When Bharatanatyam Moved from the Popular to the Classical

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Abstract

This paper is abstracted from my larger research where I study the aesthetics of bharatnatyam through the axis of spectacularization of the bharatanatyam body at different points of its history. I focus on the period between the end of 1950s and 1970s, which sets off the rupture between popular aesthetics in film and classical aesthetic in the mainstream bharatanatyam world. This period led to the complete transition of transmission techniques to a tertiary model of learning from its primary habitus in hereditary practitioner households spearheaded as early as 1936 by Rukmini Arundale through her institution of mass learning and transmission, Kalakshetra. Several dance schools mushroomed among the bharatantyam middle and upper class, largely populated by upper-caste, Brahmin female students of hereditary *nattuvanar* teachers following the lead set by Arundale's tertiary model of transmission. This period was punctuated by a loss of dancing bodies, practices, and methods that irrevocably impacted how dance is being transmitted, presented, and assimilated by bharatnatyam practitioners today.

Keywords
Bharatanatyam, Pedagogy, Spectacle,Structures of feeling

Introduction

Bharatanatyam dance in the popular narrative has claimed an unbroken legacy of dance aesthetics by tracing itself to temple sculptures and Sanskrit texts dating as far back as two million years (Subrahmanyam 10). Many scholars have challenged this "mytho-poetic" historical narrative (Soneji and Peterson; Soneji, *Bharatanatyam: A Reader* and *Unfinished Gestures*; Harp, "Rewriting"; Meduri, *Nation*; Srinivasan). Taking this discourse as a departure point, my research traces the aesthetic history of the bharatanatyam body between the early to mid-twentieth century and current times (Mahadevan). The journey of bharatanatyam aesthetics even in this short period is a history of rupture, loss, realignment, and calibration.

Apart from the somatic methods used to discipline the physical dancing body, the hegemonic players or forces—upper-caste educated elites, and the prevailing patriarchy—from the early twentieth century have used the body of the female dancer to further tenets of nationalism, and upper-caste Hindu womanhood (Anagol; Anandhi; Ramaswamy; Silva; Sinha; Sreenivas; Sunder Rajan; Chatterjee). Now during the age of social media, the Hindu woman continues to be a spectacle, though with the additional qualities of being independent, expressive, and bold as a means of transitioning the bharatanatyam dancer to the global stage.[1] Thus, while the hegemonic discourse in the early twentieth-century muted female sexuality, filmmakers, teachers, and the audience have foregrounded it, though by masking it in more appealing discourses of spirituality and national pride. This disciplined, gendered, and sexualized body continues to sustain a spectacle and steers the direction of aesthetics in the bharatanatyam field.

I have divided the aesthetic history of bharatanatyam into three different waves each shaped by distinct socio-political-economic forces. Each of these drivers shape the aesthetic orientation of bharatanatyam, positioning it as a spectacle for popular consumption in that period and thereby place certain demands on the body and mind of the bharatanatyam dancer. The pedagogical methods within bharatanatyam classrooms and the performances engendered by those methods and dance techniques, respond to these macro drivers and steer the aesthetic orientation of the field.

The major driver for the first wave, from the 1930s to the 1960s, was the much-discussed anticolonial nationalism (Anagol; Anandhi; Ramaswamy; Silva; Sinha; Sreenivas; Sunder Rajan; Chatterjee). I present globalization as the major driver in the second wave, between the 1960s and early 2000s. I mark the final and current wave as beginning in the early twenty-first century and its major driver as neoliberalism played out predominantly through social media and other such digital representations. The bharatanatyam body veers towards a particular axis of homogeneity during each wave in response to the driver shaping it—nationalism, globalization, and/or neoliberalism.

Furthermore, the effect of each of these waves on the bharatanatyam body and aesthetics has been cumulative. Anticolonial nationalism removed certain aspects of the dance and added others to make the dance palatable for the emerging middle class and appropriate for its "respectable" young women. Globalization brought with it a certain adventure, where dancers started to gradually move away from the comfort zone of their primary schools of learning and were exposed to more ways of dancing, through both collaborative and competitive means. The transnational flow of visual culture opened up new methods of cultural production and assimilation that impacted mainstream bharatanatyam practice. The political economy of dance—venues, funders, and artists—concentrates on maximizing the frequency and reach of market engagements in the field by using technologies of dissemination and elitist access to information guiding aesthetic decisions in the bharatanatyam marketplace.

For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing on the end of the first wave from the late fifties to the beginning of the second wave from the early sixties to the seventies. While globalization has already reared its head by the mid-sixties, I will not be delving in detail on its impact on bharatanatyam aesthetics in this paper.[2] The period from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of 1960s moving into the second wave deserves attention as it is ridden with rupture and loss that have shaped the ongoing aesthetic direction of bharatnatyam.

This paper narrates the story of this rupture and loss by analyzing:

a. the divide between popular and classical aesthetics created in the early twentieth century when bharatanatyam moved from the popular aesthetic of the movies into the classical aesthetic of bharatanatyam mainstream as we know it today.

b. the shifts in knowledge transmission from its primary habitus in hereditary practitioner households to the emerging middle class. Knowledge transfer in hereditary practitioner households were through immersive and lived-knowledge transmision. However, the students of these hereditary practitioners from the emerging middle class extracted portable modules of knowledge for the purpose of mass transmission. This diluted, modular, and fragmented understanding of the bharatanatyam tradition is what has been transmitted since the mid-twentieth century in dance classrooms around the world.

c. the ways in which upper-caste female hereditary dancers formed their own aesthetic lineage, but claimed a continuity in traditional knowledge by attaching themselves to the hereditary lineage of their nattuvanar-teachers who hailed from hereditary practitioner families.

A Brief History of Dance in the Movies

Before bharatanatyam developed into an independent practice of its own with designated venues, dance institutions, audience members, and festivals, cinema offered an important space for generating awareness of and garnering acceptance for the dance form. Male teachers and choreographers or *nattuvanars* from hereditary practitioner families, who sought avenues to establish themselves and fill the void created by the erasure of the devadasi socioeconomic model of living and sustenance, entered the movie industry as choreographers.[3] Movies were a stopgap arrangement before these male members from the hereditary practitioner families moved on to establish schools as dance teachers. Male *nattuvanars* like K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai (1921–1974), Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, Vaideeswaran Koil Meenakshisundaram Nattuvanar (dates unknown), V. S. Muthuswamy Pillai (1921–1992), Kutralam Ganesan Pillai (1918–1983), and Kancheepuram Ellappa Pillai (1913–1974) belonged to the newly formed caste of Isai Vellalars (Soneji, *Unfinished*, 112–160), and were among the choreographers who established themselves in the movies at this time (Krishnan,161–202). These *nattuvanars* were the conduit through which the dance moved away from the bodies of Isai Vellalar dancers to women outside the community (Srinivasan). The movies created an opportunity for *nattuvanars* to establish themselves and prove their expertise to a larger public in this newly emerging bharatanatyam field.

By the end of the 1950s several of these *nattuvanars* exited the movie industry and set up dance schools outside among the rising upper- and middle-class society. This was a significant period of shift in pedagogical methods from a primary method of learning and knowledge transmission to a to tertiary one. This paper will focus on this period of bharatanatyam's aesthetic history and discuss the censoring of bodies, practices, and repertoires that took place at this time. Several practices, bodies, and repertoires were added to the corpus at this time, too, which changed the composition of the dances, aesthetics, and public reception of bharatanatyam.

1 I use the word "Hindu" instead of "Indian" as bharatanatyam dance, since its reconstruction in the early twentieth century, has been a predominantly a Hindu dance form. While a very small minority of non-Hindus pursue the dance form, they largely adopt practices, names, languages, and other markers to pass as Hindu in the bharatanatyam mainstream.

2 This paper is an abstracted version of my longer research and study. For a more detailed understanding of the three waves and their impact on bharatanatyam aesthetics see Mahadevan, *Bharatanatyam Body*.

3 Much has been written about the complicated sociopolitical history of bharatanatyam between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that led to the disenfranchisement of female hereditary practitioners of the art form commonly referred as devadasis. For a detailed account of this history with primary and secondary sources refer Soneji (*Bharatanatyam*); Meduri, and Srinivasan.

Popular and Classical Aesthetic

In the early twentieth century, bharatanatyam was establishing itself as an "urban, devotional and Sanrkitized cultural practice. The language of classicism was first applied to bharatanatyam only during the process of its reinvention at the hands of the English-educated Brahmin elites in Madras in the 1930s" (Krishnan 7). Thus, the classical arts were constructed in opposition to the popular arts such as cinema. The ways *nattuvanar*-choreographers responded to the music presented to them in the movies reflect the essence of the regional and vernacular cultural origins of bharatanatyam. However, with the rise of Indian nationalism, when the country was marching towards independence, upper-caste, educated elites reconstructed several indigenous artistic traditions into what we consider "classical" today. Indigenous practices in multiple parts of India were reinvented with imagined traditions for nationalistic purposes (Soneji and Peterson; Bhakle; Meduri; Harp; Soneji, *Bharatanatyam* and *Unfinished Gestures*; Subramanian; Weidman). Upper-caste/class, educated elites reformulated these indigenous art forms to serve as a source of national pride—cultural nationalism—through methods deemed scientific and aligned with ideals of colonial modernity. These methods included standardizing pedagogy, institutionalizing transmission, theorizing through Sanskrit texts or *shastras,* and undermining practice by relegating it as whimsical. . For instance, Vallathol Narayanan Menon (1879–1958) established Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930s in Kerala to formalize transmission of *kathakali*, *kudiyattam*, and *mohiniattam*. Rukmini Arundale (1904–1986) founded Kalakshetra (1936) to institutionalize the transmission of bharatanatyam. Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872–1931) started the Gandharva Maha Vidyalaya (1901) in Lahore to formalize what is now known as Hindustani music. Vishnu Narayan Bakthande (1860–1936) formalized music practiced in North India by introducing systems of learning through notation and was one of the founding members of a music department at Maris College in Lucknow (1926). All of these organizations invested in standardizing pedagogy and methods of knowledge transfer, enabling an uninterrupted process of transmission of arts. During this early- to mid-twentieth century period, the term "classical" became associated with the modified, abstracted versions of indigenous, hereditary art forms.

Specifically with respect to bharatanatyam, female hereditary practitioners danced in the courts, in the temples, in ritual and non-ritual contexts, in the homes of people, at community festivals. However when the dance moved predominantly to a concert hall, a new "classical" repertoire and therefore pedagogy was formalized. A syncretic dance form that could be "less formal" at times was rearranged selectively into the bharatanatyam that we know today.

Following her emphatic condemnation of bharatanatyam as it appeared in the movies Rukmini Arundale, founder of Kalakshetra (1936), was one of the prime shapers of this "classical" imaginary. Amanda Weidman refers to an article written by Rukmini Arundale in *Creative Spirit*, published by the Theosophical Society in the early 1940s. Arundale calls attention to this shift in aesthetics of dance as an awakening from the physical level of the "acrobat" to a higher level where the slightest of movements conveys higher expressions and meaning: "A tiny finger lifted with meaning," she concluded, "is far more thrilling than all the turns and gyrations and tricks of the circus performer" (Weidman 203).

This period from the late 1950s into the second wave at the beginning of 1960s marked the move from popular to classical aesthetics paralleling the move of *nattuvanars* from the movie industry into forming what is known today as the bharatanatyam mainstream. What was dance in the movies? What aspects of its aesthetics framed it as more popular than classical? What were the series of events that prompted *nattuvanar*-choreographers to exit movies? The next section of this paper will address these questions.

In his book *Celluloid Classicism*, Hari Krishnan elaborates, through detailed ethnographic research, the status of dance in the movies. His study is a discourse on colonialism, nationalism, orientalism, and rising patriarchy, and how these have affected the conception and presentation of dance in Tamil cinema and how in turn cinema dance influenced public sentiment. Putcha discusses a similar, concurrent process in Telugu movies in which a "constellation of social forces such as anticolonialism, nationalism, and migration have at once amplified and ventriloquized" the female dancer's voice (Putcha 3). I will be drawing from Krishnan's detailed research along with my own to draw attention to ways in which movement aesthetics, body holds, and sartorial choices impacted the aesthetics of bharatanatyam as it moved from the realm of the popular in the movies to the classical in the mainstream bharatanatyam world.

One of the most prominent dancer-actors during the first wave who influenced public sentiment towards bharatanatyam was Kamala Lakshman, better known as "Baby Kamala." By the late 1930s, dance had entered the cinematic medium, and Kamala Lakshman's representations of nation and womanhood through her dance was integral to bringing bharatanatyam aesthetics into middle-class homes. The South Indian film industry with its male directors, script writers, choreographers, musicians, set designers, costume designers, and producers used the body of the female bharatanatyam dancer to transmit ideals of nation building and womanhood to the emerging Indian middle class.

Kamala started learning dance from Kattumanarkoil Muthukumaran Pillai (1874–1960) before moving to Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai in the 1940s. Both were male teachers from the hereditary family of practitioners. Kamala's presence in the movies from the 1940s through the early 1960s was very important in shaping bharatanatyam aesthetics. Her status as a Brahmin woman, and the fact that she was cast to embody national spirit and ideal Hindu womanhood, inspired several Brahmin girls to take up the art form as a hobby. Kamala's roles in the movies centered more around herself as a dancer than as a character in the narrative. These roles were often desexualized, for example when she plays the sister of the film's protagonist in *Nam Iruvar* (1947) or acts as a deity in mythological or devotional films like *Sri Valli* (1945) and *Meera* (1945). In other films she appears in a dance number without playing a part in the main picture. Many of these dances, especially between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s, were patriotic. She was also popularly referred to as "Kumari Kamala." "Kumari" references an unmarried status, akin to the prefix "Miss." This nickname advanced the idea that dance could be a finishing school for young girls of that time. Performing the patriotic, unmarried, Brahmin dancer; the endearing sister; or the mythological deity muted Lakshman's sexuality and brought her closer to her middle-class audience. These markers of womanhood and nationhood were critical and formative in the public consciousness at this time for building a relationship between the emerging middle- and upper-classes and bharatanatyam, especially after the public stigma that had been systematically placed on the dance and its hereditary dancers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The rounded upper body when bending forward is not a common aesthetic today (Kamala Lakshman in 'Chori Chori,' 1956

Kamala Lakshman's dance in the movies between 1940s and late 1950s—many of which were choreographed by her teacher Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai and later by K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai, P. S. Gopalakrishnan and others—differed markedly from Rukmini Arundale's aesthetic leanings. For instance, in the movie *Chori Chori* (1956), Kamala Lakshman dances a *thillana*, an item-genre that is typically performed as part of the bharatanatyam repertoire.[4] Even though this is much later than when Rukmini Arundale founded Kalakshetra, I invoke this moment to highlight Kamala's way of dancing, which was passed on to her by her teachers Muthukumar Pillai and Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai. The choreographers who are credited in the movie *Chori Chori* are hereditary *nattuvanars*, K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai and P. S. Gopalakrishnan. The dance is performed in a proscenium setting with the dancer wearing a typical bharatanatyam costume. The almost four-minute-long *thillana* features many *adavus* that can be recognized as part of the vocabulary of dance as it is practiced today.[5] However, her body posture is very different from that of dancers today. Today performers are taught to have an erect and extended spine, whereas Kamala's spine appears to be rounded. She does not hold the turned-out plié position in a firm and clear manner throughout the dance as is expected by current teachers. By maintaining *aramandi* or bent-knee position throughout the dance, the technically proficient performer also maintains a particular height; but Lakshman moves up and down, regarded as less proficient by most aesthetic standards today. In my opinion, none of her body bends originate from a centered pelvis as is emphasized in bharatanatyam training today, rather the dancer shifts

4 See https://youtu.be/z4zVZL5B0LQ (00:37–00:41 min).

5 An adavu is a basic unit of bharatanatyam movement vocabulary.

her weight to one side while bending to her side.[6] During my conversation with her sister Radha (1942–) she emphasized that many of Kamala's movements were choreographed to respond to a more sensational aesthetic required of the movies (Ramanathan 2020). We can observe this in the dances in movies at that time. While there were many recognizable adavus, we can also notice other movements like quick turns not typical of the bharatanatyam movement repertoire. Although movements might be drawn from other idioms, in dances like the *thillana* in *Chori Chori*, the actor is largely presented as a bharatanatyam dancer—her hair, dress, makeup, and jewelry align with the commonly received aesthetics of bharatanatyam—and

Kamala Lakshman was known for her acrobatic moves (*Chori Chori,* 1956)

the basic body posture might still be very representative of the bharatanatyam aesthetics of those times. I also draw attention to the body hold and posture: She does not have an erect spine, and her body bends without rigorous attention to the core. These were characteristics of bharatanatyam at that time. Her contemporaries also possessed a more supple way of holding the body, which might have enabled them to do better body bends and "acrobatic moves" (as Rukmini Arundale called them), but was not favored by the formative classical idiom outside of the movies.

In the Tamil film *Dr. Savithri* (1955), performers Sayee and Subbulakshmi present a dance in a proscenium setting that seems like a typical bharatanatyam performance. Even though their dance is choreographed by Muthuswamy Pillai who worked under Muthukumaran Pillai and Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai who in turn taught Rukmini Devi, one observes that our current standards of an erect spine and firmly held hand gestures with lifted elbows is not emphasized. The song praises the male protagonist, possibly a male deity or a local lord. However, if we look at the dancers' bodies, they are not holding their bodies tall, as students are taught today, but rather there is a softness in the leg, and the knees seem to move fluidly. When they use their hands to gesture, they do not fully extend their arms to form angular lines as dancers are taught in classrooms today.

Video clips of female hereditary dancer Balasaraswati (1918–1984) also show that her style of dancing did not have the erect spine of Kalakshetra dancers, although it is a little more angular than both Kamala Lakshman's and Sayee and Subbulakshmi's dance in the movies at that time. This difference could be because most of Kamala, Sayee, and Subbulakshmi performances are part of movies whereas Balasaraswati's dance is in a proscenium setting. We may see more fluidity in film dancers because they perform inside the cinema medium, but also because during this period—the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s—many of the body positions performed by cinema dancers that required suppleness were relegated as not "classical" enough by the bharatanatyam mainstream.

Kamala was much younger than Balasaraswati, and when Kamala was a child artist in the movies and was developing her career as a solo dancer outside of cinema under the guidance of her *nattuvanar* teacher Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, Bala was already in her thirties. Bala's dance did not have the body bends and athleticism of Kamala's, but she still possessed a suppleness in the way she held her body that seemed more typical of dance during the 1940s and early 1950s. I am contrasting a supple body hold to the erect postures that was later introduced as the norm largely by Kalakshetra and has come to stay. Beryl de Zoete (1879–1962), is a critic and ethnologist of Dutch descent, who traveled independently in South Asia and wrote three ethnographies. She visited India in the 1950s and in a chapter dedicated to Balasaraswati

6 See post by dancer-researcher, Swarnmalya Ganesh as she emphasizes this aspect of "finding the hip" in her recent post on Instagram. Here she terms *sadir* as the older version of what we practice as bharatatanatyam today. It needs a longer discussion to validate and nuance this argument of Ganesh but for our immediate purpose I draw attention to these two videos to elaborate on the difference between Kamala Lakshman's body hold and what is assimilated as bharatanatyam aesthetics today. https://www.instagram.com/reel/CU45GaCD7n8/?igshid=MWZjMTM2ODFkZg== (October 11, 2021); https://www.instagram.com/reel/CU7rlJDBIja/?igshid=MWZjMTM2ODFkZg== (October 12, 2021).

in her book *The Other Mind: A Study of Dance in South India*, De Zoete writes about a dance concert by Kamala, in order to set her apart from Balasaraswati. She reports that Kamala performed in a space that could accommodate around seven thousand people. While De Zoete favorably comments on Kamala's *abhinaya* (facial expression), and calls her a "born dancer," she does not favor the acrobatic body practices in Kamala's performance and condemns them as "vulgarisation of Bharata Natya." She draws the reader's attention to a snake-charming dance in which Kamala, whom she refers to as the "commercialized young dancer," introduced "backward bends, serpentine coils and continually writhing arms, which are as much out of place in Bharata Natya as they would be in classical ballet" (182). She notes that the "not classically minded" crowd broke into loud applause every time Kamala's feet touched the back of her head (182–3). De Zoete's disdain for Kamala's snake dance with acrobatic feats reflects the sentiment of the times. Kamala was accompanied by her teacher, hereditary practitioner Ramaiah Pillai, in this concert. The implication was that these moves were introduced in the main body of the dance under his approval and guidance. These moves that were sometimes relegated and eschewed as not "classical" enough were part of the choreographic choices by hereditary *nattuavanars* like Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai. In the same chapter De Zoete applauds Balasaraswati for her simplicity and purity of style. While Kamala stayed away from the erotic *javalis* and the gestures associated with them, she retained some of the acrobatic moves that were choreographed for her by Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. Balasaraswati, on the other hand, was from the hereditary practitioner community, and while she stayed away from the "acrobatic feats" of Kamala, she argued for sensuality in the dance, as according to her, all of dance was spiritual including its erotic elements. But the "classically minded" had to leave out both the erotic javalis of Bala and the acrobatic moves of Kamala, leaving space for a newly forming aesthetic of the then bharatanatyam mainstream.

There is a clear parallel between the history of bharatanatyam aesthetics from the early twentieth century, which veered toward spectacularization, and the history of yoga of that time. The orientalist discourse revealed through colonial records on yoga between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries indicate a moral castigation—"disgust and morbid fascination"—of yogins who perform postural austerities (Singleton 6). It was exoticized, and to that extent was a spectacle that made them feature in these colonial records and added to the colonial imaginary about faraway exotic lands in the east (Said)). But the practice was considered by Europeans and English-educated, elite Indians as backward and superstitious, without a place among the prevailing colonial modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Well before the intervention of the Europeans, the postural contortions associated with hatha yoga was considered a "ritual pollution for caste Hindus" (Singleton 6). The specific hatha yoga practices that involved these postural austerities was left out of circulation before the 1920s and gained importance only after they were connected with the discourse of health and well-being.

Set within the same timeframe and colonial context, this contempt for postural austerities in bharatanatyam precluded many movements from entering the emerging classical aesthetic of the dance form. This contempt persisted well into the twentieth century and was shared by Europeans like De Zoete and elite Indians like Arundale. The "acrobatic" dancing disliked by Indian elites was also documented in colonial records from the nineteenth century and later in colonial Madras in the twentieth century.[7] They carried on into the cinematic medium with dancers like Kamala. In films, the female dancer continued to be the desired visual spectacle.

Sayee and Subbulakshmi, disciples of V. S. Muthuswamy Pillai, like Kamala, performed exclusively in the role of dancers or were presented as sisters to the protagonist. For instance, they appeared in *Malai Kallan*, a blockbuster movie released in 1954, as sisters of the hero, the reigning super star, M.G. Ramachandran, who later became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. They were never glamorized; on the contrary, their casting elevated the status of their identities. Their swift knee drops were athletic and can be compared to Kamala's acrobatic moves. It kept the spectacle alive in their dancing, such that they were popularly referred to as *pambara sahodarigal,* or sisters who spin like a top. (Vijayaraghavan, *A Marve*l 19). This move, and their athleticism more generally, stayed within the cinematic sphere. Similar to Kamala's snake dancing, their athleticism did not find a place within the movement vocabulary of the "classically oriented" bharatanatyam mainstream.

The reflexivity that Arundale brought to her pedagogical methods at Kalakshetra caused a radical rupture in the aesthetics of the dance form. What we consume as bharatanatyam today traces its origin not to a distant past, or to the past represented by the hereditary performers of Thanjavur, but to this legacy of rupture conceived by Rukmini Arundale at Kalakshetra in the 1930s.

7 See De Zoete (p. 165) for a colonial account of acrobatic dance written in 1870. Also see Soneji ("Performing Pasts" 5), where a primary source article by P. Ragaviah Charry from 1806 explains that young girls need great "agility of constitution" to dance bharatanatyam. See also, Pattabhiraman (The Whole World 25) for Balasaraswati's account of dancers performing brave acrobatic feats while dancing Viribhoni Ata Talam varnam in three tempos.

As a traditional practitioner, Bala positioned herself contrary to Rukmini Devi, an upper-caste, Brahmin dancer. She challenged Rukmini's effort to "cleanse" the repertoire, arguing that everything that is part of the dance is an offering to God and that there was no need to cleanse it, if the dancer approached spiritually.[8] However, they were both responsive to the rhetoric of anticolonial nationalism, rooted in Hindu spirituality, finding form in the arts. This spirituality was positioned in opposition to the Western materialism. The knee drops, the acrobatic back bends, the *rati* mudras and many other embodied practices, such as biting the lower lip to show erotic longing, a movement of the shoulder to show displeasure called *toal thalli* (Samson 79) or pushing one's shoulder were ejected from the aesthetic vocabulary of the "classical" idiom of dance.[9] These moves represented a physicality, sexuality, and materiality that was undesirable in the spiritual framing of the emerging Indian sentiment. However, the dominant feature of the Kalakshetra aesthetic lies in its overpowering physicality. While Rukmini Arundale criticized a certain kind of physicality, she embraced another. She opposed any element of spectacle that she saw as preventing the dance from reaching the spiritual realm, its true purpose. Ironically, the means she used to realize this spirituality was derived from a more globalized, Western aesthetic of lines and angles, creating yet another visual spectacle.

Primary to Tertiary Methods of Knowledge Transmission

The beginning of 1960s through the 70s saw the mushrooming of several dance schools set up by hereditary practitioners and sometimes senior students of hereditary practitioners. This was a significant period that clearly marked a shift in pedagogical methods from a primary to a tertiary, or a more modular method of learning and knowledge transmission. While this move to tertiary learning was initially marked by the inception of Kalakshetra in 1936 and from there proceeded steadily but sporadically, the 1960s marked the beginning of a more pervasive shift into a tertiary method of knowledge transmission across the bharatanatyam dance field.

Rukmini Arundale, the founder and visionary behind Kalakshetra, faced initial resistance from the traditional *nattuvanars* of devadasi households to learning dance. Rukmini was 23 years old when she saw her first bharatanatyam performance and was in her late twenties or early thirties when she ventured into learning bharatanatyam. The teachers from traditional families were skeptical of an upper-caste, relatively older woman learning their art. In Leela Samson's biography of Rukmini Arundale, she recounts the hesitation of senior teacher Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai when asked to teach Arundale:

> "I do not feel inclined to do so. You are a rich lady, a society woman and from the Brahmin community. Dance for you is only a pastime. It will not be a profession, like it is for those I teach. Their life is hard. I am very strict with them. They work seven to eight hours a day. If they do not dance properly, I am severe with them. I cannot do all this with you (Samson 80).

Here Pillai expresses apprehension to teach Rukmini Arundale whose assimilation of the dance form would stem from a secondary or tertiary habitus rather than primary one, as in the case of the traditional devadasi dancer.

Wacquant (2013) elaborates on Bourdieu's concept of primary and secondary habitus in his essay "Homines in Extremis: What Fighting Scholars Teach Us about Habitus": "The primary habitus is the set of dispositions one acquires in early childhood, slowly and imperceptibly, through familial osmosis and familiar immersion; it is fashioned by tacit and diffuse "pedagogical labor with no precedent"; it constitutes our baseline social personality as well as the basis for the ulterior constitution of any other habitus" (Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction* 6). Meanwhile, the secondary habitus is any system of transposable schemata that becomes grafted subsequently, through specialized pedagogical labor that is typically shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization. "This distinction echoes the contrast established by Bourdieu between "the two modes of acquisition of culture," the familial and the academic, the experiential and the didactic, which indelibly stamp one's relation to culture and the character of one's cultural capital, of which habitus is the embodied form (N, *Distinction*, 65-8). The first spawns the ease and insouciance that define excellence; the second bears the mark of effort and tension born of ascesis" (Wacquant 7). This elaboration

8 See Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, pp. 95–111 where he presents the problematic nature of *javalis*. These erotic *javalis* were the casualty in the crossfire between colonial modernity and emergent nationalism in the early to mid-twentieth century. They were largely censored from the repertoire of "classical" bharatanatyam.

9 Soneji talks about "*rati* mudras," a gamut of gestures indicating the different lovemaking positions that were also ejected from the gestural vocabulary of dance during its classicalization.*(Unfinished Gestures* 105). Nandini Ramani, a senior disciple of Balasaraswati who has retained the core of Balasaraswati's aesthetics, continues to use this embodied practice today.

of primary and tertiary habitus maps perfectly on to the habitus of the devadasi women, to which Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai refers, and the habitus Rukmini Devi represents respectively. More importantly, it maps to the tertiary habitus that defines all students of bharatanatyam, including myself, who are not from a hereditary community of practitioners.

During this first wave, the spirit of anticolonial nationalism was the overall driver for the different creative and structural choices that were made to the bharatanatyam idiom and therefore to the body of the bharatanatyam dancer. However, the prominence of the tertiary habitus, for the most part triggered by Rukmini Arundale during the first wave, was a structural change introduced into the field of bharatanatyam, and the only mode for the "cultural acquisition" of bharatanatyam today. This pedagogical labor, which is shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization, was the basis for Rukmini Arundale's Kalakshetra and all subsequent methods of bharatanatyam transmission. This tertiary method of cultural acquisition has allowed for far-reaching access to bharatanatyam and its ongoing transmission. This tertiary method of knowledge transmission has had a cumulative and irreversible effect on the bharatanatyam body, its idiom, aesthetic orientation, structures of transmission, and its reception in public consciousness.

Wacquant (2013) argues that knowledge gained through this method (tertiary) is grounded in a primary habitus, in this case, nation, gender, caste, class, etc., and is mediated through a scholastic habitus or a system of learning that becomes "both a motivating resource and a built-in hindrance to gaining mastery of a corporeal craft, insofar as it inclines the apprentice to a reflexive attitude" (7). I observe that this hindrance that Wacquant mentions is a crucial factor in Rukmini Arundale's assimilation of the art in her body, given how it is loaded with a level of reflexivity that changed or altered several facets of the original form.

However, Rukmini Arundale goes a step further. Not only did she assimilate the dance form in her body with a reflexive attitude, but explicitly organized a pedagogical model to transmit that knowledge through a tertiary habitus to a larger pool of students. When she established Kalakshetra School of Arts in 1936, she institutionalized this dance form and prepared it for transmission to a wider audience. Ironically, even though Rukmini Arundale learned the dance from the hereditary community—thus directly in touch with those from its primary habitus—her distance from its objective structure was much greater due to the level of reflexivity, or subjective intervention, that she brought to her learning. Over time, this method of learning has become the only method of learning bharatanatyam. Dance students in the third wave were thus only exposed to the classical orientation through this tertiary method, the sole method of assimilation for over a couple of generations before them.

Rukmini Arundale's primary habitus was shaped by her position as an educated Brahmin woman—in other words, she came from one of the highest caste groups in the nation. She married Dr. George Arundale (1878–1945), an Englishman and a prominent member of the Theosophical Society. At a very young age, she accompanied Arundale on several world tours where she was exposed to different cultures (Samson 53–74). Her reflexive attitude toward bharatanatyam imposed a critical distance between her and the dance form, a distance that arose out of her tertiary position compared to the devadasi dancers. Her primary habitus grounded in being a brahmin upper-caste woman, the idea of world religion as furthered by the Theosophical Society, and access to several world cultures as Dr. Arundale's spouse, shaped the way she assimilated bharatanatyam in her body and her singular manner of teaching at Kalakshetra. While the movies between the 1940s and 50s sustained the idea of spectacularization both in content and form, Kalakshetra was the parallel movement, launched in 1936, that created a spectacle by furthering the vision of Hindu nationalism through spirituality in the arts. Rukmini Arundale was creating the "classical" aesthetic as opposed to the popular aesthetic of the movies.

Second Wave: *Nattuvanars* Exit Movies and a Tertiary Practice Begins

I have plotted the second wave of bharatanatyam as spanning four decades, starting at the beginning of the 1960s and ending with the new millennium. The decade of the 1950s was the most commercially and artistically generative for both the movie industry and the artists associated with it. The decade also marked an increased exchange of artists, choreographers, and artistic ideas between North and South India, engendering a wider range of movement styles, vocabularies, and sartorial choices to South Indian cinema. Therefore, I observe that by the end of the 1950s changes to popular aesthetics through North-South collaborations started to make bharatanatyam in the movies unrecognizable even to the nattuvanar teachers, who had by this time started to build careers outside the movies and whose teaching practice was influenced by the classical aesthetic.[10]

Dances in movies like Vanjikottai Valiban (1958), choreographed by the Bombay-based choreographer Hiralal and starring leading upper-caste dancer-actresses like Padmini and Vyjayanthimala, were a commercial

success. The movement aesthetics, aligned with the popular aesthetic, moving away from bharatanatyam's crystallization outside the movie industry. While the female dancer was always the object of the visual spectacle in both the popular and classical aesthetic, until the late 1950s her sexuality was largely masked by nationalistic messages about ideal womanhood and Hindu religiosity. The casting and presentation of actresses were carefully managed to mute her sexuality. But now, the unabashed objectification and sexualization of the female dancer was another important change in dance in the movies.

The precariousness between classical and popular increased in the 1960s with Tamil movies like Parthiban Kanavu (1960) starring upper-caste dancer Vyjayanthimala, Konjum Salangai (1961) starring upper-caste dancer Kamala Lakshman, Thillana Mohanmbal (1968) starring upper-caste, though not Brahmin, dancer-actress Padmini,[11] Amrapali (1966) starring South Indian Vyjayanthimala. These movies glamorized their dancer-actors, through tight-fitting dresses and movements that objectified them, versus desexualizing or mobilizing them for nationalistic ends, as in the first wave.

The heterosexual female body was at the center of the visual spectacle both in the movies and outside in the growing field of bharatanatyam. However, outside the cinema in the bharatanatyam field, the dancer's sexuality was masked in her status as an upper-caste, educated, English-speaking woman who practiced this art for higher spiritual ends. Thus dancer-actresses from non-upper-caste and hereditary families, like E. V. Saroja (1935–2006), Kuchala Kumari (1937–2019), and the sisters Sayee and Subbulakshmi, did not transition into the "classically oriented" mainstream bharatanatyam after the 1960s. But upper-caste dancers like Vyjayanthimala, Kamala Lakshman, and Padmini who were stars in the popular realm, also became stars in the classical.

The higher spiritual ends invoked by the classical stream translated directly into an increase in content drawn from Sanskritic sources. The mimetic movement vocabulary was drawn from largely brahmanical religious practices. This was crucial for retaining the classical status and creating a safe space for young girls from upper-caste, upper-class families to learn the dance form (Coorlawala).

Hereditary *nattuvanars*, who had attained recognition for their work in the movies by the end of 1950s, began to associate themselves with the classical mainstream of bharatanatyam. Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, one of the most popular and prolific hereditary *nattuvanars* and a pioneer in the cinematic medium in the 1940s, was the first to enter and exit the field of South Indian cinema and dissociate himself from the popular aesthetic it nurtured.[12] He began training upper-caste, typically brahmin, dancers outside cinema and established his own following. Many other hereditary *nattuvanars* like K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai and Muthuswamy Pillai, who were commissioned as choreographers for many movies in the 1950s, followed suit and phased themselves out of the popular aesthetic to align with the classical aesthetic that had taken root in the mainstream bharatanatyam field.

Establishment of Hereditary Lineages by *Nattuvanars*

Until the 1950s, senior *nattuvanars* like Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai (1869–1954), T.P. Kuppaiya (1887–1981), and Kattumanar Koil Muthukumaran Pillai supported younger *nattuvanars* like Vazhuvoor Ramaih Pillai, Kittappa Pillai, Muthuswamy Pillai (1921–1992), K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai, and T. K. Mahalingam Pillai (1916–2002) through both sharing their knowledge and pointing them to new commercial opportunities in order to survive in the competitive settings in Madras. Many of these *nattuvanars* initially started out as musicians who accompanied the Isai Vellalar dancers (Gaston, 140–217).

In both first and second waves, teaching dance to young upper-caste, upper-class, educated women generated income, and so the elder *nattuavanars* in the family guided the junior *nattuvanars* to this professional route to financial security.[13] Thus, Vazhuvoor Ramaih Pillai worked with his maternal uncle Mannikam Nattuvanar (dates unknown) and Muthukumaran Pillai (1874–1960) before starting his own school and gaining a following. Muthuswamy Pillai also worked with Muthukumaran Pillai before setting off on his own. Dandayudapani Pillai worked in Kalakshetra for six years alongside Chokkalingam Pillai (1904–1981), son-in-law of Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, before setting up his own school, Nayakalalayam, in the 1960s. Before the 1950s when the classical stream was still forming and *nattuvanars* were still working in the movies, these teachers exchanged notes and sometimes repertoire with other *nattuvanar* teachers in their community.

During the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for female upper-caste students to move between *nattuvanars*. For instance, Kamala Lakshman started her training with Muthukumaran Pillai in the late 1930s and completed her *arangetram* with him at that time. Later, in the 1940s, when she moved to Madras (Chennai), Muthukumar Pillai requested Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai to teach young Kamala and her sisters (Gaston, 179). Likewise, Rukmini Arundale started her initial training with Mylapore Gowri Ammal (1892–1971) then with Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai at Kalakshetra, who later brought other members of his family, including Muthukumaran Pilai, Chokkalingam Pillai, and K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai to aid him.

Rukmini Arundale learned from the collective expertise and creativity of all these teachers who were sharing knowledge among themselves. Leading actress-dancer Vyjayanthimala was a student of Kittappa Pillai, Mylapore Gowri Ammal, and later, K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai (*Ramani A true,22*; *A Tribute*)

Similarly, though much later, Chithra Vishweshwaran (1950–), who was also associated with the Vazhuvoor style of dancing, started learning dance at the age of ten from T. Rajalakshmi (1917–2003), a devadasi from Tiruvidaimarudur who had settled in Calcutta where Chithra lived at that time. Chithra moved to Madras from Calcutta in the 1950s to pursue a dance scholarship and started training under Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai (*Visweswaran Namvirundhinar*). Similarly, Sudharani Raghupathy started training with U. S. Krishna Rao (1912–2005) in the late 1940s, but then continued her training with Mylapore Gowri Ammal and Kittappa Pillai in the late 1950s (Chowdurie *Looking back*). The dance aesthetics imbibed in all these dancer bodies was an assemblage of techniques and performance styles. The aesthetics they inhabited thus resulted from the exposure to these different teachers, a product of their different pedagogical methods at specific stages in their lives.

Most of the dancers eventually settled down with a single teacher around the 1960s. Though she trained with Muthukumar Pillai in her initial years, Kamala went on to have a long performance career under Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai and trace her style of dancing to him. Sudharani Raghupathy is largely associated with the Thanjavur tradition as passed on to her by *nattuvanar*, Kittappa Pillai. Kamala's sister Radha traces her style to Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai and did not learn from any other *nattuvanars*. Though having studied for just for a few years with Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, Chithra Vishweshwaran is still associated with his style of dancing. Alarmel Valli (1956–) is a disciple of Subbaraya Pillai (1914–2008) and did not learn from other nattuvanars. All the dancers mentioned above—Chithra Vishweshwaran, Sudha Rani Raghupathy, Kamala Lakshman, Radha, Rukmini Arundale—are well-to-do, English-speaking brahmins who trained under a hereditary male *nattuvanar*. There were scores of female dancers from upper-caste, upper-class families who studied with these hereditary *nattuvanars* between the 1940s and 1970s, and who then went on to establish their own dance schools or performance careers in the 1970s. They were the first generation of tertiary students who learnt the dance from their teacher, not in an immersive setting, but more often as an after-school activity, at prescribed times in specific modules.

Radha told me that her sister Kamala sequenced the steps and created a categorization of *adavus* in the 1970s in order to establish a modular teaching curriculum for her own students. She did not remember Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai following a systematic sequence of *adavus* within his dance school. She added that Kalakshetra's teaching methodology was an important influence for Kamala in devising a systematic module for the Vazhuvoor style of teaching in her own school (Ramanathan, Personal interview).

Nandini Ramani, a disciple of Balasaraswati, shared with me that every day after school during the 1950s and 1960s she had dance class with Ganesan Pillai (1923–1987), son of Balasaraswati's teacher Kandappa Pillai (1899–1941), who made them dance ten to twelve categories of *adavus*, with each category having between five to eighteen variations. (Ramani, Personal interview). It is difficult to say whether these highly structured adavus were passed on to Ganesan Pillai by his father, or whether it was something that Ganesan Pillai, similar to Kamala Lakshman, put together.

10 Outside the movie industry, the new classical aesthetic continued to further the ideology of Hindu nationalism, gaining recognition and validation from the nation, both from its institutions and its powerful elites. A key moment in the recognition of the classical stream was the establishment of Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1953, a public entity that was set up to be the custodian of culture for India. Sangeet Natak Akademi pronounced bharatanatyam dance a "classical" dance of India, thus formalizing, and articulating something that was more a pervasive sentiment until then (Charkavorty).

11 Padmini was not a brahmin Brahmin but belonged to the upper-caste Nair community.

12 See Krishnan, *Celluloid*, p. 183 for an interview given for the Tamil film magazine Citra in 1954, Ramaiah Pillai writes about his angst about the state of dance at that time in the movies.

13 K. J. Sarasa is one of the very few women nattuvanars from a herditary family of teachers. While she was inspired by Kamala Lakshman and wanted to dance herself, Vazvoor Ramaiah Pillai discouraged her from becoming a dancer and advised her to take teaching dance as a career choice instead. He pointed to her that dancers who took up bharatanatyam were glamorous and looked like "queens" and that Sarasa with her plain looks would never stand a chance among them. Also, he argued that since she came from a struggling hereditary practitioner family, being a teacher rather than a dancer would help her family financially. Sarasa became one of the very few women who became a teacher from the Isai Vellalar community at this time. https://youtu.be/z_4UqCZFpRE

Rukmini Arundale is said to have given her first public performance within six months of training with her teacher Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. I doubt if there was a pre-existing system of *adavu* classification that Arundale had to master before moving to the next level of proficiency. The categorization of the *adavus* to facilitate modular teaching must have been done by Rukmini Arundale during her process of standardizing and institutionalizing bharatanatyam that started in 1936. Dance schools that started much later in the 1960s and 70s were influenced by this model and created their own modular training packages.

Tertiary Learning Sets Hereditary Lineages apart from Aesthetic Lineages

Hereditary lineage (Gaston 140–144) was invoked by the upper-caste dancers to bring a sense of authenticity to the newly emergent classical stream. But, it is critical to distinguish here between hereditary lineage and aesthetic lineages. The first generation of upper-caste female dancers developed their own unique aesthetic slant largely due to the way knowledge was transmitted to them by their male non-performing teachers from the hereditary community, and secondly also because many of these dancers were exposed to more than one *nattuvanar* teacher. However, the hereditary lineage of a *nattuvanar* teacher or their *bani* has been erroneously conflated with the dancer's own aesthetic byproduct. Actually, this first generation of dancers created their own aesthetic lineage modeled on their own dancing/performing selves. Tertiary learning from hereditary *nattuvanars* largely happened on a one-on-one basis and the knowledge transfer took place between a non-performing teacher and an educated young female student, typically from a brahmin family. The individual and personalized transmission method, where the teacher demonstrated or described the movement while seated, led to a wide range of interpretation, and therefore aesthetic diversity, in the bharatanatyam field. These brahmin student dancers who learned the dance from seated nattuvanar teachers had to dig deep within their own aesthetic sensibilities to translate the words, gestures, and eye movements indicated by their seated teachers into actions (Vaidyanathan personal interview, Sundaram, personal interview).[14] The teacher and student typically developed a unique vocabulary of words and gestures through which the students translated the intention of the teachers. The *nattuvanar* teachers also altered their teaching methods to suit the aptitude and abilities of their students in this personalized training arrangement. Radha, the sister of Kamala Lakshman, shared with me that Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai used to suggest hand and neck movements while seated. She added that her sister, Kamala, was a prodigy who used to grasp his suggestions and translate it into movements with a unique sensibility (Ramanathan personal interview). Kamala's style of dance then served as a template for her sister, Radha to follow. Thus Radha's dance, while it is attributed to the hereditary lineage of the Vazhuvoor *bani* is for all practical purposes a unique formulation of this Vazhuvoor *bani* by her performing model, Kamala.

S. K. Rajaratnam Pillai, another hereditary *nattuvanar* who assisted Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai (1931–1994), largely taught on a one-on-one basis and had a large student following. One of his senior disciples, now a teacher in California, shared with me that her teacher very rarely got up to demonstrate abstract technical movements, but rather gave most of his instructions through verbal cues and hand gestures while remaining seated. She remembers that keen attention was required to translate his suggestions into movement. This individualization of aesthetics was evident in 2011 when his students got together to celebrate his 80th birthday. She was surprised that there were certain movements that some of his disciples knew and others did not. The movements and choreographies that came out of those interactions were unique to the teacher-student combination. The teaching was largely customized to the student and the teacher's state of knowing at the time of transmission. It drove their creative trajectory, rather than being based on an extraneous syllabus or curriculum, standardized repertoire, or collective aesthetic generated through mimicking senior students in a larger class.

From the 1970s through the early 1990s, these first-generation, upper-caste, English-speaking, tertiary students of the hereditary *nattuvanar* teachers started to set up their own dance schools and teach dance. Sudharani Raghupathy founded Sree Bharatalaya in 1970, Vyjayanthimala started Natyalaya in 1969, Radha started Pushpanjali in 1984, Revathi Ramachandran (1952–) started Kala Sadhanalaya in 1987, and Chitra Vishweshwaran started Chidambaram Dance Academy in 1975. Even hereditary *nattuvanars* like S. K. Rajaranam Pillai who apprenticed with Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai started Rajaratnalaya in 1970, and hereditary female *nattuvanar* K. J. Sarasa (1935–2012) who apprenticed with Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai started Sarasalaya in the late 1960s.[15] These performing teachers offered a template that produced students who danced like them. As we saw, Radha based her dance on her sister Kamala's understanding of Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai's aesthetics.

14 While a few *nattuvanars* like Muthukumaran Pillai, Muthuswami Pillai, and Kalyanasundaram Pillai were known to demonstrate movement, most of the times the movement was conveyed through a generated vocabulary of seated movements, gestures, or words that were usually developed over the years between the teacher and their students. See https://narthaki.com/info/tdhc/tdhc12.html, an article in Narthaki.com by Ashish Mohan Khokar on Muthukumaran Pillai (30 Aug 2009) and https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/on-a-classical-path/article4787717.ece by Savita Gautam for *The Hindu* on 6 June 2013 that document that these teachers were taught dance but hardly danced.

The students of the second generation of tertiary teachers mapped onto their performing teacher's aesthetic. Unlike the first generation of student performers, the second generation of students did not have to harness their inner creative sensibility and epistemological base as deeply as was demanded of their teachers. This was significant as it marked the beginning of a certain level of homogeneity within the students of a particular teacher. This homogeneity set off a distinctive aesthetic lineage that started with these upper-caste performing students of *nattuvanar*-teachers. Rupa Srikanth reported in *The Hindu* that Uma Namboodripad (1980–), a senior student of Chithra Vishweshwaran, "has adapted and internalised Guru Chitra's dynamic style that involves adavus in motion and introduction of the flick of the head and wrist to finish with a flourish, in a sense" (Srikanth). Though this report is from the third wave (2000 onwards), it signals the kind of aesthetic lineage that can be traced to first-generation tertiary students like Chitra Vishweshwaran who became performing teachers during the second wave. On the one hand, the first generation of upper-caste dancers who trained directly under *nattuvanars* from hereditary families engendered a range of aesthetics that were attuned to their understanding of the styles passed on to them by their teachers. On the other hand, these upper-caste teachers needed validation of their aesthetics, and they sought this validation from the *nattuvanar* teachers from hereditary families who gave them a stamp of authenticity and claim to a heritage or lineage. While Radha's students danced like her or Kamala, they associated themselves with the Vazhuvoor tradition. This was a strategic move to give their dance a sense of authenticity (Meduri, *Temple stage*, 141). In sum, upper-caste Brahmin dance teachers needed a non-Brahmin hereditary *nattuvanar* to create a sense of validation, authenticity, and continuity of tradition.

Nonetheless there is often a discrepancy between two schools that claim their hereditary lineage to a particular *nattuvanar*. While their aesthetic lineage can be traced to performing gurus, their hereditary lineage is traced to *nattuvanar* teachers. The students of Radha, a direct disciple of Vazhuvoor Ramiah, perform their *theermanam adavu* keeping the knee of the extended leg bent, rather than keeping that leg straight. However, the students of K. J. Sarasa, a female hereditary dancer, the founder and artistic director of Sarasalaya, also lay claim to the Vazhuvoor tradition. Her students perform the same *theermanam adavu* by keeping the working leg straight rather than by bending the knees as done by Radha and Kamala. Radha's students, moreover, have a very distinctive head shake attributed to Kamala's style of dancing, and which is hardly seen in any other dance school that claims the Vazhuvoor tradition (Ramanathan, Personal interview; Lakshman, Personal interview).

Aesthetic Lineage Fosters Aesthetic Diversity

During the second wave, most teachers seem to be conflicted about accepting other styles and were anxious to leave their mark on their students. Male dancer A., who runs his own school in Chennai, recalls his teacher, K. J. Sarasa, teasing him in class by inquiring if he went across the Adyar Bridge over the weekend or to Mylapore when he executed certain steps that to her keen eye seemed to be a slight aberration from the movement vocabulary typical of her teaching. She was referring to Kalakshetra, which was on the other side of the Adyar Bridge, and also where Sudharani Raghupathy, senior disciple of Kittappa Pillai, resides and teaches in Mylapore.[16] Teachers were respectful of the skills and aesthetics of other dancers while fiercely guarding their own aesthetics.[17] This created the opportunity for different aesthetic streams to co-exist and thrive during the second wave, fostering a healthy aesthetic diversity.

Thus, the beginning of the second wave started with a rupture with the popular aesthetic and a classicalization of bharatanatyam outside the movies. Many practices, movement vocabularies, and repertories were altered, or all together left out, to suit the requirements of the abstracted "high art" that bharatanatyam was forming into. The transmission methods moved from the primary to tertiary

15 In contrast, K. J. Sarasa and S. K. Rajarathanam Pillai were still non-performing teachers from the hereditary community who started schools around the same time as these upper caste dancers. Their students still maintained an aesthetic diversity, as neither of these teachers demonstrated movement. They also maintained a one-on-one teaching model, especially for those students who were securing opportunities to perform. However, in the case of K. J. Sarasa a certain uniformity came through due to larger class sizes, especially in the later years as junior students watched the senior student dancers both perform and demonstrate movement in class settings (Sundaram, Personal interview; Rangarajan, Personal interview).

16 It is also noteworthy that as the city of Madras developed, certain districts such as South Madras were largely Brahmin occupied. Kristen Rudisill (2007) traces the creation of upper-caste brahmin taste in art appreciation and maps out caste clusters in Madras which features Adyar, Mylapore, and T. Nagar that have the highest number of *sabhas* where brahmins congregated to cultivate their appreciation of "high art" (pp. 58–60).

17 Lakshman, senior student of K. J. Sarasa, shared with me that he used to love watching the new *adavu* variations that Muthuswamy Pillai brought to his choreographies. He also shared that his teacher, K. J. Sarasa, while making snide remarks about learning movement vocabularies other than the ones passed

methods of knowledge transfer. This brought the loss of implicit, familial knowledge transfer. The hereditary dance practice was the antithesis of the tertiary method of instruction and presentation. Many believe that the art of hereditary practitioner and solo performer Balasaraswati (1918–1984) died with her (Pattabhiraman and Ramachandran, 1984). Though she trained a few dancers, it might have seemed largely futile to invest in a time-based, modular teaching method given that she had six generations of hereditary dancers preceding her and another six generations preceding her teacher, Kandappa Pillai. Her training in the primary Isai Vellalar habitus sets her apart from all other well-known dancers who performed between the 1950s and 1970s. Dance was an immersive learning experience for her. She was as good a musician and vocalist as she was a dancer. Her in-depth knowledge of music and hereditary culture, and her tacit understanding of dance and its lived history infused her engagement with the dance. It would have been impossible to pass along all this through a tertiary model. At the performative level, this translated into the interruption of the seamless nexus between music and dance, the multiple aspects—historical, familial, and situational—of interpreting a line of poetry, and the embodied movements that were an extension of sociocultural lifestyle, all of which had been funneled through the art of improvisation. This practice of improvisation, which cannot be taught but rather is seasoned into a hereditary dancer over years of immersion, was lost to the stripped down, modular way of transmitting the art in the tertiary manner. Improvisation lost the race to pre-choreographed, time-bound, rehearsed routines.

The futility of teaching a grand tradition that the hereditary practitioner inherits might have been felt by Balasaraswati, Kittappa Pillai, and many other *nattuvanars* who were sometimes accused, especially by upper-caste, Brahmin dance students, of "hoarding" their art.[18] Some amount of distrust also stems from the actions of dancers like Rukmini Arundale, who systematically took their art and did away with the community. Rukmini Arundale remarked, "It is a well-known fact that they (hereditary performers) are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody else to conduct a dance performance… Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers. The second part is to train *nattuvanars* from good families. I am happy that on Vijayadasami day I was able to prove that we could do without them" (Harp 207).

While on one hand, the second wave promoted the notion of higher spiritual ends over monetary returns, on the other hand, it simultaneously opened up spaces for professionalizing and monetizing bharatanatyam through the method of mass transmission, which increased class sizes and therefore revenues. The modular way of assimilation by stripping the art from its original methods resulted in the field fragmenting into modular experts: *nattuvangam, abhinaya*, choreography, music, and rhythm composition, branching out as subfields within bharatanatyam. This fragmentation into subfields often resulted in a very reductive assimilation of the art by performing dancers who then transmitted this skeletal form to the next generation. One thing that prevailed in the second wave was aesthetic diversity due to the multiple aesthetic lineages that co-existed at this time. However, we see at the end of the second wave, due to increase in competition and collaborations there is a growing homogenization of aesthetics. In the third wave, this homogenization of aesthetics is further catalyzed by social media and other neoliberal manifestations that urges the bharatanatyam dancer to compete with the Western aesthetics in order to keep the heterosexual spectacle thriving in the body of the bharatanatyam dancer.

on through her school, also appreciated difference and innovation when she saw it. See also articles by Nandini Ramani of the Balasaraswati school on Kittappa Pillai and K. N. Dandyudapani Pillai (Ramani, *A True, A Tribute*).

18 Upper-caste actress-dancer Vyjayanthimala shared frustration about her teacher, hereditary nattuvanar Kittappa Pillai. "When I ask my *nattuvanars*, will you please teach me this or that aspect of dance, they never agree immediately or even whole-heartedly." She bemoaned that they gave excuses and hardly committed to sharing what they knew. "Take Kittappa Pillai, an invaluable treasure trove of the Thanjavur tradition. Learning from him is extremely difficult. I keep imploring him to train somebody before the art becomes extinct, but perhaps such people are not interested in keeping their art alive." She then compared him to her brahmin music teacher who freely shared her knowledge (Ramnarayanan, *Trailblazing*,31). Kittappa Pillai has trained accomplished dancers like Vidya Natarajan, Srividya Sankaranarayanan, Hema Verma and many others. The transgender dancer Narthaki Natraj, who was conferred the Nritya Kalanidhi by Music Academy in 2023 was one his prime disciples. Thus while we can take Vyajayanthimala's frustration with a grain of salt. The futility of teaching a tradition through tertiary means could have caused the reluctance she sensed in her teacher.

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