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Beyond Entertainment: Exploring Perspectives on the Purpose of Dance in South Indian History

by Lakshmi Thiagarajan

I'm at the Brihadeeswara temple, in the small southern Indian town of Tanjavur, and surrounding me are a sea of dancers etched into stone - the ephemeral quality of their movement frozen in time and space. I can't help but wonder: what did dance mean to them?

In this piece, I seek to uncover some of the motivations for dance in South Indian history. To do so, I start in the Classical Antiquity/Sangam Era by reading early texts in Tamil literature. Then I travel to the Medieval/Chola era, reviewing literature that documents performance as a part of courtly entertainment and temple ritual. I explore the emergence of a unique professional dancing community in the early 16th century. Finally, I move to the late 19th and early 20th century, when debates over women's sexuality and their participation in public life engulfed this unique community of dancers. Across these eras, I trace the role women dancers played in public life.

Classical Antiquity/Sangam Era

Fierce, proud, incurring wrath…these may not be the first words we associate with viewing dance today, but these emotions are at the heart of early Tamil literature (100 BCE to 600 CE) and performance. One of the oldest surviving Tamil texts, the Tolkappiam, describes two types of dance - *Muntherkuravai* and *pintherkuravai* - performed in front of and behind a king's chariot during a victory procession after battle. Dance here might be seen as an expression of the ruler's power and authority, serving as a force that shaped public morale. Saskia C. Kersenboom argues in her book, *Nityasumangali*, that performance was also a way to appease the natural spirits and forces beyond one's control. An early Tamil text called the *Purananuru* refers to groups of dancing women (*Atumakal* and *Virali*) as having powers over the rain and describe performances offered as part of the worship of a tree stump. Dance, in these instances, was not viewed as just a leisure activity, but as a means of dealing with the anxieties and forces of the unknown.

The Medieval/Chola Era

From the mid-9th to 13th centuries CE, much of Southern India was under the rule of the Chola empire. Epigraphical records from this time note the presence of two separate groups of dancers who performed in royal courts and temples respectively. The emergence of numerous texts documenting dance technique suggest that it had become a much more formalized theatrical endeavor focused on its artistic and dramatic potential.

The employment of women in temples to sing and dance in front of the deities and perform ritual tasks such as waving a pot lamp and drawing *kolams* (floral patterns drawn with rice flour) also highlight new religious associations of the art with specific Hindu deities. In some senses, this continues the use of dance as a means of dealing with the risks of the unknown, as seen in the Sangam era. A dancing form of the god Shiva, Nataraja, is also immortalised across the Chola temple sculpture, which might indicate that the practice and consumption of dance in this era was seen as a highly valued and aspirational endeavor with mystical origins.

While much of the dance technique from this period has not been passed down to us, dancer and researcher Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam has attempted to recreate these movements. They are characterized by a fluid use of the waist and torso, creating curves and bends that pose a striking contrast to the more angular geometry that characterizes dance styles like Bharathanatyam today. This Chola period style expressed imagery from the natural world— embodying the movements of serpents, peacocks and vultures— and the stylised expression of feelings like shyness and arrogance (demonstrated here from 14:10 to 16:49).

The Early Modern/Nayak and Maratha period

Between the mid-16th and 19th centuries CE, the Southern Indian city of Tanjavur was ruled by the Nayak and the Maratha kingdoms. The southern Indian dance style of Bharathanatyam and its associated Carnatic music tradition, in its present form, were shaped here. The distinction between temple and court dancing dissolved and a professional community of practitioners (*devadasi*) who served a dual role in both institutions emerged. They lived in matriarchal family structures, engaged in non-conjugal relationships (often with patrons who supported their careers), and enjoyed a degree of literacy and financial freedom few women in this region were afforded. However, there are records of the court buying and selling devadasis, and the extent of their agency remains debated.

The modern movement vocabulary (*adavus*) followed in Bharathanatyam today and the structure of what is now considered the 'traditional' concert format (*margam*) were first documented in this era as part of the repertoire of the courtesan dancer. This format featured a mix of genres and types of independent compositions (with hundreds of individual songs documented under each musical category) that together made up a several hours long performance. Each composition has a distinct role: to visualise rhythm and music, to sing the praises of a king, god, or supernatural power, and to explore and dramatise human anxieties and emotions towards the unknown. This performance format might be seen as an amalgamation of the different meanings and features of dance in this region historically.

The 19th-20th centuries

The annexation of Tanjavur by the British Crown in 1856 led these groups of courtesans to find new venues for their art. One such location was the colonial city of Madras where performances flourished in the homes of the wealthy. A type of composition called the *Javali* grew in popularity. These songs were quick and lighthearted, featuring themes of passion. Some of them were performed in a mix

of languages such as this piece, ‘Oh my lovely Lalana’ which features a blend of English and Telugu. In the 1956 movie *Muddu Bidda*, we can see a Javali, ‘*Amtalone Tellavare.*’ Through the piece, the heroine expresses her feelings of love and desire. The relaxed, improvisational and conversational quality of her movement might reflect the lived experiences of these artists and their audiences. Some of these compositions have survived, in modified form, in contemporary practice today and offer a window into what the lives of these women might have looked like.

The late 19th century also saw the beginning of a campaign against these women's dances that came to be dubbed the ‘anti-nautch movement’. Three main factions arose in this debate. The first, influenced by the purity pledges taken in England and its colonies, took issue with the non-conjugal sexual lives of these women, saw the dance as amoral solicitation and campaigned for its abolishment. The second sought to preserve the dance form by advocating for its practice to be taken over instead by women from ‘respectably’ married families. The third faction, a subset of wealthy women from this very community, fought to preserve their practice and livelihoods. But in 1947, a law was passed that banned dedication of women from these communities to temples. The loss of this major source of patronage and the social stigma that surrounded the pursuit of a dance career for women from these backgrounds meant that the practice of Bharatanatyam shifted away from this community to be practised instead by primarily more privileged class and caste performers. Although outside the purview of this article, much has been said today about whether this constituted a form of cultural appropriation.

An exploration of these few instances of dance in Southern India suggests that, rather than being solely a form of entertainment, dance has served as an expression of political power, religious fervor, and of women’s sexualities. It offered a means of dealing with the unknown and was a tool for embodying and communicating difficult and deeply human feelings. It is perhaps this capacity that can explain its enduring value.

Homepage Image Description: *Lakshmi Thiagarajan, author of the article, kneels gracefully on the ground in a covered walkway outdoors, lit by lanterns. One leg is forward, clad in yellow and red silk pants with a percussive bracelet on her ankle. Her clasped hands frame her face, adorned with a bindi and golden headband. She looks off to the side with a small smile.*

Article Page Image Description: *A view of the outside of the Brihadeeswara temple shows two large golden turrets with many intricate carvings, surrounded by a similarly carved wall. There is a bright blue sky behind the temple and a large tree on the other side of the image.*

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