

1: Tradition and the Individual Dancer

History and Innovation in a Classical Form

Critical accounts and promotional materials frequently refer to *bharata natyam* as “ancient.” The dance form’s status as traditional and classical seems to render it fixed, even timeless. A connection to the past appears to be a given for this dance practice. Even on closer examination, a relationship to the past seems integral to the dance form’s identity, its content, and its structure. Present-day *bharata natyam* choreography draws from the dance practices of earlier decades and centuries. Its movement vocabulary derives from *sadir*, the solo dance performed by temple and court dancers in precolonial and colonial South India. The *margam*—the concert order that determines when in a program each dance piece appears—was standardized in the nineteenth century by the renowned musician-composers of the Thanjavur Quartet. The roots of *bharata natyam* extend still further back. For example, the *mudras*, or hand gestures, used today accord in both shape and meaning with those described in the *Natyasastra*, a Sanskrit dramaturgical text, dating from the beginning of the Christian era. Similarly, an *arangetram*, or initial performance, described in the fifth-century Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* correlates with that of *devadasi* practitioners of the nineteenth century, which then established the protocol for twentieth-century debuts.

Bharata natyam’s repertoire consists largely of songs written between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. The poems of love and religious devotion that form the basis of the *bharata natyam* canon emerged from the musical and literary traditions of previous centuries. The sung poetic text that accompanies *bharata natyam* choreography rests on the conventions of *bhakti*, or devotionism, which center on the worship of deities in personal, emotional terms. *Bhakti* emphasized role-playing and characterization and thus inspired a number of artistic projects, including a repertoire of dance music. The idiom of *sringara bhakti*, or devotion through eroticism, aligned sexual love and religious devotion. These idioms, which first developed in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, undergird much of today’s solo choreography.

Bharata natyam’s relationship to its past, however, is neither implicit nor unselfconscious.¹ Rather, twentieth-century dancers connected their performance

work to that of the past through specific choices in repertoire, choreographic themes, and movement vocabulary. They referenced Sanskrit texts, Tamil literature, temple sculpture, and religious ritual, using them in divergent ways and making their engagement with the dance form's history more apparent in choreography and pedagogy than earlier dancers had done. Practitioners also put forward commentaries that outlined their understanding of *bharata natyam's* past as it established the aesthetic values of the present. This intentional and overt use of historical sources separated their practice from that of pre-revival performers.² They emphasized specific antecedents for the dance genre and downplayed others, decisions that aligned with their discussions of *bharata natyam's* identity, function, and rightful place in society. The histories they proposed, as the selection of certain elements of practice and cultural influences to the exclusion of others, varied depending on their attention to distant or recent origins, to local, regional, or national traditions, and to concerns of gender and class. Different understandings of *bharata natyam's* past therefore dovetailed with divergent politics of representation.

Moreover, despite commonalities between *bharata natyam* and earlier practice, present-day performance reflects changes in performance content and context. Some dancers in the twentieth century transformed the choreography's style of rendition, extending lines out into space and augmenting the angularity of positions. Others broadened its floor patterns, traveling across more of the performance area than *sadir* dancers did in order to suit the larger proscenium theaters of the twentieth century. Similarly, some performers amplified the facial expressions of the *abhinaya*, debating the use of theatrical versus naturalistic expression and foregrounding the use of full-body pantomime, again with the aim of rendering the expressions legible to a less proximate audience.

Repertoire has also changed. Even the most traditional choreography is not completely fixed: it transforms in the process of its transmission. A conventional *bharata natyam* piece consists of a compilation of phrases set to the music of a dance style's customary repertoire. Dance teachers arrange material learned from their mentors but assembled according to their own decisions. Historically, *nattuvanars* set choreography but did not dance publicly; dancers performed but did not create new works themselves. Instead, dancers improvised decisions in performance, choices that sometimes found their way into a set version of a piece.

The twentieth century offered further opportunities for change as dancers moved between performing and teaching. Nineteenth-century practice adhered to a gendered division of labor in which *devadasis* danced and their *nattuvanars* taught; twentieth-century dancers took up these two tasks simultaneously. This allowed dancers to transition from performance into arrangement and composition. Opportunities for creation included the crafting of items within the conventional *margam* genres and the choreography of innovative pieces with new structures. For example, dancers devised material that fit within the solo reper-

Figure 5: Rukmini Devi in the twentieth-century bharata natyam costume. Courtesy of Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



toire but that relied upon non-dance music or out-of-circulation choreography from the past. Likewise, practitioners commissioned music and created pieces outside conventional genres, choreographing ensemble works and evening-length pieces based on the bharata natyam movement vocabulary.

The previous century has also seen changes, in Susan Foster's (1986) terms, to the elements that frame performance. The use of the term bharata natyam as the sole appellation for the dance form is a twentieth-century development. The now-traditional bharata natyam costume developed through Rukmini Devi's and Ram Gopal's experiments with concert attire in the 1930s (Ramnarayan 1984b: 28; Khokar 2004: 37). The context of performance has also changed. Devadasis danced in a number of settings, including courts, temples, and public festivals, as well as in the homes of patrons. By contrast, post-revival dancers restricted their concerts to the urban proscenium theaters until the 1980s, when organizers began presenting festivals in temples.

Despite these changes, most dancers who define their work as classical bharata natyam concur that a sense of continuity should undergird choreographic endeavors. However, ideas of authenticity, tradition, classicism, and history do not automatically generate or rely upon consensus. Rather, each of these concepts has a range of possible definitions that performers draw from and deploy in different ways. Individual dancers diverge in their understanding of what the most impor-

tant aspect of the dance form's history is, how best to express allegiance to that history, and what elements of dance practice should be maintained or revived. Through these contrasting definitions of classicism and history, bharata natyam dancers also put forth their own ideas of creativity and expressivity. Not only did twentieth-century bharata natyam undergo some particularly notable changes, but, at the same time, dancers' appeals to the past were evident. Explanations for this apparent paradox are tied to the early twentieth century and to the move to recontextualize that era's performance practice.

This chapter draws out the different definitions of tradition and the accompanying, contrasting versions of history that performers proposed, locating these varied points of view in the social, political, and artistic perspectives of each dancer. I argue that dancers relied upon views of creativity that supported their understanding of bharata natyam's past and illustrate the tensions between individual contribution and allegiance to tradition that characterize twentieth-century bharata natyam, indicating that they are mutually constituting rather than that they work in opposition. The pages that follow trace a genealogy of histories, indicating the different identities that performers crafted for the dance form through reference to its past.

The Anti-Nautch Movement, Textual Orientalism, and Dance Orientalism

Sadir, the solo, female dance form associated with the literary and musical traditions of southern India, was performed by devadasis, courtesans and ritual officiants dedicated to temple and court service. Devadasis never married but lived instead in female-headed households with their grandmothers, mothers, and children. The ritual confirming their entry into temple service paralleled the wedding ceremony for other women: devadasis married the presiding deity of their temple. They were then considered *nityasumangali*, ever-auspicious women (Kersenboom-Story 1987). Because auspiciousness—the spiritual power associated with domestic stability and good fortune—and social standing in mainstream Hindu society depended on a woman's status as a wife with a living husband, a devadasi inhabited a unique position: her auspicious state, linked to an immortal spouse, endured lifelong. Despite this marriage to the deity, devadasis did not remain sexually abstinent. Rather, they entered into liaisons with men, initially selected by the senior women of their household, who became their patrons. These affiliations were nondomestic: they kept separate homes and did not perform household tasks for patrons. Children remained with their devadasi mother.

Devadasis trained in dance and music and, unlike most other women of their time, learned to read and write. They traveled about freely in the outside world, which contemporaneous elite women did not, although, in some cases, women so

dedicated to the deity had to remain in the city (Marglin 1985: 33). They received a salary from the temple or court and supplemented this income with grants earned for particular performances. In devadasi households, unlike in most other Hindu families, parents preferred girl children to boys, because females continued the hereditary occupation and performed key domestic rituals. Elder women controlled financial and other decisions in these households.

Nonetheless, social and economic dependence on men curtailed the relative freedoms that these women exercised. Although they received a salary, devadasis relied on their patrons for nonessentials. In addition, devadasi households entertained lavishly, which depleted even substantial resources (Srinivasan 1985: 1872). Their presence moreover contributed to a sexual double standard in which society allowed elite men both wives and mistresses while restricting most women to lifelong monogamy. Devadasis' autonomous income in the form of a salary and even their land holdings depended on their remaining in service and upholding the system by initiating their daughters into the devadasi office (Anandhi 1991: 740).

Marginal but respected, receiving their own income but tied to temple or court service and deriving luxury items from patrons, devadasis were ambiguous figures in pre- and early colonial Tamil society. Anti-nautch agitations complicated the devadasis' status further because they brought temple women to the fore of a controversy over the status of women and "native" cultural practices. This movement, begun in South India in 1892, mobilized against the dedication of women and girls as devadasis to ritual service and against their related performance practice. Nautch is an anglicization of *nach*, a Hindi word for dance. Hence, the movement identified itself as an "anti-dance" movement, even as it focused on the status of women and the social structures around ritual dedication. Anti-nautch activists attempted to eradicate courtesanship by abolishing the hereditary offices of temple and court service and by eliminating the performance of *sadir*. The ostensible prurience of the dance, reformers maintained, supported a system that institutionalized prostitution; moreover, courtesanship had cultivated a lascivious dance form.

By contrast, revivalists—nationalist activists invested in maintaining ancient Hindu traditions—defended the devadasi system. Unlike reformers, who relied at least in part on Victorian feminism, revivalists celebrated indigenous cultural practices and upheld the social status quo (Sangari 1989). The nationalist-revivalist camp set the stage for *bharata natyam's* refiguration in the 1930s by locating evidence of cultural accomplishment in precolonial Indian practices. Some revivalists focused their attention specifically on dance, positing that indigenous classical forms were cultural treasures that would contribute to national pride.

The devadasis of Madras presidency fit easily into neither reformist nor revivalist camps. They collectively opposed anti-dedication legislation on both material and aesthetic grounds, agitating for the right to retain their hereditary offices

and their livelihood. Like the revivalists, devadasis argued that temple dedication and dance practice need not necessarily result in courtesanship (Arudra 1986–87a: 19). Further, they maintained that the legislation itself would encourage prostitution in their communities because it left women without a source of income (Jordan 1989: 263–75).

Although anti-nautch activists did not secure legislation against dedication until 1947, by the early years of the twentieth century they had eroded public support for dance and pushed sadir to the margins of social life. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, sadir remained stigmatized, and respectable elites frowned upon its performance. Although still practiced, the dance form had fallen from favor.³ The eradication of patronage and of public approval displaced sadir, leaving it without a clear social or aesthetic function and with minimal economic support. Anti-nautch agitations altered dance practice as much as they did ritual protocol and domestic arrangements.

A new generation of practitioners, most of them descended from non-devadasi communities, turned to solo South Indian dance in the 1920s and 1930s, bringing it to the modern urban concert stage. As they did so, they strove to salvage a disparaged and displaced form. The anti-nautch attempt to excise sadir from public life left *bharata natyam* without an immediate, visible, and respectable precedent for its appearance in the theaters of the cities. The anti-nautch movement's discrediting of dance meant that the revival's performers needed to justify their practice of the dance form. Performers responded to such criticisms by validating their decisions to study and perform *bharata natyam* through recourse to history, foregrounding elements of the past both choreographically and discursively. They strove to avoid the stigma that afflicted the devadasi legacy by either circumventing or reclaiming the recent past and justified their performance of *bharata natyam* by linking it to other artistic and ritual practices. This look to the past sparked debates over the history of dance. In sanctioning contemporary performance through reference to historical sources for choreographic decisions, dancers responded not only to anti-nautch criticism but also to Orientalist thought.⁴

Colonialists justified imperial rule by claiming that their imposition of an alien government and economy reformed colonized societies and brought them in line with European post-Enlightenment values. Colonizers argued that theirs was a "civilizing mission," intended to uplift those they ruled by freeing them from their own oppressive practices. Imperial rulers claimed to bring civilization to an otherwise degraded populace. They criticized "the East" for remaining fettered by tradition while "the West" embraced change and vitality. At the same time, colonial Orientalists valorized ancient textual traditions.⁵ This celebration of the subcontinent's high-culture past, however, did not compel Orientalists to reject the colonial rescue narrative. Orientalist scholars reconciled the two perspectives and maintained that contemporaneous India was the attenuated rem-

nant of an illustrious civilization, with the authentic India remaining in the past rather than existing in the present.

Formed through an unequal but dialogic exchange between Brahman informants and English and German scholars, Orientalist writings privileged the voices of elites, their cultural and literary products, and their ritual practices (Inden 1990; Ramaswamy 1997: 27, 38–39). The discovery that Sanskrit, as a progenitor of the Indo-European language group, linked India to Europe accelerated this glorification of India's past and its canonical texts. Orientalists further maintained that civilization inhered in classical traditions and, tautologically, that "classicism" provided evidence of civilization. They located India's "civilized" legacy in the hegemonic Sanskrit language and literature and in the communities that maintained them. For Orientalists, India's greatness lay doubly in the past: because civilization required "classicism," by definition rooted in history, and because invasions and political corruption had, they maintained, diluted India's access to its classical traditions and, hence, its civilizational status.

As the historian Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) argues, the logic of colonialism depended upon this putative cultural deficit for its moral justification. The independence movement then required that nationalists counter the premise of native inferiority by supplying evidence of indigenous accomplishment. Nationalists replaced the narrative of the civilizing mission with one that celebrated local cultural products and represented them as equal to, if not better than, those of the colonizer. Through a process that Ramaswamy labels a "nostalgia for civilization," nationalists and regionalists struggled against the colonial condemnation of Indian society and strove to reconstruct the merits of its past in the present.

When, in the 1930s, a new generation of dancers took to the concert stage under the auspices of nationalism, they faced a dilemma: how to celebrate the heritage that made India unique while contesting colonialist charges of stagnation. Performers resolved this quandary by proposing specific origins for *bharata natyam* that accommodated a validating classical culture while also highlighting the creativity that inhered in the form. They argued that contemporary, innovative agendas found expression in *bharata natyam* and that traditionalism did not preclude originality. Practitioners embodied this dual agenda when they posited historical origins that supported their choreographic choices.

This imperative, split between originality and historicity, surfaced in choreography in response to the dance form's intersection not only with colonialism and nationalism but also with global discourses of artistic originality (Allen 1998; Coorlawala 1996; Srinivasan 2003). European and North American premodern and early modern dancers represented choreography as an autonomous, creative venture that addressed serious intellectual and philosophical themes rather than merely providing entertainment. The idea of dance as "high art" rather than as a diversion in turn inflected the recontextualization of *bharata natyam*. For instance, a 1938 newspaper article credited the new seriousness that the modern-



Figure 6: Ruth St. Denis in *Radha*. © V & A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum.

dance movement had ascribed to dance with the support offered to the Michigan-born classical Indian dancer Ragini Devi during her European tours (“The Dance in Indian Sagas,” 1938). Moreover, a number of dancers who laid claim to innovation in dance, including the modern-dance forerunner Ruth St. Denis, the ballerina and choreographer Anna Pavlova, and the Indian modernist Uday Shankar, played a role in the bharata natyam revival, urging attention to “forgotten” In-

dian arts while also signaling the importance of creative invention. The dancers of the *bharata natyam* revival deployed this ideology of originality, and its accompanying notions of interiority, inspiration, and the concept of autonomous art, to challenge Orientalist claims of stasis while also differentiating their endeavors from *devadasi* practice.⁶

At the same time, however, an Orientalist emphasis on “Eastern tradition,” in dance and in public culture generally, colored *bharata natyam*’s intersection with global dance modernism. Early modernists and interpretive dancers relied on classical dance as the foil that highlighted their own creative ventures (Chatterjea 2004a; Srinivasan 2003). The same international figures who prompted inquiry into the solo Indian dance forms sought out practices that would corroborate their understandings of “the East” as spiritual and steeped in ancient tradition. For these reasons, as well as because of the success of institutions such as the Music Academy and Kalakshetra in rendering classical dance visible, twentieth-century viewers came to expect markers of continuity in Indian dance and rejected invention for its own sake. By mid-century, international and Indian audiences privileged classical Indian dances over modernist ones: for example, Shankar’s cross-cultural fusions enjoyed popularity in the 1920s and 1930s but later incurred criticism for their eclecticism.⁷ The revival’s *bharata natyam* dancers differentiated their projects from more experimental works such as Shankar’s not only by upholding continuity in dance technique and repertoire, but also by pointing to historical precedent for the innovations that they made.

Revival-era practitioners contended with local economic upheavals as well as with global artistic epistemologies. Initially, imperialism destabilized royal authority and removed the economic structures that supported classical Indian arts. Anti-naught activists subsequently criticized the colonial government for supporting dance performance, while an independent state had not yet emerged to formulate its own arts policy. These shifts in political systems and in public perception of performance affected *sadir* directly, because it cut off financial support for Thanjavur’s *devadasis* (Meduri 1996). The performers who entered the dance arena in the 1930s therefore depended on *sabhas* (private, voluntary arts organizations) and, post-1947, on government agencies for their support. The shift from a feudal system to a postcolonial market economy left a new generation of performers with increased freedom and decreased stability. Although the independent Indian government introduced socialist initiatives, such as land reform and state ownership of large industry, it also retained features of a capitalist economy. As Janet Wolff (1987) argues, the economic precariousness of a capitalist art market fosters the idea of “autonomous art” by releasing practitioners from the need to please patrons and pushing them instead to compete with one another, so that they have a vested interest in proving their uniqueness. Moreover, when artistic practice no longer restricts itself to hereditary groups, the number of performers can increase. Even when a government funds artistic endeavors, as in In-

dia, performers compete against a host of others in a similar position and therefore need to establish the singularity of their work. Private organizations depend on memberships and other kinds of individual or corporate contributions. This scarcity of resources in relation to the number of artists dictates the selection of some performers over others according to particular criteria.

However, the social and political investments of the late colonial and early postcolonial period complicated an economic situation that encouraged individuality. Government agencies and private cultural organizations consolidated themselves around nationalist or regionalist agendas. These forms of sponsorship encouraged dancers' performance work to align, in some way, with the outlook of the funding body, often through reference to past practice and its relationship to present-day communities. At the same time, they required evidence of uniqueness in order to differentiate between dancers. Such organizations, finding themselves in the position of choosing one dancer over others, sought evidence of both exceptionality and continuity.

These two apparently competing agendas—originality and traditionalism—thus developed in reaction to the political forces that inflected the refiguration of solo South Indian dance as a concert art. Twentieth-century dancers deployed markers of both historicity and creativity in performance and in their commentaries on the dance practice, relying upon and resisting the assumptions of the colonial moment in which *bharata natyam* appeared as a stage art. Practitioners articulated these concerns by staging their understanding of the dance form's past in both performance and verbal form. The rest of the chapter follows the genealogy through which this dance form came to embody both traditionalism and originality.

Originality and Origin in the Revival

E. Krishna Iyer (1897–1968), a Tamil Brahman lawyer, was one initiator of the multiple transformations that *bharata natyam* underwent during the revival.⁸ In 1923, the twenty-six-year-old sought out dance training from the renowned performer Madurantakam Jagadambal in order to prepare for a role in *Malavikagnimitra*, a Sanskrit play. He segued into solo performance when the dance guru A. P. Natesa Iyer heard of his abilities and offered to train him in *sadir*.⁹ At the urging of his mentor, E. Krishna Iyer set out to restore *sadir* to its rightful place in public life, undertaking this mission through concerts of conventional dance pieces, or *margam* items. Iyer assumed *devadasi* attire and, through both his appearance and his performance skill, convinced audiences that he was not only a woman but also a hereditary dancer. Conjoining these performances with lectures on the aesthetic value of *sadir*, he toured throughout southern India.

Subsequently, Iyer entered the political arena as a nationalist activist, turning his attention away from performance and toward arts promotion and criticism

(Gaston 1996: 93; Raman and Ramachandran 1984b: 29). As joint secretary of the reception committee, Iyer, along with two colleagues, organized the 1927 All India Music Conference that accompanied the Madras meeting of the Indian National Congress. In 1928, when the Music Academy was formally established, Iyer retained his role as joint secretary. Subsequently imprisoned by the colonial government for his role in nationalist agitations, Iyer urged his fellow activist prisoners to support dance. Upon his release, he persuaded the Music Academy officers to promote sadir. The academy board made a trailblazing move when they agreed to his proposal and included a performance by the Kalyani daughters, the devadasi dancers Rajalakshmi and Jeevaratnam, in its 1931 concert series. Disinterest and ambivalence met this first attempt, but a subsequent performance by the dancers was well attended.

Iyer also distinguished himself in the dance field by directly challenging the anti-nautch campaign of Muttulakshmi Reddy. Reddy, herself from a devadasi family,¹⁰ was a medical doctor and feminist activist who campaigned for anti-dedication legislation and the abolition of temple dance. In 1930, she authored the Madras Devadasis Prevention of Dedication bill in order to free dedicated women from their dependence on ritual service and sexual patronage and ideally to encourage them into conventional, monogamous marriages. This, she believed, would also eradicate the stigma on the devadasi community (Nair 1994: 3164). When sadir appeared in two public functions in 1932, Reddy voiced her complaints in letters to two English-language dailies, *The Mail* and *The Hindu* (Arudra 1986–87a: 19). Iyer countered Reddy's arguments by defending the aesthetic value of the dance and the role it could play in the cultural life of the nation. The two debated the validity of devadasi dance through a volley of letters until the editor of *The Hindu* discontinued their dialogue. Iyer then wrote an open letter to the president of the Madras Music Academy requesting that the academy's board raise the issue at their annual meeting (Arudra 1986–87a: 19). The academy sponsored a debate on December 28, 1932, circulating a resolution in advance that Iyer had proposed in favor of dance performance and patronage. Musicians, scholars, and critics came forward in support of sadir, rejecting anti-nautch claims in speeches that emphasized the dance form's aesthetic and social merits, and eventually passed a resolution in favor of the dance form. This resolution was also instrumental in confirming the change of the dance form's name from sadir to bharata natyam.¹¹

The term bharata natyam sanctioned the form, distancing it from devadasi words for dance, such as sadir, *dasi attam*, and *chinna mela*. The name also carried etymological associations that validated the form by invoking the *Natyasastra*, Indian classical music, and music theory. The term natya moreover connotes a multigenre theater form rather than solo dance, linking bharata natyam to pan-Indian dramatic traditions and distancing it from the solo performance of devadasi dancers. These connotations for bharata natyam, in contrast to the

Tamil devadasi names, carry the prestige of the Sanskrit language and suggest elite, pan-Indian associations.

The Music Academy prompted another strategy of the revival—the “textualisation of dance” (Srinivasan 1983)—in 1930, when it included an article in the first issue of its journal by V. Venkatarama Sharma, who argued that bharata natyam accorded with the tenets of the *Natyasastra* (Arudra 1986–87a: 18). Subsequently, the organization fueled the revival not only by legitimizing bharata natyam through activism and critical inquiry, but also by presenting concerts by the most influential dancers of the period during its annual festival season in December and January. In addition to the recitals by the Kalyani daughters in 1931 and 1933, they presented a 1932 performance by the renowned devadasi dancer Mylapore Gowri Ammal, who in turn influenced both Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati. During the first part of the decade, the academy sponsored presentations by other devadasi performers; by the late 1930s, adolescent Brahman girls were appearing on the academy’s stage. This foray of high-caste, middle-class young women into performance and its support by the Music Academy cemented the gains of the revival and affirmed the respectability of bharata natyam. The revivalist goal of legitimizing dance by involving high-status women in public performances was realized.

Rukmini Devi (1904–1986), who was in the audience of a 1935 Music Academy dance recital, extended this validation process through her efforts in performance, pedagogy, and composition. Rukmini Devi’s first entries into the Madras public sphere came in the 1920s not through dance, but through nationalist activism and theosophy, an eclectic, transnational religious movement. Devi hailed from a Tamil Brahman family with a background in Sanskrit scholarship and music; her father was a member of the theosophical movement (Ramnarayan 1984a: 19–20).

As an adolescent, Devi came under the tutelage of Annie Besant, an English theosophist and proponent of Indian nationalism. Besant, though British, served as president of the Indian National Congress from 1917 to 1918. Her politics drew on the Orientalist-nationalist underpinnings of her religious community: for her, India’s right to independence arose directly out of its value as a great civilization with an ancient history, rooted in Sanskrit and Upanishadic Hinduism (Allen 1997). Besant’s position rested upon Orientalist and nationalist discourse and thus contributed to, in the historian Sumathi Ramaswamy’s (1997) terms, “neo-Hindu” Indian nationalism. According to Ramaswamy, neo-Hindu activists celebrated the merits of contemporary India as descended from the glorious traditions of an ancient past (26–27). Rukmini Devi espoused political beliefs similar to Besant’s and promoted the Theosophical Society’s social causes. Like Iyer, Rukmini Devi began her artistic career in the field of drama. She participated in (and later directed) theatrical productions at the Theosophical Society, including politically inflected performances. Her activism and theater work,

combined with her marriage to the English theosophist George Arundale, threw her into the spotlight of Madras's public arena.

Fortuitous circumstances channeled Rukmini Devi's artistic and political interests into dance. In 1928, while touring Australia and Southeast Asia on Theosophical Society business, Rukmini Devi met Anna Pavlova, whose dancing she had seen and admired in Bombay (Ramnarayan 1984a: 29; Sarada 1985: 40). Pavlova encouraged Rukmini Devi to learn dance, offering to provide instruction herself and arranging for her to study with her soloist Cleo Nordi until Pavlova could join her in London. Although the ballerina died before Rukmini Devi could train with her, Pavlova left a lasting impact by suggesting a way for Devi to combine her devotion to dance, spirituality, and nationalism. Pavlova had installed ballet as a "high art" and shifted public opinion of the form. She likewise encouraged her friend to "revive the art of [her] own country" (quoted in Ramnarayan 1984a: 29), a statement that inspired Devi to seek out training with traditional practitioners of *sadir* in Madras. In 1935, at the suggestion of E. Krishna Iyer, she attended a performance at the Music Academy, approached devadasi dancers, and finally met Mylapore Gowri Ammal, who accepted her as a student. She later pursued training under Meenakshisundaram Pillai, a guru of the Isai Vellala caste, a community from which most devadasis and nattuvanars came.¹²

In December 1935, Rukmini Devi gave her debut concert for the Theosophical Society's anniversary celebrations. Although this performance was not a formal *arangetram*,¹³ it launched Rukmini Devi's dance career. Her determination to dance stirred up a furor among the anti-nautch elites of Madras, and, according to the theosophist Barbara Sellon, some of those invited boycotted her debut performance but many other curious onlookers appeared, swelling the audience to almost a thousand (Sellon, cited in Ramnarayan 1984b: 21). Rukmini Devi's performance won over her detractors and convinced remaining skeptics of the aesthetic value of the form. A month later, in January 1936, Devi founded Kalakshetra, an institution housed on Theosophical Society grounds where she provided students with training in *bharata natyam*, *kathakali*, and Carnatic music. Rukmini Devi's status as a middle-class Brahman woman and as a respected public figure, combined with the arguments she put forth in favor of the dance, accelerated the *bharata natyam* revival and convinced a wider public of the legitimacy of the dance form.

Tanjore Balasaraswati (1918–1984) entered the dance field from a position distinct from that of either E. Krishna Iyer or Rukmini Devi. One of the first dancers to appear at the Music Academy, she was also one of the only devadasis to continue performing through the revival and beyond. She thus bridged a gap between devadasi and higher-caste dancers (Allen 1997: 64–65; Gaston 1996: 81; Singer 1958: 374). Balasaraswati came from a Madras-based family of musicians descended from performers of the Thanjavur court. Her mother, Jayammal, and her grandmother, the legendary veena player Dhanammal, trained her in music

and music appreciation from a young age. As a small child, Balasaraswati visited her neighbor Mylapore Gowri Ammal and imitated her dancing. The latter suggested that Balasaraswati learn dance, a proposal Jayammal and Dhanammal initially rejected. Eventually Dhanammal gave her permission, and Balasaraswati began, at the age of four, to study with Kandappa Pillai, a nattuvanar who, like his student, came from a family with several generations of involvement in the Thanjavur court music and dance milieu.

Balasaraswati presented her arangetram in 1925. In spite of anti-nautch pressure, her debut replicated devadasi precedent as it took place in the Ammanakshi temple in Kanchipuram. She gave her first concert at the Music Academy in 1933, initiating a long-standing relationship with the institution. The concert also brought Balasaraswati to national renown: Uday Shankar attended and was so captivated by her dancing that he requested a repeat performance. He invited Balasaraswati to join his company but, on Jayammal's advice, she refused, concerned that Shankar's experiments would dilute the classicism of their family's tradition (Arudra 1986–87a: 20, 1986–87b: 25; Raman and Ramachandran 1984a: 28). However, Haren Ghosh, a friend of Shankar's and an impresario, was also in the audience. He arranged Balasaraswati's first concert outside of southern India, in Calcutta, which led to other concerts in North India and thus bolstered her national, and eventually international, reputation.

These performances, in North India and globally, both fostered Balasaraswati's career and furthered the gains of the revival more generally.¹⁴ Although Balasaraswati identified herself as a traditionalist who fought the tide of change, she nonetheless, through her skill as a performer and her standing as a hereditary practitioner, contributed to *bharata natyam's* new status as an urban, concert art form. She brought a sense of continuity to the recently recontextualized form as she argued in favor of maintaining its key aesthetic features. Although she fought moves to "improve" the dance by aligning it with the premises of aesthetic theory, she nonetheless supported the burgeoning respectability of the form by noting parallels between it and the dance practices described in Tamil literature and Sanskrit theory.

Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati differed not only in their background and their initial performance experiences, but also in their approaches to *bharata natyam*. Indeed, at first glance, each of these two dancers seems to represent one of the apparently competing tendencies of creativity versus allegiance to tradition. Devi enjoys pride of place as the first modern *bharata natyam* choreographer, while Balasaraswati inspires devotion as a purist who fought the tide of history. Devi developed original choreography for solo conventional dance items, created new *margam* items, choreographed for classical songs that had not previously operated as dance accompaniment, and created ensemble works.¹⁵ Balasaraswati, although she performed in and occasionally created ensemble pieces, achieved renown primarily as a performer within the solo *margam*, with national and in-

ternational audiences praising her skill in evoking dramatic scenarios through structured improvisation. The dancers' aims likewise differed according to their contrasting priorities and perspectives on the dance form. Devi strove to salvage *bharata natyam* and to erase its stigma, purifying it while also aligning it with modern aesthetic values.¹⁶ Balasaraswati sought to uphold a tradition that she saw as continuous, aiming to protect *bharata natyam* from alteration.

These two practitioners also provided divergent accounts of *bharata natyam*'s history and its ideal state. They described the most significant traditional values of the form as emerging out of disparate historical moments. For Devi, allegiance to past precedent meant recapturing the features of the multigenre "total theater" of Sanskrit drama (Peterson 1998: 58) and resurrecting these values in the present. Balasaraswati, by contrast, portrayed as traditional the repertory and concert-order principles laid down by the nineteenth-century Thanjavur Quartet and transmitted through an oral tradition of *devadasi* dancers and their *nattuvanar* mentors.

Each dancer likewise situated creativity in a different aspect of choreographic practice. Devi located artistic expression in the composition of new works, while Balasaraswati found aesthetic inspiration in the opportunities for expressivity offered by improvised sections of a dance performance. Devi undertook new choreographic ventures that, she maintained, accessed "the spirit of the traditional methods" (in Ramnarayan 1984c: 29), while Balasaraswati believed that inherited repertory provided ample scope for the exploitation of imagination (Bannerjee 1988: 39). These dancers put forth two divergent arguments about the relationship between creativity and continuity.

However, although they defined both tradition and individual expression differently, Devi and Balasaraswati shared the basic premise that *bharata natyam* could best express originality through fidelity to the past. Although each referred to contrasting historical moments and different aspects of performance, both foregrounded the importance of tradition, identifying quality in *bharata natyam* as the preservation of fundamental elements of an originary dance practice. Both found creativity within classicism rather than in experimentation for its own sake. Their work therefore met at a crucial point: each located originality within continuity. Devi and Balasaraswati proposed contrasting versions of the dance form's identity while sharing a basic understanding about it. For both, the dance form's history remained an index of its aesthetic quality.

After a brief stint as an interpretive dancer,¹⁷ Rukmini Devi pursued a short but influential career as a solo *bharata natyam* artist. Her most significant contributions, however, came not through performance, but through the revision of pedagogical methods and the composition of new works. She introduced changes to instruction and performance, suggesting that these developments neither broke from tradition nor replicated it. Similarly, she infused *bharata natyam* with new choreographic structures and themes that expressed the values of tra-

ditional practice while not necessarily mimicking its form.¹⁸ Through these projects, Devi conjoined two agendas of originality and allegiance to the past into a single style of choreography.

When she founded the Kalakshetra institution, Devi revamped bharata natyam training by introducing the idea of a dedicated dance school where students learned in formal dance classes. This approach contrasted with the ongoing learning process that constituted the traditional *gurukula* arrangement, in which a student lives with the teacher to pursue long-term immersion in dance study through both formal lessons and informal tutelage.¹⁹ The *gurukula* or *gurusishya* system is informal in that students learn not only through classes with the teacher but also through observation and, eventually, by teaching the mentor's junior students. The pace of instruction is individualized in this system: each student proceeds at her own rate. There are no exams, grades, or official markers of progress (except for the arangetram), and instruction is continuous, not marked by entry into new levels or by a graduation out of tutelage. The student provides domestic and other assistance in lieu of payment.

Despite these fluid qualities, *gurusishya* teaching methods are both tightly organized and authoritative. *Gurukula* instruction follows a standardized pattern in that a student acquires the basic movement units, or *adavus*, in a set order, proceeding to new material only after mastering the earlier. When students proceed to repertoire, the process replicates the concert order, with students learning a *jatisvaram* after completing *alarippu* and so forth. Students learn through direct practice and imitation, not through questioning or explanation. According to traditional *gurusishya* protocol, the student dancer learns under one mentor only. The young dancer embodies the aesthetic values of a mentor's artistic lineage by replicating the teacher's repertoire and style of rendition (Ananya 1996); only after a student has trained long enough to internalize these priorities does she move on to improvisation.

The Kalakshetra school, by contrast, standardized the means through which students learned dance, providing them with a syllabus complete with grade levels and exams. Rukmini Devi thus created an institution based on modern models of education, ensuring that teachers gave instruction in a consistent manner and guaranteeing that students gain the type and amount of information appropriate to their level, a project that, as Uttara Coorlawala argues, aligned bharata natyam training with the British dance syllabus system (1996: 67). Rukmini Devi also developed a system in which student dancers learn from different Kalakshetra teachers at various times in their training. In doing so, she encouraged her pupils to replace the more conventional loyalty to a single teacher with a fidelity to the school.

Kalakshetra also provides instruction in Sanskrit aesthetic theory alongside practical lessons. At each level, students memorize appropriate verses on and categories of dramaturgical classification (Sarada 1985: 21; Coorlawala 1996: 66). Al-



Figure 7: Statue of Rukmini Devi in front of the Kalakshetra Theatre. Photograph by author.

though rooted in ancient texts, this transformation of pedagogical methods relied on modern values: Rukmini Devi provided training in aesthetic theory so that students would understand the reasons for what they did. She encouraged students to investigate the theoretical underpinnings of classical dance practice and not merely replicate what their teachers imparted. This move democratized dance instruction by giving students greater agency in the learning process and

by offering them the opportunity for increased knowledge (Gaston 1996: 125; Meduri 1996: 366–72; Ramnarayan 1984a: 22). Through this process, Devi helped dancers of subsequent generations to create an educated, authoritative position in relation to the form.

Rukmini Devi brought an egalitarian angle to dance training by rejecting a need for obedience. At the same time, however, the loyalty to the school that it cultivated reveals a modern concern with individuals internalizing rules so that dancers discipline themselves. There is a parallel here between embodying the rules of dance, as part of dance education, and the Foucauldian (1979) paradigm of modernity in which citizens internalize discipline rather than experiencing it as submission to an outside force. Through such attention to classical principles, Kalakshetra dancers inherited a modern attention to repeatability (Franko 1989) in place of the historical priority given to the imprint of a specific mentor. This method also encouraged students to incorporate the values of the Sanskrit texts so that they developed a greater loyalty to classicism than they might have if they received instruction without theoretical justification.

Rukmini Devi not only systematized the means through which teachers imparted material, but also standardized the performance of movement to make it more consistent from one dancer to the next. In lieu of the stylistic traces associated with individual instructors that characterize the gurusishya system, Rukmini Devi developed a style emblematic of the institution as a whole. She preserved the steps and dynamics of the Pandanallur tradition in which she trained, but she also included, at first, ballet exercises added to render the adavus more accurate (Sarada 1985: 20). Rukmini Devi used ballet training to influence the stylistic rendition of units of movement rather than to alter the vocabulary itself, augmenting an existing classical attention to shape and angular line. Devi privileged precision and accuracy in choreography, especially in *nritta*, the rhythmic aspect of performance. She highlighted the Pandanallur style's emphasis on spatiality (Coorlawala 1996: 68; Meduri 1996: 334): the extension of the limbs in clean, clear lines typifies the adavus of the Kalakshetra style. She thus emphasized geometry over rhythmic counterpoint. At the same time, however, Devi also cultivated rhythmic precision in her dancers, foregrounding less the mathematical complexity typical of Carnatic music than a metrical correspondence between footwork and hand, arm, and upper-body movement. Thus, she created a Kalakshetra style that was exact, precise, and articulate.

By instructing student dancers to produce defined movements apprehended through uniform means, Rukmini Devi generated a pool of performers uniquely suited to group choreography.²⁰ Her Kalakshetra institution required such dancers because she elevated ensemble work to a new level of importance. Over the course of a forty-year choreographic career (1944–84), she composed twenty-five dance dramas, of which seven were reconstructions and eighteen were completely new works based on the Indian literary canon (Ramnarayan 1984c: 38; Sarada

1985: 62–212). She based these new works on mythological themes, Sanskrit plays, and Tamil dance drama forms, including the all-male Brahman theatrical form *bhagavata mela natakam* and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century multigenre *kuravanji*. She took responsibility for aspects of composition that ranged from the development of scenarios, commissioning scores, and setting the movement to dancing in pieces herself, at least initially.

Devi began her foray into ensemble choreography with the reconstruction in 1944 of an out-of-circulation Tamil dance drama, the *Kutrala Kuravanji* (Ramnarayan 1984c: 27–28; Sarada 1985: 40–42; Peterson 1998: 39–40, 57–63). She composed the dance sequences and employed the musician Veena Krishnamachariar to develop the melody of the songs based on the existing poetic text. Despite her interest in the values, not the form, of historical genres, she conducted extensive research in order to faithfully reconstitute the dance.²¹ Although Devi had the option of staging *Sarabendra Bupala Kuravanji*, the only dance drama that devadasis continued to perform at the Thanjavur temple, she decided not to do so because of, among other things, the drama's praise of a human king rather than a god (Sarada 1985: 40; Ramnarayan 1984c: 27; Peterson 1998: 59) and its frank eroticism (Peterson 1998: 59–60).

This decision to stage a work neither in the current repertoire nor danced within recent memory inaugurated Rukmini Devi's role as a choreographer. She went on to achieve recognition for the composition of ensemble works accompanied by commissioned scores. Her longest-lasting impact on the dance field came through her innovative authorship of new material as well as through the transformations she made to dance pedagogy. She exercised creativity primarily through the composition of new works rather than by reinterpreting conventional ones.

That Rukmini Devi based her *Kutrala Kuravanji* on a historical work with an existing scenario, however, also aligned her inquiry with traditional practice. Although her decision to reconstruct a *kuravanji* provided an opportunity for compositional investigation, its historicity allowed her to explore older aesthetic values, which she preferred to conducting experiments for their own sake. Moreover, in this project, and within her oeuvre of dance dramas generally, Devi emphasized elements of choreography that intersected with the aesthetics of ancient Sanskrit drama as identified in dramaturgical texts (Peterson 1998). Devi's primary and most sustained attention to Sanskrit dramaturgical theory, however, treated it as an influential principle rather than as a model for composition. Sanskrit texts, especially the *Natyasastra*, provided her with inspiration, not with a set of literal guidelines.²² In Devi's commentaries, tradition, the *sastras*, and sometimes even *bharata natyam* itself operate as conceptual frameworks and as "guiding spirits."

In these ways Devi began to tease apart the intertwined notions of classicism and tradition. "Classical," in general terms, denotes an adherence to a spe-

cific set of defined principles, while “traditional” suggests an unbroken, handed-down heritage. The distinction made in English between the two terms parallels that made in Indian aesthetic theory between *sastra* and *parampara*, or between prescriptive text and oral tradition. Although Rukmini Devi did not emphasize this distinction discursively, in practice the attention she gave to the spirit rather than the structure of older choreographies separated classical aesthetics from specific items of traditional repertoire (Mavin Khoo, personal correspondence 2003). Within her choreography, classicism emerged as a set of principles that a dancer could work with and within. She created a choreographic style that relied on the practices of the past and that valued continuity but did not demand the continual replication of form. This notion of classicism, as distinct from traditional repertoire and structure, allowed her room for creative inquiry without compromising an aesthetic that she saw as fundamental to the Indian heritage.

That Rukmini Devi both referred to and refigured classicism, through changes in pedagogy and performance protocol, supported the *bharata natyam* revival by further bolstering the legitimacy of the dance practice. In revivifying the values of Sanskrit drama through *bharata natyam*, Rukmini Devi validated her choreographic innovations through recourse to a tradition that predated the *devadasi* repertoire. As she saw it, then, she did not so much reconstruct *bharata natyam* as reclassitize it. By focusing on Sanskrit drama and ancient aesthetic theory texts, as well as by aligning specific compositional decisions with these venerable sources, Devi circumvented the recent past, thereby escaping the aspersion cast on *devadasi* dancers and confirming the respectability of *bharata natyam*.

Rukmini Devi’s inquiry into classicism through her emphasis on technique also allowed her to present *bharata natyam* as international without capitulating to a Western aesthetic. By foregrounding the technical rather than the devotional body, she was able to position *bharata natyam* on a par with ballet without subjecting it to European standards. She drew out ballet’s Pythagorean model (Foster 1996a: 14) and Sanskrit aesthetic theory’s geometric concerns (Vatsyayan 1977: xiv)²⁵ through the spatial priorities of the *Pandanallur* style and through her own interest in technique, creating a style that examined these elements rather than simply reflecting their form by, for instance, integrating the vocabularies from European concert dance or ancient Sanskrit drama.

Rukmini Devi therefore claimed universality for *bharata natyam*, through features marked as Indian, establishing Indian epistemologies as equivalent to those of the West and creating a choreographic project that, as I will argue in the following section, was nationalist not only in content but also in form. Her inquiry into technique and her engagement with ballet and Sanskrit aesthetics emerged out of colonial hybridity but was not a capitulation to colonial pressure; rather, it constituted a powerful rejoinder to colonial Orientalism and its charges of stasis. Her engagement with a range of practices prefigured an international awareness within the *bharata natyam* field, anticipating the move by some present-day

choreographers to invoke a dialogue across movement languages without blending into a global homogeneity.²⁴ Rukmini Devi's reformulation of bharata natyam also resisted Orientalist representations of Indian dance by standardizing training protocol and thus by integrating such post-Enlightenment concepts as rationalism and democracy into bharata natyam teaching and performance. This project challenged a colonial understanding of Indian culture as trapped in fixed traditions and restricted by autocratic and authoritative hierarchies.

The attention Devi gave to the technical body rather than a primarily devotional or even expressive one also helped her to circumvent the stigma associated with devadasi performance.²⁵ By emphasizing technique, she mitigated sensuality and the expression of the *sringara bhakti*—devotion through an erotic idiom—that characterized devadasi performance, neutralizing the sensuality associated with the solo dancer and the devotional repertoire. The creation of uniformly proficient performers, alongside the development of group choreography, likewise deflected attention away from the display of the individual female dancer, thereby further validating the form for middle-class women. Her concern with technique as a larger, presumably universal, standard of excellence represented an apparently neutral area of inquiry where accomplishment in dance could be distanced from devadasi performance, lifestyle, and livelihood. The importance that Devi gave to the technical, rather than ritual, dancer thus enabled her to offset a continued affiliation of the dance with the nondomestic sexuality of devadasi practitioners.

Rukmini Devi's interest in dramatic development and narrative tension likewise defused enduring associations of bharata natyam with the marginal status of devadasis. In conventional items of repertoire, the dancer portrays all individuals involved in the dramatic scenario, which commonly depicts a young woman in love, her absent male lover (equated to or compared with a god), and her friend, whom she sends as a messenger. Devi's dance dramas shifted the portrayal of emotion from the individual expressivity of a solo dancer to an action-oriented plot enacted by an ensemble. The dramatic elements of performance thus rested less on the cultivation of emotional states, including romantic love and sexual desire, than on the progression of a story from exposition through conflict to resolution. By mitigating the portrayal of individual sentiment, lifting layers of poetic reference and character portrayal off the solo dancer, Rukmini Devi's dramas resolved some of the tensions created by the erotic overtones of the solo expression of *sringara bhakti*.

The accompanying emphasis that Rukmini Devi gave to religion and spirituality outside *sringara bhakti* idioms increased the legitimacy of bharata natyam and accelerated the revival. Her dance dramas emphasized the exploits of gods and mythological heroes, shifting religious aesthetics from individual expression to a narrative encounter. She also initiated changes in stage practice by placing icons of gods onstage and offering an obeisance to the stage and the *nattuva-*

nar, thus, in Anne-Marie Gaston's terms, "reritualizing" *bharata natyam* (1992: 156–57). Rukmini Devi bolstered the gains of the revival by distancing the dance form's devotional expression from the intricacies of *sringara bhakti* to a more straightforward celebration of gods and heroes, representing the dance form's religiosity in a potentially more respectable way.

Rukmini Devi's dance dramas not only validated *bharata natyam*, they also increased its accessibility for a larger audience. These works trace a story line that accrues narrative force as it progresses; by contrast, traditional items of repertoire deploy a lyric mode, foregrounding an individual dramatic moment, delving into its emotional complexity, and investigating it from a number of perspectives. Devi's use of the narrative form and of the blocking of characters in the stage space and the use of full-body dramatic expression meant that the audience did not have to rely solely on their comprehension of the sung poetry and the *mudras* in order to understand the dance. These decisions rendered the dance dramas legible to a nonspecialist audience and thus fostered their popularity nationally and internationally.

Rukmini Devi proposed a definition of tradition that, on the one hand, validated *bharata natyam*. On the other hand, her recourse to the distant past legitimized change by establishing a history for *bharata natyam* long and encompassing enough that the dance could not have avoided transforming.²⁶ By arguing that she reaccessed the fundamental qualities, not the exact configuration, of a traditional practice, Devi resolved a tension between authenticity and originality. This simultaneous look to both the past and the future supported her transactions with national and global politics. Her involvement in political activism as well as her experience with narrative drama and ballet, as Indira Viswanathan Peterson (1998: 58–59) suggests, inspired Devi to reconstruct the values of an ancient, pan-Indian practice that could nonetheless accommodate new structures and themes. Her desire to salvage the form, combined with her goal of establishing its vitality, initiated a project radically different from that of contemporaries such as Balasaraswati. Moreover, while Rukmini Devi's career path led from global experiences with dance to local ones, Balasaraswati traveled in the reverse direction: she drew from a local practice and then embarked on a global performance career.

Whereas critics hail Rukmini Devi as a pioneer, they celebrate Balasaraswati as a purist; whereas Rukmini Devi revived a tradition, Balasaraswati preserved one. Balasaraswati foregrounded this role and saw herself as safeguarding, not resuscitating or improving, an artistic legacy. She gave precedence to the dance heritage itself over any singular contribution she could make as an artist. Both her goals and her background diverged from Devi's: she sought to uphold a practice that, she argued, had already achieved perfection.²⁷ Nonetheless, like Devi, Balasaraswati deployed a modern discourse of creativity in her representation of *bharata natyam*, one that pivoted upon expressivity rather than innovative com-

position. She emphasized the experience and projection of interior states in performance over original authorship.

Balasaraswati shared a strategy with Rukmini Devi when she supported her decisions through an understanding of history. For Balasaraswati, however, authority lay with the devadasis and with the very practices that Devi eschewed. She identified devadasis as the rightful guardians of *bharata natyam* because of their direct link to the oral tradition of southern India's historical cultural center, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Thanjavur court. She learned dance under one mentor, Kandappa Pillai, and espoused an allegiance to the Thanjavur court lineage to which she and her guru belonged. Balasaraswati thus saw herself as responsible to the cultural inheritance of her family, community, and dance style. She defined the parameters of ideal performance practice in adherence to the protocol established by the *gurusishya* oral tradition. She demonstrated this allegiance to nineteenth-century dance practice by performing customary *margam* items deploying lyric rather than narrative modes and by retaining, as much as possible, the teaching methods of the *gurukula* system. In both pedagogy and performance, she struggled to retain facets of traditional protocol.

Balasaraswati, like Devi, composed *kuravanji* dance dramas, which her students performed, and she included compositions that previously had appeared only in music concerts in her solo repertoire.²⁸ She put forth these new works and performed in ensemble pieces, such as *kuravanjis* and Sanskrit dramas, but maintained that these were separate projects that did not and should not inform classical *bharata natyam* (Balasaraswati 1988: 38). Instead, she argued that the dancer's original input into the form came not through incorporating new pieces into the *bharata natyam* repertoire but through the expressive opportunities offered by improvisation, especially in the *abhinaya* aspect of conventional performance.

Balasaraswati retained the movement vocabulary, style, and repertoire of the Thanjavur court tradition in which she trained. The *adavus* of this style are similar in name and shape to those of the Pandanallur tradition that Rukmini Devi deployed. Although different instructional lineages feature *adavus* that are specific to them, the overall vocabulary and its system of classification remain consistent from one style to the next. The method of rendition, however, diverges. A Kalakshetra dancer snaps the limbs into a firmly angled position; a student of Balasaraswati eases them into a gently articulated gesture. Both styles, in keeping with conventional features of most classical Indian dance forms (Vatsyayan 1992), take the angles of the joints as a fundamental means of organizing movement. However, the Kalakshetra dancer reaches out into space, while a dancer in Balasaraswati's style retains an internal focus. Balasaraswati's students likewise give a leisurely quality to transitional movements, especially those of the hands and arms, while Devi's attention to accuracy encourages a staccato articulation of arm and head movements. Balasaraswati's emphasis on lyricism manifests it-



Figure 8: Balasaraswati performing an alarippu. © Jan Steward 1986.

self even in abstract phases with no dramatic content; Rukmini Devi's interest in precision appears in expressive as well as rhythmic material.

Balasaraswati drew upon the oral tradition of the Thanjavur court style in her choice of repertoire, favoring items she inherited over those of her own composition. Whereas Rukmini Devi preferred the clarity and dramatic force of multiple performers carrying consistent roles, Balasaraswati emphasized the challenges offered to the solo dancer by the lyric mode's shifting characterization. She retained the traditional poetic format, examining the emotional nuances of a specific dramatic moment rather than taking the audience through a series of events.

Balasaraswati maintained that this lyric mode and the opportunity it gave the soloist for multiple, shifting characterizations offered a unique opportunity for creative expression. She highlighted the scope for dramatic interpretation that such a format afforded the individual performer, arguing that this creativity came through adherence to traditional protocol, not in spite of it. She emphasized improvisation rather than composition, achieving renown for her inventive and evocative *sanchari* bhavas, or elaborations of the sung poetic text of a piece. Such was her skill at improvisation that, according to the American ethnomu-

sicologist Robert Brown, Balasaraswati performed the same piece fifteen times during a concert tour, yet rendered each version anew by deploying a wide range of references and poetic tropes in improvised sections (1986: 7).

Similarly, some additions to Balasaraswati's repertoire came through decisions made in improvised performance. She first performed her signature piece, *Krishna Nee Begane Baro*, as an improvisation (Raman and Ramachandran 1984a: 27). During a recital that she gave when she was fifteen years old, her mother Jayammal sang the *padam Krishna Nee Begane Baro* as a musical interlude. Balasaraswati joined her with abhinaya and improvised the rendition of the song. Over time, she refined the item and it became one of her most celebrated performance works (*ibid.*).²⁹ This process, which added a new item of choreography to her repertoire, illustrates the importance she gave to improvisation rather than preplanned devising.

Tradition, Balasaraswati argued, not only provided a dancer with scope for dramatic exploration but also offered an ideal aesthetic frame through which she and her audience could access this expressivity. The margam begins with an abstract invocation, or *alarippu*, moves through to the *jatiswaram*, a highly technical piece, and the *sabdam*, a work that juxtaposes thematic and rhythmic dance, reaching its apex in the dramatic development and rhythmic complexity of the *varnam*. Short dramatic pieces known as *padams* and *javalis* follow, and the concert concludes with the *tillana*, a dynamic, virtuoso item. Balasaraswati explained the logic for this ordering, drawing parallels between dance, temple architecture, and ritual practice (1991: 10–11). She maintained that this concert structure embodied a unique aesthetic logic without which the form no longer cohered.

Balasaraswati defended tradition by proposing an aesthetic and conceptual framework for adherence to performance conventions and validating them through reference to temple praxis. She also examined them through modern discourses of creativity, where an explicit discussion of interiority and the strategies needed to invoke it came to the fore. In performance, in her discursive representations of *bharata natyam*, and in her teaching, Balasaraswati emphasized the cultivation of emotional states. She maintained that the successful rendition of improvised sequences required attention to interiority. For a dancer to convey the mood of a piece effectively, Balasaraswati argued, she must develop within herself a sense of the sentiments specific to the song as well as an overall tone of devotion. This explicit discussion of the devices a performer should use to foster *bhava* and *bhakti*, or devotion, while drawing upon traditional South Indian aesthetics also aligned *bharata natyam* with a global discourse on expressivity in artistic practice, especially as articulated in dance modernism. It is not surprising, then, that Balasaraswati's emphasis on interiority gained the approval of premodern, early-modern, and modern dancers in North America.³⁰

In her teaching, Balasaraswati sought to uphold traditional modes while ad-

justing them to new contexts. She strove to recreate the one-on-one training methods typical of the gurusishya system, whether providing instruction in her home or in a more formal environment. Although she adapted her approach to include group classes in which students practiced *adavus* together, she taught her most serious students both technique and repertoire in private classes. Even when teaching delimited classes in an institutional environment, Balasaraswati's teaching method was informal and flexible, introducing new material when the student appeared ready rather than when she had completed a specific set of tasks as laid out in a syllabus.

She could not, however, avoid modernizing the teaching process at the same time that she sought to preserve its tenets. She taught dance in environments different from those a traditional mentor would encounter: she gave instruction at the Madras Music Academy and subsequently held residencies at universities and arts organizations during her foreign tours. Although Balasaraswati initially taught *abhinaya*, encouraging her students to learn *nritta* with her mentor's son, Ganeshan Pillai, practical concerns, such as Pillai's ill health, pushed her to abandon this conventional division of labor. Furthermore, although she defended her community's role in the creation and maintenance of classical *bharata natyam*, she taught upper-caste and foreign dancers. Students from both groups pursued intensive training with her although they did not always have access to the same kind of long-term, on-site immersion that disciples benefited from in the traditional *gurukula* learning experience.³¹

Despite these modifications to pedagogy, Balasaraswati nonetheless privileged learning through direct practice rather than theoretical study. Although she, like Iyer and Devi, described the *Natyasastra* as the source of all classical Indian dance forms (1988: 38), she rejected the move to integrate Sanskrit aesthetic theory into dance training, arguing that understanding comes through praxis, not through textual analysis.³² She likewise criticized an overall impetus in the dance field to evaluate *bharata natyam* according to the tenets of the *sastras*. Balasaraswati argued that *bharata natyam*, and *sadir* before it, already accommodated the principles of the Sanskrit texts and that the dance form required no modification in order to do so more effectively (1991: 12). She further maintained that regionally distinct and historically mutable "ways of life" embodied the values of canonical texts while, paradoxically, appearing to diverge from them (*ibid.*). Therefore, she maintained, the impetus to reform *bharata natyam* by associating it more closely with aesthetic theory was misguided (1984: 14).

In arguing for the value of recent historical precedent, Balasaraswati maintained that the traditional form already constituted a creative art. This premise served to cement *bharata natyam's* status as a theatrical, rather than ritual, practice. In addition, when she valorized the *devadasi* tradition, Balasaraswati explicitly acknowledged that stage performance differed from ritual service. Although she expressed religious devotion through her performance work, she rejected the

impetus to “re-ritualize” *bharata natyam*, contesting the claims made by other dancers that they enhanced the dance form’s spirituality when they modified performance protocol by performing obeisance to the stage and placing religious icons in the theatrical space. She insisted that dancers recognize the difference between ritual dance and the stage version of *bharata natyam*, urging performers to confront their new role honestly and not claim to “put the temple on the stage.”³³ Her determination to acknowledge the difference between ritual and concert practice consolidated *bharata natyam*’s position as autonomous art by emphasizing interiority over explicit display and by calling attention to, rather than masking, the function of *bharata natyam* as a creative performance practice in a modern, urban context.

Balasaraswati also helped to solidify the gains of the revival, paradoxically, by fighting the tide of change. The emphasis she gave to maintaining, rather than reforming, the repertoire and protocol of the Thanjavur court style gave the revival a sense of continuity. For viewers, critics, and performers, her presence in the arts as an heir to the *devadasi* legacy and her steadfast resolve to maintain her dance heritage indicated that despite the numerous changes wrought by the anti-*nautch* movement and by the revival, *bharata natyam* retained a connection to its past. Through her efforts, the revival operated, at least in part, as a continuation as well as a rebirth. For these reasons, dancers, critics, and spectators invoked Balasaraswati’s name as a symbol of continuity throughout the twentieth century.

Balasaraswati, in contrast to Rukmini Devi, foregrounded the importance of tradition, a concept more rigid in its definition than classicism. Nonetheless, she extracted for her attention the elements of this heritage, such as interiority and expressivity, that intersected with a modern understanding of creativity. Like Devi, Balasaraswati emphasized the values rather than the form of aesthetic theory texts, although she argued that dancers’ recent historical practice already accommodated such tenets and that dancers need not turn to ancient texts for guidance. Both Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati mobilized Indian epistemologies and specific, local aesthetics as frameworks for understanding and theorizing a range of practices, including non-Indian ones (Balasaraswati 1988). Moreover, both assured that *bharata natyam* could travel nationally and internationally at the same time that they challenged Orientalist assumptions by locating creativity in a traditional practice. Balasaraswati extended this anti-Orientalist move when she suggested that text be understood through *praxis* rather than vice versa.³⁴ Balasaraswati argued that specificity in practice manifested the values of a universalizing textual tradition, suggesting not that practice accord itself with theory, but that only *praxis*-based traditions could truly realize the values of the treatises.

Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi, despite their differing aims and choreographic projects, shared a fundamental assumption: that a *bharata natyam* dancer

best demonstrated originality through fidelity to the past. Each located tradition in an originary moment that defined the parameters for individual contribution. Both maintained that this classical practice allowed them room to exercise creativity and imagination. Through this position, they aligned their understanding of *bharata natyam's* history with international discourses on originality and autonomous art while reinforcing the dance form's connection to a local and national heritage. As they had the case of tradition, they proposed different definitions of creativity, identifying it with authorship and expressivity respectively.

Each of these concerns facilitated the dancers' transactions with national and global discourses of artistic production. Rukmini Devi took inspiration from the European ballet revival of the early twentieth century, which, colored by discourses of modernism, emphasized the role of the choreographer as innovative author. Because Devi interacted with ballet and not with the emergent modern dance, and because she espoused a nationalism rooted in cultural revival, however, she located invention in the recrafting rather than the replacement of a tradition. Balasaraswati spent the first decades of her performing career in India and directly encountered a global dance context only in the 1960s, beginning with the East-West Encounter in Tokyo in 1961. When she performed in the United States for the first time, at *Jacob's Pillow* in 1962, it was at the request of Ted Shawn (*La Meri* 1985: 12); she subsequently won acclaim not only from Shawn but also from Martha Graham (*Raman and Ramachandran* 1984b: 26; *Cowdery* 1995: 5). Modern dancers found in her assertion that individual, emotional experience articulated universal themes a corroboration of their own views on artistry, which had been challenged by the subsequent generation of postmodern dancers. Likewise, Balasaraswati's foreign students found expressivity a lure because, for them, *bharata natyam* offered an avenue toward an interiority that the other dance forms they experienced lacked (*Cowdery* 1995: 51, 55).

These two legendary figures, despite their competing visions, shared the basic premise that individual expression could manifest itself in a dance that acknowledged, explicitly and in choreographic form, a debt to earlier practice. In doing so, they helped to forge a legacy through which *bharata natyam* articulated the concerns of both historicity and originality. Early-twentieth-century practitioners positioned these concerns in dialogue with global discourses on dance, an impulse that extended into the latter part of the century. This multifaceted ability of the dance form enabled its performers to contend with national and international demands for indicators of both authenticity and invention.

Antiquity and Creativity in Late-Twentieth-Century Choreography

Late-twentieth-century dancers who identified their work as *bharata natyam*, rather than as Indian contemporary dance, retained the fundamental premise put forth by Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi: that *bharata natyam* best ex-

pressed originality through allegiance to tradition. These performers, like their predecessors, situated originality within classicism. They too defined tradition and classicism through specific histories that they proposed for the dance form. From the parallel, if contrasting, projects of Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi, these performers inherited strategies for negotiating the concerns of innovation and tradition. However, subsequent generations of dancers refigured this heritage, drawing out specific components of past practice and reflecting on them in a variety of new ways.

For example, many later practitioners concurred with Balasaraswati that the solo margam repertoire afforded the individual performer the greatest scope for dramatic interpretation. Some dancers, such as Balasaraswati's senior disciple Nandini Ramani, deploy this expressivity in order to maintain their mentors' stylistic and repertory legacy. Others divide definitions of creativity, finding originality in the composition of new ensemble works while also pursuing the opportunities for dramatic rendition that solo performance provides. The 1980s and 1990s also saw an increased interest in reconstruction projects that carried out a more overt inquiry into the distant past while also providing ample opportunity for the production of new choreography. Dancers based such endeavors on, for example, the temple repertoire, Sanskrit texts, and visual iconography.

Late-twentieth-century *bharata natyam* retained an attention to past practice but also broadened and deepened the inquiry into history, drawing on a wider range of sources and identifying these traces of the past more explicitly in choreography. Performers made their engagement with the past more apparent than it had been previously. At the same time, however, the demand for new work also increased, especially internationally. The *bharata natyam* milieu of the late twentieth century also encouraged experimentation more actively than in the earlier decades.

The interest in producing works that are at once both original and classical accelerated in response to different political and economic factors from those of the early century. These include an increased attention to, in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) terms, "intentional cultural reproduction" on the part of larger and more globalized diasporic South Asian communities. Appadurai suggests that immigrants seek out emblems of cultural identity because their diasporic position requires the transmission of culture to be explicit rather than tacit. Regional and even national difference, especially for the elites of these communities, fades in relation to the threat of "Westernization." Such immigrants seek out cultural reproduction in specific practices, finding evidence in them of cultural affiliation.

Bharata natyam provides South Asian communities with a potent symbol of cultural identity because of the conjunction that revival-period dancers and promoters established between nationality, spirituality, and feminine respectability. Although some practitioners contested Devi's alterations to the form, none, other than Balasaraswati, explicitly challenged her attempt to shift the dance

form to “women of good families” (Sarada 1985). Devi’s standardization of pedagogy and performance established dance training as a respectable practice for young Indian women. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 3, this new respectability cemented the dance form’s popularity by mobilizing an association of femininity with cultural heritage and therefore with national identity. The revival established a relationship between *bharata natyam* and middle-class respectability, femininity, Sanskrit traditions, and pan-Indian Hindu religious themes. As chapter 2 indicates, however, the dance form remains tied to regional as well as national identities, and it therefore operates as only a partial signifier of Indianness in non-Tamil India. The nationality of *bharata natyam* appears most convincing abroad, where both its disreputable traces and regional and linguistic specificities seem all but invisible. In a diasporic context, the association of *bharata natyam* with nationhood and respectable femininity overshadows other resonances of the dance form.³⁵

The practice of *bharata natyam* therefore endorses an allegiance to a homeland on the part of South Asians outside of the subcontinent. For these individuals, *bharata natyam* expresses a set of “traditional Indian values” (Gaston 1991) that endure over time. Diasporic South Asian communities locate respectability and cultural continuity in *bharata natyam*. For example, Chennai-based dancers, including Nandini Ramani, Chitra Visweswaran, and Vyjayantimala Bali (personal correspondence 1999), noted that nonresident Indian communities value “traditional” elements of performances. Likewise, Gaston reports that “expatriate communities consistently place a greater emphasis on the religious or devotional elements of the dance” (1996: 318). Such groups request of both immigrant and Indian dancers overt displays of tradition, eschewing reference to the transformations the dance form underwent during the twentieth century.

This association of *bharata natyam* with “traditional” Indian culture has bolstered the dance form’s popularity. The connection of *bharata natyam* to Indian, or even South Asian, identity encourages large numbers of girls to take up *bharata natyam* training. Although most pursue this study as a hobby, many others aim for a performance career. The diasporic demand for cultural symbols results in a proliferation of trained amateur dancers while, ironically, encouraging large numbers of young women into pursuing dance as a career.³⁶ This surplus, in turn, puts pressure on dancers to differentiate themselves from their peers through the authorship of original works, while the importance of *bharata natyam* as a cultural emblem encourages performers to demonstrate their fidelity to the past. Within South Asian communities, dancers benefit from highlighting their allegiance to tradition, but they also find that they need to distinguish themselves from amateur practitioners by illustrating their creativity.

Outside of diasporic communities, however, the situation differs. The twentieth century saw shifts first toward and then away from classicism, in public demand for Indian dance within the mainstream non-South Asian dance milieu.

Figure 9: Ragini Devi.
Courtesy of Jerome
Robbins Dance Division,
The New York Public
Library for the Performing
Arts, Astor, Lenox and
Tilden Foundations.



From the 1910s to the 1940s, audiences outside of India and the South Asian diasporas attended concerts of interpretive work based on Indian themes and aesthetics, including those of La Meri, Uday Shankar, Ragini Devi, Ruth St. Denis, and Anna Pavlova. By 1935, Ragini Devi had turned to classical Indian dance. Uday Shankar returned to India, and subsequently, in the post-independence period, the popularity of his work waned, both in India and internationally. Also in 1935, Ram Gopal brought classical Indian dance to the international dance sphere. Gopal, whose concerts deployed the movement vocabulary and the repertoire of *bharata natyam* and other classical forms, began his international touring career during the early years of the *bharata natyam* revival. He achieved renown overseas with his contemporary stagings of classical choreography, selling out theaters in London's West End. These performances included *margam* items choreographed as duets and trios, with the pieces clustered thematically so that they formed an interlinked whole. Subsequently, Balasaraswati, embracing a more specific understanding of tradition, brought her *margam*-based solo concerts to prominent venues in the United States, Europe, and Asia from 1961 until the early 1980s. Thus, early-twentieth-century viewers, both in India and abroad, supported the performance of Indian-themed interpretive work, but the

mid-twentieth century saw a turn away from such material and toward work that demonstrated classicism.

In the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, however, public perception came full circle, witnessing a split in international bharata natyam choreography between those works created and performed for “community” versus “mainstream” audiences. Viewers and funders situated internationally have again turned toward innovative modern and postmodern works in the South Asian dance field, seeking out choreography that intersects with Western contemporary aesthetics. Especially in North America and Britain, non–South Asian audiences, promoters, and funders favor explicit markers of experimentation in the bharata natyam–based choreography they patronize. Spectators privilege pieces that participate in a global art milieu rather than those that retain traditional aesthetics.³⁷

Enduring Orientalist viewpoints alongside a lack of familiarity with choreographic codes often lead non–South Asian viewers to assume that bharata natyam choreography, no matter how recent its composition, is “ancient” and “traditional” unless its innovative moves manifest themselves explicitly. Although creativity is not restricted to choreography that demonstrates modernist or postmodern aesthetics, many international audiences require clear indicators of (Western) contemporary aesthetics before they identify a work as innovative. Some dancers argue that this kind of work receives the most funding of all South Asian–based dance material (Ramphal 2003: 32). At the same time, however, the same viewers seem to expect convincing markers of Indianness from bharata natyam–based choreographies in order to differentiate them from Western contemporary dance or Indian modern dance. Thus, in order to extend their work beyond diasporic South Asian communities, dancers based or touring abroad demonstrate both the historicity and originality of their performance projects.

In Chennai (as Madras was renamed in 1996), dancers encounter different expectations from those in cities abroad. Because Chennai played a key role in reestablishing bharata natyam, for at least some of its denizens and venue organizers, overt markers of classicism and continuity remain more important than indicators of innovation. The city’s relationship to national and regional political movements extended, in a postcolonial context, an imperative to demonstrate indigeneity: that which appears too “innovative” runs the risk of looking “Western” (Menon 1998: 46; Chatterjea 2004a: 116–18). At the same time, a surplus of classical dancers and traditional performances (Coorlawala 1996: 71; Gaston 1996: 119–21; Meduri 1996: xl) encouraged dancers and spectators alike to seek out examples of new creative works. Dancers in the city found it necessary to differentiate themselves from their peers by proposing new ideas for performance works that nonetheless exhibit indicators of traditionalism.

Both inside and outside India the surfeit of trained bharata natyam dancers prompts performers to distinguish themselves from their peers by creating

choreographing that is original. At the same time, to remain within the sphere of classicism, dancers identify the historical basis of their work. Those who perform outside of India grapple with the contradictory demands of South Asian community and “mainstream” audiences, both of whom demand demonstrations of “authenticity” and of accessibility, but who find these elements in contrasting aspects of performance.

Late-twentieth-century dancers responded to competing demands for innovation and classicism by creating choreography that drew upon historical sources in new ways. These practitioners, like those of the revival, identified as “traditional” an adherence to the values of an overarching, originary form, which they defined in contrasting terms. Dancers expanded possibilities for innovation, however, by drawing upon a wider range of sources than their predecessors had done, located in both historical and living movement practices. A greater specificity in the inquiry into the past combined with an increased interest in creative exploration. Like revival-era dancers, late-twentieth-century performers proposed histories for the dance and suggested means for recreating the qualities of a primary form in choreography. These projects provided for new interpretations of *bharata natyam*’s structure and content.

The Chennai-based dancer Padma Subrahmanyam maintains that her choreographic endeavors return present-day dance practice to a standardized, *sastric* form. While researching the *Natyasastra* for her doctorate, Subrahmanyam encountered descriptions of *karanas*, fundamental units of movement. She took the canonical status of the *Natyasastra* as an indication that the text described a germinal practice. This originary form, she argued, brought forth the regional variations that exist in the present. Based on the aesthetic theory text’s division of dance forms into *marga*, or orthodox, and *desi*, characterized by regional variations,³⁸ Subrahmanyam maintained that classical dance should mitigate regional markers in favor of the movement priorities of the original form, as delineated in the theoretical text.

Subrahmanyam translated descriptions of *karanas* into movement, combining them with the basic positions and transitional movements of *bharata natyam* so that virtuoso turns, jumps, and leg extensions augment the *adavus* of the form. Her pieces resemble conventional *bharata natyam* choreography in that they rely on its syntax and much of its vocabulary. Her changes to the classical form came primarily through additions to rather than the replacement of its vocabulary through the inclusion of movement that, she argues, derive from the Sanskrit text.³⁹ She therefore suggests that the material she has created adheres to classical precedent more closely than “regional” forms such as *sadir did*, arguing that *bharata nritya*, the new dance form that she developed through reconstruction, revivifies an originary practice.

In her 1979 publication *Bharata’s Art Then and Now*, Subrahmanyam simultaneously deconstructs claims to authenticity and replaces them with her own

understanding of an essential form. She argues that any heritage must include change: “Traditions have been a continuous process. Every new element takes time to get permeated into the field and once it gets established, it joins the tide of tradition. This is how tradition itself grows” (1979: 93). Likewise, she interrogates arguments based on historical authenticity, maintaining that

the so-called traditional concert of *Bharatanatyam* is by itself a product of the changing time. The presentation has gone through enormous changes in the past forty or fifty years. Hence, it is easy to imagine the changes that could have taken place in the last 300 years and the last 3000 years. Who could say which is original, pure and authentic. (1979: 92)

Yet, she returns to claims of historical validity when she debunks *sadir*’s traditionalism. She maintains that the relative novelty of the form and its divergence from the hegemonic textual tradition negate the claims a dancer might make for its conservation: “The *Sadir* is itself only hardly [*sic*] 300 years old. It has its own connection as well as discrepancy from Bharata’s *Natyasastra*” (1979: 92). Subrahmanyam challenges practitioners’ argument that *bharata natyam*’s value lies in a continuous tradition that extends back to a distant past. Rather than deconstructing the notion of classicism as synonymous with venerable practices, however, she replaces one construction of history—in which *bharata natyam* retains authority because it is ancient—with another one in which the *Natyasastra* is canonical, and *sadir*, because it deviated from the tenets of the text, was not (1979: 76–77).

Like Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati, Padma Subrahmanyam posits that creativity emerges in relation to *bharata natyam*’s history. This past, in turn, sets the boundaries for acceptable change (Subrahmanyam 1979: 93). She follows Devi’s lead when she refers to distant origins for *bharata natyam* and separates her choreography from the dance form’s recent antecedents. However, the early-twentieth-century practitioner located in *sadir* artistic accomplishment compromised by the lifestyle of its practitioners; for Subrahmanyam, the movement vocabulary itself, as well as its idioms and its context, contributed to the dance form’s ostensibly attenuated state. Although she expresses respect for particular *devadasi* dancers (1979: 91), she nonetheless maintains that *sadir* did not equal the dance described in the *Natyasastra* (88–89). Similarly, she contests the position of many of her colleagues by querying the aesthetic authority of the Thanjavur legacy, especially that of the much-valorized Thanjavur Quartet (85).

Like Rukmini Devi, Subrahmanyam proposes a history long enough that it includes change. Subrahmanyam argues against fixity within *sadir* itself, stating that because it has endured only three hundred years, its claim to traditionalism remains partial. Likewise, she maintains that its legacy cannot preclude transformation. Subrahmanyam, in a move parallel to Devi’s, circumvents any remaining stigma on dance by evoking the unquestionably authoritative Sanskrit dramatur-

gical text as the primary influence on her choreographic practice. She makes a more far-reaching claim than her predecessor, however, when she indicates that she reaccesses the content and form, not just the values, of the inceptive dance practice. Although for Devi the Sanskrit texts provided inspiration, for Subrahmanyam they constitute the source of classical dance. Subrahmanyam's investigation of the distant past provides historical evidence that supports the changes she introduced to bharata natyam. This, in turn, helped to establish her singularity as a choreographer and performer and to distinguish her work from other inquiries in bharata natyam. Just as Rukmini Devi aligned her innovative ventures with the aesthetic values of the past, Subrahmanyam exercises creativity through her investigation of an earlier practice.

Vyjayantimala Bali, by contrast, foregrounds the historical legacy of the Thanjavur region. For her, traditionalism means adherence to the tenets of the oral tradition as transmitted by her mentor, Kittappa Pillai, and in her performance work she presents margam items from this stylistic lineage. Her approach parallels that of Balasaraswati in that she strives to uphold the Thanjavur tradition, as handed down by Isai Vellala practitioners, and not allow it to be diluted by hybridizing influences. Like Balasaraswati, she sees this allegiance to tradition as enabling rather than precluding personal expression.

In contrast to both of the early-twentieth-century practitioners, however, Bali emphasizes the temple tradition of nineteenth-century solo female dance. With the assistance of her guru, she reconstructed a number of items from the Thanjavur region's devadasi repertoire, basing their design on existing musical scores and on research into temple performances and rendering them in performance through the bharata natyam movement vocabulary and phraseology, which she acquired in her training.⁴⁰ Bali sees this project as one of resuscitating the source choreographies, suggesting that her original input lies not in the creation of new works but in the idea of reintroducing temple material into concert performance and the groundbreaking research that led up to the performance of these items.

In integrating ritual repertoire into the margam so that temple and court items appear alongside one another, Bali deploys elements of both Balasaraswati's and Devi's strategies. Like Balasaraswati, she associates her work with an oral tradition and connects her undertakings to the recent, rather than distant, past. She maintains that an allegiance to bharata natyam's history articulates itself best through preservation of movement vocabulary, the solo format, and a concert order based on that of the margam. She further emphasizes conservation when she describes her reconstructions as the reviving of "old and forgotten forms" (Bali, biographical sketch, promotional materials 1999).

Bali's approach also parallels that of Devi, however, when she embraces the opportunity to craft performance material from compositions that have fallen out of circulation. As Devi did with the *Kutrala Kuravanji*, Bali locates opportunities for her individual contribution to bharata natyam in the revisiting of

work no longer in the current repertoire, finding creative expression not only in composition but in the research that led up to the final product. Bali's choreographic choices, like *Devi's*, also render the religiosity of the dance form more explicit. By reconstructing items from the temple repertoire, Bali, like *Devi*, supports her decisions by ritualizing *bharata natyam*. In drawing together the strategies of both revival-era dancers, Bali resolves tensions between innovation and allegiance to tradition, creating new material outside the *margam's* genre categories but supporting these choices through identifiable historical referents.

While performers such as Subrahmanyam and Bali negotiate the competing pulls of individual expression and allegiance to the past, the Toronto-based choreographer Hari Krishnan makes explicit the contrast between innovation and classicism. Rather than updating material received from his mentor or reconstructing out-of-circulation works, Krishnan selects pieces for his concerts that exhibit traits that he identifies either as "very traditional" or "very contemporary" (personal correspondence 1999). Although he strives to retain the classical aesthetics of the repertory items that he has learned from his mentor, Kittappa Pillai, he also creates and performs new compositions. He furthermore states that all of his work, by definition, expresses contemporary values because he "liv[es] in a contemporary world" (*ibid.*). Although he maintains that his dance "is not about extremes,"⁴¹ his concert *Solo Works* (1999) juxtaposes contemporary works and *margam* items, drawing out their contrasts as well as their similarities.

When God Is a Customer, one of the three compositions featured in the *Solo Works* performance, juxtaposes *bharata natyam* *padams* and *javalis* with phrases of quotidian gesture or abstract expressionist, contemporary dance-derived movement. The former accompany sung poetry, while the latter occur alongside a spoken English translation of the *padam* text projected over the sound system. A. K. Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman's (1994) translation of songs by the seventeenth-century Telugu poet-composer Ksetrayya inspired Krishnan's creation of the piece. Krishnan compiled a selection of the Ksetrayya songs and arranged the short pieces so that they fed into a linear narrative. Although the original poems, following genre conventions, explore the emotional nuances of particular dramatic instances, when strung together they form a single story that traces the actions and reactions of a particular character. In keeping with the erotic idiom of Ksetrayya's poems, Krishnan positions the pieces so that they recount the development and demise of a love affair between a courtesan and her patron, *Muvvala Gopala*, a form of Krishna.

The piece commences with a *mela prapti*, a musical item of the temple repertoire. As the poems begin, the lights come up slightly, and Krishnan materializes out of the shadows. Barely visible in silhouette and seated on a pedestal, he suggests, through stylized gesture, the intimate encounter between the courtesan and her god-lover. In silence, Krishnan then depicts the heroine's awakening the following day using quotidian movements like stretching his arms, throw-

Figure 10: Hari Krishnan as nayika. Photograph by Cylla von Tiedemann.



ing back his head, and using small, delicate gestures to suggest the woman's ab-lutions. He holds a dignified, feminine pose, with a straight arm propped on a raised knee, during an English translation that expresses the courtesan's joy: "To-day is a good day."

He stands, descends from the pedestal, and in conjunction with the sung Telugu lyrics launches a classical padam, using mudras and facial expressions to convey the mood of the song as he traverses the stage in a stately manner, walking in time to the music. In the role of the heroine, Krishnan extends his hands and draws them back, indicating a request: "Ask him to come." He then raises a hand to his forehead and extends it to the front, bowing slightly, conveying her promise to "give him a royal welcome." He develops this mood of joyous anticipation, tracing articulate hands and arms through sanchari bhavas that invoke the regal status of the absent lover. At the end of the Telugu song, Krishnan resumes a more quotidian stance as he represents the woman patiently awaiting her lover's arrival.

The piece proceeds in this manner as stylized mudras sculpt the imagery of

the Telugu refrains, the tone of which Krishnan invokes through semirealistic facial expressions. During the English translation, his countenance remains neutral, and he holds a pose or performs a pantomimic gesture that conveys the sense of a single word from the line of poetry. For other sections of the English text, he employs an abstract expressionist vocabulary that suggests emotion through full-body positioning rather than through facial expression and gestures. For example, as the poetry describes the heroine's anxiety, he contracts his torso, bringing his hands to the center of his chest. He follows this sinking of the chest with a counteracting arch of the spine, led by the hands. He reaches his arms out from his center, a movement that pulls his entire torso into an open flexion and creates a vulnerable look.

As the piece winds toward its conclusion, Krishnan performs the classic bharata natyam padam *Indendu*. Dignified and disdainful, the heroine conveys her anger at the god-lover's infidelity. Krishnan's facial expressions augment the sarcastic rejoinders of the text and the mudras. He dismisses the perfidious consort with an arching sweep of his hand, his outward-facing palms signaling an unqualified rejection. Krishnan's piece, however, ends on a different note from the classical padam. He returns to the pedestal in silence, accompanied solely by instrumental music. He hovers, looking hesitantly out over the stage space, and finally retreats from its emptiness with a dropped head and slightly concave torso, suggesting that the heroine, despite her show of fury, succumbs to sorrow at her lover's departure.

The structure of *When God Is a Customer* conjoins historical source material with new choreography, exhibiting a tension between them but also suggesting their complementarity. The piece negotiates a disjuncture that early-twentieth-century practitioners encountered between narrative and lyric works as well as between the resonances of each as "innovative" and "traditional," respectively. Rather than reconstructing movement from historical sources, as Subrahmanyam does, Krishnan recontextualizes older dance material. In keeping with such a perspective, he maintains that the pieces portray the experiences of a seventeenth-century courtesan while also speaking to sentiments encountered in contemporary life: "It could be Muvvagopala of the seventeenth century or it could be John over on Fourth Street" (Hari Krishnan, personal correspondence 1999).

Krishnan's views parallel those of Balasaraswati in that he performs conventional margam items because he finds in them ample scope for dramatic expression. Like Balasaraswati, Krishnan locates universality in emotion, a commonality that endures across time and provides a link between cultures. At the same time, and in contrast to the revival-era dancer, his is an explicit project of invention. He takes an approach that is more overtly experimental than that of Rukmini Devi or of his more senior contemporaries Vyjayantimala Bali and Padma Subrahmanyam. Unlike them, Krishnan embraces experimentation for its own sake. He refers to history as a source of choreographic material but not as a stan-

dard that sets the parameters for innovation. In projecting both of these agendas in a single concert, he suggests that the two imperatives need not compete with one another or cancel each other out. He intertwines commitments to tradition and innovation without validating one through the other, indicating that the tensions between these concerns pose less of a problem for him than for his seniors.

As a Tamil dancer from Singapore who lives and presents his work in North America, Hari Krishnan inhabits a position more distant from both the devadasi tradition and the bharata natyam revival than do Chennai-based practitioners Bali and Subrahmanyam. As a man performing bharata natyam in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Krishnan faces less of a stigma associated with dance than do more senior female practitioners like Subrahmanyam and Bali, who began their training and performance practice when anti-nautch criticism remained fresh in the minds of viewers. The margin between Krishnan's choreography and the censure of the anti-nautch movement that his age and gender creates enables his frank representation of the courtesan tradition. Likewise, his temporal and geographical separation from the nationalist reclamation of bharata natyam renders his position less subject to demands for authenticity, facilitating his presentation of new work. His position as a male dancer also releases him from an ostensible concordance between femininity and tradition, which accelerates demands for continuity within bharata natyam.

Krishnan, from the very position that allows him to circumvent colonial criticism and nationalist demands, grapples with the enduring affiliation of bharata natyam with femininity. For his Canadian audience, an association of South Indian solo dance with elite women intersects with a European and North American assumption that dance is a feminine practice. Although Krishnan adopts a female character, his appearance onstage, bare-chested, clad in trousers, and wearing minimal stage make-up, disrupts an association of this piece with drag performance. Similarly, when Krishnan steps out of his female, courtesan character in order to perform a more pedestrian movement, he reminds his audience of his separation from the character that he plays. His explicit foregrounding of authorship supports his position as a male practitioner of a presumably feminine pursuit. Krishnan foregrounds his role as choreographer, a position that, in both southern India and in North America, aligns more easily with masculinity than does that of dance performer. Similarly, the more abstract movements and neutral facial expressions that he adopts during the English translations universalize the piece's themes not only on a linguistic and national level but also on a gendered one. *When God Is a Customer* offsets a feminization of dance by making its originality apparent.

Performed in Canada, *When God Is a Customer* addresses an audience that requires more markers of innovation than a Chennai audience does to recognize a contemporary piece. The largely non-Indian North American audience that

witnessed the Solo Works concert would tend to label most choreography of Indian origin as “traditional” and ancient unless actively encouraged to categorize them differently. Krishnan’s experiments must be apparent for the majority of his viewers to find them legible, while Subrahmanyam’s and Bali’s projects, performed in Chennai, can introduce invention in more minute ways and still meet with viewer comprehension. In highlighting authorship rather than masking it, Krishnan addresses the expectations of a mainstream Canadian dance audience that craves evidence of originality. He therefore makes visible his global situation through a graphic juxtaposition of classicist and innovative agendas.⁴²

Shobana Jeyasingh’s Challenge to Tradition and Innovation

Shobana Jeyasingh, a contemporary British choreographer who creates works based in *bharata natyam*’s movement vocabulary, also explicitly acknowledges her transnational situation. Like the other choreographers discussed here, she reflects on issues of traditionalism and innovation as they inform her work. In contrast to practitioners who define their work as classical, however, she eschews in-choreography references to historical source materials. In both her choreography and her written commentaries, she challenges neo-Orientalist and nationalist longings for “authenticity,” refuting both an Anglo-British fascination with “ancient tradition” (Jeyasingh 1990) and an Indian immigrant longing for an unchanged homeland (Jeyasingh 1993: 8). While many *bharata natyam* practitioners debate parameters for acceptable change, Jeyasingh argues that transformation inheres in all forms, including those identified as traditional.⁴³

Like Krishnan, Jeyasingh rejects the claim that she “updates” an ancient form (1995: 191). In response to critics who suggest that her work fundamentally alters an otherwise unchanged practice, she maintains that concepts of classicism and tradition define themselves not through an exact replication of their past, but through the consensus achieved among performers and viewers (Jeyasingh 1993: 6–7). She counters the suggestion that her work provides a singular challenge to a static orthodoxy by arguing that her oeuvre interrogates a constructed, not an inherently fixed, tradition.

Shobana Jeyasingh deploys a *bharata natyam*–based movement lexicon in order to create works within a high modernist tradition that avoids both narrative and lyric dramatic modes.⁴⁴ She uses neither the personally oriented, nuanced emotionality of Balasaraswati nor the action-oriented, dramatic crafting of Rukmini Devi. She eschews both the traditional exploration of a lyrical format and a contemporary classical investigation of linear narrative, highlighting instead such fundamentals as bodies, space, and time (personal correspondence 1999). Unlike the other choreographers discussed here, Jeyasingh mobilizes, modifies, and rearticulates the units of movement of *bharata natyam* without drawing on historical sources such as aesthetic theory texts, classical poetry, or images from

temple sculpture and practice. She does not reconstruct out-of-circulation works, nor does she address the dance form's past in theme or narrative. She performs a reverse move to those who modify the classical form through attention to dramatic lucidity by basing her pieces on game structures, as in *Raid* (1995), or on representations of geography, as in *Making of Maps* (1991). In *Romance . . . with Footnotes* (1993), by contrast, Jeyasingh references bharata natyam by deploying the structure of a varnam, juxtaposing lyrical, contemplative sections with explosions of virtuoso rhythmic footwork (Rubidge 1996: 40). She deconstructs the conventional investigation of mood, however, replacing it with the exploration of the divergent spatial pathways formed by multiple bodies in complex groupings.

Jeyasingh retains the underlying aesthetic premises of bharata natyam, such as a grounded use of weight and the division of the body into triangular shapes rather than lines. She cites the "objective" nature of such movement priorities (Jeyasingh 1995: 193) as evidence of their suitability for use in formalist work but also seeks to "ask questions of the adavus" (personal correspondence 1999). Through these strategies, she uses bharata natyam to "creat[e] a new dance language" (1995). She describes her work as an autonomous venture, the primary relevance of which derives from her individual forays into structural and formal concerns and not from social or cultural issues (personal correspondence 1999).

Despite her rejection of overt markers of continuity, Jeyasingh, like classical choreographers, stakes her position discursively through reference to history. She discusses the same historical influences cited by other practitioners, such as the *Natyasastra*, the margam as laid down by the Thanjavur Quartet, and the bharata natyam revival, but she locates transformation within the practices of the past, deconstructing a "historicist" move to insert the "old" into the "new" (Franko 1989). She highlights evidence of change rather than continuity in each canonical moment, using history to validate experimentation rather than to set acceptable parameters for transformation. For instance, she describes the bharata natyam revival not as the rebirth of a vanishing practice but as a dynamic, self-conscious construction of tradition in the face of colonial criticism (1993: 7–8, 1995: 193). She likewise cites the Thanjavur Quartet and their standardization of the concert order but inverts the argument that their decisions hold an authoritative sway over the present moment. She suggests instead that this standardization, although now canonical, may have once inspired debate and controversy.⁴⁵ She similarly invokes the much-referenced *Natyasastra* but makes apparent the strategy implicitly mobilized by Rukmini Devi and Padma Subrahmanyam, maintaining that if bharata natyam has a two-thousand-year history, then it must have undergone radical transformations (Jeyasingh 1993: 7). Unlike Subrahmanyam, however, Jeyasingh does not replace one tradition with an older, apparently more valid one but instead insists that no practice, even the most ancient and authoritative ones, remains unchanged.

For Jeyasingh, moreover, bharata natyam's history is not only dynamic but



Figure 11: Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company in *Romance . . . with Footnotes*. Photograph by Hugo Glendenning.

also hybrid. She maintains that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century choreographers negotiated, in dance material, the aesthetic preferences of the various rulers of Thanjavur (Jeyasingh 1993: 7, personal correspondence 1999), and that others, through *bharata natyam*, grappled with the colonial contradictions of the early twentieth century. Based on this view of history, she suggests, practitioners can also incorporate the cultural hybridity of present-day British society into choreography.

Jeyasingh identifies her work as “contemporary British dance” rather than as a cross-cultural form, reminding her viewers that, for instance, the composer she works with “lives next door . . . in Stamford Hill” (1995: 192). She makes a more radical claim when she foregrounds Britain’s hybridity alongside her own: “My heritage is a mix of David Bowie, Purcell, Shelley, and Anna Pavlova and it has been mixed as subtly as a samosa has mixed itself into the English cuisine in the last ten years or so: impossible to separate” (1995: 193). In a number of her commentaries, she states that if her work reflects any kind of identity, it is a transnational, urban affiliation, not an Indian one. For instance, she describes her piece *Surface Tension* as embodying the competing but invigorating pulls between different cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic resonances of urban life (Jeyasingh, presentation, University of Surrey, Guildford, 2000).

She therefore suggests that integrating *bharata natyam*’s movement vocabulary into British contemporary dance does not displace a fixed tradition as much

as it participates in a legacy of continuous change. Jeyasingh's description of her choreography as British and contemporary allows her to circumvent the imperative within the *bharata natyam* sphere to celebrate tradition. Likewise, she avoids the tendency in the classical milieu to legitimize creativity by invoking historical sources. This, in turn, enables her to acknowledge multiple origins without necessarily making them manifest in choreography.

Although Jeyasingh circumvents the debates in the *bharata natyam* field over innovation and tradition, the set of concerns with which she contends is analogous to those faced by classical practitioners. Like the other choreographers discussed here, Jeyasingh refers to history in order to frame her choreographic choices. An understanding of the past enables change for Jeyasingh by providing not an essence, as for Devi, nor an ideal form, as for Subrahmanyam, but evidence of continuous transformation. Like Balasaraswati, she maintains that creativity has long inhered in the classical form. Unlike her revival-era predecessor, however, Jeyasingh locates creativity not in individual expressivity but also in changes to the form itself.

Jeyasingh's understanding of history, then, queries the assumption that the rigor and integrity of the *bharata natyam* movement vocabulary depend solely upon a relationship to the past. She also challenges the assumption that innovation is solely a twentieth-century phenomenon. By suggesting that *bharata natyam*-inspired choreography can incorporate modernist aesthetics on its own and that it can be innovative without integrating historical sources into choreography, Jeyasingh untangles the relationship between originality and continuity that early-twentieth-century practitioners such as Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi established. That she does so in contradistinction to critical and spectatorial representations of her work, however, suggests the extent to which, in the *bharata natyam* sphere as a whole, these two imperatives remain tightly intertwined.

Jeyasingh, like the other practitioners discussed here, invokes new themes in and alongside an understanding of the past, albeit represented discursively rather than choreographically. Such historical references shed light on the classical form by indicating that even a modernist choreography rooted in *bharata natyam* contends with the intersecting agendas of originality and tradition and engages with an understanding of history. The understanding of history proposed by all of these artists foregrounds some sources over others, aligning *bharata natyam* with particular communities and therefore articulating particular politics of representation. Although, for instance, Devi's and Subrahmanyam's versions of history refer to a pan-Indian, Sanskritic legacy that frames *bharata natyam* and Balasaraswati and Bali emphasize a Tamil regional heritage, Jeyasingh's view of the relationship between past and present raises issues of hybridity and global interaction, deploying aspects of the past that, for her, embody Britishness and a transnational urban experience.

All of these approaches indicate a relationship between the production of his-

tory, cultural identity, and politics.⁴⁶ Bharata natyam dancers deployed their understandings of history in order to contend with the pressures placed on the dance form by colonialism, reform movements, and nationalism. The following chapters demonstrate how histories, being selections of particular elements to the exclusion of others, produce political positions. These histories, as sets of political choices, align bharata natyam with communities both “imagined” (Anderson 1991) and immediate.