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Appropriating the Arts: The Death of Sadir, the Birth of Bharatanatyam, and a 21st-Century Narrative

Dance has made me who I am today. I am a professionally trained classical dancer and have been learning a specific Indian dance form since kindergarten. In middle school, I once cried in the car after my mom picked me up from dance class. “My teacher told me to fix my stance and posture so many times and now my legs hurt!” I complained. That was one particularly strenuous class and it took a week for my leg cramps to recover. Dance, which I thought was supposed to be an outlet for me to be free and happy, began to feel dreadful. However, it is difficult for me to tell you the name of which dance I learned because today, in doing so, I feel as though I am participating in a movement of cultural oppression, casteism, and appropriation. Therefore, let me tell you—with caution—that this dance is called bharatanatyam (*bha-ruh-tha-naat-yum*). More appropriately and authentically, however, this dance was sadir (*sa-deer*).

For nearly the past millennia, a community of Indian women known as the devadasis (*day-va-daa-sees*) performed sadir—a hereditarily passed-on dance form—in courts and temples, largely for the entertainment of the elite upper classes (“Devadasis”). With the arrival of the British in India, sadir was banned on the grounds of over-eroticism and sensuality, thus supposedly not worthy of being art. The history that played out henceforth presents a complex and ironic dynamic among upper-class Indian nationalists, who sought to transform sadir into a

more acceptable dance form, and the British colonizers, which led to the birth of bharatanatyam. Although bharatanatyam is said to have originated from sadir, I argue that these 'revivalists' created a completely new dance form by stripping away the key elements and defining characteristics of sadir, its supposed 'precursor.' The deliberate and unjust transformation of sadir's techniques and aesthetics was heavily influenced by a modern capitalist society and an Orientalist lens, and continues to negatively impact bharatanatyam students and even performing arts on a global scale to this day.

The Devadasi and her Dance: A Brief History

The banning of sadir and the stigmatization of the devadasi community reveal a troubling history of artistic censorship by colonizers and, ironically, compliance by Indian nationalists. The British deemed the devadasi system a burden to society because the devadasis did not fit the "new paradigms of womanhood" and the culture of "indigenous patriarchy that valued women's domestic roles" that the colonizers brought along ("Devadasi"). Sadanand Menon, cultural journalist and scholar of Indian politics and art, explains in Viveka Chauhan's documentary, *The Journey from Sadir to Bharatanatyam*, that the banning of sadir led many devadasis to seek prostitution as a means of earning income (00:13:40 - 00:15:03). This led the British to not only see the dance as impure and unfit for a 'modern' society but also made them view the devadasis—who previously held a respectable position in Indian society—as obscene and in need of sanctification. Dr. S. Anandhi, professor of sociology at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, further explains in the documentary that the ban of sadir was a form of sexual suppression; the British did not believe that sensuality could be a part of art for it to have a space within national politics. This ultimately led to the nationalization of bharatanatyam (Chauhan 00:19:15 - 00:21:06). In this case, the power dynamic between Indian nationalists and

British colonizers seems to be ironic and complex because the former did not counter the latter's misguided views, but rather collaborated with them in suppressing the devadasi culture. Dr. Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan, scholar of postcolonial studies, gender, and religion in South Asia, argues that both Indian nationalist and colonial powers were responsible for the "state-sanctioned gendered violence against devadasis" and that an agenda of the nationalists was to generate a social stigma against the devadasi community (243). This collaboration not only marginalized the devadasis but also laid the foundation upon which sadir was transformed into bharatanatyam to fit the cultural expectations instilled by the colonizers and implemented by the Indian nationalists.

Looking at this issue through the lens of politics allows us to understand the large-scale objectives of the British colonizers. In her paper titled "The Politics and Poetics of Dance," Susan A. Reed, associate professor of gender studies and anthropology, makes observations about trends of the suppression of indigenous dances by colonizers:

> Colonial administrations often perceived indigenous dance practices as both a political and moral threat to colonial regimes. Local dances were often viewed as excessively erotic, and colonial agents and missionaries encouraged and sometimes enforced the ban or reform of dance practices. (506)

Reed describes a historical pattern of colonial suppression of local dances. Her ideas can be extrapolated to a discussion of the ideological implications of colonial suppression in the context of the devadasi and sadir, where it translated into colonization of the mind. The British altered the narrative of what it meant to be a 'pure' artist and internalized this in the minds of the elite upper-class Indian nationalists. In turn, they wished to appease the British and sought to restructure the dance to fit into this newly laid out model of decency, respect, and sanctity of art.

It is evident that colonial imposition led to cultural transformation and adaptation. This narrative demonstrates both the psychological impact of the banning of sadir, as well as the plasticity of the construct of Indian nationalism.

The Overarching Role of Nationalists

Several scholars have discussed the efforts of the 'revivalists' such as Rukmini Devi in creating bharatanatyam by 'cleansing' and 'sanitizing' the dance of sadir that they considered to be in the wrong hands. One particular scholar, Dr. Swarnamalya Ganesh, a performance studies historian and also an Indian classical dancer, has learned sadir from many *gurus* (teachers) including R Muthukannammal, an 82-year-old woman who is the last devadasi dancer ("Dr. Swarnamalya Ganesh")! Dr. Ganesh's research and involvement in this field are true testaments to the lost richness of sadir. In "RENAMING 'SADIR' AS BHARATANATYAM: What's in a Name?" she extensively discusses the inherent failures of Rukmini Devi's attempt to resuscitate sadir as bharatanatyam. Dr. Ganesh suggests that Devi utilized two main methods to transform sadir into bharatanatyam:

> First, the repertoire of Sadir was largely tampered with by censoring compositions and the surreptitious supplanting of new (acceptable/respectable?) words; and, second, by reducing its imaginative, spontaneous quality into a pre-rehearsed, monotonous display of learnt and accepted techniques. (121)

The removal of agentic sensuality by Devi perhaps suggests a desire to make the dance more structured. I argue that this was an attempt to make bharatanatyam more easily taught through mass reproduction. Today, there is a set of rules that all bharatanatyam teachers follow across the globe. The reason bharatanatyam clubs at universities can form and thrive, including the one I am a part of today, is because these rules are the same no matter who your guru is. Both my

friend—who learned bharatanatyam in California—and I—who learned bharatanatyam in India—can close our eyes and do any step we are asked to dance in unison. This is a result of the intense conditioning, rule-setting, and standardization that was done to the dance by nationalists like Devi.

[Re]creation of Sadir into Bharatanatyam: An Artistic Analysis

Sadir, on the other hand, could certainly not have been taught through mass reproduction, as evidenced by the various stylistic features that differ from present-day bharatanatyam. After watching multiple videos of Dr. Ganesh and her students performing sadir, I drew some key observations of the dance in comparison to bharatanatyam as I learned it. Firstly, the lack of aramandi (*a-ra-mun-dee*) perplexed me. Aramandi is a half-squat posture that is maintained throughout the majority of bharatanatyam dance sequences (see Fig. 1). Watching sadir performances, my immediate reflex was to think that the dancers were not dancing 'properly' because their armandis weren't as defined as I had been taught.

However, it then dawned on me that the aramandi likely did not exist in sadir! Rukmini Devi was deeply inspired by Anna Pavlova, a key figure in Russian ballet and even learned ballet from her in Australia until she was asked by Pavlova to move to India to "learn the dance of her own country" ("Rukmini Devi Arundale"). Inspired by the techniques and forms of ballet, Devi likely incorporated the aramandi in bharatanatyam to introduce a structured posture that can be precisely replicated. This idea is advanced by the fact that bharatanatyam's aramandi is often compared to the demi-plié stance of ballet (see Fig. 2). Magdalen Gorringe, a scholar and dancer of bharatanatyam, along with dance artists Shivaangee Agrawal and Jane Chan, note in their paper "The value of 'South Asian' dance technique to 'contemporary' dance training" that the aramandi is a "deeper and more elastic" version of the demi-plié found in Euro-American

contemporary dance and ballet (302). Overall, it is evident that the ‘revivalists’ of sadir were heavily influenced by Western dance. The British seem to have instilled the idea that European culture was the framework upon which local art forms should be constructed, further suggesting colonization beyond land and into minds.

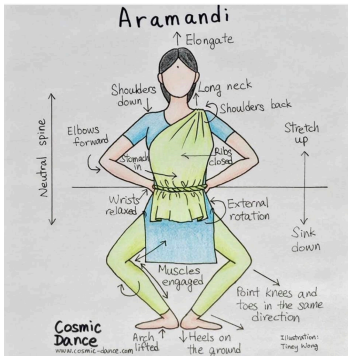

Fig. 1. Aramandi position of bharatanatyam

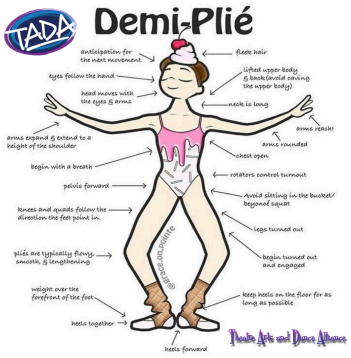

Fig. 2. Demi-Plié position of ballet

Practitioners of bharatanatyam and Russian ballet have amalgamated their first-hand experiences with historical explanations of the similarities between the dances, which furthers the idea that Anna Pavlova’s influence on Rukmini Devi biased the defining characteristics of bharatanatyam. Miriam Lamas Baiak, a professionally trained Russian ballet and bharatanatyam dancer, notes that Devi even incorporated ballet classes into the bharatanatyam dance curriculum at Kalakshetra, the international art academy she founded (“Bharatanatyam and Ballet”). Therefore, there is an undoubted influence of Devi’s experiences with Pavlova that shaped the way bharatanatyam is taught and performed today. Within a broader framework, the intertwining of ballet in bharatanatyam training reflects the impact of global influences on the massive transformations made to sadir, suggesting that the destruction of sadir and the creation of bharatanatyam were nestled in international cultural contexts and relations. Taking one step further, this may suggest that the ‘revivalists’ saw the need for nationalizing art not as making the Indian culture unique and original, but rather to make it fit in with international standards.

Another aspect of sadir that was significantly different from bharatanatyam as I learned it was the degree to which abhinaya (*a-bhee-nay-ya*) was utilized. Abhinaya is the Sanskrit term for expression and it is not something that I was formally taught as a part of my dance training. Only when we had a performance, would my teacher tell us at what point to smile, when to enlarge our eyes and be mad, or when to express sadness on our faces. However, abhinaya seems to be a large defining factor of sadir. Due to the difficulty in teaching and even coordinating and controlling the expressions of multiple students performing on a stage, most teachers may stick to the three most commonly and easily expressed emotions of happiness, anger, and sadness. I argue that this was a deliberate change as a part of the standardization that was done to sadir to transform it into a more uniform and teachable dance form. It supports the idea that the importance given by sadir on individual expression was suppressed and deliberately sacrificed to make bharatanatyam controlled and marketable.

The final observation I made with respect to sadir was the extent to which Dr. Ganesh and her disciples were engaged and immersed in the dance; it was evident that they were in full control of their bodies. However, it is important to note that there is a sharp contrast between control and rigidity in dance. I view control as agency and being the master of one's organic movements, in contrast with rigidity, which results from the aim to perfect a dance against a predetermined template of movements. Referring to Dr. Ganesh's aforementioned paper, we recollect that removing agency and spontaneity was a part of Rukmini Devi's agenda while creating bharatanatyam (121). However, this decision ultimately nullifies the essence of dance. Dr. David Davies, a professor in the philosophy department at McGill University, discusses the role of agency in dance through philosophical and scientific lenses in his paper titled "'I'll Be Your Mirror'? Embodied Agency, Dance, and Neuroscience" from the book *The Aesthetic Mind*.

He writes, “In dance, . . . the artist’s own body serves as the vehicular medium through which the artistic content of her performance or of the work is articulated” (346-7). Unlike most forms of art, in dance, the artist *is* the art. Dr. Davies further argues that the purpose of learning dance is to train dancers to be able to rely on agency to spontaneously, yet intentionally, generate movements with their bodies (350). In the context of bharatanatyam, there seems to be a conflict between a dancer’s desire for genuine artistic expression and the need to conform to a pre-established and accepted set of movements and stylistic norms. Therefore, the removal of agentic sensuality significantly crushed the spontaneous spirit of sadir, through which a bharatanatyam that relies on the monotonous conformity of its dancers was born.

Dr. Ganesh’s ease and fluidity in movement have been noted by several dance enthusiasts, demonstrating the power of agency and spontaneity in dance. Shivaangee Agrawal wrote a blog entry in which she describes the gracefulness and ease with which Dr. Ganesh performs sadir. “Devoid of the physical rigidity and performative formality of bharatanatyam, it was a joy to watch the ease, pleasure and responsiveness with which Swarnamalya danced,” Agrawal writes (“Reflection on Sadir”). Performative formality is undoubtedly a key element in bharatanatyam; it makes the dance ‘crisp’ and ‘clean.’ However, given the hereditarily passed-on and improvisational nature of sadir, it is likely that performative formality was not given the same amount of importance it is given in bharatanatyam today. Furthermore, the fluidity and ease of Dr. Ganesh stand in stark contrast to my own experiences as a bharatanatyam student, where adhering to rigid rules was more important than personal expressive freedom. Overall, these observations support the idea that bharatanatyam is a completely different dance than its precursor, as evidenced by Dr. Ganesh’s appropriate revival of sadir, an attempt at rewriting the

narrative of cultural appropriation of the devadasi's dance that has been largely withheld in the 21st century.

Reasons for Standardization

The form and genre of traditional dances are not just elements of individual performative aesthetics, but also of larger political and cultural constructs. Therefore, it is important to place these changes made to sadir in the socio-political and historical contexts of India in the early 1900s. The overarching need for the death of sadir lies in the fact that the British had banned it. However, the cause for sadir to have been appropriated by the upper-class Indian nationalists is much deeper than that. Firstly, the standardization of the dance made it more teachable, ultimately being a powerful tool to bring in revenue by setting up art institutions like Kalakshetra. In a broader light, this reflects the capitalist-driven mindset of the nationalists. While sadir was only passed on to the devadasi descendants, bharatanatyam has been made into a tool of capitalism through mass reproduction.

Secondly, the institutionalization of bharatanatyam may have had an overarching motive of the nationalists to solidify the Indian identity on a global scale. As more students begin to learn bharatanatyam, more people in the world internalize the dance as a symbol of Indian culture, which is why today, bharatanatyam is the most well-known Indian dance form. This may have been a deliberate attempt of the nationalists in order to alter the false notions of Western superiority laid out by Orientalist theories. The catch, however, is that the method they sought to achieve this, as seen earlier, was to make similarities between bharatanatyam and Euro-American dance forms like ballet. This brings in a complex contradiction between the intentions and actions of the nationalists, resulting in a dance form that is based on the standards of art accepted in Western culture. Nonetheless, it is evident that redefining the notion of Orientalist performing

arts was a key agenda of the Indian nationalists that ultimately acted as a framework upon which sadir was broken down and reconstructed as bharatanatyam.

Implications of the Changes on Dancers

One of the most prominent ways these changes make themselves visible in bharatanatyam today is through the prevalence of injuries among dancers. As a bharatanatyam student, I was always warned about potential injuries of my hamstring, hips, and, most dreaded of all, my knees. My teachers would often tell us about the unnerving stories of lower-body injuries they suffered throughout their careers as dancers. However, as victims of constant leg cramps and sprains ourselves, the students never doubted these stories; we knew we had it coming and in a way, we were taught to be tolerant. It is interesting to note that high injury rates have been scientifically proven among bharatanatyam students. Anthropologists Dr. Joyce K. Paul and Dr. Satwanti Kapoor conducted a study on 70 bharatanatyam students in Tamil Nadu to test for incidence of injuries and published their findings in a paper titled "Dance related Injuries among Bharatanatyam Dancers" in the *Indian Anthropologist*. A few of their key observations include that the aramandi position leads to significant foot and ankle injuries among dancers and that the knee is, indeed, the most prone to injuries in bharatanatyam dancers (26, 28). Therefore, in the process of standardizing bharatanatyam that took place in the early 1900s, the 'revivalists' seem to have either forgotten or even ignored the fact that by setting rigid and strict rules that disregarded the natural flexibility and limitations of the human body, they were increasing the risk of injury among the millions of students of bharatanatyam across the globe in the decades to follow.

However, the detrimental consequences of the intense standardization done to bharatanatyam extend beyond physical injuries. Dr. Paul and Dr. Kapoor mention in the

concluding paragraphs of their paper that one of the postulated reasons for such dance-related injuries includes “the state of tension among the students in competition with their peers, with pressure from teachers, expectation of parents, oncoming examinations and the high standards of the institute itself” (28). Therefore, the rules and strict culture associated with bharatanatyam training appear to have significant psychological impacts and I can deeply resonate with this in the form of the difficulty I faced in attending my biweekly dance classes. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that physical injuries from dance can lead to further stress among dancers. Dr. Lynda M. Mainwaring, Dr. Donna H. Krasnow, and Dr. Gretchen Kerr, experts in dance, physical education, and health, make observations about the dance-centered culture of pain and tolerance in their paper “And the Dance Goes On: Psychological Impact of Injury.” The researchers note that the community of dance tends to promote ignorance—and even acceptance—of injury (111). Ultimately, this can only create a vicious cycle: stress leads to injuries, then injuries lead to further stress. The standard of perfection in dance set by bharatanatyam teachers is often a uniform level, regardless of each student’s individual physical and mental capacities. Therefore, there is bound to be significant levels of stress among students striving to meet these rigid expectations. Altogether, these consequences suggest that the rigorous standardization and institutionalization of bharatanatyam continue to have profound implications, shifting our conversation from 20th-century transformation to 21st-century narratives.

Implications of the Changes on a Global Scale

Shifting the scope of this exploration into a broader light allows us to analyze how the aforementioned changes made to sadir affect art, identity, and power on a global level. Firstly, the narrative of the history of sadir reflects the influence of socioeconomic status and power in determining who and what gets representation. The upper-class Indian nationalists such as

Rukmini Devi shaped the fate of sadir. The deliberate decision to even change the name to 'rebrand' the dance demonstrates how powerful these figures were in changing a millennia-old culture of artistic expression. Nevertheless, to preserve the ancientness and the pre-colonial sense of respect attributed to devadasis and sadir, they still maintained thin yet strong connections with the culture. This, too, explains why bharatanatyam is known as the oldest Indian classical dance, when in reality it was born less than a century ago while India was still a British colony.

Moreover, the birth of bharatanatyam implicitly validates a culture of appropriation of indigenous art forms. By denying the devadasis the basic right of expression in the form of performing a dance that had been passed on in their families for many generations, then extracting that dance from their culture and repurposing and rebranding it, the 'revivalists' forcefully subdued the voices of the devadasi. This highlights questions about cultural ownership and the ethics of appropriating indigenous art forms. In her 2015 paper "Terrains of Bollywood Dance: (Neoliberal) Capitalism and the Transformation of Cultural Economies," Anna Morcom, a professor of ethnomusicology at UCLA, suggests that middle-class families often send their children to learn bharatanatyam to bring them closer to Indian culture (293). However, she rightly speculated that bharatanatyam would soon "feed into class construction" in the same way that Bollywood dance does due to the "increasing amounts of money that are entering into classical performing arts" (293). Therefore, it is clear that the commercialization of bharatanatyam in a contemporary capitalist society will only increase in the coming years. As someone who has even competed in bharatanatyam competitions, I feel as though this emerging culture of profit associated with bharatanatyam today does not do justice to the communal and inherently authentic nature of sadir. As the institutionalization and commercialization of bharatanatyam become more deeply rooted in its very nature, it becomes critical to step back and

reevaluate how to preserve the name and recognition of sadir, a dance that is lost a little more with each passing day.

Final Reflections: Shaping the Future

My journey as a dance student has been shaped by both the strict standards of bharatanatyam and my evolving understanding of its origins in sadir. As a young girl, I always wondered how there could be a right and a wrong in art and why it was so utterly strict in bharatanatyam. Yet today, I feel enlightened knowing that sadir—what bharatanatyam originated from—accepted and even encouraged agency, spontaneity, and individuality. I feel *seen*, and less like a small fish in a large sea of dancers being taught the same steps, postures, and expressions.

I would like to remind you, however, that these experiences are unique to my journey as a dance student; there may be dancers who were openly taught about devadasis and sadir and there are certainly dancers who did not face the same degree of scrutiny and performance pressure that I did. Nonetheless, I propose the need for a more inclusive and holistic approach to bharatanatyam education.

Exploring the conflicting roles of upper-class Indian nationalists as the ‘revivalists’ of sadir in the form of bharatanatyam reveals a more holistic understanding of the historical and socio-political hardships imposed on the devadasi community during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Furthermore, in conducting this exploration, we create a more solidified grip over the reasons behind and the extensive ethical complications involved in the so-called process of ‘restoring’ sadir as bharatanatyam. On a larger scale, I invite you to question the stories you are told. Challenge the narratives that you were conditioned to believe and seek the ones that were hidden from you. What is the history behind the ‘oldest’ of the art forms? What does it mean for

an art form to be ‘classical?’ Lastly, what messy histories precede the recognition of these classical arts on global platforms?

The institution of dance carries the responsibility of being a powerful worldbuilding tool. Specifically as bharatanatyam dancers, we carry the responsibility to respect and honor the devadasis, without whom the richness of Indian classical dance would lose its foundation. Although it may be difficult to erase a century-old history of oppression and appropriation, it is certainly possible to instill awareness of the history of the devadasi and her dance in present-day bharatanatyam dancers and students. With the guarantee from my own experience, this awareness will inherently generate a stronger sense of individuality and power in bharatanatyam dancers and, hopefully, also in the community of dancers across the globe. By reclaiming this agency today, we can enrich this art form and honor the devadasi and sadir for their unfortunate, complex, yet undoubtedly resilient histories.

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