

Dance in Indian Society: The temple and courtly traditions

*Tiziana Leucci*¹

Introduction

“(...) A dancer is the one who is bursting with youth, expert in dance and music, always bold, energetic, untiring, and who in any group of young and beautiful girls would stand out in excellence.”

Nātyasāstra (4th century C.E., ca.).²

“(...) A courtesan is a woman who takes pleasure in always performing the arts under the guidance of an expert master. Her gestures must be graceful. She should be humble, yet must have strength of character. She should be clever in dealing with royal and aristocratic persons, free from the faults and diseases, sweet and intelligent in her speech and also of an untiring nature.”

Nātyasāstra (4th century C.E., ca.).³

Indian society, as with any other form of human culture, was constantly transformed in the course of time. In this article I will deal with those traditions of dance performed in the past in the Indian temples and royal courts. For those who are not fully acquainted with South Asian history, I'll just give here some elements to frame my paper historically. First of all one should keep in mind just a few dates which are important for their implications not only on the socio-political changes of the Country, but because they affected tremendously the choreographic traditions too. I will focus here only on Indian history, this area being my specific field of research, though similar cultural aspects and

socio-political conditions could also be found in other South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The first date to be retained is the 15th of August 1947, when India got its Independence from the British colonial power⁴. A few months later, on the 27th November 1947, after almost a century of animated legal debates, the High Court of the Madras Presidency (which included at that time almost the totality of South India) passed a law, known as the *Devadāsī Bill*⁵, which forbade the performance of dance in temples and other religious institutions. Traditionally performed by a community of women known by the generic Sanskrit term of *devadāsī*,⁶ such dances had been part of the complex Hindu liturgy since at least the 9th century C.E.⁷ The liturgy included daily rituals and offering of songs, music and dances in honour of their deities in the shrines. Those ladies were very skilled professional artists, quite proficient in music, song, dance, literature and poetry too. In the meantime, they were also courtesans, whose way of life was totally different from the majority of other Indian women, for whom married life was the only possibility open to them⁸. Courtesans were also highly educated at that time in India, whereas the other women were not. In contrast to wives, whose marriages were always arranged, courtesans did not marry, but could themselves choose their patrons and lovers. Bold, economically independent, cultivated, wealthy and witty, they were in a way similar to their European counterparts of the Renaissance period.⁹ Being quite beautiful and seductive, from Marco Polo's accounts (13th century) onwards, they constantly attracted the attention and the curiosity of a

number of European travellers in India. Described by the majority of them, courtesans inspired in the travellers' native countries a large number of ballets, operas, poems, novels and musical compositions, where the character of the Indian dancer, known by the generic term *bayadère* of Portuguese origin (from *bayladera*, a female dancer), was portrayed on the Western stage as the symbol of Indian femininity, as well as an example of exotic beauty, seduction, female faithfulness and devotion.¹⁰ Enchanted by them, several European artists and poets, including J. W. von Goethe, composed many lyrical works in their praise. Despite that, not all European visitors to India were equally fascinated. In fact, along with travellers, merchants and colonial officers, quite a number of Christian missionaries (both Catholic and Protestant ones) went to India. Some of the local customs shocked the missionaries quite a lot, particularly the common practice of a large number of female artists and courtesans performing music, songs and dances in their religious institutions. Consequently, they started a campaign to reform the so called Indian 'superstitious' religion and 'obscene' behaviour which, according to them, allowed those 'dishonest' women, whom they considered as mere prostitutes, to perform particularly in the temples. Such a puritan 'crusade', virulently spread among the European residents in India, and among the Indian urban elites as well. The members of this latter group gradually integrated the 'morality' of the zealous European missionaries and of the other bigoted preachers who joined them later on, by themselves starting to perceive their own traditional customs as 'indecent'. The result of such a long, but well infiltrated campaign was the above mentioned *Devadāsī Bill*, which destroyed with one final stroke those ancient, but still lively at that time, artistic traditions by depriving those highly refined artists of any dignity and livelihood:

"Missionaries like the Abbé Dubois and some Westernized Indians (...) attacked the *devadāsī* institution with a puritanical fanaticism (...) They succeeded only too well in their task: the abolition by law of the *devadāsī* was regarded as a necessary reform

of South Indian temple culture, but it also resulted in the total destruction of one major segment of that culture through which for one and a half millennia a deep-rooted Southern religious sentiment had expressed itself. The whole range of art that had surrounded the temple was eliminated, and even the whole issue of temple eroticism was prejudiced."¹¹

Soon after the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of India started to be formulated. Enacted by the Constituent Assembly on the 26th November 1949, it finally came into effect on the 26th January 1950. Meantime, the complex and highly sophisticated dance and music traditions, nurtured in the temples and royal courts during the previous centuries, did not find appropriate support, as the princely states of India, which up until then had been the main patrons of those artists, were themselves all abolished with the adoption of democracy.¹² Thus, the majority of those performing artists lost totally the previous patronage and protection, and were also refused any financial aid for the practice of their profession by the newly established government. Only a very few of them integrated into the new cultural politics and joined the newly founded dance and music schools, now attended mainly by the children of cultural urban elites, and no longer the members of their own traditional communities. Consequently, the majority of them were obliged to leave their former professions. Some survived by selling petty goods, by rolling *bidis* (cheap and low quality Indian cigarettes), by practising this time true prostitution, while large numbers of them finished their lives as destitute beggars. Such a drastic change in the socio-artistic South Asian landscape resulted in a deep transformation in the training of the arts, in the teaching and learning processes, in the expectations of the audience and the practitioners, in the repertoire, in the music and dance techniques, in the social background of the new students and, finally, in the place and the manner of rendering and presenting the traditional dance and music repertoire in the newly constructed theatres and concert-venues.¹³

For a better understanding of why such artists were previously attached to the temples and the royal courts, and what their specific functions in those particular places were, one needs first of all to know how the Indians themselves perceived their deities in the shrines, and how they organized their liturgical services within that context.

The Indian deities in their shrines are like kings in their palaces

An important aspect of the past structuring of Indian society was the close connection between the deity and the king and, consequently, between the temple and the royal palace. If one takes for instance the etymology of the Tamil term referring to the word 'temple' (*koyil*), one will soon realize that it means literally 'the king's palace', the meaning of the term *ko* being 'king'. There was therefore a connection not only linguistically, but also from a conceptual point of view between the deity/king and the temple/royal palace. Moreover, the images of the Indian gods in a shrine were, and still are today, conceived as 'true' living beings which need to be woken up in the morning, washed, anointed with several perfumed substances, dressed, made-up, decorated with jewels and flowers, fed with meals and refreshing drinks, praised with laudatory poems, taken around the temple precincts in processional chariots, entertained with music and dance concerts, enjoyed with the pleasures of love making and, finally, they are put to sleep in the night with the sweet sounds of lullabies. As the kings in their palaces, the deities too are surrounded by a number of priests and ministers, poets and performing artists, and like their human royal counterparts, they receive the visits of ambassadors and devotees, accept their offerings and prayers, listen to their requests and complaints, administrate justice, give them audiences, offer them music and dance concerts, etc.

Therefore the liturgy in the temple mirrors the same etiquette followed in the past within the monarchs' courts and aristocratic palaces. Thus, the main deity in a shrine is still now served by a numerous attendants (the number varies according the size and importance of

the temple, as well as the prestige and wealth of its patronage and numbers of donations), exactly as a king who was once attended by a large retinue of people. In other words, the deities are considered in their 'royal' palace/shrine to be true presiding 'divine' monarchs. Quite interestingly in those days, when an Indian king conquered new territories by subjugating other kingdoms, as thanksgiving to his family's tutelary deity he would often erect a new temple or enlarge and further embellish an older one¹⁴. It was therefore common that the stronger a monarch became, the bigger was the shrine constructed by him to assert his own power upon his subjugated enemies and vassals, as so aptly stated by the historian, Ronald Inden:

"To assume a dichotomy between the activities of 'peace' and 'war' in the representations of these states has been very misleading. (In India) the building of a temple was, for example, as much an act of war, as it was an act of peace, as much a political as it was a religious act."¹⁵

Similar to the cultural politics of Italian and other European princes and noblemen during the Renaissance, the Indian aristocratic elites used to invite, both to their courts and to the shrines patronized by them, the best artists available at that time, as a clear symbol of their own political and economic power, of their incontestable wealth, refined culture, prosperity and generosity. According to the prescribed texts (Sanskrit: *sâstra*) a good king was, in fact, expected to be just, powerful and honest, had to protect his kingdom and people, and had also the 'duty' to support and encourage the artists. In the following quotation you will find the ideal image of him as portrayed in the *Nâtyasâstra* (4th century C.E. ca.), a treatise on the art of theatre, music and dance:

"(...) A king (*râja*) is a man of character, intelligent, truthful, self-controlled, diligent, bold, who has a good memory, brave, patient, a man of integrity, far-sighted, adventurous, grateful, polite, determined in taking a vow to protect the people, heroic, steady, forgiving, active, careful, having the knowledge of sacred, legal and literary texts (*smṛti* and *sastra*), knowing all about polity, clever in arguing and reasoning, able to understand the

motives of others, *have practical knowledge in different arts*, knowledge in acquisition, increasing and spending, ability to detect the weak points of his enemies and free of vices. These are the characteristics of a just king.”¹⁶

In the past, just as the great monarchs in their courts so also were the deities in their own majestic shrines/palaces surrounded by many attendants, ministers, priests, ascetics, servants and, *last but not least*, by excellent performing artists, including dancers and musicians, who added to the temple and to the kingdom as well: fame, prestige and glamour.

The dancers’ and teachers’ duties and functions in the temples/courts

All the elderly dancers and teachers¹⁷, once attached to the South Indian temples and royal courts, with whom I have learnt poetry, dance and music, referred to their professional duties and functions in both those contexts, by saying that their work was well structured and strictly done by turn. Each family of artists had specific rights and duties to be performed during a fixed time of the day as well as on the occasion of temple festivals, court celebrations and processions in both places. They all emphasized that their ritual services were regulated through meticulous calculation done by the astrologers in accordance with the horoscope of the various dancers and the liturgical calendar of celebrations specific to each shrine. The scheduled time of their performances also took into consideration those periods of inauspicious time (*i. e. Rāhu kāla*¹⁸, eclipses, etc.) and pollution (*i. e. menses, diseases, post-delivery seclusion, death, etc.*). In such cases other appointed dancers had to substitute for the absent ones in order to keep both the temple and court service uninterrupted.

To better understand such a complex organization and its close interconnection with the seasonal festivities and the related agricultural work, it is necessary to focus on the dedication ceremony of young girls to the temple and royal palaces. From the ethnographic works dealing with temple and court dancers in both South and North Indian

tradition¹⁹, and the results of my own interviews with aged *devadāsī*, *rājadāsī*, and *nattuvanār* during my field-work in India, important elements emerged from their descriptions of such a ceremony²⁰ (Leucci 2008d). The selected girl had to be examined by the king, the chief *devadāsī*, and the authorities of the temple and the monastery (Sanskrit: *matha*). She had to be graceful, good-looking and manifest a disposition to music and dance, and possess some special ‘auspicious’ signs. Like any other offering to the gods (fruits, flowers, food, etc.), the girl had to be ‘spotless’. After having received the approval from all concerned, the ceremony of dedication could take place on an auspicious day selected by the temple astrologer, in accordance with the girl’s horoscope. The ceremony radically changed the status of the girl whose life, from that time onwards, did not belong any longer to her previous family but was fully integrated into the temple’s and the court’s music and dance community. According to the description of the *devadāsī* I met, the day of the dedication ceremony she was dressed as a ‘little goddess’. She wore a nine yards *sarī* and received real gold and precious stone jewellery from the temple and court authorities as ‘god-king-gift’, the same ornaments which decorate the statues of the deities to this day, known as ‘temple jewellery’²¹. Escorted by the priests, the elder *devadāsī*, the chief of the local monastery, the king’s officers holding all the royal insignia (*i. e.* white parasol, banners, flags, fly-whisks, etc.), and by temple musicians, she was taken in procession to the shrine where the dedication ceremony took place in front of the deity’s effigy. Soon after, aided by the senior dancers, she paid homage and bowed to the Earth goddess by standing on a quantity of un-husked rice-paddy covered by a cloth, on top of which a number of auspicious signs were drawn. Here she had to hold a twisted *sarī* kept stretched by two *devadāsī* as a ‘balance support’. Then, the *nattuvanār*, seated behind the girl, took her ankles and guided her first dance-steps by uttering the accompanying syllabic rhythms. In this ritualistic way, inside the temple, in front of the god, she started her artistic training followed by the interpretation of the images

produced by the scattered rice on the ground during the execution of her first dance sequence. From their particular shapes were taken oracles regarding the quantity and the quality of the next rainfall and harvest. All these elements clearly indicate the close link between the *devadāsī*, the regularity of the rain, the fertility of the earth and the welfare of the entire kingdom. After the dedication ceremony, the young girl entered into her new community of courtesans/artists. She then started the long and strenuous training in dance, vocal and instrumental music. At that time, as already mentioned, the courtesans and temple dancers were among the most sophisticated women in India, and the young girls also had to learn poetry and master several languages and related literature in order to fully accomplish their duties and functions. Thus, the dedication ceremony also marked the beginning of the girl's training under the guidance of the temple dance and music master (Sanskrit *guru*; Tamil, *nattuvanār*) and her consequent affiliation to his own artistic lineage (Sanskrit *gurukulam*). This affiliation implied that the girl became a true member of the master's family, not merely as a student, but mainly because she was instructed in the master's family tradition of dance and music repertory peculiar to her temple of affiliation. Such a repertory, of which her *guru* was the custodian and the transmitter to the younger generation, was comprised of a number of songs, dances and rhythmic sequences, hand gestures, narrating the deeds, loves and miracles of gods, saints and heroes according to the major myths and local legends of the temple (Sanskrit, *sthalapurana*). All the South Indian dancers and masters I met, used to refer to this tradition employing the Tamil term *pāni*, adapted from the Sanskrit term *bhāni*. Commonly meaning 'mode, a musical style or family tradition' (Pesch 1999: 294), this word literally means 'stores, provisions' or 'word, speech'. It therefore implies both the idea of being a 'casket' of songs, stories, dances, and melodies, representing the 'wealth' and 'artistic property' of a specific 'family tradition' as well as their professional identity²². The holders of such a tradition had the duty of passing it on to the next

generation of both the 'natural' and the 'adopted' children, being all of them part of the same 'god and teacher's lineage' (Sanskrit: *devakulam* and *gurukulam*), and to enrich the family 'patrimony' with new compositions. In this way, their artistic knowledge could be preserved. Being imparted only through oral transmission and not having a standardized dance and music notation, if a generation of artists stopped practising and teaching their repertory, their tradition would have been irremediably lost. Thus, one understands better the importance of the *pāni* as a specific artistic style and as an uninterrupted 'family tradition'. Such precautionary measures aimed to prevent any possible interruption of service in the temples and royal courts, and also preserve the transmission of their artistic tradition to future generations.

To further corroborate the skills of Indian courtesans as proficient dancers and musicians, I will quote below a paragraph taken from the Tamil epic titled *Cilappatikāram* (Litt. "The anklet's story"), composed around the 6th century C. E. The public dance debut of the young Mātavi at the royal palace in the king's presence, during the religious festival in honour of the god Indra, is described in the following words:

"The dancer Mātavi had broad shoulders, long tresses of hair adorned with flowers and most expressive eyes. From her fifth year she studied the art of dancing and music under well known masters. She also cultivated the sister art of cultured manners. She studied for seven years and her fame as an exponent of the dance swept the country. The ruling monarch of the Chola country, who by right of victory in many battles wears the gold anklet of heroism on his feet, invited her to show her art in debut at his court when she was just twelve years of age."²³

After having described Mātavi's artistic qualities the text continues to enumerate the skills of her dance and music masters:

"Her dance guru was a master of the two types of dancing, the lyric and the dramatic. He was an adept at harmonising the rhythm of the body with the flow of song. He knew the words of every current song and could play

skilfully on every musical instrument. He was a great exponent of movement, gesture, harmony, composition and rhythm. He had duly taught Mātavi the eleven positions of the upper body and the graceful use of the lower limbs. (...) He had taught her expert footwork and graceful movements to song, composition and rhythmical patterns of quantitative sound. (...) He was capable of teaching in such a way as to bring out the best in his disciples and make them masters of the subtlest nuances, allowing no detail to escape attention.”²⁴

Finally, the qualities of the king, as patron of artists and himself an art expert, are mentioned here along with the honorific gifts bestowed by him on the deserving performers:

“The Chola king who was a great connoisseur of both the arts of dance and music was captivated by the performance of Mātavi and her accompanists and by the newness as well as the traditional skill behind it. (...) He was immensely pleased with Mātavi and in time-honoured fashion he gave her a crown of green leaves and eight thousand gold pieces as tokens of his appreciation of her art.”²⁵

Indian Dancers in the Accounts of European Travellers and Missionaries

Domingo Paes, one of the first Portuguese travellers in India, described the temple and court dancers of the Vijayanagar kingdom, whom he called *baylhadeiras* (dancing girls), around 1520-1522 in the following manner:

“They feed the idol every day, for they say that he eats; and when he eats, women dance before him who belong to that pagoda, and they give him food and all that is necessary, and all girls born of these women belong to the temple. These women are of loose character, and live in the best streets that are in the city; it is the same in all their cities, their streets have the best rows of houses. They are very much esteemed, and are classed amongst those honoured ones who are the mistresses of the captains; any respectable man may go to their houses without any blame attaching thereto. These women (are allowed) even to enter the presence of the wives of the king, and they

stay with them and eat *betel* with them, a thing which no other person may do, no matter what his rank may be.”

“(…) Against the gates (of the king’s palace) there were two circles in which were the dancing-women, richly arrayed with many jewels of gold and diamonds and many pearls.”

“(…) Who can fitly describe to you the great riches these women carry on their persons? Collars of gold with so many diamonds and rubies and pearls, bracelets also on their arms and on their upper arms, girdles below, and anklets on the feet (...). There are women among them who have lands that have been given to them, and litters, and so many maid-servants that one cannot number all their things.”²⁶

Paes and many other European travellers (Leucci 2005a and forthcoming; Bor 2007) were very impressed by the wealth and high status of the Indian temple dancers and courtesans. Noteworthy here, Paes wrote that their residences were always located in the best streets. Later on, invited by the king of Vijayanagar, he visited a shrine within the monarch’s palace. Soon after, Paes was accompanied to a special building where the royal ballet’s dancers were trained and where the king used to watch their performances:

“Then at the entrance of this building in the middle nave, there is, standing on four pillars, a canopy covered with many figures of dancing-women, besides other small figures which are placed in the stone-work. (...) You must know that they make no use of this building because it belongs to their idol and to the temple. At the end of this is a little closed door where the idol is. Whenever they celebrate any festival of this idol, they carry it on a golden throne and put it underneath that canopy which is made for that purpose; and then come to the Brahmans to perform their ceremonies there, and the dancing-girls come to dance. (...) Thence we went up by a little staircase, and entered by a little door into a building which is in this manner. This hall is where the king sends his women to be taught to dance. It is a long hall and not very wide, all of stone sculpture on pillars, (...). And on the pillars are other images, smaller, with other images yet more subordinate, and other figures again, in such a way that I saw this work gradually diminishing in size on these pillars

with their designs, from pillar to pillar, and each time smaller by the size of a span as it went on and on, becoming lost; so it went dwindling gradually away till there remained of all the sculptured work only the dome, the most beautiful I ever saw. (...) The other images on the pillars and panels, are all dancing women having little drums (*tom-toms*). The designs of these panels show the positions at the ends of dances in such a way that on each panel there is a dancer in the proper position at the end of the dance; this is to teach the women, so that if they forget the position in which they have to remain when the dance is done, they may look at one of the panels where is the end of the dance. By that they keep in mind what they have to do.”

“At the end of this house on the left hand is a painted recess where the women cling on their hands in order to better stretch and loosen their bodies and legs; there they teach them to make the whole body supple, in order to make their dancing more graceful. At the other end, on the right, in the place where the king places himself to watch them dancing, all those floors and walls where he sits are covered with gold, and in the middle of the wall is a golden image of a woman of the size of a girl of twelve years, with her arms in the position which she occupies in the end of a dance.”²⁷

Another interesting account, about the South Indian dancers, was provided by the French artillery commander Maistre de la Tour. He served Sultan Haidar Ali Khan, the muslim ruler of the Mysore kingdom (in present Karnataka State) and father of the famous Tippu Sultan, helping him to fight against the British army. De la Tour lived in the royal court for three years, and when he went back to France wrote a book dedicated to Haidar Ali Khan, entitled *Histoire d’Ayder-Ali-Khan*, which was published in Paris in 1784. He has described the dancers as follows:

“We cannot speak of performances, songs and dances, without mentioning the *bayadères* (...). At present the court of Ayder-Ali is one of the most famous in India, particularly his royal troupe of dancing girls which is certainly one of the most prestigious, not only for the wealth but also because more than any other ruler the sultan is very fond of *bayadères*.”

“(…) *La Comédie* in the court is composed only of women. A lady director, who also acts as impresario, selects and purchases little girls

of four and five years old from among the most graceful ones; (...) under the guidance of expert masters begins their training in vocal and instrumental music, dance and whatever is convenient to stir up aesthetic pleasure and love of beauty in the soul of the prince and the other members of his court, including the art of seducing hearts, even less sensitive ones. The young girls so instructed start to give public performances when they are about ten or eleven years old; generally the features of their faces are the finest and the most delicate, with big black eyes, beautiful eyebrows, a little vermilion mouth and shining teeth; dimples in the cheeks, chin and in each finger; long black plaited hair reaching the ground. (...) Their clothes are made of embroidered fabrics or golden brocades, richly decorated; they are covered by jewels from head to foot. (...) In the *comédies* they play, the plot dominates; (...) the tunes of the arias are joyful and pleasant, and the words sung by the solo voice often express the lamentations of lovelorn lovers. The chorus arias appear to be gayer even if more monotonous, due to the continuous repetition of the lyrics.”

“The dancing girls are superior in their art to the actresses and singers, and we can also say that they would be highly appreciated and admired if they could perform on the stage of the *Opéra* in Paris: all dance and all play in those lovely girls; their features, eyes, arms, feet, every part of their body seems to move in order to charm; they are quite light though their legs are very strong; they turn on a foot and quickly they stand up with amazing vigour the next moment. They are so precise in doing the steps and the rhythmic sequences to be able to accompany the other musical instruments with the sound of their ankle-bells, and because their gait is very elegant and their body is fine and lively, all their movements are consequently extremely graceful.”²⁸

It is clear that the artistic skills and charming allure of Indian dancers impressed Maistre de la Tour a great deal. He felt they truly deserved to perform at the European “temple” of the dance of his time: the *Opéra* in Paris.

While the Indian dancers conquered the hearts of their European admirers, they could not equally charm those of the Christian missionaries, despite the fact that even some of these recognized the dignity and refined

behaviour of the Indian courtesans. Though they vehemently condemned the ‘sensuality’ and ‘libertinism’ of the native people, still we have long descriptions about the dancers, such as the following one by the above mentioned Abbé Dubois. His work, which apparently he plagiarised from the French Jesuit Father, Nicolas Jacques Desvaulx²⁹, was published at the beginning of the 19th century and was reprinted several times during the 19th and 20th centuries:

“It really seems as if most of the religious and civil institutions of India were only invented for the purpose of awakening and exciting passions towards which they have already such a strong natural tendency. The shameless stories about their deities, the frequent recurrence of special feast-days which are celebrated everywhere, the allegorical meaning of so many of their everyday customs and usage, the public and private buildings which are to be met with everywhere bearing on their walls some disgusting obscenity, the many religious services in which the principal part is played by prostitutes, who often make even the temples themselves the scenes of their abominable debauchery; all these things seem to be calculated to excite the lewd imagination of the inhabitants of this tropical country and give them a strong impetus towards libertinism. (...) And after all, is it surprising that libertinism and all its consequences prevail in a country where the passions have so many incentives and such ample opportunities of satisfaction ?”

“Many of them (the Brahmins) possess abominable books in which the most filthy and disgusting forms of debauchery are systematically described and taught. These books also treat of such matters as the art of giving variety to sensual pleasures, the decoction of beverage calculated to excite the passions, or renew them when exhausted. They also contain recipes for philtres, which are supposed to have the property of inspiring unholy love. The courtesans of the country often have recourse to those potions in the hope of retaining the affections of those whom they have enslaved, mixing them secretly in the food of their victims. (...)”

“To have any connection with a courtesan, or with an unmarried person, is not considered a form of wickedness in the eyes of the Brahmins. These men, who look upon the violation of any trivial custom as a heinous sin,

see no harm in the most outrageous and licentious excesses. It was principally for their use that the dancers and prostitutes who are attached to the service of the temples were originally entertained (...)” Courtesans, whose business in life is to dance in the temples and at public ceremonies, and prostitutes are the only women who are allowed to learn to read, sing, or dance. It would be thought a disgrace to a respectable woman to learn to read; and even if she had learnt she would be ashamed to own it. As for dancing, it is left absolutely to courtesans; and even they never dance with men. Respectable women sometimes amuse themselves by singing when they are alone, looking after their household duties, and also on the occasions of weddings or other family festivities; but they would never dare to sing in public or before strangers.”

“(...) The idols are afterwards taken from the temples and carried in procession, to the sound of music, to the place where the cattle have again been collected. The *temple dancing-girls*, who are to be found at all feasts and public ceremonies, are not absent on this occasion; they march at the head of the large concourse of people, and from time to time pause to delight the spectators with their lascivious dances and obscene songs.”

“(...) *The courtesans or dancing-girls* attached to each temple (...) are called *devadasis* (servants or slaves of the gods), (...). And these lewd women, who make a public traffic of their charms, are consecrated in a special manner to the worship of the divinities of India. Every temple of any importance has in its service a band of eight, twelve, or more. Their official duties consist in dancing and singing within the temple twice a day, morning and evening, and also at all public ceremonies. The first they executed with sufficient grace, although their attitudes are lascivious and their gestures indecorous. As regards their singing, it is almost always confined to obscene verses describing some licentious episode in the history of their gods. Their duties, however, are not confined to religious ceremonies. Ordinary politeness (and this is one of the characteristic features of Hindu morality) requires that when persons of any distinction make formal visit to each other they must be accompanied by a certain 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 of politeness.”

“These women are also present at marriages and other solemn family meetings. (...) They are brought up in this shameful licentiousness from infancy, and they are recruited from various castes, some among them belonging to respectable families. It is not unusual for pregnant women, with the consent of their husbands, to devote the child that they carry in their womb, if it should turn out a girl, to the temple service. They are far from thinking that this infamous vow offends in any way the laws of decency, or is contrary to the duties of motherhood. In fact no shame whatever is attached to parents whose daughters adopt this career.”

“The *courtesans* are the only women in India who enjoy the privilege of learning to read, to dance, and to sing. A well-bred and respectable woman would for this reason blush to acquire any one of these accomplishments. (...) Nevertheless, to the discredit of Europeans it must be confessed that 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 behaviour, 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. Of all the women in India it is the courtesans, and especially those attached to the temples, who are the most decently clothed. Indeed they are particularly careful not to expose any part of the body. I do not deny, however, that this is merely a refinement of seduction. Experience has no doubt taught them that for a woman to display her charms damps sensual ardour instead of exciting it, and that the imagination is more easily captivated than the eye.”

“God forbid, however, that any one should believe me to wish to say a word in defence of the comparative modesty and reserve of the *dancing-girls* of India!”³⁰

Conclusion

“The dance which relates to sentiment (rasa) and psychological state (bhava), is always fit to find a place in the court of great kings.”

Nandikesvara’s *Abhinayadarpanam*.³¹

The court culture in India, as we know from ancient literary texts, treatises, iconographic sources, European travellers’ accounts and ethnographic researches, elaborated specific codes and hierarchical rules of behaviour prescribed for each member, starting from the monarch to his queen, ministers and other royal officers. Such detailed *corpus* of regulations attests to the level of sophistication of Indian courts and also the degree of proficiency of those patronized by royal families. From the time of the above mentioned *Nātyasāstra*, until the annexation of princely states to the Indian Union, following the declaration of Independence in 1947, court dancers and musicians were accordingly expected to conform to the high standards imposed upon them by senior artists and scholars (Hindu *pandits* and Muslim *ustads*). During my interviews with members of the royal families of Tanjāvūr and Puri in Orissa, and the last court dancer attached to the royal palace of the Wodeyar dynasty of Mysore (Karnataka State, South India), the late K. Venkatalakshamma (b.1906 - d. 2002) with whom I learnt dance, they all explain to me the complex and highly refined code of behaviour required of both artists and other officials employed in their courts. That is why, as K. Venkatalashamma once told me during a dance class, dancers and musicians since childhood devoted their entire lives to the arts as they knew that their cultivated audience could truly appreciate their talent and also easily make out any mistake and imperfection. Mediocrity had no place in such a context, with both patrons and performers being highly qualified.³²

Generally, the donations by temple women to religious institutions were: 1) lands and paddy fields; 2) perpetual lamps; 3) gold to be deposited in the temple treasury, the interest of which was used in the shrine for the provision of oil or ghee for the perpetual lamp and for the food offering thrice a day to the deities; 4) various types of oil lamps and other worshipping items; 5) cows and goats in order to supply milk for the daily offerings and anointments of the statues of the gods and *ghee* (clarified butter) for the lamps; 6) food to be offered daily to Brahmans, temple servants, ascetics and pilgrims; 7) stone and metal images of gods; 8) jewels of gold and precious stones to decorate the statues of the gods; 9) gardens to supply flowers for the garlands offered daily to the gods; 10) areca-nuts, coconuts, flowers, fruits and all the other items for daily rituals in temples and monasteries; 11) works for the building and the restoration of temples, monasteries and places of public utility as water tanks, bridges, hospitals, lodges for pilgrims, etc.

Such donations being quite expensive, they necessitated considerable wealth in order to assure their regular supply to the temple for ‘as long as the moon and the sun shall shine...’, according to the common formula found in the ancient epigraphic inscriptions. A question arises: how could the courtesans provide such costly donations? From both Indian and European sources we know that temple authorities provided them with houses, paddy fields and food in exchange for their services to the gods, which could guarantee their basic living. We also know that they were patronized by members of the royal family, rich landlords and wealthy pilgrims, who offered them precious gifts in exchange for their ritualistic and artistic services. According to all the *devadāsī* and *rājadāsī* I met, their presence was necessary not only during the major socio-religious events of the kingdom, including the coronation of a new monarch, marriages, queens’ child-birth, religious festivals, visits of ambassadors, return from victorious war expeditions, etc., but also during those rituals performed to prevent or face critical situations such as

retardation of rainfalls, drought, inundations, famine and epidemics. They were also invited to perform their auspicious dances and songs in the houses of aristocratic people during the major rites of passage in their communities, and also for music concerts in the residences of art *connoisseurs*. On those occasions also, they received costly presents and large sums of money which they shared with their dance masters and musicians. They also received regular gifts from their lovers who competed for their favours, as at that time it was a matter of prestige for a nobleman to have the honour of being the patron of a *devadāsī* (Leucci 2005a, 2008d). The majority of courtesans were very well-off and, therefore, able to offer costly gifts to shrines and monasteries³³. The very fact that their donations have been recorded carved on the temple walls, itself an expensive act, and a privilege reserved only to few, gives further evidence of their wealth and prestige. Considering that it was a common practice to offer gifts to the deities and to finance works of public utility by the members of royal families, aristocrats and other well-off people, Vâtsyâyana’s *Kâma Sûtra* clearly attests the ‘duty’ of rich and accomplished courtesans to offer donations:

“The gains of the wealthiest and best kind of courtesans are to be spent as follows: building temples, tanks, and gardens; giving a thousand cows to different Brahmans; carrying on the worship of the gods, and celebrating festivals in their honor; and, lastly, performing such vows as may be within their means.”³⁴

The study of Indian iconography, too, reveals to us a wealth of images of dancing figures. The walls and pillars of ancient temples and royal palaces were often full of sculptures and paintings portraying scenes where dancers and musicians were beautifully carved and designed. Similarly, a large number of performing artists are exquisitely depicted in the miniatures decorating the palm-leaves manuscripts as well as other precious books and albums. All those documents offer a true mine of information for the historians of Indian fine arts, dance and music, which are disciplines closely related to each other in the

South Asian traditions, as the following paragraph from the ancient work, *Visnudharmottara Purana*, clearly suggests, relating a dialogue between the sage Markandeya and the King Vajra:

« King Vajra requests the sage to accept him as his disciple and teach him the art of icon-making, so that he may worship the deities in their proper forms.

The sage replies that one cannot understand the principles of image-making without a knowledge of painting.

The king wishes for instruction in this art and is told that, unless he is accomplished as a dancer, he cannot grasp even the rudiments of painting.

The king requests that he be taught dancing, whereupon the sage replies that, without a sense of rhythm or a knowledge of instrumental music, proficiency in dance is impossible.

Once again the king requests that he be taught these subjects; to which the sage replies that a mastery of vocal music is necessary, before one can be proficient in instrumental music; and so finally the sage takes the king through all these stages before he is taught the art of image-making. »³⁵

Before concluding this article, I would like to call the reader's attention to some other interesting aspects of the temple and court dance traditions in India. Firstly, in those days a good dancer was expected to be an excellent actor too and, consequently, an actor was also supposed to be a good dancer, as the two disciplines of acting and dancing were closely connected. Secondly, there was a sort of 'specificity' and 'complementarity' in the functions and duties of both the performing artists and their audience, as the roles played by each one of them had not to be confused. In other words, performers had the 'duty' to emote themselves in order to communicate to the audience the feelings and the richness of the characters portrayed on the stage. The spectators, on the other hand, had the 'duty' to respond to the artists' solicitation by revealing their own emotional reaction, by manifesting a sort of empathy with the rendering of a particular character and by also

sending back to the artists their own feelings of understanding and appreciation of the performance. Without this sort of complicity and communion between them, without the artist's capacity to arouse emotional effects in the audience, a performance could not succeed. Furthermore, both the talent of the artists and the quality of the performance was consequently evaluated by this magical effect of 'compassion' in the true sense of the original Latin word meaning: 'to suffer mutually and emote together'. Despite a number of similarities between the Indian and the European Renaissance princely court traditions, in my opinion one major difference perhaps lies there.

Though in India, some cosmogonic myths conceived the dance as a true 'cosmic primordial event', a sort of metaphysical act of creation, the original cause of life in the universe, and despite the fact that the Hindu deities themselves are described as dancing, as in the case of the gods Shiva, Parvati, Kali and Krishna, in the historical sources there is a clear difference between the artists who perform a dance and the god/monarch who attends their performance as spectator and not as actor. The roles here are clearly defined and are not interchangeable. If the Indian princes and members of the royal families studied theoretically and practically dancing and music in order to know and appreciate them, they never publicly performed, unlike their European aristocratic counterparts. If our manuals on the art of how to present oneself at court, such as the *Libro del cortegiano* (1528), by the Mantua writer Baldassarre Castiglione, in which it is prescribed for kings and noble people to take classes in dance and to perform them in the palaces, it was not the case with the Indian princes and noblemen, who, though they would spend lot of time in the study of dance and music and in attending recitals and concerts, would not themselves show officially their capacities to others.

Describing in detail the role of dance in Indian society is an ambitious and difficult task indeed, due to the complexity and variety of such articulated traditions. This present work therefore does not pretend to explain all the nuances and subtleties of the Indian

choreographic art, nor to fill the gap of knowledge that still exists about the past performing traditions of the Indian temples and royal courts, but is just an attempt at offering a little broader view on the subject.

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Notes

¹ I would like to thank here my Indian dance masters, in particular Kama Dev, V.S. Muthuswamy Pillai, M. Selvam Pillai, Kadur Venkatalakshamma, Kelucharan Mohapatra. I am also very grateful to my professors and colleagues: B.M. Sundaram, R. Venkatraman, Arudra, Joep Bor (University of Leiden) and Davesh Soneji (McGill University, Montreal). Finally, I thank a lot Barbara Segal and Bill Tuck for their remarkable editing work.

² NS, XXXIV, 50-54: 218.

³ NS, XXXV, 76-83: 223.

⁴ The other European colonial powers in India in 1947 were the Portuguese (territory of Goa in West India) and the French (territories of Chandernagor, Pondicherry and Karaikal in East and South India, and Mahe in South West India). Those territories also attained independence and later joined the Indian Union.

⁵ For the full text of the law, see Soneji 2012 : 235-236.

⁶ *Devadāsī* : from the Sanskrit words *deva*, “deity”, and *dāsī*, “female attendant, servant”, “the deity attendant”. Generic term denoting a community of temple women and courtesans with various ritualistic and artistic tasks both in the

Indian shrines and royal courts. *Rajadāsī* (the king’s attendants) were generally called court dancers. See: Srinivasan 1983; Marglin 1985; Kersenboom-Story 1987; Leucci 2000, 2005a ; Soneji 2012.

⁷ Leucci 2012 b, and forthcoming.

⁸ In the Buddhist and Jain traditions, and among some Hindu ascetic groups as well, women could also join their monastic institutions, but it was not always a decision appreciated by the members of their families.

⁹ See Feldman & Gorgon 2006.

¹⁰ See Leucci 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012a, 2012b and forthcoming.

¹¹ Hardy 1978: 138, 150.

¹² I would like to make it clear to the readers that I am not at all defending here the old *status quo* of feudal system in India. Rather, what I am truly regretting is that the newly constituted democratic nation failed to patronize those professional artists. Although they were certainly connected with the previous princely states’ socio-political system, they still deserved full support from the new government as a form of respect to their knowledge and artistic skill. Even the post-Revolution time, both in France and Russia, did not prevent the new governments from supporting artists active in the previous monarchies. In a way, what happened in the free India could be easily compared to an eventual law in the West forbidding all female professional dancers, musicians, actresses, and opera singers from performing on stage and in private concerts, because they were considered to be mere ‘prostitutes’ by the supposed ‘immorality’ of their professions and way of life. One should also not forget that in the past, in Europe too we had some similar examples of puritanical ‘zeal’ which tried to close on the grounds of ‘immorality’ the theatres, even during William Shakespeare’s time. Moreover, till the 19th century, European actors and other performing artists were often denied permission to be buried in Christian cemeteries, simply because of their ‘indecent and sinful’ profession.

¹³ See Leucci 2008 and forthcoming; Peterson & Soneji 2008 ; Soneji 2010, 2012.

¹⁴ Leucci forthcoming.

¹⁵ Inden 1990: 230-231.

¹⁶ *Nâtysasâstra*, XXXIV, 82-98: 219.

¹⁷ I am referring, particularly, to T. K. Pattammal, Kadur Venkatalakshamma and V. S. Muthuswamy Pillai.

¹⁸ According to the South Indian calendar, in each day of the week there is a period of a few hours named *Rāhu kāla* (Sanskrit litt. : Time of Rāhu'), which is considered to be very inauspicious. During this period of time, people avoid starting any new action, to take a decision, to fix a meeting, to perform any ceremony, to buy important goods, etc., as they believe that anything done during this span of time will surely fail to succeed. The *Rāhu kāla*'s period changes each day, that is why people regularly consult the calendar and the almanach to know exactly at what time of the day it starts and ends.

¹⁹ See Marglin 1985; Kersenboom-Story 1987, 1990; Erdman 1992.

²⁰ Leucci 2008d.

²¹ Leucci 1996.

²² "The training format, the repertoire and especially the element of 'style' of interpretative rendering, called *pāni* ('stores, provisions', or 'word, speech') are very jealously guarded by families and their professional interest groups. To be part of such a transmission is no small or light matter. It brings riches and privileges, but also strong restrictions and responsibilities to entire genealogies." (Kersenboom 1995: 96).

²³ Adigal 1977: 7.

²⁴ Adigal 1977: 7-8.

²⁵ Adigal 1977: 11.

²⁶ Sewell 1991: 241-242; 264, 270.

²⁷ Sewell 1991: 286-289.

²⁸ Quoted in : Deleury 1991 : 753-755.

²⁹ See Murr 1977.

³⁰ Dubois 1983 : 308-309, 337 and 339.

³¹ Gosh 1992: 38.

³² Seetha 1981; Bor 1986/87, 2007 and forthcoming; Leucci 2005a and forthcoming.

³³ See, for instance, the biography of Bangalore Nagaratnamma (1878-1952) by V. Sriram 2007.

³⁴ Vatsyayana 1993: 228.

³⁵ Vatsyayan 1977 :2.