

Growth of Bharatanatyam During The Anti-Nautch Movement of Colonial Era, Through The Famous Gurus & Their Banis.

Bindu S. Rao

(Doctoral Student of PhD program in Dance, University of Mysore, India)
Corresponding Author: Bindu S. Rao

Abstract : ‘Bharatanatyam’ is the most revered classical dance forms of India. It is one of the most studied, respected, depicted, researched, performed and practiced Art today. It has reached it’s peak form, with great masters, performers and researchers leaving no stone unturned in taking it further. Bharatanatyam fell into Oblivion during the British Raj, just like other ancient Indian techniques like the Yoga, the Ayurveda, Sanskrit, the Gurukul education and much more. Most of the evils of the Hindu way of life were glorified excessively, like the Sati system, the devadasi system, the caste system, the cultures and traditions, Untouchability, the native couture etc. Yoga was considered evil too. Bharatanatyam was mis-understood as Nautch, performed by the degraded class. Most of them who educated in English, and read English literature, were ashamed of their own religious existence. They wanted to get rid off anything that could bring dis-repute, including Bharatanatyam, which they believed was Sadir, a dance of the devadasis. The Anti-Nautch movement started in the late 19th century swept the Southern part of India for about 40 years, and it is believed that dance went into Hibernation, and was revived in the year 1932 and later by the efforts from famous revivalists of the likes of E Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi Arundale, V Raghavan and more. We carry this belief till today. But, a careful study into the times of the famous gurus of Bharatanatyam that existed during the late 19th century till Independence brings to light a different perspective of Bharatanatyam that shows not only bare survival, but also significant growth in the way Bharatanatyam was taught and practiced in those times.

Keywords : Bharatanatyam Origins, Anti-Nautch movement, Bharatanatyam Revival, Bharatanatyam Gurus, Bharatanatyam Banis, Bharatanatyam Styles, Bharatanatyam vs Sadir.

Date of Submission: 22-04-2018

Date of acceptance: 08-05-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

All forms of Indian dance were seeing a decline during the British Raj, as expressed by many sources from history. Today Bharatanatyam is seen as an extension of the Devadasi dance that existed pre-independence, mostly known as *Sadir*, or *Dasiattam*. As the devadasis degraded in their social status in the 18th and 19th century, so did their dance, i.e. Bharatanatyam (as per the sources). This further led to the coining of the word Temple prostitution by some writers, who linked the devadasi profession to the lowest of the professions. In 1892, Under the initiative of Rev. J Murdoch, a social phenomenon emerged, that opposed the nautch parties organized for private entertainment, and soon it took the shape of the Anti-nautch movement, where all nautch girls and nautch parties were condemned, and were termed unacceptable. The then Viceroy and the Governor of Madras clearly denied any connection between the devadasis and prostitution, but a word of mouth had already created lot of damage. Bharatanatyam, as a dance, too could have come under pressure, but, due to it’s pure form, the society had complete knowledge about it’s existence and practice, and it was considered a part of culture of every south Indian household. The existence of a lot of gurus teaching Bharatanatyam during this period throw more light towards not only the existence of Bharatanatyam, but also, it’s development during the Anti-Nautch movement, when all other loose forms of dance performed by the devadasi performers were opposed. This period marks the development of many *Banis*, or Styles linked with Bharatanatyam. As Bharatanatyam existed well before independence, and has continued till today, passed on to us since centuries, terming it as a devadasi dance, or it being the successor of *Sadir* is questionable.

II. BHARATANATYAM STYLES OR IT’S BANIS

The presence of different *Banis* in Bharatanatyam creates a very important distinction between Bharatanatyam & *Sadir*. *Sadir* existed probably only as a Thanjavur court repertoire and with the common practitioners of dance in court and temples, with references of Natesa Iyer teaching *Sadir* to E Krishna Iyer and

to some devadasis (to combat financial difficulties), whereas we see many *banis* or styles of Bharatanatyam existing in different other parts of South India, representing the vast geographical areas they thrived upon, e.g. *Vazhuvoor*, *Pandanallur*, *Mugoor*, *Mysore*, *Kolar* styles etc, whereas, we do not find any references of styles in *Sadir*, or any mention of its technical variations.

These *Banis* (Styles, or *Gharanas*) had distinct features, that had its own tradition and philosophy. Eg Due to adherence to spiritual practices, unlike the Thanjavur Style, Melattur Style abstains from items praising living patrons like the kings, and only Gods and great rishis were deemed worthy of such glorification. Kalashetra focused on Bhakti items, refraining from the Shringara rasa. Mysore style focused on Abhinaya, and *Muguru* style focused on *Nritta*. *Nanjangud* style was based on Yogic postures, and the *Vazhuvoor* style gave more importance to *Lasya* form of dance.

The *Table 1* shows a summarized view of the *Banis*, the *Sub-Banis*, the year of active propagation and growth, prominent gurus of those styles, the famous artists of these *banis*, and differentiation of their styles.

Bharatanatyam Banis (Styles)					
Bani	Sub-bani	Year	Prominent Gurus	Artists	Style
Mysore (Karnataka parampara)	Kolar	~ 1880	Kolar Kittappa	Nagarathamma, Varalakshmi	Temple, Court & Sabha focussed
	Muguru	~ 1860	Amrithappa, Subbanna	Murugu Jeemma	Nritta Oriented
	Mysore	~1880	Jatti Thayamma. Gundappa	Venkatalakshamma , Lalitha Srinivasan	Abhinaya oriented.
	Nanjangud	~1890	Subramanya Kaushik, Dasappa, Rajamma	Geeta Vishwanath, Dr Mala Shashikant	Nritta, Expression & Yoga
	Chintamani, Mulabagalu	~1880	Now Extinct		
Thanjavur	Thanjavur	~1700	Tanjore Quatrate, Kandappa Pillai.	Bala Saraswati, Nandini Rmani.	Abhinaya & Nritta
	Pandanallur	~1885	P S Minaksisundaram K Muthukumara	Mambalam Geeta, Alarmel Valli	Emphasis on Linear Geometry
	Baroda	~1862	Kanthimati, Appaswamy	Kubernatha tanjorker	Based on Thanjavur pattern
Vazhuvoor		dated to the chola dynasty	Samu nattuvar, Madhurantakam Jagadamba, Manikantha Natuvannar, V Ramaiah	Padmini, Baby Kamala , Padma Subramanya, Priyadarshini Govind	Gracefull postures, Lasya Aspect dominates the Tandava.
Kalashetra		1934	Rukmini Devi, PS Minaksisundaram, K Muthukumar	R K Laxman, S Sharada, Dhananjayans.	More Importance to Nritta and replaced Shringara with Bhakti.
Melattur		~1885	Bharatam Natesa Iyer, Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer.	Revathi Ramachandran, Sheela Unnikrishnan, Harini Jeevita	Dramatic elements & extensive use of Gati Bheda
Kanchipuram		~1920	Kanchipuram Ellappa	Laxmi Visvanathan, Udupi Laxminarayan	Importance to Nritta, Poses

Table 1: Bharatanatyam Banis or Styles

This concised view of the Table gives us immense clarity of the ways in which Bharatanatyam was being taught under the Guru-Shishya parampara during the 19th and 20th Century, the times considered not conducive to the Performing Arts. Refer *Table 2* for the timeline of difference Gurus that existed, taught and propagated Bharatanatyam during the Anti-Nautch movement, and were responsible for its growth during Colonial era. These gurus, alongwith numerous other gurus and stalwarts belonging to the Carnatic Classical Music, the renowned artists and Vidwans of those times, and the different streams like the Kuchipudi and the Bhagavatha Mela dance forms, worked in close collaboration to learn and teach these classical art forms of Ancient India.

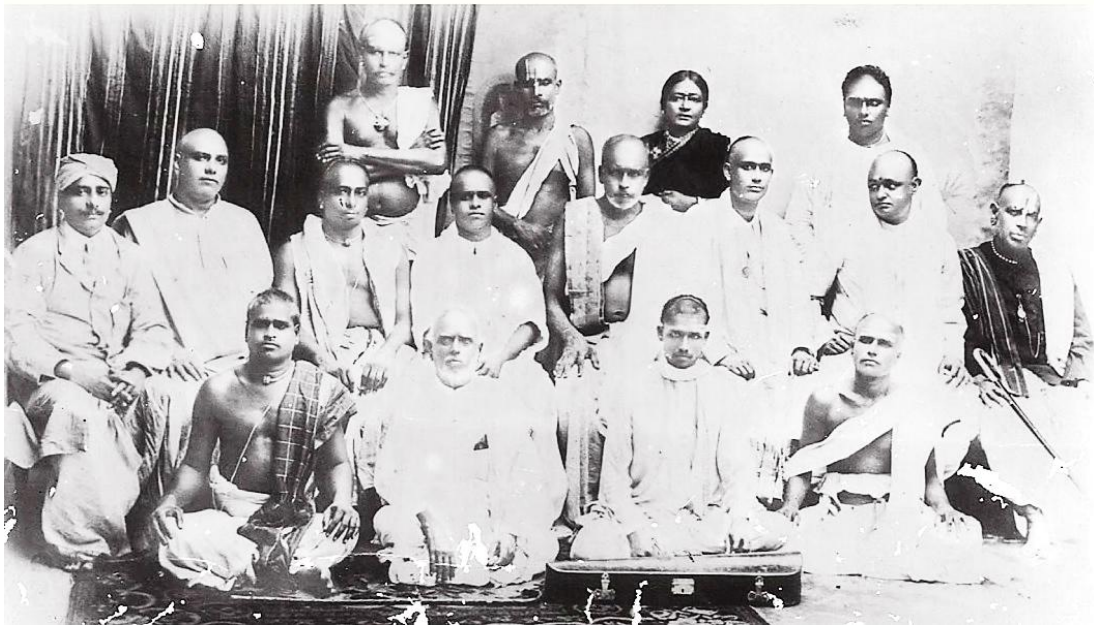


Figure 1 : Vina Dhanammal and Musicians, 1911. P.C Douglas Knight Jr.

Vina Dhanammal, T Balasaraswati's grandmother, was known for her great talent in Venna rendition. She is seen with other stalwarts like P Swaminatha Iyer, T Panchapakesa Sastri, T Nagaraja Bhagavathar, K Vaidyanatha Iyer, T Krishna Iyer, Muthiah Bhagavathar, Govindaswamy Pillai, TC Singaracharyalu, Kumbakonam Azhaganambi Pillai and others. This photo was taken in 1911, and depicts the strong team spirit, that knew no religion, caste, creed, upper or lower class, but was based on Talent and love towards Art. [1]

III. BHARATANATYAM GURUS, THE REAL TORCH-BEARERS.

During the times of the Anti-Nautch Campaign that began in 1892, till the Music academy conference of 1932, that is said to be a milestone for the revival of Bharatanatyam, we find many references of famous and revered gurus, who had dedicated themselves to Bharatanatyam. Their contribution towards the performing arts have been immense. *Bharatam Kasinathayya*(1676-1740)[2] was an eminent natyacharya and composer. He is credited to have composed a lot of early Alarippus and sabdams. Some of his famous Shabdams were Manduka and Dashavatara. Kasinathayya was a great teacher, and has a lot of disciples, prominent among them were the Ramanathapuram Brothers, Panchanadayya and Vaidyanathayya. These Brothers became competent dance composers in Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, dedicating their work towards the Almighty. The beauty of the Unnathapureshwara and the Nandikeswara temples were the prominent themes of their compositions. *Natesa Iyer* (1865-1935 A.D), known for his great efforts in reviving Bhagavatha Mela, also was highly proficient in Bharatanatyam. For his proficiency in the art, his disciples conferred on him the title, "Bharatam". Also, in those times, Bharatanatyam as a short-form was called as *Bharatam*. When he could not manage the expenses of the annual Nataka Utsav hosted by him, Natesa Iyer took to teaching dance to devadasi performers of Tanjore, that fetched him regular income to support his task. He was the guru for many famous artists namely "Bharatam" Nallur Narayanaswamy Iyer, Pichu Bhagavathar, "Kinjin" Kothandarama Iyer and K Ramani Iyer. He taught Bharatanatyam to numerous of his disciples, and is one of the most respected of the Gurus. He is also said to be the guru of Melattur Dorairaja Iyer, the torch-bearer of Melattur style of Bharatanatyam. Another highly respected guru was *Vedantam Laxminarayana Shastri*(1886 – 1956), a kuchipudi teacher and exponent, who learnt dance from Sri Vempati Venkatanarayana. He performed Bharatanatyam with great ease and class. He was highly proficient in both theory and performance aspects of dance, music and talas. He paid individual attention towards his pupils and explored the hidden talents in them. Laxminarayana Sastry is credited for introducing solo system of dance in the otherwise traditional dance drama form of Kuchipudi. Balasaraswati, Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, Gowri Ammal, Vempati Peda Satyam, Vempati Chinna Satyam are some of his students. He was a specialist in Abhinaya. In the late 20s and early 30s, he, alongwith his son, Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma toured India extensively to propagate Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi.



Figure 2 : Vedantam Laxmniarayana Shastri teaching Abhinaya to T Balasaraswati, 1947~48

Kattumannarkoil Muthukumara Pillai (1874 – 1960) was one of the greatest teachers of his times, along with his contemporary *Minakshisundaram Pillai*. His name still glows in the performing Bharatanatyam references. He was the only dance master of the old tradition who had a career as a performer also. M.K. Saroja, Rukmini Devi, Mrinalini Sarabhai, TK Narayan were some of his students. He has also enjoyed special appearances in regional feature films like *Kannika* (1947). He was very good at Abhinaya too. He travelled from village to village, teaching and preaching Bharatanatyam. *Swarna Saraswati*, another great Bharatanatyam dancer of early 1920s was highly proficient in Abhinaya. She preceded Balasaraswati and was not related to devadasi tradition of dance. Muthukumara Pillai is said to have brushed up his Abhinaya skills from *Swarna Saraswati*. *K. Lalita* (1918-1992), a brahmin, learnt Bharatanatyam from K. Muthukumara Pillai in 1931 at the age of 13 in Madras. She could not give formal Arangetram, as during those times, Bharata Natya easily could have got misunderstood as a devadasi tradition. At the age of 16 she opened her own dance school “Saraswati gana



Nilayam”, and became a guru, teaching Bharatanatyam to her disciples.

Figure 3 : Muthukumara Pillai teaching one of his disciples Mr. TK Narayan, 1940s. p.c T K Narayan.



Figure 4 : Swarna Saraswati, a great exponent of Abhinaya. P.c. Mohan Khokar.

K Kandhappa Pillai (1899-1941) inherited the great tradition of Bharatanatyam for over six generations into the family of nattuvanars and dance teachers. He was a teacher to T Balasaraswati. She started training at the age of five under him. In 1925, at age seven she had her *arangetram* (debut public performance) at a shrine to the goddess Devi in the city of Kanchipuram. *Mylapore Gowri ammal* (1892-1971) represented a pinnacle of perfection. She was particularly noted for the perfect synchronization of muscle movement and emotions through her Abhinaya. Her mother Doraikannamma too was a dancer who had learnt Bharatanatyam from Krishna Nattuvanar of Tanjore.

Muguru Amritappa (~1848~1920) [3] a gifted Natyacharya, along with Muguru Subbanna, developed the Muguru tradition of Bharatanatyam. Krishnaraja Wodeyar III appointed Amrutappa to head the ashthana troupe. Amritappa was a great teacher, and had a vast following of disciples. Once, he continuously performed Natuvangam for twenty four performing teams that had complex Nritha items, and it was considered an extraordinary feat. *Yajamana Kolar Kittanna*, [4] as mentioned earlier, stands tallest amongst Natyacharyas of Mysore. He underwent rigorous training under great gurus of his time, such as Sadashivayya and Venkatasubbayya. Kittanna was a very active person, and was well versed with Nritha and Abhinaya. He taught to a lot of students, and his style of Bharatanatyam was more vibrant. *Jatti Thayamma* (1857-1947) [5], the inimitable stalwart of Mysore style of Bharata Natya, plays a pivotal role in enlightening us with the Mysore Bharata Natya Bani. The Mysore tradition of Bharata Natya is also known as the Rasabhinaya tradition [6], and it was formulated by Jatti Thayamma.

Minakshi Sundaram Pillai (1869-1964), formed the Pandanallur Bani, known for its broad sweeping movements and exquisite framing of Teeramanams with beautiful Adavus. He too, like K Muthukumaran Pillai, was a great teacher, who also for some time taught at Kalakshetra, on the invitation of Rukmini Devi. One of his disciples was Shanta Rao, a saraswat brahmin hailing from Mangalore, and a contemporary to Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi. She had her own unique style of Bharatanatyam, what was dynamic and more masculine [7].

Kanchipuram Ellappa came from Kanchipuram, and honed his skills with Kandappa. Ellappa was kandappa's cousin. Ellappa had been Kandappa's assistant for several years. His home in Mambalam attracted the likes of Ram Gopal, the internationally famous dancer, and a host of French girls who made Madras their dance-home. He was a skilful teacher and a great singer. Ellappa accompanied Balasaraswati for her program after Kandappa left Bala. Ellappa is known for propagating the Kanchipuram Bani.



Figure 5 : Shanta Rao, p.c LIFE Magazine

Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer (1900-1980) developed the Mellattur Style of Bharatanatyam. Unlike other Bharatanatyam gurus, Mangudi was a spiritual person, and he avoided the items which glorified the poet's human patron. It is only the deities or the great rishis who were deemed worthy of such glorification. Thus, the repertoire of a Melattur style dancer consists mostly of the ancient items performed in the temples.



Figure 6 : Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer

Kalanidhi Narayana (1928-2016) was born in a brahmin family of Sumitra and Ganapati. She started training at a very tender age of seven under various gurus including Kamakshi Ammal for Padams and Javalis, Manakkal Sivarajan for vocals, Kandappa Pillai for Nritha, Chinnayya Naidu and Mylapore Gauri Ammal for Abhinaya. She performed her Arangetram at the age of 12 at the Madras Music Academy.

Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, *Kittappa Pillai* (1913-1999), *Uday Shankar* (1902-1977), *Shivanandam K P* (1917-2003), *Bhanumathi Kumbakonam* (1925), *Muguru Jeemma* (1899- 1983), *Ram Gopal* (1912- 2003), *T. Balasaraswati* (1918-1984), *Rukminidevi* (1904-1986) were some of the renowned torch bearers of Bharatanatyam from the early 20th century till the late 20th Century, spreading the light of Bharatanatyam to every nook and corner across the globe.

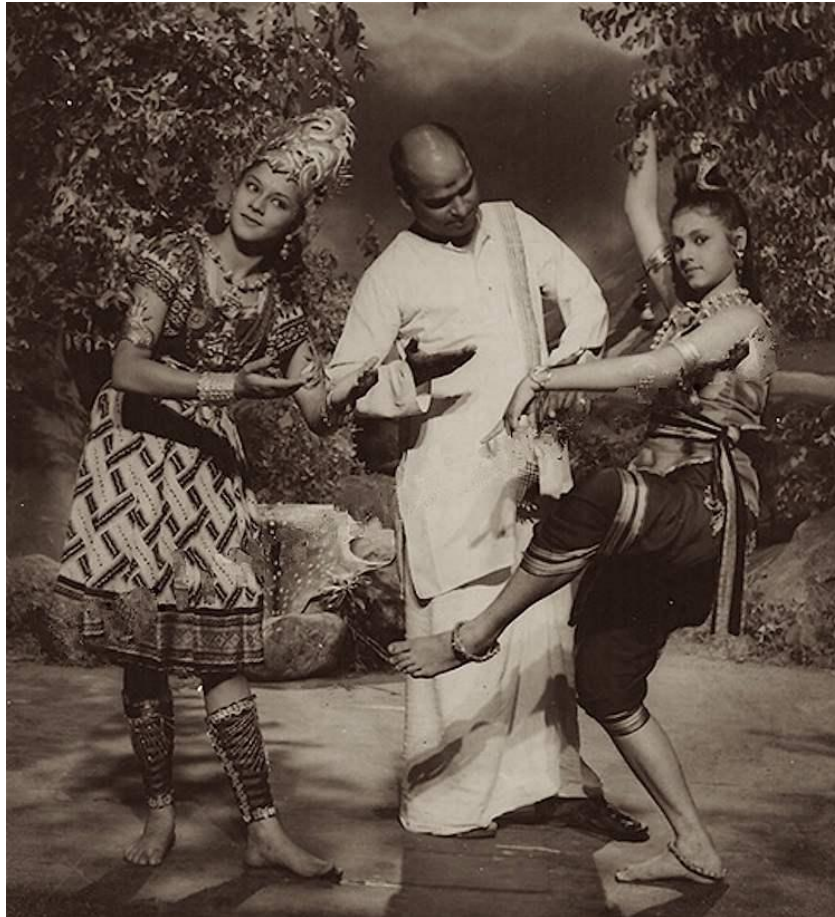


Figure 7 : Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, the architect of Vazhuvoor style of Bharatanatyam, directing the travancore sisters Ragini & Padmini.

IV. CONCLUSION

The different Banisor the styles, covered a vast geographical area and were like the vedic schools (*Paathshalas*) present since generations, with the real torch bearers being the Gurus, and not the *devadasis*, as presented in the generic Bharatanatyam texts. These Gurus were responsible for the ongoing culture of the Guru-Shishya Parampara that still exists today. With such a vast presence of such revered gurus from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, and the development of their own unique styles, one can infer that Bharatanatyam was never out of vogue. Interestingly, all these styles existed, improvised & flourished during the colonial rule, especially during the Anti-Nautch movement and had nothing to do with Sadir. Numerous Arangetrams & performances between 1930 to 1940 ranging from Bombay to Mangalore, Mysore to Chennai, give us an idea of the vast presence of Bharatanatyam gurus who must have painstakingly coached such performers for many years to reach this level. Thus, stating that Bharatanatyam did not exist, or was renamed and revived, is not a correct claim, and would be an insult to all these gurus, who have dedicated their entire lifetime pursuing and propagating this unique and ancient dance artform of India. We must honour our such a rich way of teaching the ancient wisdom to our future generations and give due credit to all the above teachers who have kept Bharatanatyam alive till today.

REFERENCES

- [1] Douglas Knight Jr, *Balasaraswati – Her Art & Life*, Wesleyan University Press, 2010.
- [2] Hari Krishnan, *Inscribing Practice' Reconfigurations and Textualizations of Devadasi Repertoire in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-century South India*, Bharatanatyam-A Reader, Oxford University Press, 2010
- [3] Dr. Chudamani Nandgopal, *Shile Kale*, Sundara Prakashana, 2011.
- [4] Classical Dance Heritage of Karnataka, edited By Dr. Chudamani Nandagopal, Karnataka Bharatagama Pratishthana, 2012.
- [5] K Ramamurthy Rao, *Natyasaraswati Jatti Thayamma*, 1994.

- [6] Ranjani Govind,,*Reviving the Mysore Parampare in Bharatanatyam*, Aug6 2015, The Hindu.
[7] G Venkatachalam, *Dance in India*, Nalanda Publications, 1947

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Bindu S. Rao. Growth of Bharatanatyam During The Anti-Nautch Movement of Colonial Era, Through The Famous Gurus & Their Banis..” IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 23 no. 05, 2018, pp. 43-51.