

Abstract

This article relies on reflexive ethnographic methods to theorize artistic and creative ownership claims. It seeks agency for three women through writing and concrete production performance with a live audience. Focusing on the performance *Encounters*—a production based on the life story of the dancer, Amany of the early and mid-nineteenth century, I explore the history of a group of Indian dancers from Puducherry and Yanam who were taken to Europe in 1838 to perform at numerous European venues.<sup>1</sup> By revisiting the repertoire performed by them and the representation of the dancers, I argue that these dancers were and remain misrepresented in the historical record as Devadasis (“servants of god”), generally misunderstood to be prostitutes. These Devadasis were termed “La Bayaderes” to mean “a female dancer” in French. Autoethnography revealed facts that make these women at once relevant to the present-day performing artists in particular and society at large. This article is also a narrative of women claiming their little-known platform, as three histories of Amany, Mangatayaru, and I come together.

*Eṇḍu dācukonḍu ninnu? Yemi setu nenu? Where do I hide you? What should I do?*

I kept repeating this line with Sudha as she taught me to sing this song: “It is *da...cu*, Akka. *sa ni da pa*. Try to sing the notes.” I was struggling with the word *dācuko* (*hide*). The heroine in the song says to Krishna, “Where do I hide you? Your face exudes such beauty; it is impossible to hide you!”

Krishna pervades my life and is not different from my art. They are one and the same to me. I could hear Sudha’s sweet and slightly frustrated voice echo while my mind kept asking where and how I should hide this Krishna/my art. Does it have any meaning if I keep it/him to myself?

Sudha decided to move to the stanza.  
*Aṇḍiṇḍu tirugakurā ativalu nī toḷi*  
*Pōṇḍu kori yeveḷa pōgarucunnāru.*

Do not wander around, my dear. Those women are waiting out there to make you theirs.

I thought of the repertoire of the neo-classical dances

of South India, one of which I am trained to perform. So many other dancers learned with me, so many dancers are dancing, and hundreds, thousands, millions of them all over the world continue to do so. While some of them know that the source of their art is the Devadasi, others do not. Yet they continue to pillage the richness of the art that belonged to me and my ancestors. Today, I with the rest of them stand, in Urmimala Sarkar Muni’s words, as agencies of responsible representation of history/tradition/identity/transition/dignity/modernity/and respectability.

“Akka! You are missing the notes! *Ni ga ga ri* ..... *pōgarucunnāru* (waiting anxiously),” chimed Sudha. Of course, I missed the notes with these debilitating thoughts gnawing at me.

Priya<sup>2</sup> called just after class to continue a discussion we had started a few weeks earlier: “Yashoda! Did you know about the dancers from Pondicherry (now Puducherry) that went to Europe in 1838? You must have heard about them as a few people have written about them. A French impresario, E. C. Tardival took them to Paris and other places to perform.”

I did hear of this. I had read Joep Bor’s writing on their journey overseas. For some reason, it seemed like a myth back then—and I wasn’t paying attention. Nevertheless, even though these writings were interesting, I didn’t dwell on them too much, as they felt distant to me. Yet when Priya explained how she had been carefully gathering research around these women from 2001 to the present, and not published anything on it yet, I became excited. Somehow her sharing this with me became much more meaningful.

These dancing women are integral to the narrative of my life. I look at them and other ancestors in subjective reflexiveness through my practice and dialogic engagement—with my teachers, families, the neo-classical dance form and texts of Kuchipudi, the hallowed Sanskrit texts, and my fellow dancers. This multiplicity in my practice makes me consider the organic and deep connection of the human dancer to society as opposed to the idea that the dancer, like a goddess, is above mundane life! Academician and performer Pallabi Chakravorty bursts this notion: “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.”

“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! Did the troupe 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.<sup>3</sup> One part of me did not like that I did not take them seriously earlier. Perhaps it was my complacency! Perhaps it is 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.

*Eṇḍareṇḍarini kātu? Eṇṭani ne vinnaviṇṭu?*  
*Paṇḍemāḍukonnāraṭa paṭṭuku poyēdamanucu*  
How many of them can I ward off? How much can I plead with them? I hear they are betting on taking you away.

*Paṭṭuku poyēdamanucu!*  
That they will take you away!

Amany is now my art; she is mine. I needed my guru, Annabattula Mangatayaru (Amma) to say that to me. 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 Devadasis going to Europe in 1838. Amma blew me away with her awareness. “Pondicherry was under French rule. So was Yanam closer 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 stupefied! 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 we showed her, as that of Meesala Venkateswara, the deity of both Yanam and my hometown, Peddapuram. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 *svarapallavi*<sup>5</sup> and *gaptu varusa*<sup>6</sup> I learned from amma! Amany—I could feel her on my skin!

“Let us sing the last stanza, Akka”  
*Mudamoto mā muddu muvragopālaswāmi*  
*Gadigōṇna tamakamuna gūdi iddaramu*  
*Nidura paravaśamuna vadaluno kaugillu*  
*Paḍilamuga nā jadanu batti kattu kondunā*

(O my dear Muvragopala!)

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 I also dance and write about her. So we 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 Sivanesan, a Sri Lankan/British veena player and composer who was her collaborator, and asked them if they wanted to continue the partnership

<sup>3</sup> Later, I read Priya’s account of the Nachwalis in Coney Islands (Srinivasan, *Bodies*). Academician Avanti Meduri, or Avanti akka, as I call her, made an important observation that the embodied involvement of Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova in the exotic dances of the Orient stimulated the revival of Indian Classical Dance in India (Meduri). Dancer-choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh’s fascinating theatre work, *Bayadere: The Ninth Life* in March 2015 at Birmingham, U.K., also captured these Devadasis who travelled to Europe (Roy).

<sup>4</sup> This was something Priya said really surprised her and yet she found over 60 pieces of orchestral Western classical music that were inspired by the encounter.  
<sup>5</sup> This is a phrase of solfa syllables repeated in various tempi while the dancer performed choreographed movements.

<sup>6</sup> This refers to a spurt of pure dance performed extempore to the percussion and violin, generally after the performance of the love songs called jāvalis. This is a significant aspect of the Kalāvantulu (as the Devadasis were referred to in the Telugu speaking areas) repertoire.

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,”<sup>7</sup> 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 Śabdām*—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 *mallēpuvavu* (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 *svrapallavi*. The description of the movements in “The Spectator” (1838) seemed like the movements I learned in a *svrapallavi* which was set to *Ānandabhairavi rāga*. I told Priya we should use *Ānandabhairavi* 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 gamakas (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.”<sup>8</sup> 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 *Padilamuga nā jaḍanu baṭṭi kaṭṭu koṇḍunā*... *keep you with me, securely*, Priya’s words, “I am not you,” hauntingly 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 ökkate nāku gauravānni icchiṇḍi. Ammamagāru-Buli Venkataratnamma gāru ānāḍe annāru. Eppaṭikainā ī vidye rakṣistuṇḍani” (Only my art has given me respectability). My grandmother, Buli Venkataratnamma, told me in those days that the art alone would stand by me. Amma spontaneously blessed the project and the makers: “Mā pēddavāḷḷa 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 daunted 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, Karaṇas, 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...cu* 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!

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

<sup>8</sup> *Karanas* are often acknowledged as the most basic sequences of movement that characterize 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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