

PREFACE

I have, in the first chapter of this thesis, offered what I hope are fairly respectable reasons for researching bharatanatyam in an English department. In the extra-mural space of this preface, it may be freely confessed that I also had an intensely personal reason for doing this: merely the fact that I have been involved with bharatanatyam as student, performer, teacher and now researcher, for some twenty years, and that is more than two thirds of my life. Dance has always claimed my primary loyalty, and if I have thought of myself as 'belonging' in any community, it has been in the community of traditional performers. This is a sense of location rather than a full identity; what with English education and a certain commitment to a 'modern,' non-hierarchical lifestyle, I was already too alienated a subject to feel entirely at home in the world my dance master inhabits.

This world has always offered serious temptations, however, largely because of the kind of person my master is. Thanjavur K.P. Kittappa Pillai has studied, written about and taught dance for most of his eighty five years. Kittappa is no naif, no one-dimensional figure who expresses the sweet simplicity of a pre-modern pastoral existence. He is, for **example**, as familiar with the interiors of international jet aircraft as the most up-to-date high-flying academic, his last two tours abroad being in Canada and Greece. But he can take 'modernity' or leave it; on the whole, he prefers to leave it. About eight years ago, his students spent the night around a radio set, waiting for the announcement of the names of those aboard the Kanishka from Canada that had crashed into the sea, because we knew he had been booked on that flight. It turned out that the mridangam vidwan had got lost on his way to the airport at the Canada end: Kittappa ruled out the idea of travelling without him, because it was discourteous ("we went as a group, we must come back as a group") and because the mridangist was particularly incapable of coping on his own **with** the protocols of **international** travel. At the expense of convenience, time and money, **Kittappa's** troupe had been rebooked on the next flight.

That is not a moral story. Its **significance**, for the purposes of explaining this thesis, is that Kittappa has been resolutely recalcitrant from the point of view of all those who have tried to modernize him: the government, the bureaucratic networks of art-promoters, dance '**connoisseurs**,' dancers who wanted a quick six-month bharatanatyam fix. But modernity's minions invariably misread his serene (and frequently, his ferociously witty) **evasion** of their demands. I have cooperated in an entirely grudging way with the efforts of 'senior' brahmin dancers, appointed by some government institution on a gross salary, to wring his knowledge out of him under duress, or to capture his five-century old familial heritage on some spools of tape. The barely disguised contempt these **dancers**--some of them his own students--displayed towards Kittappa was inexplicable to me then; now, with a better sense of the history of the brahmin encounter with the isai vellalar community, I know that contempt for what it is: a product of the merging of a poisonous upper caste bigotry and a distinctly modern bureaucratic rationality.

So my Ph.D. project had its origin in one of the many fits of outrage I felt on Kittappa's behalf, and on behalf of other isai vellalar teachers I knew and respected: the late T. Brinda, who taught me music for some years; T. **Balasaraswati**, whose student **Shyamala** taught me abhinayam. It also tapped into my feeling that the vitality of the dance was being choked out of it by the conventions and silly affectations that marked it as a brahmin practice. My project was sustained by a faith in the efficacy of theory: perhaps if I could understand what was wrong with the present **practice** of the dance, and why it was wrong, I might be able to connect up, through filaments of recovered history, with the richer and infinitely more interesting practices of the dancers of the past.

I am sure there will be those who still do not feel that all this adds up to a convincing reason for researching dance in an English department. But even the most resolute critic of cultural studies must have noticed the number of people of his or her acquaintance, in India, who '**do**' English **professionally** but 'really are,' deep down, something else: activists, advertising **experts**, artists, break **dancers**, Carnatic **musicians**, coffee planters, cricketers, educationists, folk singers,

feminists, film makers, gays, gurus, jazz enthusiasts, journalists, nature lovers, performers, poets, priests, social workers, translators, travellers, to compile a **Borgesian** list from within my narrow circle of acquaintance. No one wants to define his or her essence exclusively in terms of academic work in English; to do so makes them feel ghostly and irrelevant when they go home to their families or when they share their pleasures with their peers. English all by itself is too alien, too closely identified with modernity, **and** modernity, after all, is something even people in English departments are ambivalent about. This ambivalence is what cultural studies captures and transforms into what can sometimes be genuinely engaged interpretation, **with** genuinely fascinating results: which may be reason enough to take cultural studies seriously.

NOTES ON DEVADASI, SADIR AND BHARATANATYAM

The origin of the practice of dedicating young girls to temples has been matter for wild speculation; the theories advanced have suggested everything from a nun-like order to tantric rites in which the devadasis tested the ascetism of their male sexual partners. For my purposes in this thesis, it is enough to note that the practice was widely prevalent long before the Saivite revivalists of the sixth century, in what is now Tamil Nadu, established offerings of dance or music by women as standard features of Hindu temple worship. Epigraphic evidence from this period onwards suggests that devadasis were wealthy, honoured and important members of the Hindu community.

The word devadasi literally translates as 'slave of god,' which is not a particularly appropriate capturing of what it implies. I am not sure why this word has come to be the generic term for women of this group; as is usual with such standardized usages, the reason **may** be sought, no doubt, in some colonial Census Report, which in turn no doubt reflected some colonial official's oscillation between moralism and fascination with the otherness of this community. Devadasis were known by many names in South India, names either specific to the region (for example, soole, nayakasani, or patra in what is now Karnataka; thevaradiyal in what is now Tamil Nadu; bhogam and saani in Andhra Pradesh) or specific to the tasks they performed (ganika, rudrakannikai . and so on). Devadasis came from many middle-level castes like the Nattuvan and the Melakkarar (castes whose male members were usually musicians or music and dance teachers), the Sengunthar and the Mudaliar. Early in this century, as part of a consciousness-raising exercise, these castes gave themselves, in Tamil Nadu, the designation isai vellalar (cultivators of the art of music) and in Andhra, kalavanthulu (artists).

The devadasis. it has been noted by many commentators, speak of themselves as following a murai or a way of life, rather than as belonging to a specific caste: i.e., their identity is conferred on them more by their practices, than by their birth. Dedication to a deity in a ceremony called, in Tamil Nadu, 'pottukattu' committed them in childhood to rigorous apprenticeship under a nattuvanar guru or a music teacher. They

became accomplished performers, their services being required in temples for tasks like the holding of the chamaram or ceremonial fan in temple processions, the carrying of hand-lamps, the weaving of garlands, and the kumbha-arathi (the ceremonial waving of the pot-lamp).

Dance and music, both contributions of the devadasis, were among the upacharas, ways of honouring the deity. The devadasis had special ritual dances to perform during festival cycles in the temple. In return for their services to the temples, devadasis and their families held tenure over lands (maniams) granted by the temples (or had rights to the produce of that land, or to its monetary equivalent). Usually, they were also entitled to cooked food from the temple kitchens, to free housing or housing sites near temples, and to provision for their training under nattuvanars. These entitlements could be taken for granted as long as successive generations could provide girls or women to perform the necessary services. Girl children were, **therefore**, prized by this community; talented girls meant, in addition to temple entitlements, the favour and patronage of private individuals and even of royal houses.

Devadasis also had secular roles. They were looked upon as nityasumangalis--women who were always **auspicious**--since they were wedded to the immortal deity of the temple; having special powers as a result of this bond with the deity, they mediated between ordinary mortals and fate itself, warding off bad luck, performing a range of tasks at private functions and during rites of passage. For instance, it was considered lucky if a bride's thali was strung by a devadasi, or if members of her community sang or danced at weddings. Such documentary evidence as we have suggests that devadasis were held in high esteem. Special honours were granted to them in their lifetimes and when they died, their spouse-deities went into mourning.

Sadir existed as a continuum from the '**possessed**' dancing of **cultic** significance to the ritual dancing in temples, from the celebratory dancing on secular occasions, to the sophisticated practice of the court dancer. In the period under study here, sadir was danced by devadasis in both sacred and secular spaces. In the 19th century, the nattuvanar brothers **Ponniah**, Chinnaiah, **Sivanandam** and Vadivelu adapted sadir for

the court-stage and set up its 'concert' format in the Maratha court at **Thanjavur**.

Sadir was also called dasiattam, and karnatakam; since it used the 'small **drum**' orchestra (which included the 'softer' instruments like the mridangam, the veena and the clarinet) it was called chinnamelam, as opposed to periamelam. the orchestra that usually got outdoor engagements and included instruments like the nadaswaram and the tavil.

By the 1920s, sadir had fallen into disrepute, most of its traditional performers either preferring or driven to marry 'respectably' or to use their talents in other professions. (Many of them turned to acting and singing for the newly created cinema industry.) Some version of the term bharatanatyam seems to have been 'officially' used for the first time in the early 1930s by members of the Music Academy of Madras, as part of an attempt to restore dignity and **acceptability** to the dying dance form. **Rukmini Devi Arundale**, who, along with a number of brahmin women, began to learn and perform sadir in the late 1930s, preferred to call the form Bharata Natya; in the text of my thesis, however, I have used the more current version of the term (bharatanatyam) except when referring explicitly to Rukmini Devi's usage.