

# Decline Of Bharatanatyam In Colonial Era, Due To It's Comparison With Nautch

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*Abstract: Anyone performing Bharatanatyam today, can easily tell that this dance form is one of the most sophisticated, the most meticulous, the most intrinsic, the most austere, and the most flawless form of dance, that has been passed on to us from our ancestral legacy, has been a part of our culture, and has found evidences in ancient texts as well as sculptures. With so much into the richness of our heritage, we still fail to acknowledge the same in our recent ideology of Bharatanatyam, wherein we compare it with lesser known, lower forms of dances like Sadir, Koothu, dasiattam, and other folk dances that was not meant for the studied audience, but existed only for basic entertainment. Though we see great Bharatanatyam performers today of stage, and are proud of this heritage, the annals of the history are speaking exactly the reverse, that fills our minds with a lot of guilt and ambiguity. Today, we have many evidences, that show that Bharatanatyam, with it's name intact, existed hundreds of years back, and was not the new name coined for Sadir in the post-colonial era. The deformation of the history in our texts have to be corrected. This paper brings to notice the reasons for the decline of Bharatanatyam in the colonial era, it's effects on the research texts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

**Keywords:** *Bharatanatyam degradation, Bharatanatyam origin, Sadir vs Bharatanatyam, History of Bharatanatyam.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The existence of Bharatanatyam was challenged due to it's comparison with Nautch, as the British failed to differentiate between Nautch, or the dancing in private parties vs. Bharatanatyam, which had no scope for public performances due to the uncertainties of governance in the State having British dominance. This itself was the reason for the fall of Bharatanatyam, linking it with devadasis, the stigma attached to it, that's difficult to erase, it's re-birth story, and the many researches that are still going on to unravel the mystery that it has become today.

We are aware of the Bharatanatyam banis, or the Voice of Bharatanatyam arising from different schools, or the different Bharatanatyam styles that, like religion, have their own inheritance, namely. Mysore Style, Pandanallur Style, Vazhuvoor style, Kalakshetra style, Thanjavur Style, Moogur style etc.

In the Mysore Style, there is no evidence of any other name existing for Bharatanatyam in the Colonial era. There is

also a mention of Bharatanatyam school in Srirangapatna in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

In the Colonial era, the Orientalizing of Bharatanatyam is also responsible for the Western audience getting a wrong impression about it. The likes of Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, though good dancers, were more of a stage performers, who derived their Style from basic Bharatanatyam steps, and changed it to suit the way Westerners preferred to see. Even today, the West considers India as the country of extreme poverty, Snake charmers, Pagdi-wearing arabs, having bizarre ways of living and entertainment. This was the reason why there was no name for the dance they performed, apart from being called Oriental dance.

The British officers only witnessed entertainment as arranged by the Maharajas for them, based on the availability of dance troupes, or the dancers who performed in private parties, which moreover was not a cultural event, but an event of Nautch, similar to the Mujra prevalent during those times in the Northern part of India.

In Ancient India, Art has always been above religion. But recent studies have always had a biased approach, bisecting this sacred art between the upper and the lower castes, the rich and the poor, the elite and the common, and creating a divide within the followers and practitioners of this Art. Such studies only have made more harm, than be of any use to our country and it's heritage, showing pseudo-support to a particular section, and calling other's views as Nationalist and anti-poor.

Stalwarts of Music and Dance were religion-proof. Tansen, the famous classical singer, was a Muslim by birth, and baiju bawra was a Hindu, but their ragas enthrall even today. Saint Tyagaraja was a brahmin, Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa were of lower castes, and Saint Kabir was a Muslim, but their creations are timeless classics, highly respected and even worshipped by brahmins and non-brahmins equally. Vedantam Lakshminarayan Sasthry as well as Minakshisundaram Pillai have contributed immensely to Bharatanatyam and even have taught many disciples of different castes, without any prejudice. Mylapore Gowri Ammal, as well as Jatti Thayamma have been of equal importance to the Bharatanatyam fraternity for their famous Abhinaya and dance performances in Pandanallur style & Mysore style of Bharatanatyam respectively.

The recent political scenario has created a partition in our minds based on caste. This dissection of Bharatanatyam has degraded it to the lowest of levels, even more than the *Nautch* would have ever done. But, all this has fortunately not disturbed the true seeker of Bharatanatyam, as the performer has never bothered to go beyond the teachings of his Guru, as the Guru-shishya channel has remain un-disturbed in it's legacy, and still continues in the way it was thousands of years ago.

## II. REASONS FOR DECLINE OF TODAY'S BHARATANATYAM

There have been several reasons for Bharatanatyam getting degraded during the Colonial era, that created a legacy for further dilution of morals a research should adhere to for this divine art.

**NO NOTABLE FEMALE PUBLIC PERFORMANCES:** There were no much public performances by stalwart women of Bharatanatyam that could catch the eye of the British historians. The dance remained confined to learning only in the *gurukula*, and transferring from the teacher to the student. Women of good families did not perform dance in public due to the political uncertainties. But, the brahmin men used to perform kuchipudi, a male dance form of Bharatanatyam, and even teach it to students and other performing disciples. The likes of Minakshisundaram Pillai, Valuvor Ramaiah Pillai too were proficient in Bharatanatyam, and there is no reference that they performed, or knew about Sadir. The then famous oriental dancers RamGopal and Uday Shankar too had learnt Bharatanatyam from such Stalwarts. This was the way Bharatanatyam was alive in a low-profile way in our Society.

**SADIR OF MARATHA COURT:** Secondly, the Maratha court, after the exit of the Tanjavur quartette, followed the Maharaja Serfoji norms based on the Nirupanas and the court dance routine, mostly based on the prevalent dance in the

Kaveri delta, to name it as Sadir, that got textual reference in the English texts mostly after the 1950s. There is no mention of Sadir either in the Sanskrit, Kannada or early Tamil literature. There is no mention of Sadir in any texts pre-Independence. Also, Sadir is unknown in the Mysore style of Bharatanatyam, and there is no any reference of Jatti Thayamma doing a Sadir in the Mysore Courts. This is a sufficient reference to state that Sadir did not exist outside the Maratha Court. Also, recent studies have shown that Sadir did not exist in Maratha courts, but was only performed as a folk variety in the rural areas of Viralimalai near Thanjavur. The Modi documents of the Maratha period have no mention about any Sadir being performed by the dancers. Thus, Sadir seems to have been a solo folk dance done by the devadasis of Viralimalai during the festive times. A recent video of Sadir being done by the legendary Sadir performer Smt. Muthukannammal shows no any resemblance of it's style with today's Bharatanatyam. Though the name of Sadir is said to be in vogue during the revival times of year 1932, there is absolutely no mention about it in any of the journals, or conferences of those times, until in the 1957 book of E Krishna Iyer on Bharatanatyam.

**LINKING BHARATANATYAM TO DEVADASIS:** Thirdly, much research refer devadasis (temple dancers) as the torchbearers of today's Bharatanatyam, that was earlier *Sadir*. But, There is even no reference of *Sadir* being performed by the Temple dancers, as Sadir was said to be a court dance. Yet, many writers have linked Sadir to the devadasis, thus linking it to temple dance, eventually linking it to Bharatanatyam, and going beyond to name it the predecessor of Bharatanatyam, for saving the devadasis against the devadasis abolition bill, by stating them the real torch-bearers of this rich Indian culture. But least did one know that the fire of this torch will burn the very hand that it is holding. Today, it is almost a truth, even in our textbooks, that Bharatanatyam was Sadir, a mere courtesan dance. Isn't it unfair to inherit such a wrongly interpreted and twisted facts about our own History, for which we have to be ashamed of today for no reason?

**WRONG INTERPRETATION OF ANCIENT LYRICS:** Though there is a mention in colonial texts that dance forms in India existed in temples, courts, and private gatherings, there is no mention about the Quality of the dance being performed in these venues. The translated texts of tamil and Sanskrit mention about the eroticism present in the dance movements, which, by no means will Bharatanatyam, in it's purest forms of guru-shishya paramapara, will ever do, i.e to attract other by casual movements. The strict guru-shishya parampara can be compared to no less than the martial arts learning, wherein perfection of movements is more important than the movement itself. Such perfection is of no need for entertainment, but are directly linked to Yogic postures and mudras, that not only reflect a language of representing the ways of Nature and the Gods, but also has a rhythm that when made from the foot, activates the chakras within the body, that can equal, or even excel the meditative posture. This bliss can only be experienced by the Bharatanatyam performer, wherein he does not get tired of dance, but gets rejuvenated. Infact, the Nanjangud style of Bharatanatyam focusses on this aspect with greater detail.

*ORIENTAL DANCES AND THE WESTERN TASTE:* Just as the way the Oriental dance was re-constructed for the western audience, Sadir too was performed for reasons of entertainment of Kings and the guests of Kings. It may have been also performed by devadasis, not in temples, but to the demand of their Patrons. The Colonial era was the time when the Indian society was blamed for many ills, viz. the dowry, the sati system, the nautch culture, questioning of the religious beliefs, the education system, and there were reforms taking place everywhere. But, the middle class cultures have weathered many onslaughts, to remain confined within the four walls, but doing every ritual that has passed on since centuries, and will always be a part of culture and tradition of better living.

*POST INDEPENDENCE POLITICS:* The Post Colonial political scenario saw a huge divide within the society based on the Aryan & Dravidian concept, and Sanskrit was being forced out of the temples, considering it as an Aryan language, not fit in the Dravidian state. Though, the Aryan/Dravidian concept has been recently proved wrong based on the genetic mapping, the divide now is irreversible. This has led to the ownership issues for Bharatanatyam, where the self-proclaimed Dravidian races have scorned others to have hijacked Sadir from them, and have renamed it Bharatanatyam. As the name of Bharatanatyam has many references well before it was claimed to have been renamed, the above theory of ownership is doomed, as once again, our motherland has never distinguished between Art and Religion, and anyone who has based his theory on religion has a biased agenda. But, All the above claims have taken a toll on Bharatanatyam itself, as there is no patriotism attached to it today, as somewhere in the inner minds, there is a doubt that keeps bothering about its origins.

Post Independence saw a thrive in the safety and security of the common man, with democracy taking the front seat, and the environment getting more liberal for the latent talents to come out into the open. India witnessed good growth in the Music as well as Dance art, with the likes of MS Subbulakshmi, T Balasaraswati, becoming celebrities, irrespective of their inherited backgrounds. The Indian Government had started giving a lot of encouragement to Music and performing Arts, and the devadasis had a chance to teach and show their acquired art to the society, but such an exercise was not seen much. Either the devadasis had limited resources, or were not proficient enough to harness their skills, or not many devadasis knew dance, as they were dedicated mostly to other temple routines. There is no much account of the whereabouts of the devadasi families post-independence, as either they got married, or lead normal lives. Some devadasis

who had been highly vulnerable to exploitation, were revived by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy at her rehab home 'Avvai'.

*ANTI NAUTCH CAMPAIGN, DEVADASI ABOLITION BILL AND REVIVALISTS:* The Anti Nautch Campaign had gained momentum since 1892, and devadasis were losing their social status. A lot of awareness got created about the evils of the Devadasi Temple tradition, especially among the English educated minds, who came together to cleanse the society of any unacceptable traditions. Modern thinking paved way for the revival of Bharatanatyam from the clutches of its inferior associations, leading to a permanent setback to the origins of Bharatanatyam through Sadir inheritance, and an eventual linkup with the devadasis.

### III. CONCLUSION

Irrespective of how one sees it, the decline of Bharatanatyam has inevitably taken place in the research texts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from the references taken from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In research, a small thread can be taken to build a strong rope, and this is what has happened of the History of Bharatanatyam. If any new aspirant is made aware of the linking of Devadasi with Bharatanatyam, there is a great possibility that the aspirant may lose interest in learning it, and eventually one can see a decline in the propagation of this art form. Further, linking it to religion will do greater harm, and an irreparable damage to this most precious possession of Indian roots and its recognition. It is time to detach all the weeds from the Plant, and enable it grow. The references of Sadir nautch being the pre-decessor of Bharatanatyam is not convincing, and this hypothesis need to be forgotten. A holistic view regarding the origins of Bharatanatyam has to be formed, and the history has to be re-written in its most glorious form.

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