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Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance

Matthew Harp Allen

For the past several years I have been investigating the local circumstances of what is commonly referred to as a “revival” of dance in South India in the 1930s, working outward from a study of the *padam* genre of dance music.¹ Reading the work of Jennifer Post (1989), Regula Qureshi (1991), and Tapati Guha-Thakurta (1992), which describes and theorizes “revivals” in the performing and visual arts in the northern part of the subcontinent, has convinced me that the events in South India bear study as part of a larger pattern. Accordingly, I have been led to an investigation of pan-South Asian patterns of revival and of intellectual influences from outside South Asia upon these (self-consciously nationalistic) complexes of events.

This study centers on Rukmini Devi (1904–1986), a central local figure in the South Indian revival of dance, and on Nataraja (literally, *raja*, king, of *natanam*, of dance), a primarily South Indian manifestation of the Hindu god Siva, who became the central icon and master metaphor for the revival of dance and, arguably, for the Indian nationalist movement as a whole. In an attempt to understand these local actors—one human, one divine—my gaze has been drawn outward from South India toward Bengal, which as the capital of British India served as a major conduit for intellectual currents between India and Europe; to the Theosophical Society (founded in 1875), a transnational creature bred by the United States, Europe, and India;² to Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), initially a geologist, later a disciple of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, and finally a world-renowned aesthete and historian of South Asian art; and to three American and European dancers who choreographed along Indian themes and performed these creations in the Americas, Europe, and Asia during the decades leading up to the revival.

The term “revival” is a drastically reductive linguistic summary of a complex process—a deliberate selection from among many possibilities—which cries out to be examined from more than one point of view. While the “revival” of South Indian dance certainly *involved* a re-vivification or bringing back to life, it was equally a re-population (one social community appropriating a practice from another), a re-construction (altering and replacing elements of repertoire and choreography), a re-naming (from *nautch* and other terms to *bharata natyam*³), a re-situation (from temple, court, and salon to the public stage), and a re-storation (as used in Schechner 1985:69, a splicing to-

gether of selected “strips” of performative behavior in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents an historical one). The discourse on South Indian dance to date has privileged the term “revival” over other equally descriptive ones, obscuring the complexity of the process, focusing attention onto a simple, celebrative vision of the giving of new life.

Rukmini Devi was not the only dancer central to the revival, and she was not the most popular dancer to emerge from it. It is the role which she ascribed to herself and which posterity has granted her—in the words of N. Pattabhiraman, “her unique contribution was to destroy what was crude and vulgar in the inherited traditions of dance and to replace them with sophistication and refined taste” (1988:24)—which places her at the center of this essay along with Siva-Nataraja, the deity who became her model for action. Detailed consideration of T. Balasaraswati, the world-renowned *bharata natyam* artist from the hereditary dance tradition who, virtually alone from her community, continued to dance after 1940, and of “Baby” Kamala, who as a young girl became the first Brahmin “star” of the dance in the early 1940s, is not possible here.

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Nataraja, an ancient form of the god Siva indigenous to South India, would serve as the perfect *nayaka* (lord) of the revived dance. The astonishingly beautiful bronze sculpture of Nataraja from the Cola era (ca. 9–11th century C.E.) is today the focus of his renown in the international art world, but even earlier (ca. 530 C.E.), Nataraja was depicted in stone in the Chalukya center of Badami, dancing with the wives of the *rishis* (sages) in the forest. As we will see, however, despite his deep roots in South Indian religious tradition, Nataraja had never before been asked to play a role quite like the one reserved for him in the 20th-century revival.

The groundwork for this complex process of “revival” and other “re’s” was laid by intertwined cultural and political forces within the Indian nationalist movement, itself grounded substantially in Orientalist thought and Victorian morality. Key figures in the movement to revive Indian high culture, such as Rukmini Devi and Ananda Coomaraswamy, far from being isolated monocultural social actors, embody in their persons and their intimate associations this intellectually and culturally hybrid world.

I'm happy [...] I was able to prove we could do without them.

—Rukmini Devi (in Sarada [1943] 1985:50)

I begin with a 1943 quotation by Rukmini Devi, the first Brahmin woman to perform dance in modern South Indian history⁴ and the founder and long-time director of the preeminent dance training institution in South India, Kalakshetra:

One great new thing that has come as a result of these difficulties is the complete separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers. It is

a well-known fact that they are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody else to conduct a dance performance. I have always had a determination that this must go. They used to think that, except the usual class of people, no one else would be able to dance. Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers. The second aspect is to train Nattuvanars [dance teachers] from good families. I am happy that on Vijayadasami day I was able to prove that we could do without them. (in Sarada 1985:50)

What *great new thing* has been accomplished? What were the *difficulties*? Who are they, this *usual class*? And who are we, the *good families*? How can an intelligent, idealistic human being like Rukmini Devi exult that on an auspicious day she is able to dispense with the artistic collaboration of an entire class of fellow human beings? Why did she think that appropriation—though she probably never used this term, it is implicit in her use of *separation* above—of the dance art was legitimate, indeed imperative? Given the centrality of Rukmini Devi to the 1930s revival, and given the tremendous prestige that bharata natyam has come to enjoy as an all-India and an international “classical” dance art, it behooves us both to search for answers to particular local questions and to study the webs—the social, political, intellectual, and artistic currents of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in and outside India—in which her statement hangs suspended.

Let us consider the specific local questions posed above: The “great thing,” the “separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers,” was to Rukmini Devi the second and final *aspect* or stage of the appropriation of a dance art from a hereditary community of artists. In the first stage, the *we*, young women from “good families,” had begun studying and performing dance in the mid-1930s, Rukmini Devi being one of the first Brahmin women to do this. For instruction, however, *we* were compelled to go to *them*, the *nattuvanars*, dancemaster-teachers and kinsmen of the community of women dancers known as *devadasis*. Devadasis (*dasi*, servant, of *deva*, god) were female Hindu ritual practitioners, women who underwent training and initiation in religious-artistic service, including dance and vocal music. After her period of training, a devadasi was ritually married to the god of a Hindu temple and therefore became *nityasumangali*, always-auspicious, by virtue of the fact that, married to the god, she could never become a widow.⁶

In the first *aspect*, or stage, of appropriation, the hereditary community of devadasi dancers was replaced by a new community of upper-caste dancers. This was a gradual process and not an uncontested one; arguments abounded in the early 1930s between those who thought the existing human “vessel” needed to be replaced by a new (pure) one, and those who claimed that the vessel had integrity and only needed a better coating and a proper venue for display. Through the decade of the 1930s, a stream of non-Brahmin dancers from the traditional community were presented at the Music Academy, the most prestigious public performance venue in Madras (founded in 1928), by the lawyer E. Krishna Ayyar (1897–1968) and other Brahmin arts connoisseurs (Arudra 1987:23–28). These performances proved instrumental in encouraging “middle-class” women (an Indian-English euphemism referring substantially to the Brahmin community) such as Rukmini Devi to see and then to study dance. By 1940, most of the dancers from the traditional community who had danced at the Music Academy during the 1930s had stopped performing publicly, with the notable exception of T. Balasaraswati (1918–1984). She established a dance school on the Music Academy premises, performed from the 1930s to 1970s in the Academy’s December “music season” concert series, made repeated international tours and trained many foreign students begin-

ning in the 1960s, and was elected to the Academy's highest honor, the *Sangita Kalanidhi*, in 1973.⁷

What were the recent *difficulties*? The new students depended on teachers from the traditional community who possessed the techniques of the dance art. In 1943 Pandanallur Chokkalingam Pillai (see Singer 1972:176–80), a nattuvanar teaching at Rukmini Devi's school, left her employ for a more lucrative offer elsewhere, on the eve of several important concerts and after a variety of interchanges which he likely viewed as demeaning and she likely viewed as impudent. A series of tensions between Rukmini Devi and nattuvanars preceded Chokkalingam Pillai's departure, beginning back in 1935 with her decision to perform for the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of the Theosophical Society before her earlier *guru*, Chokkalingam Pillai's venerable father-in-law Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai (1869–1954), thought her ready (Meduri 1996:277, 299). This would have been unthinkable in the traditional teacher-student relationship, in which the teacher determines the date of the student's *arangerram* (premiere performance). It was also a traditional practice for a nattuvanar to receive handsome gifts on the occasion of a dancer's *arangerram* in addition to gifts (or cash salary, in the case of new institutions such as Kalakshetra) given during the course of instruction—a custom which Rukmini Devi did not follow. Such conflicts are illustrative of the inherent clash of cultures that occurred when a student came to the practice from outside the hereditary community, bringing an explicit agenda involving appropriation based on a worldview which considered the hereditary keepers of the tradition as unworthy.

By dispensing with traditional teachers and using her own students as nattuvanars, Rukmini Devi dramatically altered the modalities of communication in performance.

In the second stage of revival, according to Rukmini Devi's thinking, the services of the troublesome traditional dance teachers were thus to be dispensed with, completing the removal of the entire traditional community, dancers and teachers, from the profession. As the traditional nattuvanars did not simply teach their students but also actively directed their performances onstage—reciting rhythmic compositions which the dancers performed through their nonrepresentational *nritta* (“pure dance” in *bharata natyam* parlance) and serving other functions as well—the lack of a nattuvanar onstage to direct the dance presented a serious problem. Rukmini Devi clearly felt that the solution was to train nattuvanars from within her own social community. As she stated in 1943, at that time she had trained new nattuvanars from *good families* who could take over the work (to her satisfaction, at least), and several Kalakshetra performances that year were conducted by student-nattuvanars. By dispensing with traditional teachers and using her own students as nattuvanars, Rukmini Devi dramatically altered the modalities of communication in performance. In the new situation, the student-nattuvanar was in no way able to direct the dance in the manner of the traditional teacher but simply was to try to follow it; hence the slighting term *tattuvanar* used by critics to describe such new, nontraditional nattuvanars (*tattu* simply means to beat a stick; i.e., the student-nattuvanars needed neither talent nor depth of experience to do their job—only the ability to keep time).

Unlike the first stage, this second stage of appropriation, replacement of the traditional nattuvanars, was never completed. Although Rukmini Devi ended

her institution's employment of nattuvanars from the hereditary community in 1943, a number of traditional nattuvanars thrived, or at least survived, outside Kalakshetra, and some nattuvanars descended from the early 19th-century Tanjavur Quartette (four eminent nattuvanar-composer brothers) remain a major force in bharata natyam training to the present day.⁸ Still, the lines of power and authority between student and teacher have shifted considerably, a process which Rukmini Devi was instrumental in initiating. Formerly, the teacher wielded near-complete authority over his charge from youth through her maturity, invariably directing the dancer's performances and retaining considerable control over her career. Today, students engage teachers and pay cash tuition for training. (This has resonances of the modern consumer, shopping for instruction.) Once mature, dancers rarely use their guru as the nattuvanar onstage for their performances, relying instead on a cadre of more-or-less freelance nattuvanars and accompanying musicians, or even on taped music.⁹

Finally, a basic question: Why did Rukmini Devi and others deem a separation of *our* work from *theirs* necessary? The question is answered in a narrative given to Avanthi Meduri by her own Brahmin dance teachers in Madras (themselves products of Kalakshetra), a narrative that thousands of young middle-class Indian dance students have absorbed in essentially the same form since the 1930s—one which surfaces in countless books on and reviews of dance:

My dance teachers told me a story, a story they were never tired of repeating [...], that this dance was once called *sadir* and that it was performed in the sacred precincts of the temple. They said that the *devadasi* (temple dancers) who practiced this art form lived and danced happily in the temple environments. [...] But then the *devadasi* turned “corrupt” and profaned the art form, they said suddenly, and rather angrily. Frightened by their anger, I asked rather hesitantly about how they had profaned the art. They looked around them to see if anybody was eavesdropping, and whispered into my ear: they said that dancing became associated with *nautch* girls because of the corrupt ways of the *devadasi*. [...] A highly complex system rooted in religion had become “corrupted” until the “respectable” people of the south initiated a campaign in the late 1920s to abolish the ill-reputed *devadasi* system. (Meduri 1988:1)

Nationalism, Colonialism, and “Revival” in South Asia

There is strong evidence that events taking place in South India were part of a larger pattern. In the world of musicology there were significant currents of influence flowing between scholars of *Hindustani* (North Indian) and *Karnataka* (South Indian) music in the early 20th century, a fact that has remained a subtext in the scholarly discourse, proceeding as it has tended to along two parallel tracks (very few performers or scholars are intimately involved with both traditions). First, the North Indian (Marathi) lawyer-scholar V.N. Bhatkande (1860–1936) traveled south in 1904 and met Subbarama Dikshitar (1839–1906), author of the treatise *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini* (1904) and adopted grandson of the composer Muttusvami Dikshitar.¹⁰ Bhatkande familiarized himself with the Karnataka *melakarta*, the scale-based system for classification of *ragas* (melodic modes), which then became a formative influence in his own systematization of Hindustani musical practice. Dikshitar provided Bhatkande with manuscripts from the 15th–18th centuries which demonstrated to Bhatkande's delight that—unlike in the North where (he felt) the tradition was in the hands of unlettered practitioners—“the music that is practiced there [in the South] has the authority of the texts” (in Ratanjankar 1967:17). While Karnataka music theory thus proved a direct in-

spiration for the development of the *that* system of raga classification in the North, the idea of the music conference was first established in the North and was later taken up in the South. At the first All-India Music Conference in 1916, organized by Bhatkande under the sponsorship of the Maharajah of Baroda, the South Indian musicologist Abraham Panditar of Tanjavur was in attendance and presented a paper. Eleven years later in 1927, the first music conference in South India took place as an appendage of the annual Congress Party meeting in Madras—an event which led to the founding of the Music Academy of Madras the following year. (The doyen among Madras *sabhas*, music-sponsoring organizations, the Music Academy hosts a yearly music conference with scholarly paper sessions as well as performances of music and dance, maintains a research library, and has published a scholarly journal since the early 1930s.)

Regula Qureshi has documented a process of revival/appropriation in the northern part of the subcontinent which appears strikingly similar to the process in the South. Qureshi notes the goals and methods of the revivalists in the North—a primary goal being reclamation of the spiritual status of music, and a primary method to achieve that goal being a shift of personnel—and argues that European Orientalist thought played a major role in this nationalist endeavor:

Somewhat ironically, it was British Indology which showed the way to reclaiming the spiritual status of music, through its paradigm originating in European alienation and today debunked by Marxist historians (Thapar 1977): The Hindu Golden Age of Spirituality, whose ideation and historical reality is enshrined in Sanskrit texts. [...]

The visionary who set out to achieve the new goal in a comprehensive way is V.N. Bhatkande. He directly embodies this “engaged” pursuit of historical scholarship as a pivotal figure in the entire enterprise of musical revival and of redefining Hindustani music. Pandit Bhatkande was the “father of music conferences”; as the life and soul of the first five such events, he engaged nationalists and their noble patrons to support socially acceptable teaching and performing venues. [...]

But there was a major shift required to realize this musical transformation: that of personnel. Initiated and articulated very clearly by Bhatkande, it became the agenda for middle-class Hindu music lovers for a generation: to take music out of the hands of the Muslim hereditary professionals and win it for the Hindu elite through discipleship and devotion. (1991:160–61)

While, in the course of the revival, communities of Muslim musicians and dancers in the north of the subcontinent were disenfranchised, the hereditary community of non-Brahmin Hindu dancers was replaced in the South. In both cases, the replacement performers came from high-caste, almost exclusively Brahmin, Hindu communities.¹¹ Leaving behind the practice of dance in the face of overwhelming social pressures, a significant number of women from the traditional dancing community nevertheless continued in the profession of musical (most often vocal) performance, where they have achieved great recognition; however, in the 1990s, very few of the women descendants of this community are going into musical performance.

Neither the mother nor grandmother of T. Balasaraswati performed dance, though their female ancestors had been court dancers at Tanjavur. Leaving dance behind, like many members of their community, the women in this family began to concentrate in the late 19th century on vocal or instrumental musical performance. (When Balasaraswati wanted to begin dance training as a young girl in the 1920s, it was the subject of a heated debate among family

members and close friends.) The women of this family are atypical in that they continue as professional musicians today, while most women of the community have stopped singing as well as dancing. The decline in the number of hereditary South Indian women performers closely parallels the two-stage withdrawal of women from artistic performance in Western India. According to an account by Jennifer Post, the women of Western India first left dance to concentrate on vocal music and then, one or two generations later, ceased performing music as well (1989).

Qureshi notes that the replacement of Muslim musicians by upper-caste Hindus in North India had the extraordinary effect of closing the social gulf between performer and audience, a chasm in the patron-artist relationship that had existed for centuries. The revival of dance in the South led to the same change there, as thereafter the connoisseurs were from the same community as the performers. V.N. Bhatkande and Rukmini Devi played analogous roles in a drama of appropriation and legitimation within a pan-South Asian framework of nationalist aspiration and cultural regeneration. The arts were “revived”—renamed, appropriated and repopulated, reconstructed, represented—as one wing of the nationalist enterprise. In South India, as we have seen, it was a national meeting of the Congress Party in Madras in 1927 that led to the founding of the Music Academy. Furthermore, important figures associated with the early days of the Music Academy, such as E. Krishna Ayyar (whose presentation of devadasi dancers at the Music Academy first gave Rukmini Devi the opportunity to see dance in a “respectable” setting), were intimately involved with the nationalist movement. Krishna Ayyar, a member of the socialist section of the Indian National Congress who shocked his contemporaries by performing devadasi-style dance in drag as early as 1926 (Meduri 1996:158–60), was in and out of jail for nationalist activities in the 1930s (Arudra 1987:35–36).

In her study of the creation of a new “Indian” art in Bengal (her quotation marks signifying an attention to not only the constructed, restored nature of artistic practice but of the nation itself), Tapati Guha-Thakurta argues that Indian nationalist thought was inextricably intertwined with international intellectual and political networks, oriented to the seat of colonial power in England:

The new nationalist ideology of Indian art, its aesthetic self-definitions and its search for a “tradition” had strong roots in Orientalist writing and debates. British Orientalism produced and structured much of its notion of an Indian art tradition. While it had provided the core of historical knowledge and archaeological expertise on the subject, it would also stand at the helm of the aesthetic reinterpretation of Indian art during the turn of the century. (1992:146)

The motivation for such an interest on the part of the British was complex and notably political. To study in order to consolidate influence was an implicit agenda of British colonialists since at least the time of the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal by Warren Hastings in 1784—an agenda which by the turn of the 20th century had become quite explicit. Guha-Thakurta quotes Lord Curzon, chief English administrator of India from 1898 to 1905:

The development of Orientalist studies in India was, for rulers like Curzon, a great imperial obligation: “Our capacity to understand what may be called the genius of the East is the sole basis upon which we are likely to be able to maintain in future the position we have won.” (1992:147)

The major British figure involved in the creation of this new “Indian” art was the art educator Ernest Binfield Havell (1861–1934), who first came to India in 1884 to take up the position of Superintendent at the Madras School of Arts. After spending a decade in South India, he was Superintendent of the Government School of Art, Calcutta, from 1896 to 1906. During his tenure in Calcutta his interest gradually turned from encouragement of what he viewed as Indian “crafts” towards the “fine arts” (a shift of focus we will see occurring as well in the early career of a young scholar inspired by Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy). In Calcutta, Havell became intimately involved in promoting a young Bengali painter, Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), as the fount for a school of truly Indian art: “His protégé Abanindranath and his pupils engaged with utmost seriousness in reviving what they considered ‘the lost language of Indian art,’ as part of their concerted campaign against the Westernization of art in India” (Mitter 1984:80). Havell sold off pieces from the mediocre European collections of the Calcutta Art Gallery in order to buy Mughal paintings and other examples of Indian art, a move that earned him criticism not only from some British quarters, but also from the Bengali nationalist press. In 1906 Havell was recalled to Britain, declared “unfit for further service in India” by a government irritated at his “meddling in the arts revival” (Meduri 1996:96). Havell thus became a somewhat oppositional “internationalist” figure (Meduri 1996:xxiii) within British Orientalism, as did Coomaraswamy and the woman who would have the most profound effect on Rukmini Devi, Annie Besant (1847–1933).

Rukmini Devi and the Theosophical Society

Although born into a South Indian Brahmin family, Rukmini Devi would not grow into the stereotypical life of an early 20th-century Brahmin woman, illiterate and cloistered in a circle of domestic duties. Due to her family’s intellectual temperament, notably her father’s involvement with the international Theosophical movement, she was highly educated—her studies included Sanskrit, at that time the almost exclusive preserve of Brahmin males—and was raised in close contact with American and European intellectuals and artists, male and female. Rukmini Devi’s father, Nilakantha Sastri, who came from a family of Sanskrit scholars, was a civil engineer for the government, a position which necessitated frequent moves for the family around South India. Intellectually curious and impressed with the Theosophical literature he had read, he was initiated into the Society by cofounder Colonel Henry Olcott (Ramnarayan 1984a:20). When he retired from government service, Sastri moved the family to a house just outside the Theosophical compound in Adyar in the southern suburbs of Madras and placed young Rukmini and her siblings at the epicenter of the Society’s activities in India.

The question of agency is central to a consideration of Rukmini Devi. The discourse on South Indian dance to date has stressed and celebrated her independence as an actor, her courage and vision in achieving the unbelievable in the face of all kinds of odds. What has gone almost completely unremarked or at least unwritten by dance scholars, social historians, and biographers (excluding a major study by Avanthi Meduri [1996] and the attention given her in Arthur Nethercot’s 1963 biography of Annie Besant) is the extent to which her young person was the site of absolutely feverish Orientalist-internationalist Theosophical activity, culminating in the proclamation of Rukmini Devi as World Mother (twice, in 1925 and again in 1928), and further, the extent to which this activity may have colored and shaped Rukmini Devi’s subsequent involvement with the so-called revival of dance in South India.

The Theosophical Society was founded by Olcott and H.P. Blavatsky in 1875 in New York. By the time Annie Besant first set foot in India in 1893, an

Eastern “Esoteric” section of the Society had been started by Olcott, who called Besant its “sweet spirit and guiding star” (Nethercot 1963:18¹²). An idyllic site for the future headquarters’ grounds and buildings had been obtained on the south bank of the Adyar River in Madras, and, spurred by Theosophical interest in “Eastern” religions, many wealthy Americans and Europeans (some titled aristocracy) liberally supported this expansion. Besant, who to the astonishment of both supporters and adversaries back in England had been “converted to Theosophy at the height of her career as a materialist, an atheist, an anathematised advocate of birth-control, and a feminist crusader in all the new advanced movements” (Nethercot 1963:11), dived into her work in India with total dedication. By all accounts she was determined to position and maintain the Theosophical Society not simply as a mystical or occult organization, but as a major force in Indian society. She made the Society a potent player in the Indian nationalist movement, even serving as President of the Indian National Congress Party in 1917/18, though her self-insertion into nationalist politics came to be resented by many Indian leaders who “had not been informed that she was acting in accordance with the wishes of the Rishi Agastya” (Nethercot 1963:273).¹³ She founded several universities and the Young Men’s Indian Association (a counterpart to the YMCA), helped start the Boy Scout movement in India, and carried on a plethora of other community activities. The simultaneous involvement of the Theosophical Society in matters spiritual and political is telling, as we will see; the mentoring of Rukmini Devi by Theosophical leaders argues a strong role for the Society, with all its international implications, in the revival of dance in South India.

By all accounts Annie Besant was determined to position and maintain the Theosophical Society not simply as a mystical or occult organization, but as a major force in Indian society.

As a young man, George Arundale (1878–1945), the nephew and adopted son of the wealthy, unmarried Theosophist Francesca Arundale, became a protégé of Theosophical leader Charles Leadbeater (1847–1934). Arundale came to India in 1903 as Principal of the Central Hindu College in Banaras, one of the institutions founded by Annie Besant. In 1913, he met Rukmini Devi at a party given by his aunt (Ramnarayan 1984a:26). She was about nine years old. Seven years later, one year after the death of her father in 1919, Arundale, age 40, shocked orthodox Brahmin Madras society by proposing marriage to the 16-year-old girl. Upon her acceptance, the marriage took place in Bombay, away from the furor in Madras, on 29 April 1920. After she was named President of the All India Federation of Young Theosophists in 1923, and of the World Federation of Young Theosophists in 1925 (Ramnarayan 1984a:27–28), the new and exalted role of World Mother was conceived for Rukmini Devi by the leaders of the Theosophical Society. The flavor of Theosophical esoteric transactions is captured somewhat tongue-in-cheek by Arthur Nethercot, here discussing events at the 1925 Theosophical Star Camp in Ommen, Holland, leading up to the selection by the Society’s astral advisors of Rukmini Devi as the head of the new World Mother organization:

That night George [Arundale] was consecrated Bishop—so they were told the next morning—in a beautiful ceremony by no less than the Lord Maitreya himself, with all the Masters present. The Masters now began

to hand down many instructions through the newly made Bishop. [...] Rukmini astonished them all with her nightly experiences, and her husband reported that it was said of her in the other world that she had no fault. [...] On the morning of 10th August [1925], Bishop Arundale disclosed that during the night he had been entrusted with a message of incredible importance by the Masters. [...]

These announcements came just in time, because the Star Camp at Ommen opened later the same day. Annie Besant hastily summoned a meeting of the special pupils and electrified them with a general disclosure of what had occurred. The next day she divulged that Rukmini, Lady Emily [Lutyens, daughter of the Earl of Lytton, at one time Viceroy of India], and [B.] Shiva Rao [a young protégé of Besant] had passed further Initiations the preceding night, though all that Lady Emily could remember was that she had spent a very disturbed time fighting with a bat in her room.

But that night at the Camp Fire, Annie in a long address broke the thrilling news to everyone. [...] Her “daughter,” Rukmini Arundale, she predicted, would pass [initiation as one of the twelve apostles for J. Krishnamurti, the coming messiah] in a few days, and, “hearing the call of her Master very, very early in life, will be the Rishi Agastya’s messenger to the women and young ones in India, taking up a large part of the work there I have been carrying on for years.” (1963:364–65)

The creation of a World Mother organization placed Rukmini Devi in a position parallel to that of the young J. Krishnamurti (1895–1986), at that time being groomed to be the vehicle for the second coming of the messiah. The childhoods of these two Theosophical chosen-ones had striking parallels as well. Like Rukmini Devi’s father, Krishnamurti’s father Narayaniah was a frequently transferred government employee (revenue collector) and Theosophist. As upon his retirement Rukmini Devi’s father had moved the family close to the headquarters in Adyar, so had Krishnamurti’s father moved his children there upon his retirement in 1907 (his wife had died in 1905). One day, Krishnamurti, standing on the banks of the Adyar River with his brother Nityananda “shyly watch[ing] a group of young Theosophists cavorting in the waves,” was noticed by Charles Leadbeater. Struck by the young boy’s aura, Leadbeater “concluded from this initial impression, that Krishna[murti] might prove to be the vehicle that he believed the Masters were directing him to find. Before long he stated he had been instructed by the Master Kuthumi to train this boy” (Sloss 1991:25). Leadbeater initiated the process of taking control of the two boys from their father, raising them and educating them within the compound. “At the age of 14, only eight months after being discovered by Leadbeater (when he had known no English at all) with Leadbeater’s probable assistance, Krishna wrote affectionate and grammatical letters to Mrs. Besant. He saw her as a new mother and begged her to let him address her as such” (Sloss 1991:29). In 1911, Krishnamurti underwent his first initiation and was formally announced as the vehicle for the message of the coming world teacher. A major organization whose membership quickly swelled into the thousands, the Order of the Star in the East (first called the Order of the Rising Sun) was created by Besant and Leadbeater in 1911 as the organizational vehicle for the new messiah.

Though a dedicated Theosophist, Narayaniah was, naturally enough, alarmed at what amounted to the kidnapping of his sons Krishnamurti and Nityananda. He initiated a custody suit in 1912 (while they were in Sicily, far from his grasp), which succeeded in the Indian courts but was overturned on appeal by the Privy Council in London (Sloss 1991:32). Upon attaining legal

maturity in 1913, Krishnamurti elected to stay with his Theosophical sponsors. Over the next decade and a half he led a peripatetic life, moving between Europe, the United States, and India at the behest of his Theosophical sponsors. Krishnamurti grew increasingly disenchanted with the role created for him and with certain tendencies within the Theosophical bureaucracy. He showed pointed irritation with Arundale as he spun out more and more layers of mystical hierarchy (as in the set of “apostles” created at Ommen) and with the whole idea of a World Mother movement. Finally, declaring that “truth is a pathless land,” Krishnamurti dissolved the Order of the Star in the East in 1929, sending shock waves throughout the international Theosophical community and causing the World Mother movement to wither on the vine (Nethercot 1963:423). In 1933, soon after the demise of the World Mother movement, Annie Besant passed away. George Arundale assumed the presidency of the Society and, I believe, a central role in the formulation of what would be his wife’s next and most celebrated activity, the “revival” of dance.

The narrative of Rukmini Devi’s seeking out and then taking up Indian dance has acquired several iterations. Meduri reports that Rukmini Devi went to see the “Kalyani Daughters,” Jeevaratnam and Rajalakshmi (students of Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai and daughters of the eminent dancer Tiruvallaputtur Kalyani), at the Music Academy in 1933 (1996:231). Gowri Ramnarayan agrees that this dance performance was the catalytic event but states that E. Krishna Ayyar invited her to attend this performance not in 1933 but two years later, in 1935 (1984b:18). For his part, Arudra concurs that Rukmini Devi first went to the Music Academy at E. Krishna Ayyar’s invitation on New Years Day 1935, but notes that the performance that day involved not the Kalyani Daughters but instead the sisters Sabharanjitham and Nagaratnam, daughters of a Smt. (Ms.) Nagamma and also disciples of Minakshisundaram Pillai (1987:30).

Music Academy festival souvenirs I have seen indicate that the Kalyani Daughters danced at the Music Academy in 1931 and 1933, while Sabharanjitham and Nagaratnam danced in 1935 (this would imply an anomaly in Ramnarayan’s account). We may summarize that, at the invitation of E. Krishna Ayyar, Rukmini Devi either first went to the Music Academy to see the dance performance of the Kalyani Daughters on 1 January 1933 or that of Sabharanjitham and Nagaratnam on 1 January 1935. After seeing Minakshisundaram Pillai conducting the recital of his students, she decided he was the teacher she wanted to study with and approached him (sometime, then, between 1933 and 1935). Interviewed by Ramnarayan (1984b:18), Rukmini Devi introduces another teacher into the narrative, saying that in advance of studying with Minakshisundaram, she had already taken lessons from the devadasi dancer Mylapore Gowri Ammal, a renowned expert in *abhinaya* (mimetic gestural language). Then, either in December 1935 (Ramnarayan 1984b:20) or March 1936 (Arudra 1987:30), Rukmini Devi decided to have her dance debut on the occasion of the Theosophical Society’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations. As noted earlier, in making this decision herself she usurped the guru’s traditional prerogative, angering Minakshisundaram Pillai, who left to return to his home in Tanjavur District.¹⁴

The role played by George Arundale in his wife’s career has been characterized in various ways. Sources disagree, for example, on whether Devi or Arundale was the prime force behind the founding of the International Institute of the Arts in 1936, renamed *Kalakshetra* (*kshetra*, womb or place, of *kala*, arts) in 1938. S. Sarada, for one, foregrounds Rukmini Devi while acknowledging Arundale: “Inspired by the noble ideals and magnificent educational mission of Dr. G.S. Arundale, *she* established [...]” (1985:frontispiece; emphasis added). Who actually had the idea for the institute is probably impossible to answer and

is, in any case, less interesting than the question of why an active, direct role for Arundale has been discounted in much of dance scholarship. At several points in the account by Ramnarayan (whose mother Anandhi Ramachandran was one of the early students of Kalakshetra), Arundale is assigned an essentially passive role, that of a husband supporting a wife's recreational pastime. For example: "Dr. Arundale for one encouraged his wife in her new interest, for he considered dancing to be an excellent form of enjoyment and relaxation" (Ramnarayan 1984b:20). But anecdotes sprinkled throughout the literature point to, I believe, a greater involvement. Ramnarayan quotes the Theosophist James Cousins, writing about Rukmini Devi's premiere performance for the Diamond Jubilee:

A large international audience was stirred to enthusiasm by a new beauty of rhythmical expression; a group of indigenous art critics saw the beginning of a cultural era that broke bounds and opened up incalculable possibilities; *the dancer's English husband, an incorrigible idealist, saw his wife as the ordained instrument of a new and extraordinarily potent revelation of spiritual reality through art.* (in Ramnarayan 1984b:21; emphasis added)

Tours of the Kalakshetra dance troupe were sometimes combined with Arundale's Theosophical lecture tours (Sarada 1985:13-14), a fact which supports a more activist interpretation of Arundale's role in his wife's activities, as do apocryphal comments such as, "Dr. Arundale himself, it seems, would be meditating in the wings during his wife's performances" (Ramnarayan 1984b:27), and Sarada's account of Arundale serving as the arbiter on whether a particular padam should be a part of his wife's repertoire. Asked whether the "sringara [love sentiment] it expressed was too physical" or not, "he finally decided that she could dance for this padam" (1985:46). Finally, according to Sarada, after Rukmini Devi went to Cidambaram in 1937 (or 1938) to perform a dance offering for the god Siva enshrined there in the form of Nataraja,

Dr. Arundale called for a special meeting which my grandfather attended. He told me that Dr. Arundale had said that this art work of Rukmini Devi was for the welfare of India. The work would advance the emancipation of our Nation. It could be used as a channel for the spiritual power of Lord Nataraja. (Sarada 1985:5)

Several powerful themes are tied together by Arundale, suggesting that he had a quite specific vision for the use of dance towards, simultaneously, national and spiritual ends. His invocation of Nataraja was no coincidence: this one particular manifestation of Hindu deity was to take on the character of a master metaphor for the dance "revival" and, perhaps, the Indian nationalist movement as a whole.

Murugan and Krishna are the Love Rajas.
—Kalanidhi Narayanan (1990)

In the course of research on the performance history of the padam genre in South India (Allen 1992), all sources I have been able to consult suggest that in the performances of the hereditary community of devadasi dancers before 1930, the god Siva in his form of the "cosmic dancer" Nataraja was neither a

DEVI the DANCER

The first instalment of *Devi, the Dancer* (a new serial story written by 'Deisvi', author of *Bala, the Bad Woman*) appears in the issue of *The Merry Magazine* dated 25th August 1933, now on sale at all book-stalls.

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primary subject of, nor a patron deity for, dance. Interviews with consultants, catalogs of 78 RPM recordings produced in the first part of the century (beginning ca. 1904), and early printed concert programs (beginning ca. 1931), indicate that the devadasi performing repertoire was made up of primarily *sringara prabandhas*—songs involving one or more aspects of romantic love—such as the *ashtapadis* of Jayadeva's 12th century C.E. Sanskrit poem *Gita Govinda* and compositions in the *padam* and *javali*'s genres. The *padams*, written between the 17th and 19th centuries by Telugu and Tamil composers, were and still are considered by most *rasikas* (connoisseurs) to be the major expressive element of the dance repertoire:

The *padam* is justifiably the best known of dance music compositions; from the point of view of musical and poetic content, no other compositional form effects a comparable integration of sound and meaning. The true connoisseur awaits this portion of the dance recital before passing final judgment upon the dancer, for it is the *padam* which tests to the limit a dancer's interpretive range and artistic resources. (Higgins 1993:111)

In a *padam*, the relationship between the *nayaki*, a female devotee, and the *nayaka*, a male deity (or human patron), is cast primarily in the mold of lover/beloved, using a tripartite rhetorical scheme in which direct communication (often confrontation) is usually mediated through a female *sakhi*, friend (in some Vaishnava theological interpretations, the guru), who carries messages

1. A racy 1933 advertisement for "*Devi the Dancer*," a serial story about a devadasi dancer written by Deisvi, whose previous story "*set all South India thinking and talking*." This ad was placed in *The Hindu*, the primary English-language daily newspaper based in Madras, Tamil Nadu, South India. (Photo courtesy of Matthew Harp Allen)

between the two lovers, sometimes straying into the nayaka's arms along the way. This rhetorical scheme involving an indirect communication between lover and beloved dates back to the first centuries after Christ in the Tamil region of South India (see Ramanujan 1985). The overwhelming majority of songs in the padam genre focus on either Krishna as the nayaka (if in the Telugu language) or Murugan (if in Tamil), gods whose mythologies are saturated with youthful, playful, and virile resonances and stories. Though Murugan has been integrated into the Hindu pantheon as a son of Siva, the son is not a carbon copy of the father; in the Tamil-speaking region, Murugan has an independent set of associations strikingly similar to those of Krishna, the divine "romantic lead" par excellence of the song literature in Telugu and most of northern South Asia.¹⁶

An extremely popular and textually typical Tamil padam on Murugan is "Padari varuhudu" (My Heart Is Trembling) by the 19th-century Tamil composer Ghanam Krishna Ayyar.¹⁷ Never directly addressing the object of her affection (Lord Murugan, addressed by his epithet *Velavar*, holder of the lance), the heroine asks her friend to take a message to him. In the opening *pallavi* section, she manifests some disorientation at her friend's apparent indifference to her heartsickness, and by the second *caranam* section (found in a catalog of 78 RPM recordings but not sung in any versions I have heard) she has formulated a possible reason for this in her tortured mind (the bracketed phrase at the end of the *anupallavi* and *caranam* sections indicates that a brief reprise of the *pallavi* is taken at the conclusion of these other sections):

Pallavi

My heart is trembling, my soul is melting!
Go and tell him, woman! But, wait—stop a moment, friend
Is your heart of stone?
How can you gayly, pompously strut around like that
When I am in such a state? Now go!

Anupallavi

The holder of the lance [*Velavar*] who dwells in Parani, the place without
equal
I have kept him within my heart
Ayyo! What is happening to me?
Kama's arrows in my breast make me swoon
Go and bring my lord to me! [My heart is trembling...]

Caranam 1

Come woman, and bring my Murugan to me
To play with me, to embrace and love
He will sing Kambhoji raga*, and he'll sprinkle magic powder all over
me—Go!
Is there any equal to him, my friend?
He took my hand, he gave me the most precious of jewels
Go and find him—sing his favorite beautifully worded padam for him
Don't quarrel with me! Go running, and bring him to me! [My heart is
trembling...]

Caranam 2

When he gently put his hand around your waist, woman, and spoke as-
surances to you
Your mind became intoxicated, and you stood there confused

When you saw Lord Murugan who holds the lance, you fell in love with
 him
 Right in and among your full young breasts, his twelve hands** started
 playing
 I saw this with my own eyes!
 Bring him to me now, and the truth will all come out, oh soft-flower
 woman!
 Go, pay obeisances to him and bring him here! [My heart is trembling...]
 (Ghanam Krishna Ayyar, translated in Allen 1992, 2:A12)

*Kambhoji is the melodic mode in which this composition is set.

**A playful reference to one of Murugan's names, Shanmukham, "six-faced." A six-headed deity would possess the requisite number of arms for this passage to make sense.

In this piece we are "left in doubt" (to use the Indian-English phrase) as to the sakhi's loyalties because she seems less than bereft at the heroine's plight; indeed, following one time-honored padam scenario, the friend has been to the hero with a message and herself ended up in his arms. Murugan and Krishna are admirably fit for the padam genre, perfectly cast as its nayaka, or hero.

Nataraja on the other hand is a deity with a quite different set of resonances. As the respected senior exponent of abhinaya, Kalanidhi Narayanan (b. 1928), quoted above, told me, Nataraja's (and Rama's) resonances are generally more severe than those of Murugan and Krishna—whom she dubbed "Love Rajas," not having what Indian performers like to call "scope" for development in the srngara erotic-devotional mode so central to the devadasi tradition of dance (1990). Saskia Kersenboom writes of Nataraja, "This form of Siva indicates his Rudra aspect of the cosmic destruction of all impure, gross forces by means of his cosmic dance that burns all impurities to retain only the purest substance, namely gold" (1987:146). A dance that incinerates impurity is quite outside the modality of the devadasi dance, a dance preoccupied with cataloguing the infinite shadings of feeling in love.

I have found two exceptions, of different types, to the exclusion of Nataraja from the devadasi performing repertoire. First is a group of padams written and performed in or nearby the town of Cidambaram, seat of the Nataraja cult in South India. Some of the compositions on Nataraja by the earliest known composer of Tamil padams, Muttuttandavar (17th century), such as the famous "Teruvil varano" (Won't He Come Down My Street?), treat him as a lover-lord (Allen 1992, 2:A13). This is perhaps due to the fact that Muttuttandavar lived and wrote his songs in the Cidambaram area; one might argue that they were therefore written (and danced) not on Nataraja as a transcendent cosmic deity or abstract principle so much as on Nataraja the local, literally neighborhood, lord. Two gracious and generous consultants with deep knowledge of the Cidambaram temple, Vanaja Jeyaraman of Cidambaram and T.A. Sundarambal of Mayavaram, sang a series of padams for me (of unknown authorship) composed on Nataraja as a lover and told me that these were typical of the local Cidambaram town repertoire (1990; see also Allen 1992, 2:A5).

The second type of exception is a group of Tamil compositions that give an original interpretive twist to a particular part of Nataraja's anatomy. The dancing Nataraja's raised left leg is often interpreted as an auspicious gesture of blessing:

Unmai vilakkam, verse 36, tells us: "Creation arises from the drum: protection proceeds from the hand of hope: from fire proceeds destruction: the foot held aloft gives release." It will be observed that the fourth hand points to this lifted foot, the refuge of the soul.

We have also the following from *Chidambara mummani kovai*: “O my lord [...] it is Thy lifted foot that grants eternal bliss to those that approach Thee.” (Coomaraswamy [1918] 1957:71)

In this second category of exception, songs on Nataraja in the devadasi repertoire before 1940 that I’ve documented cast him neither in the role of lover nor in that of destroyer-recreator of the universe. These compositions are almost exclusively in the genre known as *ecal* (in Tamil) or *ninda stuti* (Sanskrit), where the god is not treated as lover, not worshipped in awe, but *teased* by the devotee. Contrast, for example, the mood of the verses quoted above by Coomaraswamy with “Enneramum” (Always), an *ecal* composition by the 18th-century Tamil composer Marimutta Pillai. The devotee-singer immediately and directly accosts Nataraja (no indirect or subtle approach here) in the pallavi section—“You always have one leg raised: Why such lameness, Lord?” Then in the three caranams (two of which are translated below), successive possible reasons for his disability are put forth in question form. I found documentation of only one dance performance of this composition, by Smt. Swarnasaraswati (a performer from the traditional hereditary community) in 1936:

Pallavi

You always have one leg raised
Why such lameness, Lord?

Anupallavi

Great kings and good people praise you, O dweller of the golden hall at
Cidambaram
Still, but even now you are not resting that leg! [You always have one leg
raised...]

Caranam 1

You walked all the way to Daksha’s house and put out his sacrificial fire,
didn’t you?
And that time you kicked Yama, the god of death, did you sprain your
leg and have to raise it, limping?
When you firmly caught the moon and rubbed it into the ground, did
that give you rheumatism?
Were you tired out by your dance contest with the fierce goddess Kali?
When you held the poison in your throat to save the world, did it spread
down through your body to that leg?
Did your dance display for Vyaghrapada the tiger and Patanjali the snake
leave you exhausted?
Does your golden foot have an ache, after all these experiences? Is that it,
Lord?
[You always have one leg raised...]

Caranam 3

When bracing yourself to bend the mountain bow, did your foot become
dislocated?
When the devas were worshipping you, did it somehow affect your mat-
ted locks?
When you left famed Kailasa in the far north and came walking all the
way down south to Cidambaram, did your leg experience some pain?
That golden anklet that jingles “kalakala” when you dance—did it rub
and irritate your leg?
Did the demon’s coarse, unruly hair irritate your leg as you stood atop him?

Among so many possible causes, which could be the one?
 I just do not know, O dweller of the Golden Hall, O Lord Natesa
 (Nataraja) of Cidambaram
 [You always have one leg raised...]
 (Marimutta Pillai, translated in Allen 1992, 2:D1)

Another popular Tamil ecal padam is “Nadamadi tirinda” (Wandering About) by the 18th-century composer Papavinasu Mudaliar. After positing a similar set of causes for the poor god’s disability, the devotee-singer comes to the ingenious conclusion that maybe, after all, it’s his own fault: “Was it because of one of these things, or *was it due to my sins?* O my Siva! Didn’t you used to say you were first among the three great gods?” (in Allen 1992, 2:D4).

Nataraja as New Nayaka

Re-Sanctifying a Recently Secularized Dance

During the 1930s, several linked changes took place in dance practice in South India, foremost among them the replacement of the traditional community of dancers. Affiliated changes were the renaming of the dance as *bharata natyam*, evoking a connection with a presumed glorious Hindu golden age; the excising from the repertoire of songs (or parts of songs) that contained textual references judged to be erotically suggestive; a general increase in tempo and in *nritta*, the rhythmic component of the dance¹⁸ (at the expense of the graceful mimetic technique of *abhinaya*, which flourishes best in a leisurely tempo); the movement of dance from the premises of temple and salon to the public stage; and the advent of Nataraja as both a patron deity *for* dance and a subject for portrayal *in* dance.

While cultural workers like E. Krishna Ayyar and Rukmini Devi moved dance practice quite deliberately out of the temple to what they felt would be a more respectable home on the secular stage, dancers and program presenters quickly came to feel that the new stage needed some type of spiritual resonance. The severing of dance’s temple roots cut off perhaps the most vital source of nourishment for animating and guiding dancers’ limbs in the new setting. As a result, it became the custom during the 1930s to place a religious icon on the secular stage, providing/restoring a semblance of a devotional setting. Looking back, Rukmini Devi states: “My intention was that dance, now abolished in the temple, should create the temple atmosphere on the stage” (Ramnarayan 1984b:29). Though there is no consensus on who started the practice of placing an idol of Nataraja onstage, it is certain that Rukmini Devi was one of the first dancers to do this, just as it is certain that Balasaraswati disliked and criticized the practice. Arudra writes that while other dancers placed Nataraja onstage, “Balasaraswati flatly refused to follow suit. She used to say, quite vehemently, that she would not show any disrespect to Nataraja’s idol with her lifted foot pointing towards him in dance movements” (1986:12). While Nataraja soon became the standard patron deity for dance, a niche he occupies on dance stages around the world to this day, it appears that he was neither the first nor the only deity to be so invoked:

Even people who have been regularly witnessing Bharatanatyam recitals for the last four and a half decades cannot be definite who started this practice of placing a divine figure on the stage. [...]

Some people think it was Kalki Krishnamurthi that initiated this custom when his daughter Anandhi [Ramachandran] and her partner Radha [Viswanathan] used to dance in the early days. Anandhi says she was too

young to remember whether there was any icon on the stage but she vividly remembers her father's innovation of an additional curtain just behind the usual front curtain. When the curtain supplied by the theatre people was raised or drawn across, the second curtain with a painting of a large Nandi on it was there to be seen and admired by the audience for four or five minutes. [...]

Anandhi Ramachandran believes that Rukmini Devi, the founder of Kalakshetra, was the first person to place the icon [of Nataraja] on the stage to bring the temple spirit to the temporal dance stage. (Arudra 1986:12)

While cultural workers like E. Krishna Ayyar and Rukmini Devi moved dance practice quite deliberately out of the temple to what they felt would be a more respectable home on the secular stage, dancers and program presenters quickly came to feel that the new stage needed some type of spiritual resonance.

Planted in a corner of the dance stage, Nataraja thus became a symbolic *patron* for dance, with *bharata natyam* dancers performing a brief *puja* (worship) to his icon before beginning their recital—a custom retained to this day by the vast majority of dancers. Nataraja also became a *subject* of dance, his *ananda tandava*, “blissful vigorous dance,” described and sometimes even mimed by the new generation of dancers in a manner totally foreign to the *lasya*, graceful and feminine, *devadasi* dance practice. Indeed, Ramnarayan specifically cites the “creation of dances to music previously not even thought of as possible dance material (such as the dance of Nataraja)” as one of Rukmini Devi’s personal innovations (1984c:29). The number of compositions in the dance repertoire on Nataraja as a cosmic dancer increased dramatically during the “revival.” By far the most popular song on this theme from the late 1930s through the 1960s was “Natanam adinar” (He Danced), a composition of the Tamil composer Gopalakrishna Bharati (1810–1896). Though new to the dance proscenium, it should be pointed out that this and other compositions of Gopalakrishna Bharati were not new songs, but songs already popular in vocal concerts; the songs were imported into dance in the 1930s and ’40s as an explicitly articulated strategy of revival. Rukmini Devi and others choreographed a range of existing compositions that had never been danced before, including the *kritis* (the primary genre of concert music) of the 19th-century “Trinity” of venerated Karnataka composers: Syama Sastri (1762–1827), Tyagaraja (1767–1847), and Muttusvami Dikshitar (1775–1835).

The earliest mention I found of a dance performance of *Natanam adinar* was in 1939 by “Miss Lakshmi Sastri” (Lakshmi Shankar, an eminent Hindustani vocalist today); I documented 25 additional performances between 1940 and 1970, by far the greatest frequency of dance performance of any song. According to Sarada, “Natanam adinar” became one of two “masterpieces” of Rukmini Devi: “In ‘Natanam adinar,’ she pictured Lord Nataraja’s dance in all its glory and sacredness. The different poses of the god of dance she used were perfect. She usually ended her dance recitals with ‘Natanam adinar’” (1985:47).

“Natanam adinar” also became a standard item in the performances of Kamala (b. 1934); I documented nine performances of it between the years 1948 and 1961. A child prodigy who retained the stage name “Baby Kamala” well into her teens, Kamala had her arangerram in 1941. In 1948 at age 14 she

danced for the first time as part of the Music Academy's season and became a fixture at its yearly festival thereafter. While Rukmini Devi and Kamala began studying Indian dance within a few years of each other (ca. 1935 and 1937 respectively), Rukmini Devi was about age 30 at the time she began, while Kamala was only three. Partly due to her youth and innocence, Kamala and not Rukmini Devi was the first Brahmin woman dancer to become a major star, on the screen as well as onstage:

When Rukmini Devi gave a jolt to middle-class morality by learning an art practised until then, with very few exceptions, by devadasis alone, the response was not wholly positive. Her efforts did not at once break the dark spell cast on the art. She was dubbed a maverick and the opposition she had to face even from the elite and enlightened is already history.

It was Kamala who transformed, almost overnight, the loathsome into the laudable. The timing was perfect. The conditions ideal. And her age was just right. She was still a child, a "baby" and her innocence and charm endeared her to one and all. In addition she possessed the required blend of glamour and appeal that rendered Bharatanatyam a vitally alive artform of contemporary relevance. (Vijayaraghavan 1988:24–25)

"Natanam adinar" narrates the story of how Siva came down from the Himalayas and danced in the form of Nataraja for the benefit of his devotees in the Golden Hall at Cidambaram. A notable feature of this song is a *jati*, a passage of rhythmic solfège syllables (partially transcribed below) coming after the anupallavi, which imitates and was invoked by the new generation of dancers to mime Nataraja's dance:

Pallavi

He [Nataraja] danced so beautifully, so artfully,
A blissful dance in the golden hall of Cidambaram

Anupallavi

Long ago on Mount Kailasa in the North
Keeping his promise to the great sages
Without fail, he came to the city of Cidambaram
In the month of Tai, on the full moon anniversary of the guru

Jati

And he danced: "tam, takita takajam takanam tari kundari..." [He danced so beautifully...]

Caranam

He danced, and all the eight directions shook—"gidu gidunga"
The head of the cosmic snake Sedan trembled, the whole earth shivered
Water drops from the Ganges splashed over the land and the gods celebrated

Krishna sang lovingly for his [Nataraja's] dance
Siva's matted locks swayed in the air while the cobra danced with its hood spread

He danced about, giving all assembled his blessings with the sound of
"tontom tantom"

And he danced: "tam, takita takajam takanam tari kundari..." [He danced so beautifully...]

(Gopalakrishna Bharati, translated in Allen 1992, 2:G1)

Based on my documentation of repertoire change, I feel that the new class of women entering the profession of dance must have embraced “Natanam adinar” as an anthem, just as they embraced Nataraja himself as a new kind of nayaka, hero, for dance. Siva as the cosmic dancer Nataraja was free from the kind of criticism that an earthy, sensual, often philandering Murugan or Krishna could come under from social reformers and was full of resonances suggesting spiritual detachment and masculine power, images invoked by both revivers of dance and Indian nationalist politicians.

Iconographically, we can see the rise of Nataraja and the domestication of the dance in two images that frame the critical years of the revival. The first is from August 1933 (plate 1), coming not long after devadasi dance was first presented at the Music Academy (in 1931), a year or so before Rukmini Devi started her study of Indian dance, and just after a flashpoint in the public debate on the devadasi and her dance (a long-simmering debate that dated back to at least the early 1890s: see Meduri 1996:56). In early December 1932, after the Raja of Bobilli invited the devadasi dancer Sitaramudu to perform at a function commemorating his election as the leader of the Legislative Council and Premier of the Madras Presidency, the social reformer Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886–1968), a medical doctor herself coming from a devadasi family background, wrote in protest to the English-language Madras newspapers the *Hindu* and *Madras Mail*. Outraged, she felt betrayed that prominent citizens who had vowed not to attend devadasi dance performances had attended the Raja’s function (Meduri 1996:222). Her criticism met with a rejoinder from E. Krishna Ayyar, touching off a prolonged exchange of letters between the two; upon the conclusion of both Krishna Ayyar’s letter to the *Hindu* of 14 December 1932 and Dr. Reddy’s response of 19 December, an increasingly fatigued editor writes in brackets, “Correspondence on this subject will now cease—Ed. H.”! While Krishna Ayyar argued for giving the hereditary dancers a “respectable” venue in which to perform (a belief he was putting into practice at the Music Academy at this very time), Reddy was for stopping devadasi dance performance as well as banning the religious initiation and dedication of devadasis, which she saw as the root cause of the degradation of her community. It was into such a conceptual space that Rukmini Devi stepped with the idea that dance should be preserved in a (supposedly) more worthy social community.

The 1933 image is an advertisement for a serialized popular story, and the textual references are quite racy, averring that the author’s previous story *Bala the Bad Woman* “set all South India thinking and talking.” (I have not yet been successful in finding any stories by “Deisvi.”) In it, a dancer performs in a temple setting while her musical accompanists, some clad in turbans, stand and move with her. That this is an accurate portrayal of performance practice up until the 1930s is attested to by V.K. Narayana Menon:

Reform was certainly necessary not only in the social attitude to the Dance, but in the practice and presentation of the art itself. Public performances of *Bharatanatyam* in the early years of this century were somewhat crude. Recitals often lasted the whole night. The music was hardly ever of good quality. Bagpipes (!) were the order of the day for drones. Three or four male singers dressed in green and red turbans stood on one corner of the platform, the drummer often standing behind the dancer and walking up and down the stage. The *Nattuvanar* and the musicians began to sit on the platform and they dressed soberly. The bagpipe gave place to the tambura. The dress and the make-up of the dancer (who used to be overdressed, over-made up and over-ornamented) were improved. The dignity of the platform was sternly maintained and overtures from the audience severely snubbed. (1963:18; emphasis [!] in original)

The placement of Nataraja in this advertisement is I think quite suggestive: outside the main frame of action, he hovers in an inset at the upper right corner. He seems to be waiting in the wings, as it were, for his grand entry into the “revived” dance.

By the mid-1940s, the appropriation and domestication of bharata natyam by “middle-class” dancers was virtually complete. Rukmini Devi had moved away from solo dance performance and was producing dance dramas at Kalakshetra (see Meduri 1996:376–82), and a barely pre-teen “Baby” Kamala was making her mark in the dance world. In an advertisement from a 1946 dance souvenir (plate 2), a bright-faced young boy and girl illustrate the fact that social permission had by this time been given for children of “good” families to dance. Indeed, this course of action is here not merely given tacit approval but is actively marketed to the English-speaking Madras audience. Nataraja in this image is the radiant glow to which the children direct the eye as they dance to his cosmic rhythm (and by implication the rhythms of Ram Gopal, whose recordings are herein advertised).

How Nataraja Became a New Nayaka

Ananda Coomaraswamy and “The Dance of Shiva”

The central figure in promoting Nataraja as the symbol of the synthetic grandeur of ancient (specifically Hindu) Indian art, science, and religion was Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy. As iconic as the composition “Natanam adinar” has been to the revived bharata natyam tradition, and as Nataraja himself has been as a patron deity and new subject for the revived dance, Coomaraswamy’s essay “The Dance of Shiva” (first published in the book of the same name in 1918) has been the most influential publication in the phenomenal 20th-century popularization of the Nataraja image.¹⁹ Today, the icon of Nataraja is found in many places. A 1993 PBS television special on dance visually references Nataraja at the beginning of its segment on India, the camera panning slowly around a huge bronze while the narrator intones, “In India, the gods dance!” (Dunlop and Alexander 1993); affluent Indians and Indophiles place reproductions of Nataraja bronzes in their homes and corporate boardrooms; the icon of Nataraja is present at many Indian cultural functions; and non-Indians who come into contact with Indian art, philosophy, religion, or aesthetics cannot fail to encounter this most potent symbol:

Five years ago, I had a beautiful experience which set me on a road which has led to the writing of this book. I was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves rolling in and feeling the rhythm of my breathing, when I suddenly became aware of my whole environment as being engaged in a gigantic cosmic dance. [...] I felt its rhythm and ‘heard’ its sound, and at that moment, I *knew* that this was the dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshiped by the Hindus.
(Capra 1977:xv)

Where did the author of *The Tao of Physics* come across such an idea? As his book unfolds it is clear that it came to Fritjof Capra from the same source that reached the dancer Ted Shawn (to be discussed below), the same source to which my Karnataka teacher, T. Viswanathan, first referred me when I asked him early on in my training for readings on the arts in India: the essay by Coomaraswamy.

Nataraja’s status today as an ubiquitous symbol for everything majestic and noble in Indian culture (in conjunction with his presence throughout antiq-

uity in sculpture and literature) might tend to obscure the fact that he was not so well-known just a few decades ago. V. Subramaniam argues that there has been a major growth in awareness and appreciation of Nataraja (unfortunately matched by a corresponding increase in “vulgarization”) in this century:

The Nataraja image itself, *almost unknown outside South India round the turn of this century*, is now found in all the posh lounges of Indo-Philic Western homes, offices and universities all over the world and practically in every Western museum either as an original or in a good replica. The dramatic story of the recent theft of the Sivapuram Nataraja, its detection by a British art critic, its valuation at over 4 million dollars, the well publicized legal action and its impending restoration to India have all highlighted the glory of the Nataraja image beyond all doubt. We may also add that through a study of this icon and that of Sivakama Sundari, the consort of Nataraja, Western artists and art critics have come to appreciate the basic principles and standards of Indian sculpture more than through any other means. On the other hand, we cannot also forget the story of vulgarization. The icon has become a prestige symbol, regardless of the quality of the casting and as a result, these icons are made in every State of India and with all sorts of alloys and even the Tibetan refugees in Janpath, Delhi, do a roaring trade with ugly icons of the dancing lord. (1980:xviii; emphasis added)

Like Rukmini Devi, Ananda Coomaraswamy was a person deeply steeped in European as well as South Asian culture and thought; as the child of a Ceylonese father of Tamil background and a British mother, he quite literally embodied the two cultures. His father, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, born in 1833, became the first Asian accredited for the practice of law in England (and the hero of an unfinished novel by Disraeli!). In 1876 he and Elizabeth Beeby were married by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Ananda was born the next year in Ceylon (today Sri Lanka). The elder Coomaraswamy died in 1879, as he was about to board a ship for England to enter Parliament. Ananda grew up in England, training in geology and receiving a doctorate from London University in 1906 (Lipsey 1977:9–11). While conducting geological research in Ceylon he was struck by the desuetude of native crafts. He longed for the “possibility of a true regeneration [...] of the national life of the Sinhalese people” (Guha-Thakurta 1992:160). This led to his first work in the realm of aesthetics, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908):

The basic intent of the book was polemical. [...] Tradition was located in the medieval Ceylon that existed prior to British occupation, especially in her arts and crafts that flourished until the invasion of Western commerce and machine-industry. [...] The book thus came to stand as a manifesto of the Arts and Crafts idealists in England. C.R. Ashbee’s vision of “a nobler, finer and saner order of things” and “the protection of standard in life” was given the reality of a preindustrial, traditional world of craftsmanship in the medieval Kandyan kingdom of Ceylon. The nostalgia for a medieval past found, here, a model world, more accessible in time than the European middle ages for it had preserved itself right into the nineteenth century, and traces of it still lingered on. (Guha-Thakurta 1992:160–61)

Coomaraswamy was clearly influenced by the British Arts and Crafts Movement, in particular the work of William Morris; *Medieval Sinhalese Art* was

printed on Morris's Kelmscot Press, which Coomaraswamy had moved to his house and resuscitated in 1907 (Lipsey 1977:44–45). Guha-Thakurta stresses that at the same time, however, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* “marked a subtle transition in Coomaraswamy from his Arts and Crafts preoccupations to a new concern with the propagation of Oriental art and aesthetics, from a purely ‘Eastern standpoint’” (1992:160). As with Havell before him, Coomaraswamy’s attention evolved in the first decade of the 20th century from an emphasis on crafts towards an overriding concern with Hindu India’s “classical” heritage in the arts—a concern both to demonstrate the existence of an ancient, sophisticated heritage based on ideals of *Vedanta* and *yoga* and to revive that heritage in the present day:

This neo-Platonic aesthetic in vogue in 19th century Europe, which enjoyed a great preponderance with all nineteenth-century critics of Academic and Neo-Classical art, also lodged itself at the center of the new Orientalist view of Indian art. To explain and justify their admiration for it, “fine arts” in India was associated with a profoundly transcendental view of art in Indian philosophy. Havell’s and Coomaraswamy’s natural choice here was the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy, which considered the material world to be an illusion (*maya*), the veil of which had to be removed in order to perceive the ideal. [...]

While Greek artists took as their model an ideal physical type of an athlete or a warrior, the Hindu artists sought their ideal in forms that “transcended” nature into something supernatural and divine. Their ideal type was said to be embodied in the figure of the *Yogi*. [...] Coomaraswamy joined Havell in an elaborate exposition on the links between art, asceticism and *Yoga* in the Indian tradition, showing how the worshipper and artist became one in the construction of divine images. (Guha-Thakurta 1992:178)

An emphasis on a high art grounded in a specifically Hindu spirituality was reflected in Coomaraswamy’s next major work, *Rajput Art*, published in 1916, and then in *The Dance of Shiva*, published 1918. After unsuccessfully trying during World War I to interest the Banaras Hindu University in the establishment of a museum of Indian arts (to be based substantially on his growing personal collection), by 1920 Coomaraswamy had accepted a position at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and moved his entire collection to the United States (Lipsey 1977:124–26).

Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn

As a young girl in Somerville, New Jersey, Ruth Dennis (1879–1968) listened at her parents’ farmhouse as summer boarders from New York City with intellectual pretensions debated the relative merits of the newly formed Theosophical Society and Christian Science sect (both were founded in 1875). Her mother, the first woman M.D. graduate of the University of Michigan, took her periodically into New York and encouraged her growing interest in Asian religions. Mother and daughter both soaked themselves in Orientalia such as the actor Edward Russell’s popular society readings from Sir Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia* (Shelton 1981:49)—a play Rukmini Devi would produce at the Theosophical Society in Madras several decades later, circa 1935 (Sarada 1985:2).

The impressionable Dennis (who would take the professional name St. Denis in 1906) soon imbibed the Orient from a rather different type of

source. In May 1903, the extravagant Luna Park amusement center at Coney Island opened. Its entrepreneurs, taking their cue from the Midway Plaisance at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893, itself inspired by earlier international expositions in Paris) introduced for the 1904 season an exhibit called “The Streets of Delhi” (Kasson 1978:63, 69). St. Denis later wrote in her autobiography, *An Unfinished Life*:

During these days someone took me down to Coney Island. I was mildly intrigued by the sights and sounds, but my whole attention was not captured until I came to an East Indian village which had been brought over in its entirety by the owners of the Hippodrome. Here, for the first time, I saw snake charmers and holy men and Nautch dancers, and something of the remarkable fascination of India caught hold of me.

When I reached home that evening I determined to create one or two Nautch dances. [...] With these I was sure I would find some vaudeville bookings and, with the money earned, produce *Egypta* [a dance project preoccupying her at the time]. I was very happy over my decision, and went the next day to the Astor Library to do a little research in Nautch costumes.

Everything went according to plan for a few days. But when pictures of Nautch dancing girls led me to the Devidassi, who were temple dancers, and they in turn brought me to the temples themselves and the name of Radha, the shifting center of interest began, ever so slightly, to move away from Egypt and towards these strange new mysteries of Hindu religion. [...] I read everything I could lay my hands on; in the library I called for pictures of Nautch dancers, of temples, of the Himalayas, of the jungles, and saturated myself in this atmosphere. (1939:55)

St. Denis created the dance *Radha* in 1905/06, hiring a ragtag troupe of “supernumeraries” (including, sometimes, family members) to assist her in her planned vaudeville act (Shelton 1981:197). What strikes me in hearing her discuss the development of this dance is her disarming candor—she lays no claim to authenticity either in choreography or in representation of mythology:

My first Indian dance was a jumble of everything I was aware of in Indian art, but with little sense of balance and continuity. Ideas came in a stream and from quite unrelated sources. One morning at breakfast Mother and I planned the scene for the *Cobra* dance with bits of toast and a saltcellar. I thought in terms of scenes and not of technical virtuosity. Mother and I moved our bits of toast about to indicate where the Indian water carrier came in and spoke to the fruit seller, where the merchant’s stall was, and where the brass seller squatted to watch the snake charmer’s exhibition.

By now, as you will see, I had expanded my plans to include supernumeraries. My intense interest in India had sent me into the byways of New York and I collected a little company, which used to meet in our flat to rehearse two or three times a week. They were of all varieties—Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists. Some were clerks from shops, some were students at Columbia, and one or two were unmistakable ne’er-do-wells. They would sit on the floor and answer in a chorus the questions that I flung at them. One night Father had to separate two combatants in a religious war. I had unwittingly asked a Moslem instead of a Hindu the rituals of a Hindu temple. [...]

Out of my jumbled and confused ideas two dances began to emerge, the *Nautch* and the *Incense*. [...] But *Radha* was, I sensed, to be the blos-

som of all these little plantings. I conceived of her as an idol in her temple, who for a brief time was infused with life and danced a message for her devotees. Theologically speaking, this was inaccurate, for Radha, although the beloved of Krishna, the god of love, was seldom worshipped on her own account; but at no time, then or in the future, have I been sufficiently the scholar or sufficiently interested to imitate or try to reproduce any Oriental ritual or actual dance—the mood to me is all, and inevitably manifests its own pattern. (1939:56–57)

The heart of *Radha* is a five-part “dance of the senses” culminating in a “delirium of the senses”; these six segments are framed within beginning and ending tableaux where the goddess sits in lotus position on a pedestal. A group of “priests” enters at the beginning and sits in a semicircle to watch her dance a progression “from the senses of far distance to the more intimate ones,” ending in the “delirium” which leaves her supine on the floor. The description refers to a 1941 film of St. Denis performing *Radha*:

The lights come up on a chastened Radha, lifting her arms in supplication. After tracing the petals of a lotus blossom on the floor, she withdraws to her shrine. The final image shows her sitting on her pedestal, transformed by *samadhi*, self-realization. (Desmond 1991:32–33)

St. Denis identified so much with this dance that for a time she adopted Radha as her professional name (Sherman 1979:3).

As her career evolved St. Denis picked up a like-minded partner, and together they assiduously cultivated the personae of “divine dancers” in an extremely heterodox performing environment, moving between vaudeville and more “legitimate” venues, crisscrossing the United States, Europe, and Asia. Their voracious interest in world dance traditions would lead to choreography of cross-cultural impressions ranging from *Egyptian Ballet* (1922) to *Cuadro Flamenco* (1923) to *Ishtar of the Seven Gates* (1923) to *A Legend of Pelee* (1925) to *General Wu Says Farewell to His Wife* (1926). It was while she was on tour in Denver in 1911 that Ted Shawn (1891–1972) had his first glimpse of Ruth St. Denis:

In her audience was an impressionable, idealistic youth, a divinity student-turned-dancer, only nineteen years old. Ted Shawn saw before him a glamorous goddess who blended the two ideals most dear to his heart, divinity and dance. Watching St. Denis, he vowed that he too would become a “divine dancer,” though he did not suspect that he would marry the high priestess herself. (Shelton 1981:102)

Three years intervened before, in 1914, Ted Shawn requested an interview with St. Denis through her brother. He auditioned for her, costumed as an Aztec warrior; St. Denis found him adorable and talented. That spring, she invited Shawn to tour with her company and, a week into the tour, he proposed to her: “Ruth was amused. Her road romances dated back to the days of Jack Hoey and *The Man in the Moon*. She had always attracted ardent suitors, but marriage was out of the question” (Shelton 1981:121–22). He was persistent, she grew increasingly fond of and reliant on him, and they were married in August 1914, leading to the birth of their Denishawn company. Taken with the idea of “divine” dance, which he had seen in St. Denis’s performance, Shawn researched and developed dances based on mythology and movement in many cultures, always valorizing what he considered healthy masculine elements:

Some eight or ten years ago, Gertrude Hoffman had two Sinhalese dancers with her in vaudeville who performed a stick dance without masks. Both of these dancers seemed pathetically effeminate. It was with real surprise then that I saw one group of dancers after another in Kandy, the ancient capital of Ceylon, dancing robustly, energetically and with one hundred percent masculinity. (Shawn 1929:139)

For a time, the Denishawn style “was a happy hybrid, a blending of St. Denis’s romanticism with Shawn’s sentimentality, her exoticism and his eye for the vernacular” (Shelton 1981:165). Choreographic ideas from *Radha*, the “motherlode” of St. Denis’s expanding repertoire (Shelton 1981:62), eventually crystallized into her *Nautch* (1919) and *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* (1923), which were by far the most popular dances in the India portion of the Denishawn Dancers tour of Asia in 1925/26. Sherman (1979:35–38) reports that St. Denis initially did not intend to perform the *Nautch* for Indian audiences, but after an enthusiastic reception—by a largely Indian audience—in Rangoon, she overcame her reluctance. Though contemporary observers agreed that St. Denis’s *Nautch* was a tremendous success in India, they disagreed on the possible reasons for its popularity:

During that first Calcutta engagement Ruth had the courage to perform two of her Indian dances, the *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* and the *Nautch*, which she had tested on a Rangoon audience with some success. Her audiences at the Empire Theatre in Calcutta greeted the *Nautch* with roars for an encore and in India it became the most popular dance in the Denishawn repertoire, along with *Black and Gold Sari*. Just why the *Nautch* struck such a responsive chord with Indian audiences is connected with the politics of colonialism and nationalism. [...]

He [Ted Shawn] reasoned that their enthusiasm was a natural response to Ruth’s superiority to the native nautch dancers, her “having a richness and purity beyond the conception of these native women and having a beauty and charm of person not possessed by them...” Other onlookers suggested, a trace more cynically, that the natives may have been merely titillated by the spectacle of a Western woman in Indian dress performing a dance done only by harlots, but Nala Najan, an Indian dancer born in America, supported Shawn’s view. “She opened the door,” he said. “The Indians saw that a woman could dance and be respectable at the same time. Indian dance was looked down upon by the upper class and was relegated to a certain class of women. This changed after Miss Ruth went there.” (Shelton 1981:198–99)

After her performance in Calcutta, Rabindranath Tagore came backstage and asked if St. Denis would stay in India to teach at his Viswa Bharati (World University). An early Indian intellectual to stress the importance of dance, Tagore produced in the same year *Natir Puja—The Worship of the Danseuse*, idealizing and deifying devadasi dance (Meduri 1996:160). A male dancer from Tamil Nadu, C.N. Vasudevan, is also known to have performed a dance on Nataraja while at Viswa Bharati in the late 1920s, leading Abanindranath Tagore to remark, “It was as though the Southern bronze had come alive!” (Srinivasa Ayyangar 1986:48). Though St. Denis did not join the faculty at Viswa Bharati, she and Tagore did present one joint recital in New York in 1930 (Shelton 1981:198). The Denishawn troupe finished the Indian segment of their tour with a week of performances in Madras in May 1926. There is no evidence that Rukmini Devi or any of the Theosophical coterie there saw

Ruth St. Denis perform (they may have been in Europe at the time) or what their reactions to her *Nautch* may have been. I suspect, however, that had they been in attendance they might have felt it less than edifying, given the reaction of the “other onlookers” quoted above as well as the description of St. Denis’s *Nautch* by Jane Sherman, who witnessed it many times as a member of the Denishawn troupe during the 1920s:

This encomium [from the critic of the Rangoon *Daily News*] reflected the triumph of research and artistic instinct over the lack of concrete evidence, since there were few teachers to whom RSD could turn for help in realizing her vision of what a nautch dance must be. She knew from her reading that nautches were founded on a religious basis: they usually embodied some aspect of Krishna, the god of love, and his goddess wife, Radha, who was the symbol of the human soul. She knew that they told the story of their meeting and their love for each other. But she also recognized that nautch dancers were entertainers who danced to earn money. Somehow, she reconciled these contradictory elements into a convincing whole. The result was heavily weighted in favor of earth versus heaven. [...]

In a bright spotlight against a plain backdrop, this seductive creature enters upstage right. Her headsheet is wrapped half across her face, only her large, kohl-blackened eyes showing. She moves forward with a slow, voluptuous, swinging walk that flares out the folds of her skirt and causes the bells of her anklets to tinkle. She pauses a moment, removes one end of the headsheet from her face, and puts it on her left hip as she reveals a wide smile. Holding the other end of the gleaming material out in her right hand, she stands with pelvis thrust forward toward her extended left foot. Then she continues her wide walk-steps with a hip swagger as she makes a big salaam with both hands at her forehead, to the right, then to the left, then to the front, saucily greeting her audience. [...] Throughout most of the dance, RSD babbles her special, coquettish Hindi double-talk, thus creating a stage full of people where she is the center of attention. [...]

At one point, she bunches up the huge skirt in both hands and again advances directly toward the audience, this time with strong stamps of feet and bells as she grins ingratiatingly if with a touch of contempt. She drops the skirt, swaggers downstage left, and holds out a hand, pointing to its palm and demanding, aloud, “*Baksheesh!*” When refused money, she turns away with disdain to repeat the demand on the right.

(1979:35,37)

In this passage we perceive that St. Denis was aware of some of the basic moves of Indian dance, such as the repetition of gestures right, left, and center; however, her template for nautch dance was essentially conjured up from a pastiche of Orientalist readings, photos in the New York Public Library, and her exposure to sideshow entertainers in the “Streets of Delhi” at Coney Island, long before she reached India. The reception of this dance “weighted towards earth versus heaven” among some of the more discriminating Indian connoisseurs of the day was decidedly mixed—a situation that I find somewhat puzzling, but which may reflect the fact that most English-educated Indians in the early 20th century learned from a young age to avoid rather than seek out opportunities to see Indian dance. Perhaps, therefore, a normative standard by which to judge Indian dance was known only by dancers and their teachers, not by the larger public, however erudite or educated. In the past few years the question of just how St. Denis and her dancers were received has drawn

the attention of dance scholars such as Uttara Asha Coorlawala, who confirms a “split verdict” among Indian connoisseurs:

In Europe and the United States, St. Denis’s dances had drawn accolades from the artistic and cultivated Indians who traveled, including the musician Inayat Khan, the philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy, the political activist and poet Sarojini Naidu, and the Maharajas of Kapurthala and Cooch-Bihar. However, the noted patron of the arts, Jamshed Bhabha, recalls that when as a little boy he was taken to see the Denishawn dancers at the Excelsior Theatre in Bombay, the show was vaudevillian, inconsequential kitsch—and in this opinion he is not alone. (1992:124)

During the India segment of their Asia tour in the spring of 1926, Ted Shawn created his *Cosmic Dance of Siva*. Shawn’s 1929 book *Gods Who Dance* attests to the fact that he was a voracious reader, of Coomaraswamy and his circle, of Nietzsche, of materials relating to religion, mythology, and the arts in many cultures (see his bibliography, 1929:207–08), so it is no surprise that he settled on Nataraja as the subject for one of his dances. As the troupe moved through India, Shawn consulted with various dancers and scholars, commissioned a score, and built an elaborate costume through purchases from various shops and bazaars:

Early in the Indian tour I began to prepare myself for the creation of the *Cosmic Dance of Siva*. I read books on the theology of Siva, talked at length about the subject with scholarly men, and studied painting and sculpture representing the deity. The preparation for the final production was long and thorough.

Lily Strickland, whose published music we already had used for dances, was living in Calcutta where we met and discussed the Siva score which I commissioned her to write. I searched everywhere for proper accoutrements. At the Cawnpore bazaar I bought the first silver pieces of a two-hundred-dollar collection of virgin silver that was assembled into the Siva costume I designed. [...]

Boshi Sen was a disciple of the Vedanta cult and took me to Allahabad where he asked a swami to tell me about Siva. The swami spoke lyric English and his words soared and burst into rockets of glory, sparkled and spouted like fountains in the sky. My previous studies of Siva and the swami’s exposition convinced me that I had taken on quite a nifty subject for a solo in which I would try to dance the creation, preservation, destruction, reincarnation, and ultimate salvation of the universe. I turned to Boshi and said, “What an awful fool I’ve been. Who am I that I should dare attempt this task that’s beyond human doing?”

“You don’t have to do it,” Boshi answered. “Make your body an instrument and remove your petty self from it, and Siva will use your body to dance through. You will not be dancing, you, the little personal Ted Shawn, but Siva will dance—if you ask him to.” And so it was, and I never gave a performance of that dance without consciously asking Siva to take possession of my body to use as an expression of the power and the beauty and the rhythm of his being, and the dance never failed to reach its audience with power. (Shawn [1960] 1979:197–98)

The piece premiered after the Denishawn company left India, at the Grand Opera House in Manila on 17 September 1926. Like St. Denis’s *Nautch*, it be-

came a mainstay of their repertoire for decades to come, equally popular in “legit” and vaudeville houses across the United States:

Ted scored a major triumph with his *Cosmic Dance of Siva*, which electrified his American audiences as it had in the Orient. As the Hindu sculpture of Nataraja or the dancing Siva, he wore only body paint, brief trunks, and a towering crown and stood on a pedestal within a huge upright metal ring that haloed his entire body. Moving in plastique, he mimed five cosmic stages: creation, preservation, destruction, reincarnation, and salvation. The dynamics of the solo ranged from still balances on half-toe to violent twists of the torso and furious stamping of the feet, all confined within the hoop that represented the container of the universe. At thirty-six, Ted was more agile than Ruth and more virtuosic, and critics devoted almost as much space to his dancing as to Ruth's. (Shelton 1981:213)

While chroniclers of the Denishawn company's history are substantially in agreement that these intrepid American dancers “scored a major triumph” in India and America with their dances on Indian themes, the curious fact remains that, in India at least, their legacy seems to have been short-lived, a splash rather than a deep penetration into the soil:

Apparently Ruth St. Denis' nonauthentic impressions of Indian dance were indeed a great triumph in India. She was hailed by *The Times of India* with “rapturous applause and genuine enthusiasm.” Her *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* provoked virtual riots. Yet today, most dancers in India are unfamiliar with her name, whereas Pavlova, who also visited India within a year of St. Denis, is recalled in reverential tones. (Coorlawala 1992:124)

Though not acknowledged as an influence of any consequence by Rukmini Devi (or any other major South Indian dancer, to my knowledge), Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn have a place in the revival, especially when we allow our focus to include not just South India but North India (especially Bengal), the United States, and Europe. In their youth, the three were consumers of the same international intellectual and cultural Orientalism that colored events in South India: while St. Denis and Shawn discovered Coomaraswamy's *Dance of Shiva* in New Jersey and Denver, Rukmini Devi (and George Arundale) turned its pages in India (or Europe), and, as noted earlier, St. Denis and Rukmini Devi both loved Orientalist literature like *The Light of Asia*. They all shared the basic concept of dance as divine, a path to unity with god. Perhaps the most telling suggestion of St. Denis's influence in India remains that no less a personage than Rabindranath Tagore asked St. Denis to join his faculty. In her thoughtful evaluation of St. Denis's impact on Indian dance, Coorlawala argues a significant historical importance for her Indian-ish dances, preceding as they did Pavlova's collaborations with Uday Shankar (considered below) by almost two decades. She also says that Pavlova created a series of dances based on themes originally choreographed by St. Denis: “That Pavlova admired St. Denis' dances can be deduced from the fact that she included them in her own concert program, presented around England” (1992:144). Finally, through the work of St. Denis and Shawn, an awareness of Indian dance (however drastically mediated) was awakened in audiences throughout the United States and Europe and in the minds of young aspirants creating the new field of modern dance.



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I want to dance for everybody in the world.

—Anna Pavlova (in Franks 1956:40)

The beloved ballerina of her time, and a woman who continues to cast long shadows in the world of dance today, Anna Pavlova (1881–1931) logged as many miles as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn during her career as a professional dancer. She regularly performed at the world’s leading opera houses, to be sure, but she also wanted to take ballet where it had never been. In the course of her travels Pavlova took a keen interest in, and studied whenever possible, the national dance traditions of the countries she visited.²⁰

At age ten, she was accepted for ballet training at the Tsar’s Imperial School of Ballet in St. Petersburg, and upon graduation she rose steadily through the ranks of the Imperial Russian Ballet to become prima ballerina in 1906 or 1907 (Franks 1956:17). This status allowed her to begin touring internationally; she performed in Paris in 1909, New York and London in 1910, and in 1911 she formed her own company. During World War I she toured North and South America for five years, and from the end of the war up until her death kept a home in London while touring the world with her company.

As early as 1909 at the Imperial Ballet, Pavlova danced the lead role in *La Bayadère*, a high-Orientalist period ballet of 1877 “set in the India of the rajahs” (Anderson 1992:106); then on her first trip to India in 1922, she witnessed a Hindu wedding and became interested in creating dances based on more authentically Indian movements. Back in London, she was introduced to a young art student, Uday Shankar, who had “produced brief dances for his father’s shows [variety fundraisers for Indian veterans], including a successful garden party program in 1922 where King George V congratulated him” (Erdman 1987:71). Pavlova invited him to choreograph two pieces, *A Hindu Wedding* (a piece for 22 dancers) and *Radha-Krishna* (with Pavlova and Shankar as principals, plus eight *gopis*, maidens). Shankar toured the United States with Pavlova in 1923/24. However, Joan Erdman reports that, as he was only appearing in *Radha-Krishna*, he was quite bored. Shankar asked to be cast in other dances as well, but Pavlova said no: “Pavlova refused to use him as an extra. She suggested instead that he go to India and bring ‘something to show us. There are such wonders in your country and you want to try our things. Never, never, never’” (1987:73).

Bringing the focus back to the local events of revival in South India, Pavlova—like St. Denis and Shawn—found it extremely difficult to see actual Indian dancers dancing in India and issued these young Indian artists a challenge. Her charge to Uday Shankar was essentially the same charge Rukmini Devi has said that she received from Pavlova: to find and resuscitate India’s dance.

Together with her husband, Rukmini Devi first saw Pavlova in 1924 at London’s Covent Garden, an experience she remembers as her “first glimpse into the fairy tale world of ballet” (Ramnarayan 1984a:28). Four years later Pavlova’s troupe and Rukmini Devi’s Theosophical entourage crossed paths at various places in Southeast Asia. During this time the two became friends. Rukmini Devi wanted to study ballet, and while Pavlova arranged for Devi to study with Cleo Nordi, a member of her troupe, she was intent on directing Rukmini’s interests closer to home:

In 1928, Society work took the Arundales to Australia and the East Indies. Dr. Arundale lectured in city after city. To their surprise and delight, the couple found that the Pavlova Company was also touring the same cities simultaneously. [...] Finally, at Surabaya, when she and Dr. Arundale got into a boat sailing to Australia, whom should they see but Pavlova and her troupe of forty dancers! [...]

2. With the “revival” of South Indian dance, children from “good,” middle-caste families began to practice the genre. Here, “Let Your Children Dance to the Rhythm” advertises dance records in a souvenir brochure from the Natana Niketan (*The Indian School of Kathakali Dancing*), where Guru Gopinath was its chief teacher in 1946. (Photo courtesy of Matthew Harp Allen)

While sitting on the deck one day, Rukmini Devi said to her: “I wish I could dance like you but I know I never can.” Pavlova was quick to reply: “No, no. You must never say that. You don’t have to dance, for if you just walk across the stage it will be enough. People will come to watch you do just that.” [...]

Rukmini Devi sighs and concludes her recapitulation: “Incidentally Pavlova once said to me *You CAN learn ballet but I think that everyone must try to revive the art of his own country*. Pavlova herself stated that she had said the same thing to Uday Shankar who danced with her as Krishna.” (Ramnarayan 1984a:28–29)

Pavlova was the model—and ballet the style—most highly privileged by Rukmini Devi in this retrospective interview and confirmed in other sources, such as the following letter written to her ballet instructor Cleo Nordi:

Anna Pavlova was certainly one of the most beautiful and inspiring artists I have ever seen. We believe in India that art is the language of the Devas, the Angels and Gods. If there was anyone who positively proved this theory and showed to the world the high worth of Art, Anna Pavlova was that one.

Anna Pavlova was the exemplification of the Indian conception of the dance of Siva and the sublimation of the body so that dance becomes the music of the body and the body is transcended till it is no more the physical but is only the vehicle of spiritual expression. When she appeared on the stage, she electrified the audience and it was impossible to look at anyone else. It is to her that I owe the inspiration to serve as an artist and to assist in the cultural revival of this country of mine. (in Franks 1956:87)

I think the high-classical, fine-art resonances of ballet must have conjured up an aura Rukmini Devi felt appropriate for dance (more than, for example, the work of St. Denis or Shawn). In the coming revival, this view of dance would be perfectly counterpointed, supported, and legitimated by the installation of Nataraja (appropriately referenced in Devi’s testimonial to Pavlova above) both as a patron deity for dance and as central character in a revised repertoire of compositions. These compositions themselves would be interpreted by a new community of dancers, in an equally new setting.

Bharata Natyam awoke one morning to find itself great.

—T. Sankaran (1973:n.p.)

A remarkable transformation occurred in dance practice earlier this century in South India. From the time of “Devi the Dancer” (plate 1) to “Let Your Children Dance to the Rhythm” (plate 2), two snapshots framing 13 years of South Indian history, dance underwent a profound metamorphosis from nautch to bharata natyam, from “untouchable” activity to national artform and finishing-school desideratum for young women of marriageable age. This transformation unfolded and was nurtured in the Indian nationalist movement, which was deeply influenced by European Orientalist thought and Victorian morality. Nataraja was a key agent in the transformation; his unsuitabilities from the point of view of previous dance practice became precisely the stellar qualities of his revised résumé as applicant for nayaka-hero in the new dance. Through his work, substantially grounded in late 19th-century European and Bengali intellectual currents, Ananda Coomaraswamy groomed Nataraja, brought him to the attention of artists like Rukmini Devi, Ruth St. Denis and

Ted Shawn, and Orientalist-spiritualists like Annie Besant and George Arundale. Nataraja was then moved center stage in Madras by Rukmini Devi and by the international set of people and ideas that educated, inspired, manipulated her. This, finally, must be my way of provisionally resolving the question of Rukmini Devi and agency: I see her as both an independent actor and as heavily conditioned by a set of people and ideas.

It is my hope that this study will contribute not only to our understanding of the dance “revival” in South India—hitherto considered as primarily, or even exclusively, an internal artistic and social affair—but also to our understanding of other contemporary “revivals” in and outside South Asia, of transnational aspects of cultural communication, and, finally, of the phenomenon itself of “revival.” I’ve tried to crack open and take apart this term, to illustrate how it essentializes and masks a many-faceted historical process; I’ve tried to refine the very nebulous idea of “influence” by articulating the conceptual threads connecting various actors in this drama; and while critiquing them I’ve tried to honor the imperfect but deeply committed actors who each in their own way worked toward a vision of truth and beauty.

Notes

1. This essay grew through presentations for the exhibition “The Cosmic Dancer: Shiva Nataraja” at the Yale University Art Gallery, the Social Science Research Council seminar “Sangit: Studies in the Performing Arts of South Asia” at the University of Pennsylvania, and an Ethnomusicology colloquium at the University of Illinois. Great support was given by my teacher T. Viswanathan of Wesleyan University, the American Institute of Indian Studies doctoral dissertation fellowship which supported me in India during 1989–1990, and the University of Oklahoma Junior Faculty Research Grant which supported the revision of this article during the summer of 1996.
2. The Theosophical Society emerged within the general milieu of Spiritualism, a 19th-century fascination with occult occurrences dating from the “Rochester Knockings” of 1848 (Cranston 1993:120). Spiritualism quickly attracted many influential followers on both sides of the Atlantic: in the 1860s, for example, séances were held in the Lincoln White House (Cranston 1993:120). The immediate stimulus for the founding of the Theosophical Society was a lecture on the subject of the Kabbalah in the New York City home of the Russian emigré Helena Blavatsky in September 1875. Together with her American friend Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (a lawyer who had served on the panel investigating Lincoln’s assassination), Blavatsky founded the Society two months later. The founders hoped to wean the more intelligent among the Spiritualists away from sheer fascination with occult phenomena towards a rational philosophy which could explain larger life questions. For the name, the founders invoked the composite term *theos* (god) plus *sophia* (wisdom)—a notion which dated back to Neoplatonism and had been used by early Christian mystics. Blavatsky glossed the term as “divine wisdom such as that possessed by the Gods” (Cranston 1993:145) and aligned her movement firmly in the tradition of Spiritualism, which she opposed diametrically to Materialism. Due to its impassioned embrace and defense of Asian religions, notably Buddhism and Hinduism, the Theosophical Society eventually gained a large following among Indian intellectuals and political leaders. This list included Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, as well as Mohandas Gandhi, who stated that it was at the invitation of Theosophist friends—non-Indians—that he first read the *Bhagavad Gita* (while studying law in London) and came to a respect for his own ancestral culture (Cranston 1993:195).
3. Before the 1930s the dance form was known variously as *nautch*, *cinna melam*, *dasi attam*, or *sadir*. One strategic move of the revival, for which credit has been claimed by several parties (see Arudra 1987:21), was its renaming in the mid-1930s as *bharata natyam*, literally the complete dramatic presentation (*natyam*: dance, drama, and music) of *Bharata*. *Bharata* is a polysemic term referring to India itself, also to the legendary sage believed to have composed (ca. second century C.E.) the *Natya Sastra*, a comprehensive treatise dealing with all aspects of *natyam* from aesthetics to details of staging.

4. The South Indian cultural historian Theodore Baskaran writes that another Brahmin woman danced in public at least a year before Rukmini Devi Arundale: “The public performance of Bharatanatyam was done even before Mrs. Arundale, by one Mrs. Balachandra at Kumbakonam sometime in 1934” (1996). While it is on record that this woman (known professionally as Kumbakonam Balachandra) danced at the Music Academy in December 1938 (Arudra 1987:21), I do not have corroboration from another source of an earlier date for her dance.
5. A brief note is necessary to situate myself as a student of one of the hereditary families of non-Brahmin musicians and dancers. As a graduate student at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, I studied Karnataka music with Dr. T. Viswanathan (b. 1926), brother of the dancer T. Balasaraswati. Balasaraswati’s profound influence on 20th-century dance—in and outside India—was of a different order than that of Rukmini Devi, whom I characterize here as being preoccupied with “rewriting the script” for dance. Balasaraswati, simultaneously a conservative and a revolutionary, on the one hand did her utmost to *preserve* the heart of the scripts (musical, choreographic, spiritual) for dance as handed down by her female community ancestors and by the lineage of male *nattuvanar* teachers dating from the Tanjavur Quartette (first half of the 19th century), while she also defended the honor of hereditary dancers and their families against the attacks of Rukmini Devi and others on their character and artistic creativity. At the same time, she saw that Indian dance was heading into a radically altered world of performance and patronage and, as a brilliant creative dancer and musician (blessed with a visionary *guru*, Sri Kandappa Pillai), was able to survive into the new era. That Rukmini Devi was an intimate participant in the disenfranchisement of a community of artists to which my teacher’s family belongs must not blind me as a scholar to the fact that she was simultaneously a dedicated artist and organizer who inspired many thousands of young people to study and respect the artistic traditions of India.
6. See Srinivasan (1984) and Kersenboom-Story (1987) for extensive accounts of the devadasi heritage in South India.
7. For summaries of the career of T. Balasaraswati, see Narayana Menon (1963) and Pattabhiraman and Ramachandran (1984a, 1984b).
8. See Sruti Foundation (1989) for an account of a recent seminar in their honor.
9. For an illustration of the changing relations between a *nattuvanar* from the traditional community and his Brahmin dance students as their careers developed, see Pattabhiraman (1987:38) on Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai.
10. Dikshitar’s *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini* included *svara* (Indian solfège) notation for hundreds of his grandfather Muttusvami Dikshitar’s compositions; in some places he added European notational symbols to describe details of *gamaka*, ornamentation. In this he followed in the steps of his colleague Cinnasvami Mudaliar, publisher of *Oriental Music in Staff Notation* (1893), the first publication attempting to render Karnataka music in European notation.
11. Nationalist renaissances freighted with Orientalist overtones occurred not only in South Asia but in the Middle East and other regions of the world during the same time period. See discussions of the First International Conference of Arab Music in Cairo, 1932, in Ali Jihad Racy (1993), and of the founding of the Rashidiya Institute in Tunisia, 1934, in Ruth Davis (1989:53).
12. Nethercot, who records numerous examples of internecine warfare within the mystical-political structure of this most unusual organization, feels that this apparent favoritism did not please other Theosophical leaders back in New York.
13. Here, Nethercot drily observes the skepticism with which Besant’s critics greeted her pronouncements. Invocation of the legendary *rishi* (sage) Agastya in Indian political discourse would be comparable to a claim by an American politician that God directed him or her to pursue a particular policy.
14. For her part, Rukmini Devi states that it was the influence of Mylapore Gowri Ammal as well as “some friends” that “persuaded her” to dance at the Diamond Jubilee, a performance which she didn’t consider a formal *arangerram* (Ramnarayan 1984b:20). The most remarkable explanation I have come across for Rukmini Devi’s early *arangerram* comes from a fellow dancer, Ram Gopal:

The Western reader may find it strange that after only six months of training Rukmini dared give a recital that took a traditional dancer six years to perfect. The answer is simple. Rukmini Devi had assiduously studied

Russian ballet technique and was an adept at barre work, also a rigid follower of the purest style of that great tradition. (1956:107)

15. *Javali*, like *padam*, is a dance-music genre of *bharata natyam*. *Javalis* are by most observers considered “lighter” than *padams*, due to their textual content, relatively fast tempo, and to the custom of singers’ taking occasional liberties with the structure of their ragas.
16. *Padams* on *Murugan* sometimes achieve a romantic tension by alluding to a rivalry between his two wives: his Tamil, southern sweetheart *Valli*, and his Aryan, northern wife *Devayanai* (see *Clothey* 1978:65; *Zvelebil* 1991:81; *Allen* 1992, 1:227–32).
17. Some scholars hold that “*Padari*” is a composition of *Vaidisvarankoil Subbarama Ayyar*, another 19th-century Tamil *padam* composer (see *Allen* 1992, 1:208).
18. *Laya*, rhythm, is specifically located by *K. Chandrasekharan* at the foundation of *Rukmini Devi’s* program: “I think she became convinced that only through discipline and control—through *laya*—could the regeneration of the art be effected, its excesses sheared” (in *Ramnarayan* 1984b:24).
19. *Meduri* notes the complementary influence of the 1926 revival of the publication of *Abhinavagupta’s* 11th century C.E. commentary on the *Natya Sastra*, which “intellectualized, spiritualized and transcendentalized the theatrical tenets” of the *Natya Sastra* through a monotheistic *Saivite* lens (1996:160).
20. *A.H. Franks* contrasts *Pavlova’s* desire to “dance for everybody” with her countryman *Sergei Diaghilev’s* belief that “the longer a work of genius remains hidden from the enthusiasms of the multitude the more complete and more intact it will remain for the lovers of true art” (1956:40).

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