

## 4 Training of Bharata Natyam Teachers

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### RECRUITMENT OF DANCE TEACHERS

Until the 1920s Bharata Natyam was almost exclusively the domain of the *isai vellala* community. Most non-hereditary aspirants had to learn dance from them. The total involvement of the *isai vellala* families with dance and music until the 1940s is exemplified by the account of Naga, the wife of K.N. Dakshinamurthy, a *nattuvanar* and dance teacher. Her lineage is interspersed with dancers, teachers and musicians. Her recollections are important because they form part of an unrecorded history: "As my relative Amaniammal was a *dasi* it will not be recorded who her husband was, but she had five children. Her two daughters: one Kalyani became a dancer and another, Gunavati became a singer. All her three sons became musicians: Kandasami played the clarinet, Vaithyalingam, the *mridangam* (drum) and Pasupati, the *tavil* (drum)." Dance and music continued in the next generation:

Kalyani had four children. Her two sons were both associated with dance and music: T. Swaminathan was a dance teacher and *nattuvanar*; he received the Central Sangeet Natak Award. Krishnamurthy played the violin. Her two daughters: Rajalakshmi, and the other, whose name I cannot remember, were good dancers. Rajalakshmi's two daughters, Jivaratnammalla and Kasturi, were also good dancers.

The list is endless until the 1940s and 50s, when many hereditary families stopped training their children in both dance and music. From the early 1950s to the late 1970s, few girls from *isai vellala*

families studied or performed the dance. Most dancers were from higher castes, usually academically well-educated, and often from wealthy and influential families. Teaching continued to be dominated by men of the *isai vellala* community. They were perceived as the true repositories of authenticity because their families had been associated with music and dance for generations. The education of these hereditary dance teachers was usually confined to the artistic and their families usually were neither wealthy nor influential. Socially the teachers and dancers were far apart. Thus a fairly clear division could, at one time, be discerned between the higher caste dancers and the traditional *isai vellala* teachers.

To highlight changes that have taken place in the past years, I have divided the teachers, some of whom were also dancers before becoming teachers, into two categories. The "older" category is for those born before 1942, and "younger", for those born after 1942.

Since the 1930s, and particularly in the past decade, the distinction between teachers and dancers has become increasingly blurred. Now dancers from the *isai vellala* community, as well as the more numerous examples from other castes, both teach and conduct recitals.

### NATTUVANARS

The person who conducts a dance recital is known as a *nattuvanar*. Because *nattuvanars* have been central to the transmission of the dance, their background requires some explanation. Traditionally, the Bharata Natyam orchestra was led by a male *nattuvanar*, who knew the dance choreography and music intimately. He was also a senior musician and in most instances, a dance teacher. *Nattuvanars* who taught the dance and organized the music for *devadasis'* performances were also the main medium by which, from the 1930s onwards, the dance was transmitted to non-hereditary dancers.

A *nattuvanar* performs *nattuvangam*. This involves several duties: striking cymbals, one of which is approximately three, and the other two inches across, and held in either hand; uttering

rhythmic syllables (*jatis*);<sup>1</sup> singing in the classical style of Karnatic music; controlling the tempo (*laya*) of the dance; and conducting the dance orchestra. As each of these is an art in itself, it takes many years to become a *nattuvanar*. Skill in *nattuvangam* is important for a dance teacher. Its technique is often a closely guarded professional secret. No recital of Bharata Natyam is considered authentic unless conducted by a *nattuvanar*. A recent innovation which has occurred in the last ten years is to dispense with the *nattuvanar*. This dance music usually lacks the tension and excitement that the percussive beating of the *nattuvanar*'s cymbals brings.

Until the 1930s, the profession of *nattuvanar* encompassed both teaching dance and conducting dance recitals. Many still combine both activities, but there is also a tendency towards the bifurcation of roles. Today the skills to perform *nattuvangam* and conduct dance recitals have been acquired by many musicians (vocalists, percussionists and others). Because many of these new *nattuvanars* do not teach dance, the word *nattuvanar* may now be used for a specialist who only conducts Bharata Natyam recitals. At the same time, the ability to perform *nattuvangam* is an extremely important additional professional qualification for a dance teacher. With it, they are able to present public performances of their students and thus attract more students. It gives teachers full artistic and financial control over the performing situation of their students which they would not have if they had to hire a *nattuvanar*. If they lack skill in *nattuvangam*, a teacher's only alternative is to train a *nattuvanar*, in their repertoire, otherwise their students will not be able to perform. Likewise dancers need a *nattuvanar* who is familiar with their repertoire if they wish to perform.

### BECOMING A NATTUVANAR

Knowledge of rhythm and music is basic to *nattuvangam*. Singing is an important skill. If the *nattuvanar*'s voice is not very good, he/she must still have the necessary musical knowledge to direct the rest of the orchestra and be able to provide vocal accompaniment

during practice and rehearsals. Many vocalists have their first professional exposure to Bharata Natyam as accompanists. While working with dancers they gradually develop other skills required to be a *nattuvanar*. Another route to becoming a *nattuvanar* is as an instrumental accompanist. Several *nattuvanars* have been violinists. By being exposed to the dance, accompanists learn the dance repertoire and may later become teachers. Because vocal training normally precedes the study of any form of Indian music, many instrumentalists also have the skills to sing for dance recitals.

Older *nattuvanars* reported that it used to be customary to have two *nattuvanars* in an orchestra—the senior and an apprentice. Both would beat the cymbals (*talam*) and sing. The apprentice usually took the dominant role in the first three pieces (*alarippu*, *jatisvaram* and *sabdam*), while the senior *nattuvanar* spoke the complex rhythmic passages in the central piece, *varnam*. Even though the student conducted the recitals he/she would very often hand over the payment to the master. Gradually the apprentice took over the master's work and the master then retired, generally leaving the big city and returning to his native village.

*Nattuvanars* were jealous about imparting the skills of their profession to others, at first, only a few from outside the community chose to learn. Several musicians for Bharata Natyam reported that they were not taught *nattuvangam* but "just did it". There did not seem to be any organized way for teaching the beating of the cymbals. One *nattuvanar* explained: "In the beginning I taught all my master's junior classes and gradually worked my way up. Even now I encourage my senior students to conduct my junior classes so that they will learn how to beat the cymbals as they go along." Another was completely self-taught: "I used to watch my father but he never taught me exactly how to do it. By the time I decided that I wanted to make teaching my career he had died so I just picked up the cymbals. It is not that difficult when you have grown up with it." The teaching of *nattuvangam* became institutionalized after 1944, when it began to be taught at dance schools such as Kalakshetra. At Kalakshetra it was taught along with dance, music, Sanskrit and academic subjects. The graduates of this institution, both male and

female, emerged fully equipped to teach all aspects of Bharata Natyam, the practical as well as the theoretical. Because the medium of instruction was English, it was possible for them to find employment all over India and abroad. The demand for these graduates led to a trend towards acquiring a diploma to teach dance.

From the very beginning of the dance revival, higher caste women and men began to perform and teach dance, and to conduct their students' recitals. Today, persons from a wide variety of backgrounds are active as *nattuvanars*, thus eroding the prerogative of traditional practitioners. Whereas most of the early hereditary male dance teachers added the word *nattuvanar* to their name, as it identified their profession, this practice has recently gone out of vogue. Now the title of *nattuvanar* is attached only to older male members of the *isai vellala*. The late V.S. Muthuswamy *Nattuvanar* identified himself as such all his life, both in conversation and in the sign on the door of his home and studio. "Modern" dance teachers either add the prefix *vadiyar* (teacher), the Tamil equivalent for *ustad* (Neuman 1980; Kippen 1988), or *guru*, which has connotations of a spiritual guide. Another title is the Sanskrit term *natyacharya* (senior dance teacher), clearly a form of sanskritization. While the function of *nattuvanar* is performed by persons from various communities, those from the higher castes usually describe themselves as *natyacharya* or *guru* but not as *nattuvanar*.

### SKILLS REQUIRED TO TEACH BHARATA NATYAM

To become a full-fledged Bharata Natyam dance teacher, able both to teach and to conduct recitals, takes many years. Of all the skills required, the ability to dance ranks lowest, though some teachers are, or were, dancers. Among the teachers I interviewed, only half the older generation of teachers from traditional families had undergone intensive training in the basic steps, and not all of these had proceeded as far as dancing the first two dances of the concert repertoire (*alarippu*, *jatisvaram*). This, however, constitutes no problem since Bharata Natyam teachers do not usually demonstrate

the dance by dancing alongside their students. This is primarily because the teacher provides the rhythmic accompaniment for the class by beating a stick held in one hand on a block of wood (*tattukal*) while seated cross-legged on the floor. In addition, the highly codified and symmetrical nature of the dance makes it possible to demonstrate the movements with one or both hands while remaining seated. Thus a convention has grown up whereby the role of the teacher involves providing rhythmic accompaniment and a watchful eye, but does not usually include demonstrating the dance. This is despite the fact that many teachers today are, or were, dancers. The teaching methods used in the 1930s and 1940s were similar to those in evidence today. For example as Shanta Rao, one of the best-known non-hereditary dancers of the early period of the revival explained:

In his teaching of this tradition [P.S.] Minakshisundaram would never demonstrate a movement or gesture for imitation by his pupils. He sat in the corner of the room beating the *thata kulli* [*tattu-kal*, block of wood and stick] ... sometimes his face would express joy, sorrow or love, according to the mood of the song ... he might make the slightest gesture of the body or hands, giving one just a hint. It used to surprise me how much I could learn without following any actual movements demonstrated by the teacher (Ashok Chatterjee 1979: 47).

Minakshisundaram would however, often have one of his senior students demonstrate. Rukmini Devi reported that two of his *devadasi* students (P. Jayalakshmi and P.K. Jivaratnam) would demonstrate the dance for her benefit.

Although it is rare for a teacher to stand and demonstrate, there are examples of those who did so in the past (e.g. K. Muthukumar, Khokar 1964:20; Parvati Kumar), or continue to do so. In my own experience, K. Ellappa occasionally demonstrated the intricacies of a movement, while V.S. Muthuswamy regularly stood to demonstrate and make suggestions about alternative ways of arranging the steps. Muthuswamy had an active dancing career as a young boy, dressed as a girl as did his teacher K. Muthukumar. (Khokar 1963; pers. comm. Nala Najan).

### ACQUIRING TEACHING SKILLS: RHYTHMIC COMPONENT

A Bharata Natyam dance class begins with the beating of the feet. The first and most important skill to be acquired is mastery over the rhythmic component. In a dance class a wooden stick strikes a block of wood (*tattu-kal*); whereas during dance recitals cymbals (*talam*) are used. Unlike the cymbals which engage both hands, the *tattu-kal* leaves one hand free to demonstrate the arm and hand positions (*hastas/mudras*) while the other continues to beat the rhythm. This is essential during a dance class. For concerts, however, cymbals are more suitable on account of their musical quality. Both the cymbals and the *tattu-kal* are often referred to collectively as the *talam*. Both serve the same purpose, to guide the rhythmic beating of the dancer's feet. During recitals, and occasionally during a dance class, the *mridangam* (south Indian drum) is also played. When the dance is being taught, the teacher beats the *tattu-kal*, and recites syllables (*solkattus*) that accompany the dance steps (*adavus*). Once the basic steps are mastered, dance compositions, including both abstract and descriptive dances, are taught. Most of the older generation of dance teachers had received some instruction in the music of the dance repertoire while serving their apprenticeship with a senior dance teacher. Others worked as accompanists for dance recitals, before becoming *nattuvanars* and sometimes dance teachers. Knowledge of the dance, combined with musicianship, is still the hallmark of the most successful dance teachers.

### VENUE OF APPRENTICESHIP

Training in dance and music for the older generation took place in an apprenticeship situation in the household of their teacher or with a member of their own family. Families with a long tradition of teaching dance usually taught all the skills required to be a *nattuvanar*. In most families in which a tradition of teaching dance had been maintained over several generations, the sons studied exclusively

with their fathers, or with a blood relation. They taught them the basic dance steps and the vocal accompaniment. Training in *nattuvangam* was given by allowing the apprentices to conduct classes for the junior dance students of the master. Dance instruction to potential teachers was nearly always given by immediate family members. Hence, dance traditions may be regarded as close to family traditions; new musical knowledge is, however, sometimes introduced.

A greater proportion of the older generation than of the younger generation obtained an all-round training in dance, leading directly to working as a *nattuvanar*. This was probably linked to their training while living in dance households. The influence of receiving training in the teacher's household was reflected among the younger generation teachers as well. In my experience, all the younger generation teachers who had received an all-round training studied with teachers who ran an institution in their own home. It gave a greater opportunity to practice teaching dance and the allied skills needed to enter the profession. Initially, many struggling teachers travelled to the home of their students to teach. While this was convenient for the student it was also their loss. Dance, when taught in the student's home, isolates the student from the total environment of the dance and the training is compartmentalized rather than embracing the various aspects of the dance. Travelling to the various student's homes was also very tiring and time-consuming for the teacher. Subsequently some teachers, as they became more successful, established their own institutions, within or adjacent to their homes. The teachers with institutions belong to three different communities: *isai vellala*, brahmin and non-brahmin. This development re-established the situation that must have existed in the traditional context, where the children of teacher's families grew up in a home where dance and music was taught. P.S. Swaminathan trained in the home of his grandfather, P.S. Minakshisundaram, in Pandanallur. Later he lived in modest quarters in Delhi for most of his adult life. He makes it quite clear that he was very aware of the importance of teaching in one's own home so that the younger generation are constantly exposed to dance and music:

"My children were never exposed to dance or music at home. I have always had to travel around Delhi giving tuitions. Now that my son is older and lives in Delhi, he has a government job, and it would be hard for him to accompany me." He lamented the shift of dance teaching from the temple towns to cities and the present policy of granting scholarships rather than the traditional *gurukulavasa* system in which the student lived with the teacher and performed *seva* for knowledge.

In the 1970s and 80s, there weren't any active artists in my village of Pandanallur. They had either given up their art, died or migrated to the big cities. I belong to a family of traditional artists (Tanjore Quartet). Now if I asked the government for a scholarship to teach my son our hereditary occupation, I would feel bad.

#### THE LEARNING SITUATION FOR THE OLDER GENERATION, *GURUKULAVASA*

Musical training for the older generation of the *isai vellala* community began before the age of ten and usually involved living with their teacher (*gurukulavasa*). The student visited his/her parental home about once a month. In many cases, their own fathers had students training in the family home in the same manner. Often there were several students, at different levels of expertise, studying different skills from the same teacher (vocal, violin, dance, etc). Those students who lived in the same village as their teacher, became day scholars and spent varying amounts of time in their teacher's home. For some, there were definite hours for classes, but for others, the learning situation was less structured. T.A. Rajalakshmi remembers her early training with T.P. Kuppaiya in Tiruvidaimarudur: "He would send for us when he had free time, as we lived in the opposite house."

The musical traditions associated with Bharata Natyam were mainly passed on through the *isai vellala* and brahmin communities. Amongst the older generation there are examples of high caste persons providing vocal accompaniment for Bharata Natyam but very few examples of brahmins who conducted dance recitals

before 1950. The low status accorded to the dance also degraded the *nattuvanar* profession. T.V. Venkataraman, a brahmin dance teacher said that his father T. Vitthal Iyer<sup>2</sup> gave him *mridangam* training but did not approve of him performing *nattuvangam*: "It is very rare to find a brahmin *nattuvanar*. My father thought that it would not be proper for me to take up *nattuvangam*. He wanted me to play the *mridangam* and be a musician, but not a *nattuvanar*."

During the revival all of the non-hereditary dancers had to study the dance from the *isai vellalas* who had a lower social status. To overcome the impurity implications of contact with them several strategies were adopted. U.S. Krishna Rao and his wife, Chandrabhaga Devi lived with P.S. Minakshisundaram, but had their food prepared by their own cook. The implications of the different communities' status are evident in Krishna Rao's remarks:

We are brahmins and he belongs to the Pillai class (*isai vellala*). In the dance class he was the boss, but after the class he would ask us to sit and he would sit below, because we are brahmins. He had to respect us. This is the greatness of the man. Only while teaching he was god.

#### TRAINING AND EDUCATION OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Most dance teachers of the older generation had no professional qualifications other than their artistic credentials.<sup>3</sup> Uma Dandayudapani from a hereditary family was a university graduate. She commented on her relatives: "Long ago in our family nobody studied or did anything else outside of the tradition, just music and dance. I don't think they could read or write. From the moment they were five they were taught music or dance."

Women teachers from both hereditary and non-hereditary families are becoming more numerous as dance teachers, especially in training beginners. Some are displacing male dance teachers. Some of the reasons for this have to do with education and adapting to the new modes of teaching. Until recently, many male *nattuvanars*, from hereditary families, spoke only Tamil, which restricted their horizons. As dance is taught all over India, English, as well as

regional languages other than Tamil are important. In addition many of the traditional masters had only a limited education outside of the dance. A dance teacher summed up the situation: "Now women have started teaching: they are given more importance because of language and education. These girls can speak several languages (English, Hindi, Gujarati, etc). Most *nattuvanars* know only Tamil."

As the dance becomes more academically oriented educated teachers do not feel threatened by inquiries from their students. One high caste male dance teacher was aware of his own shortcomings, "Some women have already studied dance theory before they come to a dance master, to learn the practical aspects. These women then become masters themselves. And because they are able to explain things better, they attract more students."

The lack of appreciation for their traditional expertise was particularly upsetting for teachers who had devoted their lives to dance and music, "Many students who come to you want to learn dance but they do not know the guru's background. They do not know who we are."

These traditional masters could recognize that teaching methods were changing so that verbal communication was replacing the traditional methods. As one teacher explained: "The girls who can express themselves can impress people."

The new non-hereditary female teachers have usually trained with several traditional masters. They are also able to go beyond the traditional ways of teaching, which is mainly by rote. One non-hereditary female teacher contrasted the background and teaching methods of the older with the more recent dance teachers. She believed: "The new group of teachers are smarter, more educated, more scientific minded. I could not question my teacher. He would just look and say, carry on with your dance. All my students, however, ask me questions. I like it and I answer them."

Non-hereditary dancers/teachers who were educated extolled the importance of a well-rounded education.

They [traditional teachers] were very narrow minded. They are afraid that if they give you too much knowledge there will be nothing left for them to

teach. It is like a miser hoarding his money. They are frightened. All professional musicians are like that. If you ask something they scoff and say: "You think you know a lot? You can't sing a note and you ask me questions!" They feel threatened because they have only that art. They had no other interests in life. That art brought them money, fame and land, so why should they share their knowledge?

The intimate teaching situation is an important consideration for preferring women teachers. Unmarried dance teachers may be viewed as potentially hazardous. One male teacher explained: "The students come and sit and talk to the teacher and they get to know each other. Sometimes they even discuss their troubles. Purposely for this dance field I married, otherwise how would high class people allow their daughters to study with me?"

Many of the younger generation had employment skills besides their dance, having received a more extensive formal education than their parents. More than half the males and females of the younger generation had acquired a university degree. Some teachers hoped that their children would find jobs outside dance, and most sought to ensure that their children had alternative means of earning a living. This safety net was important until the late 1970s. By the mid-1970s, the current boom in Bharata Natyam had begun; soon teaching Bharata Natyam would become a viable occupation. Members of traditional families were particularly in demand because association with them conferred an assurance of authenticity.

Kalyani, the niece of K.N. Dandayudapani, remembers growing up in his home where he taught dance: "I used to cry every day. I said, I only want to dance but my uncle, Dandayudapani, sent me to college. I was not interested in studies. I joined his group classes, and he saw my interest develop he started teaching me. My mother [who was his sister] and I lived in his house." She remembered her interaction with K.N. Dandayudapani's daughter, Uma:

Uma, was in school and was not interested in dance. I used to force her and say we must learn this art. After your father we have to do all this; it is our tradition. Her father wanted her to have a regular job. She did her B.A. in Fine Arts and then started to work in the National Textile Corporation working as an assistant manager, or something. In 1978 she started a small



dance class. Now she has a large school of over three hundred students and I have a big school in Delhi.

Both women were from hereditary families which no doubt accounts for some of K.N. Dandayudapani's reluctance to teach them. Neither of these women had given a debut recital, but had studied music which is essential to teach and conduct dance recitals. They also continued to improve their musical skills after they had started to teach. I studied and performed with Uma in 1979 and was aware of the initial difficulties she encountered in establishing herself. Both these women became successful dance teachers in the 1970s. It would have been difficult earlier because of the lower demand. In the 1980s Bharata Natyam received a further boost with a veritable explosion in student numbers.

In the 1980s, with the renewed interest in the art of the traditional families, the trend has been for fathers to actively encourage at least one of their offspring. Sons were usually encouraged to take up a more steady profession. Nevertheless those who were able to maintain both careers: a regular job and that of a dance teacher—have recently been able to support themselves by teaching dance and conducting recitals full-time.

Until the late 1980s, most children of dance teachers received some training in music and/or dance, but relatively few took it up as a full-time profession. Most teachers preferred their sons to take up other professions and did not encourage them to teach dance full-time. There was sometimes tension between the "realistic" older generation, who had struggled to survive before the recent dance boom, and the younger generation who wanted to abandon their secure jobs and be involved in the dance full-time. The confidence and flexibility afforded by their academic education was not readily available to their parents, whose main education was artistic. The latter had no choice about their source of livelihood. Even amongst the older generation, those few who had obtained additional educational qualifications did not depend on teaching dance alone for their livelihood. Because they could earn a steady income with their modern occupation, they taught dance as an extra source of income in their spare time. Younger teachers mainly described their

motives for making a career in dance in terms of job satisfaction. At present, teaching dance may also be more lucrative than other job opportunities.

Over the past twenty years, the number of people wishing to learn the dance has increased. Dance teachers with an academic education, and therefore other options, reported that since about 1975 they have been able to earn a living by teaching dance. Though some are still in the transition stage and combine regular employment with teaching dance, many are choosing to teach it full-time. Their reasons are that they regard teaching dance as more satisfying, although more precarious, than an office job. This trend, which involved only a small proportion of the older generation, is almost the rule for the younger generation. Education is the key to diversification.

#### PAYMENT

The majority of the *isai vellala* students reported paying for their training by working for their teacher. They described this barter system as performing service (*seva*) for their master. The actual tasks and duties were not fixed but included such things as: shopping in the market for vegetables and other daily requirements, running errands, escorting the teacher's children to school, washing clothes, chopping vegetables and other tasks associated with preparing food, sweeping, looking after the cows and massaging the teacher. If the student's family owned land his/her parents might give a sack of unmilled rice (paddy) to the teacher, at least once a year. Usually the teacher fed, clothed and taught the students for several years before presenting them to the public in the debut performance (*arangetram*). On that occasion the teacher would be honoured with a present (*dakshina*), which might be substantial or just a token gesture. The older generation of non-*isai vellala* generally paid cash for their dance or music training. Others rendered *seva* (service) in return for their initial training. A combination of two kinds of *seva* in return for exposure to the dance

was common for musicians who had completed their musical training: doing menial chores and playing in the teacher's dance orchestra.

The majority of the younger generation from all communities paid fees for both music and dance training, when they studied with non-relatives. Generally a cash payment conferred a higher status on the student than payment with *seva*. Usually the period of training, the number of dances to be mastered and the amount to be paid, were agreed beforehand. It was the practice to pay in advance. The contract was, in most cases, honoured. The *seva* method of payment, however, was often open to abuse. C. Radhakrishna remarked: "The *seva* was much, the teaching was limited to—about fifteen to twenty minutes a day. Whatever my teacher needed I had to bring from the bazaar."

There are, however, also positive examples of *seva* being an effective method of payment. By itself, the concept of *seva* is important. Whereas previously students performed menial household tasks, today dancers from influential families are able to help their teachers in other ways such as securing railway reservations, or other favours reserved for the wealthy and influential. While *seva* can be viewed as an impediment to the professionalization of the art, it is a formalized way for the student to reciprocate for the personal attention given by the teacher.

Many dancers and teachers were quick to differentiate the circumstances of their training. For example, P.S. Swaminathan was in Pandanallur at the same time that the non-hereditary dancer Shanta Rao was undergoing training with his uncle, P.S. Minakshisundaram, and he described her as a "paying guest". Swaminathan was also specific when he confirmed that while high-caste dancers had lived in their family home, no *devadasis* would have been allowed to live there. His family, descended from the Tanjore Quartet, were distinct from other dance families, in that until approximately 1987 there is no record of their women being allowed to dance or have any professional association with it.

While the Tanjore Quartet family was adamant that no *devadasi* live in their home, T.K. Ganeshan, also a descendant of the Tanjore

Quartet, lived at the home of the hereditary dancer, T. Balasaraswati. Her family is a leading hereditary music and dance family. Balasaraswati's grandmother, Dhanammal was a *vina* player, and her mother, Jayammal, was a vocalist. Balasaraswati had two brothers who studied music: Ranganathan became a *mridangist* and Vishwanathan a flautist and singer. T.K. Ganeshan learned much of his late father's (T.N. Kandappa) dance and music repertoire from Balasaraswati and her family. He had no choice; his father died when he was eighteen and the family heritage was continued by her as his father's most illustrious student.

Among families descended from the P.S. Minakshisundaram branch of the Tanjore Quartet, none of the present teachers taught their own children until the late 1980s. On November 19, 1989, K.P. Kittappa's granddaughter, gave her debut recital (*arangetram*) in Tirunelveli and he conducted the recital. Hence an earlier prediction that the hereditary tradition would be broken in this family after the present generation may not come true. Similarly, until 1950 K.P. Kittappa earned his living as a vocalist. His father, T. Ponnaiya, had forbidden him to perform *nattuvangam* because of the stigma attached to the dance. But in the 1950s he began performing *nattuvangam*. Both these events mark a gradual elevation of the status of dance, and a decline in the stigma attached to it by traditional families. Also, the temple has been reinstated as a venue for the *arangetram* for girls from all communities, including that of the *isai vellala*.

#### GENDER ROLES: PERFORMING/TEACHING

Attitudes within the *isai vellala* community towards the participation of their female members in the dance contrast sharply with those of practitioners who have come from outside the community. This has been an important factor in changing the role and position of traditional families among dancers and teachers of Bharata Natyam. Initially, dance orchestras were usually composed entirely of male musicians. Before the microphone was introduced, it was thought that male voices were more suitable, being stronger, and therefore



better able to project. Although several early dancers noted that women had, on occasion, sung for them, this was unusual and generally limited to the latter part of the programme, which was dominated by the descriptive genre of songs.

Before 1940, it was uncommon for a woman to perform *nattuvangam*; I know of no examples from that period where a performing artist was also a *nattuvanar*. The first documented occasion on which three women conducted a dance recital was in 1943 at Kalakshetra. A traditional *nattuvanar*, A.P. Chokkalingam, withdrew his services for an important Bharata Natyam recital, and three women, Rukmini Devi, Radha Bernier (both dancers), and S. Sarada (musician and Sanskrit scholar) took the plunge into this hitherto male domain. Their qualifications for the task were obtained after a very short period of intensive training from a percussionist (*mridangist*) who specialized in accompanying Bharata Natyam. Sarada recounts how necessity became the mother of invention and forced the women to break with tradition and study and perform *nattuvangam*.

Chokkalingam Pillai (a hereditary teacher) left Madras in 1943 because of monetary considerations ... The *arangetram* of A. Sarada and Rukmini's performance at the Madras Music Academy were to take place ... Nagasvaram Vidwan Veeruswami Pillai ... sent the *thalam* on metal cymbals by post ... Bhairavan Pillai, who used to play the *mridangam* at Rukmini Devi's dance recitals, and was an expert in this art, came to our rescue and taught Radha and me to do *nattuvangam* with cymbals. Rukmini Devi with her great capacity to learn quickly, mastered this art soon (Sarada 1985: 50).

For high-caste women to perform a function that was traditionally allotted to men was a revolutionary innovation. More specifically these men were from another community, at that time regarded as socially inferior to their own. S. Sarada quotes Rukmini Devi:

One great new thing that has come as a result of these difficulties is the complete separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers. It is well known that they are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody to conduct a dance performance. I have always had a determination that this must go (Sarada 1985: 50).

Rukmini Devi took up the challenge to democratize the performing of Bharata Natyam, "They used to think that, except the usual class of people, no one else would be able to dance. Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers. The second aspect is to train *nattuvanars* from good families" (Sarada 1985: 50). Other dancers, including *isai vellala* women soon followed their example. Today women from a wide variety of backgrounds perform *nattuvangam* and there is an increase in the number of actively performing dancers who now run schools and conduct recitals.

The trauma of being beholden to the whims of the male *nattuvanars* from the *isai vellala* community, together with the newly attained confidence that they too could perform this function, meant that from 1943 onwards, Kalakshetra, one of the major dance institutions where Bharata Natyam is taught, never again employed a *nattuvanar* from the *isai vellala* community. Between 1943 and 1980 only one *isai vellala* student (the late T.R. Devanathan) was trained to become a *nattuvanar* at Kalakshetra. The 1943 incident and subsequent decisions, whether conscious or unconscious, were regarded by many as the first major step in loosening the hold that hereditary male *nattuvanars* exercised over female dancers. No longer would non-hereditary dancers be dependent on a professional community of *nattuvanars*. Within the traditional community, however, little changed. Hereditary dancers who continued to perform after the revival continued to depend on *nattuvanars* from their community.

#### ATTITUDES TOWARDS FEMALE INVOLVEMENT IN THE DANCE

Among the younger generation, most of those coming into teaching from a predominantly dance background were females. By contrast, males of the younger generation in hereditary families came to teaching from a predominantly musical background, although some also performed dance on stage.

Among the older generation, the female teachers were equally divided into brahmin and *isai vellala*. Only one, from the *isai vellala* community, did not marry. Four female dancers (two brahmins and two *isai vellala*) were married to dance teachers and both taught and conducted dance recitals.

Among the *isai vellala* families, whom I interviewed, there were more daughters than sons working as *nattuvanars*. Three important *isai vellala* families, those of T.R. Devanathan, S.K. Rajaratnam, and K.N. Dandayudapani, have daughters rather than sons engaged in teaching dance, while two *isai vellala* families, those of V. Ramaiya and T.P. Kuppaiya, have both sons and daughters and grandchildren teaching and conducting dance. However, in 1985 the sons tended to be more active. Some examples among brahmins who have daughters who teach dance are S.K. Kamesvaran and T.V. Venkataraman. V. Sadasivan, a brahmin, has a son who does so.

#### WOMEN FROM ISAI VELLALA FAMILIES: WOMEN AS DANCE TEACHERS

Among the *isai vellala*, attitudes towards allowing daughters to study and perform dance were ambiguous. Most families refused to train their daughters, perhaps because they believed it would be detrimental to their marriage prospects. Others allowed their daughters to study dance, but did not encourage professional careers as dancers, although some performed *nattuvangam*. Recently several families have even allowed their daughters to give an *arangetram*, despite its strong association with the *devadasi* tradition. Not only did they call this first recital an *arangetram*, but these girls then actively pursued a performing career. In 1989, most of these girls were under the age of twenty, and were very often the youngest of several children.

With the democratization of education, those daughters who had been allowed to dance were in many ways socially equal to their brahmin counterparts; often educated in an English-medium school

and exposed to a cosmopolitan life-style. In many instances, the opportunity to dance had been denied to their elder sisters. It seems that, until recently, attitudes towards daughters were constrained by the need for the community to overcome the social opprobrium attached to the institution of *devadasis*.

Another important force amongst hereditary families is that in those cases where all the children were discouraged from taking up a career in dance or music, very often it was the daughters who were present while their father taught at home. Without formal training, many of them picked up the dance by watching. Sometimes they were allowed to perform along with the other students in the annual day of their father's school. The initiative to study dance has sometimes come from the girls themselves as the male members of the family usually had other plans for them. In the 1950s and 60s their fathers were anxious that they attend college, for several reasons: first the dance for hereditary families was still not totally acceptable, second, having had a limited academic education themselves they saw higher education as offering other employment options.

#### THE EFFECT OF URBANIZATION<sup>4</sup>

When interest in the dance revived, many teachers moved from their villages, mainly in the Tanjore District of Tamil Nadu, to large urban centres. K. Muthukumar was one of the first to go to Madras to seek employment. Members of P. S. Minakshisundaram's family (A.P. Chokkalingam, P.C. Subbarayan), as well as V. Ramaiya, T. Swaminathan, K. Ganeshan, M. Durairaj, S. Manikkam, V.S. Muthuswamy followed soon after. To most of them the film industry was the greatest attraction in Madras. I shall not discuss the role of the cinema here, but it is worth noting that when dance was first featured in films it was classical. The popular style that is current in modern movies developed only later.

Other cities also attracted teachers in the 1950s and 60s: members of the P.S. Minakshisundaram family went to Delhi (P.S. Swaminathan) and Bangalore (P.M. Muthaiya, K.P. Kittappa),

while members of the T.P. Kuppaiya family went to Bombay. This generation left their villages because they could no longer sustain the artistic traditions in which they were trained in their original setting. Teachers to whom I spoke include representatives from the following towns and villages: Pandanallur, Tanjore, Vaidisvarankoil, Tiruvaluputtur, Tiruvidaimarudur, Kutralam, Kiranur, Seyyer, Chidambaram, Swamimalai, Pudukkottai, Tiruchendur, Tiruvarur, Mannargudi, Kanchipuram, Vazhuvur, Tirumuruganpuni, Kattumunarkoil, Mellattur, and Karaikkal.

Not all the early *nattuvanars* retained their connection with their native place. By and large the older teachers returned to their villages, sending their younger relatives to the urban centres to continue the work they had begun. In order to study with these teachers, in particular P.S. Minakshisundaram, many dancers during the 1930s and 40s lived in the temple towns where the dance had once flourished. The notable exception was Rukmini Devi who brought *nattuvanars*, teachers and singers to Madras, housing them in her institution, Kalakshetra.

The paths taken by two important hereditary dance families, those of T.P. Kuppaiya and of the Tanjore Quartet, provide an interesting contrast. The Tanjore Quartet family, headed by P.S. Minakshisundaram, remained closely attached to the village of Pandanallur. Minakshisundaram himself went to Madras briefly in the 1930s, but soon returned to Pandanallur. Others of the same family, who shifted permanently to Madras, chose to live in lodgings, leaving their families in the village. This form of movement to the large urban centres was presented to me as a major factor in preventing the children of the Tanjore Quartet *nattuvanars* from taking up dance as a profession: they could not train their sons (born in the 1940s and 50s), who remained behind. When A.P. Chokkalingam, P.C. Subbarayan's father, first left home, Subbarayan's grandfather, P.S. Minakshisundaram was still teaching dance in the village of Pandanallur. It was in this way that Subbarayan was exposed to the dance. Minakshisundaram's death in 1954 resulted in a lost generation from this particular family. Subbarayan's son, now (1989) in his late thirties, is one example of this "lost

generation". He regretted not studying with his father, but he was also very clear that it was only recently that teaching dance came to be regarded as a worthwhile occupation.

In contrast to P.S. Minakshisundaram's family, that of T.P. Kuppaiya moved *en masse* to Bombay in the 1940s. They therefore maintained a much looser association with their native village, Tiruvidaimarudur. This may have been because the patriarch and custodian of the artistic knowledge, T.P. Kuppaiya moved as well. Once in Bombay, the older *nattuvanars* taught and were involved in the dance full-time. The youngest member, T.K. Kalyanasundaram studied *mridangam*, but also qualified as an accountant. For many years he accompanied Bharata Natyam, but did not rely on this as his sole income. In the 1960s, when the demand for *nattuvanars* increased, Kalyanasundaram stepped into the "family firm". At first he worked with the overflow of dance students being trained by his elder brother, T.K. Mahalingam and brother-in-law, A.T. Govindarajan. He later trained his own students.

The V. Ramaiya and K.N. Dandayudapani families shifted to Madras. The V. Ramaiya family remains rooted in Madras, while the K.N. Dandayudapani family has dispersed to various urban centres. Dandayudapani's younger brothers first went to Hyderabad before returning to Madras (K.N. Pakkiriswami) and Delhi (K.N. Dakshinamurthy). All three brothers trained many dancers and dance teachers.

From the early 1940s, V. Ramaiya taught many famous dancers, in particular Kamala Lakshman, and many aspiring *nattuvanars* and dancers have lived and studied in his home. Some came as trained singers (S.K. Rajaratnam, S.K. Kamesvaran); others trained as dancers before acquiring training as accompanists on the spot (K.J. Sarasa). All of them are now successful *nattuvanars* with their own schools.

A major attraction of the dance for the younger generation was the opportunity to travel and perform abroad. These opportunities have become common recently for the younger generation, particularly for those who are single and able to stay away for long periods. The younger generation are quite capable of looking after

themselves outside India. They usually speak some English, are more cosmopolitan and more flexible in dealing with unfamiliar situations than the older generation.

## DISCUSSION

Whereas previously Bharata Natyam and other allied arts flourished in the great temple towns of the south, it now exists outside its original context, divorced from the artistic stimuli, festivals, crafts and traditional way of life of which the dance was one component. The younger generation of teachers, whether they migrated to the urban centres, or stayed in temple towns, have not experienced this "wholeness". This has had repercussions for the dance. As well, the paucity of information about exactly how *sadir* was presented makes it difficult to assess the magnitude of the changes brought about.

The lack of a strong hereditary association between the present older generation of teachers and the likely next generation makes it probable that the current trend towards a sharing of the various interpretations of Bharata Natyam will continue. The artistic vision of Bharata Natyam dance masters has always been diverse and will continue, as all art forms adapt and change. While it would be naive to suggest that this cross-fertilization is a new development, unique to modern times, it is evident that it is proceeding more rapidly than at any other time in history. The fact that the younger generation spends less time than the older did in studying music and dance in their formative years, suggests that standards may suffer.

On the other hand, although the children of the older *nattuvanars* began their artistic training later than their parents did, they may have studied with a greater sense of purpose and in a more systematic manner, more as a matter of choice and less as a hereditary imperative. Armed, as many of them were, with a B.A. or B.Com. degree, they had many other options open to them. Because of their educational qualifications, the social difference between the younger generation of *nattuvanars* and their dance students was not as wide as it was at the beginning of the dance revival, in the 1930s. This

has had an influence on the *nattuvanar*/dancer relationship, the dynamics of which are constantly in flux.

Clearly, Bharata Natyam is being modernized, and teachers are not being trained in the same way as before, yet Bharata Natyam has never been more popular. Interest and enthusiasm in the dance continues to increase, with the result that many more members of traditional families may be encouraged to return to the profession.

Although the dance has attracted many from outside the *isai vellala* community, there continues to be a reverence for the artistic knowledge of traditional families. It is significant that in the end Rukmini Devi conceded: "Traditional dance teachers have something in them that the others do not have. They have complete dedication. I cannot define this quality. Tradition has its own atmosphere which you cannot describe."

## NOTES

1. *Jatis* are rhythmic syllables uttered in a fixed sequence. They have both a rhythmic and sonorous quality.
2. See Sarada (1985: 32) for more details about T.V. Vitthal Iyer.
3. Some of the notable exceptions are V.P. Dhananjayan, U.S. Krishna Rao, H.R. Keshavamurthy and C. Radhakrishnan, as well as some others.
4. Neuman (1980: 26) remarks on the effect of urbanization on the Muslim musicians in New Delhi.