
THE GENDERED BODY: GENDER POLITICS AROUND THE DANCER'S BODY

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Abstract: The dancing bells around the feet, the controlled passion in expression through agile body movements, the facial gestures and artistic gesticulation of the body dressed in various elaborate styles of dressing and ornamentation; set the stage for the Indian scenario of dance in its space of storytelling, through the ages. Deeply influenced by the Hindu mythology and rich cultural connotations of the land of myriad language and colours, the stage of the Indian dance forms, in the various structures of the classical and the folk dances of India, brings together a rich history in its numerous narratives. The history of these dances however could form another story in itself, carved out of a very complex space of various politics of power, gender and culture that directly have influenced the breathing space of the dancing body.

This paper will look into the politics that have influenced the space of the dance platforms, through time since the earliest centuries of the history of Indian dance. The *Devdasis*, or the temple dancers seen all over the temple sculptures at Tanjavur, Cholaapuram, the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai, the Nataraja Temple at Chidambaram all over South India and in the temple works of Orissa, makes one think of the patronage the dancers in the temples have received. However, the *Devdasis* were thought to be married to God and were to remain eternally in service of the Lord in the Sanctum Sanctorum of the temple space which often involved dancing and singing in honour of the gods. The temple dancers of South India and of Orissa were preferably women and the male dancer was not welcome into the devotional life. The 'devdasis' often called 'rajdasis' or 'alankaradasis' were mainly the beautifully dressed performers at social functions, whereas the male dancers were limited to the social and celebratory space only, outside the temple. This divide made the men the musicians or gurus, and the women the 'dasis' in the temples. She was however below respectable social standards, no matter if dancing be a choice and passion, or any kind of compulsion. Similarly, the 'gotipuas' of Orissa, who are male dancers dressed as girls had to leave the temple premises once they started to become mature men to become performers, and gurus outside the temple. However the holiness of the temple kept the woman dancer caught within the folds of the temple space, as did the 'maharis' or the female dancers at the Orissa temples. As has the honour of the woman in ancient Hindu society been conformed to her limitations by the Brahmanical texts, so has she remained in all other spaces, misconstrued and misinterpreted.

The tradition of dancing in the Kathak gharanas again held the power in the hands of the male performers who were rooted in the Brahmin activities of story-telling at the temples, and female dancers were too few in number, until the Mughal era. This paper will thus focus on the various representations of gender power relations in dance forms of India, tracing it through various Indian Classical Dance forms like Bharatnatyam, Odissi, Kathak and Kuchipudi. The influence of Yakshagana tradition on *raj nartaki* and Nandikeswar's classification of the kinds of *nayak* and *nayika* gendering the space of dance will also be looked into.

Keywords: devdasis, gotipua, mahari, Nandikeswar's nayika bhed, Yakshagana.

Introduction: Indian dance forms are an innate part of our diverse, rich and mesmerizing cultural history. It is however really interesting to note how the politicizing of gender roles has always greatly affected the stage of the female and male dancer differently. The feminine and masculine spaces in the world of dance have brought up and created their own instances of unanswered and silenced questions. Situated in a male-dominated system, the body of the female dancer has been intrinsically related to the construction of gender politics. Throughout history, the body and the gendered space have often limited the scope of growth and social stature of performers and performances as themselves. Dance has much been seen as an Art form in the light of the female body. The female body is what has primarily defined a female dancer and the consecutive gender spaces in

dance. Much like the historian Altekar and his justification of Hindu women's importance in society through an intelligent validation and establishment of her restrictions at and outside home, most politics have brought up practices that could in the grab of grandeur and splendour hide covert intentions of the rule makers. Brahminical Hinduism and Colonial rule in India have altered and defined these spaces further throughout history, which has politicized the very space of dance and certainly the lives of the performers.

The division on the stage of dance between what is theoretically 'male' and 'female' has been an ancient one, and quite definitive in our ancient dance texts. Bharatmuni's *Natyasashtra* and Nandikeswara's *Abhinaya Darpana* have remained two of the most interesting texts related to dance, in our Sashtras.

Classical Indian Dance narratives greatly revolve around the Mahabharata, Ramayana, the Life of Sri Krishna and various instances from Hindu Mythology which sorted out the male and the female characters to present and uphold through performance and expression, very distinct roles. One very interesting discussion that can offer a peep into the importance given to feminine grace and the mandatory paraphernalia is Nandikeshwar's *Nayikaveda*. We can understand how deeply prejudiced the functioning of the female body on stage is and how that has been used to stereotype gender roles simultaneously.. The female dancers are characters who never quite exist as essential selves; as their essentiality of femininity, femaleness and grace is unquestionably put much in relation to the man, the *nayaka* or the male that she entertains or accompanies. The female characters/*nayikas* are majorly divided into three categories- the *Swakiya*, *Porokiya* and *Samanya*. The traits of a *Swakiya nayika* entail the grace of a timid, shy woman who is attractive and dedicated to her husband. The *Porokiya nayika* as the name suggests is a transgressor as far as relationships are concerned. The *Samanya nayika* brings together, in further categorization, what would probably still be seen as the negativities in the female character. She is adamant, audacious, jealous, hurt and angry when deceived, or wilfully and not ignorantly enchanting. She uses her means, resources and her wit to beguile. This hypnotic, captivating and vehemently expressive woman who has very little 'passivity' is but the third category whose innate and inherent nature of having an impassive 'self' is not seen in very positive light. All the three categories however are active, passive, and reactive or non- reactive in relation to the 'man'. The captivating female dancer in different traditions, cultures, and dance forms has a long history behind her. Her presence on stage marks a history more complicated and intense than one can imagine while sitting back and enjoying a performance. The 'politics' inherently present in gender division and distinction is uncomfortably hidden in the space of the dance narratives.

One can begin with a look into the lives and cultural practices of the 'temple dancers' who were known by different names in different parts of India, and surrounding whom consequent dance forms in the temples evolved.

The 'female dancer' in the Bharatnatyam and Odissi dance forms evidently came up from the '*devdasi*' culture- culture that dedicated women dancers to the service of God in the temples.

She became enslaved in the boundary of the temple, and an entertainer locked in the folds of God, Religion and the Royal Court. Catherine Kermorgant writes,

"In the Vedas, fertility, dance and prostitution are closely intertwined- conversation hymns, designed to bring rains, entailed special ritual performances by dancers and prostitutes. The 'Mahavrata' fertility rite calls for ritual intercourse with a prostitute.... Prostitutes, like the *devdasis* today, were considered auspicious and associated with the fertility of the land."

No honour however was ever bestowed upon them, as an insightful reading of history will suggest.

Bharatnatyam is a name the dance form acquired much later. To begin with, it was called '*dasiattam*'- the dance of the servants/*devotees/dasis*.

Dasiattam got the dancers as girls to be dedicated to the services of the temple and the gods. The ritualistic dedication took children of the *devdasis* into the fold of temple service since the tender age of three or four. The girls were 'sacrificed' by the parents to earn the goodwill and blessings of the resident God/Goddess. It was compulsion and fear. Very few women came to become a *devdasi* out of her free will. The girls were trained in a rich extent of arts by the gurus to come to the ripe age that would be followed by '*arengetrum*' - the first public show of her dance, which would then completely involve her into the *devdasi* culture and tradition, or rather serve to be the official marker of the beginning of her endless lifetime of plight. The '*arengetrum*' brings out a more stark reality woven intricately and subtly into the ceremonious richness, splendour and show of magnificence. It is the most coveted politicized space of the male-dominated system, the space of the woman commodified. Kermorgant writes in *Servants of the Goddess*,

"A young *devdasi's* *arungetram*, her debut dance performance before the deity, took place after her first menses and signalled her availability for a sexual liaison. Deflowering a *devadasi* was a matter of great prestige. Sexual desire was seen as a manifestation of divine presence; a *devadasi's* dance was believed to stimulate the cosmic energy within man. As the erotic sculptural relief on temples around Indis show, the joy of sexual union was seen as a paradigm for religious ecstasy. Men believed that having intercourse with a *devadasi*, an act of purification, would lead to celestial bliss; *devadasis* were taught that it was their *dharma*, their sacred duty, to provide sexual services to male devotees,"

The temples competed among themselves in pride of displaying the beautiful *devdasis* who could then be bidden for by the men. It was so preached that the sexual union with a *devdasi* was an act of holy purification for a man, while serving them was part of the *devdasis'* 'godly' and 'elevated' duties.' The elevated, holy *devdasis* were thus earners of expensive gifts, riches, fame and money for the temples, in the

name of service rendered. They were the cultured women, the greatly patronized dancers, who were married to God for a lifetime which meant they would never have to go through the misery of being widowed and thus were offered the great duty of purifying men and entertaining them, as part of their service to the world.

The 'sacred prostitution' that various temple dancers had to choose as living, ostracized them out of all respectable and honourable places in society. They were the beautiful, cultured, splendid entertainers who after God were servants of the Kings, Brahmins and Men. The ones they entertained were the ones who demeaned their social status, reducing them to commodities possessed by the Brahmins or Royal brands. In pre-colonial India, they were branded on the chests with symbols that denoted whether they belonged to the Kings or The Brahmin priests who considered themselves representatives of God on Earth that naturally should have entitled them to all the things that belonged to God, or the service of God, beginning with the beautiful and talented *Devdasis*.

The male dancers were not considered to be holy and thus could not remain within the temple space. As sons of *devdasis*, they got training to become gurus and performers outside the temple, whereas the daughters of the *devdasis*, one daughter of each *devdasi* was to be dedicated, sacrificed to continue her mother's holy tradition that had neither earned her mother nor would earn her and any honour in the society. The Devdasi tradition was greatly patronized by many kings and rulers which can be seen in the names and sculptures of the *devdasis* inscribed on the temple walls at the sites of various Indian architectural brilliance.

In pre-colonial India, the *dasis* were divided into various categories with evolving patterns, of social and economic systems around them—the *Rajdasis* (ones who danced in the Royal courts/court entertainers), the *Alankaradasis* (danced at social functions and weddings) and the *Devdasis* (dancers at the temple) namely. They were used as desired and labelled as the Royal Court, Religion or System needed or required. Shovana Narayan says how in colonial India, 'devdasis' became "synonymous with temple prostitution and, therefore the practice was banned by Government Legislation."

Dance was taken away from the *devdasis*, the dance forms that they had protected till the twentieth century was taken away from them and they were completely excluded from the culture and society.

It can thus be seen how the holiness of the female temple dancer and unholy status of the male dancer proved to be advantageous to the growth of the cultured system with the male heading. The female

dancers died as *dasis*, and the males were the honoured gurus. The 'man' as the performer and Guru became liberated from the folds of the temple to do the honourable task of spreading the culture of dance. However male dancers too have remained victims in many ways, strangely caught in the massive rigidity of femaleness and maleness in dance, which makes dance more a graceful entertainment that had been forced upon the women as their forte. Thus even today, the male dancer somewhere in the eyes of society steps down from his position of enjoying the masculine space in society to be a part of the woman's world of dance. He is a misfit there and unacknowledged in comparison to the 'lack' of the gracefulness a female dancer's body embodies and carries. Nevertheless, the guru is always the male in these traditions; he is the one who enlightens.

Along with 'maharis' or the female temple dancers were again the heritage in the rich temple traditions of Orissa, the tradition of young male dancers being trained in the art to perform in front of the crowd dressed as beautiful, graceful girls, was also well known. The 'gotipuas' as they are called, are trained in the art which they must leave behind after they start showing the signs of their sex, post puberty. They too became trainers or professional performers. Kathak, which was a temple dance form born in the North Indian belt, had begun with the male Brahmins as an oral narrative tradition which saw a tradition of male lineage. It had been born out of the practices of Hindu priests in temples who while giving sermons "entered into a state of rhapsody and started utilising song and dance as a ritual for working". Therefore Kathak had its roots in Male Brahminical Hinduism, into which only a few women temple dancers namely the 'kalavangtis' or 'bhagtans' were allowed. A new era of Kathak began with the Mughal Empire. It is heard that Jodhabai, the Hindu wife of Emperor Akbar was the first to bring in the Kathak dancing tradition into the Mughal court. In this the female dancers have been seen to be moved to the margins, after women started getting involved into the folds of the dance since then. The male gurus and performers have till date probably remained the most celebrated notion of this dance form.

Shovana Narayan, the famous Kathak dancer Shovana Narayan in her book *Indian Classical Dances* writes, "Misinterpretation of Kathak by the popular film world of Bombay has cast a dusty veil on the temple origin of the dance form and its hereditary Hindu Brahmin practitioners such as the great legendary artistes belonging to the Lucknow and Jaipur 'gaharanas' even during the Muslim period."

Though that is true, the culture of the courtesans as seen in the Bollywood interpretations has probably roots in silenced history too, that the fictionally

written lives such as *Umrao Jaan*(1981) and *Pakeezah*(1972) talk about.

The female dancer was used to define a culture space, or simply left out of it, and what she was used to define was what disowned her.

Changing gender domination however has been seen in some dance forms like Kuchipudi. The rise of the dance form Kuchipudi was formed with the influence and inculcation of the dance of the Devadasis, the Yakshagana tradition of dance from Karnataka and the court dancers. Kuchipudi like the Yakshagana tradition of dancing has shown a very interesting play of gender roles. Very bright, colourful and engaging dance forms, the classical and folk dance form have been extremely popular ones. In times of pre-Independence, these practices were essentially ones that were done by 'nomadic groups' contrary to the dance practices of temples or courts, and hence apparently the inclusion of female participants became difficult for them. The female characters and roles in Yakshagana folk tradition as well as in Kuchipudi had always been performed by male dancers.

Nowadays, these male artist centred dance forms are greatly being taken over by women learners and performers giving rise to many all women Yakshagana teams as well, who perform the dance as energetically, as vivaciously and as boldly, which is often the question posed to them, asking them how they manage to perform such an energetic male dance form.

The female dancer has thus always remained the 'other' in the garb of being the celebrated icon. She has been the paradigm of perfection, of beauty that could be socially ostracized as and when needed. At times she was the non-existent entity. She defined grace in dancing, kept dancing alive, but it all left her. Shovana Narayan writes that, "the task of sanitization of the newly re-christened Bharatnatyam, has been attributed chiefly to Rukmini Devi by dissociating the

devdasi's dance from erotic and overtly romantic overtones and making it more pristine and sombre."

It makes it clear how the classical dance forms in post-colonial India finally came into society to be taken up by 'respectable women; and not holy devdasis who meant nothing but pollution in the society. Though the dance forms have been saved, the devdasis were never rescued with the rebirth of the culture. Dance was in a way freed from the grasp of the dirt and filth, its image recuperated.

The politics on the stage of dance has thus been a growing and changing power that has controlled the definitions of gendered spaces within the stage of the Indian Dance Forms. The politics of dance have infiltrated Society, Religion, Systems, traditions, often putting them to proper use for division and distinction leading to discrimination and marginalization. The power equations have trickled down through ages to become a powerful net that has caught the dances in the constricted spaces such that they continue to influence the space of dance, even today. The gender politics have often needed redefinitions most alarmingly, and do so even today, to offer the deserved respect to a performer, beyond all gender constraints. Though dance today has become a celebrated art form, and for India, many of her dance forms are increasingly becoming nationally and internationally acclaimed. The gendered roles and manners however never cease to exist. A woman tapping her feet and moving her body to the sound of music among people will still not be seen as a very respectable one, while as a learner and performer of a classical form, she still might be. The opposite is probably truer for the man, whose practising some dance form is either considered path breaking, greatly valued in absence of more such male dancers, or else simply tagged 'effeminate.' Gendered spaces and manners have thus only got modified over years; and are still far from being broken down.

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