

WORLD DANCE DAY AND INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

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Asian Age, 28th April 2015
(English Version)

In December 1935, the elite in Madras was all agog with the news of a young Brahman girl, getting ready to perform the dance of the low devadasis, the mistresses of the Lord, who had danced for centuries to please Him and his high caste followers. This was at the height of the controversy that Dr. Muttulakshmi Reddy, the daughter of a devadasi and a father she would never know, had raised as she campaigned vigorously for the abolition of this shameful system and the dance form as well. On the other hand, there were others like the Brahman, E Krishna Iyer who protested that the enquire and ancient dance form had to be retrieved and preserved, while the controversial institution of the devadasis could be dumped. It was in the background of this war that the young Rukmini Devi went up on stage at the Adyar Theatre, before an amazed audience. She had shattered tradition and disrepute, but social leaders from her own community got up, straightened their angavastarams and just walked out, in sheer disgust.

This was around the same time that an American, re-born as Ragini Devi, was voraciously consuming the skills of Kathakali and other forms in order to revive them, through re-packaging. Many others were also active in this decade that really began the determined 'salvaging and sanitising' of the arts from the moral depths to which they had sunk over centuries, in both temples and royal palaces. Care was, however, taken by the brahmanical classes to imbibe and retain the traditional esoteric skills that the devadasis and courtesans had jealously guarded for several generations, before society chose to forget them. Kathak, for instance, had to extricate itself through the Maharaj family from the opprobrium of being the sleazy nautch of the tawaifs that was notorious enough to enter the English dictionary quite early in a rather derogatory sense. Odishi, said to be oldest of the classical dances of India with pre-Christian era bas relief sculptures to prove its antiquity, had also fallen into disrepute with the mahari dancers at Puri and elsewhere being treated as objects of lust, despite centuries of skills and aesthetics.

Gurus like Kelucharan Mohapatra had to separate the intricate nuances of Odishi from intrinsic disgrace.

To be fair, not every great dance form was degraded in public esteem as some continued for centuries on their own strong traditions and their ladies, if any, or young boys were not available for other purposes. Vallathol's campaign to extend Mohiniyattam from small pockets in Kerala that led to the establishment of Kalamandalam and to the spread of this dance is also a point here. This too was in the 1930s. The argument here is not only of the cleansing of those major dance traditions, but also of the remarkable take-over by the upper classes. This process began in the third decade of the the last century and took only four decades to get its act together. In many cases, this consisted of the quiet surgical separation of many, not all of these dance-music forms from their original low-strata practitioners. It is strange, therefore, that while celebrating the success of India's classical dances, these issues have hardly ever come up, although many invariably discuss how Uday Shankar was the first ambassador of dance from India in the 1920s. His highly creative choreography was however not Indian classical dance.

Let us now recall a bit of the politics and national aspirations that also played a role in this process. From the late nineteenth century, the newly emerging pan-Indian educated class was yearning to tell its imperial masters that the India had indeed boasted of a vibrant developed civilization millennia ago: when their own islands were inhabited by people dressed in animal skins and armed with sticks and stones. The archaeological re-discoveries of the lost glories of Hindustan, that gained momentum from the middle of the 19th century, triggered off a massive wave of self-respect. It is obvious that when tangible culture leads the battle, intangible cultural expressions could hardly remain mute. In 1927, the Council of State in Delhi deliberated on a motion on how to tackle the evils that were associated with the devadasi system and in the same year, the strident anti-devadasi campaigner, Muttulaksmi Reddy, succeeded in passing a stern resolution in the Madras Legislative Council. Her rival, E.Krishna Iyer, however, convinced the Indian National Congress that music and dance deserved to be separated from total condemnation only because dance was the monopoly of a disreputable class. The Congress party backed him and held the first All India Music Conference in Madras in 1927, which soon gave birth to the path-breaking Madras Music

Akademy in 1928. But Muttulakshmi soon responded the next year by getting an Act passed against "erring devadasis" within the Madras Presidency. And so on.

To return to the issue, it is not submitted that women from respectable families had never performed dances. The original cast of Tagore's maiden dance drama Valmiki Pratibha of 1881 had his neices, Pratibha Devi and Sushila Devi in it. But Tagore's dances were not 'classical' despite what Bengal may think, nor was the event conducted by professionals as part of their regular livelihood.

Let us also view it from the angle of democratization of art and taking it out of small monopolistic groups or from traditional strongholds. This is certainly commendable and it applies to most of the classical dance forms that are now performed all over India and abroad, far beyond their original confines. A half-American half-Bajpayi, Indrani Rehman, for instance, stunned audiences in Delhi and overseas with her mastery over different South Indian dance forms, while later, a Sonal Mansingh of Gujarat led the Odishi brigade. Another is the story of how Kanak Rele of Mumbai helped in rehabilitating and spreading the Mohininiyattam of deep Kerala to a much larger stage. Similar stories exist for Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Manipuri and Sattriya as well.

How elitist were ancient classical dances? A few years ago, I had obtained from the Archaeological Survey of India the measurements of the traditional halls attached to temples, the Mandapas of Tamil Nadu, that are also called Natya-mandirs elsewhere. The results showed that except for the two Brihadesvara temples at Thanjavur and Gangaikonda Cholapuram that were indeed very large, the rest were usually between 200 and 650 square feet. They could thus permit audiences of only some thirty-forty to a maximum of eighty or so. Thus, had it not been for the liberation of these arts from the temple or the kothi-haveli, they would never have been viewed by many hundreds or even a couple of thousand at the same time. It is needless to say that the dance steps and floor plans had also to be edited and modified to suit the needs of a front-facing audience which the higher-level Western proscenium stage demanded, rather than carry on the earlier uni-directional salutations.

This short history of how the lotus of classical dance in India was cut off from the muck out of which it arose has hardly been considered worthy of serious

discourse, but we could at least ponder over it on the occasion of the World Dance Day. The transformation and rigorous modernization that many of these dance forms have gone through in just a few decades render them almost unrecognisable by their original performers. Independent India needed to reconstruct and reclaim its past and secure for itself the aristocracy that only antiquity can bestow: so it got it, sans the traditional practitioners. Now that it is all over and done with, can we not focus clinically on how modern India procured many of these ancient classical dances from the subaltern classes after a determined appropriation and thorough dry cleaning?