

Narrating Lives: The Devadasi and Her Art

PAROMITA BOSE

Abstract: The reform movements in South India had the question of the devadasi quite centrally located within its discourse. The devadasi was seen as all evil and hence had to be removed from the society. At the same time, the art itself had to be saved. Hence, the most feasible option was to distance the art form from the practitioners, thereby rendering them impoverished. This would also move the art form out of the “monopoly” of the hereditary families. Being criminalised by the law, many practitioners were engaged in the teaching of the art forms to people from outside the community. This in a sense made art more acceptable, whereby children of “respectable” communities would not only learn dance but also take it up as their profession; at the same time, it took the art form away from the original practitioners. The aim of this paper will be to trace the effects of the anti-nautch movement, the revival of dance and the abolition of the devadasi system on the life of the practitioners from within the community. It will discuss the lives of four women, (via biographical narratives), all belonging to the devadasi community, and how they negotiated their identities, and art amidst the changing attitude of the society towards dance and music- Veena Dhanamma (1869-1938), Bangalore Nagarathamma (1878-1952), M.S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004) and T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984).

Keywords: Devadasi, nautch, reform movements, dance, music

The issue of devadasi reform was embedded in larger public debates about sexuality in colonial India....National imaginaries and identities, inflected by class and caste anxieties, undoubtedly hinged upon constructions of gender, and specifically on the control and regulation of female sexuality. Reform projects around the devadasi also represented a persistent, middle class altruism that was justified through the discourse of moral recuperation. Nonconjugal female sexuality represented a near-irrevocable moral degeneration, and it was in large part responsibility of middle-class women to reform and neutralize its dangers by way of example. (Soneji 112-113)

The question of the devadasi was integral to the reformist movements in South India. The institution was seen as sanctioned prostitution under the garb of religion, and hence faced severe criticism in and around the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Christian Missionaries and the reform movements in Southern India took it upon themselves to reform the Indian society, which they felt had no moral principles. The practice of the nautch came under serious scrutiny because of the attached moral stigma. This led to the anti-nautch movement which began in Madras in 1892. The movement was started by the Madras Christian Literary Association, which was led by Rev. J. Murdoch. He termed the devadasi as “repulsive and immoral” and put both accomplished dancers and common prostitutes on the same platform. They were also accused of impoverishing and ruining their patrons. A nautch performance was held for the welcome of the Prince of Wales in 1875. However, there was a huge outcry on the proposition of organising a nautch performance during the visit of Prince Albert Victor in 1890. This crusade against the nautch performance was led by Rev. J. Murdoch who later went on to publish extensively on Indian social reforms. In a pamphlet issued by The Christian Society, Madras, titled, “Nautch Women: An Appeal to English

Ladies on Behalf of Their Indian Sisters” brought out in 1893, the Christian Society advised the British ladies not to attend these parties and also prevent their men from doing so. Another pamphlet, “Nautch—An Appeal to Educated Hindus” dealt with the evils associated with the nautch such as loss of money, disease, bodily weakness, bad influence on one’s character, etc. The only solution provided for the improvement of the society was the abolition of the system. Social Reformers from England took it upon themselves to persuade educated Indians from boycotting these performances. Miss Tennant and Mrs. Marcus Fullers, two of the most influential amongst them, condemned the dedication of girls to temples. Mrs. Fullers, the wife of a missionary in Bombay wrote in her book, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*: “We are convinced that if the highest officials in India were to refuse to attend nautches on moral grounds, their action would be an object lesson in moral education to the whole country. Hindu hosts would soon be ashamed and drop the nautch from the programs of their public entertainments” (Chakravorty 44).

Under the able guidance of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the anti-nautch movement gathered momentum and the devadasi institution was finally banned. In her resolution titled, “Why should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples be Abolished?” she talks about the practice of dedicating girls or young women to temples as a slur on Indian womanhood and a great wrong done to the youth of the country. She advocates the abolition of the devadasi system and suggests that they should be given some land so that they could lead a life of respect thereafter. She blames the temple, religion and people for this “immoral practice”, for forcing children into the profession in the name of religion. In her *Autobiography* and *My Experiences as a Legislator*, she mentions the need for the abolition of the system which is full of vice and is morally degrading. Emphasising the moral, psychological and medical consequences, she proves the need for the abolition of the system. Muthulakshmi Reddi managed to get the resolution passed in the legislative assembly and the devadasi system was eventually banned in 1947.

The devadasi was seen as all evil and hence had to be removed from the society. At the same time, the art itself had to be saved. Hence, the most feasible option was to distance the art form from the practitioners, thereby rendering them impoverished. This would also move the art form out of the “monopoly” of the hereditary families. Being criminalised by the law, many practitioners were engaged in the teaching of the art forms to people from outside the community. This in a sense made art more acceptable, whereby children of “respectable” communities would not only learn dance but also take it up as their profession; at the same time, it took the art form away from the original practitioners. The aim of this paper will be to trace the effects of the anti-nautch movement, the revival of dance and the abolition of the devadasi system on the life of the practitioners from within the community. It will discuss the lives of four women, (via biographical narratives), all belonging to the devadasi community, and how they negotiated their identities, and art amidst the changing attitude of the society towards dance and music. The paper deals with the lives of Veena Dhanammal (1869-1938), Bangalore Nagarathnamma (1878-1952), M. S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004) and T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984).

A Performer in the Private Sphere: Veena Dhanammal

Her singing is straightforward and mind capturing. There is scholarship and a sparkling quality in her swarakalpana but they do not wipe away the sweetness. Graceful and pleasant playing of the veena is complementary to her sweet voice. —Gurajada Appa Rao. (Subramanian 45)

Veena Dhanammal was born in Georgetown, a suburb of Madras, which was known as the housing place of the devadasi community. Her family was attached to the court of Tanjore. According to Lakshmi Subramanian, a prominent historian, who has researched extensively on Carnatic music: “Proximity to the city’s [Madras] cultural elite helped in her interactions with some remarkable composers and poets through whom she was able to develop a set of distinct ideas about the genre of padams, love songs which were traditionally associated with ritual music” (Subramanian *Tanjore*

Court xxviii). Dhanammal was one artist who performed mainly in the private sphere. She performed every Friday at her house, on Ramakrishna Street, which could accommodate a maximum of fifteen people. Most of the people who came for her Friday night soirees were her patrons and admirers, generally the elite. It was a very select audience that she played for. She enjoyed enormous prestige among the royalty of South India, which included Mysore, Tanjore, Travancore and Madras among others. She kept alive the salon culture in Madras which was in contrast to the emerging trend of public performances by upcoming artists.

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of the Trinity of composers, Tyagaraja, Muthusvami Dikhsitar and Syama Sastri:

The emergence of these composers has to be understood in the context of devotional and musical activity in the temple city where, for more than two centuries, a substantial corpus of music scholarship and performance had been consolidated under the patronage of the ruling court... as some scholars have suggested, this (the court taking interest in music and the issue of patronage) was part of the growing Brahminisation of musical culture in the region (Subramanian *Tanjore Court* 5).

There was sudden interest in pursuing music which came about after the emergence of this Trinity, whose compositions were immensely popular: "...there was a growing interest in pursuing music, not as a profession or traditional occupation but as a personal passion that lay outside one's professional pursuits" (Subramanian *Tanjore* 10). However, there was the tendency to distance the devadasis, the community which had so long performed both the music and the dance forms, owing to a newly developed moral sensibility. In spite of all this, Dhanammal still had immense popularity between 1900 and 1920.

Dhanammal played the veena as she sang, and hence was better known as Veena Dhanammal. As Lakshmi Subramanian mentions in her biography of the artist, Dhanammal had a lot of contempt for certain mannerisms that she identified as male and coarse and for the inability of the male singers to sing *padams* and *javalis*. She was dismissive of the display of complex rhythmic control. It is this simplicity that made her different from the others and added to the fact that her popularity hardly diminished during her performing years. Dhanammal also believed in lineage. She believed that art should be passed on from one generation to another. Her ancestors were performers at the court of Tanjore; she herself was trained in *abhinaya*, and as a result she made sure that she personally trained her next generation. She is even believed to have taken a fee for the training imparted, to bring in professionalism. This has stark resemblance to the *guru shishya parampara* in North India, except for the fact that it was strictly patriarchal, while Dhanammal's tutelage took place in a matrilineal set up. It is from this tradition that we see the emergence of T. Balasaraswati, Dhanammal's granddaughter, who in her address at the Madras Music Academy says: "[I]t was Veena Dhanam who outlined to me the repertoire of padas and presented their scope... My interpretation of the padam then depends on Dhanammal's interpretation of all her music and not just the padas. She set an ideal of richness and subtlety of emotions, expression that shines like a lamp before those who have heard and appreciated her music" (Subramanian *Veena* 103).

Dhanammal, however, spent her last few days in penury, and stayed reclusive, performing only for a select few. She hardly ever performed at bigger concerts. She refused to be part of the "classical" mission of the new emerging society, which projected the 'ideal' performer as one who performed compositions of the Trinity and within the public space, for behind this project was the desire to gain respectability for the art form in the public domain. Recognition for Dhanammal also came in after her death: "Was there something in her music that made it accessible only to an intimate and interiorised circle of admirers who shared a personal bond with the artist and the music she embodied and conveyed which was not possible in a larger concert space?" (Subramanian *Veena* 91). Dhanammal believed in possessing a distinct style and the concept of a lineage, something that Bangalore Nagarathamma strongly believed in as well. In and around 1927, Dhanammal and Nagarathamma collaborated a lot with regard to the emerging anti-nautch movement that was being spearheaded by Muthulakshmi Reddy.

The Struggles of Bangalore Nagarathamma

Bangalore Nagarathamma's mother, a devadasi, was attached to the temple of Nanjangud. Few years after the birth of Nagarathamma, her mother had fallen off from her patron. She and her daughter were then taken by Giribhatta Thimayya, a Sanskrit scholar, musician and an instructor at the Shakuntala Nataka Sabha. It was under his tutelage that Nagarathamma began her training. Nagarathamma's mother, Putta Lakshmi, realised that getting her daughter to be a court dancer was not going to be an easy task. After a fall out with Thimayya, she moved to Bangalore, and started preparing Nagarathamma to be a court dancer. She was taught music, dance, the violin and was also made to study languages like Telugu, Kannada and English. Though her mother passed away soon, after 1893, Nagarathamma acquired the stature and recognition that her mother had desired for her.

There are three high points of Nagarathamma's life, which are of relevance and which I will focus on in this section. First, the *Radhika Santwanam* episode, second, the campaign against the anti-nautch and third, the shrine that she helped build in Tiruvayyaru. *Radhika Santwanam* written by Muddupalani, a courtesan in the court of Pratapasimha, deals with the jealousy of Radha when she is unable to accept the union between Krishna and Ila, her niece. It culminates in Krishna coming to Radha to please her. As Sriram. V, her biographer and a music historian, mentions:

The work had probably been first noticed in the modern times by Charles Philip Brown, the renowned Orientalist scholar and lexicographer. Who had while leaving India in 1855 left behind a collection of manuscripts ready for printing at the Madras Manuscripts Library.... the work was published in 1887 and later in 1907 by ...an associate of Brown. It had also received attention of sorts from Viresalingam... the Andhra reformer... a staunch supporter of the Anti-Nautch movement.... on the work itself, while commending the style and the ideal admixture of Sanskrit and Telugu in it, Viresalingam claimed to be shocked by its content. Having denounced Muddupalani as an adultress, he declared that the shamelessness of the work was not surprising as it was written by a prostitute. (Sriram 38)

Nagarathamma decided to republish the text, with a prologue indicating the reasons behind doing so, as some errors had crept in the circulating edition and some of the passages had been deleted. Being a devadasi herself, she felt the need to bring the literary work into limelight and also do away with the claims that Viresalingam had made about Muddupalani.

After the republication of the work, Viresalingam and Nagarathamma condemned each other. While Viresalingam accused the book of being bereft of any modesty and being filled with graphic, crude descriptions of lovemaking, Nagarathamma claimed that accusing Muddupalani of adultery was uncalled for, as she should be evaluated on her work and not on her personal life. The book was released in March 1910, and after furious deliberations, where it was accused of obscenity by the purists, called "injurious to public morals", and that everyone who possessed a copy of it was liable under Section 293 of the Indian Penal code, the Government issued a memorandum in September, 1911 mentioning, "that all copies of the book *Radhika Santwanam* should be destroyed as objectionable passages are found on nearly every page of that work" (Sriram 51). The two major reasons why this text was targeted was, one, that it dealt with the erotic, where gender roles had been inverted, that it was written by a courtesan and hence dismissed as being frivolous, and two, that another devadasi had taken up the cause to stand against a renowned figure in the anti-nautch campaign, which was seen as unacceptable. The idea was to distance the courtesan/prostitute from the public domain and publishing a book written by one, which carried a foreword by another, justifying the reason for its republication, would jeopardise the project.

It was in 1921 that Nagarathamma had a vision about Tyagaraja, followed by a letter from her guru, Bidaram Krishnappa, who lamented to her about the dilapidated state of Tyagaraja's Samadhi. She was pained by the description and thought of the vision as a sign to "begin a life of dedication to his cause" (Sriram 97). When she visited the Samadhi later, she found the neglect towards the Samadhi unacceptable: "She had found her Lord and Master, a deity and a patron rolled into one. She was to refer to herself as a Tyagaraja Dasi from then on" (Sriram 98). She acquired the land by

exchanging it with her own land worth the same value and the construction began in 1921 itself. So long, no women were allowed to worship during the *Aradhana*, an event which was held in commemoration of the composer's passing away in Tiruvayyaru. Nagarathamma was also refused this honour. Considering she had rebuilt the Samadhi, bearing all the expenses and the fact that she was such an ardent follower of Tyagaraja, this came as an insult. She had made up her mind to begin an *Aradhana* which would be only conducted by women. Hence, she got around 40 devadasis from around the area and they conducted the *Aradhana* together, which was a huge success, thereby ending the male monopoly of the celebrations. This group of women also included all the daughters of Dhanammal, who herself had earlier been denied a performance during *Aradhana*. Nagarathamma in her own way broke down a system which denied women equal rights and in getting devadasis to perform, she provided them with a platform to showcase their talent and also to give them "an opportunity to offer their tribute to Tyagaraja by means of the music they knew" (Sriram 110).

The anti-nautch movement was in full swing through the career of Bangalore Nagarathamma. Unlike Dhanammal, who faced only bits of it, also because of the fact that she performed essentially in the private space, though she protested against the abolition of the devadasi system, Nagarathamma was at the forefront of the struggle against this. The anti-nautch movement led by Muthulakshmi Reddi thought of the practice of dedicating girls or young women to temples as a slur on Indian womanhood and a great wrong done to the youth of the country. It believed in the need for the abolition of the system which was full of vice and was morally degrading. The Devadasi Association argued in nine individual sections as to why this law should not be passed.¹ "[T]he Association unanimously and emphatically protests against the introduction of the Bill of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi regarding Devadasis as it affects the ancient customs and usages of the community and specially religion" (Soneji 128) was the response of the Devadasi Association, Madras, when Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced the Bill in the Legislative Council. While in the Legislative Council, members spoke for and against the proposed Bill, the devadasis, led by Nagarathamma worked on the memorandum, which separated devadasis from common prostitutes, and projected service to God as the main aim of the profession. They agreed that a certain section of them had gone astray, but believed that the entire community should not be held responsible and reprimanded for the same. Such memorandums were passed across the Madras presidency and though the Government acknowledged the receipt of these memorandums, they served no purpose eventually. The Government took time over passing the resolution, more so because it was tampering with religion and the temple. The Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926, curbed the economic rights of the community, whereby the devadasis had to give away all the land that they had acquired by virtue of the duties at the temples. Once the Act was passed, most of the payments in lieu of the land that was being taken away were not made and many devadasis led their final days in penury, including the likes of Mylapore Gowri Ammal, the renowned dancer, who even taught Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati. The Bill was passed as Act V in 1929, and devadasis would soon sink into oblivion in a couple of years. There were very few options available to the devadasis after the abolition of the system. The most common among them was to get married and thereby gain social acceptability. Perhaps the greatest example of such a shift of accepted identity was M. S. Subbulakshmi. Born into a devadasi family, Subbulakshmi, grew up to be one of the greatest practitioners of Carnatic music, gaining both social mobility and acceptability.

The Devadasi "wife": M. S. Subbulakshmi

M. S. was born in Madurai in 1916. Her mother was one of the earliest professional veena players. She belonged to the devadasi community. There are no early records of her life. M. S. showed keen interest in music as a child and though her mother did not get her any formal training at an early age, the intrinsic quality of her voice made her mother take her to veena concerts and eventually get her a guru, first, in Madurai, Srinivasa Iyenger and later in Seithur, Sundaresa Bhattar. She showed

immense potential and did her first gramophone recording at the age of 10. Her mother found an appropriate match for her in the family of the rajah of Ramanathapura. But Subbulakshmi refused to get married, and eventually moved to Madras, a move that was not approved by her mother:

The Tamil tradition, which had attached value to the arts of the devadasi, seemed to provide a social foundation, however tenuous, on which the women could now rely. By the end of the nineteenth century it had become socially acceptable for a well-to-do Brahmin to take a devadasi “wife” in addition to his legal Brahmin wife. The second wife was allotted a slot in society, grudgingly perhaps, but a slot nonetheless. The man would support the woman with a reasonable degree of fidelity and she would recognize him as her “husband” to the exclusion of other men. Such a state of affairs would enable her to claim a particular Iyer or Iyenger (the two main South Indian Brahmin sects) as her husband and as father of her child. The man would graciously let her make the claim. Such an acknowledgement undoubtedly reflected a male dominated society’s arrangement of convenience, but it did provide the women a measure of dignity in addition to a patina of security. (George 83)

For M. S.’s mother, not having a man in the house did not raise any issues. She had seen a similar situation with her mother and grandmother. She was well reputed as a veena player and earned enough to take care of her children. But after the anti-nautch movement, there was a general perception that devadasi women should be married off to help them gain social acceptability. The youth were encouraged to marry them, even if she were to become the second wife. M. S. married T. Sadasivam in 1940. They stayed together till Sadasivam’s death in 1997. At first Subbulakshmi’s mother did not approve of the match, for she found a better match for her in a businessman. This proposition prompted Subbulakshmi to leave home and go away to Madras. She landed at Sadasivam’s place, who was always ready to help someone in need. He was already married and had two daughters: “He understood the dilemma in which MS was caught... He knew that MS was too inexperienced in the ways of the world to get ahead on her own. The obvious course open to both was for Sadasivam to substitute for her mother. He took up the role with relish, while MS drew comfort from having such a worldly-wise man to turn to” (George 114-115). The fact that M. S. had moved to Madras, with a man who her mother did not approve of, broke her mother down. Later in her life, she was accused of not having taken care of her mother in her good times, of not having reconciled with her. But part of it had to do with the fact that after her marriage not only did she turn completely submissive to her husband, he almost erected a fortress around her with regard to the information that went out to the public arena. He took every decision in her life, whether it was about working in films, or which concert to sing for.

Their marriage was not well received. It was unacceptable for a man to either marry above or below his caste, and Sadasivam had married a devadasi, a non Brahmin. Even after a decade of their wedding, the Kanchi Swamigal objected to M. S. wearing the nine yard saree, as she was not a Brahmin. But soon enough, Sadasivam made sure that the ascetic changed his opinion. He went on to call her “Brindavan tulasi”. Sadasivan was determined to wipe away the wife’s past: “Orthodox as he was in his Brahmanical ways, he set out to ensure that his wife fitted into his socio-religious hierarchy as an equal and that the Brahmin establishment accepted her as such. He would pursue that goal restlessly; using music and cinema, religion and charity, political connections and social contacts, journalism and every other avenue open to him for the purpose” (152). The personal qualities that Subbulakshmi possessed made her an ideal candidate for this social elevation: “She was self-effacingly devoted to her husband and family, a primary quality in a Brahmin wife....She was unassertive, unobtrusive, orthodox and diffident in a graceful sort of way” (153). Her Sanskrit was impeccable, which made her a part of the Sanskritization process, where, mastery over the language and devotional rituals, could bring you upward mobility. She almost became representative of a class of women who yearned social acceptance through marriage and transformed themselves in the process. Girish Karnad observes that “Subbulakshmi’s spectacular career had much to do with the way she managed to shed all traces of her devadasi past and transform herself into the perfect image

of a Tamil Brahmin housewife” (91). Perhaps, Subbulakshmi had realised that this change of status would suit her career and her ambition. She adapted herself very well into this changed status and went on to mesmerize the world with her music for the next few decades.

In contrast to the life of Subbulakshmi is that of Balasaraswati.

The *sringara* of Balasaraswati

By the time of her [Balasaraswati's] dedication, more and more of the traditional community was being absorbed into a new social order that excluded and marginalised matrilineal families to such extremes that the families and their way of life became invisible and seemed to have disappeared. Balasaraswati's choice to live in a manner consistent with the family culture and social order that preceded her, and to remain in the public view at that, was an act of extraordinary courage. She was exemplary of the code of ethics that had for centuries given strength to the devadasi community. (Knight 30)

Following the lineage of Veena Dhanammal, Balasaraswati was one of the finest exponents of Bharatnatyam of her generation. In her biography, written by Douglas Knight, who was married to Balasaraswati's daughter, there is an extensive engagement with both her lineage and her art form. Born in a devadasi community, she had a rich family name to live up to: “Balasaraswati was the last nationally significant performer of Bharatnatyam who was trained and raised in a manner consistent with her antecedents from the devadasi community” (Knight 7). Balasaraswati's ancestors were performers in the court of Tanjore. Her family moved to Madras in the 1860s. The house in which Dhanammal held her Friday night soirees was Balasaraswati's first home.

Bharatnatyam was in the middle of a lot of debate by the turn of the century. The anti-naught movement had given rise to two streams of thought, one, to abolish the dance and the practitioners, and second, to reform and preserve the dance. Balasaraswati's earliest teacher was Mylapore Gowri Ammal. Of her she mentions, “The initial inspiration for me to take up dancing came from seeing performances of Gauri Ammal when I was very young. If this lady had not brought the dance to such a stage of development, the combination of music and dance that I have attempted to realize would not have been possible” (Knight 26). Though dedicating girls to a temple was being advocated against in the 1920s, Balasaraswati's family dedicated her to their family temple in Tanjore, for her mother believed that “it was not the service to a particular temple that was important, but rather the dedication to a life of art” (Knight 28). As I have mentioned earlier, Dhanammal, Balasaraswati's grandmother, strongly believed in the lineage of art being passed on from one generation to another. Balasaraswati's second teacher was Kandappa Pillai, whom she acknowledged as her only guru. A nattuvunar himself, he played the mridangam and sang the padams, till he found a better singer in Jayammal, Balasaraswati's mother.

Balasaraswati's arengetram happened in 1925, and her first public performance in 1927. The Theosophical Society had long been present in the country. Their effort was to “redefine and glorify a ‘national’ Indian history and culture, and they eventually found a source for this rediscovered history in the notion of a classical age that was declared a pan Indian heritage” (Knight 63). Annie Besant and George Arundale, two theosophists, influenced two very significant people with regard to the anti-naught movement and the revival of art forms. These people were Muthulakshmi Reddi and Rukmini Devi, the earlier credited with singly spearheading a movement and eventually abolishing the devadasi system, and the latter for ‘reviving’ dance and providing it with respectability. I have discussed the role of Muthulakshmi Reddi in greater detail in the earlier section. While she advocated the abolition of the practice and the practitioners, she was opposed by E. Krishna Iyer, who advocated that the dance form itself should be preserved. The Madras Music Academy was set up precisely with this idea in mind, to bring back the art forms from oblivion. Though initially set up with the idea to salvage music, the Academy incorporated dance in 1931. After the first sponsored concert, the review mentioned that Bharatnatyam, which was being condemned for so long, was thought of as unworthy of all the criticism levelled against it. The performances of Balasaraswati

received mixed reviews around the 1930s. She was praised for her pure dance and criticised for her abhinaya. She is said to have worked really hard at this, by even performing just abhinaya concerts. At a later stage she commented that “dignified restraint is the hallmark of abhinaya... the dancer has no use for movements of the torso, but gestures only through the face and hands” (Knight 101). It should be noted here that eventually, it was abhinaya that was seen as her forte.

The arrival of Rukmini Devi posed some threat to the dancing community. Her project of re-visioning and reorganising dance came at a juncture where one of the concerns in society was to preserve the dance form. Her idea was also within the revisionary view of the Theosophical Society which was trying to create a classical past for the Nation. Rukmini Devi learnt from nattuvunar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. She became the first woman to perform the traditional dance form from outside the community. Her performance gained social acceptability. And it was this that she banked on and reconstructed dance/Bharatnatyam as we know it now. She was always appreciative of Balasaraswati, and felt she had the right knowledge of both music and dance for she had a strong lineage behind her. The Anti-nautch movement had left most of the nattuvunars impoverished. Many of them now started associating themselves with institutions which catered to teaching dance outside the community. A lot of them had already moved to Almora to assist the dancing group of Uday Shankar. Rukmini Devi, also, took stock of this situation and employed a great many of them at Kalakshetra. Thus, not only did she provide employment to these artists, she made the students learn from the traditional masters and also moved the dance form beyond the monopolised family structure, where it was now imparted to people outside the community. Thus, the earlier attempt to distance the art form from the practitioners was actually becoming a reality through these new institutions:

As a reconstructed style of Bharatnatyam emerged, one area of experimentation was the use of musical compositions that were not from the repertoire composed for dance....Most of the practitioners and teachers from the traditional professional community agreed that pieces not composed for dance could not be suitably substituted for those that were....The great nattuvunar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, in a speech... remarked, “Departure from tradition, the inclusion of totally unsuitable pieces in the name of innovation only lowers the standard of this art. I am not against change. There is bound to be change and new ideas. But these can be called by a different name and not brought under the name of Bharatnatyam. Such innovations make a sublime art ridiculous... Bizarre costumes and inappropriate themes will only lead to the destruction of this art”. (Knight 118-119)

Thus, Rukmini Devi in her attempt to revive the dance form, at some point was deviating from its original structure.

The most talked about controversy between Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi was on the issue of *sringara*. Rukmini Devi emphasised non *sringara* songs, while Balasaraswati believed *sringara* as the essence of dance.

Sringara is an ancient concept that permeates the aesthetics of the Indian consciousness, and it is this generative theme and the rules that govern its treatment that may be described as classical....The poetry composed for Bharatnatyam was predominantly in Sringara Rasa... Balasaraswati was fully aware of a bawdy, irreverent quality to the repertoire of traditional Bharatnatyam... She avoided them in concerts. (Knight 102)

The arena where this controversy reached its climax was the All India Dance Festival in Bombay in 1945. The festival opened with Rukmini Devi's performance. Clearly she was the predominant star, as it also included performances choreographed by her and by other performers/artists who hailed from Kalakshetra. She included a *sringara* piece in her performance, only to prove the point that “if you are respectable, then *sringara* would itself become respectable, and that if you were not, then the performance of *sringara* was not” (Knight 131). Apart from this, a part of her profile read as follows, “She has succeeded in dramatizing it with appropriate music and costumes, and has rescued it from all monopolies, specially as regards to teaching and conducting” (Knight 130). This was in contrast to the non existence of a profile for Balasaraswati. These troubled the sensibilities of Balasaraswati.

Her performance was slotted just after a presentation by the students of Kalakshetra, who had used props and done up the stage. Balasaraswati performed on an empty stage in contrast to this, without any additional lighting or props, to her mother singing for her. She had proved a point through this that it was not just about props and stage effects and her performance was remarkable.

Balasaraswati, too, like Subbulakshmi, performed across the globe. She also taught extensively at Universities in the USA. At home, she was awarded with all the honours one could think of. But both of them represent two ends of a paradigm. While Balasaraswati chose to live in a manner consistent with the family culture and social order that preceded her, that of the devadasi system and believed in the lineage, like her grandmother, Subbulakshmi gained social acceptability, was accepted as the 'ideal' Hindu Brahmin wife, by virtue of her marriage to Sadasivam, and his project of presenting her as one.

Of the four texts that I analyse above, three (M.S., Balasaraswati and Bangalore Nagarathnamma) have been written by male biographers. Veena Dhanammal's biography is written by Lakshmi Subramanian. I observe that Subramanian has a far nuanced and critical approach towards the life and events in the life of Dhanammal: "It locates her (Dhanammal's) art within the cultural, social and intellectual milieu she inhabited, allowing readers to track the changing musical landscape of southern India, as a process of urbanisation — beginning in the late nineteenth century..." (Subramanian Front Cover). The two texts, the biographies of M.S. and of Bangalore Nagarathnamma do provide biographical details about the lives of the mentioned artists, but fail to look at them critically. Douglas M. Knight's biography of Balasaraswati is different from these two in terms of the fact that he is related to Balasaraswati and hence, a lot of information which is otherwise unavailable elsewhere can be accessed in this text. Some of them are incidents and stories which have been passed on from one generation to another. In that sense, this book acts as a parallel text to that of Lakshmi Subramanian, where certain events overlap. While Subramanian's text closely interlinks the art forms and the politics of performance and analyses one's effects on the other, the other texts merely provide biographical details of the artists.

Through the four lives analysed above, I trace the effects of the anti-nautch movement, the revival of dance and the abolition of the devadasi system on the life of the practitioners from the community. Veena Dhanammal, being more of a private salon performer, was not affected by the ongoing debates around the anti-nautch movement. Though she voiced her views against it, she did have a select set of connoisseurs who would come listen to her at her home. Bangalore Nagarathnamma fought fiercely against the reform movements, whether it was bringing back *Radhika Santwanam*, or the memorandum advocating why the devadasi system should not be abolished. She was very vocal about her position. Neither Dhanammal nor Nagarathnamma felt the necessity of a male member in the house. M. S. Subbulakshmi, for me, represents the other end of the paradigm as I have mentioned above, for whom the security of a family, a husband, and social acceptability could do wonders. She therefore fitted into the paradigm of the nautch abolitionists who advocated marriages of devadasis, even if they were second wives to the youth. She became the chosen 'ideal' for an entire community's aspiration— that of social acceptance. Balasaraswati, till her last day, fought against the restructuring of dance. She was against the stage set up, the changes in music and lights, the costume, etc. She believed that the art form should not have been distorted in the name of reviving. She never gave up on her style, never incorporated the costume changes, etc. But the fact that she had very few students made her form of dance fade away. Also, the fact that she was, at the end of the day, a devadasi as opposed to the new emerging upper caste women who were learning and teaching Bharatanatyam, made their brand of dance more acceptable. The revivalists reconstructed and restructured dance, giving it a new look and perhaps life. And eventually it was this brand of dance, taught by the traditional people (belonging to the community) but under the control of people from outside the community that was more acceptable and more dominant in the mid twentieth century and thereafter.

Notes

¹ The memorandum mentioned points to issues like, devadasis are not prostitutes, real purpose of the devadasi caste is religion and service, that their fundamental principle is 'Service to God', the whole community cannot be condemned for the sins of a few, that their right to property would be affected, that they have enough support for their cause in the public opinion, that what they need at this juncture is education, etc. ('Madras Devadasi Association' in *Bharatnatyam, A Reader* edited by Daves Soneji 128)

Works Cited

- Chakravorty, Pallabi. *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*. Kolkata: Seagull, 2008. Print.
- George, T. J. S. *MS: A Life in Music*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2004. Print.
- Kannabiran, Kalpana. "Judiciary, Social Reform and Debate on 'Religious Prostitution' in Colonial India" *Economic and Political Weekly* 30.43 (1995) JSTOR. Web. 22 Jan. 2010.
- Knight, Douglas M. *Balasaraswati: Her Art and Life*. Chennai: Tranquebar Press, 2010. Print.
- Meduri, Avanthi. *Rukmini Devi Arundale*. New Delhi: Motilal Banaridass, 2005. Print.
- Reddy, S Muthulakshmi. *Autobiography*. Madras, 1964. Print.
- . *My Experience as a Legislator*. Madras: Current Thought, 1930. Print.
- Samson, Leela. *Rukmini Devi*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2010. Print.
- Soneji, Daves. *Unfinished Gestures*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012. Print.
- . Ed. *Bharatnatyam: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.
- Sriram, V. *The Devadasi and the Saint- The Life and Times of Bangalore Nagarathnamma*. Madras: East West Books, 2007. Print.
- Subramanian, Lakshmi. *From Tanjore Court to Madras Music Academy*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.
- . *Veena Dhanammal: The Making of a Legend*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2009. Print.