I thought of the repertoire of the neo-classical dances. Aṅdiṅdu tirugakurā ativalu nī toṭi Sudha decided to move to the stanza. It is important to keep the historical footprint of the temple dancer alive. It is important because the temple dancer was not an imperial orientalist fantasy. She was real.

“Ah, you are missing the notes! Ni ga n’…” pōgarucunnāru performer Pallabi Chakravorty bursts this notion: “It is important because the temple dancer was not an imperial orientalist fantasy. She was real.”

There were five dancers and three men who were the musicians,” continued Priya. “One of them was Amany. I emailed the details to you. Read when you can! You will love it!”

I read and saw the images and lithographs and all of the newspaper reviews she sent. Seventeen-year-old Amany, a Devadasi, was as graceful as my art. So beautiful was her dance that sculptor August Barre created a bronze statue of her which stands even now in the Musee de Guimet, Paris. Why did she go to Europe?

Did Amany not think that people (“those women”) in Europe would strip her of her art, and take everything that was hers? Amany signed a contract for eighteen months. She was one of the group of eight artists benefit from this? The newspaper reviews showed that they performed at 150-200 venues!

This time the narrative of these Devadasis made me feel their presence. One part of me did not like that I did not take them seriously earlier. Perhaps it was my complacency! Perhaps it was because sometimes academic writing, especially from the West, can be very hard to understand. Another part of me lapped up—in awe—the pieces of evidence Priya uncovered. Yet, I was not willing to share them.

“The notes go higher, Akka,” said Sudha, singing it for me. Endendairindari kātu? Ethani ne vinnavittu? Parandādūkkonādārī pattalu pokēdāmanu. How many of them can Iward off? How much can I plead with them? I hear they are betting on taking you away.

Pattalu pokēdāmanu! That they will take you away!

Amany is now my art; she is mine. I needed my guru, Amma, to Mangatayaugu (Amma) to say to that. Priya suggested that we speak to my guru to ask her advice about the research. I took the lead and asked Amma to join a Zoom call. We listened while Amma told us about the Devadasi going to Europe in 1838. Amma blew me away with her awareness. “Pondicherry was under French rule. So was Yanam close to our Mummidivaram in the East Godavari district. One of our ancestors, Amany, is supposed to have travelled overseas. She should be from the early to mid-1800s because she is six generations earlier than I.” We were surprised! As the magnitude of what Amma told us dawned on us, a positive power engulfed both of us. Amma recognized the sketch in the lithographs she showed her, as that of Meesala Venkateswara, the deity of both Yanam and our hometown, Pedaparum. As I translated to Telugu the description of the dance, she quickly identified parts of the dances from the pieces she taught me. The music Amany danced to, had inspired many European composers living in Vienna. These musical works were played on Western instruments and their written musical scores remain to this day. As we went through them, I discovered one which was identical to the svapavalayi and gaptu varasu I performed from amma—I could feel her on my skin!

“Let us sing the last stanza, Akka” Mudamuto mā mudu muvvagopālasī Gādgilāna tanaikāmuna gūṭi iddāram. Mānu varavasamu vadalu ko Akka Padilamuga n jadana bāttu kattu kondunā (O my dear Muvvagopali)

When the two of us are spent and asleep in a happy embrace, I might lose my grip on you in a moment of weakness. So let me bind you to myself with my braid.

Can I really bind Amany? The only way I own her is through dance. I embody my art, my Amany, and stand confident. “Those women,” too, may have her now because she cannot be stolen from me if also dance and write about her. So now have Amany as she wished to be spoken about in writing, song, and dance.

Priya said the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra came to her and Hari Sivan, a Sāṅkṛiti/British veena player and composer who was her collaborator, and asked them if they wanted to continue the partnership.
that had been created the previous year. They wanted to continue exploring the relationships between Indian dance/music and Western music.

“Let’s dance her story, Priya,” I said to her. “She is a global artist. Let us do this project with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. She belongs to everyone who wishes to know her. The world should see and experience her grace. Let’s dance her story.”

So began the work. Melbourne-based musician, Uthra, transcribed the musical notes for “Malapou” and “Indianner Gallop,”7 into Carnatic svaras. These are two of the music pieces archived by the Symphony Orchestra. Uthra identified Indianner Gallop as Bhairavi. Another dance piece which found a place in the newspaper reviews was The Salute to the Rajah, The Salām Daruvu, or Salām Sabađam—an encomium with a salute which was an integral part of the Devadasi repertoire.

The description of the “Malapou” dance from the newspaper reviews brought a twinkle to Amma’s eyes. “They are mālippuvu (jasmine flowers),” she corrected. The dancer holds the garland of jasmine flowers and dances to music with very graceful, gliding movements. At the end of the piece, she winds it around the arm of the discerning spectator. She said the music could also be a svarapallavi. The description of the movements in “The Spectator” (1838) seemed like the movements I learned in a svarapallavi which was set to Anandabhairavi rāga. I told Priya we should use Anandabhairavi in this production because there are many pieces in my Kalāvantulu repertoire from earlier time periods in this rāga. Hari then composed a pattern based on the one I learned. But he tried to make it complicated. I told him to keep it simple and repetitive and not get into all of the garnakas (flourishes) present in the Carnatic music styles now. He listened and adapted it.

It was time to think of the dancing. I was excited to teach Priya, but she was hesitant: “I am not you, Yashoda! My body moves from the training of modern Bharatanatyam and Odissi to the karanas and kalaripayattu. It is, of course, sourced from the dance of the Devadasi originally, but I’m not sure if I should learn your dance, especially when you will not be dancing on stage with me.”8 Priya’s words repeatedly interrupted my thoughts as I tried to focus on the notes Sudha was teaching me.

The literature I was singing interrupted my thoughts. As I sang Padamugā nā jādanu baṭṭi kaṭṭu koṅdunā... keep you with me, securely, Priya’s words, “I am not you,” haughtily teased me. These interruptions seemed productive, and I allowed them to persist, much to Sudha’s perplexity. She did not understand why I could not grasp a simple note.

I decided to use this interruption as a rhetorical device to write my experience in this article (Srinivasan, “Material”). This is because it allows me to bring my bodily knowledges along with the theoretical knowledges that come to me, so my writing can be understood by many people. I knew my family was expanding. It wasn’t just Priya; along my journey I met many who were sensitive to the crucial role of the kalāvantulu women, the stigma attributed to them and, yet, genuinely respectful and embracing of my art and people.

When we began, Priya, Hari, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra insisted on Amma’s opinion on the production. They would not hear of doing this without her consent. As we proposed to put her art on a global platform, Amma was in joyful tears as she recounted how she was not comfortable talking about her kalāvantulu background even ten years ago. And as she was to see the stories of her ancestors come to life once again, she proudly claims her kalāvantulu lineage.

“Nā vidya ŏkkaṭe nāku gauravānni icḥchidi, Ammammagāru-Buli Venkatarattnamma gāru ānāde annūru. Eppātikinā i vidye rakṣiṭūndi” (Only my art has given me respectability). My grandmother, Buli Venkatrattnamma, told me in those days that the art alone would stand by me. Amma spontaneously blessed the project and the makers: “Mā pĕddavāḷḷa āśīsulu,” she said, transferring the blessings of the elders. I was amazed at Amma’s reaction. She was aware of the changed context of the Devadasi. While she respected and treasured her ancestors and the art handed down to her, she also understood that today’s Devadasi pervades dancing space and bodies. She did not rely on texts for her facts. The memory and intelligence in her dancing body were her knowledge base. That was her text. Her dancing body was her discourse.

I could not travel to Australia because of border lockdowns due to Covid, so I would be projected on a large screen. She, Hari, and the other musicians would perform live but they would interact with me on the screen. As I danced on the screen, images of Amany and Amma’s followed, while the orchestra played the music from 1838. In the lithograph, we perused. The women seemed to have considered the god, Meesala Venkateswara, as their king, and, reflexively, I chose to dance the Salām Daruvu, praising and saluting the king.

I am sometimes haunted by the history I carry in my body through my practice.

The repertoire I learned from Amma is truly a rich archive. My body bursts with deep-rooted information as I dance; the archive and the repertoire are forever in conversation (Taylor). Priya occupied the dialogic space as she danced a contemporary and experimental mix of Odissi, Bharatanatyam and kalaripayattu, but dressed in a costume that indicated the influence of the West through her tutu which was worn on top of parts of a sari. I encouraged Priya to perform a few movements from the kalāvantulu material. After all, the neo-classical dances are but an offshoot of the Devadasi repertoire.

There was Amany, Amma, and I “encountering” one another on an international platform once again. There was no morphing of identity, no hesitation or hiding. This situation left me with a feeling of fulfillment and hope.

“Akka! You opened up your voice! That Da... was perfect,” said Sudha happily. Of course, it was! No more hiding! No more keeping Krishna or my art just to myself. It is a new beginning to a story we thought had ended.

7 These musical compositions are described in the above mentioned newspapers as some of those to which Amany danced.

8 Karanas are often acknowledged as the most basic sequences of movement that characterise Indian dances. A karana is a combination of the movement of the hips, legs, feet and hand. Kalaripayattu is a martial art form.
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