyman's Encyclopaedia**, for instance, has the following entry on bayaderes:

Bayadere... is the name given to the trained dancing-girls of India, the nautch girls. They are usually selected from the lowest class of people, and their dancing has a decidedly immoral tendency. Some of the pantomimic dancers are attached to the Hindu temples. (Vol. 2, 193)

3. Pavlova and Shankar partnered each other in two 'Indian' ballets, **Krishna and Radha** and **A Hindu Wedding**. Shankar went on to set up an academy of dance (The Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre) at **Almora**, to which he invited various traditional Hindustani musicians, and dance teachers from all over the country. Kandappa Pillai, **Balasaraswati's** teacher, taught at this institute for some years.

4. St. Denis, an American modern dancer, brought her company (Denishawn) for a tour of India between January and May 1926.

5. **Black and Gold Sari** was built around the figure of a shopgirl who, displaying a sari, begins to fantasize herself wearing it, the fantasy being enacted in dance. A contemporary dancer reports on the filmed version that the images of St. Denis, "frozen from another era in celluloid, show a knock-kneed woman staggering on stage in what is considered underwear by Indian standards" (Coorlawala 13).

6. Anandi, personal communication. The link is partly through Anna Pavlova: **Rukmini** Devi had become fascinated by ballet after watching Pavlova dance, and had wished to **learn** the form: Pavlova even recommended a teacher and later advised Rukmini Devi, as she had advised Shankar, to learn the forms of her **own** country. Shankar, as I have mentioned, partnered Pavlova.

7. See Geeta Kapur: "**Ravi Varma**" and "**The Place of th. Modern.**"

8. Of course, Stringara still provides the substantive content of much bharatanatyam. but in **Rukmini** Devi's own dancing, its importance was minimized.

9. Raphael, "Demands of Art," trans. Norbert **Guterman**, London: **Routledge** and **Kegan Paul**, n.d., 207; qtd. in Michele Barrett, "The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Criticism," 702. Without quite making the kind of connection between art and swadeshi that someone like Ananda Coomaraswamy made, Rukmini Devi invested in the mystique of craft production: as part of **Kalakshetra's** effort to reform taste, it included a weaving section where refurbished 'traditional' saris were designed and woven on **handlooms**.

10. The report of the 1927 Music Conference, where the decision to set up the Academy was made, lays out its objectives: they include the bringing together of "scholars and musicians... to consider the problems in the theory and practice of Indian music with a view to improve and standardize the same" and the improvement "of public taste" (Report of the All India Music Conference 16).

11. Cousins's husband, James Cousins, was an art enthusiast who was also associated with the Theosophical Society; he encouraged Rukmini Devi to start her institute of dance in the 1930s.

12. The patriotic but relatively uncontroversial cultural activism of the Music Academy was expressed by such actions as the institution of a prize, in 1931, for the composer of "the best **kriti**, in praise of Mother India, personified as a deity, with no reference to matters communal or political, in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, **Malayalam** and Kanarese..." (**JMAM 2.1** [1930]); it was also probably typical of the Academy's approach to the politics of region and culture that a Sanskrit composition eventually won the prize.

13. The Theosophical movement was started by a woman: Madame Blavatsky; among the Society's prominent members in the early decades of the twentieth century were Besant herself, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Margaret Cousins, Rukmini Devi, and Radha **Burnier**.

14. Kalakshetra observers recall how most of Rukmini Devi's recitals were preceded by introductory lectures by Arundale, lectures which did the work of justifying the art to fresh **initiates**.

15. Elder's own experiment, if the pictures in her book are anything to go by, and in spite of her claims for it, was not such a signal contribution to the furtherance of Beauty's cause. The photographs from her production of Sarojini Devi's (sic) "Harvest Song" show a group of unhappy people, spindle-shanked and acutely **uncomfortable** in their **mongrelized Greek-cum-Indian** costumes, striking desperate attitudes intended, no doubt, to convey Divinity, but achieving a look of collective anxiety about loss of dignity. **One** would be hard put to find a more absurd image of

miscegenation or a better image for the 'ugliness' of failed attempts at cultural translation.

16. Arundale mentions the friendship between these two women without any reference to an artistic debt, but that this debt existed is beyond doubt.

17. Quoted in a report in the Kalakshetra Golden Jubilee Year Commemorative Booklet; source not identified.

18. See **Kapur's** "Place of the Modern in Indian Cultural Practice," where she seems to suggest that this applies especially to Third World art. In India, she points out, "**nationalism... is at the very least a foil to the universal modern**" (2805).

19. See the quotation Balasaraswati uses from the Tamil classic Silapadikkaram, to illustrate her demand for a fine discrimination between the requirements of different kinds of **dances**:

[Madhavi's guru] knew when only one hand had to be used (**pindi**) and when both hands had to be used (**pinaiyal**). He also knew when the hands had to be used for exhibiting action (**tolirkai**) and for graceful effect (**elirkai**). Knowing as he did the conventions of dancing, he did not mix up the single-handed demonstration (**kutai**) with the double-handed (**varam**) and vice versa.... In the movements of the feet also he did not mix up the **kuravai** with the **vari**. He was such an **expert**. (qtd. in "On Bharatanatyam" 12)

Or see the precise descriptions of bodily movement or expression required by convention for the communication of **moods** or states of being in the Natyasastra or the Abhinaya Darpana. The contents of the Natyasastra include, among other things, chapters on the mythic origin of theatre, on the **construction**, consecration and purification of the playhouse, on literary form, metrical rules, prosody; on **vocalization**, the staging of plays, musical instruments, **talams**; on typologies of dance movement divided according to body parts. The sections on audience response are intended to help the performer judge whether or not his play has been successful-- he is told to watch out for such signs as **horripilation** during thrilling scenes, exclamations of **kastam!** during pathetic scenes or **aho!** during spectacularly successful scenes. A precise and entirely practical '**classic book**,' in other words, containing nothing susceptible to a 'spiritual' **interpretation**.

20. The kind of training that involved fine detailing of affect on the body's surfaces and muscles passed out of vogue with the devadasis. Shanta Rao, speaking of Kalyani Ammal, whom she saw when the latter was 70 years old, was awestruck by the sensitivity with which her face could register emotion. "She was a **revelation...Kalyani Ammal** showed us the full agony and suspense of Radha with just a flicker and trembling of her **nose-jewel**. Not a muscle moved elsewhere!" (qtd. in Chatterjee 10). **Kalyani's** daughter, **Jeevaratnam**, was

eenakshisundaram Pillai's favourite pupil; she died of smallpox at 21. Pillai said of her: "The cymbals in her hand would drop into my lap as I sat cross-legged conducting the **music**. I used to get carried away by the beauty of her acting. I cannot imagine ever again seeing such perfection of expression..." (qtd. in Chatterjee 38).

21. It is as if Ravi Varma's school were to represent all the experiments with modernity that had ever been carried out in the field of Indian painting. Geeta Kapur points out that Indian painters resolved the problem of the modern by drawing eclectically on both Indian and western resources; but this eclecticism also conveyed a "struggle to become historically viable," and sometimes led to the resuming of a "lapsed commitment to history" ("Ravi Varma" 60). Bharatanatyam performers could not acknowledge either their **historical roots--except** by dissembling--or their eclectic borrowings from cultures other than Indian ones.

If the gesture that virtually erases the entire devadasi-dominated period from the history of the dance were unique to **Rukmini** Devi and her immediate circle, it would hardly be worth considering in such detail. As a matter of fact, a decorous silence on the devadasi tradition has become so natural that speakers at conferences, for instance, drop their voices when they have to make reference to it; the very word 'devadasi' or 'devaradiyal' has largely pejorative **connotations**.

Even supposedly scholarly histories of dance gloss over the actual process by which the devadasis were deprived of their professional status. See, for instance, Lakshmi Viswanathan's Bharatanatyam: The Tamil Heritage (1984), in which she speaks of the "fading away" of the community after the abolition of dance in temples. Viswanathan's recent choreography for a history of bharatanatyam in dance (Vata Vriksha. 1996) produces unintended hilarity in its attempt to slur over the contribution of the devadasis. As a critic reports the sequence of events:

A doctor [Dr. **Muthulakshmi** Reddy] was passionate in seeking to abolish the system of devadasi dedication in temples; the doctor and another player [E.Krishna Iyer] fought [back to back, on the stage!] over the issue [resulting in the latter being thrown literally off the stage]; dance was about to 'die a silent **death**' when it was rescued by Rukmini Devi who brought about its renaissance, first by learning the art after watching two devadasi-s performing it, then by excelling in it, and finally by establishing Kalakshetra. (Mayakoothan II 10)

After such insults, what forgiveness?

22. In the visual realization of mythological narratives, Kalakshetra had models that had already captured the Indian imagination: Thanjavur paintings, which were sometimes an explicit point of reference for the tableaux on the stage; the **mythological** paintings and oleographs of Ravi **Varma**. The frontal tableaux and **stage-composition** of the dance-dramas clearly bore traces of the influence of the visual arts, even

down to the tasteful ceremonial umbrellas and cloth-covered thrones.

23. One dance enthusiast of the generation that watched devadasi performers informed me that the dancer would frequently chew vethalai (betel leaves) while performing, and interrupt her performances to spit out the juice to one side, or, occasionally, on a member of the audience with whom she had reason to be annoyed. My own master, Kittappa Pillai, thinks nothing of taking such vethalai breaks, making casual comments on the stage, or ruining the 'finished' effect of a performance by asking the dancer to repeat a failed theermanam (a set piece where danced steps and spoken syllables have to be co-ordinated) on stage.

24. Though Rukmini Devi was known to advise her students not to adopt a 'scientific' approach to dance, and though by and large her own creative efforts relied heavily on her intuition, she was also conscious of making bharatanatyam more 'rational' than sadir, both at the level of individual movements and at the level of finished choreography.

25. The version she saw (Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji) was performed in the Brihadeeswara temple at Thanjavur, and was scripted by one of Meenakshisundaram's ancestors in honour of the Maratha king Serfoji II. Rukmini professed herself uninterested in this version, since it was written in praise of a mortal king, and not of a deity; as such, it was not an effective vehicle for the exhibiting of India's 'spiritual' past.

26. In 1952, Balasaraswati played the kuravanji in a production of the Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji. staged at the Tamil Isai Sangam.

27. A.S. Altekar expresses his agitation, in his famous Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, over the "phenomenon of women appearing without any clothing over the upper person in the sculptures and paintings of Central and South India" (283). He ventures various explanations: perhaps the sculptors were not skilful enough to represent the upper garment? Perhaps the women are in their private apartments? Perhaps the sculptures represent Dravidian culture? Perhaps it is an artistic convention, excusable because women were to be considered clothed in the sanctity of their motherhood? Only dancing girls would not have the sanctity of motherhood as protection, he concludes. "As a consequence we usually find dancing girls appearing with a full dress covering their entire person from their necks to their ankles" (289).

28. The brothers were the ancestors of Rukmini's dance guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai; the latter's grandson, Kittappa Pillai, happens to be my master.

29. This notion has so passed into popular history that the than President Venkataraman could echo it in 1987: "In the realm of dancing... Bharatanatyam had existed for centuries but as a form that had lost the pedestal on which Bharata had placed it. It had fallen so low as to be regarded as an accomplishment of only Devadasis" ("President's Address").

30. In this context, see Geta Kapur's argument about the centrality and nationalist overtones of the iconic presentation of the main character in the Damle-Fattelal films, especially in Sant Tukaram, in "Revelation and Doubt".

31. The padam is in the ragam Begada, Misra Chapu talam, and was composed by Subbarama Iyer. I have translated the sahityam as follows:

1. Why should I be afraid of anyone?

Let them talk; is this [relationship] a secret? Let them talk'

2. Victor in war, my Lingadurai; having won his favour,
am I not lucky, my friend?

4. I have consented [to take him as lover], why should other people grudge me this? And once I have entry into the palace, who will say anything to block me? Woman, would one ride on an elephant's back and then creep in by the bylanes and back-gates? Indeed! I sought this handsome lord (purushan) and won [became united with] him; what have I done that is wrong, that makes people whisper enviously about me in the middle of the street?

The tone is one of defiance and pride, not at all one of anxiety.

32. This padam is set in the ragam Saranga, to Atatalam, and was composed by Subbarama Iyer.

33. This revival took place in 1932: see "Notes and Comments," Journal of the Music Academy Madras 3.1 (1932), 181.

34. See Freud, "Character and Anal Erotism," for instance; and Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death, especially the chapters on Martin Luther and Jonathan Swift. This kind of thinking, especially Brown's, is, of course, not very fashionable in the present intellectual climate, tied up theoretically as it is with an un-Foucauldian repression theory and historically with the mood of the Sixties and sexual liberation. Nevertheless, I find it a useful and at any rate an interesting way of explaining the acute anxiety about money in relation to women and the persistent imagery of dirt that went along with this in the anti-nautch discourse.

35. See, for instance, the huge commercial success of Ravi Varma's painting and oleograph studio: commercial success was not incompatible with religious feeling in the field of calendar production.

36. In her lecture "Indian Women," for instance, Besant deplors the attempt to make Indian women more assertive or more like western women:

One might as well picture Savitri in a divorce court, or Sita suing the cobbler for damages in a libel **suit**...**We** have women enough who are brilliantly intellectual and competent; let us leave **unmarred** the one type which is the incarnation of spiritual beauty. (113)

37. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival" 1874. There is very little information on **Rukmini** Devi's messianic role, though Krishnamurti's became subject of a full blown controversy in 1911.

38. One might contrast Rukmini Devi's style of activism with that of the Indian People's Theatre Association, for instance, to arrive at a sense of the various **possibilities** that a revival of bharatanatyam could not explore. See, in this context, Malini Bhattacharya, "Indian People's Theatre Association: A Preliminary Sketch."

39. Heidegger in "The Origin of the Work of Art" uses this as shorthand for the setting up of complex interactions between art-work, the 'earth' or material out of which it is made, and the 'world,' with which he suggests it is in a state of constant striving: the 'truth' that we perceive emerging in the very process of this unresolved striving.

40. See the ethnographic work of Saskia **Kersenboom-Story**, for instance, or the experiments made by Avanti Meduri in Chicago; or the radical choreographic efforts of Chandralekha or **Mallika Sarabhai**.