

Dancing-Girls and *Bayadères*: Challenging Representations of Indian Temple
Women

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Abstract

The *devadasi*, temple women of South India, have long been painted in an Orientalist light. European travel writers visiting India viewed them as prostitutes, denying them their societal power as women who served the divine; later on, they were made into one-dimensional *bayadères* by European audiences in their operas and ballets, stripped down to the fact that they were Indian women dancers. This thesis studies two challenges to this Western image of the *devadasi* and illuminates their cultural significance as esteemed women and masters of dance. Chapter 1 explores the writings of Jacob Haafner, who challenged European thoughts of *devadasi* by contemporary travel writers. In Chapter 2, Shobana Jeyasingh's *Bayadère: The Ninth Life* deconstructs the harmful images and stereotypes present in the Marius Petipa ballet *La Bayadère*. In studying these sources, this thesis illuminates the complex histories of the *devadasi* and their continuing legacy in the present.

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Introduction

Divine servants. Temple women. Dancing-girls. Women of loose moral character. Prostitutes. Whores. All of these labels have been attributed to the *devadasi*, translating to “servant of god,” a group of women attached to Hindu temples who danced and sang for the god they honored.¹ Hailing from south India, notably the region of Tamil Nadu, these women were masters of classical Indian dance and music.

Devadasi practiced a dance form known as *sadir*, though the closest equivalent in today’s Indian dance is *Bharatanatyam*, developed in the 1930s and 1940s.² This dance is made for storytelling. Every *mudra*, or hand position, represents some image, concept, or thing, and certain poses denote specific characters. The dance is percussive, with accentuated stomping of the feet and intricate movements of the legs, hands, and arms. Facial expression, or *abhinaya*, plays a major part of the artistic tradition, with the direction of the eyes calling attention to another part of the body. For example, to highlight a *mudra*, a dancer may look at the hand, then back to the audience.

Carnatic music serves as an accompaniment to the dance, with modern performances including voice, mridangam, a two-headed drum, and *manjira*, a pair of small cymbals used to mark time. The *manjira* are usually wielded by the dancer’s teacher, if done in an educational performance setting; this musician is also the one calling out dance syllables, guiding the dancer

¹ Joep Bor, “‘On The Dancers or *Devadasis*:’ Jacob Haafner’s Account of the Eighteenth-Century Indian Temple Dancers,” in *Music, Dance, and the Art of Seduction*, ed. Frank Kouwenhoven and James Kippen (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2013), 233.

² This dance form has many spellings, including “*bharatanatyam*” and “*Bharata Natyam*.” I will be using the above spelling in this work.

in her dance. Other popular accompanying instruments include a modern European violin, *vina*, a stringed instrument, and *venu*, a bamboo flute.

Although dance was at the heart of their sacred image, the *devadasi* were complex cultural icons whose significance went far beyond their artistic work. They were respected and esteemed women who were deemed invaluable to the temples they served. They were well-educated, able to read and write, which was uncommon for women at the time. They were wealthy leaders of their family groups. Their children were their own, no matter who their father was. They could be elevated from a lower social caste into a higher one by their position as a *devadasi* alone.³

Misunderstanding (or deliberately misreading) the high status of these temple women, European travelers, missionaries, and colonizers from the 17th through the 19th century gradually stripped down the complex roles of the *devadasi* to mere dancers, usually representing them as a base or one-dimensional character. They became known as *bayadères*, a term that means “a professional dancer from India,” and lumped in with all other women dancers in India, including courtesans and traveling troupes.⁴ Worse, she began to be viewed as a victim in need of saving from “a life of temple-harlotry.”⁵ Under the influence of British rule, 19th-century India began to lump traveling dancers, courtesans, and *devadasi* into a low societal class of “*nautch*-girls,” who they saw as contemptible figures of sexual enticement who needed the civilizing work of the British colonialists to improve their lives.⁶

³ Hubel, “The High Cost,” 160-181.

⁴ “Bayadère,” Outils et Ressources pour un Traitement Optimisé de la Langue, Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/bayadère>.

⁵ Kunal M. Parker, “‘A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes’: Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800-1914,” *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (July 1998): 563.

⁶ Grace E. S. Howard, “Courtesans in Colonial India: Representations of British Power through Understandings of *Nautch*-Girls, *Devadasis*, *Tawa’ifs*, and Sex Work, c. 1750-1883” (MA Thesis, University of Guleph, 2019), 2, 5.

Multiple scholarly studies from the modern day retain this fundamental view of the *devadasi* as a victim in a multitude of ways. For some, marriage to a deity denies them the ability to enter into a traditional marriage and, by some accounts, has left them vulnerable to sexual exploitation by Brahmin priests.⁷ Other scholars highlight the extreme youth of girls dedicated, in some cases by the age of four or five, and mention how they are then sexually abused not only by priests, but also by temple patrons, with some being trafficked as sex workers in nearby towns.⁸ In some accounts, their name is mistranslated to “slave of gods,” which underscores a view of these women as enslaved victims in need of rescue from a profession that should be abolished on the grounds of human emancipation.⁹ While these negative portrayals of a low-status victim with little bodily autonomy or social capital may resonate with the experience of contemporary *devadasi*, this portrayal erases the richer histories of these women before British colonialism undermined their social and economic status. It is difficult to recover histories that have been so pervasively eroded. How can cultural legacies long shaped by globalized colonial values be challenged, manipulated, and reclaimed?

A promising critical approach in current musicological research focuses on difference and calls for a careful reevaluation of these problematic representations and their complex political afterlives. Representations of difference abound across many centuries of writing and scholarship. Travel writers in the era of colonial expansion noted in some detail people and customs that they found bizarre and strange, applying European biases in other locales as a basis for proving white superiority in terms of music and dance, as well as religion and culture. As

⁷ Maggie Black, “Women in Ritual Slavery: *Devadasi*, *Jogini* and *Mathamma* in Karnataka and Adhra Pradesh, Southern India,” *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies* 16, nos. 1 and 2 (2009): 180.

⁸ Tmaeshnie Deane, “The Devadasi System: An Exploitation of Women and Children in the name of God and Culture,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 24, no. 1 (May 2022): 1.

⁹ Ankur Shigal, “The Devadasi System: Temple Prostitution in India,” *UCLA Women’s Law Journal* 22, no. 1 (2015): 108.

Olivia Bloechl and Melanie Lowe reveal in their introduction to the 2015 edited collection *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, this approach influenced the foundational disciplinary methods and priorities within music research disciplines, privileging Western (and specifically European) forms of music and dance along with their composers and practitioners, in marked opposition to non-European art forms and practices.¹⁰ New research on difference in the musicological field emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, and draws upon studies of gender, race, class, and postcolonial studies to illuminate and rework problematic modes of representation. Harnessing a more critical concept of difference is crucial for understanding the *devadasi* and their dance as multi-dimensional and misunderstood figures in global popular culture, Western art forms, and modern-day transnational and diasporic Indian life.

At the same time, current day teachers and practitioners of the *devadasi*'s dance form often gloss over the past in favor of its so-called beginning as a revival of an ancient dance. According to Teresa Hubel in her article "The High Cost of Dancing: When the Indian Women's Movement Went after the *Devadasis*," students at the Kalakshetra performing arts college in Chennai, are taught an edited version of the dance's history. This school, founded by Rukmini Devi, a Brahmin woman notable for her efforts in the dance's revival, are taught that without Devi's work, the art form would have been lost.¹¹ Modern *Bharatanatyam* dancers are viewed as better trained and more beautiful in the dance form, as the *devadasi* danced only for their deities and in a vulgar manner, and did not understand music or theory.¹² Recent edited works, such as *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, edited by Davesh Soneji, do call attention to the past of the dance

¹⁰ Olivia Bloechl and Melanie Lowe, "Introduction: Rethinking Difference," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Bloechel, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8-9.

¹¹ Hubel, "The High Cost," 175.

¹² Uttarra Asha Coorlawala, "The Sanskritized Body," *Dance Research Journal* 36, no. 2, (Winter 2004): 50.

form. However, many contributors to this volume do not go into deep detail about the *devadasi* themselves, but rather the institution as a whole. Valuable specific details about who these women were and how their lives might have been like too often are glossed over or not mentioned. Nevertheless, many of the works in this volume do examine the effects of colonialism, sexism, and British imperialism on the *devadasi* and how the dance was edited to become acceptable for middle- and upper-class women to perform, while the *devadasi* were expected to fade away.¹³ One entry specifically was written by an organization of *devadasi*, the Madras Devadasis Association, pushing back against laws that would strip them of their positions and land holdings.¹⁴

My thesis begins by tracing the development of the negative views of *devadasi* women, which were so far-reaching in their global influence. I then illuminate contemporary artistic work that reclaims a more positive and empowered image of these women's lives in the past and for the present. It is framed around two case studies, each involving an example of a challenge to the common narrative. The first chapter covers European travel writing's narrative of the *devadasi* and how it is challenged by the writings of Jacob Haafner, a Dutch anti-colonialist, anti-missionary travel writer, whose chapter "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*" is believed to be written in honor of a dancing-girl with whom he had a relationship. This chapter not only provides incredible detail on the lives of these temple women but also makes sure to highlight how wrong other travel writers are, calling them ignorant.

¹³ See Srinivasan, "Reform or Conformity? Temple 'Prostitution' and the Community in the Madras Presidency," 139-159; Raghavan, "Bharata Natya- Classic Indian Dance," 185-191; Allen, "Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance," 205-252; in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. by Davesh Soneji (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

¹⁴ Madras Devadasis Association, "The Humble Memorial of Devadasis of the Madras Presidency," in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. By Davesh Soneji (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 128-138.

The second chapter foregrounds a recent work by Shobana Jeyasingh, a South Indian *Bharatanatyam* dancer, entitled *Bayadère: The Ninth Life*. This work challenges the Western ballet *La Bayadère*, an exoticized ballet set in a European's idea of ancient India, full of incorrect tropes regarding Indian culture and the *devadasi*. This ballet is a staple part of the Western ballet canon, particularly in Russia, where it premiered in 1877. Her work offers a deft artistic challenge to these ideals and tropes, and points out the contradictions in the masks applied to the *devadasi*.

Chapter 1: Jacob Haafner's Challenge to the Western Image of *Devadasi*

Much of our information on *devadasi* comes from travel writings, written by Europeans as they traveled to India and experienced what was to them exotic and strange. These writings, usually penned by male travelers, suffer from the racism and sexism of the time, and generally promoted the imperialist ideal that the nations they visited needed to be saved and educated in Western values.

In this chapter, I consider the challenge of using travel writing published from the 17th through the 19th centuries as a source of information on the *devadasi*. A closer look at the travel literature reveals that some authors depicted a more sensitive (and perhaps more accurate) appraisal of these women's lives and roles that pushes back against the stereotypical judgements commonly recycled by their contemporaries. A notable example is Jacob Haafner, a Dutch travel writer, whose relationship with a dancing girl and fierce anti-missionary and anti-colonial values helped him see *devadasi* in a much more nuanced and favorable light.

The Problems of Travel Writings

Travel writers' publications should always be read through a critical lens, to account for the nature and aims of the popular literary genre, whose readership was generally more attracted to sensational stories than historical accuracy. According to Prasun Chatterjee, travel writers attempt to depict the daily lives of the inhabitants of the places they visit and document, but often do so inaccurately. The events they portray are suspect and can rarely be verified by other sources. The everyday life activities of the indigenous people of the nations they visit are

mentioned only sporadically, and come out of nowhere.¹⁵ When travel writers do depict daily activities, it is often done with an undercurrent of racial and societal superiority. A notable example of this undercurrent is John Henry Grose, an English Company servant, whose work *A Voyage to the East Indies* was published in London in 1772. When speaking of the indigenous peoples of Africa, he refers to the “simplicity of the inhabitants” of the African island of Comro, now referred to today as the Comoro Islands. He states that the house of the king in the town of Johanna “is built of stone and mud, and does not make a figure superior to a common English alms-house,” is “wretchedly furnished,” and refers to the inhabitants of Johanna as “simple savages.”¹⁶

Chatterjee mentions that these travelers often cast themselves as heroic, risk-taking protagonists in their search for adventure, fortune, and renown in new worlds that were suddenly available to Europe.¹⁷ In doing so, Scobie argues that they affirmed the colonial viewpoint in which the European was the holder of knowledge and power.¹⁸ Many examples exist of heroic interventions by travel writers in the indigenous populations’ everyday lives. One is from Niccolao Manucci, an Italian self-taught physician, who wrote *Storia do Mogor* about his voyage in India from 1653 to 1708. This writing speaks of his successful medical treatment of the wife of a *qazi* in Lahore. He writes about her illness, saying that she had been deemed incurable by all physicians, going so far to portray those who had treated her as in need of guidance, for they would “burn all their books and profess themselves disciples of him who cured her.”¹⁹ He goes

¹⁵ Prasun Chatterjee, “Gender and Travel Writing in India, c. 1650-1700,” *Social Scientist* 40, no. 3/4 (March-April 2012), 59.

¹⁶ John Henry Grose, *A Voyage to the East Indies* (London: Printed for S. Hooper, 1772), 14-17.

¹⁷ Chatterjee, “Travel Writing in India,” 64.

¹⁸ Claire Scobie, “The Representation of the Figure of the *Devadasi* in European Travel Writing and Art from 1770 to 1820 with specific reference to Dutch writer Jacob Haafner” (PhD diss., University of Western Sydney, 2013), 43.

¹⁹ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, Volume II, trans. William Irvine (London: John Murray, 1907), 176.

to the house of the woman, struggles to find a treatment to help her, and then administers an enema. When her family objects, due to societal beliefs around it, he quotes the Quran, and this convinces her family to try his treatment. He monologues for a lengthy amount of time on not knowing what to use, then, in a miraculous moment, he remembers. In order to preserve his reputation with the locals, he gives the family a time frame- if there was no improvement in three hours, there was nothing more he could do. When the woman recovers, he portrays himself as the hero in his writing, claiming that if he had not given her this treatment, made up of ingredients that only he knew, the woman would have died. He then speaks of himself being mentioned in rumors as the “doctor who was capable of resuscitating the dead.”²⁰ This vast exaggeration of his importance makes it impossible for any reader to not see him as the hero; he saved an innocent woman from a disease that the local physicians were too under-educated to treat. This also cements the colonial viewpoint that the indigenous people of non-European nations needed a civilizing force and education, which only the European nations were equipped to do.

Another heroic ‘intervention’ is described by the 17th-century physician François Bernier, where he prevents a woman from undergoing *sati*, a practice where widows burn themselves on their deceased husband’s pyre. Bernier speaks of these “shocking spectacles” with great distaste, describing the women as “frantic” or possessed by a “diabolical spirit.”²¹ Having been charged to speak to the widow in question to convince her to not commit *sati*, he approaches her first with an offer of a pension to support her and her young sons. When she refuses, he threatens her, calling her a “wretched and unnatural mother,” telling her that, if she

²⁰ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, 179.

²¹ François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668*, ed. Archibald Constable (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company, 1914), 307-308.

dies on the pyre, she might as well “cut [her sons’] throats, and consume them on the same pile; otherwise [she] will leave them to die of famine, for [he] shall... annul their pensions.”²² This convinces the mother, at the cost of denying her agency and forcing her into the inauspicious state of widowhood. However, to European audiences, Bernier was no doubt a hero for preventing the death of a woman by her own hands.

Travel writers also frequently portray themselves as infallible by their manner of living with the indigenous peoples of their traveled area, as Abbé J. A. Dubois, a Jesuit missionary who worked in India from 1792 to 1823, described in his *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*. He describes his method of living among the people of India, saying that he “recognized the absolute necessity of gaining their confidence,” and as a result he “made it [his] constant rule to live as they did,” for example, by adopting their style of clothing and following their cultural practices in terms of diet.²³ By doing so, he became a friend of the people, and boasted that he was often favored by them.

It was this viewpoint and implication of writing that sets off this infallibility. By holding the knowledge of these regions, and sharing it with the people back home that could not make the journey, these writers claimed to know all about a particular area, based on their own travels and personal experiences. According to Chatterjee, they claimed to be “able to ‘penetrate’ the truth better than their contemporaries and ‘lay bare’ the elements of the ‘described’ in front of their readers.”²⁴ In other words, they highlighted for the readers of their texts their exceptional knowledge, their lucid viewpoints, and their ability to separate fact from fiction. Abbé J. A. Dubois stated in his work that he “may be permitted to doubt whether there has been any person

²² François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 308.

²³ Abbé J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*, (London: Oxford University Press 1906), ix.

²⁴ Chatterjee, “Travel Writing,” 64.

more favorably situated for gleaning information or more zealous in his pursuit of knowledge.”²⁵

Abbé Carré writes in his introduction to his work *The Travels of the Abbé Carré in India and the Near East, 1672 to 1674*, in a letter to the Directors of the General Chamber of the Royal Company in the East, that he has worked “solely to gain the honor of your goodwill and protection by revealing sincerely the truths you ought to know for the good of your affairs.”²⁶

These statements reaffirmed the knowledge of these travel writers to their audiences, portraying themselves as the sole owner of knowledge of these far-flung places where their readers would likely never go. As most of their readers had no knowledge of the areas depicted, many would likely take the writings of these travelers as fact, with little ability to spot potential inaccuracies.

Another issue that plagues travel writers’ published works is their antiquated view of the women in the places of their travels, and their tendency to harness racialized and exoticized tropes to compare them negatively against European women. When reading accounts of Indian women in travel writers’ accounts, it can be difficult to accurately understand their place in their own society, due to the highly biased depictions of many travel writers. Non-European women are liable to be depicted as more natural, sensual or fertile than their European counterparts.

A notable proponent of this view is the 17th-century Jesuit Abbé Barthélemy Carré. In his discussions of his travels through Arabia, he describes not only the practices of the people he stays with, but includes a copious amount of description of the women he sees:

The women dress like the men, except that they wear glass bracelets and anklets on their arms and legs, as well as a few gold or silver coins around their neck... Their heads are bare, with long plaits of hair hanging down their backs to the ground, which gives them a natural grace, more charming and agreeable than all the devices and plasterings of our European ladies.²⁷

²⁵ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, ix.

²⁶ Barthélemy Carré, *The Travels of the Abbé Carré in India and the Near East, 1672 to 1674*, Volume 1, trans. Lady Fawcett, ed. Sir Charles Fawcett and Sir Richard Burn, (London: The Haylukt Society 1947), 1.

²⁷ Carré, *Travels of the Abbé Carré*, 56.

He focuses on the differences of the dress of the women, referring to their differences as giving them a natural grace that European women somehow lack, and viewing their jewelry and adornments as more pleasing than that of their home cultures. Even then, he seems surprised by this revelation, that he could find the women in such a “fiery climate” as beautiful as the most beautiful women of Europe.²⁸ Multiple authors follow this trend, speaking of the sensuality and beauty of these women, usually from a place of surprise, as if they expected these women to only be a pale imitation of European women.

At the same time, European women are often viewed by these travel writers as having the moral high ground, due to the natural sensuality that they find in women living in other geographical areas. Abbé Carré has a section of his writings where he compares the women of the Mughal harems with Christian nuns back in France, saying that the Mughal women had less power and were more sexualized than the nuns. The “women of the seraglios,” or harems, have “only the intelligence of animals,” as “it is impossible for them to become intelligent, as they are without any knowledge of what goes on in the outside world.”²⁹ He denies, or is unaware of, the many accomplishments of the women in the harems of Mughal India, which included architectural works, such as the building of Humayun’s tomb by his wife, Haji Begum, funding for education, such as Bibi Razi’s founding of a college and allotment of stipends for students and teachers, and political power.³⁰ Instead, Abbé Carré likens these accomplished women to

²⁸ Carré, *The Travels of the Abbé Carré*, 56.

²⁹ Carré, *The Travels of the Abbé Carré*, 260.

³⁰ Rukhsana Iftikhar, “Cultural Contributions of Mughal Ladies,” *South Asian Studies* 25, no. 2 (July-December 2010): 325-330.

“brute-beasts” possessing “extreme stupidity and ignorance.”³¹ However, when describing what are presumably nuns in France, he describes them as follows:

‘Oh!’ I replied, ‘what are you saying? In France we also have girls shut up between four walls, but what you call seraglios in your tongue, in ours we term religious houses. They are, however, quite different from your slave-women, of whom you think so much. Truly they possess other beauties, qualities and perfections, than those of your women, who endure nothing but slavery, and who have nothing to recommend them but a little beauty that lasts only a brief moment... Ours go in of their own free will... seeking the peace of these cloisters after having tasted the good and evil of this world. Yours are shut up only for one object, and that a low and infamous one... whereas ours are actuated by noble and exalted motives. [Your women] are made to serve the sensual passions and pleasures of one man. Instead of this, our women go there to preserve their chastity, to serve a Man-God... ours are filled with joy and love for their dear companions.’³²

Abbé Carré’s language, according to Chatterjee, places the women in convents as markedly higher than the women of the Mughal Empire harems, comparing them directly with the European nuns. However, if he would have compared European nuns with European men, they would not be found in so high a place in society.³³

Although travel writers’ accounts offer helpful levels of detail, we can see that their need to establish their own authority and prove the value of their work and cultural knowledge, suggests narrative accounts riddled with inaccuracies and bias. However, these accounts are still valuable sources as they provide historical knowledge on *devadasi* and their lives, providing intensely intricate details on these women, from how they danced, what they wore, and how they lived. We can acknowledge and read against the biases of these travel authors to piece together an image of the *devadasi*. Missionaries, such as the Abbés Carré and Dubois, tended to view these women far more negatively due to their religious objective to convert Indian people to

³¹ Carré, *The Travels of the Abbé Carré*, 260.

³² Carré, *The Travels of the Abbé Carré*, 259-262.

³³ Chatterjee, “Travel Writing,” 65.

Christianity. Those who have had close relationships with other dancing girls, notably Jacob Haafner, view them in a more positive light. No matter what biases these authors have, though, all of them view the women of India and the *devadasi* through a Eurocentric lens, making their cultures the most important and describing those of India as strange and foreign. This lens must be taken into account when using these details.

The Typical European Image of the *Devadasi*

So, what picture do the travel authors paint of *devadasi*? Unsurprisingly, a rather sexist one. Many focus on the seductiveness of their movements and dance, and their sexual freedom almost always earns them the label of prostitute. The Abbé J.A. Dubois compares *devadasi* to European prostitutes, and though in many other places in his writings he is critical of and condemns them for their sexual freedom, he says that their manner of seduction is preferable to those of European prostitutes. “The quiet seductions which Hindu prostitutes know how to exercise with so much skill resemble in no way the disgraceful methods of the wretched beings who give themselves up to a similar profession in Europe, and whose indecent behavior, cynical impudence, obscene and filthy words of invitation are enough to make any sensible man who is not utterly depraved shrink from them with horror.”³⁴ As a member of the clergy, Dubois clearly looks down upon both sets of women due to his religious beliefs. According to John Henry Grose, “one may safely say, that those of this profession have made vows of unchastity which they religiously keep.”³⁵ Though he here refers to the wide subject of dancing girls, a few sentences later he refers to sets of them in service to Hindu temples, ensuring that that description is also applied to the *devadasi*.

³⁴ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 586.

³⁵ Grose, *Voyage*, 138.

Many also focus on the dress and bodies of the *devadasi*, especially their dance, highlighting their sexual appeal and beauty while also reducing them to mere seducers and not women who served gods and had immense privilege compared to other Hindu women of the time. Dubois, when speaking of the duties of *devadasi* to sing and dance in the temples, says that the *devadasi*'s "attitudes are lascivious and their gestures indecorous."³⁶ Grose in particular remarks on their dance, describing it as lewd, and, as with Dubois, "lascivious."

All these love-scenes, the girls execute in character-dances, and with no despicable expression... in some of their dances, even in public, modesty is not extremely respected, in the motions of their limbs, the quivering their hips, and other lascivious attitudes into which they throw themselves... but in private parties, to which they are called... they give themselves a greater loose, and have dances in reserve; in which, though still without any grossness in point of discovering their bodies, they are mistresses of such motions, and the lewdness of looks and postures, as are perhaps more provoking.³⁷

Adding to this reduction to sex objects, the manner of their dress is reduced, many times, to an ogling of the *devadasi*'s breasts. Grose speaks of the "peculiar way of managing and preserving their breasts," and gives a lengthy description of how exactly the breast-wear of *devadasi* was formed, how it functioned, and describes their breasts as having an "exquisitely tender texture."³⁸

Of all the travel writers to speak about India and its *devadasi*, Jacob Haafner is one to note, as his writings are incredibly different to the prevailing narrative of the time. Though he does have his flaws, his commentary of the *devadasi* is favorable, rather than demeaning or demonizing. Boer believes that it was his relationship with Mamia, an Indian dancing-girl, though not a *devadasi*, that allowed him to see these temple women in such a positive light. While the full details of her and Haafner's relationship are not fully relevant, the most important

³⁶ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 586.

³⁷ Grose, *Voyage*, 139-140.

³⁸ Grose, *Voyage*, 141-142.

details to note are that, allegedly, Mamia offered herself to Haafner via the elder leader of the troupe giving him a love-betel, which Haafner rejected, though they later reunited and began a relationship. Upon a shipwreck, Mamia saved Haafner, though she accrued injuries that would later lead to her death. Joep Bor, in the chapter before his translation of Haafner's chapter on the *devadasi*, says that it is obvious that Haafner wanted to honor the memory of his lover and wrote the chapter on the *devadasi* in her honor.³⁹

In addition to his eyes being opened and his attitude changed from the typical European views at the time towards India's dancers, his writing also condemns many European colonizing forces and strategies, making it clear that he is more accepting of India's cultural values and that his work is not so Eurocentric as that of his contemporaries. He wrote a work condemning Christian missionary activities, describing them as futile. These missionaries were "ignorant, proud and conceited, living in illness and luxury, and making a god of their bellies." He viewed them as "accomplices and vindicators of the fortune seekers, and trailblazers for the colonial rulers." And the colonial rulers were the targets of most of his ire. Haafner was also outraged by the imperialist practices of the English, whom he depicts as tyrants committed only "to robbery and devastation- to the unbridled nature of the indiscriminate superpower." These anti-colonial, anti-English, and anti-missionary views shaped his writings. Though in doing so he does give way to the white savior stereotype, implying that it is his work, and only his work, that will save the people of India from the colonizers, part of his mission was to expose the oppression and exploitation of the Indian people. He often wrote about the destructive effects of colonialism, and about the greed-driven wrongdoings of Europeans in India and beyond.⁴⁰ In doing so, he aligns himself more closely with the colonized than the colonizers, and it is this viewpoint that makes

³⁹ Bor, "Jacob Haafner's Account," 236-242.

⁴⁰ Bor, "Jacob Haafner's Account," 235-236.

his works, though still problematic, much more likely to be correct. This is why his descriptions make up the majority of the second half of this chapter. While there are still likely mistakes, his depiction of *devadasi* as more than common prostitutes, depicting to the European public how they were seen by the Indian people, makes his work invaluable when creating a picture of the pre- and early-colonial era *devadasi*— though one must note that one can never remove their personal biases from such descriptions, as the observer is not separated from who or what is observed. These biases must be taken into account when using Haafner’s work.

Like other European travel writers, Haafner is guilty of propagating the comparisons of European and non-European women, though he does not give European women the moral high ground; rather, he extols the virtues of the *devadasi* and demeans European women. In his chapter “On the Dancers or Devadasis” in *Reize in Eenen Palanquin*, he makes two comparisons to the difference between *devadasi* and European women. When speaking of the clothing the *devadasi* wear, he makes remarks about the *devadasi*’ breasts being “the most important charms of a woman” and that their views “differ to a large extent from many of our European beauties, who do their best to destroy these natural jewels with bodices, corsets, and whatever those things are called.”⁴¹ Later, when speaking of the dances of the *devadasi*, he uses very different language to differentiate between the two groups of women. The *devadasi*’ dances are “regulated and gracious,” and consist of “light and ingenious jumps and steps.” When speaking of European women, however, his tone changes. Their dances have “cold and meaningless gestures, contortions of the body and break-neck jumps.”⁴² While this favorable tone is useful to develop an image of how the *devadasi* might have been in that time, without the condescending and

⁴¹ Jacob Haafner, “On the Dancers or Devadasis,” in *Music, Dance and the Art of Seduction*, trans. Joep Bor, ed. Frank Kouwenhoven and James Kippen (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2013), 255.

⁴² Haafner, “On the Dancers or Devadasis,” 258.

demonizing tone of other travel writers, it nevertheless demeans one group of women in favor of the other.

Haafner's Image of the *Devadasi*

The best place to start when creating this image is the beginning, when determining if a girl meets the requirements a *devadasi* is expected to fill to be dedicated to the temple and god she will serve. Haafner includes a lengthy description of this process, and also of the requirements to become a *devadasi*. A girl who wished to become one should be beautiful, flexible and able-bodied. She should not have scarring from a smallpox infection. She should not yet be able to be married, nor engaged, nor married. These requirements allow a *devadasi* to fulfill her purpose. The dance of the *devadasi*, best seen, though changed, in modern *Bharatanatyam*, is difficult, requiring immense strength and dexterity to complete. Haafner also remarks that these requirements were absolutely necessary for the first order of *devadasi*, but were more flexible with the second order.⁴³

There were two orders of *devadasi*, differentiated by the lifestyles they led, the deities they served, and where the *devadasi* came from if dedicated from a family, and not the descendant of a *devadasi*. The first order served the great deities, Vishnu and Shiva. Though Brahma is the third major deity of the Hindu religion, there were no temples dedicated to him, and as a result no priests or *devadasi*. These *devadasi*, as devotees to the main deities of Hinduism, were expected to be more devout. They were not allowed to leave the temple premises without the permission of the main priests, except for celebrations and holidays. During these days, an image of the deity they served was led through the streets, and their dancing and

⁴³ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 253.

singing in front of the procession was required and expected.⁴⁴ Though they had fewer freedoms in terms of being able to wander freely, they did still have sexual freedom, although they were required to choose their lovers from the high castes, such as Brahmins, as Brahmins were not allowed to have sexual relationships with *devadasi* of the second order. To do so would lead to necessary purification on the Brahmin's part.⁴⁵ These *devadasi* came from higher castes than the second order, as they were largely taken from the *vaisyas* caste, made up of commoners. This caste was the third out of four, and consisted of farmers, merchants, and those in trades.⁴⁶ Contrary to popular belief and widespread mention in travel writers' works of the time, *devadasi* of both orders were "not obliged to offer themselves first to the head priest of the temple, as travelers and ignorant Europeans write and say," Haafner says in another example of his fiery writing.⁴⁷ Instead, they could choose their partners in or outside of the temples, so long as they were from the high castes, and were "even free to remain life-long virgins if they so desire."⁴⁸ This is more important to mention for the *devadasi* of the first order, who were limited to the temples and therefore were assumed to be only available to the priests, but it did apply to both orders.

The second order, in contrast, served the minor deities, such as Kali, Kartika, Sarasvati, and Indra. Though these deities were still respected, as they were less important, for lack of a better term, than Vishnu and Shiva, *devadasi* of the second order had fewer requirements to meet and had more freedoms. *Devadasi* of the second order were not required to live in their temples, and as a result did not require permission to leave. Rather, they lived in the area surrounding the

⁴⁴ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 251.

⁴⁵ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 252.

⁴⁶ "Vaishya," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vaishya>.

⁴⁷ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 254.

⁴⁸ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 254.

temple, and had the freedom to move about as they wished. A certain number had to be at the temples each day, and on festival days, all were expected to attend.⁴⁹ These women were dedicated from the highest branch of the *sudras*, the fourth and lowest official caste in Hindu society, comprised of laborers and artisans.⁵⁰ Notably, perhaps many of these women were from the *tantiravayan*, or weavers, who “when they have five daughters... [they] make it their duty to dedicate one of them to the service of the temple.”⁵¹ Though it is unknown how many were dedicated from this subgroup of the *sudras*, it must have been significant for Haafner to have made note of it.

Perhaps most notably, the second order of *devadasi* had much more sexual freedom than the first order, and were able to use this to accrue wealth. *Devadasi* of this order were allowed to have nearly anyone as lovers, with three important exceptions; they could not have sexual relationships with Europeans, Muslims, or those of low castes, mainly the *sudras* and casteless.⁵² Many used this freedom to engage with men of wealth, and used the gifts they received to create generational wealth for themselves and their descendants. Many of “their lovers (who usually consist of businessmen, *baniyas*, and others) are also more generous and richer than the Brahmins, they earn a great deal of money.”^{53,54} They would often be given gifts for their appearances at different celebrations and ceremonies, such as weddings, the reception of high-status people, and parties, usually of money, clothes, fabric, or jewels.⁵⁵ This was in addition to what they received from the temples, from which they did receive a stipend, as well as

⁴⁹ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 252.

⁵⁰ “Shudra,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shudra>.

⁵¹ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 253.

⁵² Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 251.

⁵³ A *baniya*, commonly spelled today as *bania*, is a branch of the *vaisya* caste, made up of business owners and moneylenders. See “Banias,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 1, 2007, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Banias>.

⁵⁴ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 254.

⁵⁵ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 254.

inheritance from inherited temple lands.⁵⁶ While the first order *devadasi* were probably allowed to perform at and attend such events, it is likely that their tighter attachment to their temples limited how many they could attend. As a result, those of the second order had more freedoms and were most likely wealthier than their first-order counterparts.

These *devadasi* also held positions of esteem in their communities, being part of ceremonies such as marriages, and even visits by dignitaries. *Devadasi* of either order were regarded with respect and honored with the title of *begum*, with the closest equivalent of this in English being the title of Lady. The community regarded a *devadasi* as “an indispensable jewel of religion” and as respected, esteemed members of their communities.⁵⁷ In addition, *devadasi* ritually married to gods earned the status of *nitya sumanguli*, translating to “ever-auspicious female.” This is because the role of women in the society of the time placed the role of wife and mother highly, with mothers of multiple children whose husbands were alive were considered auspicious, while widows were inauspicious, especially if they had no children. Because these *devadasi* were protected from becoming widows through their marriage to a god, who can never die, they were considered lucky by the Hindu community both before and during British colonial rule.⁵⁸ While not all *devadasi* were ritually married to gods, this auspiciousness was applicable even to *devadasi* who were unmarried. They surpassed the auspiciousness of wives who had multiple children and whose husbands were alive due to this connection to the gods they could be married to, which led to this esteemed status and their important place in important events. Though members of the first order were certainly a part of these proceedings, it is likely that

⁵⁶ Hubel, “The High Cost,” 171.

⁵⁷ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 259.

⁵⁸ Hubel, “The High Cost,” 170-171.

those of the second order, with their distinct freedoms, could have participated in more of these ceremonies and events.

Even Abbé J. A. Dubois, with his demeaning view of the *devadasi*, mentions this importance in ceremonial meetings between dignitaries or rulers. Though he labels them courtesans and not *devadasi*, it is clear which group of dancing women he means, as ordinary courtesans did not fill the roles that *devadasi* did in important ceremonies. “Ordinary politeness... requires that when persons of any distinction make formal visits to each other they must be accompanied by a number of these courtesans. To dispense with them would show a want of respect towards the persons visited, whether the visit was one of duty or politeness.”⁵⁹ Haafner gives more detail and provides an important part that Dubois does not mention, which involves the gifting of a *nazr*, or the gift presented on the first meeting of two rulers, dignitaries, or other distinguished people. As Haafner mentions in a footnote, “one never approaches a ruler or a distinguished man for the first time with empty hands,” and that makes the statement that “when great persons and even rulers are presented with a *nazr*, it is [the *devadasi*] who offer it”⁶⁰ all the more impactful. In addition to their ceremonial and religious roles, these temple dancers and singers were so respected by their communities that they were required at dignitary visits, and that they were the ones who presented the first gifts to any person of distinction. Far from being common whores, prostitutes, or courtesans, *devadasi* were respected individuals who had many roles to fill.

A *devadasi*, if not born the daughter of a *devadasi*, would be dedicated in an intricate ceremony when she was young. She would be dedicated only with the permission of her parents, and was brought up from childhood within the *devadasi* community of her particular temple to

⁵⁹ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 585.

⁶⁰ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 259.

be educated in how to fulfill her future role.⁶¹ Haafner's chapter is the only source that I have found with all of the intricate details, which I have included below.

When parents wish to offer their daughter to the service of the temple, they inform the head priest who comes to see the girl; if he finds her suitable, the *lagnapatra* (a written document in which the parents give up all the rights of their child) is drawn up and signed by them. The girl is then led to the temple with pomp and triumph; for this day, one chooses an auspicious day in the *pancankam* or almanac. The devadasi receive her from the hands of her parents; they first make her bathe in the *tirtha* or pond, dress her with new linen, and then decorate her with the *gahana* or jewels that belong to the temple; the head priest then leads her to the statue of the deity and makes her repeat or reiterate a vow in which she dedicates herself to the service of the god for her entire life; after this, to reinforce her vow, he takes a garland of flowers that adorns the deity and puts it around her neck, and makes her drink the milk with which the statue has been washed; next he takes a pick and pierces her earlobe, ending the ceremony, after which the girl is forever attached to the service of the god.⁶²

This ceremony sets the girl onto her path, providing her not only with a potential vast increase in social status, but also an education far surpassing those of other girls in her community. It is mentioned in many writers' accounts that this is the case, usually with a backhanded compliment that it is not respectable for women to do so. Abbé J. A. Dubois remarks that "they are the only women in India who enjoy the privilege of learning to read, to dance, and to sing." While it is true that the arts of dancing and singing were frowned upon for "well-bred and respectable" women, the education in reading alone set up the *devadasi* to become learned and well-educated individuals.⁶³ Haafner describes their education in more detail, saying that "they are also instructed in reading and writing, as well as the *Puranas*, which are all forbidden to be known by the women and daughters of private citizens."⁶⁴ From the moment of her dedication, he continues, she is "instructed in all she needs to know, such as reading, writing...

⁶¹ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 253.

⁶² Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 253.

⁶³ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 586.

⁶⁴ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 251.

[and] the history of the gods, mainly the god whose service she has entered. She learns *mangalas*... as well as the *Puranas* and other *patis* or books, except the *sastras* and *Vedas* which she is not allowed to read.”⁶⁵ Although there were limits to a *devadasi*'s education, she was far more educated than other women of their communities, and this education no doubt influenced their state of auspiciousness in society.

The Dance of the *Devadasi*

Devadasi were known best as dancers, and for being very skilled, something that many travel writers mention. While their dance of *sadir* has been lost to time, many of its features have been preserved, though absent of its inherent sexuality, in the modern dance form of *Bharatanatyam*. The transition from *sadir* to *Bharatanatyam* is problematic, led by upper- and middle-class Indian women of the modern era, as well as artists and theosophists, who did not want to let the art form die with the *devadasi*. Rather, during the process of the formation of India as a country in its own right, a need for a national image and culture pushed its way to the forefront of India's goals. The push for dance, whose artists had been long punished by English colonists, became a way to nationalize Indian culture. As a result, the dance of *sadir* was modified to become what it is today. In doing so, the creators of *Bharatanatyam* pushed back against the *devadasi* and their dance, which existed at the same time, saying that their new work was truer to ancient Indian traditions of dance than *sadir*; they claimed it possessed a spiritual and aesthetic heritage and equivalent to the status of classical as with western ballet, further pushing the dance of the *devadasi* to the sidelines.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Haafner, "On the Dancers or *Devadasis*," 251.

⁶⁶ Uttarra Asha Coorlawala, "The Sanskritized Body," *Dance Research Journal* 36, no. 2, (Winter 2004): 50-54.

One of the main people behind this modification was Rukmini Devi, a South Indian Brahmin woman who later founded Kalakshetra, a performing arts college in Chennai, which today is renowned for its teaching of *Bharatanatyam*. Having learned *sadir* herself from Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, a well-known *devadasi* guru of the 1920s and 1930s, she stripped it of *sringara*, also found spelled as *shringara*, a term meaning “the expression of erotic and sensual love [which is] also intimately connected to spiritual devotion.”⁶⁷ One of the ways she did this was by forbidding certain poetic texts to be used alongside the dance. Any text that involved the dancer invoking “God as Lover or God or king as patron and Lover” were banned.⁶⁸ According to Balasaraswati, a descendant of *devadasi* and a dancer of *Bharatanatyam*, *sringara* “becomes the love of God,” as shown in the Group Dance of the Cowherd Girls. The lyrics of the songs sung with this dance, as quoted by Balasaraswati, show this passion:

The Magical One,
 Who shook the young tree like a stick,
 And brought the fruits down—
 Should he come amidst our cattle,
 Shall we not hear again,
 The music of the sweet konrai flute
 On His lips!

and

Oh, the look on her face!
 Her garment and bangles slipped away
 With her hands, she covered herself.
 Seeing her,
 Who hid herself with her hands,
 His shame and pity became wild passion.
 Oh, the look on His face!⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Hubel, “The High Cost,” 175-176.

⁶⁸ Coorlawala, “Sanskritized Body,” 55.

⁶⁹ Tanjore Balasaraswati, 1975, “Bharata Natyam,” in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. Davesh Soneji (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 198.

These lyrics clearly speak of eroticism and passion, and yet Balasaraswati says that these songs should remain. As she says in defense of these lyrics, “some who seek to ‘purify’ *Bharatanatyam* by replacing the traditional lyrics which express *shringara* with devotional songs. I respectfully submit to such protagonists that there is nothing in *Bharatanatyam* which can be purified afresh; it is divine as it is and innately so.”⁷⁰ Though she makes clear that the *sringara* experienced in *Bharatanatyam* is not carnal, and perhaps therefore does not properly address what *sringara* was to the *devadasi*, she does tie that expression to the divine, as it would have been, even if carnal, to the *devadasi*.

Devi, in removing *sringara* from *Bharatanatyam*, left behind *bhakti*, meaning an attitude of pure spiritual devotion. This is considered appropriate for today’s dancers of *Bharatanatyam*, while *sringara* is not.⁷¹ This sanitized the art form, allowing it to be preserved, but in doing so stripped important parts of the *devadasi*’s dance, so that we may never truly know the dance of the pre-colonial and colonial era *devadasi*. Problematic as it might be, *Bharatanatyam* is still useful for giving us some approximation of what the *devadasi* dancing might have been like. *Bharatanatyam* is an incredibly skillful art form, requiring dexterity, strength, and expression. A recital program of *Bharatanatyam* consists of seven parts, the *alarippu*, *jatiswaram*, *shabdam*, *varnam*, *padam*, *tillana*, and the *shloka*, and may last upwards of two hours.

The movements of the typical *Bharatanatyam* recital program have been described well in Tanjore Balasaraswati’s speech at the 33rd Annual Conference of the Tamil Isai Sangam, an organization that promotes Tamil music. The *alarippu* is pure rhythm, the movements done to relax the body of the dancer and to prepare for the work to come. It is done to focus the dancer’s mind as well, to help one remove distractions and focus. *Jatiswaram* adds melody to the rhythm

⁷⁰ Balasaraswati, “Bharata Natyam,” 198.

⁷¹ Hubel, “The High Cost,” 175.

of *alarippu*, although words do not make an appearance until the *shabdham*. This is where meaning begins to come to the dance, which brings the mood to the recital. The *varnam* is a continuation of sorts to the *shabdham*. In the words of Balasaraswati, a member of a *devadasi* family, describes the *varnam* as a movement where the dancer is able to provide her own creativity to the movement, while still representing the tradition of the movement. This is the section where a story is told, usually of a deity, and lasts generally from 45 minutes to an hour, without rest. This is where *abhinaya*, or the art of expression, comes into play, as the dancer acts out the story told in the music. Following that is the *padam*, a shorter movement that is slower and more introspective, though still relying heavily on *abhinaya* and accompanied by chanting sacred verses. Then comes the *tillana*, a fast-paced movement, while the *shloka* ends with the dancer dancing to a traditional verse, a more introspective movement.⁷² While *devadasi* dance may not have had the strict programmatic requirements of today's *Bharatanatyam*, and the loss of *sringara* is felt, there are certain aspects that we may be able to pull from to develop an idea of what their dancing might have looked like: the concept of *abhinaya*, or expression, the various hand gestures that denote certain objects, moods, or actions, called *mudras*, and the steps and patterns of movement.⁷³

The Music, Duties, and Community of the *Devadasi*

As for the music, it can be assumed that Carnatic music of the south of India was used as the basis of *devadasi* music. According to Haafner, *devadasi* sang “the praises of the gods, their

⁷² Balasaraswati, “Bharata Natyam,” 199.

⁷³ For a fuller understanding of what *Bharatanatyam* looks like, I recommend looking at the additional viewing sources cited below. The Agrade and Rosenberg video is particularly useful, as it explains the *mudras* and *abhinaya* used in the dance and how they relate to the story being told. The remaining three are solely examples of *Bharatanatyam* dance, ranging from more traditional to more modern interpretations.

victories and deeds,” and were taught, in addition to their singing, dancing, particular styles of music in their temple, and the history of the god they served, as well as “hymns and songs of praise.”⁷⁴ The accompanying ensemble consisted of a multitude of instruments, such as the *nagasvaram*, an oboe-like instrument, the *tuti*, or a drone instrument, the *talam*, or small cymbals made of brass, the *maddalam* and *dhol*, two different types of drums, and the *cilampu*, also known as the *tala*, a set of cymbals, one of steel and one of brass. These cymbals were played by the *cilampukaran*, which acted as a dance master, keeping time and guiding the dancers with voice and strikes of the cymbals. All of these instruments were played by men, either from the lowest branches of the *sudras* or the sons of *devadasi*, and were not allowed inside the innermost sections of the temple with the dancers. Rather, they remained just outside on a porch, so that they might be easily heard by the *devadasi* as they danced.⁷⁵

Though singing and dancing for their deity are what the *devadasi* are best known for, they also had a variety of duties within their temples. They were expected to perform for the image of their deity, and sing and dance before it for processions, but they also did ceremonial work and performed jobs for the upkeep of their temples. All *devadasi* must:

weave the *vanamālās* or garlands of [wild] flowers with which [the gods] are adorned, and to bind together the *lāñchanas* or bouquets of flowers which they use at offerings and to decorate the altars; to sweep the temple and the priests’ cells in the inner courtyard... they also have to clean the wool from which the *vāstras* or clothes of the gods are woven; prepare the *cūrṇam* or sandalwood powder with *lāl* (some sort of red and yellow powder) with which the mark or *bhāga* is made on the forehead of the deities; clean the lamps which hang in front of the image of the god, provide them with oils and wicks, and preserve the sediment of this oil which is used to ignite the homas or fire offerings. Those who serve in the temple of Vishnu also have to feed the monkeys who are being taken care of in memory of Hanuman.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 252-253.

⁷⁵ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 257-258.

⁷⁶ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 252.

Most of these tasks are ceremonial- the weaving of the *lāñchanas*, the cleaning of the *vāstras*, and preparing the *cūrṇam* to make the marks on the image of the deities' foreheads. While they do have work typically thought of as “women’s work,” Haafner makes it clear that they have far more ceremonial duties than the “women’s work” of cleaning, even if those ceremonial duties may seem monotonous to our eyes.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the *devadasi* is that their community was matrifocal and matrilineal. All children of *devadasi* had a place in their society, though there were no doubt some who did not have children. Haafner writes, that the *devadasi* did have methods of birth control; however, if they did have children, girls would be raised to be *devadasi* and the boys would be raised as musicians.⁷⁷ Though these children were those of the upper-class men who served as patrons for the *devadasi*, unlike those of conventional wives, a *devadasi* was not required to surrender her rights to her offspring. According to Theresa Hubel, “the children of the *devadasi* belonged only to the *devadasi* and not to any men at all.”⁷⁸ Rather, they were taken in by the *devadasi* and raised in their own homes, where they were raised to become the next generation of *devadasi* and musicians in the temples. Because only women could become *devadasi*, they were first in line to receive any generational wealth from their *devadasi* mother when she passed away. This was because the *devadasi*, with their payments from temples and patrons and access to inheritance from temple-owned lands, were their family’s main source of income, allowing them to be providers without a man involved.⁷⁹ This created a matrilineal, matrifocal society within the *devadasi* community, one notably important when conventional women did not have such privileges. However, the male children of *devadasi* still had their place

⁷⁷ Haafner, “On the Dancers or *Devadasis*,” 254.

⁷⁸ Hubel, “The High Cost,” 171.

⁷⁹ Hubel, “The High Cost,” 171.

in their community. Many times, a male child was brought up in the role of musician, playing for the *devadasi* as they danced. This allowed them to reap the benefits of their mothers' careers, while still affording them purpose in the *devadasi* community.

The image of *devadasi* painted by writers such as Haafner greatly differs from those of other writers. While possessing sexual freedom, and though that freedom did lead to payment for relationships and performances, they were not prostitutes, nor were they disrespected by their own communities. Rather, they held places of high esteem, despite the potential low castes of their birth, were highly educated, and incredibly wealthy. However, due to Western ideals of sexual purity and chastity of women, many more writers portrayed them as either wicked women or victims of an abusive system. This led to their downfall, stripping them of status and intergenerational wealth, especially once British colonial power was firmly entrenched. This culminated in the end of the system in 1947, when the devotion of *devadasi* to their temples in Tamil Nadu was outlawed.

While *devadasi* do exist today, it is in a state far removed from their former positions of power and prestige. Modern *devadasi* are largely devoted to a goddess named Yellamma, and are considered wives of her husband, Jamadagni.⁸⁰ While they receive respect from their community in some ways, and can receive gifts such as new saris, they are little more than prostitutes. Some are able to make enough money to care for their families, or buy plots of land, but many of their daughters become *devadasi* as well due to lack of future prospects. In addition, HIV and AIDS infections are rampant among the modern *devadasi*, with little to no healthcare available,

⁸⁰ W. J. Johnson, "Yellammā," in *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, 2009), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198610250.001.0001/acref-9780198610250-e-2786>.

meaning that their lives are often short.⁸¹ The lives of the *devadasi* today are far removed from their former positions of prestige and respect.

⁸¹ William Dalrymple, “Serving the Goddess: The dangerous life of a sacred sex worker,” *New Yorker*, August 4, 2008, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/08/04/serving-the-goddess>.

Chapter 2: *Bayadère: The Ninth Life* as Challenge to the Westernized *bayadère*

Bayadère: The Ninth Life is a staged modern dance reimagining of French choreographer Marius Petipa's famous 19th-century ballet *La Bayadère*, created and choreographed by Shobana Jeyasingh, an Indian woman trained in the art of *Bharatanatyam*. Rather than strictly following the plotline of the original ballet, Jeyasingh's work reshapes the narrative, limiting *La Bayadère*'s plot only to the first act of *Bayadère: The Ninth Life*. As Sooraj Subramaniam, a dancer in the original production, explains, this act highlights the protagonist's disbelief about the culture in which the ballet was created and presented. The second act travels back in time, where one of the characters falls back into 19th-century Europe, the time when Indian temple dancers first performed in Europe and began to be featured as exoticized figures in ballets, plays, and operas. The protagonist begins to take on the image of the *devadasi* who were objectified, exoticized, and fetishized. The third act focuses on dance itself in the 21st century, exposing the cultural tropes that European people were all too happy to use when talking about distant, fascinating civilizations. Subramaniam questions the work of these cultural tropes- how do they relate to our cultures in the present day, how do we address these tropes, and in addressing them, what tensions confront us?⁸²

⁸² "Company dancer Sooraj Subramaniam on the story and style of *Bayadère – The Ninth Life*," Shobana Jeyasingh Dance, last modified October 2, 2017, <https://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk/explore/sooraj-subramaniam-story-style-bayadere-ninth-life/>.

Jeyasingh's motivations for thoroughly deconstructing Petipa's problematic ballet is clear. In her first viewing of *La Bayadère* in the 1990s, she describes the impact it had on her as "viscerally contradictory."⁸³ *Fakirs*, disciplined ascetics, were played as animalistic, dancing low to the ground and in positions of servility; the *mudras* used by the Golden Idol, meant to be an image of Shiva, were weak and improperly held. The character Nikiya, after whose profession the ballet is named, is not at all Indian in her name and depiction. Jeyasingh muses on the implausible depiction of Nikiya in the ballet and imagines a reverse scenario of cultural distortion from afar:

I wondered if a traditional dance-maker in India in 1866 would have composed a dance work set in Tunbridge Wells with a heroine named Kamala. Would their exotic "English" Kamala have danced barefoot to the sound of drums surrounded by beautiful sets that evoked the English countryside with the silhouette of the Roman Colosseum in the background? Would all the men have worn tartan kilts in the belief that this was the national dress of the English? Would the depiction of Morris dancing have ended up looking like Flamenco?⁸⁴

Jeyasingh challenges the persistent anachronisms and incorrect cultural depictions of the original ballet with her work. *Bayadère: The Ninth Life* forces the audience to confront the past of the European character of the *bayadère* and asks what this character means to Jeyasingh as a contemporary Asian woman living in Britain. *Bayadère: The Ninth Life* is inspired by Jeyasingh's encounter with the fictional Nikiya of the ballet.⁸⁵ In so challenging this encounter with a fictitious India, Jeyasingh allows us to push back against the character of the *bayadère* and the exoticized fantasy world she exists in.

La Bayadère

⁸³ Shobana Jeyasingh, "Dancing Times' Talking Point: Thoughts on Petipa's *La Bayadère*," last modified September 28, 2017, <https://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk/explore/talking-point-dancing-times/>.

⁸⁴ Shobana Jeyasingh, "Dancing Times' Talking Point."

⁸⁵ Shobana Jeyasingh, "Dancing Times' Talking Point."

Before one can discuss how Jeyasingh's work challenged such a staple of the ballet canon, one must briefly explain the work from which this reimagining came. *La Bayadère* is a ballet originally choreographed by French ballet dancer and choreographer Marius Petipa (1818-1910), a staple name in ballet choreography, with music by Austrian ballet composer Ludwig Minkus (1826-1917). It premiered in 1877 in St. Petersburg as part of the Imperial Russian Ballet. The ballet plot centers around Nikiya, a temple dancer and the titular *bayadère*, her lover Solor, a warrior, the High Brahmin priest who lusts after her, the Rajah, and the Rajah's daughter, Gamzatti. When Nikiya is consecrated as the lead temple dancer, she catches the eye of the High Brahmin. She rejects him, as she loves Solor, a warrior. The two swear eternal love to each other. The Rajah decides to reward Solor's bravery as a warrior by giving him his daughter, Gamzatti, to marry. Though Solor has sworn eternal love to Nikiya, he agrees to marry Gamzatti, who is jealous of Nikiya. By the order of the Rajah and with help from Gamzatti, Nikiya is tricked into accepting a basket of flowers containing a venomous snake, which bites her. She dies, and Solor marries Gamzatti. At the completion of their vows the gods, angry at his betrayal to Nikiya, destroy the Rajah's palace, killing everyone inside, and Solor and Nikiya are reunited in eternal love.⁸⁶

Minkus' music for *La Bayadère* is a rather formulaic example of a late nineteenth-century ballet score. Featuring abundant waltz sections and movements, with their easily recognizable bass line, the tonal language generally remains safely ensconced between the I and V of the key, except for moments of chordal movement. It is telling of the roots of the score that a thoroughly European music and dance form serve as the music for this supposedly Indian tale. However, it would likely have been equally problematic if Minkus had attempted to borrow

⁸⁶ "La Bayadère," The Marius Petipa Society, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://petipasociety.com/la-bayadere/>.

Indian musical elements to accompany these characters. Such cross-cultural borrowings usually ended up doing little more than stereotyping an exotic sonic other, rather than respectfully and thoughtfully engaging with the music of another culture.⁸⁷

The very term “*bayadère*,” a French bastardization of the Portuguese term *bailadeira*, is a sloppy catch-all for “professional dancer from India.”⁸⁸ This term erases the likely role of Nikiya, who is presumably a *devadasi*, by lumping temple singers and dancers sometimes ritually married to gods in with traveling dance troupes and courtesans. The term *bayadère* did not differentiate between different styles of dance or different professions. If she was an Indian woman and she danced, she was called a *bayadère* in European works and writings.

Moreover, the *bayadère* was often relegated to a background character, with one, played by the *prima ballerina* taking the lead. 19th-century ballets featured many supernatural women, such as sylphs and shades. These characters could be portrayed well by a strong *corps*, allowing for the use of abstract choreography. These characters “appealed to the contemporary taste for idealized, fantasized womanhood.”⁸⁹ The Western character of the *bayadère*, when used directly as a substitute for the *devadasi*, fulfilled these tastes. She was foreign and beautiful, but like sylphs and shades, unattainable due to her devotion to her religion and her temple, and strong association with divinity.

The second is the depiction of the High Brahmin. Not only does he lack a name, making him a mere idea instead of an actual character, but he plays into a harmful stereotype that led to the downfall of *devadasi* under colonial rule. He follows the common Orientalist trope in the

⁸⁷ For an example of musical stereotyping, see Judy Tsou, “Composing Racial Difference in *Madama Butterfly*: Tonal Language and the Power of Cio-Cio-San,” in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Bloechel, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffery Kallberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 214-237.

⁸⁸ “Bayadère,” Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales.

⁸⁹ Robert Ignatius Letellier, *The Ballets of Ludwig Minkus* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2008), 119.

performing arts of the corrupt Brahmin priest, who preys on the *devadasi* and demands sexual favors. This demonizes Brahmin priests and, in addition, the Hindu religion, and denies *devadasi* agency by portraying them as victims that need to be rescued from the priests by non-Hindus, reinforcing colonialist ideals.

Travel writers propagated this ideal for centuries, particularly in relation to the practice of *sati*, or the ritual burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. Manucci's *Storia do Mogor* about his travels in India from 1653 to 1708 attacked the Brahmin priests regarding the practice of *sati*, and invokes Christian morality, stating "for in everybody else there are some evil traits, while all the rest is good; whereas in the [Brahmin] caste, where there ought doubtless to be something good, one meets with nothing that is not entirely evil."⁹⁰ In *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, published in Paris in 1670 to 1671, François Bernier did not condemn *sati* specifically in his scapegoating of Brahmin priests; rather, he attacked the Hindu religion and the Brahmin priests' place in it, saying that the "tricks and impostures" of Brahmin priests are "wicked and detestable," that they "encourage and promote these gross errors and superstitions to which they are indebted for their wealth and consequence. As persons attached and consecrated to important mysteries, they are held in general veneration, and enriched by the alms of the people."⁹¹

Bernier pointed out an example of one ritual, and uses this to further demonize the priests as reprehensible, taking advantage of a young girl, likely a *devadasi*.

These knaves select a beautiful maiden to become (as they say, and as they induce these silly, ignorant people to believe) the bride of (Jagannat originally) [Jagannatha], who accompanies the god to the temple... where she remains the whole night, having been made to believe that [Jaganatha] will come and lie with her. She is commanded to inquire of the god if the year will be fruitful, and what may be the festivals, the prayers, and the alms which he requires in return for this bounty. In the night one of these [imposters] enters the temple through a small

⁹⁰ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, Volume III, trans. William Irvine (London: John Murray, 1907): 61.

⁹¹ Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 305.

back door, enjoys the unsuspecting damsel, makes her believe whatever may be deemed necessary, and the following morning when on her way to another temple, whither she is carried... by the side of [Jagannatha] her Spouse, she is desired by the [Brahmins] to state aloud to the people all she has heard from the lustful priest, as if every word had proceeded from the mouth of [Jagannatha].⁹²

Jagannatha is a regionally worshiped avatar of Vishnu, one of the main deities of Hindu religion, and is associated with Krishna, one of the main deities of the Hindu religion who is another avatar of Vishnu.⁹³ As Vishnu was a common deity for devadasi to be dedicated to, and *devadasi* were often considered the spouses of whichever deity they were dedicated to, it is likely that Bernier saw the dedication of a *devadasi*, and interpreted it in a way that matched with his pre-existing biases. Indeed, he does mention the traveling of the *devadasi* alongside the image of a deity, something that *devadasi* were expected to do for important religious ceremonies. However, in interpreting these events in this way, he disparaged the religious practices of the Brahmins and *devadasi*, and allowed for future Christian missionaries and British colonial powers to step in to save the *devadasi*, leading to the loss of their prominent status and wealth.

Finally, as Jeyasingh was quoted above, the India depicted in the ballet is full of Orientalist tropes that do not accurately depict India. Instead, it relies on a created India that takes pieces of non-European, exotic places that are not related to India in any way, seemingly throwing them against the wall to create a mish-mash of non-Europe to wow and fantasize the audience- leading to a *devadasi* in a jeweled top and harem pants when she should be in something much closer to a *sari*, a secondary love interest (Gamzatti) in a frilly tutu, and intricately painted Orientalist-style backdrops.

⁹² Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 305-306.

⁹³ "Jagannatha," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jagannatha>; "Vishnu," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 16, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vishnu>; "Krishna." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 1, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Krishna-Hindu-deity>.

Bayadère: The Ninth Life as a Challenge to La Bayadère

Shobana Jeyasingh is a notable choreographer in today's modern dance world. She was born in Chennai, but grew up in Sri Lanka and Malaysia before settling in Britain in 1981. She was trained in Bharatanatyam and that dance training influences her choreography. In addition, her experiences as a British Asian woman have shaped her work, which explores the conflicts that arise between diverse origins, both personal and cultural. Her work embraces the hybridity of identity and style.⁹⁴ Her production *Bayadère: The Ninth Life* is a shining example of this embracing of hybridity, and uses it to challenge the social issues of Orientalism and the corrupted image of the *bayadère* when compared to the devadasi.

However, *Bayadère: The Ninth Life* is not the only work to use this hybridity to expose social problems. Other works have focused on these issues, such as *Material Men*, which studies the indentured labor system and how it affected Indians.⁹⁵ Another work, *Bruise Blood* combines the vocal work of Shlomo, a British beatboxer, with her choreography to tell the story of Daniel Hamm, a young man who was wrongfully arrested in the Harlem riots of 1964. He had to let out his bruise blood to show that he had indeed been assaulted by the police.⁹⁶ More recently, in 2022, Jeyasingh partnered with Kareem Roustom to produce *Clorinda Agonistes- Clorinda the Warrior*, inspired by Monteverdi's *Il Combattimento*, shows the Muslim Clorinda both as the warrior of the original production but also in the modern day as a protestor, "determined to tell

⁹⁴ "Shobana Jeyasingh," in *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers*, ed. Jo Butterworth and Lorna Sanders, Third edition, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021): 120-122.

⁹⁵ Sarah Albinali, "Shobana Jeyasingh: My Life in Dance," *Eastern Eye*, Apr 21, 2017, <https://login.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/shobana-jeyasingh-my-life-dance/docview/1891344408/se-2>.

⁹⁶ "Shobana Jeyasingh," *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers*, 122-123.

her own story in her own way.”⁹⁷ To have such a choreographer challenge such a staple in the ballet canon and reveal the ethical implications of portraying a group of people in such a manner is promising, as Jeyasingh’s lived experiences give more weight to her work’s challenge.

But how, exactly, does Jeyasingh’s *Baydère: The Ninth Life* challenge this work? The answer is multifaceted. To begin with, a recording of the music of the ballet was digitally edited until it resembled the sounds of Indian instruments, manipulating themes of the original score. By exchanging the sound of a Western orchestra and Viennese waltzes for the sounds of Indian music, one pushes against the Western idea of the *bayadère*. When it comes to the dancing aspects of the performance, Shobana Jeyasingh challenges *La Bayadère* by not focusing on its plot, but by creating something new.

The plot of *Bayadère: The Ninth Life* is a bit complicated. In the first act, an Indian man, hereafter referred to as the protagonist, tells his friend via Whatsapp about his reactions to a production of *La Bayadère* he has seen. As he recounts the final act, the shades of the ballet’s Kingdom of the Shades segment come from the screen and kidnap him. This leads into the second act, where the shades turn him into the *bayadère* that they represent. He is stripped and forced to wear a dancer’s clothes. This section is performed over texts from the French reviewer Théophile Gautier in regards to the visit made by *devadasi* on tour in France in 1838. In Jeyasingh’s words, “Gautier’s words tell us why this *bayadère* is attractive to them but he/she is isolated/alienated from their persistent demands.”⁹⁸ He tries showing them some real *Bharatanatyam* but it is not well-received. Gautier’s texts recount the death of Amany (the Indian dancer he met in Paris), which may or may not be true, as there is little concrete historical

⁹⁷ “Clorinda Agonistes- Clorinda the Warrior,” Shobana Jeyasingh Dance, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk/works/clorinda-agonistes/>.

⁹⁸ Shobana Jeyasingh, email communication, March 6, 2023.

evidence for the event. As this happens, we head into act three, where the protagonist regains his modern self and removes all of the exotic paraphernalia, such as parrots and fans, from the stage. He encourages the shades to change their clothing, and they dance the Kingdom of the Shades excerpt as contemporary dancers.⁹⁹

The music is an important aspect of the work's challenge against Western views of India. Gabriel Prokofiev, a Russian-British composer and the grandson of composer Sergei Prokofiev, was tasked with the editing of the Minkus score to create something different for Jeyasingh's production. Prokofiev's work started with a recording of the music of *La Bayadère*, using it as a sound source that he manipulated to form a new work that is very different from the original score. The first act has snippets from the Minkus score that Prokofiev deliberately and creatively deconstructed and distorted as the music is sent over the internet for the protagonist's blog post. In the second act, while the spoken writings of Théophile Gautier take up the majority of the soundscape, the Minkus score undergoes major edits. The piano enters the score here, but Prokofiev manipulates this sound, transforming it into a "faux-Indian piano" or "i-piano," for short.¹⁰⁰ By removing the attack of each note, Prokofiev creates a sound not unlike that of a tambura, a long-necked, fretless lute used in Indian classical music as a drone.¹⁰¹ This is used to play out the sounds of Gautier's and Europe's fantasies of India and the *bayadères*. As the act progresses, more sounds from Indian classical music enter the score. An Indian flute, *veena*, *mridangam*, and *chenda* enter, as well as a type of vocal percussion known as *jathis*, performed by dancer Sooraj Subramaniam, who plays the protagonist. The third act returns the sounds to

⁹⁹ Jeyasingh, email, March 6, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ "Composer Gabriel Prokofiev talks us through the music he has created for *Bayadère – The Ninth Life*," Shobana Jeyasingh Dance, n.d., <https://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk/explore/manipulating-minkus-score/>.

¹⁰¹ "Tambura," *Britannica Academic*, last modified September 23, 2011, <https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/levels/collegiate/article/tambura/71101>.

the modern world, with dancers' voices returning the listener to 21st century life. The music becomes more electronic, and yet it is entirely created from a recording of Minkus' Kingdom of the Shades music. In Prokofiev's words, it becomes a "modern, post-minimalist 'remix' of *La Bayadère*."¹⁰²

What is notable about this aspect of challenging the ballet is the fact that Prokofiev used a recording of Minkus' score itself, as most, if not all, of the sounds included in the music come from a recording of the original ballet. Regarding the second act, introducing Indian sounds to this highlights the exoticized views of Westerners to the character of the *bayadère*. The displacement of the Western sounds of the original ballet with Indian ones sets the scene for the challenge Jeyasingh sets up to the image of the *bayadère*, which will be discussed below. It sets the scene of exotic landscapes, which the Western viewers saw when they saw the *devadasi* perform in 1838, while also ensuring that the Western musical sounds are buried underneath this overwhelming sense of Indianness, making their importance much lower compared to the sounds of Indian instruments and vocal percussion.

However, the third act is the most insightful. A recording of Minkus' music is directly edited and brought into the modern era. This defies expectations in that the ballet's music is changed. What the ballet purports to be is brought into question- its staging, its sounds, its ideals. This remix forces viewers to reexamine the ballet's score and sounds, which works alongside the challenge of the third act that Jeyasingh presents in her choreography.

There are three main challenges to the ballet *La Bayadère* in the danced portions of Jeyasingh's work, with one major theme in each act. The first act reacts to the original ballet from the perspective of an Indian man, which I will simply call the protagonist from this moment

¹⁰² Shobana Jeyasingh Dance, "Composer Gabriel Prokofiev."

forward. In a trailer for a production of the work at Sadler's Wells in London, we see the response to the character of the *fakir*, an Indian holy man. The term *fakir* originally means an Islamic initiate of a Sufi order. In Western usage, it has also been attributed to Indian ascetics and yogis.¹⁰³ The text reads "I have never seen a holy man move like this," which is demonstrated by a man in red lighting behind the protagonist.¹⁰⁴ In most productions of *La Bayadère*, the fakir dances low to the ground, almost animalistically, in a position of servitude. When not dancing, he is on his knees, or crouched in a very "feral" sort of way, for lack of a better term. He is dressed in hide rags and a wig of stringy, unkempt hair.¹⁰⁵ He does not have the inherent grace of the *bayadère*, the Brahmin priests or the High Brahmin, despite being a holy person himself. The text response by the protagonist highlights this disconnect- he has never seen a holy man move this way.

In the second act, the shades from *La Bayadère*'s "Kingdom of the Shades" segment, considered one of the best works in ballet history, kidnap our protagonist and bring him through time to 1838. He becomes one of the *devadasi* on tour, hired and brought around Europe as a novelty. This kidnapping takes place over the readings of text by Théophile Gautier. "At last we are going to see something strange, mysterious, charming," the reader quotes, "something unknown to Europe, something new... India, wild and remote as it is, has come to us. It is

¹⁰³ Paul Lagasse, "Fakir," in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, and Columbia University, 8th ed., Columbia University Press, 2018, <http://ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?auth=tufts&url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/columency/fakir/0?institutionId=991>.

¹⁰⁴ Sadler's Wells, "Shobana Jeyasingh Dance - Bayadère: The Ninth Life - Trailer (Sadler's Wells)," YouTube, September 12, 2017, performance trailer, 0:01-0:11, <https://youtu.be/jqe7cUDGdYs>.

¹⁰⁵ Ludwig Minkus, *La Bayadère*. The Royal Ballet and the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Ross MacGibbon, performed 2018, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London: Medici.tv video, <https://edu-medic-tv.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/en/ballets/la-bayadere-marianela-nunez-natalia-osipova-royal-ballet>.

imperative that we should pass judgment on its *bayadères*.”¹⁰⁶ During this reading, he is stripped of his identity and forced into a new one- that of the Europeanized *bayadère*.

Though it was devadasi who toured, likely from the second order, European audiences could only see the *bayadère*, come to life before them on the stage. The context of these temple women were not easily accessible to the audiences this ballet was performed before, so instead the incorrect images of Asia were applied to them. Indeed, the protagonist is dressed in harem pants, not something similar to a sari, holds a fan which he bites, and wears the nose ring typical of devadasi, worn as a sign of their rank.¹⁰⁷ This is done over a different set of quoted texts: “her skin is tawny... [like] the coat of a deer or a panther. To touch, this skin is... cooler than a lizard’s under belly... Her big toe is separated from the others like a foot of a lark.” More quotes used include: “[her] blue-dyed gums and teeth... [are] alien, Asiatic,” “ears... pierced with enormous holes... upper lobe riddled with openings;” “a little bodice... compresses the breasts.”¹⁰⁸ These texts focus so heavily on the appearance of the devadasi, but the ones about her dance are perhaps worse. The protagonist attempts to shake off the countenance of the *bayadère*, showing some real *Bharatanatyam* dancing. Gautier’s text responds with such phrases as “neck movement like a bird regurgitating,” and “unbelievable rolling of the eyes.”¹⁰⁹

The whole of the second act reads as absurd. With modern eyes, these descriptions and depictions read as simply wrong and unsettling, especially with a man acting in such a sexualized way as to bite his fan. In our patriarchal Western culture, the act of a man taking on this character of the Westernized *bayadère*, so sexualized and exoticized, highlights how wrong these

¹⁰⁶ Théophile Gautier, “Th. des Variétés: Début of the Bayaderes” in *Gautier on Dance*, trans. Ivor Guest, ed. Ivor Guest (Princeton: Princeton Book Co., 1986), 49.

¹⁰⁷ Sadler’s Wells, “Shobana Jeyasingh Dance,” 0:17-0:39.

¹⁰⁸ Théophile Gautier, “The Devadasis, otherwise known as Bayaderes” in *Gautier on Dance*, trans. Ivor Guest, ed. Ivor Guest (Princeton: Princeton Book Co., 1986), 41-42.

¹⁰⁹ Gautier, “The Devadasis,” 44.

past Europeans were. It becomes absurd that anyone ever thought this way. Though perhaps there is something to be said about how it took a man taking up this character for it to seem wrong to Western eyes, it is nonetheless effective in highlighting the ludicrous image of the Western *bayadère* in comparison to the Indian devadasi, especially Haafner's image of these temple women.

The third act can perhaps be read as most challenging. The protagonist fights back against this character and the exoticization of India for European use. Gone are the fans, the parrots that denote "India." Gone are the shades, the European viewers of the past forcing him to dance and act in a certain way. Instead, he brings the shades to his side, and together they dance this celebrated piece of ballet performance—the Kingdom of the Shades, where Nikiya's ghost confronts Solor while he is under an opium-induced haze—as contemporary dancers. Their clothing changes to that typical of contemporary dancers, and the whole dance is rewritten to be modern, rather than stuck in the tradition of Petipa's original choreography. He deconstructs this idealized image of a noble, beautiful *bayadère* and forces the former audience to dance with him, rather than against him. He removes the exotifying factors and becomes himself—an Indian man—challenging this European image of what he should be, what the *bayadères* should be.

Conclusion

Under British colonial rule, the image of the *devadasi* as an auspicious woman changed. The European view of them as prostitutes began to influence Indian culture. Movements led by women meant to improve their lives turned on the *devadasi*, attacking their sexual freedom and resistance to traditional gender norms. Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, both the first Indian woman medical graduate from Madras University and member of a legislative council, wrote in her work “Why Should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples be Abolished,” published in the 1920s, that the *devadasi* were victims, taught from a young age that prostitution was their only course of action in life; that abolishment of the practice and the stripping and settling on of their hereditary lands, given to them by the temples, was the only way forward. She believed that the *devadasi* needed to be wives and mothers, deliberately refusing to acknowledge that they were already considered wives to deities and that many of them were mothers themselves.¹¹⁰ The Madras Devadasis Association responded with the statement that they were not prostitutes. They explained that they were dedicated to their deities, they may have undergone permanent concubinage to a single man since they could not marry, and that they were indispensable to their religion. They also decried the loss of their hereditary lands, saying that such losses would lead them to poverty, and poverty was and is a main contributing factor to prostitution.¹¹¹

This change in image led to the *devadasi*'s loss of status as pillars of art and culture. Instead, that status was co-opted by middle- and upper-class women of India. In the years before

¹¹⁰ S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, “Why should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples be Abolished?,” in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. Davesh Soneji (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010): 116, 121-122.

¹¹¹ Madras Devadasis Association, “The Humble Memorial of Devadasis of the Madras Presidency,” in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. Davesh Soneji (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010): 128, 130-134.

India's independence, notably in the 1920s, the status of the *devadasi* had waned. Reddi's writings reduced them to girls, instead of women, who were unable to rescue themselves and needed someone like her to do it for them. The so-called feminists of the All India Women's Conference, of which she was a part, took this stance. By 1929, the anti-Nautch campaign had undermined the *devadasi*'s heritage, making it a socially unacceptable profession, especially among the upper- and middle-class Hindu communities of South India.¹¹²

However, a growing concern of this process was the loss of their art. A revival movement, affirming that the *devadasi* tradition should be abolished, wanted to ensure that the dance of the *devadasi* was preserved. This largely came from a nationalistic stance, that their dance was a staple of Indian culture and should belong to all Indians. This led to the reconstruction of a dance that was, in actuality, a renamed appropriation of the *devadasi*'s art. This art, called *Bharatanatyam*, was considered acceptable for middle- and upper-class, largely Brahmin, women to perform, but not the *devadasi*.¹¹³ In 1947, the process of devoting *devadasi* to temples was outlawed. Thus, betrayed by a feminist movement that should have held them as a goal, an ideal, and stripped of their art, standing, and forms of income, the *devadasi* became what Europeans called them: prostitutes, highlighted today in scholarly studies as victims of a cruel practice while either failing to mention or incorrectly contextualizing their past, with little to no mention of how colonialism caused their loss of status.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Hubel, "The High Cost," 167-168.

¹¹³ Matthew Harp Allen, "Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance," in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. by Davesh Soneji (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 212-213.

¹¹⁴ For examples of studies about the *devadasi* today, please see Maggie Black, "Women in Ritual Slavery: *Devadasi*, *Jogini* and *Mathamma* in Karnataka and Adhra Pradesh, Southern India," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies* 16, nos. 1 and 2 (2009): 179-205; Tmaeshnie Deanne, "The Devadasi System: An Exploitation of Women and Children in the name of God and Culture," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 24, no. 1 (May 2022): 1-26; Ankur Shigal, "The *Devadasi* System: Temple Prostitution in India," *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 22, no. 1 (2015): 107-123; Maria-Costanza Torri, "Abuse of lower castes in South India: The Institution of Devadasi," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11, no. 2 (2009): 31-48; Bincy Wilson, "Can Legislation Alone Protect Devadasi Girls from Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation?" *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 29, no. 5 (2020): 606-625; Dipty Joseph and Bino Thomas, "Life Skills Development Training for Adolescent Girls at Risk-Rescued

However, the *devadasi* need not be remembered only for their downfall. The image that modern people have of these women has been tarnished by British colonial ideals and a nationalist movement that viewed them as unideal women, centered around what these movements made them. However, it is vitally important to recognize the past of these women and challenge the modern image of them as prostitutes and victims. Haafner and Jeyasingh's works push back at this image. There is room in the musical and artistic spheres for new interpretations of these women. *La Bayadère* and other works such as *Le dieu et la bayadère* need not be the only works depicting *devadasi*. Jeyasingh's work fulfills this in that she challenges the artistic narrative present from these 19th century ballets and operas, but there is room for more, for work highlighting and featuring *devadasi* as nuanced, three-dimensional heroines. Where is an accurate story about a *devadasi* as the main character, her joys and pains of life? Where is a film that does not depict a *devadasi* as a victim? Where are the poems, the short stories, the novels that do just that? Where are the operas and musicals? Anyone with the research behind them and an artistic goal can bring these stories to life, and should. Good media that recognizes past and present biases and is accurate to these women's lives is welcome, as one contemporary dance cannot be enough.

Both Haafner's and Jeyasingh's works challenge these images and traditions surrounding the *devadasi*. They peel back the biases present in so many other travel writers' narratives and give astonishing detail, and call out inaccurate works that strip these women and their culture into others that exist only to titillate and astonish their audiences. Both works ask for a reevaluation of these women, their artistic significance, and cultural position. The conflicted

Devadasi Girls in Karnataka," *Artha- Journal of Social Sciences* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1-16; and Amit Anand, "Unheard and Unnoticed: Violence Against Women in India – a Study of Practice of Witch-Hunting, Honour Killing and Devadasi System," (PhD diss., Lancaster University, 2022).

depictions of the *devadasi* warn against any similar reading of their lives and work. Attending to these complexities allows their stories to inspire new artistic connections in the present.

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