

Journey of Classical Dance in the Context of Changing Status of Women Dancers

Dr. Chetana Desai

Associate Professor and
Head of the Department of Sociology,
Abasaheb Garware College, Pune.
Maharashtra, India.

Abstract:

India has a reach tradition of classical dance with eight forms and each of these forms has a long history and rich tradition. The majority of classical dance artists are women and the status of women dancers is always changing with the changing social conditions. The present paper seeks to find out the relationship between the changing social situation and the status of women classical dancers in different periods of time.

Date of Submission: 05-03-2022

Date of Acceptance: 21-03-2022

I. Introduction:

India is one culturally rich country, where almost every state has its own language, cuisine, cultural specificities and dance forms. India has a reach tradition of classical dance forms with eight forms and each of these forms has a long history and rich tradition. All the incredible classical dances originated in the country during the ancient times. The majority of classical dance artists are women and the status of women dancers is always changing with the changing social conditions. The present paper seeks to find out the relationship between the changing social situation and the status of women classical dancers in different periods of time.

Status of Women dancers in different period:

In India dance is considered not only a means of entertainment but also something more than that which has a spiritual and religious importance. Dance has been used as a means of devotion. India has a tradition of dancing during religious festivals. It is believed that it is through the dance that one can achieve the peace of mind and helps to attain salvation. This is why it is used as a means of devotion. Such a belief must have been resulted into the tradition of ritual dancing in India.

When the religious importance of dance was at the peak, the dancers had certain positions in society. The social status of dance artists was comparatively higher at that time. Since the medieval period there has been a tradition in India of appointing dancers to perform in temples. Afterwards they came to be known with different names in different parts of the country. In south India they were called as *Devadasis* (servant of Gods) and it seems that they had to serve God through their art. The efforts of these women dancers or artists contributed a lot in maintaining the dance art tradition. Though the classical dance had spiritual and religious importance, the status of such dancers in temples did not remain much higher due to changing social, political and economic conditions.

In south India the custom of *Devdasis* was a common feature in almost all the famous temples. It was matter of the status of the temples to employ *Devadasis* in a good number. It is reported fact that the famous Rajeshwara Temple at Tanjavur had four hundred *Devadasis*. A *Devadasi* was a girl “married” to a deity and dedicated her life to worship and service of the temple for the rest of her life. Originally, in addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, the woman learned and practiced ‘Sadir’ (Classical Dance - *Bharatanatyam*), and enjoyed a high social status as a dancer (Dutt and Sarkar Munshi, 2010).

Devadasis used to dance and sing for the god but obviously for the entertainment of priests, visitors and patrons. These women played an important role in maintaining and surviving some classical dance forms such as, *Bharata Natyam*, *Dasi Attam* etc. the custom of appointing dancing girls in the famous temples was itself an outcome of social practice. Later on, this became a matter of prestige, rather than requirement. Their position and status in society started declining due to several socio-economic reasons such as,

1. Growing number of *Devadasis* brought pressure on the temple economy due to which, they had to earn themselves for their personal expenses.

2. Decline in the financial position of temples after some period led to the decline in the status of *Devadasis*.

3. Some foreign invasios caused social unrest due to which, these ancient arts and traditions suffered a lot.

4. Decline in significance of the rituals performed by *Devadasis*.

These are some of the reasons due to which *Devadasis* as well as their art lost its religious importance and it became means of livelihood for these women and thus classical dance started becoming a vulgar art, which was considered useful for attracting people towards the women of ill fame. The girls in rich, reputed, dignified and upper caste families never took interest in it, rather they were not allowed to do it and women dancers were looked down upon. The traditional and ancient art, which had religious importance, has been kept away from society. It remained the art of lower class, ill-famed people, who looked at the art as only a means of livelihood and it was not at all used for the religious purposes. Thus it lost its religious importance. *Devadasis* kept continuing their art but outside the temple.

Downfall in Status:

This was the situation in South India that affected the status of women dancers. In Northern India situation was different but the outcome was same. Again the social, economic and political conditions affected the status of classical dance and women dancers.

Even in Northern India the temple connection of dance has been well established as can be seen in the art of '*Kathavachaka*' a story teller who carried on the tradition to this day in the North in the temple area and in the open space. Here too the religious content of dance, of course, suffered a setback during the period of foreign invasions and the following Muslim Rule. The Mughal rulers also extended patronage to music and dance. However, with the arrival of the Mughals there was a definite shift in the content of the dance and the emphasis also changed. The dominance of Muslim culture and their choices were imposed on the old form. The result was the growth of refined but superficial court dance lacking in original vigour and dignity and the religious content. In the changing gesture of a new culture it lost all its mythological and spiritual significance and was reduced to a purely attractive art. No doubt this shift in the content and emphasis declined the status of women dancers. This transition of the art of Kathak from temple to the court made female dancers '*Baijis*' or '*courtesans*'.

The art of classical dance has been flourished in South India by *Devadasis* and in North India by *Baijis* in the courts of Mughal Emperors, but the status of women dancers has been declined. With the coming of the British the arts were neglected. It was during this period that classical dance came to be known as '*nauch*'. The British who came to India, in the administrative services took the native entertainment; they called these dancers '*nauchwalis*'.

Such a review noticeably specifies that the religious significance and comparatively higher status of dance and dancers declined all over the country and the reasons for this transformation were considerably common. These reasons were mainly the changing social, political and the economic conditions. Thus the traditional Indian art was kept away from the society. It remained the art of low category and ill-famed women. Some classical dancers adopted popular dance styles along with classical dance for livelihood, which ultimately resulted into the tremendous decline in the status of women dancers. The reason of the seclusion of this art from upper class and caste women are different in different parts of country. They vary widely according to caste, local customs and historical period. Despite such restrictions and variations, women's participation in dance, theatre, music and in the visual arts is visible. However dancing has not been accessible to all women until recently.

Upward Transformation:

The situation did not remain same. It slowly but steadily started changing. With the Independence Movement of the early 20th century, the arts were revived as banners for Nationalism. Ravindranath Tagore and his school at Shantiniketan gave a splendid motivation to the cultural renaissance in the arts, which led to the entry of Bengali Brahmins in performing arts. The arts started flourishing. Some social changes allowed women artists to give frequent public performances. In modern India almost all performing art forms are open to women artists. Of course dance doesn't remain the exception for this. In fact, women dance artists have an important role to perform in modern India in this field.

Among the early pioneers who took Indian dancing from town and beyond the frontiers of the country was late Maneka. She challenged the rule, which ranked dancing as the methodology of *Devadasis* and acquired a thorough knowledge of the technique of Kathak. Her name must go down as the first Indian lady whose efforts are of immense importance for society women to follow into the realms of the classical art. After her many women dancers can be credited for the revitalization of dance and the position of women dancers.

Today the situation has changed. In independent India, due to comparatively free social and political atmosphere and the efforts of several pioneers, classical dance regained its lost status. Though it lost its religious

importance, its social importance is growing day by day. Girls and women of upper class and caste started learning, performing and looking it as a career opportunity. Most of the renowned women classical dancers in India belonged to upper caste and class today. Status of women classical dancers is high and at present there are hundreds of dance schools in India where thousands of girls and women are learning classical dance. At many places classical dance has been included in school and university curriculum and many girls wish to opt for it as a career. They are looking at it as a dignified means of livelihood. Indian dance is now a widely recognized and respected art form all over the world. Many young and even middle aged women from Indian as well as non-Indian backgrounds are learning Indian dance with great interest and enthusiasm (Reginald Massey:2004). As such, the art form of dance has become an environment for women to discuss, debate and evaluate issues and their outcomes... to strengthen the link between knowledge and action (Kushwaha Saumya:2003).

In fact, the women of India enjoyed right from the ancient period the great continuum of a role in dance even with a tale of tears and tortures, trivial trials and tribunals during that she faced in the mediaeval period, undoubtedly grades her as a victor in the present scenario. (V. Prabhu Kumari:1999)

Thus it can be said that classical dance not only has regained its lost dignity, but also becoming a means to acquire certain position and status in society. In other words it can be said that it is becoming a status symbol.

References:

- [1]. Altekar, A.S., 1956. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Benaras: MotilalBanarasi Das, 1956.
- [2]. Dutt, B. & Sarkar Munshi, U. (2010). *Engendering Performance- Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity*. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd: New Delhi.
- [3]. Kushwaha, Saumya. 2003. *Women Welfare Some New Dimensions* (Sarup & Sons, New Delhi), p. 83.
- [4]. Orr, Leslie. C. 2000. *Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 5.
- [5]. Reginald Massey, *India's Dances their History, Technique and Reportaire* (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 2004), p. 1.
- [6]. Singh, A.K. 1990. *Devadasis System in Ancient India*. Delhi: H.K. Publishers and Distributors. p. 13.
- [7]. V. Prabhu Kumari. 1999. "Indian Woman – A Victim or a Victor" in *South Indian History Congress 16th Session*, (Loyola College, Chennai), p. 14.

Dr. Chetana Desai. "Journey of Classical Dance in the Context of Changing Status of Women Dancers." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(03), 2022, pp. 53-55.