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Hints Of Devadasis And Origins Of Bharathanatyam

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Abstract: In south India the dancers, dance teachers and musicians of the *Isai Vellala* community constitute a distinctive group of hereditary performing artists. For those who worked in temples as well as riyal courts. This group was divided into the *Periya melam* and *Sinna melam*. The distinction centered on the type of instruments they played and whether they accompanied dance. The women dancers were called as *Devadasis*. The dancers also belonged to *Isai vella* community. So they undertook many functions until the late 19th century of a public campaign to abolish the institution of *Devadasis* ,which ended in 1947 with the passing of the Devadasi bill.

Key words: Devasis, Isai Vellala, Periya melam & Sinna melam, Temple girls, Pottu Kattuthal, Nityasumangali,

INTRODUCTION:

Dance in traditional Indian culture permeated all facets of life. Its outstanding function was to give symbolic expression to abstract religious concepts. The close relationship between dance and religion, particularly as a philosophical metaphor, began very early in Hindu thought. There are numerous references to dance which include descriptions of its performance in both religious and secular contexts. As traditional Indian society has never clearly demarcated secular from religious activity, it is difficult to ascertain in which situation dance may have originated. For this and other reasons, there continues to be ambiguity surrounding the secular and religious components of the dance tradition.

The earliest references to dance and dancers in the *Rg Veda* and early legal texts such as the Laws of Manu and the *Arthasastra*, stress its secular function. The metaphor in the *Rg Veda*, of dawn as a dancing girl putting on her ornaments (*Rg Veda* 1.92) is devoid of any link between dance and religious activity. The Laws of Manu provide for rules to curb dancers in a secular setting and make no mention of a possible religious association. The king is advised: "Gamblers, dancers and singers—let him instantly banish them from his town" (Manu IX. 222). The advice seems to have been largely ignored. Dancers were often given a respected place in society on account of their accomplishments.

Another source of information is theatrical plays written during the classical period. Many of them include a dancer as one of the main characters and provide further information about the social position of dancers in both temples and royal courts. Kalidasa (5th century AD), who lived in Ujjain, describes the dancers in the Mahakala temple during the evening worship of Siva: "The temple girls' cinctures tinkling with the dance steps, their hands weary with the yak-tail fans"1. In his play *Mallavikagnimitra*, Kalidasa describes the dance of the courtesan Mallavika in the royal court. We may therefore surmise that as early as the fifth century dance took place in both temples and courts. The dual role of dance is also described in the religious chronicles (*puranas*), several of which recommend dedicating girls to temples[2].

Royal Courts

Dancers were important adornments to a royal court, where the king assumed godlike powers. Certain ceremonial activities were performed by dancers, such as holding the royal umbrella and fanning the royal couple with yak-tail fans. They were also present at state occasions such as royal consecrations[3]. The same ceremony was accorded to a king as to the god in the temple. In fact temple ritual was modeled on court ritual. The religious power vested in the king empowered him to transfer *devadasis* to religious duties or to call *devadasis* for secular activities. It is recorded of King Jalauka of Kashmir that: "A hundred out of his seraglio, who had risen to dance (in honour of the god) at the time fixed for dancing and singing, he gave out of joy to Siva"[4].This practice was not restricted to Hindu rulers.

Dancers enhanced the king's prestige. This was why, in the eleventh century, the ruler of Tanjore, King Rajendra I, ordered four hundred temple dancers to be brought from nearby temples to be attached to the Brihadisvara temple in Tanjore, which was the main temple in his kingdom[5]. The inscription recorded the event names all the temples, both Saivite and Vaishnavite, that had dancers attached to them[6]. The centralizing of the dance tradition around the city of Tanjore made it a focus of culture in South India. Many musicians and dancers received generous patronage over many generations from the Tanjore court, as well as the Brihadisvara and other temples in the town of Tanjore. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the

climate was ripe for the Tanjore court to support the four poet-musicians, now known as the Tanjore Quartette. They came from a hereditary family of musicians and dance teachers and it is their musical and dance compositions that have had the greatest effect upon the Bharatanatyam repertoire as we see it today. Without patronage, either by rulers or temples, the professional dancers (*devadasis or devaradiyar*), dance teachers and musicians could not have developed the art to the high standard that it achieved. The influence of the Tanjore rulers for several centuries was extensive. For example, in the eleventh century the Chola king Vira Rajendra (1063-1070), "ordered some land at Tiruvotriyur to be reclaimed and the produce used for services in the temples including ... maintenance ... of dancing masters and girls"[7].

Context of the Dance

When the dance was a hereditary profession, the *devadasis* had a well-defined and important role in society. The most important validation ceremony for the *devadasi* who danced as part of temple ritual was to be formally married and dedicated to the temple deity or to a ritual object (*kalyanam*). This usually took place before puberty and allowed her to dance as part of temple ceremonies and celebrations. For the *devadasi* who danced in temples her marriage and dedication to a deity ranked as a more important qualification than her dancing ability.

There were six prescribed ceremonies of dedication before *devadasis* could take part in temple ritual, marriage (*kalyanam*); dedication (*muttirai*); ritual first dance lesson8; the presentation of ankle bells (*gejjaipuja*); the debut recital (*arangetram*) after the completion of dance training; and the selection of a patron[9]. All six ceremonies were supposed to be completed, at the latest, just after the first menstrual cycle. There were, however, exceptions in practice.

The Madras legislative debates of 1922 on the abolition of the *devadasi* system describe the qualification for the marriage ceremony, "Above the age of sixteen the religious tenets prohibit their enrolment. A girl to be dedicated according to the rules observed from time immemorial must be a virgin ... no temple authority would think of dedicating a girl above fourteen". But in the same debate it was also pointed out that there was no scriptural basis for this tradition[10].

In the 1920s, interim legislation was passed forbidding the dedication of minors. This meant that if a girl were to be dedicated before puberty some other type of ceremony had to be devised. The need for dedication before puberty was a very real concern for the *isai vellala* community who introduced a practice known euphemistically as "the Rose Garland Ceremony" (*rojapumala*i). This consisted of a rose garland, with the symbol of marriage, the *pottu*, hidden in it, being placed around the neck of the young girl to be dedicated. Dedication continued, usually in secret from the authorities, but with the knowledge of the temple authorities and the local townsfolk and villagers[11]. The rose garland ceremony was not universal and girls were still being openly dedicated. The age of dedication also varied.

The several women, who had been dedicated in the normal way, even in the 1920s and 30s. One of them, T. Rajalakshmi, remembered her dedication to the deity in the *Mahalingesvara* temple in 1928-1929 in the village of Tiruvidaimarudur, when she was eleven or twelve years of age she says that, "Yes, yes, that is the tradition. I was dedicated to the god. It was called *pottukattu*"[12].

Because the Lord was her husband, the *devadasi* was always auspicious (*nityasumangali*). Hence, one of her important duties was to perform the *arati* ceremony.

A lamp made of kneaded rice-flour is placed on a metal dish or plate. It is then filled with oil or liquefied ghee and lighted. The women each take hold of the plate in turn and raise it to the level of the person's head for whom this ceremony is being performed, describing a specified number of circles with it[13].

The *arati* ceremony was important as part of religious ritual in the temples: "After the dancing-girls have finished all their other duties in the temple, they never fail to perform this ceremony twice daily over the images of the gods to whom their services are dedicated"[14]. It was also performed outside the temples. "It is performed with even more solemnity when these idols have been carried in procession through the streets, so as to turn aside malignant influences, to which the gods are as susceptible as any ordinary mortal"[15].

This ceremony was widespread and was performed both publicly and privately, It is performed daily, and often several times a day, over persons of high rank such as rajahs, governors of provinces, generals and other distinguished members of society. Whenever people in these positions have been obliged to show themselves in public or speak to strangers, they invariably call for the courtesans or dancing girls from the temples to perform this ceremony over them, and so avert any baleful glances to which they have been exposed[16].

The importance of *arati* in the secular world cannot be underestimated: "Kings and princes often have dancing girls in their employ who do nothing else but perform this ceremony"[17]. Only married women, whose husbands were still alive, and *devadasis* were permitted to perform this ceremony. A 'pot' could take the place of the lamp. "Instead of using a lighted lamp they sometimes content themselves with filling a vessel with water *coloured* with saffron, vermilion and other ingredients"[18]. As the embodiment of auspiciousness, the presence of a *devadasi* was important at marriages. As a *Das*i she can never become a widow.

The account of a dance teacher from a hereditary family confirms the erotic nature of the *devadasis*' activities during wedding celebrations in the 1920s and 30s, "Being a *dasi* was not something to be proud of as a little licence was taken with them. For example during the marriage celebrations she was called upon to put sandal paste on the bridegroom. This was made compulsory and no-one liked to do this."

Dance as part of the ritual in divine worship was listed as fifteenth in the sixteen acts of *honour* and homage paid to deities.[19] An inscription dating to the reign of *Kulottunga* III established that there was a time-table for the presentation of dance and the dancers took turns, "the

assignment of a fixed period in the day for every dancing girl to perform her services by turn in the temple".[20]

However number of times dance took place varied. Abbe Dubois in the nineteenth century told of singing and dancing twice a day in temples of importance.[21]

There are very few descriptions of dance in the twentieth century as part of ritual; this one, in the temple in *Ramesvaram*, was recorded with some accuracy:

At 4.30 or 5 a.m. (the *puja* begins) the dancing girls (muraikari) officiating for the day, with *rudraksha* beads in place of jewels, dressed up as a *Brahmani* and her hair uncombed ... open up all the doors to the *mahamandapa*. Later the god is taken in procession preceded by musicians and attendant dancing girl... the dancing girl repeats a *tevara* unjal or verse in honour of Siva.[22]

The dress described here appears to be very simple and suggests that of a *renouncer* (*rudraksha* beads, hair untied), rather than of the bride of god. Some who have seen the dance in temples are still around. *Pandanallur Srinivasan* is one. He is a *Mridangam* player (drummer) from a hereditary family who gives solo recitals and accompanies dance. He remembered a more elaborate dress worn by the *devadasis:* "She [the *devadasi, Saradambal*] wore only a white sari and white choli. That was the custom in those days ... no make-up, no *talaisaman* (head jewelry), but only flowers and the usual jewelry".

He describes the activities in the temple when he played for *devadasis*: Yes, I played for *devadasi*s. They were the ones married to the god. I played in the *Brihadisvara* temple in *Tanjore* for the dancer, (*Karaikkal*) *Saradambal*. It did not look like a formal *programme*. In the Lord's procession outside the temple the *devadasis* did the work of the priests, such as putting flowers at the idol's feet and offering *puja* in the nine directions (*navasandhi*). This was around 1946. I was about fifteen. As the deity was carried from the *garbha griha* (sanctum sanctorum) to the raja gopuram (gateway) for each *sandhi* or direction they performed a different tala. The *devadasis* walked in front of the procession. When the procession was over they placed the god at the entrance of the temple and the *devadasis* performed a puja. The dancer, *nattuvanar, mridangist*, *tavil*, *nagaswaram* and ottu players circled the deity three times. *Saradambal* must have been about fifty then. *Minakshi* s*undaram* was not her guru. I forget who it was.

Subbadra, wife of a *Bharatanatyam* dance teacher, the late *K.N. Dandayudapani Pillai*, had many opportunities to see the dance. She describes the dancers in the temple of Murugan in *Velrampattu* near *Vadalur,* Tamil Nadu. They were more richly adorned than those described above in Ramesvaram and they were not young: "[They] ...dressed up at home. They wore neither make-up nor the *talaisaman* that some dancers wear today. They did wear ear-rings, armlets and bangles of real gold. The ones I saw had grey hair so they must have been forty."

I knew the dance was going to be performed because I was staying at their house. All the *devadasis* wore the sari like the *brahmin* ladies [the sari would have been nine yards long, the lower half tied like a dhoti]. When the *brahmin* priest did the *puja* the *dasis* performed the same actions using hand gestures to show the bell, the light, the fly whisk, etc. They did not wear ankle bells. When they danced in the temple it was in the evening, during *kudamrai*. However, during festivals they danced both in the morning and in the evening.

She also remembered seeing dance concerts as part of a family's celebration of life-cycle events such as the onset of menstruation: When girls from rich families attained puberty, people would celebrate by having a dance performance. Weddings have always been a time for dance recitals. *Kalidasa*, in his play *Kumarasambhava*, described the god Siva and his new bride Parvati being entertained with dance at their wedding.[23] Dance as part of festivities at Hindu weddings continued to be popular during the British rule and was portrayed in woodcuts and paintings.

V. Subramaniam, records that the increase in the number of wealthy *brahmin* land owners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided a new source of patronage for *devadasis*. The newly affluent invited *devadasis* to dance at weddings. This financial support was crucial in helping the dance of the *devadasi* to survive. Apparently the *devadasi* tradition of dancing at weddings was, by that time, acceptable for anyone, demonstrating how fluid the dance profession had become.[24]

There are some examples of *devadasis*, both dedicated and undedicated who married and gave up their dance careers. A dance teacher from the village of *Pandanallur* recounted: "Even after the *devadasi* had undergone the trisul (ritual) marriage, her brother, who was educated and decided to get her married to a film producer in Madras".[25]

There are also examples of *devadasis* becoming the second or third wife to someone already married. *Pandanallur Jayalakshmi* was one example. The Raja of *Ramnad* used to invite her to dance in his palace during the *Dussehra* festival held every year. Later, the two married; she was his fifth wife. *P.S. Swaminathan*, a hereditary dance teacher, recalled one of her three performances at *Ramnad* where he accompanied her as a musician:

In 1945 when I was about eighteen I saw the Raja of Ramnad give her a *gajalakshmi* (a type of necklace) *studed* with diamonds and a diamond ring. He gave all of us musicians a dhoti each. *Jayalakshmi's* brother played the *mridangam. Rajayee* her mother, and her sister *Jivayee*, sang the songs for her descriptive dances. *Jivayee* was also a *devadasi*. But she did not marry. Some *devadasis* married widowers. After marriage, *devadasis* seldom danced for the public.

Social Stigma

The son of a *devadasi* remembered how his mother reminisced with him about how she had suffered. The suffering was social, not financial, as they had their own house and lands. But won't like to be mentioned his name. In those days, many believed that by merely watching these women participate in the rituals, men became sexually excited. Why is it that when *brahmins* began to perform the dance, the dancers were given respect and my mother wasn't. The *brahmins* have taken over the dance.

Learning the dance could lead to humiliation later. Several women from *isai vellala* families reported being

taunted by their in-laws on this account. One hereditary nattuvanar remarked: "If a girl studied dance it could be held against her. During family arguments her in-laws bring up her former connection with the dance to humiliate her, even though she had never danced publicly."

Association with the dance was thus seen as a taint on one's character. Implicitly it was seen as equal to being a devadasi. A hereditary dance teacher said: "Even if they were devadasis we do address them as such, it is not proper." Would parents allow a daughter to learn dance in the hope that she would become famous, even if it might affect her marriage prospects? Some parents said they might chance it. But most said: "I can not afford to take the risk on the presumption that she will become famous".

For some families, however, attitudes were changing. These changes were reflected in the artistic options they gave to their daughters, particularly the youngest. A woman from a hereditary family commented: "I had five children. We only encouraged my youngest daughter to study dance and now she wants to be a dancer. This is because until recently (before 1980) it was not proper for members of our community to encourage our daughters."

Dance in Temples as Part of Recent Festivals

Dance was not allowed to be re-instated as a regular part of ritual because many believed that brahmins in the temples would once again exploit dancers. Today, more than forty years later, Bharatanatyam is once again being performed in temples, as part of specific festivals not a temple rituals, by non-hereditary dancers. Many of these dancers are relatives of those same women who, until the 1940s and 1950s were forbidden to see it. R. Nagaswamy (brahmin), who organizes the annual dance festival in the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram commented on the devadasi way of life:

The devadasi way of life was an entire way of life.... They danced for the deity as an artistic extension of the elaborate worship by the priests.... They danced for god inside the temple and outside too, and again for him when he went outside in procession and at festivals.[26]

Nagaswamy provides the rationale for erotic love (sringara) which is the essence of the dance repertoire. The esoteric psychology of sringara 'union with the lord' wedded the devadasi to a single state owing allegiance to no man except Natya Seva (dance service). If they accepted a mortal as a patron they could discard him also at will, their pre occupation was with god and their Natya Seva (dance service) was to him ... as a result of their dedication their art acquired profound depth and bhava. It was wholly natural.[27]

This description is surely an idealized picture, but it illustrates the value placed on that elusive quality "bhava". Nagaswamy went on to suggest that modern Bharata Natyam had lost that quality. Reporting the reaction of the former devadasi, Kamalambal when she watched non-traditional dancers performing in the Nataraja temple, he commented that "the absence of this superior level of expressiveness {bhava) in contemporary classical Bharata Natyam was felt by Kamalambal of Tanjore, now in her seventies. She commented with the extreme caution of the old, that it is all very good but.... Her reluctant remark clearly implied that progress and skill in technique had been achieved, sacrificing the emotive quality of a weighty dance culture".[28]

Selection of *Devadasis*

It was important that a girl chosen to be a *devadasi* be good looking. Amy Carmichael, a missionary makes it clear that such girls were often carefully selected.

The ideal temple child is refined in manner; that passes too often as the years pass, but the child at first is an attractive little thing. No other is of use. She is usually "fair" as the word goes here, anything from olive to hazel-nut colour. She has a certain manner and way of her own, and she is responsive to influence, keen-brained, bright.[29]

The wife of a traditional *nattuvanar* gives a different description of *devadasis*, especially their skin colour. The standards for comparison, however, may differ. Many present-day dancers are *brahmins* and very fair. Seen from that perspective hereditary dancers may be seen as much darker: "The dancers of my time were very dark and danced without jewels. The present lots of fanciers are fair and wear lots of jewels and people look at their figure."

Today studying the dance is open to all who can pay the fees. But when the dance was a hereditary profession dancers were selected mainly from the *isai vellala* community. There were also other ways of joining the profession such as by adoption, or being sold or donated by parents for religious motives. It was not unknown for parents without children to promise to dedicate their first daughter to a temple.[30] As most couples desired a son, this was not the hardship it might at first appear.

Cornish said that, "... their ranks are recruited by the purchase of female children of any caste, and also by members of certain Hindu castes vowing to present daughters to the temples on recovering from illness, or relief from other misfortune. The female children of the dancing women are always brought up to the mother's profession, and so are the children purchased by them or assigned to temple service by the free will of the parents".[31]

There were certain procedures before a girl could be dedicated. New applicants to the temple authorities were mainly the daughters of *devadasis* but their dedication had to be agreed upon by the temple authorities. Heredity alone was not sufficient. If there was suspicion about a girl's character she could be denied dedication and the rights and privileges that went with it.

One of the main misconceptions regarding *devadasis* was that they were a separate caste: At the present day they form a regular caste, having its own laws of inheritance, its own customs and rules of etiquette, and its own *panchayats* (councils), to see that all these are followed, and thus hold a position which is perhaps without a parallel in any country".[32]

In fact *devadasis* were governed by the rules of the larger *isai vellala* community which also included men, their wives and children.

Thurston describes various artistic occupations for the sons of *devadasis*. 'Some of the sons remain in the caste, and live by playing music for the women to dance to, and accompaniments to their songs, or by teaching singing and dancing to the younger girls and music to the boys. These are

called nattuvans.'[33]

In actual fact these activities were open to all men in the isai vellala community. Thurston comments on the women of the isai vellala community who married musicians and nattuvanars: "Others marry some girl of the caste who is too plain to be likely to be a success in the profession, and drift out of the community".[34]

Recruitment into the devadasi community was also by adoption. "... devadasis are the only class of women who are, under Hindu law, as administered by the British courts, allowed to adopt girls to themselves".[35] The comments of some observers indicate that devadasis had few children, so if the profession were to continue devadasis had to adopt: "As a rule, it is seldom that these women have children of their own, unless, perhaps, they had lived in continual concubinage with some single individual".[36] Most of the adoption was from other members of their family. This could be for a variety of reasons: desire to bring up a child, someone to inherit one's wealth, or to look after one in old age. One woman told me that she had been adopted by her aunt, Kamalambal,[37] a *devadasi*, and studied dance with her. In 1947, at the age of seven, she presented a debut recital (*arangetram*) in *Tanjore* in the ancestral home of *Kamalambal's* teacher. She remarked: "I can't remember much ... my teacher *Kamalambal* sang some of the songs. My future husband was not invited, even though he was a distant relation of both my teacher and me. "At fourteen she danced in the *Tanjore* Palace. Later she married and continued to teach dance.

Other women from hereditary families performing at that time such as *T.A. Rajalakshmi* and *K. Bhanumati* also reported dancing in various places such as the one in *Travancore*. Many of them recalled very active dance careers up to 1952. *Dr.B.M Sundaram* state that "T. A. *Rajalakshmi* Between 1947 and 1952 she was living in *Tiruvidaimarudur*. She gave many programs and would not be home for even ten days. She performed in *Chetinad, Tanjore* etc. In *Chetinad* they preferred 'double dance' - two members dancing together." K. *Bhanumati* later married and gave up any association with the dance. *T.A. Rajalakshmi* continued to teach until 1993.

In the families of all *devadasis*, sons and daughters did not always inherit equally.[38] "Among the *dasis* sons and daughters inherit equally, contrary to ordinary Hindu usage [custom]."It was notable that inheritance in *devadasi* families passed through the female line.

Among dancing girls property descends in the female line first, and then to males as in other cases. In the failure of issue [children] the property of a dancing girl goes to the pagoda [temple] to which she belongs—a simple recognition on the part of the dancing girl, of a child as her daughter, in the presence of one or more individuals is sufficient to constitute her claim to adoption... they are always anxious to adopt girls, not only to become their successors in the temple, but that they may inherit their property like-wise, which is no easy matter to effect nowadays.[39]

A lawsuit (in 1876) involved a girl who claimed to be the adopted daughter of a devadasi. Her adoptive mother had died before she was dedicated. The temple authorities denied the daughter's application to be dedicated to the deity. Consequently she lost all the hereditary rights of her mother.

Remuneration and Economic Status

Unlike most married women who did not have any economic control, or even own their own children, *devadasis* were economically independent. They managed their own finances. *P.R Thilakam* said "the head of a *devadasis* family was the oldest female member known as the *Taikkizhavi*". Sons of *devadasis* being dependent upon their mothers rather than their fathers were generally regarded as inferior to daughters. Women made all the major decisions regarding the household, which included controlling the finances.40 In a joint family the earnings of all of its-members were shared. Because family wealth lay in artistic knowledge as well as the beauty and attractiveness of their women, men were often required to give artistic support to the female members of their family. This usually meant being part of the musical accompaniment for their dance. The sons of *devadasis* became dance teachers or musicians. Many of the men in the *devadasi* community could not marry, either because of the shortage of women within the community (because well over half became dedicated *devadasis*) or because they lacked the financial security to do so. A significant number of these men had to postpone their marriage until they were established as dance teachers or musicians. Some of them became independent enough to move out of the female-dominated joint family and establish a separate residence. It was rare to find a *devadasi* family with a married son still living with them. This was in contrast to the male dominated households of the *nattuvanar* families where sons often brought their wives to live in their ancestral home. These women were then obliged to help with the housework and contribute to the common good of the family with home-making skills rather than artistic ones. Here too financially secure males preferred to move out of the joint family and establish separate households.

A recent trend has been for members of the same family to establish schools in various cities around India rather than compete for students in the same localities. This has helped to maximize the earning power of their family members. Competition within the family would not benefit the whole group, whereas an artistic network in different *centres* ensured that it would create a teaching empire in which students, whose families were posted to different cities in India, as well as abroad could continue to train in the same tradition.

The *Taikkizhav*i (experienced old women) also exerted her control over the artistic training of members of the family. *Satyajit* Ray's film on the life of T. *Balasaraswati* gives us some insight into the women's decisions in this important family. It was *Dhanamal* who insisted that her granddaughter Bala should train to become a singer... but Bala at the age of two had already seen the greatest temple dancer of her time [no name] and her ambition was to surpass her.... In those days, dancing as a profession meant dancing in temples and temple dancers were frowned upon in polite society ... it was Bala's mother *Jayammal*, herself a fine singer, who decided to brave the social risk and fixed up

Kanthappa nattuvanar to teach dance to her daughter. (Text from film, Balasaraswati, made in 1977 by Satyajit Ray).

Many devadasis became wealthy in their own right. It was not unusual for them to own houses and lands. Several comments support the fact that some of the hereditary dancers in this century were wealthy. One woman from a hereditary family, reminisced "Dancers then (before 1947) were all very rich. They had owned groundnut fields". The son of a former devadasi, to whom I spoke also, said that his own mother was well off. The fact that for many centuries' dancers contributed generously to religious institutions confirms that many must have been well off. This practice was in accordance with the Kamasutra which described dancers as courtesans but whose money was worthy of being used on religious institutions such as to construct temples, water tanks and gardens.[41]

In return for a substantial donation to a temple, *devadasis* were often given privileges. In the reign of *Rajaraja* III (1298-1322) a dancer constructed high walls inside the temple of *Vellaimurti Alvar*. In return she and her descendants received the privilege of waving yak-tail fans before the deity in processions and a daily gift of rice.[42] The duty of waving yak-tail fans must have been a coveted one because the granting of this *honour* to *devadasis* is recorded in several inscriptions. As early as the fifth century, *Kalidasa's Meghaduta* describes the performance of this ritual in the *Mahakala* temple in *Ujjain*. A dancing girl holding a yak-tail fan is a common sculptural motif throughout India.

For their ritual performances, *devadasis* were given some remuneration in cash, or kind, such as rights to a house or produce from temple lands. When these girls are attached to temples, they receive certain sums as wages, the amount of which is dependent on the worth, sanctity, and popularity of the particular temple which they have joined. The money salary they receive is nominal - seldom exceeding a few annas, and sometimes a rupee or two a month. The chief object in being paid this salary is to indicate that they are servants of temple.[43]

Retirement and Funeral Rites

It was important for a *devadasi* to have a daughter to look after her in old age. A retirement ceremony is mentioned in the records of the *Suchindram* temple for *devadasis* who had reached an advanced age or had become chronically ill. Facing the assembly of priests (as at her enrolment), the *devadasi* unhooked her ear-rings and presented a gift of money. The ear-rings were returned to her, but she no longer wore them.[44] *Thurston* (1909) also records the removal of jewellery on retirement and a reduction of salary.[45]

All aspects of the *devadasi's* life were provided for, including her funeral: "When a *devaasi* dies her body is covered with a new cloth removed from the idol, and flowers are supplied from the temple, to which she belonged. No *puja* (worship) is performed in the temple till the corpse is disposed of, as the idol, being her husband, has to observe pollution".46 Even the fire for her pyre was from the temple, "The funeral pyre of every girl of the dancing girl caste dying in the village should be lit with fire brought from the temple. The same practice is found in the *Srirangam* temple near *Trichinopoly*".[47]

Naming Conventions among The Isai Vellala

The term *isai* (*icai*) appears in classical Tamil literature and refers to special music played in the court of kings and temples. In association with *vellala*, a respected term for dominant Tamil, non-brahmins, it has become the name of the community for hereditary musicians and dancers. This title was adopted by the caste association, the *Isai Vellala Sangam*, at a conference in Kumbakonam in 1948. *Srinivasa*n (1985: 1876) discusses this in detail.

Most *devadasis* and their offspring have one name which is preceded by one, and sometimes two initials. There appears to be no fixed rule whether to include one or two initials. The first initial indicates the ancestral village. The second initial indicates the mother's name. In those instances where there is only one initial it is usually reserved for the village of one's ancestry.48 For example T. *Balasaraswati*, and her relatives such as her male cousin T. *Sankaran*, the 'T' stands for Tanjore, both of them being offspring of *devadasis*, with hereditary associations with the city of *Tanjore*. This family has chosen not to include their mother's initial. In the case of the *nattuvanar*, the late V.S. *Muthuswamy*, whose mother was a *devadasi*, the 'V' stands for his native village *Vaidisvarankovil*, and 'S' for the name of his mother, the *devadasi Sethuramu*. *V.S. Muthuswamy's* family now lives in *Kutralam* but he chose to link himself with his ancestral village, *Vaidisvarankovil*. Many *nattuvanars* and dancers have similarly chosen to associate themselves with a town with which their family has been historically associated, even though they may no longer own land in it, or have anything, other than a sentimental attachment to it.

V.S. Muthuswamy also added *Pillai* to his name, which is the most common surname for male dance teachers and musicians from the *isai vellala* community. It is usually only used by men. Recently however, the tendency has been to drop Pillai,49 largely because it indicates their particular community. Males from the *isai vellala* community whose mothers were not *devadasis*, in addition to a personal name, are usually referred to by the name of their ancestral village, followed by their father's name. Thus the naming conventions *adopted* by the *isai vellala* community indicated the marital status of one's mother, and the professional involvement of their women.

Urbanization

The naming conventions provide documentation of the villages and towns from which the artistic heritage of *Bharata Natyam* derived.50 The banning of dance in temples and the profession of *devadasi* was followed by a shift of the art from smaller towns to the larger urban *centres*, in particular Madras. T. *Balasaraswati's* dance however continues to be regarded as the ultimate in the expression of the "traditional" *Bharata Natyam* technique. There were other *devadasis* who taught in Calcutta, *T.A. Rajalakshmi,* and in smaller towns such as *Tanjore-Kamalambal* and Lakshmi *Kantham*, but it has been the Madras-based *devadasis* who have had the greatest impact upon the new generation.

DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that by the turn of the century it had become clear that dance as part of temple ritual would soon be abolished, many hereditary families continued to train their daughters. There was still an active interest in including dance at weddings and wealthy patrons considered dance important. Later the cinema industry needed dancers trained in the classical tradition as well as dance teachers who could coach film stars. Though present-day dance in films bears very little resemblance to classical dance, in the initial stages of the industry, the support that dancers and teachers received from work in films allowed many of them to continue their traditional profession.

After the dedication of *devadasis* was abolished in 1947 the system disappeared in Tamil Nadu. Those women who were already dedicated, either found work as dance teachers, married (an option made possible by the new liberal attitudes), or found other employment. Only a few taught dance, either in provincial *centres* such as *Pudukkottai,* Tanjore and Kumbakonam or in Madras. T. *Balasaraswati,* who later achieved international fame for her dance and music developed her own school, with considerable assistance from Dr. V. *Raghavan* and the Madras Music Academy. The two traditions—the *devadasi* and the revivalist—persisted side by side for some decades (1930-50) and then the *devadasi* style faded rapidly away.

The *devadasi* tradition and transition has been changed. The lack of contact between the majority of the last generation of *devadasi* dancers and the early non-hereditary performers led to changes in some aspects of the dance, especially the facial expression and gesture. There is no doubt that modern venues, such as large concert halls, are less suitable for the presentation of expression {*abhinaya*) than the intimate settings of courts and salons of great houses, with the result that the importance of *abhinaya* in the dance has been reduced. Moreover, the changing social climate made the type of courtesan ship espoused by the devadasi system no longer acceptable, making some of their repertoire irrelevant. That something has been lost is not in doubt. Whether it could ever have survived into the world of the late twentieth century is also doubtful. Today' s *Bharata* Natyam provides a different function for a different group of dancers and audiences. We are left only with the faint *flavour* of the devadasi style of dance.

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III.Kautilya, trans. Shamasastry 1967, p -139.

IV.Kalhana, Rajatarangini, A chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir, trans. M.S. Stein, Vol I. 1 151, p - 28.

V.South Indian Inscriptions 2:66,

VI.South Indian Inscriptions 1985: 259-60.

VII.Ayyar Jagadisa, P.V., South Indian Shrines, Madras,1920, 128 of 1912.

VIII.Dance classes usually commenced before the age of seven. Many accounts describe the dance teacher lifting the girl's ankle and helping her to strike her foot on pounded rice paddy (Thurston 1909: 138;Khokar \964;Marg 1979 and Kersenboom 1987: 201). This particular custom is not followed today but the offering of fruits, flowers, incense and some cash, all arranged on a large round plate, continues in most circumstances.

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X.Legislative Assembly Debates of India , Second Session, "Resolution Re Prohibition of Traffic in Minor Girls" February 27, 1922, pp. -2599-2615.

XI.Srinivasan, Amrit, Temple Prostitution and Community Reform An Examination of the Ethnographic, Historical and Textual Context of Tamil Nadu, South India, D.Phil. Cambridge University 1984, p -187

XII.She reported that she had taken off the pottukattu about ten years ago because she was "fed up".

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XVII. Ibid. p - 158.

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XIX.Kane, P.V., History of Dharma Sastra, Vol.II, Part I, Government Oriental Series, Class B, No.6, Poona, 1941, pp. 704-740; Appadurai, Arjun, Worship and conflict Under Colonial Rule, A South Indian Case, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,198, p- 22.

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XXV.Kamalambal had two daughters -Rajeshwari and Ranjitam. She did not teach dance to either of them. Ranjitam married the son of a devadasi, J.(Jayalakshmi) Natarajan. He had studied dance with Kamalambal, taught dance in her school in Tanjore and performed with her.

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XXX.Dubois, Abbe J.A., Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, New Delhi,1972, p -367.

XXXI.Cornish, W.R., Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, Vol. I: 1871.

XXXII.Thurston, E., Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol.II, Madras, 1909, p-127.

XXXIII. Ibid. p- 128.

XXXIV. Ibid. p- 128.
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XXXVI. Shortt, D.John, The Bayadere or Dancing Girls of South India, Memoirs, 1867, p-245.
XXXVII.Kamalambal had two daughters (Rajeshwari and Ranjitam). She did not teach dance to either of them. Ranjitam married the son of a devadasi, J.(Jayalakshmi) Natarajan. He had studied dance with Kamalambal, taught dance in her school in Tanjore and performed with her.
XXXVIII. Srinivasan (1984:193) states that if the father of the children were a brahmin the children would not inherit from him but if he were from another caste the children could expect some inheritance from him.
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XL.Srinivasan, Amrit, Temple Prostitution and Community Reform An Examination of the Ethnographic, Historical and Textual Context of Tamil Nadu, South India, D.Phil. Cambridge University 1984, p -217
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XLII.SIE 1923: 106 No. 172 of 1923.
XLIII.Dubois, Abbe J.A., Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, New Delhi,1972, p -198.
XLIV. Pillay, K.K., The Sucindram Temple, Kalakshestra, Madras, 1953, p- 94.
XLV.Thurston, E., Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol.II, Madras, 1909, p-145.
XLVI.Hemingway, F.R., Gazetteer of the Godavari District, Madras, 1907.
XLVII.Ibid. 1907.
XLVIII. Armand, L, discusses this with reference to musicians in Madras, Sruti 1978, p-117.
XLIX.See Thurston 1909. It is very rare in the 1980s amongst the younger generation of isai vellala males to use Pillai as their last name. Woman, married or single, from this community do not usually use Pillai as part of their name.
L.Armand, L, (1978: 122) lists the royal courts and temple towns that were important musical centres.