

BHARATANATYAM: EROTICISM, DEVOTION, AND A RETURN TO TRADITION

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Abstract

The classical Indian dance style of Bharatanatyam evolved out of the *sadir* dance of the *devadāsīs*. Through the colonial period, the dance style underwent major changes and continues to evolve today. This paper aims to examine the elements of eroticism and devotion within both the *sadir* dance style and the contemporary Bharatanatyam. The erotic is viewed as a religious path to devotion and salvation in the Hindu religion and I will analyze why this eroticism is seen as religious and what makes it so vital to understanding and connecting with the divine, especially through the embodied practices of religious dance.

Introduction

Bharatanatyam is an Indian dance style that evolved from the *sadir* dance of *devadāsīs*. *Sadir* has been popular since roughly the 6th century. The original *sadir* dance form most likely originated in the area of Tamil Nadu in southern India and was used in part for temple rituals. Because of this connection to the ancient *sadir* dance, Bharatanatyam has historic traditional value. It began as a dance style performed in temples as ritual devotion to the gods. This original form of the style performed by the *devadāsīs* was inherently religious, as *devadāsīs* were women employed by the temple specifically to perform religious texts for the deities and for devotees. Because some *sadir* pieces were dances based on poems about kings and not deities, secularism does have a place in the dance form. However, the aim in all of these performances is *rasa*, and *rasa* is inherently religious, as it provides for a transcendental religious experience.

The evolution of this dance style undergoes drastic changes, influences, and perspectives throughout time, but nonetheless, manages to hold on to tradition. Dancers of this style adhere to religious traditions, regardless of modern societal influences on the culture of the dance form. The choreography and performance of both *sadir* and Bharatanatyam include erotic elements, especially within the performance of religious erotic poetry. The presence of this eroticism has been a subject of contention throughout Bharatanatyam's evolution, especially with regards to the sexuality of the dancers, both within the performances of the dance style and in the lives of the dancers outside of performance.

Despite the evolution of *sadir* dance into the modern Bharatanatyam and the despite colonial criticisms of the eroticism involved in traditional performances, dancers connect with this style as a product of their tradition and culture within the Hindu religion. With the more modern additions to the classical Bharatanatyam, including a return to performance of erotic poetry, we can see that as the dance form of Bharatanatyam progresses, there is more of a return to the traditional *sadir* dance of the *devadāsīs*. I therefore argue that modern Bharatanatyam dancers understand the vital importance of keeping the culturally historical dance style of the *devadāsīs* alive, and aim to keep tradition in their dance form as much as possible.

Female sexuality has long been defined through religious and social context in India. I will examine how views of female sexuality undergo drastic changes after colonialism, specifically within the dance form now known as Bharatanatyam. Eroticism definitely exists within the Bharatanatyam dance form, and is also present in the actions of the dancers outside of their performances. Why is this eroticism religious and why is it supported throughout history?

To find answers to this question, I will analyze the dance itself and the foundation of the form's aesthetics and presence of sexuality within the choreography. I will also look at how the sexuality of Bharatanatyam dancers is perceived outside of their performances and examine the effects of suppressed female sexuality on modern *devadāsīs*. I will consider the extent to which the colonial stigmas surrounding the *devadāsīs* have impacted the greater Indian dance culture today.

Within this context, I also argue that the erotic path to salvation is the most viable and attainable for the majority of devotees. Through Bharatanatyam and the erotic *rasa*, devotees have an opportunity to be close to their chosen deity. The erotic path offers feelings and experiences that no other path or version of expression compares to, as we will see in the following sections.

Erotic and Aesthetic Theory

According to Hindu aesthetic theory, all forms of art provide a sort of yogic meditation. As Kapila Vatsyayan says, “For the traditional Indian artist, regardless of the field in which he worked, artistic creation was the supreme means of realizing the Universal Being. Art was a discipline (*sādhanā*), a yoga, and a sacrifice (*yajna*)” (Vatsyayan 1968: 5). Producing or witnessing a piece of art is a tangible way for devotees to focus their attention on a deity and to meditatively channel their devotion and energy towards ultimate reality. Through *bhakti* and *rasa*, dancers and audience members have the ability to meditate on a deity and they undergo religious experiences.

Some scholars believe the *bhakti* movement, that was most likely rooted in devotional poetry, began in the mid to late first millennium, most likely in the southern part of India, as Narayanan states that “the devotional movement began in the south and then swept all over India” (Narayanan 2012). *Bhakti* made devotion accessible to people of all castes, genders, and socioeconomic statuses. Prior to the push for *bhakti*, lower caste men and women had to rely on brahmin priests as mediators between themselves and the divine. With *bhakti*, all castes could worship Hindu deities whenever they wanted, with an increasing popularity of home shrines and personal meditation on the deity. Essentially, the expansion of *bhakti* meant that everyone had the equal ability to attain salvation and escape from *samsāra*, the otherwise endless cycle of death and rebirth.

Bharatanatyam features Indian dancers who represent characters and illustrate stories of the deities from texts like the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and popular devotional poetry. *Bhakti* within this dance practice is centered on meditation on the deity, for both the dancer and the audience. The dancer who embodies the deity from the religious texts provides a vehicle for themselves and the audience to meditate a specific deity. As Katherine Zubko explains in her chapter on dance representing stories from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, “Several devotional activities in the *Bhāgavata* correlate to defining aspects of Bharatanatyam. For one, the repeated missives to *bhaktas* (devotees) to recite and dwell upon the stories of Krishna and visually meditate on his form are thoroughly fulfilled through Krishna-centered themes performed in Bharatanatyam” (2013: 163). The dancer embodies the deity or character (devotee, king, consort, etc.) in a specific poem or episode, and through this embodiment, meditates intensely on the form of the character. As Zubko says, “dance becomes an embodied form of recitation and

meditation, both devotional activities of *bhakti* yoga as mentioned in the Bhāgavata” (2013: 167). Dance as one of the traditional art forms derived from ancient India has allowed for a physical embodied representation of religion, and has thus made spirituality easier to grasp and understand for devotees.

Bhakti embodied in dance allows the dancer and the audience to experience *rasa*, according to Hindu aesthetic theory. *Rasa* literally means taste or flavor. It is defined by Vasudha Narayanan as a form of enjoyment and an aesthetic experience that “is sometimes said to lead one to exalted mental and spiritual states; others say that it is a space of its own, a state of delight and enjoyment that is neither sacred or profane” (Narayanan 2003: 503). There are traditionally eight different forms of *rasa* or dominant moods that were developed from the outlines put forth in the *Natyashastra*, a Sanskrit text from the beginning of the common era attributed to Bharata. The eight *rasas* are: “*śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *hāsya* (comic), *karuṇa* (pathetic), *raudra* (furious), *vīra* (heroic), *bhayānaka* (terrible), *bībhatsa* (odious), and *adbhuta* (marvelous)” (Zubko 2014: 13). *Bhakti* and *rasa* are interrelated within Hindu aesthetic theory and, as Vatsyayan notes, “the aesthetic theory of *rasa* ... provides an underlying unity to the Indian arts” (1968: 6). *Rasa* is therefore the aim of all Bharatanatyam performances for dancers. The goal is to make the audience taste the flavor, the essence, of the performance. As Zubko explains, “dancers and audience participants in the contemporary period (1980s-present) use the term *bhakti rasa* to identify a particular devotional ‘flavor’ or mood that is created by the dancer and ‘tasted’ by the audience (and often the dancer too) through well-executed elements of stagecraft” (Zubko 2014: 2). *Rasa* is a feeling that is more naturally experienced than explained, as it provides a transcendental experience for both dancer and audience, a similar goal to that of *yoga*. Since

many modern Bharatanatyam performances are thematically centered on praise for specific deities, dance offers itself as a vehicle for religious experience through human emotion and a transcendence of worldly reality. Bharatanatyam provides the ability for audiences to meditate deeply on a deity embodied by the Bharatanatyam dancer.

Of the eight traditional *rasas*, many Bharatanatyam dancers view *śrngāra* as the mother of all other *rasas*. Because erotic love can account for an array of other emotions (jealousy, anger, happiness, peacefulness, etc.), *śrngāra* is, as my *abhinaya* teacher Akka¹ put it, “the *rāja* of *rasas*.” Balasaraswati², a female hereditary dancer, was a big believer in focusing her dancing energy on *śrngāra*, as we will see in the following sections. This erotic flavor is one that is accessible to all devotees. Erotic love is something that all people can relate to, as humans experience this feeling in their worldly lives especially with a spouse. In a conversation with Bharatanatyam dancer and Dance Professor at Colorado College, Anusha Kedhar, she said that “the erotic is the most intimate you can ever be with someone else... so that’s the closest you could ever be with god to have that relationship with them.”³ The universal emotion of love and the erotic is based in the body, just as dance is based in the body. For this reason, *śrngāra rasa* is best portrayed and explored through dance and through physical expression of the body. Many

¹ During the fall semester of 2015, in DA200 Topics in Dance: Bollywood/India Abroad, I traveled to Chennai, India and took classes with world renowned choreographers and dancers in the Bharatanatyam style, including Akka who taught the emotional choreography intertwined within Bharatanatyam.

² Balasaraswati was a female hereditary dancer focused on maintaining her own heritage when it came to rejuvenating the dance form of the *devadāsīs*.

³ The love for a child or family member is strong, yes, but it's genetically predisposed. You have to love your family because you share a biological necessity to do so. But erotic love, for a spouse or even a deity, is something that has to be worked at. It takes effort to display your love for a spouse. Because of the work involved in this process, the erotic is the most intimate and most powerful type of love. It is not a biological requirement, but a desired outcome that involves tremendous effort.

dancers and scholars see the erotic, or *śrīṅgāra rasa*, as a core foundation of the dance style. The most notable of these thinkers is Balasaraswati. Balasaraswati was firm in her beliefs that *śrīṅgāra rasa* could not simply be eliminated from a newly reformed Bharatanatyam. Not all dance, and not all Bharatanatyam pieces, are focused explicitly on the erotic. Many pieces depict Krishna's childhood and focus on Yaśodā's motherly love for him. Yet the erotic remains a vital core element to the classical Bharatanatyam.

The question remains, why is eroticism so central to this dance style and why is it viewed as religious? One answer to these inquiries can be found in the *rasa* theory itself. *Śrīṅgāra rasa* is seen as a legitimate path to salvation. This theory is exemplified not only in dance, but also in religious texts like the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Gītagovinda*. *Krishna-bhakti* is inclusive of an erotic and devotional love, as we shall see in the following section. Eroticism can be considered one of the most important paths to salvation, as it is the most accessible and intimate relationship with a god. Another viable answer to this question is that sexuality itself is inherently religious. Sex is something that brings people closer to each other, and therefore brings them closer to god. As Carter Heyward argues, "sexuality is a bedrock of the entire corpus of theological tradition" (Heyward 1989: 298).

Textual Religious History

Sexuality is central to significant stories in ancient and medieval Hindu texts. Eroticism is especially present in the stories of Krishna found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda*, a well known twelfth-century poem that portrays the love affair between Rādhā and Krishna. These texts are staples for devotees of Krishna, and include explicitly sexual scenes that

are viewed in a religious context. The purpose of sexuality within religious texts has been a subject of scrutiny for scholars for a number of years. The question stands: Why is eroticism so central, especially in the stories of Krishna?

The Krishna *līlā* is a tumultuous and emotional story as presented in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This text, written between the 6th and 10th centuries CE, covers the life of Krishna, from his birth to his departure from the land of Vraja. The majority of eroticism within the Krishna *līlā* can be found in Book X. In a part of this section, Krishna is portrayed as a mischievous teenager pulling pranks on the female *gopīs* or cowherdesses of Vraja. In one scene found in Chapter 22, the women are bathing in the river and Krishna steals their clothes and climbs a *kadamba* tree before they are able to emerge from the water. After the girls beg Krishna to return their clothes so they could escape the cold waters of the Yamuna river, the following transpires

Śri Bhagavan said, “You girls have bright smiles! If you really are my servants, or will do whatever I have said, then come here and each take your own clothes.” At this, all the young girls, trembling from the cold, emerged from the pool of water. Covering their genitals with their hands, they were stricken by the cold. Seeing that they were virgins, *Bhagavan* was pleased with their pure state of mind. He placed the clothes on his shoulder and addressed them with a smile. He was satisfied. (22.16-18)

After revealing their nudity to the young Krishna, the *gopī* women were not angry with Krishna because of their intense love for him. Verse 22 reads, “The girls were cheated, deprived of their modesty, derided and made to perform like puppets. Moreover, their clothes were stolen. Yet, they were not really upset with Krishna. They were delighted to be in the company of their darling.” This section of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* negates women’s control over their own

sexuality and places all power in the hands of Krishna. The presence of sexuality in this section exemplifies that the *gopīs*' love and devotion for Krishna stand above all else, including their own modesty and control over their own sexuality.

Another scene in Book X of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* features Krishna multiplying himself to dance with the *gopīs*, presenting an ambiguously sensual scene of dance and song. Chapter 33 verse 3 reads, "The festival of the *rasa* dance began, featuring a circle of *gopīs*. The Lord of all *yogīs*, Krishna, inserted himself between each pair of *gopīs*, and put his arms about their necks. Each woman thought he was at her side only." The *gopīs* desired the body of Krishna and each wanted him for herself. The description of the dance continues thus:

The consorts of Krishna, their braids and belts securely fastened, sang about him with hand gestures and dancing feet. Their faces were sweating, their earrings rolling on their cheeks, and the garments on their breasts slipping. Their waists were bent, and they smiled, their eyebrows playful. They shone like lightning in a circle of clouds. They were intent on amorous pleasure and overjoyed by Krishna's touch. Their throats decorated with dye, they sang loudly as they danced, and the world reverberated with their songs. (33.7-8)

Although this description is not explicitly sexual, connotations of sensuality can be extrapolated from the descriptions of the women's bodies and their desire for Krishna's touch. As Tracy Coleman argues, "Such sexuality may be implied in the *Bhāgavata*, where Kṛṣṇa multiplies himself in order to satisfy each *gopī's* desire for exclusive intimacy, and where no family members intrude upon the passionate tryst in the forest. But even in the *Bhāgavata* the titillating poetic language remains ambiguous with respect to sex" (Coleman 2010: 392). In my opinion, the purpose of this sexuality within the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is to display the importance of devotion to the deity. Devotion through erotic love is the most intimate and accessible

relationship a devotee can experience in relation to a deity and this is exemplified in these sections of the stories. The *gopī* women desire Krishna and long to be in the presence of his physical body. Yes, this situation is understood as sexual,⁴ but remaining in the physical presence of a deity is a powerful religious experience, focused on more than sexuality, but on emotionality and meditation as well.

Contrastingly, Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda* contains sections that are not ambiguous whatsoever when it comes to their sexual nature. The love story of Rādhā and Krishna and the sexuality therein serve specific purposes within the Krishna narrative as seen in the *Gītagovinda*. Throughout this long erotic poem, Krishna's love affair with Rādhā is explored as they meet secretly for amorous trysts in the forests of Vraja. Some of the descriptions of these secret meetings are quite sensual as Jayadeva focuses heavily on bodily descriptions of the *gopīs*, Rādhā, and Krishna. The *gopī* women involved in this poetry are addressed in a physical manner, described by their body parts, molding them into sexual beings longing for Krishna's love and touch. We see an example of these bodily descriptions in the fourth song in verses 38, 40, and 42:

One cowherdess with heavy breasts embraces Hari lovingly
And celebrates him in a melody of love.
Hari revels here as the crowd of charming girls
Revels in seducing him to play.

A girl with curving hips, bending to whisper in his ear,
Cherishes her kiss on her lover's tingling cheek.

Hari praises a girl drunk from dancing in the rite of love,
With beating palms and ringing bangles echoing his flute's low
tones.

⁴ This sexuality is not as explicit as what is portrayed in the *Gītagovinda*, but maintains physically erotic undertones promoting erotic love for the divine. Both the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Gītagovinda* are examples of *śṛṅgāra rasa* in religious Hindu texts.

Here we see that the *gopīs* desire a physical closeness to Krishna. The women in this poem are sexualized and their devotion to Krishna is categorized by their erotic love for him. This type of devotion through *śṛṅgāra rasa* reigns supreme above *dharma*⁵ (duty) and other *rasas*.

Bodily and erotic verses are abundant in the *Gītagovinda*. This is especially true in regards to poems about Krishna and Rādhā's sexual trysts in the forests. Verses 11-15 of the sixth song of the *Gītagovinda* read:

I shy from him when we meet; he coaxes me with flattering words.
I smile at him tenderly as he loosens the silken cloth on my hips.
Friend, bring Keśi's sublime tormentor to revel with me!
I've gone mad waiting for his fickle love to change.

I fall on the bed of tender ferns; he lies on my breasts forever.
I embrace him, kiss him; he clings to me drinking my lips.

My eyes close languidly as I feel the flesh quiver on his cheek.
My body is moist with sweat; he is shaking from the wine of lust.

I murmur like a cuckoo; he masters love's secret rite.
My hair is a tangle of wilted flowers; my breasts bear his nailmarks

Jewel anklets ring at my feet as he reaches the height of passion.
My belt falls noisily; he draws back my hair to kiss me.

It is quite obvious how sexual this poem is in nature. Rādhā and Krishna involve themselves in a physically romantic relationship, one that defies *dharma* and is completely focused on devotion. Rādhā sacrifices everything to be with Krishna and her undying devotion for her Lord is highly regarded and becomes a viable path towards salvation for devotees who later imitate her.

⁵ According to the majority of the texts she is featured in, Radha is a married woman. She defies her duties of marriage in order to maintain a physical relationship with Krishna. Arguably, her devotion to Krishna was more important than her responsibilities to her husband, but this is a theory for another paper.

All of these scenes, regardless of their ambiguity or explicitness with respect to sexuality provide popular material for performance in Bharatanatyam. Solo dancers often embody Krishna and the *gopīs*, presenting the story of their sensual encounters in Vraja. The scene in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* featuring Krishna dancing with the *gopīs* remains an important one in the world of religious Indian dance. The poems in the *Gītagovinda* are prominent foundations to Bharatanatyam numbers performed both in temples and on stage. These religious texts literally come to life through Bharatanatyam performance, as dancers embody the characters and allow the audience to experience the stories of Krishna and his many female consorts first-hand.

The *Gītagovinda* was not only a mode of meditation through dance performances, but the collection of poetry also served as a way of meditating on the divine in and of itself. Meditation on the text is quite similar to meditation on the divine in Bharatanatyam for both the dancer and the audience. Jayadeva, after nearly every poem, speaks of his own writings and assures readers and listeners that his poetry provides a vehicle of meditation to rejoice in the story of Krishna. In verse 44 of the fourth song, Jayadeva writes, “The wondrous mystery of Krishna’s sexual play in Brindaban forest is Jayadeva’s song. Let its celebration spread Krishna’s favors!” Jayadeva thoroughly believes that his poetry provides a form of art that devotees can meditate upon and attain salvation through by means of *rasa*. When a text that provides a vehicle for meditation (the *Gītagovinda*) is physically performed and embodied through Bharatanatyam, the meditative power is two-fold. This is a viable form of devotion towards the divine and is a mode that adheres to religious tradition and age old theories of *rasa* and *bhakti*.

Bharatanatyam dance, through *rasa* and *bhakti*, is presented in Hinduism as a religious practice, one that can lead devotees to salvation. The performance of Bharatanatyam is heavily

based on the physical representation of these texts on stage (and historically in temples). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Gītagovinda* remain important texts for devotees as merely texts. But the addition of the performance and embodiment of the texts through Bharatanatyam brings the devotional effect of the texts to another level.

Bharatanatyam Dance Elements

The foundations of Bharatanatyam dance are characterized by several aesthetic qualities including facial expression, arm and leg movements and hand gestures called *mudras*. These movements fuse together to create stories and illustrate poems and epics from the Hindu tradition. Vasudha Narayanan, in her AAR speech entitled “Embodied Cosmologies: Sights of Piety, Sites of Power,” says that “a whole language of communication is available through these gestures in dances and rituals connected with the Hindu and Buddhist traditions” (2003: 504). There are more than thirty *mudras* that represent animals, objects, and emotions within the embodiment of these religious stories. Depending on how the *mudra* is used and how it fits in correlation with other *mudras* and movements, each singular hand gesture can have more than ten meanings. *Mudras* serve as a kind of sign language for the Bharatanatyam dance style. Narayanan explains the importance of bodily communication, saying, “we all live in cultures where we articulate with and through the word to comprehend and explain nonverbal behavior” (Narayanan 2003: 501). Some Bharatanatyam dance pieces include words in the songs performed, but much of what is communicated through the dance is conveyed through *mudras* and through emotion expressed with the eyes, especially to non-native speakers.

Erotic *mudras* are used when appropriate within Bharatanatyam performances. Anusha Kedhar spoke about growing up learning Bharatanatyam. She told me that when she was a child, the *mudras* she learned to illustrate a loving embrace, for example, were much more modest versions of the increasingly traditional gesture she later learned that implied sexual intercourse. This suggests that sexuality is used with restraint in the modern era, but as time goes on, we see this stigmatization of sex dissipating bit by bit in the realm of modern Bharatanatyam.

In addition to expressions of desire and sexuality within the foundational choreography and history of Bharatanatyam, a similar sensuality is found in the aesthetic costuming used in large performances of the dance style. Women with heavy makeup, luxurious fabrics, and sparkling jewels have become the norm for modern Bharatanatyam dance performances, adding to the definition of femininity within the dance form and, arguably, making the performing women more sexually desirable to audience members. The dance form is not exclusively performed by women, but traditionally, more women perform Bharatanatyam on stage than men. The beauty of these women is accentuated by their costuming, drawing attention to their eyes and hips. Ankle bells ring in tune to the swinging of their bodies and sparkles on their pleated aprons glimmer in the spotlights. It is unclear how fancy the costumes of the traditional *devadāsīs* were in their temple performances, as only black and white photos and artist renderings of the dancers can be referenced today. However, the dancers in the historical images are less decorated than stage performers of modern Bharatanatyam. Chandralekha (1928-2006), a modern Bharatanatyam dancer turned contemporary dance choreographer, actively opposed and disliked the sexualized enhancements and costuming for Bharatanatyam. She said she could “no longer cope with the incongruences between India’s turbulent contemporary reality within which

she danced, and the reified divine associations of the dance form, not to mention the adorned and objectified “dollification” of the female dancer herself” (Mitra 2001: 7). The “dollification” Chandralekha references in terms of costuming led her to take a different path in the dance world, criticizing the objectification of female sexuality in the modern Bharatanatyam through her sexually infused feminist choreography in modern dance.

Although sexuality is a controversial subject among critics within the style, Bharatanatyam is a religious dance. The dancers embody religious texts, embody the temple itself, and they embody spiritual transcendence in the moments of performance. “The dancer dances her worship in the temple, creates the temple within her body, and dances the temple in her performance” (Narayanan 2003: 508). Dance is a physical portrayal of the spirit, and through Bharatanatyam, dancers are able to evoke and share the religious feeling of *rasa* and spirituality through their performance of religious texts. As Narayanan states, “the body becomes a vehicle to salvation, but it is also a site of transgression, pleasure, pain, and the senses. It is a site of resistance, where agencies of power, prestige, the past, the present, and the demanding cultures of the many ‘others’ clash” (Narayanan 2003: 504). Through *rasa*, the body is the vehicle to religious experience. But as we will see in the following sections, the bodily nature of this religious practice has been subject to criticism in the modern era, as a push to secularize the body devalues the traditional form and alienates dancers.

Although the erotic is present in Bharatanatyam, the dance is not singularly sexual. Bharatanatyam is no more sexual than texts like the *Gītāgovinda* and this dance style is merely an interpretation of such literature. As mentioned before, Bharatanatyam includes performances of secular poetry celebrating kings and elite men that are non-erotic, and even includes many

non-sexual stories of deities, including the stories of Krishna's childhood. However, there are people who believe that dance and sex are inseparable. Projesh Banerji, in his *Erotica in Indian Dance* argues that "sex is inter-twined, intermingled and is a part and parcel of dance just as it is closely related to man, sex clings to dance. Just as the sun cannot be separated from its rays, in the same manner dance cannot be separated from sex" (Banerji 1983: 12-13). Banerji is speaking specifically of classical Indian dance here, and his opinion supports the view of Balasaraswati that *śrīṅgāra* is a viable path toward salvation and one of the core values of Bharatanatyam. Balasaraswati's philosophy on *śrīṅgāra rasa* will be examined more thoroughly below. I actually disagree with Banerji's view of sex and dance as interrelated. It is evident that dance can exist without sex, as is apparent in dance renditions of stories of Krishna's childhood. Anusha Kedhar sees this statement of dance and sex as inseparable as something "dangerous," as it is likely linked to the stigmatization of *devadāsī* dancers as prostitutes. The idea that dance and sex are intermingled is one that lingers from the colonial period, as we will see in the following section. Dance can and does exist without sex, but the erotic remains an important core *rasa* for Bharatanatyam.

Pre-Colonialism/Colonialism

Prior to British Colonialism, dance and song were a large part of temple ritual and devotion. A group of hereditary female dancers were privileged with the responsibility of performing dance numbers for the gods within the temple. These dancers were termed *devadāsīs* and the dance they performed was *sadir*. Most *devadāsī* women were dedicated to the temple at a very young age. They underwent a ceremony in which they were ritually married to the deity, but

some women also married statesmen and had children. The *devadāsīs* were a matriarchal hereditary group of dancers and musicians and maintained a high status in society. However, their elite husbands often had second wives who maintained the position of housewife while the *devadāsī* woman remained dancing in the temple. Davesh Soneji explains that, "...as the mistresses or 'second wives' of South Indian elites, they were implicated in a larger world of servitude that focused on the fulfillment of male desires" (Soneji 2012: xiii). They performed in salons and courts as well as the temples and served as secular entertainment and as intermediaries for devotees to meditate on the deities. Prior to colonialism, these women maintained a high status as mediators of the divine and were not condemned for their relationships with elite men.

With the influx of the British during the period of colonialism (19th-early 20th centuries), came preconceived notions of traditional *devadāsīs*. Many travel writers from the earlier part of this era observed the dances of the *devadāsīs* and subsequently wrote about them for publications directed towards a larger British audience. Ethnographies of the "Orient" became a popular literary genre, and led to various criticisms of the people and practices of India. These travel writers and ethnographers only had the capacity to view foreign practices in comparison to Western practices and religions that they were familiar with.

Travel writers characterized and stereotyped the *devadāsīs*, recognizing their elite status while simultaneously commenting on their "loose character" (Bor 2007: 43). These travel writers, many of whom were missionaries, categorized the dancers as prostitutes. The characterization of the *devadāsīs* as prostitutes by these travel writers is what eventually led to legislation that outlawed the dedication of these young girls to temples.

In 1838, an Indian dance troupe⁶ traveled to France to perform and prove their status as respectable women. The original reception of these dancers was excitement and curiosity from the majority of the European world. However, the novelty and excitement about the Indian dancing women turned quickly to disappointment and writers went back to imposing Western ideology onto the Orient. One critic wrote, “We suspect that there is something in the performance not exactly consistent with our English tastes and feelings. The dancing of the Bayaderes is altogether opposed to that of our English school— there is none of that lightness of step and motion which distinguishes the Elsslers’ aerial flights” (Bor 2007: 65). The critic went on to say that the English could not comprehend the performance of the *devadāsīs*, assumingly because it is not a dance style that could be understood in relation to what was already known in Western culture and performance.

It would have been difficult for the British to understand that the Bharatanatyam dance form was a vehicle for religious transcendence, as there was nothing similar in European culture and tradition. British imperialists instead focused on the transgressions of the *devadāsīs* outside of their religious dance practices. Their close relationships with statesmen and governmental and social elite were seen as explicit prostitution and the dancers were viewed only as courtesans, and not in the high caste standing they were in prior to colonialism. The dance form of the *devadāsīs* was a style of devotion that was unintelligible to the modern British thinker, and their dance form was regarded as backwards and primitive. Temple dancing and *devadāsīs* therefore

⁶ The troupe called themselves the real Bayaderes. Bayaderes means dancer in French, implying it was even difficult for the West to understand the name of the dancers within a cultural context other than their own. The *devadāsī* group was labeled as “priestesses” in order to help combat the rumors of their alleged prostitution. (Bor 2007: 57)

began to face incriminating laws forcing them out of their daily careers and thus threatening their means of livelihood.

Anti-*devadāsī* legislation began with the Contagious Disease Act (CDA) of 1868. The CDA subjected all female performers to an examination for venereal disease. Those who had contracted a disease were put into locked hospitals that were “used as a way of protecting British officers from venereal disease by forcibly isolating” and treating these women (Morcom 2014: 35). Anna Morcom, in her book *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion*, states that the CDA “also involved the relocation of courtesans to places outside of the city, greatly impacting their status in society” (35). The CDA identified the dancers as dirty and blamed *devadāsī* performers for the spread of venereal disease instead of placing condemnation on the British officers who took part in sexual relations with these women, and might have brought venereal diseases with them to India. Legislation continued to develop, stigmatizing *devadāsīs* and making their practices illegal.

The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 made entire tribes and communities illegal. This legislation effectively outlawed communities of female hereditary dancers. As Morcom explains, “members of Criminal Tribes thus notified could be forced to report regularly to officials, to have their homes inspected by police, to be restricted in their movements, to be resettled, or even to be placed in reformatory settlements” (Morcom 2014: 37) This act severely marginalized the society of *devadāsī* dancers. Finally, with the Devadāsī Bill of 1911 and 1927 and the Madras Devadāsī Prevention Act of 1947, *devadāsīs* were officially outlawed, as was dancing in the temples. Women were forbidden from being dedicated to temples and being married to deities. Their ritual labor was now an illegal act.

Outlawing performances of the *devadāsīs* caused them to live without income, and ironically, forced some of these women to take drastic measures to survive by prostituting themselves. These women were not originally prostitutes. Sex with elite men was merely part of their role in society, but this concept was not one the Europeans could fathom, so they labeled them as prostitutes.⁷ Because of the impediments the British placed on the female performers, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurred, forcing women to become what the imperialists had called them. As Morcom puts it, “They disappeared from legitimate and high status cultural traditions, and their arena became a low status illicit one, increasingly so in the twentieth century following independence, and particularly since the 1980s and 1990s” (Morcom 2014: 40).

In addition, the British imperialists greatly influenced the perspectives and opinions of native Indians on matters related to sexuality. In order to combat colonialism, the nationalist movement was formed, and with it came a push to de-sexualize women. This de-sexualization began interestingly with Rādhā. Rādhā was redefined as a non-sexual chaste wife of Krishna. The elimination of sexuality in Rādhā’s new identity was congruent with the desexualization of the dance style of the *devadāsīs*. “While she [Rādhā] represented an undesirable ‘erotic’ element of Hindu religious tradition, her reformulation as an iconic ‘modern woman’ could function metonymically for the uplift of Indian women, and thereby contribute to the rhetoric for the cause of Indian self-rule” (Ritter 2005: 181). The impositions of the British on the *devadāsīs* and on women in general in India gave rise to the elimination of temple dancing. But some dancers

⁷ The *devadāsīs*’ sexual relations with elite men was not for religious purposes, but for social purposes. Many *devadāsīs* ended up marrying men from elite social classes and their relationships with these men were not something other people were concerned about.

believed the tradition of the *devadāsīs* was important enough to live on in the face of post-colonial critiques.

The Reformation and Revitalization of Bharatanatyam in the Twentieth Century

The introduction of negative stigmas and anti-nautch⁸ legislation associated with the temple dancers during British imperialism proved to be the end of the *devadāsīs*, but was also the birth of an altered dance style performing the tradition of the *devadāsīs*. In the midst of the enactment of the Devadāsī Bill and the Madras Devadāsī Prevention Act, two groups were involved in the spread of the newly named Bharatanatyam and they differed in their views of the *devadāsīs* and how they represented India as a whole. These groups were the reformists and the revivalists.

The reformists saw *devadāsī* dancers and other female dancers as a symbol of the oppression of women in India and as a reification of the patriarchy. They viewed the totality of the *devadāsī* practice through the sexuality of its performers. They believed that the erotic nature of the performances of these dancers led to a life of prostitution, given their relationships with men in positions of power. The reformists aimed to restructure Bharatanatyam to eliminate the connotations of prostitution, but still aimed to maintain tradition within the dance form as much as possible.

On the other side were the revivalists, a group of dancers and Indian thinkers focused on preserving traditions. The revivalists saw *devadāsī* performers as representative of traditional India. They advocated to preserve India's traditional values and believed that this dance style

⁸ Anti-nautch movements were anti-dancer movements in the colonial period.

offered an opportunity to display pride in their traditions, combating the European stereotypes placed on dancing women. In *At Home in the World: Bharatanatyam on the Global Stage*, Janet O'Shea writes, "Bharatanatyam revival refigured and realigned nationalist gender discourses so that, through them, the new generation of practitioners established their own authoritative stance on the dance form, raising questions about the tradition and their role in it" (2007: 110).

The reformation of Bharatanatyam was established through a change in the dance form, the dancers, the name, and the context. Bharatanatyam dancers changed from the traditional *devadāsī*⁹ to upper-caste brahmin women. The reformed dance style also utilized Sanskrit instead of regional dialects, to make Bharatanatyam seem like a dance form that could be identified with the nationalist movement. In 1932, the term *sadir*, which was the dance style of the *devadāsīs*, was changed to the Sanskrit Bharatanatyam (*bharata* meaning India, and *natyam* meaning dance). The use of Sanskrit instead of a localized language of Tamil or Telugu helped to rebrand Bharatanatyam as more of a pan-Indian, national dance form rather than a style specific and limited to a southern Indian region.

The dance form was also desexualized, eliminating the performance of erotic religious poetry and focusing more on non-erotic religious poetry. There were similar changes in the choreography of the dance form, not only in stepping away from the eroticism and sexuality involved in traditional *sadir* dance, but also focusing on distancing the dancer from the narratives being performed by having the dancer portray the religious story through the use of third person story telling. Additionally, Bharatanatyam dancers moved the performance of this style out of the

⁹ The *devadāsīs* were seen as upper class women prior to colonialism. However, the stigmatization of their practices by the British removed their high status and characterized them as low class. Because these women were forced out of their jobs as temple dancers, their social status dramatically deteriorated in the colonial period.

temples and courts and onto the stage, into public light. Some Bharatanatyam performances moved from solo female dancers embodying multiple characters into small groups of dancers on stage, each playing a different role, as in a play.

Rukmini Devi (1904-1986) was one of the leading dancers in the rebranding of Bharatanatyam. Her goal was to eradicate the stigma of prostitution related to the dance style of the *devadāsīs*. O’Shea says that Rukmini Devi “refigured Bharatanatyam as a respectable accomplishment through which ‘women of good families’ expressed cultural pride” (2007: 117). Rukmini Devi placed an emphasis on spirituality and religious mythology, and created positions of authority, like choreographer roles, for women. She extracted most of her choreography for this new Bharatanatyam from the Brihadeshwara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, constructed in the 11th century CE. Over 80 carvings from the *Natyashastra* covered the walls of the temple and many of the modern Bharatanatyam movements were derived from these carvings. Rukmini Devi also took one-on-one lessons with former *devadāsī* women to perfect her traditional Bharatanatyam dance style before reforming and codifying it. She formed the Kalakshetra dance school in 1936 in Chennai, India, which is still viewed as the traditional school of Bharatanatyam today. The formation of Kalakshetra effectively solidified the dance form. In the past, dancers learned the *sadir* style in a one-on-one setting from lifetime *devadāsī* performers. Kalakshetra allowed Rukmini Devi to open dance classes to Indians who never had the opportunity to perform this unique and traditional dance style like the temple dancers did. Rukmini Devi also extended Bharatanatyam shows to upper caste audiences, performing for the elite in India. With her status as a brahmin woman, she was able to reformulate Bharatanatyam to be respectable

among the upper class, effectively carrying on the traditional style while eliminating all erotic aspects.

T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984) stood as Devi's rival in the reformation of Bharatanatyam. She was a female hereditary dancer, a *devadāsī* by birth. Balasaraswati was born in Chennai and made her debut performance in 1925 in front of a shrine to the goddess Devī. She saw Rukmini Devi's restructuring of the *devadāsī* dance as one that strayed from the *sadir* dance tradition. Balasaraswati believed that the erotic was central to the dance style and argued that Rukmini Devi's reconstruction of Bharatanatyam, which included an elimination of eroticism, was detrimental to the traditional form. O'Shea writes, "she [Balasaraswati], as a *devadāsī*, represented a hereditary practice and contested the replacement of the *devadāsīs* by elite women" (2007: 124). Balasaraswati was very committed to portraying emotion through her performances, and felt that Rukmini Devi's restructuring of the classical temple dance did not pay homage to the centrality of sexuality within the traditional dance form. Ram Gopal, a male non-hereditary dancer celebrated internationally shared Balasaraswati's view of the erotic in the dance form. In Ann Gaston's book *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*, she recognizes Gopal's opinion on the reformation of Bharatanatyam. Gopal, reacting to Rukmini Devi's sanitization of Bharatanatyam post-colonially says, "Rukmini [Devi] ... has bleached Bharata Natyam ... we worship the linga (male sex organ) and the yoni (female sex organ). That is sex. How can we deny sex between a man and a woman? How can you not feel that erotic drive? It is a charge between human beings" (Gaston 1996: 94). Sex is inherently intertwined in Hinduism and is inseparable from human life. Eroticism has become a mode of devotion for Hindus, especially for devotees of Shiva and Krishna.

Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi also differed in their views on *bhakti*. Balasaraswati believed that Rukmini Devi was missing a crucial part of the root meaning and objectives of the dance form. “When Rukmini Devi spoke of *bhakti* she intended formal devotional gestures of supplication offered to a deity; if T. Balasaraswati used the same term, it included *śrṅgāra* as a form of *bhakti*” (Gaston 1996: 90). Balasaraswati focused a lot on *śrṅgāra* in several of her more well-known pieces portraying a devotee’s love for Krishna. Krishna-*bhakti* goes hand in hand with devotion through eroticism, as we saw in both the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Gītagovinda*. O’Shea clarifies that “the idiom of *śrṅgāra bhakti*, or devotion through eroticism, aligned sexual love and religious devotion” (O’Shea 2007: 26). The elimination of eroticism in Rukmini Devi’s version of Bharatanatyam removed the most intimate and accessible *rasa* for dancers and their audience to meditate upon and thus to form a relationship with the divine.

The projection of emotions within Bharatanatyam dance and *sadir* dance is known as *abhinaya*. And for Balasaraswati, “in her address to the Tamil Isai Sangam in 1975, she described *śrṅgāra* as the ‘ruling mood of *abhinaya*’” (Gaston 1996: 92). *Abhinaya* was seen as a necessity for Balasaraswati in order to properly perform the dance of the *devadāsīs*. This expressive category of the dance was quite controversial during the reformation of Bharatanatyam by Rukmini Devi. Balasaraswati did not see *abhinaya* or *śrṅgāra* as an explicitly negative aspect of her hereditary dance form. Instead, she viewed these as forms of devotional practice and saw the erotic as the most viable path to salvation through the embodiment of these religious stories. Responding to Balasaraswati’s address to the Tamil Isai Sangam, Zubko explains that, “what Bala is indicating here is that the erotic aesthetic mood, *śrṅgāra rasa*, is a devotional mood and the enacting of *śrṅgāra rasa* is a devotional act” (Zubko 2014: 48).

Balasaraswati felt that Rukmini Devi was not in a position to alter the traditional dance form of the *devadāsīs* as she was not a hereditary dancer. Balasaraswati felt an increased passion to stand up for her family's tradition and maintain the core elements of eroticism in order to preserve the erotic path towards salvation that she saw as the most accessible and intimate relationship with the divine.

Despite Balasaraswati's opposition to the elimination of erotic poetry in Bharatanatyam, Rukmini Devi was persistent in her restructuring of the dance form whilst removing any component with sexual or erotic connotations. O'Shea speaks to how Rukmini Devi does this through her changes in choreography. "By emphasizing technique, she mitigated sensuality and the expression of *śrīṅgāra bhakti* — devotion through an erotic idiom — that characterized *devadāsī* performance, neutralizing the sensuality associated with the solo dancer and the devotional repertoire" (O'Shea 2007: 46).

Despite the efforts to maintain a traditional and authentic version of *sadir* dance that included dancing erotic poetry into the twentieth century, Balasaraswati left behind no legacy besides her immediate family. Rukmini Devi left behind a very popular and well attended dance school, and a successful legacy of Bharatanatyam dancers. It can be argued that Rukmini Devi revitalized Bharatanatyam in the only way possible, given the stigmas established by British imperialism. Unfortunately, the newly formed Bharatanatyam was lacking what Balasaraswati and other dancers saw as the essence of the dance form.

The conflict between tradition and eroticism within Bharatanatyam is a rivalrous narrative between these two lifelong dancers. Rukmini Devi saw her restructuring of the dance form as authentic and a revitalized way to preserve the tradition of the classical temple dance.

Balasaraswati saw her *devadāsī* family past as something that made her eroticized version of the dance form something that was historically authentic, and refused to take the *devadāsīs* out of their own tradition. The dance style of Bharatanatyam has continued to evolve even after this impassioned debate, and even after Rukmini Devi codified the dance form through her Kalakshetra dance school.

Personal Experience

I was lucky enough to experience the culture of Bharatanatyam in a modern context firsthand on a study abroad trip to Chennai, India in the fall semester of 2015. I was not surprised by the pervasive culture of dance and religion encircling daily life in India. However, I was surprised by the reactions I received when I used the term *devadāsī* in conversation with Indian dancers.

Akka was the *abhinaya* instructor who taught choreography and emotional projection to Bharatanatyam dancers. She was of short stature, but her caring demeanor and the vivid emotions portrayed in her dancing proved that her personality was bigger than her size. During a class discussion with Akka after a day of choreography, the subject of Balasaraswati arose. The class was exposed to Balasaraswati's role in the post-colonial debate on Bharatanatyam prior to our arrival in India. Akka avoided using the term *devadāsī* because she believed that "everyone immediately associates it with 'oh that was bad.'" She continued to say that the *devadāsīs* were not bad, but their performance was "the dance for the gods." The *devadāsīs* maintained high social status as temple dancers, dancing religiously and ritually within the temples and performing for gods and devotees alike. Their dance was spiritual and holy when it took place in

the temples. Sadly, their dance was wrongly stigmatized by the imposing British colonialists, she said.

Another woman, Chithra, a professor specializing in temple architecture, offered our class a short lecture about dance within Hindu temples and also took a defensive stance when it came to the *devadāsīs*. She argued that colonial thinkers used a different definition of eroticism and proclaimed that the *devadāsīs* were viewed as “loose women,” but she defended them saying that dancing was a normal job and that they were professionals, not prostitutes.

The defensiveness that arose in conversations with these women was an interesting aspect of modern opinions on the historical *devadāsī* situation. I questioned whether the women were defending the view of India as a whole tainted by British imperialism or if they aimed to defend the individual identity of the dancers themselves. Given that the women I spoke to were unaware of my background in the studies of Bharatanatyam and the *devadāsīs*, it makes sense that their automatic reaction was to defend the history of the *devadāsīs* and their hereditary dance form. It seems as though these modern thinkers feel the need to defend their own traditions and cultural history against the stigmas employed by British colonialists a generation before their time.

The characterization of the dance form is beginning to take on new identities in the modern age, around a century after the initial legislation against the *devadāsīs* was established. Rukmini Devi’s school of Bharatanatyam, Kalakshetra, has added more erotic poetry into the pieces taught and performed. Akka’s guru was asked to teach *abhinaya* privately to Kalakshetra dancers after years of retirement from dancing. Her position was specified in that she would teach erotic poetry and the movements and *mudras* involved within that erotic poetry to young female dancers. Prior to this teacher’s emergence from retirement, all young dancers were taught

by male gurus at Kalakshetra, making their teaching of erotic poetry an uncomfortable situation for all involved. With this new female teacher, the limits on eroticism in dance have broadened, and she has reintroduced erotic poetry to Bharatanatyam in a minimal form in her years teaching privately to Kalakshetra students. This may have been a step forward in reconnecting Bharatanatyam to the traditional *sadir* dance of the *devadāsīs* without the connotations of sexual infidelity and loose sensuality. Although this addition of eroticism in Rukmini Devi's style of Bharatanatyam is a new implementation within the revised dance form, eroticism is obviously not a new element within dance itself and within the original *sadir* dance. As Akka put it, "everyone is a sexual being, it's silly to act like it's not a part of the art form." It seems as though there is a return to history and to the original cultural and traditional dance performed by the original temple dancers.

Devadāsīs are still in existence today, but the differentiation between the Bharatanatyam dancers and the modern *devadāsīs* is more vast than it ever has been. The *devadāsīs* were forced into prostitution to promote their livelihood after their performance was outlawed, and this practice is still in effect today. Modern *devadāsī* women are no longer focused on their hereditary dance, but concentrated on how they can provide the best lives for their children, an opportunity they didn't have growing up in the aftermath of colonial criticism. The current generation of *devadāsī* women may very well be the last, as there has been an increase in education for their children and a growing number of support systems to protect the women and their children. The modern *devadāsīs* still perform *sadir* dance numbers, but mostly underground in front of only their families or friends in order to pay tribute to their heritage. Many women refuse to dance, not wanting to confront the stereotypes forced upon them during the colonial period.

Conclusion

The movement from temple to stage, from eroticism to de-eroticized poetry, and then back again characterizes a huge evolution of the Bharatanatyam dance form. Although the form has taken great twists and turns, criticisms and praises in its journey through colonialism and nationalism, it is apparent that the performers of Bharatanatyam today aim to maintain the tradition of the *devadāsīs* who danced before them, mostly through choreography. I believe we will see a push to continue to reintroduce the traditional elements of the dance of the *devadāsīs* in the near future. But sadly, dancers will never again be betrothed to a temple, employed for their hereditary musical ability. The modern *devadāsīs* will never again become dancers for the gods. In fact, the *devadāsīs* are dwindling severely in numbers, and I believe this will lead to an extinction of the hereditary traditional *devadāsī* lineage in the next couple of generations. It is sad to see a culturally traditional group of Indian women disappear with their history, but with the modern dancers of Bharatanatyam pushing to adhere to tradition, the culture of the *devadāsīs* will remain, somewhat, a part of the dance style for as long as it exists.

Part of this ancient tradition lies in the presence of the erotic *rasa*. This specific path towards salvation is valuable and essential to the dance form. The erotic remains an accessible and viable path in Hinduism and will be in existence for years to come. Sexuality cannot be removed from life and from religion, as it is a natural part of human existence.

The true beauty in the relationship between eroticism and religion is embodiment. Bharatanatyam is a pure expression of embodied religion and it only makes sense to explore the erotic through expression of the body. The bodily interpretation of erotic poetry and stories of the

divine is integral to the Hindu tradition, and although the *sadir* dance form is no longer the medium of this interpretation of religious texts, we will continue to see these elements celebrated and defended by modern Bharatanatyam performers.

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