

WOMEN AND SACRED TEMPLE DANCES DURING VIJAYANAGAR - NAYAK PERIOD IN MEDIEVAL TAMIL NADU, 14TH - 18TH CENTURY A.D

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Introduction

There were elements of change and continuity in mediaeval Tamil society that could be recognised among elite communities and commoners. Between the 14th and 18th centuries A.D., Tamilnadu was controlled by the Vijayanagar and Nayak dynasties. Dances were one of the techniques of invoking Gods throughout their reign. Gods have been mentioned in relation to this visual art since the beginning of time. Nataraja, the Lord of Dance and cosmic dancer, relished the opportunity to dance. In his presence, he enjoys watching other people dance. Dance provides a sense of aesthetic pleasure as well as a sensation of mental joy. It shows the performers' innate vision and emotionally connects souls. According to Dhamodara Chakkiyar, a fifteenth-century Malayalam poet, Gods hurried to the Kandiur temple and took their places to watch the dancing performance. Dance is emphasised in Bhakti literature and the Agamas of south India as a means of achieving spiritual happiness. As a result, dance is regarded as one of the most auspicious and pure means of expression associated with divine attributes. The *dasi attam*, *sandik-kunippam*, *sokkam*, *Meik-Kuttu*, and *Avinayak-kuttu* were all found in Tamilnadu's Vijayanagar, and Nayak period.

Dasi Attam

One of the methods to invoke Gods is through dance. According to Dhamodara Chakkiyar, a fifteenth-century Malayalam poet, Gods hurried to the Kandiur temple and took their places to watch the dancing performance. Dance has a significant place in South Indian bhakhi literature and agamas as a means of achieving spiritual happiness. As a result, dance was thought to be one of the most auspicious and pure forms of petitioning Gods.¹ It's tumultuous, dramatic, exuberant, and vivacious. It's a combination of *bhava*, *raga*, and *tala*, as well as finger work, *haztathe* handwork, and *adavathe* footwork, all interwoven with *abhinaya*. Then there's yogic calm and heavenly happiness, which is the perfect union of mind and body. The deva had no choice but to go with it when performing this attam with absolute devotion and dedication to satisfy their God or Goddess.²

Dasi Attam was Tamilnadu's sacred temple dance. *Kuttu*, *Sadir*, *Chinna-melam*, and even *Bharatanatyam* were some of the names given to it. Dance, music, and theatrical performance were all referred to as *adal*, *padal*, and *kuttu* in Tamil literature. *Kuttu*, the dramatic performance of a storey or an event, was staged with dance and music throughout the Sangam period. Madhavi of *Silappadikaram* was an *adal*, *padal*, *kuttu*, and other associated arts specialist. A dance performed by expert dancers in front of a chosen audience is known

as *sadir adal*.³ Chinna-melam or nautch with some stint are additional names for it. The Tanjore brothers renovated and called it Bharatanatyam in the 18th century. It's a delectable fusion of *marga* (classical) and *desi* (local) traditions. Many of its practises are based on the Natyasastra of Bharata and its numerous commentaries, as well as the *Silappadikaram* of Ilango and other local traditions. When the new entrant was left in the temple, she became a part of the temple's infrastructure.⁴

The nattuvanar, or dance-master, took command of her training right away. She was taught the words *teyya tey*, *teyye tey*, and *thath thath thim thonda* at first. She was told to move and turn her feet in time with the sound. She was instructed to move and turn her feet to the beat of the music. She was also instructed to perform regular exercises in order to maintain her body's elasticity. She needed to keep her body and mind in good shape. The instruction appears to be rigorous and serious based on the nature of the techniques and the way of delivery.

Dance masters and music masters, both vocal and instrumental, were employed by Tamil Nadu temples for this purpose. Panar and Uvacchar were in charge of training in a few temples. They were given kani, or payment, which was referred to as *Nattuvak-Kani*, *Nattuvanilai*, *Nattuvapuram*, *Panap-peru*, and *Ur* seven-year *vacchak-kani*, among other names.⁵ The girl was required to demonstrate her mastery of the technical arts by participating in an *arankerram* (dance debut). It was usually held in the presence of a king, complete with all the accoutrements. The monarch was so impressed with her performance that he gave her the prestigious *talaikkol* (a bamboo rod with ornaments) and the title of *Talaikoli*. Hundreds of *devadasis* received this honour during the mediaeval period. *Uravakkina-Talaikkoli* was a remarkable brilliant dancer; therefore Uravakkinanallur was named after her.⁶ With specific goals, these girls were dedicated to divine service. Some families believed that by doing so, they had gained spiritual blessings and merits. The *devadasis* believed they had appeased God's wrath and encouraged him to bestow his mercies and blessings on them. When the God and Goddess were brought closer together, they assumed there would be abundance of rain. The *devadasis* promoted the fertility of the earth and the pleasure of the people by petitioning God via dance and singing. They were also thought to be capable of extending the king's life span and therefore protecting the queen's *mangalya*.⁷ As a result, their participation in ceremonies, festivals, and gatherings was highly desired.

They performed dancing every day during pujas, on major occasions such as religious ceremonies, and when the king came to visit the temple. Dance was performed twice a day, in the morning and evening, during worship. Ritual dancing should only be performed after *dhenumudra* of the sixteen fold ceremonious process, according to *Manasara*, a colonial text. According to the Thiruvavarur-Puranam, the Tiruvavarur temple's famous *Rudra-Kanikaiyar* performed ritual dances twice daily in front of the god. Their dance during the *tirualatti* and *Tiruandikkappu* ceremonies was well-known in most temples, as it was believed that this dance drove out all evil spirits. They led the deity in procession in the Tiruvavarur temple by performing the *Tirukkaiyotti* dance.⁸

Santhik-Kuttu, a compilation of four types of dances, including *Sokkam*, *Meik-Kuttu*, *Avinayam*, and *Natakam*, was one of the most popular. In temple rites and festivals, the four-

fold division of *Santhik-Kuttu* was given a lot of weight. *Santhik-Kuttis* were the devadasis who performed *Santhik-Kuttu*. Expert male dancers also performed *Santhik-Kuttu*. *Santhik-Kuttar* was their name, and they were granted royal estates, titles, and honours. Devadasis performed a variety of dances including *agamargam*, *sandik-Kunippam*, *idavu*, *malaivu*, *sindukku*, and *vari*. Aside from the aforesaid dances, one record mentions *sokkam* and *varikkolam*. *Tiruppattadaivu*, *meikattadaivu*, and *tirucchulam* were other types of *dasi attam*. These dances were usually performed in Siva temples and were noted for their technical skill. All of these dances had religious and ritualistic importance.

Sandik-Kunippam

Sandik-Kunippam is a type of dance done during worship in front of Lord Siva as part of *Santhik-Kuttu*. *Santhik-Kunippam* has a transitory sense of taste and technical mastery. This dance was performed by devadasis (*padiyilar* and *devaradiyar*) in the Goddess's shrine in the Tiruvorriyur temple during the day while she was installed.⁹

Sokkam

Suddhanritta is another name for *sokkam* (beauty), a division of *santhik-kuttu* (pure dance). It was claimed to be the most difficult dance ever performed. *Suddha Karanas* were the 108 *Karanas* (poses) that it had (pure poses). *Sokkat-tandavam*, *Sundara-nannatam*, and *Sundarat-tandavam* were the names given to Siva's dances. *Ponnanaial*, a Tiruppuvanam temple of *rudra-ganikai*, was a specialist in these dance genres. It was done in the hopes of achieving universal peace and pleasure. The renowned title of *Sokkattandar* was bestowed to a *devadasi* who was a proficient in this dance.¹⁰

Meik-Kuttu

Agamargam is another name for *Meik-kuttu* or *meikattadaivu*, a form of *Santhik-kuttu*. Physical expressions are used to perform it. It evokes emotions like *rajasam*, *dhamasam*, and *satvikam*. Technical skill is represented in this dance by the deft use of all of the body's limbs. *Meikattadaivu* is another name for it. *Mei* denotes the body, *Kattu* denotes the act of revealing or revealing, and *adaiv* or *adava* denotes the act of approaching. *Krishnadevaraya* saw a *devadasi* do an *agamargam* dance in the Tiruvorriyur temple and handed her some lands. Even today, in Melattur's *Bhagavatamela natakas*, a dance sequence known as *Mei* is performed. For the opening sequences of *tillana*, traditional *nattuvanars* adopt a form known as *Mei adavu*.¹¹

Avinayak-Kuttu

Another division of *Santhik-kuttu*, *abhinaya* or *avinayak-kuttu*, has no storey value or subject. The four kinds of *avinayak-kuttu* are *angika*, *vacika*, *akariya*, and *satvika*. *Angikabhinaya* refers to the activity of limbs such as the hands. *Vacikabhinaya* denotes activity by music, while *akariyabhinaya* denotes action via *bhava*, *raga*, and *tala*, as well as *agamarga-nattuvanars*. This dance was originally performed by the *emperumanadiyar* in the Srirangam temple. On festival days, the temple's *araiyar* performed this dance. The *emperumanadiyar* of this temple also performed the *malaivu* (surprise dance), *kelikkal* (fun

dance) (dance expressing the females falling in love with someone in procession), animal (dance while playing with marbles), and *tattik-kelikkai* (dance while playing with marbles) (dance by clapping hands rhythmically. During the tiruandikkappu and other festival processions, they were executed. On the day of Krishnajanayanthi or Gokulastami, they enacted this at the Vasantotsava (spring festival) and the rasakrida (gopis dancing with Krishna).¹²

Natakam is the final version of Santhik-kuttu. Drama was an element of dance back then, and it was reliant on music, both vocal and instrumental. On one of the Avani festival's days, a *devadasi* performed a spiritual drama in Attur temple. The devadasis are claimed to have performed the Mavli drama based on Saint Appar's Tevaram in the Vedaranyam shrine. They also staged dance-dramas based on puranas from Tamil and Sanskrit traditions. *Tamilak-kuttu* and *Aryak-kuttu* were their respective names. These were performed in special halls known as *natakasalais*. Alagiyapandyankudam was the name of the Attur temple's dance hall. Many of these might be found in the temples of Tamil Nadu, from Kanyakumari in the far south to Tirukkalatti in the far north.¹³

They were emotionally connected, and their talents, along with their physical allure, made their dance performances visual and intellectual feasts. "The girls began to move their feet with such grace that wisdom lost its senses and the spirit was drunk with ecstasy," recounts Abdur Razaak, the Persian ambassador, about the nature of their dance. Thus, the temple dance, *dasi-attam*, perpetuated the art of *Bharata* in Tamil Nadu in its purest form. Art, like all other fields of aesthetics, provides pleasure and refinement to the mind in various forms. During the reign of Vijayanagar, this art had distinct qualities from the various schools of art. What's more intriguing about its cultural activities is that this art assimilated various aesthetic traits from previous schools very invisibly. It has incorporated the main aspects of the later Chola and Pandya Schools in Tamilnadu. The main source of inspiration for this style of painting was Hinduism. Apart from religion, the Vijayanagar society's social and cultural activities had an impact on this art.

The paintings and sculptures of the time period provide the most information about dance. Other evidences can also be used to characterise the period's dance. Dancing girls and the skill of dancing were inextricably linked in Vijayanagar culture. Dance was supported by almost all of the south Indian dynasties, with the Cholas being the most renowned. Some art epigraphic material and contemporary traveler's accounts shed light on the position of dance and dancers throughout the Vijayanagar Empire. The Vijayanagar monarchs and their feudatories were also patrons of dance masters. They worked at the temples and were rewarded by the monarchs of the day with gifts and tax-free territories in exchange for their services.¹⁴

The inscription of Narendresvara temple in Kilpakkam village, Nellore District, reveals that gifting dancing ladies to temples was still practised during the Vijayanagar period. The document was written in 1546 A.D. during the reign of Sadasiva Maharaya. Aside from dancing, the dancing girls donated to the temple and repaired the old temples of the time. The northern wall of Kunrandarkoil's Parvata-girisvara temple in the Pudukkottai District was renovated by a dancing girl. It happened under Virubaksha's reign.

Thirupparuthikunram paintings depict certain characteristics of dancing. Celestial ladies and nautch girls both perform dances in the same sequence of frescoes depicting Vardamana's life.¹⁵

Girls were consecrated to the temples at the juvenile age of 10, according to Duarte Barbosa (1504-1514). There were also people who gave their daughters' virginity to an idol as soon as they turned ten years old. They treated her with great respect and accompanied her to a monastery and the idol's place of prayer, where she was entertained by her relatives as she prepared to marry. The monarchs and their vassals in Tamilnadu significantly developed and patronised dancing throughout the Vijayanagar period. The rulers not only preserved but also developed this ancient art form.

The rasa principle can also be found in dancing sculptures. The ultimate goal of a dancer and sculpture is to evoke rasa of rasotpatti in the minds of onlookers. The development of temples and religious institutions provided a shared platform for this expression. Music allowed sculptors to produce images of free movement and attractive poses instead of stereotyped icons with few differences in traits and features when constructions or temples with more figures became a practise for dance. Sculptures and paintings in the temples depict the dance form. The panel of Siva dancing, for example, located inside the holy sanctum of the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, provides a jolt of violence that immediately indicates stirring, as well as the spectator's nerves. Internalization of exogenous rhythms is so pursued.¹⁶

The artists were inspired to construct dancing sculptures by the temple dancing institution. Through the captivating pictures, they have crystallised the contemporary form of dancing. The dancers of the temple performed the nightly dance in the Natya-mandapa or Dance Hall as part of the temple ritual. During the Nayak period, dancing performances were quite significant. The presence of various dance sculptures on the temple walls, pillars, and niches attests to this. Dance and music were internal components of the life of the people of the Vijayanagar-Nayak period, according to literature and foreign chronicles. The lifestyles of the Nayak times were enacted on all occasions, including war preparations, temple festivals, funerals, and regal processions for daily temple devotion.

Indigenous Tamil sources have offered a wealth of information about the Tamil country's music and theatre. *Kuttanul*, *Indira Kaliyam*, *Isainunukkam*, *Sayantham*, *Agattiyam*, and *Seiriyam* have been attributed to this period since the arts of music and dance appear to have reached maturity. Tolkappiyam describes *Velan veriyadal* as a possessed priest's frantic dance in the temple. The Silappadikaram has been acclaimed as a dissertation on traditional Tamil music and dance, as it is a pleasant blend of *muttamil*, i.e., *iyal*, *isai* and *natakam*.¹⁷

The Saiva (Nayanmars) and Vaisnava (Alvars), with their Tevaram and Prabandha hymns couched in music and dance, formed a vital feature of temple worship throughout the Bhakti movement. All of the art tractions that had flourished before them under the Pallavas, Pandyas, and others were continued and expanded by the Cholas.

The Nayaks of Madurai and Tanjore supported all forms of art. On the invitation of Achyutappa, family skilled in the bagavathamela heritage from Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh) arrived to Melattur near Tanjore during the Tanjore Nayak dynasty. During

Vijayanagar Nayak's reign, the *padam* and *yaksaganas* tradition dramas flourished, and he was a master composer of *yaksaganas* and *dvipadas*. Male and female dancers are featured on the dancing panels, which were common throughout the Nayak period. During the Vijayanagar-Nayak period, the famed dancer Chandraleka performed dances in front of the monarch and was respected. It is referenced in Sengalva Kalakavi's Rajagopala Vilasam.¹⁸

According to Paes, the dancing women enjoyed a high economic status in society. They were held in low regard by the general population and were tolerated with extreme care. These women were outgoing and resided on the city's most prestigious streets. They are highly regarded and are counted among the illustrious mistresses of their captions. Any decent male is free to visit them at their homes. Even in the presence of the king's wives, these ladies were allowed to enter the harem, where they stayed and chewed betel alongside them. The wrestlers were the only ones who didn't have to share this honour of eating the pan and sitting in front of the emperor. These courtesans could wrestle, and during the Mahanavami celebrations, a special wrestling competition was held. It is clear from the dance sculptures, literary, foreign, and inscriptional reports that dancing ladies had a prominent role in society at this time. The dancers of this period can be divided into three categories based on this information: Temple dancers, Palace dancers, and Street dancers.¹⁹

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the dancing girls of Tamil country were always admired and well cared for according to their ability, no one could refute the stigma they carried. Some, known as *devaradiyar*, *talaipendir*, and *patiyilar*, were admired for their temple-related activities, while others were despised because they exploited their musical and dancing abilities to make money in a dishonest manner. These female dancers became connected with concubinege and prostitution when the Vijayanagar rule crumbled. The Nayak female dancers in the art represented their interest and mood of the contemporary society. As a result of the influence of others, as well as customary and traditional customs, women of all types were religious and devoted to devotional activities individually. They performed numerous important tasks to the temple on a regular basis, allowing them to preserve the country's traditions. Invoking Gods was done in a variety of methods, including dances.

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