



Containment and control of Bahujan women's bodies The story of Bharatanatyam



—Avani Binish

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I started my dance classes as early as I started school. The earliest memory of my dance class is wearing the white and maroon uniform to my dance class, fighting with my mom to give me a different drape with the shawl than it being tied on my waist and coming back home with excruciating pain in my legs. I have been a trained classical dancer for almost two decades now and Bharatanatyam is one of the art forms I have been learning for the longest time. I will always hear my dance teacher say that the theoretical pedagogy of Bharatanatyam or any other classical dance forms in India like Mohiniyattam, Kathakali, Manipuri, and Odissi can be traced back to Natya Shastra. I didn't question her teachings until my college days when a few of my progressive seniors started challenging the Brahminical hegemony and patriarchal values integrated into classical dance forms. It took a lot of unlearning to realize that dance - especially Bharatanatyam, is not just an aesthetic and synchronized movement of the body, but rather, it is an amalgamation of expression of emotions combined with rhythm and music that depicts the hegemonic social norms. Its convoluted history is essential to understand Bahujan women, the power structures that culturally govern and discipline their bodies, the sustenance of hierarchy and subordination in the caste system and the social conditioning of Brahminical values.

1. Sadir- A Ritualistic Practice

Bharatanatyam was an eminent part of the Devadasi community in Southern India, especially the parts of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra¹. The term 'Devadasi' means the "servants of god" and it is considered to be a form of religious prostitution. The Devadasi community is not a homogenous community as it housed several non-Brahminical castes including some Bahujan castes and Dalits². Dance was part of the quotidian life of a Devadasi whose roots are rooted in the ritualistic practices associated with becoming a devadasi. This included marriage to the deity known as kalyanam; dedication to the deity often referred to as muttirai; followed by the ritualistic first dance lesson and the presentation of ankle bells called gajje puja; the debut recital after the completion of dance training in front of an audience called arangetam; and finally, the selection of a patron which is often referred to as prayojanam³. Bharatanatyam, erstwhile Sadir, was a dance form which was primarily performed by the Devadasis- especially those belonging to the Isai Vellular caste⁴.



Pictorial depiction of Bharatanatyam

2. Colonialism, revivalist movement and the denial of lived experiences of Devadasis

With the advent of colonialism and the assimilation of Victorian values like the censorship of clothes and the controlling of the sexuality of women in Indian society, it deemed practices like the Devadasi system to be barbaric and detrimental to Indian society. Coupled with resistance within the community against the oppressive system for lower-caste women, the 19th century saw Anti-Nautch movements across the country resulting in an Anti-dance movement in 1892 and the subsequent banning of temple dancing in Madras Presidency by the year 1910. In an effort to remove the stigma of its origin from the Devadasi system, the name of the dance-form Sadir was replaced with Bharatanatyam around the start of the twentieth century⁵.



Sadir is a dance form

With the advent of Indian nationalism and independence movements, reclaiming culture and history became an important part of the nationalist narrative. This served as the catalyst for a radical shift in the pedagogy and practice of Bharatanatyam. The country saw the rise and popularity of upper-caste Bharatanatyam dancers like Rukmini Devi Arundale, and Balasaraswati reviving Bharatanatyam by bringing them into mainstream Indian society. As Bharatanatyam is believed to be an art form that evolved from the book - Natyashastra, the revivalists appropriated the art form as a symbol of its glorious Hindu past depicting the stories of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Thus with the establishment of Kalakshetra - a dance school which was founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale⁶, there was a comprehensible hegemony of upper castes and Brahminization of the curriculum - be it the depiction of stories from the ancient Hindu scriptures involving bhakti and devotion and limiting the practice of Srungara or erotic love in dance performances; altering the pedagogy by concealing the past of the dance form being associated with Devadasi system with upper caste and class communities appropriating the art form and disassociating the dance form from its history of being a religious ritual art-form performed by the women from the most marginalized and downtrodden sections of the society. Further, the state of Tamilnadu, in an attempt at revivalism of Indian history and culture, adopted Bharatanatyam as the state's official performing art - one that promoted Hinduism as its main religion and Sanskrit as its intellectual language⁷.

3. Why are we discussing it today?

The origin of Bharatanatyam is embedded in the caste system. BR Ambedkar notes caste being a system of graded inequalities rooted in the concept of purity and pollution⁸. The Devadasi system as an institution can only be addressed with the acknowledgement of the socio-economic position of the women who were dedicated to the temple as Devadasis and the social norms that govern them. This system also meant that the Devadasis cannot refuse to offer sexual services to any member of the village. Dalit and Bahujan Devadasis experience a tripartite division of oppression - class, caste and gender-wise marginalities which they experience from the social structures of state, economy and society. It is an institutionalized system formulated by the upper caste men under the pretense of religion to have sexual access to lower caste women leading to control over their bodies and their sexuality. Pushing lower-caste Bahujan women into practices like the Devadasi system is an example of how graded hierarchies and hierarchical dichotomies of pure and impure women are created to distinguish between upper-caste and lower-caste women respectively and how caste becomes an important criterion to decide who can be a Devadasi. Although the Devadasi system might seem like a progressive set of norms which gives sexual freedom as Devadasis are not bound by the shackles of patriarchy which imposes monogamy and marriage relations; the very fact that upper caste men have to have control over the bodies of lower caste women and there is no agency of women to get into the system by themselves but are forced to become Devadasis because they belong to a particular marginalized caste, is not emancipatory. The freedom to choose to engage in and monetise sex work is different from being forced to engage in it because of their disadvantaged class and caste position is not freeing oneself from the shackles of Brahminical patriarchy.

Why are these arguments important while considering the dance form - Bharatanatyam? Dance as an art form should not be distinguished from the body of the performer because they are sites of social constructions of hierarchy, and subjugation. What the revivalist movement did was emphasize the already existing hierarchised binaries of pure and impure which are embedded in the caste system. The nationalist movement and the revivalist leaders like Rukmini Devi pushed for the eradication of the history of an art form that is rooted in the subjugation of Bahujan women by upper caste men. Not only was there an alteration in the history of the dance form, but there was also consequent saffronisation and Hinduisation of the art form. Foucault while addressing the concept of discourse and how it imposes limits and controls views that authorship,⁹ or creation of the identity of the author often sets boundaries to the discourse - in limiting who has access and patronage to the discourse. The revivalist movement placed the authorship of Bharatanatyam to Bharata Muni and the Sanskrit text Natya Shastra, which can be seen as an attempt to limit the patronage, access and history under the aegis of Brahmins. Today, a female Bharatanatyam dancer's body is manifested as an upper-caste Hindu women's body which is considered pure. What we see here is a constant denial of agency of Bahujan-Dalit women, a recital of hierarchized dichotomies and Brahminization of the art form by deeming it to have originated from Natya Shastra. Through this whole process, what we observe is the exercise of power through existing social structures, the creation of a new discourse and the production of knowledge. The Revivalist Movement in Bharatanatyam did not just deny the agency and historicity of the Dalit-Bahujan women, but through institutional disciplinary methods, surveillance and control of the production of knowledge extended a similar form of external regulation, like it was there in the Devadasi system. As a Bahujan woman myself who has been studying this dance form for the last two decades, the erasure of the history comes with an effort of containment and control by the state, patriarchy and caste system to contain and control bodies of women for time immemorial. Foucault extends his idea of control to the concept of "docile bodies" created and maintained for political order¹⁰. Through this, it can be understood that even art forms were also created, revised, regulated and maintained to create "docile bodies" that are subjected to subjugation, oppression, and extortion to maintain the Brahminical political order in the Indian state.

Far from being "docile bodies", there was always resistance from the marginalised communities towards the hegemonic culture. There were movements exhibiting community consciousness of the Dalit-Bahujan communities for a change in the hegemonic narrative set by the upper castes in Bharatanatyam. That's when counter-hegemonic movements in Bharatanatyam become notable. Dancers like Nrithya Pillai have formed an entire discourse in spreading awareness about the subaltern history of the dance form followed by an attempt to "re-casteing"¹¹ Bharatanatyam that will further show the world the individual agency and nuanced form of resistance in the pedagogy of Bharatanatyam. Bodies can be contextualized as a site of (Pillai, 2022) politics and dissent which are shaped by social structures, institutions, power relations and agency. Dancers like Nrithya Pillai posit a way towards an emancipatory practice from the clutches of the convoluted history of casteism, classism and patriarchy entrenched in Bharatanatyam by restoring the power centre back to Bahujan and Dalit women in reclaiming their individual agency and their subjectivities, and the art form itself.

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About the Author



Avani Binish is a passionate researcher with a Master's degree in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her research interests include Gender, Urban Spaces, Gentrification, and Religion. Though she initially found herself gravitating towards the topic of Religion, she has since decided to diversify her research interests.

In addition to her research pursuits, Avani is also an erratic writer and moody dancer. When she's not busy analyzing the world around her through a sociological lens, you can find her aimlessly wandering around the monuments of Delhi, raving about the latest food discovery, or meticulously scheduling her time.

With her diverse interests and unique perspective, Avani is poised to make significant contributions to the field of Sociology and beyond.