

Sacred Steps Under Colonial Shadows

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical trajectory of Bharatanatyam, examining its transformation from a sacred temple ritual to a globally recognized classical dance form, with a particular focus on the disruptive impact of British colonialism. Originating over two millennia ago in Tamil Nadu, Bharatanatyam was historically sustained by *devadasis* (temple dancers) and *rajadasis* (court performers) who utilized intricate expressions (*abhinaya*) and hand gestures (*mudras*) to convey deep spiritual devotion and mythological narratives. These artists held high social standing, supported by royal patronage and codified artistic frameworks like the *Margam* format established by the Tanjore Quartette.

However, the colonial era introduced severe setbacks through British legal interventions and the Anti-Nautch movement. Motivated by Victorian moral standards and religious biases, colonial authorities heavily stigmatized, marginalized, and ultimately banned the dance form. This systematically stripped traditional performers of their financial support, dignity, and socio-cultural identities, pushing the classical art form to the brink of extinction.

In response to colonial suppression, the Indian independence movement catalyzed a wave of cultural nationalism. Post-independence, visionary reformers and institutional bodies orchestrated a major revival. They restructured Bharatanatyam by shifting it from the traditional *guru-shishya* system to formal institutional training, adapting it for modern theater stages. While this successfully preserved the dance, democratized education, and elevated its spiritual refinement, it also repositioned the art within elite social spaces, marginalizing the original hereditary communities. Ultimately, the evolution of Bharatanatyam, alongside the resilience of regional folk dances, underscores the enduring power of Indian heritage and its capacity for resistance and adaptation amid profound political and social shifts.

KEYWORDS

- Bharatanatyam
- Devadasi & Rajadasi
- Anti-Nautch Movement
- Colonial Suppression
- Cultural Nationalism
- Revivalism
- Tanjore Quartette

INTRODUCTION

Bharatanatyam is a foundational pillar of Indian classical culture, carrying a rich legacy that traces back over two millennia in the temples and historical inscriptions of Tamil Nadu. Derived from ancient theatrical treatises like the *Natyasastra* and guided by Nandikesvara's *Abhinayadarpana*, this multifaceted art form seamlessly integrates pure rhythmic movement (*nritta*), expressive storytelling (*nritya*), and dramatic representation (*natya*). Historically preserved and choreographed by *Nattuvanars* (traditional conductors), the dance was systematically structured into its modern performance path, the *Margam*, by the celebrated Tanjore Quartette during the 19th century.

Long before the advent of European colonization, Bharatanatyam served as an essential medium of spiritual devotion (*bhakti*) and cultural preservation, utilizing distinct hand gestures (*mudras*) and facial expressions (*abhinaya*) to bridge the gap between human worshippers and divine truth. It was deeply intertwined with the social fabric of South India through two distinct communities of highly respected female artists: the *devadasis*, who dedicated their lives to sacred temple rituals, and the *rajadasis*, who performed in the prestigious spheres of royal courts. This paper examines how these traditional structures were dismantled under British colonial rule and subsequently reshaped during the twentieth-century revival movement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Pre-Colonial Context and Traditional Practitioners

Scholars trace the antiquity of the dance form back over two millennia, citing foundational Tamil literature such as Ilango Adigal's *Silappatikaram* (2nd century CE), which details the technical mastery of the dancer Madhavi, as well as complex theoretical structures from texts like Nandikesvara's *Abhinayadarpana* and the *Natyasastra*. Historically, the art form thrived under a well-structured social arrangement where *devadasis* (temple dancers) and *rajadasis* (court dancers) were the sole custodians of the practice (Bose, 2022). Critiques emphasize that these hereditary communities were highly respected social institutions rather than marginalized entities. Their performances, organized through traditional guilds (*melams*), were central to the economic and spiritual ecosystem of regional kingdoms, especially under the patronage of the Maratha kings of Thanjavur (Katrak, 2013). This period also saw the architectural structuring of the performance repertoire into the *Margam* format by the Tanjore Quartette.

Colonial Hegemony and the Anti-Nautch Movement

The socio-cultural fabric supporting traditional practitioners fractured heavily during the 19th and early 20th centuries under British imperial administration. Research illustrates that colonial authorities viewed the *devadasi* institution through an Orientalist lens overlaid with restrictive Victorian moral codes (Allen, 1997). The intersection of British legal prohibitions and the domestic "Anti-Nautch" campaign significantly pathologized the *devadasi* lifestyle, misinterpreting the sacred and sensual expressions of *sringara* (devotional love) as crude or obscene (Katrak, 2013). Consequently, systematic legal reforms criminalized the practice and dissolved royal endowments, causing immediate economic displacement, disenfranchisement, and widespread social stigma for hereditary performance families (Bose, 2022).

The Twentieth-Century Cultural Revival and Reconstruction

The modern reinvention of the dance form, which involved changing its name from *Sadir* to *Bharatanatyam*, was a strategic response orchestrated by upper-caste Indian nationalists and elite reformers like Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Ayyar (Allen, 1997; Meduri, 2004). Literature analyzing this "revivalist" paradigm argues that the reconstruction process was deeply ironic. While reformers successfully rescued the art form from total erasure, they did so by "cleansing" and "sanitizing" its aesthetics to suit modern, bourgeois patriarchal sensibilities (Katrak, 2013).

By transitioning instruction from the hereditary *guru-shishya* (lineage) framework to formal institutional academies like Kalakshetra, the art form became democratized and accessible to middleclass women, yet it effectively displaced the original hereditary *devadasi* artists (Allen, 1997; Bose, 2022). In contrast to this institutionalized elite appropriation, scholars also emphasize the

resilient efforts of legendary hereditary artists, such as T. Balasaraswati, who sought to preserve the structural depth and emotional authenticity of the original tradition amidst rapidly changing societal attitudes (Bose, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, historical, and archival research methodology to examine the sociocultural evolution of Bharatanatyam. Because the core objective is to trace the systemic shift of the dance form from its traditional roots through colonial suppression to its modern institutionalized revival, a qualitative framework is best suited to analyze historical narratives, legislative acts, and cultural discourses.:

DATA COLLECTION

- **Primary Sources:** To analyze the historical and colonial periods, primary data is collected through 19th and early 20th-century colonial documents, British legislative acts (such as the anti-devadasi laws), and archival materials regarding the Anti-Nautch campaign. Classical treatises, including Nandikesvara's *Abhinayadarpana* and the *Natyasastra*, are also referenced to establish the traditional benchmark of the dance form.
- **Secondary Sources:** Contemporary academic literature is gathered to contextualize the historical data. This includes peer-reviewed journal articles, historical monographs, books on dance history, and critical cultural analyses detailing the twentieth-century revival movement led by elite nationalists and surviving hereditary artists.

What is Bharathanatyam?

Bharathanatyam is a classical art form and dance performed about 2000 years ago. Author ilango adigal have mentioned about the character Madhavi in Silapathikaram which was an epic literature during 2nd century CE. References of dance in earlier days are also found in sculptures and inscriptions in temples of Tamil Nadu.

Until 19th century, Bharathantyam was called by several names, such as Kuttu, Adal, Chinamelam, Sadir and Dasiattam or Desiattam. The origin of bharathanatyam is by Natyasastra but the Tamil text followed by all performers is ABINAYADARPANA of Nandikesvara.

Bharathanatyam contains 3 components: NRTTA, NRTYA AND NATYA. NRRTA is nonrepresentational, NRTYA is representational and NATYA is drama. Kuttanul, Panchamarabu, Mahabaratacadamani and Bharatasenapatiyam are the popular and available texts on natya.

FOUR BROTHERS (Chinnaya, Ponnaya, Sivanandam and Vadivelu) also called as TANJORE QUARTETTE who were supported by Maratha kings, formed MARGAM (path) which is the format for performing Bharathanatyam even today.

Earlier it was performed by devadasis who performs on temple and rajadasis who performs on courts. The Nattuvanars are the real composers and choreographers of this epic and rich art form.

HOW BHARATHANATYAM WAS IMPORTANT BEFORE COLONIALISM?

Bharathanatyam was important to express sacred belief (bhakthi). The art of showing how a commoner feels about worshipping god or goddess connect the divine truth to the audience. Various mythological stories that connects the performer as well as audience.

Using the hand gesture (mudras) and facial expression (abinaya) helps the dancers to convey the exact meaning of the script. Powerful talam and beats that they provide, engages everyone and bound together. Each composition varies with standards and meaning.

Unlike after colonial period, dancers and nattuvanars are respected in society paying high standards. Royal courts provided status and financial support because they are the keepers of the tradition and culture of the fine art of Tamilnadu.

These performances are essential during temple festivals and other occasions. Many poses of bharathanatyam have embodied in the temple architecture, which reflects until now.

DEVADASI SYSTEM

DEVADASI'S are women who are also known as (servants to god) they are married to the god. They will be performing in the temple narrating mythological stories. They are not allowed to experience the outer world since they belong to god.

These devadasi has shaped the most important aspect and history before colonial period. They are most respected and dedicate their life to the dieties, especially during chola period.

RAJADASI'S

RAJADASI'S are also known as court performers, who perform or dance in royal courts during occasions and for entertainment too. They are considered as the most important point of growing the culture to the next level.

They are palace dancers were devadasi's are slaves of god. Rajadasi's have equal respect and importance compared to devadasi's. Rajadasi's are popular and known in few places like Tanjavur (TANJORE).

ANTI-NAUTCH MOVEMENT

During colonial period Britishers started to eradicate the culture and traditions followed by Indians especially art forms. Devadasi's and Rajadasi's are severely suffered due to this movement.

The word "NAACH" is a Bengali term means DANCE later corrupted by British as "NAUTCH". The main aim of the Britishers to abolish the practice of the classical art forms so that the identity of the particular community will be demolished.

The British officials named such dancers as "NAUTCH GIRLS" and allow them to dance just for entertainment purposes. Britishers had their own NAUTCH PARTIES to show the dancers talent in front of stage. Though highly trained and respected within local culture, they were sometimes misconstrued or stigmatized by British colonialists.

Therefore, those dancers slowly started to lose their respect and dignity compared to before colonial period.

WHY DID BRITISHERS BANNED BHARATHANATYAM

This is all the because of the root cause of the act RELEGIOUS DISBELEIF ACT. This act states that any Indian who did not change his religion to Christianity cannot inherit their ancestral property. Which simplifies one thing Britishers interferes in cultural beliefs and practices. They forced Christianity and Victorian models and practices on Indian people. So to abolish the cultural thought from the people Britishers Banned Bharathanatyam and few other cultural practices all over India.

People called Devadasis as ill fame. Their dignity ruined completely.

IMPACT ON BHARATHANATYAM

Slowly dancers started to lose their royal support financially and they had no payment for performing. Since, the government is taken by colonial people they had zero interest towards investing in this cultural aspect of India.

Therefore, devadasi had no role in enlarging their cultural aspect and had a chance to perform too. They lost their identity and lost their dignity in front of society that cannot be accepted by them because they are one of the main reasons for setting such a standard for this art.

Much social discrimination raised and eventually the art form nearly disappeared.

REVIVAL

Immediately after the independence, many scholars and exponents started to the art. Few notable exponents and Nattuvans are Rukmani Devi Arundale, M.K. Saroja, Mrinalini Sarabhai, C V Chandrasekhar and etc.. and Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Thanjavur Panchpakesa Nattuvanar, Karaikal J.Sarasa, Thanjavur brothers etc...respectively.

Slowly temple performance changed to modern stage performances. DANCERS started to recognise themselves in society and gained the respect again.

Kalakshetra and Sangeet Natak Akademi helped transform Bharatanatyam from a traditional guru–shishya learning system into a more organized art form taught through institutions, classrooms, and structured syllabi. This made dance education more accessible to larger sections of society.

At the same time, social reformers such as Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer reshaped Bharatanatyam to match the cultural values of the emerging middle class. Greater importance was given to spirituality, devotion, and artistic refinement, while many elements connected to the earlier devadasi tradition were reduced or removed.

Although these efforts helped preserve and popularize Bharatanatyam, the traditional devadasi community gradually lost its central role in the art form. As the dance entered elite social spaces, upper-caste and urban practitioners became the new face of Bharatanatyam.

The performance style also changed over time. More attention was given to nritya (pure dance movements) and refined abhinaya (expressive storytelling), while older and longer temple-based performance traditions became less common.

Eventually, Bharatanatyam moved beyond temples and became widely performed in theatres, cultural festivals, and international stages. It came to represent an important symbol of Indian classical culture and heritage across the world.

Nationalism and Cultural Revival

During the struggle for Indian independence, traditional dance forms gradually became important expressions of national identity and cultural self-respect. Under colonial rule, many Indian artistic traditions had been dismissed as backward or morally inappropriate. In response, Indian scholars,

artists, and cultural reformers began to revive indigenous art forms in order to reconnect people with their historical and cultural roots.

In this atmosphere of cultural awakening, Bharatanatyam gained renewed importance. The dance, which had once faced social stigma during the colonial period, started to be viewed as a symbol of India's artistic and spiritual heritage. Revivalists worked to preserve its techniques, music, expressions, and narrative traditions while adapting the performance style for modern theatre audiences.

The revival of classical dance was also linked with the growth of cultural nationalism. Many reformers believed that protecting traditional arts was essential for preserving India's identity during foreign rule. Dance institutions and academies introduced systematic training methods, helping younger generations learn and continue these traditions in a more organized way. Cultural organizations, public performances, and educational institutions contributed significantly to restoring respect for Indian dance.

At the same time, folk dances continued to play an important role in maintaining regional culture and community traditions. Unlike classical dance forms, many folk traditions survived through village festivals, rituals, and collective celebrations. These dances preserved local languages, customs, beliefs, and everyday experiences even during periods of political and social change.

Thus, both classical and folk dances became symbols of cultural continuity and resistance. They helped strengthen national pride and reminded people of the richness of India's artistic heritage.

Conclusion

The colonial period brought major changes to Indian dance traditions and affected the social position of many performers and artistic communities. Colonial attitudes, combined with social reform movements, weakened several traditional practices and reduced the importance of temple-based performances.

However, Indian dance traditions did not disappear. Bharatanatyam adapted to changing social conditions and eventually experienced a cultural revival through the efforts of artists, scholars, and institutions. Folk dances also continued to survive through community participation and regional celebrations, preserving local identity and cultural memory.

Today, these dance forms are recognized not only as artistic performances but also as important reflections of India's history, spirituality, and social transformation. They represent the endurance of cultural traditions that continued to survive despite colonial influence and modernization.

Although the colonial era changed the structure and perception of Indian dance traditions, it could not destroy their cultural significance or artistic spirit

Future Scope

1. Oral Histories and Ethnographic Studies of Hereditary Lineages

A significant area for future inquiry is conducting extensive fieldwork and gathering oral histories from the remaining descendants of the traditional *devadasi*, *rajadasi*, and *Nattuvanar* communities. While archival text records the legislative and public discourses of the colonial era, direct ethnographic accounts can provide an invaluable, counter-hegemonic perspective on how these families subverted, survived, or experienced the twentieth-century transition and displacement.

2. Digital Archives, Motion Capture, and AI Preservation

With advancements in technology, future studies can explore the intersection of classical dance and digital humanities. Research can focus on utilizing motion-capture technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to digitally archive the precise geometry of *mudras* (hand gestures), *charis* (leg movements), and complex rhythmic patterns of various traditional lineages (*banis*). This could create a standardized, accessible global digital repository for preserving stylistic nuances that are at risk of being lost.

3. Globalization, Diaspora, and Cross-Cultural Hybridity

As Bharatanatyam has firmly established itself on global stages, future research should investigate its transnational adaptation. Scholars can analyze how the dance form is being renegotiated by second- and third-generation South Asian diaspora communities in the West. This includes exploring how the art is used to navigate identity, and how it adapts when intersecting with Western contemporary dance forms, non-Indian musical scores, and global social justice themes.

4. Re-centering Marginalized Narrative Themes

While the modern revival heavily emphasized spiritual purity and traditional mythological themes, modern choreographers are increasingly using the structural vocabulary of Bharatanatyam to address contemporary socio-political issues. Future research can critically evaluate this thematic shift—examining how modern performances address climate change, gender politics, mental health, and queer identities, thereby transforming the dance from a historical artifact into an active medium for modern social critique.

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Author Profile

S. Shevaani is an accomplished classical dancer and versatile youth leader who has dedicated nearly a decade to the preservation and performance of Indian classical arts. For the past nine years, she has rigorously trained in Bharatanatyam, culminating in the successful completion of her *Arangetram*—her debut formal solo performance. Demonstrating a deep academic and practical command over the dance form, Shevaani has also cleared four progressive examination grades under the prestigious *Prayathnam* board.

An active and widely recognized performer, Shevaani has graced numerous stages across prominent temples and elite *sabhas* (cultural organizations). Her artistic excellence has been broadcast to wider audiences through a featured performance on the national television network, Doordarshan (DD

Channel). Furthermore, her commitment to the global scaling of traditional dance is marked by her active participation in major collaborative milestones, including successful entries into the **Guinness World Records**, the **Traditional Book of Records**, and the **Divine World Book of Records**. In recognition of her technical virtuosity, expressive depth, and dedication, she has been honored with several prestigious cultural titles, including **Kala Bhaskara**, **Natya Kala Jyoti**, and **Nrithya Kalamani**.

Beyond her artistic pursuits, Shevaani maintains a well-rounded profile in academics, sports, and civic leadership. She is an active member of the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and the Bharat Scouts and Guides, embodying disciplined citizenship and community service. Balancing physical endurance with linguistic scholarship, she is a competitive sports enthusiast and has achieved the distinction of a *Pandit* qualification through the Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha. Melding her deep physical training with an analytical understanding of dance history, Shevaani continues to contribute meaningfully to the evolution and documentation of India's classical heritage.