

Vajira: The Pioneering Female Dancer

Mirak Raheem

Vajira Chitrasena is regarded as a pioneer in the field of Kandyan dance, primarily for being the first female professional dancer. At nearly ninety, she was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2021, in recognition of her art form and her contribution to dance culture in Sri Lanka. Vajira has received numerous awards from the state and private institutions in Sri Lanka, and she has been the subject of numerous articles over the years. Most of the popular writings on Vajira highlight her critical contribution in advancing the female form of a traditionally male dance, paving the way for successive generations of professional female stage dancers. These commentaries that appeared in print and, later, in online media, also document the aesthetics of her dance and the supporting role she played to the acclaimed Kandyan dancer, Chitrasena, who was her partner on stage and in life. These accounts have, however, tended to ignore her role as a multifaceted artist. In addition to being a performer, Vajira is a choreographer of traditional dances and a co-creator of numerous productions; she has also been a teacher to numerous dancers over the decades and, in this process, she has developed her own, influential pedagogy for teaching Kandyan dance.

The inadequate manner in which Vajira's contribution has been documented is not unusual. It is part of a wider problem of gendered and simplistic historiographies. In order to understand this gap, it is useful to look at how the history of traditional dance in Sri Lanka is understood. Kandyan dance claims a history of over 2,500 years with its origins closely tied to a healing ritual, the *Kohomba Kankariya*, which is associated with Sinhala communities from and around the central highlands of the island. The tri-traditional dances—Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamuwa—are treated as indigenous dance forms of the island, while Bharatanatyam, although recognized as a representative dance form of the Tamil community of the island, is not often accorded the same status.¹ In pre-colonial times, the tri-traditional dances were used largely for ritualistic purposes by male practitioners to heal, to ward off evil, and to invoke blessings on individuals and communities. When Sri Lanka became an independent country in 1948, the fate of traditional dances associated with the island was in question, as over 400 years of colonial rule had altered belief systems

and weakened the socio-economic systems that supported the ritual and the traditional artists. During the later colonial period, Kandyan dance was treated more as an exotic spectacle to entertain visiting dignitaries, rather than an art form to be preserved and celebrated. It is only during the 1940s that it emerged on stage as stand-alone theatre entertainment, presented by both ritual masters (*gurunnanses*) and a new generation of dancers, including Chitrasena and, later, Vajira, who learned traditional dance for the purpose of performing on stage.²

Histories of the tri-traditional dances of Sri Lanka tend to highlight a handful of pioneering women, pointing out their significance as the first female dancers on stage and summarizing their life stories. Their contribution in these narratives is presented as creating a space for female dancers on stage. Yet, these female pioneers emerged on stage at a critical point in the journey of the tri-traditional dances from ritual space to stage. Temporally, this overlaps with the early efforts of their male counterparts, both the *gurunnanses* and the stage dancers who were attempting to “break in” audiences. While one-off performances of traditional dance would have drawn an audience for their novelty, these early performers had to “create” audiences through repeated performances and developing methods of sustaining their interest, including through choreography and theatre craft. Rarely do these popular histories seek to account for the multiple and varied roles these female pioneers played beyond carving out a place for women on stage, and it is seldom acknowledged that these women artists also transformed the dance in other ways, including as performers, teachers, choreographers, troupe leaders, producers, and costume designers.

Vajira was preceded by individual female dancers, such as Miriam de Saram and Chandralekha (Brenda Hilda Karunatilake), who broke new ground in the early 1940s, including the wearing of a version of the *Ves*, the ritual attire of the *gurunnanses*. Although the female dancer had antecedents (as recorded in historical texts, literature, and on rock and wood carvings), and was found in specific contexts in the pre-independence era, Kandyan dance, at least in its ritual form, had no formal place for her. Vajira is a key figure in the history

of Kandyan dance on stage as she is probably the first professional female dancer. Dance, for her, unlike for her predecessors, was a full-time vocation, not an amateur pastime. Her life story provides a useful prism to better understand the development and contribution of the female dancer beyond that of a performer and teacher to a co-conceiver who pushed the boundaries of the tri-traditional dances on stage.

The Embodiment of Lasya

Vajira chose dance rather reluctantly. Born on March 15, 1932 in Kalutara, a seaside town close to the capital city of Colombo, Vajira was one of seven children from a middle class family. As a child she tried to skip the classes at her home, which were taught by a striking young dancer, Chitrasena—who was then making a name for himself on stage. Encouraged by her mother, Vajira followed a series of dance classes in Kandyan and ‘oriental’ dance, a form of dance fusion sweeping across the Indian subcontinent and beyond—under various teachers. In 1946, she decided to join the Chitrasena Kalayathanaya, the dance school set up by Chitrasena, as a full-time student. She became a member of the troupe and, within two years, became a soloist.

As part of the Chitrasena Ensemble, Vajira went on to perform on stages in Sri Lanka and cultural capitals across the world, including Moscow, Berlin, New Delhi, London, and Sydney. She was considered the epitome of the female form of the dance and was referred to as the “prima ballerina of Kandyan dance.” While Kandyan is seen to be a more *tandava* (loosely translated as masculine) dance, akin to Kathakali, the advent of the female dancer was presented as the emergence of the *lasya*—or feminine—form of the dance.³ In the media, Vajira was described as embodying this *lasya* form of Kandyan dance: “I believe it was she who created out of this traditional *tandava* dance lyric a *lasya* dance of delicate beauty,” points out Bandula Jayawardene, art critic and visiting lecturer.⁴ Although Sri Lankan reviewers often highlighted her grace, they did not always recognize the underlying strength and weight that she brought to the dance and the efforts she made to challenge her male counterparts on stage and to match their steps and leaps.

It is only a handful of commentators, such as Ernest Macintyre, Bandula Jayawardene, and Samson

Abeyagunawardena,⁵ who, in short articles, have drawn attention to the breadth of her contribution. But a more detailed assessment of her work is lacking. Only one or two observers, including Sunila Abeysekera, have highlighted the personal challenges faced by Vajira and the enormous strength of personality she showed in defying social conventions.⁶ In addition to her multiple dance roles, Vajira was also a mother to three children: daughters Upeka and Anjalika, and son Anudatta. She was determined to continue performing and touring despite the physical challenges of motherhood; in 1957, barely three months after giving birth to her son, she was part of a dance troupe that toured the USSR. As a female dancer, regularly performing on stages across the country and later internationally, she served as a role model for young women passionate about taking up dancing as a vocation.

The Creator

Vajira served as a teacher to successive generations of dancers and continues to sit on the veranda of her studio apartment directly overlooking the dance studio to keep an eye on the classes. Beyond teaching sections of the traditional repertoire as taught to her by her teachers, Chitrasena and Lapaya Gurunnanse (who was also Chitrasena's guru), she developed her own pedagogy. Vajira took over effective charge of running the Kalayathanaya by the late 1950s, assisted by the more senior dancers in the ensemble. She developed a series of exercises for training dancers, which broke down Kandyan dance positions and movements. These exercises made the processes of teaching and learning much easier and ensured greater clarity and consistency in lines and stances. In doing so, she also expanded the range of movement in the genre, for instance, such as adding floor and kneeling exercises. This approach contrasts the ritual form, which has no movement in which the dancer lies at floor level. For inspiration, she drew from her exposure to other dance traditions, including classical ballet and contemporary dance. She utilized this inspiration during tours to Eastern Europe, the West, and Australia, or when artists, such as the contemporary dancer Martha Graham, visited the island in 1956.

While establishing herself as the principal female dancer in the Chitrasena Dance Company by the late 1950s, Vajira began exploring choreography. She

¹ Satkunaratham, Ahalya. “Staging War: Performing Bharata Natyam in Colombo, Sri Lanka.” *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 45, no.1, 2013, pp. 81-103.

² See Mantillake, Sudesh. *Colonial Choreography: Staging Sri Lankan Dancers Under British Colonial Rule from the 1870s to the 1930s*. University of Maryland, 2018; Reed, Susan A. *Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010; Nurnberger, Marianne. *Dance is the Language of the Gods*. VU University Press, Amsterdam, 1998; Amunugama, Sarath. *Kohomba Kankariya, The Sociology of a Kandyan Ritual*. Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2021.

³ *Tandava* is a term used in the Indian subcontinent to describe masculine dance styles or forms. Its origins lie in the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva. *Lasya* is seen as feminine and associated with the Goddess Parvati.

⁴ Jayawardene, Bandula. “Vajira and the Ballet-art.” *Nrtya Puja, A Tribute to Chitrasena 50 Years in the Dance*. 1987, p.14.

⁵ Op. cit.; Macintyre, Ernest. “Towards a Biography of Vajira” *Vajira: A Dancer to Treasure*, 1996; Abeygunawardena, Samson. “Keeper of a Great Tradition.” *Vajira: A Dancer to Treasure*, 1996

⁶ Abeysekera, Sunila. “Conversations with Vajira: 1996.” *Vajira, In Celebration of Fifty Years of Dance*, 1996.

ventured into this area when creating productions for her child students. It is remarkable that, barely a decade after Chitrasena's attempts at devising mudra natya or Sinhala ballet, Vajira took on the challenge of exploring the medium for child performers in the early 1950s. Mudra natya emerged around the 1930s and 1940s, marking a transition from dance dramas; while the former used dance as the primary narrative tool, the latter used a range of media such as song, spoken word, as well as dance.⁷ Chitrasena's mudra natya, such as *Karadiya* (1961) and *Kinkini Kolama* (1978), are seen as some of the best examples of the medium. Vajira replicated his approach of using Kandyan dancing as the framework for choreography without being bound by it: while drawing from Kandyan dancing positions and steps, she integrated natural movement and mime.

Although Vajira's "children's ballets" employed simple story lines, they were often grand productions with large casts, original music scores, and fantastical sets and costumes. Her productions did not seek to compromise on originality or artistry, even while they provided space for children of different ages to perform. These productions often involved collaborations with some of the leading Sinhala musicians of the day, such as Amaradeva and Ananda Samarakoon, both of whom practiced and lived in the Colpetty school. This school was where Vajira taught, but was also her home. She created eleven children's mudra natya over her career. By the 1960s, she was able to use her choreographic skills to devise sequences in Chitrasena's mudra natya. One of her earliest efforts was the swan sequences in the 1963 staging of *Nala Damayanthi*, in which she also played one of the principal roles.

The subject of attribution can be a tricky issue in any art form that requires collaboration. Mudra natya required multiple artists to design and create the different elements, including the plot, choreography, music, and design elements. Understanding Chitrasena and Vajira's contribution to the mudra natya from the 1960s is to recognize the partnership they created and the ecosystem they fostered to unite fellow artists working in different fields. Vajira's role evolved over time from choreographing sequences to taking on more of a central role, including to develop the plot in the production *Shiva Ranga* (1986). "When I started to experiment with creative dance, Chitra[sena] did not try to stop me. With fifteen-minute ballets, I got more experience to do larger stories. I improved my experiences in creating movement and telling stories through dance."⁸

⁷ Raheem, Mirak. "Chitrasena's Mudra Natya: Embodying the Form." *The Sunday Times*, January 24, 2021

⁸ Interview with Vajira

Aside from mudra natya, her choreography extended to re-setting or creating new traditional items, including collaborations with the master drummer and composer Piyasara Silpathipathi, and staged productions devoted to presenting the tri-traditional dance forms.

Strikingly, from a global perspective, the role of choreographer, even in contemporary dance, continues to be male dominated in many contexts. But Vajira and her South Asian counterparts have created a strong and vibrant female tradition that continues to this day and is exemplified by the women who currently head the Chitrasena Dance Company and Kalayathanaya.

The material for this article is drawn from research carried out for a soon-to-be published book on Chitrasena by this same author.



©Chitrasena Dance Company