

## FEMININE REPRESENTATION IN KARNATAKA'S FOLK DANCES –

An analysis of both the worshipped feminine and participatory feminine

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### Abstract

Karnataka's rich history, culture, and natural wealth make it a treasure cove of folk dances. At present a staggering number of over 110 folk dances have been documented. (Boralingaiah) Karnataka's folk dances are mostly termed together and introduced as '*gaṇḍu kāle*', literally translating into male arts. Folk dances performed exclusively by women are an insignificant number. There seems to be a huge disparity in the representation of women in Karnataka's folk dances.

Hence the scope of this study is to look at the representations of women in folk dances in Karnataka. The purpose of the study is many folds:

1. To delineate the feminine representations in Karnataka's folk dances in two categories – the worshipped feminine and the participatory feminine
2. To understand the worshipped feminine through folklore, symbols, and practices in folk dances
3. To examine the participatory feminine in traditionally exclusive folk dances performed only by women through its form and content
4. To analyze the role of femininity and female constructs in Karnataka's folk dances

Descriptive research methodology specifically an ethnographic approach is used as the research design in this study. Primary data has been collected by observation, participation and interviews. Secondary data has been collected through analyses of articles and books.

In the traditional worldview of binary gender, only men and women are represented. Even between these two genders, we see a huge disparity. Feminine representations are extensively studied in literature and paintings – these portrayals are delineated to understand topic. Feminine representation in folk dances of Karnataka can be studied in two broad categories. The first is the worshipped feminine or divine feminine and the second is the participatory feminine. In the worshipped feminine folk dances such as karaga kuṇṭa, pūjā kuṇṭa and jōgati ṇṭya are studied. In participatory feminine - tarle barle kunitha, lambāṇi kuṇṭa, umatāṭa, pugudī ṇṭya, damāmi ṇṭya are elaborated. Women in mixed dances are also briefly mentioned to get a complete picture.

The analysis of the female representations determines the cultural evolution of feminine representation, which can broadly be grouped into four phases: pre-historic, vedic, historical, and current. Behavioral scientists studying women's underrepresentation state that a gender-imbalanced picture of society can reinforce and perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. The

study concludes that more women should claim performance spaces and take forward the legacy of folk dances in Karnataka.

**Keywords:** Folk dance, Feminity, Karnataka, Women in folk dances, Feminity in folk dance, Ritualistic dances, Tribal dances

## Introduction

Folk in India is an umbrella term for ethnocentric complexities. Myths, legends, and history shape them to form a gamut of beliefs and customs. Food, ritual, medicine, games, art, etc innumerable such verticals can also be termed as folk. However, we have four main categories - folk music, folk dance, folk theatre, and folk puppetry in performative folk. Among these folk dances are reminiscences of an unbroken chain, it's infact a living chronicle of mankind.

*“There is hardly a civilization or culture wherein the awareness of human movement as a vehicle of expression of joy or sorrow is not evident” - Kapila Vatsyayana (Vatsyayana)*

Folk dances are not performed for gain, fame, or status in society. Raw energy and unbridled joy mark folk dances that are passed on through oral traditions. These dances are based on ethnicity- caste, and tribe determine the structure of the dance. They reflect geographical influences, language, rites & rituals. Folk dances can be performed for religious, social, didactic, or entertainment purposes. Practiced mostly by the unlettered communities of society, they draw richly from crude imagery and unrefined metaphors. Its icons and symbols mark the archetypes that govern the Indian psyche. It also is a referral point to anthropological, ontological, and philosophical perspectives of civilized man.

Each state in India is a cradle of innumerable folk dances. Karnataka too with its rich history, culture, and natural wealth makes it a treasure cove of arts. The long coastline, the exuberant western ghats, the arid northern plains, and the rich plateau create a geographical diversity for unique arts to flourish. Evidence of cave paintings, rock art, and petroglyphs found scattered in places like Kupgal, Anegudi, Hiregudda, Onake kindi, etc prove the presence of prehistoric humans in the state. Community dancing, dancing with linked hands, and celebratory dances can be found in these cave paintings. Thus, the evolution of folk dance from its nascent prehistoric beginning can be traced in Karnataka. Folk dances are performed across the state, their distinctly unique forms continue to evolve well into the present era, representing the cultural identity and regional flavour of their origin. A rich tapestry of colourfull costumes and a wide variety of rhythms, textures, instruments, and choreography wrap the folk dances in Karnataka.

At present a staggering number of over 110 folk dances have been documented. (Boralingaiah) This does not include folk music, folk theatre, or folk puppetry genre. Karnataka's folk dances are mostly termed together and introduced as ‘*gaṇḍu kāle*’, literally translating into male arts. Robust, acrobatic, loud, and rugged energy defines performance like *dolḷu kuṇita*, *kansāḷe (kamsale)*, *pūjā kuṇita*, *paṭā kuṇita*, *sōmana kuṇita*, *vīragāse*, etc. These are a few of the most prominent and popular dances of the state. Folk dances performed exclusively by women are scanty compared to the large number of dances performed by men. Among this astounding gamut of 110 folk dances, an insignificant number of women-centric folk dances are found. There seems to be a disparity in the representation of women in Karnataka's folk dances. Women play a major role in folk music; the music genre of Karnataka such as *gege pada*,

*caudike mēla*, *burrakathā*, *sōbāne pada*, etc have a wide canvas for women performers. However, the balance is tipped in Karnataka's folk dances. Another striking feature in Karnataka's folk dances is that men and women do not mingle and dance together. Although few tribes, allow the genders to mix, only a miniscule few forms exist.

Therefore, the scope of this study is to understand the representations of women in folk dances in Karnataka. The limitation of the study is restricted to exploring the presence of women and femininity in folk dances. It does not study other genders, gender roles, gender stereotypes, or feminist theories. Other performative genres of folk music, folk theatre, and folk puppetry are not included. Only folk dances of Karnataka are considered. The purpose of the study is many folds:

5. To delineate the feminine representations in Karnataka's folk dances in two categories – the worshipped feminine and the participatory feminine
6. To understand the worshipped feminine through folklore, symbols, and practices in folk dances
7. To examine the participatory feminine in traditionally exclusive folk dances performed only by women
8. To analyze the role of femininity and female constructs in Karnataka's folk dances

## Literature review:

Existing literature on Karnataka's folk dances are mammoth documentation. The books (Boralingaiah) (Shivshankar) extensively tabulate the myth, origin, performance, rituals, costume, makeup, properties, and progression of Karnataka's folk dances. They help largely to understand the relationship between ethnic groups and performance. It also sheds light on the complex topics of symbols, intent, purpose, and need of folk dances. It gives meaningful insight to grasp the folk scenario in totality. However, gender dynamics, power play, the contemporary milieu, and the present status of Karnataka's folk dances have not been dealt with. There are no separate studies available on femininity or women-centric views in Karnataka's folk dances. The overall scarce availability of research articles on Karnataka's folk dances also creates a big lacuna.

Descriptive research methodology specifically an ethnographic approach is used as the research design in this study. Ethnography involves the study of culture or community through observation and participation, here the area being Karnataka's folk dances. Primary data has been collected over years of participation - training, learning, and performing folk dances along with regional masters, and interviewing them. Secondary data has been collected through interviews with scholars, and folklorists, as well as through document analyses of articles and books.

In the traditional worldview of binary gender, only men and women are represented. Masculinity and femininity are the attributions to these two genders respectively. Even between these two genders, we see a huge disparity. Femininity is a set of constructs that can be physical, social, emotional, or they are attributes that are associated with women. The word femineity was first recorded by Chaucer in 1380. As a movement, it began to take shape in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when women worldwide began to fight for education and their ability to vote. In India, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the movement was on the rise, with the abolition of sati and child marriage women's education was being encouraged. The words femininity and women's

representation began surfacing during this period. The negligible incidence of women's representation in work, politics, art, culture, trade, etc began to change by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Folk dances in Karnataka too have experienced a similar journey.

Dance is an expression of emotions; it began as an outpour of powerful emotions that needed to be communicated. It reflects the myriad facets of human experience, both men and women express these emotions equally. Although both genders have the emotional ability to feel and emote the representation of the same in art is biased. When it comes to physical expression of movement as studied in the article “*Dance and gender*” - men generally have more upper-body strength than women, and women often have more hip flexibility than men. These differences lead men and women to move differently due to innate different body structures. For instance, a cultural tendency to highlight stylistic elements perceived as either masculine or feminine, has produced some distinctly gendered styles of dance, with masculine styles often emphasizing leaps, jumps, power, and upper-body strength and feminine styles focused upon flexibility, fluidity, and emotion (Oliver)

*“Femininity, in the context of the Social Sciences, refers to a socializing ideology that encompasses various interpretations and expressions of being a woman. It is not a fixed set of essential traits, but rather a concept that defines and organizes gender-related practices and relationships. Different scripts and patterns of femininity are learned and reinforced throughout life, with some forms being dominant while others are marginalized.”* As defined by the International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences (Second Edition), 2015

Femininity is a set of attributes that can be associated with any gender or sex. Hence these representations can be interpreted in several ways in any medium of art such as music, dance, literature, or painting. Feminine representations are extensively studied in literature and paintings, women being the central theme in many of these works. Some well-known portrayals of feminine representation in these art mediums are:

- Supernatural portrayal -attributes beyond the laws of nature. Women are portrayed as holy, and divine with excessive power, beauty, and strength. Can be seen as both positive like goddesses, angels, etc or evil like ghosts, spirits, etc
- Stereotypical portrayal – widely used oversimplified one-dimensional view expressed about women. For instance, women shown as weak or emotional or women represented as thin, graceful, docile, etc
- Feminine Symbolism – An artistic tool that helps to metaphorically depict women. They can be animal symbols like a dove, doe, snake, etc Women can also be represented through inanimate symbols like a flower, rain, water, pots, etc
- Gynocriticism – A new feminist literary criticism approach. Establishing a female framework. A new model to adopt female experiences rather than accept male theories
- Deconstruction portrayal – A newer approach where individuals perform gender through their behaviour, appearance, and language. It is based on the belief that cultural practices determine gender and not biology.

Several such feminine representations can be seen in art and literature throughout the world. Only the first three representations of the supernatural, stereotypical, and feminine symbolism can be traced in Karnataka's folk dances. When we take the totality of all the folk dances of Karnataka we can study feminine representation in two broad categories. The first is the worshipped feminine or divine feminine who is revered in several folk dances and the second is the participatory feminine seen in folk dances performed exclusively by women.

## Worshipped Feminine Folk Dances

In the first category of worshipped feminine or divine feminine, we find innumerable Goddesses, rituals, cults, and temples scattered across the state like Mysuru Chamundeshwari, Shringeri Sharadamba, Kollur Mookambike, etc. However in this paper the focus is only on Goddesses embodied in folk dances of Karnataka.

### 1. KARAGA KUṆITA

*Karaga kuṇita* is a ritualistic dance that is performed invoking the goddess every year. Most famous is the Bengaluru *Karaga* thronged by lakhs of people. It is also found in several other districts like Hassan, Tumkur, Kolar, etc. The origin of the *Karaga* festival is derived from *Mahābhārata*. When the Pandavas are on ascent to the Himalayas at the end of the epic, *Draupadi* is walking behind them. She is attacked by the demon *Timirāsura*. She is unable to call out to her husbands who are far ahead. She assumes her primal form of *Ādi Śakti*, a powerful raging entity. From her sprang *vīrakumāra*-s (warriors) to annihilate this demon. Thus, the *Tigalaru* or *Vahnikula Kṣatriya* community is said to have been born out of her.

The male protagonist dons the role of *Draupadi*. The dancer wears a yellow sari and blouse and decks himself with jewellery. He also wears the *tāḷi* or *mangala sūtra* during the rituals as the mark of a married woman. His face is smeared with turmeric, and a big red *boṭṭu* (*bindi*) or vermilion adorns his forehead. On his head, he supports the *karaga*. *Karaga* means an earthen pot made from unbaked clay. The pot is filled with water or food grains and balanced on the head. This pot is completely enclosed in a bamboo cone structure covered with jasmine. The performer's back is completely covered in sheets of jasmine flowers, it starts from the tip of the cone to the knee of the dancer. The face is also partially covered. The tip of the cone is decorated with small flags and a tiny umbrella. The dancer holds a sword with a lemon attached to the tip in one hand and a long stick in another. The dancer is accompanied by *tamaṭe*, *are*, *nādasvara*, *nagāri*, and *ṭāsu*. He keeps moving rhythmically with gusto. As the beats become faster, he gets into a convulsive state where the whole body seems to be shaking.

The divine feminine is invoked here, but the performer is always a male. Several feminine symbols can be noted here:

- Pot- Pots with water denote a uterus, symbolic of fertility and femininity
- Sari- The divine goddess is represented here with the sari. The turmeric colour also adds to the cleansing and healing properties.
- Water- *Gange pūje* or worship of Ganga is ritually done as part of the *Karaga* celebrations. It's a symbolic salutation to women, rain and prosperity.
- Jasmine- The jasmine symbolizes abundance; it also depicts the graceful and soft feminine side of the mother goddess who is presently in a ferocious avatar.

## II. PŪJĀ KUṆITA

*Pūjā kuṇita* represents the *grama devate* or village goddesses. *Grama devate* is the local village deity she is the guardian of the village protecting and nurturing them. It is performed in the Bayaluseeme region of Karnataka mainly in Mandya, Tumkuru, Hassan, etc. It originates from the *meravaṇige sampradāya*, or the tradition of processions prevalent across the state. Every temple has its share of fairs, festivals, and celebrations. During these revelries, the Gods are taken out in *ratha*, or huge chariots around the village. A grand entourage of drums, music, dances, and fanfare always accompany this procession.

*Pūjā kuṇita* is essentially a solo dance; the man performing this dance carries an 8 to 10-kg bamboo frame on the top of his head. The bamboo structure is square-shaped and 4 to 5 feet in width and height. It is decorated with a row of *kaḷasa*<sup>1</sup> on the top of the frame. Saris and long rows of flowers are used to decorate the frame. The mask of a *Dēvi* or Goddess is fixed at the center. The whole structure rests on a *kamaṇḍala*<sup>2</sup>, which is balanced by the dancer on his head. These massive structures are called *pūje*. They are symbolic of the powerful goddess and are revered.

The dancer wears a *kacce pañce*<sup>3</sup>, a *kāsī aṅgī*<sup>4</sup>, or sometimes remains bare-bodied. A cloth is tied around the waist. He wears a thick *peta* or turban to support the wooden structure and *gejje* or anklets that complete his attire. The dancer is supported by a team of musicians. They play a variety of percussion instruments like the *tamaṭe*, *tāsu*, *dimḍi*, and *sambālā*. The dancer begins by taking the blessings of the goddess mask on the *pūje* and then places it on their head. The dancer begins with slow steps, all the while balancing the huge *pūje* on the head. The beats are very typical--- fast rolls juxtaposed with pauses. They build the pace slowly. The dancer performs several acrobats along with energetic movements of jumps and leaps. The fast-paced tempo is indeed a test of the dancer's dexterity. Some feminine symbols seen here are

- Kalsa- Pot-shaped embellishments represent prosperity
- Sari- The divine goddess is represented here with the several saris that are hung in rows
- Flowers – Rows and rows of flowers are used to decorate the Goddess

## III. JŌGATI NR̥TYA”

*Jōgati* can be men dressed as women, or third gender who are dedicated to the service of the Goddess Yellamma, the popular deity of Northern Karnataka. Yellamma is a very powerful Goddess, who attracts thousands of devotees. *Jōgati* could also mean *yogini* as the women who follow the path of spirituality. It could also stand for one who carries the ‘*jagaa*’ or the world on their heads indicative of the pots on their head. These devotees take *dīkṣe*, making them part of the temple and ritual services. The usually mistreated and marginalized eunuchs / transgender are considered as a pious symbol and their blessings are considered holy. They perform the *Jōgati atta* by singing and dancing in praise of the goddess. Steel/ mud pots are decorated with peacock feathers and a mask of the deity is placed on the pot. The pot is filled to the brim with water and placed on a *simbi* or round white cloth ring, which supports the pot.

<sup>1</sup> a small metal water pot, decorated with betel leaves and coconut

<sup>2</sup> An oblong water pot with handle and spout

<sup>3</sup> A rectangular unstitched cloth, wrapped around legs and tied at waist also called dhoti

<sup>4</sup> Tunic that is overlapped and tied with threads on left side also called angarekha

The pot is never kept on the floor as it symbolizes the Goddess herself. The dancers do several acrobats without spilling a drop of water.

The team usually consists of four to five dancers with three or four members in the orchestra. The dancers wear the typical *ilakal* sari and adorn simple jewellery. Though it is a goddess being worshipped and the dancers are in complete women's attire it's only the third gender or men dressed as women who perform this dance. The music ensemble is also unique, it comprises of *caudike*, a rare instrument along with the *talā*, *śruti*, and singer. *Jōgati* dancers are very dramatic in their performances. They prostrate on the floor and roll over, sit on the knee, and turn. They also pick up notes with their lips from the floor. Two *jōgatis* hold hands and perform fast twirls called '*apāle tipāle*'. The spins are extremely fast but the water in the pots is intact. They stand on another person's back or walk over an inverted tumbler. As they perform these acrobats, they balance the pots with aplomb. Some feminine symbols here are:

- Pot- Pots with water is symbolic of fertility and femininity
- Water- It's a symbolic salutation to rain and prosperity

Some of the other dance forms that have the worship of the divine feminine that are mentioned in the text such (Boralingaiah) (Shivshankar) are – *Māri kuṇita*, *Cauḍam'ma kuṇita*, *Bhūteyara kuṇita*, *Bhagavantikā*, *Tuḷasi kuṇita*, *Maṅkāḷam'mana*, *Durgā kuṇita*. An exquisite folk form of Karnataka is the *Somana kuṇita*. The dancers wear huge masks and dance with *betha* or wooden sticks and peacock feathers. They are bodyguards to a Goddess hence they are categorized under *Māri Ārādhane*<sup>5</sup> (Boralingaiah). There are also more than twenty folk dances like *Harige kuṇita*, *Vīramakala kuṇita*, *Raṅgada kuṇita*, etc that are documented under *Māri Ārādhane* (Boralingaiah). They exist as rituals within their community but are dwindling in numbers. They are not prominently seen on the folk performance circuits either. All the dance forms mentioned above are about the divine feminine with supernatural powers and energy. But these dances traditionally are always performed by men and never by women. We can notice that the attire used by these dancers are saris or skirts representing the feminine, but the men don the roles of women. The feminine is acknowledged and worshipped but real women are not allowed to perform the same. The reasons for this are disparity is murky and hard to determine.

American feminist and philosopher Judith Butler in her study 'Gender Performativity in Dance' (Oliver) mentions how the iterative or repeated acts of gender produce a kind of static or normal view of gender. She explains how repeatedly performing 'acts' becomes the accepted definition of that gender even though there is no pre-given or abiding gendered body or identity. As we have seen above the feminine representation is worshipped and becomes more visible than the women themselves. Butler further in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Oliver) describes how gender is not always socially constructed but also as a performative construct. She describes performing gender as legitimizing norms, as making explicit the social norms through repeatedly performing them. Over the years the pattern of worship and performances has established the divine or worshipped feminine who has immeasurable strength, magical powers, and destructive and protective energies, this construct

<sup>5</sup> Mari is local title given to Goddess Durga or Kali

is holy, abstract, and intangible. For the physical and tangible women, the performative powers and freedom are curled, with other genders donning their roles.

## Participatory Women Folk Dances

In Karnataka's folk dances feminine representation is also seen in participatory women's folk dances. Only a negligible number of dances are traditionally exclusive to women.

### A. TARLE BARLE KUNITHA

The dance performed by the *Hālaki okkaliga* tribal women is called “*Tarle nṛtya*” or “*Tarle baralē nṛtya*”. *Hālaki okkaliga* are an indigenous tribe who live in the foothills of the Western Ghats in Uttara Kannada. The women of this tribe stand apart for their attire. They wrap the sari from the front to a knot in the back to cover the chest and they do not wear blouses. The front portion of their bodies from the neck to the chest is covered with thick beads in all colours. Their hair is oiled partitioned in the center and pulled back into a knot. The knot is decorated with hibiscus or any flowers available. Earrings, *kaḍa* - silver anklets or silver bracelets, nose rings, and *boṭṭu* (bindi) make the costume beautiful.

These women perform a closed dance meant to bring prosperity to the clan. “*Tarle*” means a naughty or wayward person in Kannada. However, here it is used as “*taarele*”, which means to get, and “*baaralē*” translates to come along girl. One woman is the lead singer, and the songs address different aspects like rain, clouds, beauty, etc. The rest of the women keep repeating *tarle* or *baralē*, asking for prosperity. The women hold hands to make a closed circle and swing their arms up and down without breaking their bond with each other.

*Tarle baralē* is a closed dance with soft inward movements; only women perform this dance. The dance is performed in a circle, where the women are mostly connected or linked to each other throughout, either by holding hands, locking elbows, or holding the next person's waist. They move sticking to each other with their arms interlocked at the waist in quick short steps, resembling a centipede. Some movements are done with a snake-like quality of sliding and slithering movements. They do not usually have supporting instruments only the songs are used to create the music.

### B. LAMBĀṆĪ KUṆĪTA

The *Lambāṇi* or *Baṇjāra* are nomadic tribes found scattered across the sub-continent. Believed to have originated in the deserts of Rajasthan, these tribes moved away from drought in search of livelihood, traveling across India. They have settled in several parts of Karnataka, they are seen in large numbers in Gulbarga, Bellary, Sandur, and Bijapur. Though they remain minorities and economically backward, their culture is exceedingly rich. Their language is a unique blend of so many Indian languages; they are the true gypsies of India.

The women in the community make a splash of colours with their attire, which is an exquisite art on display. Every piece of their garment is heavily embroidered with colourfully hand-woven designs replete with mirrors, old coins, shells, and cowries. Their big multi-coloured skirts with mirrors and cowries are called *peṭiyā*, and their heavily-adorned backless blouse is

called *kañcōli*. They cover their head with an equally heavily embroidered *dupatta*<sup>6</sup>. Their arms are covered with ivory bangles from the smallest to the biggest sizes. Their other accessories comprise oxidized jewellery in black metal, including earrings, headpieces, nose rings, finger rings, necklaces, etc. A handkerchief is tied to the index finger on the right hand, and the colourfull cloth is twirled with every step adding to the visual appeal.

The men wear the traditional *dhoti*<sup>7</sup>, *kurta*<sup>8</sup>, and colourfull turban. They also wear a waistcoat with embroidered mirrors. Performers have a shawl resting on their shoulders or a piece of cloth around their waist, and *nagāri* instruments accompany this dance form. Men play the instruments, and only women perform this dance.

When the men begin to strike the *halage*, the women enter in a single file and form a circle with both their hands over their heads. The heel of one leg is tapped near the ankle of another in succession, while the wrists are rotated in harmony. They dance in a circle formation; this shape defines their dance. The continuous rise and fall of the long colourful skirts and *dupattas* in a constant twirl almost makes it hypnotic.

### C. UMATĀṬA

One of the unique and exclusive dances performed only by women is the *Umatāṭa*. This dance is performed by the Kodava or Coorg women from the hilly terrains of Karnataka. The region is known for plantations of areca and coffee. The people from this region are sophisticated, affluent, and polished and are known as bold and proud. The region is also the birthplace of the river Cauvery. Hence many rituals and traditions here are connected with the river Goddess whom the Kodavas worship.

This dance is performed by the Kodava women wearing the sari, traditional Kodava unique gold jewellery - gold earrings, necklaces, bangles, etc and the conventional *kuñkuma* or vermillion on their foreheads. The women wear full-armed blouses in red or pink shades and a sari in similar colours. The sari is wrapped in the traditional Coorgi way, the pleats of the sari come behind, and the *sērag<sup>9</sup>*u is taken from the front over the chest and wrapped around the back. The edge of the sari *sēragu* is then pulled over the right shoulder and fastened with a brooch or a safety pin. A red scarf with gold *zari*<sup>10</sup> broader is wrapped around the head.

The *Umatāṭa* dance is performed by 6 to 12 women. *Āṭa* means to play or act, like in *Kolāṭa* is dance or play with sticks. The women keep moving in a circular formation. The dancers hold brass cymbals in their hands. They sing the songs on Goddess Cauvery, beating the cymbals together. There is usually no other musical support, though sometimes they are accompanied by *madale* and *valga*, a *shehnai*-like instrument. The song in the Kodava language is rich in imagery of the beautiful land they live in.

A woman or doll holding a pot filled with water stands in the center, representing Mother Cauvery. The movements are simple steps of tap and join or small hops with minimum leg lifts. The dancers enter the area in a single file, tapping their cymbals. Then make a circle and begin at a very slow pace. The dancers alternating strike their own cymbals and later the

<sup>6</sup> Unstitched lengthy piece of cloth used by Indian women to cover back, head or chest.

<sup>7</sup> A rectangular unstitched cloth, wrapped around legs and tied at waist also called dhoti

<sup>8</sup> Long tunic worn by men with full arms and closed neck

<sup>9</sup> Sēragu – is the loose end of a sari that is draped over the front of the chest and hangs in the back

<sup>10</sup> Zari boarder – Boarder of saris that are weaved with silk threads sometimes silver or gold.

cymbals held by an adjacent dancer. They face their pairs, tap alternatively, and turn around on the spot while dancing. The whole team converges to the center and expands.

#### D. PUGUḌI NRṬYA

The *Puguḍi nrṭya* is performed by the *siddi* tribe, which traces its ancestry to Africa. The *siddis* were probably being exploited as slaves and at some point in time, made Karnataka their home. Their dark skin, thick lips, broad forehead, and typical African curly hair make them distinct. Hundreds of years ago, these descendants of the Bantu people of Southeast Africa, who were sailors, crew, mercenaries, or slaves settled here. One theory even states that to escape slavery they hid in forests. They are good hunters and are also known for fishing, hunting crabs, and making special delicacies of red ants. They have now become one of the few indigenous tribes from Karnataka. Except for the physical distinction, they have local traits, making them as native as any other tribe in Karnataka. This tribe has its collection of several unique dance forms like the *Damāmi nrṭya*, and *Puguḍi nrṭya* performed by women.

Women perform this dance carrying empty earthen pots that have now been replaced by plastic pots. They have a slightly bent knee position and hold the mouth of the pot facing towards them, and they continuously blow air into it. They keep turning the pot and tapping it with both their palms. Rotating the vessel, in a sitting position, they create a rhythm and keep moving. They also change their feet patterns, according to the music. The music for this dance includes *gumṭe*, *tāḷa*, and vocals. The origin and purpose of this dance have been lost in time. It is now being performed for entertainment during their festivities. Pots represent the uterus or *garbha*. Another probability is that the pots were rare for the tribes, and the dance was a method to cool the clay once they were shaped. Irrespective of the origin, it is interesting to watch how they use their own breath to create a rhythm, the low-frequency hum is almost internalized.

#### E. DAMĀMI NRṬYA

*Damāmi nrṭya* is another dance performed exclusively by women of *siddi* community. Here the dancers usually follow a single file and enter the stage, then make columns and rows as they move to simple percussion rhythms. One or two women take the lead to sing loudly while the others keep repeating the last words in the chorus. The women hold a *makari* or *morā*<sup>11</sup> in their hands as they perform. The songs are usually about catching crabs, cooking, and daily life hence they hold the bamboo basins in their hand. The movement is simple bends, taps, and turns. The women like African tribes have an innate rhythm that sways their body. Their costume was traditionally the sari and skirts which they wore daily. But now for the stage, they have adapted the costumes. They wear costumes made with bright-coloured skirts, blouses, and sashes. They come back their hair and make it into a bun like knot. They stick feathers or leaves in the bun. They also mark their faces with colourful lies or dots using paint.

### Women In Mixed Dances

Apart from the above-mentioned dances performed exclusively by women. We also have women in mixed dances. When we look at Karnataka's folk dances we do not have men and

<sup>11</sup> Bamboo strips are interwoven to make large baskets or flat plates with three side border

women dancing together in general. However, there are a few very rare exceptions that need to be mentioned, as they also have women participate as performers.

- *Sōligara nṛtya* or *Gōrukana nṛtya* are dances performed by *sōliga* tribes. These tribes are seen around Chamarajanagar, Biligirirangana hills, etc. Men and women dance together in circles in this form. They repeat the songs of the lead singer in the chorus and clap their hands and thighs to create rhythm. The women wear saris folded up to knee level, stick leaves to the knots in their hair, and tie some leaves and twigs around their waist too. The same steps are done by both genders. There are no pairing or couple movements here like holding hands, etc.
- *Kīlkudure* are hollow wooden decorated horses used in processions. This is a common practice seen across the country. In Karnataka too we have men and women dress as kings and queens walking on wooden stilts, wearing regal costumes and heavy makeup. They dance with the horses being balanced on straps attached to their shoulders.
- A few other tribes that have mixed dances are *yerava*, *koraga*, *kudiya*, *siddi*, *hakkipikki*, etc. These tribes are found in the interiors of our land, they are forest dwellers, herders, or gatherers. Both men and women perform in unsynchronized, spontaneous outbursts to mark a celebration. They are simple basic steps, mostly restricted to circles or lines. The music is usually one or two percussion instruments for support. They have not been adopted to stage, and the number of people in the tribes is also dwindling making these forms very hard to access.

## Analysis Of the Female Representation

The social constructs seem to have dictated the representation of women in more than one way. The prevalent customs and environment at different time frames of cultural evolution seemed to have shaped the disparity of representation. Based on the folk dance's origin, myth, practices, and interaction with practitioners a broad theoretical time spectrum can deduced that can shed light on the disparity. The cultural evolution of feminine representation can broadly be grouped into four phases:

### I. Pre-historic phase

When we observe the dance celebration of tribal communities, which is the oldest of folk forms, are observed in their natural habitats. We see men and women both participating equally in all the celebrations. The hunter-gatherer humans with nomadic life had begun to settle into an agrarian society, cultivation, fishery, animal husbandry, etc. A more fixed dwellings with structured life had begun to take shape. The gods are natural elements like rain, fire, thunder, etc. These are elements that invokes fear in them or that which is needed for their survival. Dance is a way to connect and communicate with the community. Indigenous tribes of Karnataka like *jennu kuruba*, *helava*, *siddi*, *hallaki*, *soliga* all have women performing folk dances. They are not idolized for their beauty or grace but meet the men as equals. They are not like the couple dances of the West where men lead and women follow. It was an egalitarian society where everyone was equal. The presence of an egalitarian society prior to recorded history is vouched by most folklorists.

## I. Vedic phase

Worship of natural elements was replaced with human-like gods with myths, stories, and legends. Here we see the beginning of a patriarchal society. With the advent of language and writing, rituals and customs began to dictate the mode of worship. The divine feminine is represented as the other half of the equation needed to maintain the equilibrium in nature and life. She is recognized as *Prakruthi* -nature to the male *Purusha* - man, she is seen as the benevolent mother, protector, and nurturer. Over time, different philosophies began to sprout across the county. A branch of Hinduism is the *Śākta* philosophy which worships the Divine Mother, or Devi, as the source of all creation. *Shakti*, *matrika*, *devis* became the manifestation and personification of the Supreme Goddess. The era began to create an aura of mystery and secrecy around the divine feminine.

## II. Historical phase

The historical phase is the written recorded framework, where several dynasties and colonizers in the state are well documented. In this phase, evidence of two thousand years of dynastic rules can be seen. During this phase, we see the complete establishment and flourishing of a patriarchal society. The 'male gaze' is rampant, women are depicted in arts, literature, and culture from a male perspective, and it objectifies women to please the male viewer. Women are given the roles of caretakers, and homemakers while dancing is performed mostly by men. Recorded history also shows women were denied education, curbed from thinking, and had no freedom of choice or independence. The divine feminine beliefs that had been started earlier phase began to translate into performative arts. This led to the birth of several folk dances with men in the lead. Women performers were seen in folk music as music was considered suitable to pursue while dancing by women was seen as an obscene body exhibition and lowly pursuit. Women were denied the pleasure of dancing in public. Feminine symbols began to replace real women, they were meant only to be revered and worshipped.

## III. Current phase

Education, financial independence, and occupational freedom have begun to redefine the role of a woman. Several women from traditional families have learned from their fathers and have started performing in public. Although traditionally most dances were restricted to only men women have learnt these dance forms. Several women also run their own dance schools, and dance teams. The tough male-oriented bastion of folk dances is being mastered by women, with adaptations in costumes to suit the female bodies. National and international performances by women folk dancers have begun to change the face of Karnataka's folk dances. Here are a few examples of women performers who have started the trend, built teams, and continue to have successful runs in the folk dance fraternity:

- a. Smt. Savitha Chirukunaiya from Malavalli thaluk, Mandya trained under her father Sri Chirukunaiya, and brothers in *Pūjā kuṇita*. She is the first woman to have broken the barrier in this field and has been successfully doing so in the past 35 years.
- b. Smt. Panniaamma from Hegodu, Shivmogga and Smt. Sujatha Murthy from Sagara where the first women *dolḷu kuṇita* team successfully been around for 40 years. Both don't come from traditional families yet trained with regional master and aced the form.

- c. Smt. Shwetha Devraju from Tarikeri Thaluk, Chikmangaluru has been performing *vīragāse*. from the past 30 years. Not hailing from a traditional family she learned from regional master Sri. Basvaraju, and continues to train young women and run a *vīragāse* performing unit

Several educational institutions and organizations in the past two decades have begun to invite and learn folk dances from regional masters. Also, several initiatives from the Government – Janapada jatre helped popularize folk dances. Institutions, corporates, and agencies have begun to introduce the art forms to women of all ages. It can therefore be acknowledged that now more women are becoming part of the folk dance legacy.

In Kannada, the term ‘*Tāyi bēru*’ means the mother root, it is used to describe all folklore in general. The term acknowledges the presence of a woman by calling all folk forms the ‘mother’. These words also admit that all art forms around us today have branched out of folklore only. Folk dances which are milestones in the cultural evolution of human existence gave a glimpse into the journey of women's representation over the millennium. In the present era where gender equity is an accepted norm, several women are claiming performance spaces. In folk dances, too more women should take forward the legacy of folk dances in Karnataka. Behavioral scientists studying women’s underrepresentation state that a gender-imbalanced picture of society can reinforce and perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. Hence bridging this gap may be a key for future generations. With technological advances, higher education, supportive cultural environment the disparity in women's representation in folk dances should be minimized.

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