

# *Journey of Dance from Devdasi to Contemporary Cohort*

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Esteemed young girls of the Indian society who were dedicated towards the service of a deity or a temple for their entire lives were the ones who are known as Devdasi's. These Devdasi's had to perform a Pottukattu ceremony to dedicate themselves to a particular temple or deity, this ceremony was similar to a marriage ceremony. Their duties included taking care of the temple, performing rituals and practicing Indian Classical art traditions like dance and music, as they were an essential part of the temple traditions.

While analyzing the emergence of Devdasis's we come across two tales. One of them narrates us about the mythological origin while the other informs us about the practice of Devdasi being significant. The first one tells us that the birth of a Devdasi was attributed to sage Vishwamitra. He, when was not lured by the Apsaras of Indra's court, questioned Indra's definition of a beautiful Apsara and drew a picture of a beautiful maiden on his thigh with the help of the juice of a mango twig and from the picture emerged 'Urvashi'. Urvashi was supervised to bring music and dance into the world of humans. While the other one informs us that the great queens of Somavamshi Dynasty decided that in order to honor the gods, certain women who were trained in classical dancing or singing should be married to the deities and devote their entire life to them. This way these queens commenced the Devdasi tradition.

It is believed that the period of Devdasi in India is related to the destruction of the Buddha Period. The Devdasi's in the Buddha period were Buddha Bhikshus, these were insulted like prostitutes and illtreated. The end of Buddha dynasty proved fruitful to these bhikshus as the Brahmins lent a hand to them for their revival and got them engaged to the Temples. The major contribution to this tradition was given by King Vikram Aditya of Chalukya in the 12th century. The king built a temple named

'Chandralekha' and accumulated beautiful girls from different parts of the world and got them engaged in the Temple as Temple dancers. The girls having sculpted face, expressive eyes and elegantly pretty hands and feet were enrolled. Before they could take part in temple rituals they had to perform six prescribed ceremonies of dedication. These were – Marriage (Kalyanam), Dedication (Muttirai), Ritual first dance lesson, Presentation of the ankle bells (Gajjaipuja), The debut recital (Arangetram) and Selection of a patron. Further, their Education and discipline took place. They were imparted the knowledge of reading, writing, singing and dancing at a tender age of five or six. To face the audience and go live on stage, minimum three years of training was mandatory for them. Rigorous training in singing and dancing under skillful gurus were opted by them and they continued honing and practicing their art under the expert guidance of their Gurus for the rest of their lives. They were given great respect in the society as they underwent series of events in life to enhance their cultivation. In 1997, the Devdasi's used to stay in the empty areas around the temples, were given land and freed from the work of temple. Getting married was never an option for them, however some did opted for the same in the later years of their life, though they remained inconspicuous in people's eyes. The girl child who was born from a Devdasi's womb was authorised to carry forward the lineage, however, if the child was devoid of the adeptness required to be an efficient dancer, she could opt for a different field of her interest. A Devdasi could also settle on adopting a child to continue her genealogy. Devdasi's were known for bringing good luck in others life and thus were often called for religious chores. They were known for their cleanliness, modesty, dignity of deportment and civility of language. Upon the death of a Devdasi no puja was conducted in the temple, the dead body was burnt with the help of the fire-wood supplied from the Temple and after

the cremation, temple was purified after which the Deity was served a curry of bitter vegetables. In 19th century the Devdasi system was still prevailing in the southern part of India, however due to the Muslim invasion it was destroyed in the Northern part of India. The major Temples which had Devdasi system as a ritual were the Temples of Odisha, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

The ascent and fall in the status of Devdasi's can be believed to be running in correspondance with the ascent and fall of Hindu temples . The invasion on the Hindu Temples caused great suffering to their status. Subsequently, Devdasis were constrained into a life of poverty, misery and in many cases, prostitution.

The Thanjavur District had been blessed with the rule of the three great Hindu dynasties which are – The Cholas, The Nayakas and The Marathas. Their dedicated patronage had been the principle cause of the development of the performing arts, mainly music and dance. Under the patronage of these three dynasties, art witnessed an amalgamation of three cultures – Tamil (Cholas), Telugu (Nayaks) and Marathi (Marathas), which helped in the growth of art in various segments. The patronage of Chola Kings to art elevated the status of mere Devdasis to that of Rajadasis or royal courtesans. Along with the Temple dancers, the Court dancers too enjoyed high respect during this Period. During the Rajaraja Chola's period two types of dance forms originated based on languages, these were - 'Arya Kuttu', the dance performances rendered to the songs of Sanskrit language. 'Tamil Kuttu', the dance performances rendered to the songs of Tamil language. Thus, the Chola period proved to be the 'Golden Period' for all the budding and professional artists.

The Vijayanagara period saw a great increment linguistically. In the field of Tamil writing we can observe four striking improvements, we see a continuation of the custom of anthologisation and of picked up writing as various specialized works like language structures, etymologies, critiques on bardic writing and treatises on music and dance. Many written forms of folk or oral literature were brought to limelight during this period. Prabandha, a connected narrative began to be used quite widely and have demonstrated to be of tremendous significance for the arrangement of the Devdasi repertoire; it shows a comparable blend of antiquated traditional

Tamil creations, folk specimens, Sanskrit poems, acclaim sonnets and mankalams. About twelve thousand female artists were employed in the Kingdom. The royal residence dancers were held in incredible regard by the ruler as they were permitted to bite betle before him, which nobody else was allowed to do except these courtesans and wrestlers. Their artwork was greatly favoured

And extraordinary consideration was given to the preparation of dancers. A unique room for guidance was created inside the palace which contained boards that demonstrated the correct positions and bars which were utilized for the physical training of dancers. The court also hired a composer, Goppa Tippa, who composed a manual on dance.

The Kings of Nayak period were appreciable enthusiasts of literature and arts. They followed the golden age of the Chola Dynasty. King Raghunatha Nayak and his son Vijayaraghava Nayak were, apart from being the guardians of art, eminent and recognized royal artists in many works of dance, music and yaksagana compositions. Their rich guardianship evoked and intensified more lively artistic activities.

King Raghunatha penned the kavya 'Valmiki Charitra' in Telugu which highlights his extensive knowledge on dance theory. The work depicts the beautiful dances of the heavenly fairies – Urvashi and Rambha. Technical aspects of dance, such as Padabhedas and sarirabhinaya, which have been mentioned in previous scientific works on dance, are also dealt with in this work. His understanding and comprehensive knowledge of dance as an art can be seen with the insight with which he shows the smallest details and technical features of the dance.

King Vijayaraghava was an expert in the theory and practice of music and dance, as portrayed in his compositions of Yaksaganas. A prominent poet of his court 'Cengalvaka Kavi' wrote a beautiful prabandha 'Rajagopal Vilasamu' in Telugu which provides a complete picture of music, dance and literary activities of King Vijayaraghava's palace. Using five cantos, the author gave a vivid description of the Ras Lila of Krishna with the Ashtha Nayikas. He even recounted the palace of Vijay Vilas, decorated with literary banner 'Saradadhwaya',

which represents the ingenuity of King Vijayaraghava in the field of music, dance and literature. The work also states that the king sits on the throne with the 'Sahityarayapendera' dressing his ankles, watching the beautiful dance of the Palace dancers. The presence of various types of dance performed by most experienced dancers can be seen in his court. Numerous Madana and Dutya padas, Navaratna

Malika and other Lakshya Natyas are said to have performed by great artists in his court. In 'Prahlada Charitrayaksagana' the regal creator depicts the dance forms staged in the court of the demon King Hiranyakasipu by the court artists. We can see dance merged in a great part of King Vijayaraghava's work which highlights his fondness and love for the workmanship. After the decline of the Nayak rule, Thanjavur experienced another recognized dominion of Maratha Kingdom.

The Maratha Period proceeded with the heritage of the illustrious support to craftsmanship, dance and literary works comparable to their antecedents. The cultural traditions developed and peaked under the aegis of Marathas of Tanjore. However, Maratha rulers experienced marginal changes in their ownership. In almost every village, case of Brahmins and Vellalas were landowners and the productive forces such as slaves, serfs and tenants continued to support them through their hardwork and perseverance. They were held back in every possible way and their well-being was ignored. Their interests were rejected at the expense of local princes and idle classes such as Brahmins and courtiers. In their free time, with additional income and time in their hands, they created new pleasures and developed interest in dance, music and art traditions.

The protection and growth of the royal dance cumulated during the reign of Marathas. At the end of 18th century, the rulers of Tanjore became interested in 'Dasiattam'. The opening of a new era in the history of Caranatic vocal by Tyagaraja benefited Bharatanatyam and Bharatanatyam entered a stage of new power and perfection.

King Serfoji - II was a great patron of literature and arts. He encouraged numerous poets and scholars, he himself was an able scholar in almost all the disciplines.

He was a multilinguist and above all the architect of the internationally renowned library. This library consisted abundant amount of manuscripts, from which 'Natyaprabandha' included several dance numbers of Sadhir-attam which were popularly performed by accomplished dancers in his court. His erudite scholarship in the science of music and dance observable from several of his Nirupanas (solodancing). According to the contemporary records these Nirupanas were performed in court as well as in different temple festivals. The Dasiattam came to be known as Sadir when it was performed in court. The Trinity of South Indian music and The Tanjore Quartette lived at Tanjore during his reign. These brothers of the Tanjore Quartet properly modelled and planned a systemized structure for Sadir dance. They performed the style in a modern way. The women of family learnt the art from Raja Nartakis during his reign, his two daughters were said to have been accomplished Sadhir dancers. The Raj Nartaki's resided in the palace itself and were given prior intimation regarding their performances in the court. The dances were regularly enacted in Darbar Hall and Sangita Mahal. These meritorious court dancers in addition to their monthly salaries were given presents by the King as a token of appreciation, immediately after their performance. However, there were guidelines made for the artists which were to be carefully followed by them at the hour of leading the dance in the court. These guidelines were applicable for dancers, dance instructors as well as Nattuvanars. All of these proves that Lord Serfoji - II was a dynamo, electrifying the whole aesthetic universe of Tanjore during his period.

The extension of British rule led to the emergence of petit middle class which was impacted by the western thoughts. These, without understanding the source and nature of the Indian dance craftsmanship, confused it with the portrayal of sensual sanctuary figures and denounced it as horrendous and indecent. They saw no difference between a cultivated proficient Devdasi and a typical prostitute, naming both as fallen ladies. Thus, the influence of the Britishers led to the declination of the Devdasi tradition. The launch of Anti-Nautch Movement not only eradicated the system but the art itself. The Classical dance of South India was almost wiped out by the first quarter of 20th century.

The Social Reform Movement took place and post reform dance no more lived in an intimate space with its audience as it was permanently institutionalised and moved into a proscenium space. The objective of this movement was to change and revamp the whole 'cultural world of performances'. This replacement of an old cultural world with a new one involved replacing all intimate spaces of performance with the modern proscenium stage. The new Bharatanatyam was experienced frontally by the audience for the first time when Rukmini Devi Arundale performed in the Theosophical Society. However, bringing dance into a proscenium required the revivalists to re-imagine the form in a frontal format and hence dance went through a period of rigorous experimentation. Drawing from Russian ballet, Rukmini studied and recast the Bharathanatyam body to suit a frontal format. However, creating a distance between the dancer and the audience, making changes to the geometry of the form, staging Bhakti as devotion without desire were all more than aesthetic choices. It was a part of giving the classical dance a new identity by making it a respectable pursuit and by dissociating it from the stigma of a devadasi.

Today, with the varied kind of performance spaces emerging, the classical dance is spilling out of auditorium spaces prompting the dancers to re-imagine their visual aesthetic and their relationship with the audience.

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