BETWEEN 'CELESTIAL MAIDEN' AND 'SACRED PROSTITUTE': THE MYTH OF THE DEVA-DĀSĪ IN THE IMAGINARY OF THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract
One of the most controversial discussions in the contemporary Indian arts environment remains the connection of the post-colonial classical dance practice with the Devadāsī or the Maharī, the temple dancing girls. Born in the Early Medieval India, amidst and in close connection to the Bhakti and the Tantric movements, abiding in the temple institution, the so-called 'Devadāsī temple system' remains a mystery, between awe and fascination to the nowadays practitioner and connaisseur of Indian arts. While tracing back the socio-religious contexts that brought the temple dancers on the foremost place of the stage of Indian art history, the author looks for the understanding of this myth in the imaginary and the reality of contemporary practitioners, from the perspective of a foreigner researcher-cum-practitioner of an Indian art form. The paper is based on consulting the existing literary sources concerning the Devadāsī system, and the research is focusing on the nowadays classical dance practitioners' imaginary (re)construction(s) of this system. Till today, here she stands, the woman-as-dance practitioner, either Indian or from any other part of the world, at the cross-road of all myths, imaginarily rooted in the past, but living all the aspirations of the nowadays social, cultural, religious, political dynamics, neither celestial maiden, nor sacred prostitute.

Keywords: *Devadāsī*, *Maharī*, *Bhakti*, medieval temple system, Indian Classical dance
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1. Introduction

The Indian dance, revived as national heritage in the post-colonial era, yet based on the 'interculturalism' of the Indian elites, influenced by the Euro-centric notions of devotion, piety, societal propriety (Chakravorty 2000), bears the legacy of a feminine figure that became at the same time a defining element of the Indian culture and a 'backward' tradition, 'moral degeneration of the women from temple servants

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(*Devadāsī, Maharī*) to '(sacred) prostitutes' (Vijaisri 2004). From a vital function of the temple, during the British rule her status changes, either under socio-economic pressure, or under the look of a colonialist patronising attitude. The figure of the *Devadāsī,* the temple woman dancer and singer, exerts curiosity and fascination right away to a newcomer into the study of Indian classical dance, and becomes sometimes, in time, a reference for positioning one's own practice and performance. Whether the *Devadāsī* still stands as an archetype for the classical dance practitioner, or if *she* remains just a reality or myth of the distant past, one tends to define, investigate and define a rapport with this figure, as seen in the author's own experience, and in the results of the interviews with other dance practitioners, either of Indian origin or from abroad. The multi-dimensionality of dance as cultural and social practice is addressed in this research at the intersection of (auto)ethnographic investigation (see Ellis & Bochner 2000: 733-768) and historical, political, cultural, social and religious framing, taking into account post-colonial and feminist perspectives (Chakravorty & Gupta 2010, 2012). The research does not seek to unveil this controversial mystery, the myth of the *Devadāsī* practice in India, it situates as rather an analytical exploration to give an understanding for what was once a practice where women possibly could express their freedom out of the society bindings, as educated, learned and 'sacred' and how the practitioners today relate to these far-time distant roots in the context of the (still) patriarchal and conservative Indian society. I started in my search from the affirmation that while dance is at once social, aesthetic, spiritual, political, economic, sexual, and semiotic (Chakravorty & Gupta 2010, 2012), the contemporary approaches to dance "address identity issues and their articulation to dance, a shift from an authoritative position to a multiplicity of voices" (Carter & O'Shea 1998, 2010).

The *Devadāsī*, in her antagonistic position between 'celestial damsel' and 'sacred prostitute', that lingers in the affirmation of the *Bhakti* (devotion) and the denial of the *Śṛngara* (erotic) expression (Sarkar & Boyce 2014: 131-151) in the interpretation of choreographies and performances, is still haunting the imaginary of the contemporary classical dance practitioners, between the nostalgia of a sacred lost horizon and the quest for belonging to a legacy, to a long-time tradition (see Banerji 1983, Apffel-Marglin 1985, Sikand 2017, Chakravorty & Gupta 2010, 2012).

The paper is divided into three parts, the first section briefly investigates the *Devadāsī* system's evolution throughout the intricacies of history, the second part renders excerpts of a larger field investigation and discussions with practitioners of Indian classical dance, in their subjective relating to the myth or the reality of the *Devadāsī* system, while the third part brings into consideration perspectives that provide a context that enriches the understanding of the complex cultural aspects that the Indian classical dance emphasizes, and one's own positioning as a dancer and researcher in this so vast universe that is defined as Indian classical arts.

2. **Devadāsī** *and the intricacies of history*

In this section, I explore a part of the available literature concerning the *Devadāsī* temple system, in the socio-cultural and religious contexts of its raise as a temple highly respected practice, to its 'decadence', and vanishing, being taken out in colonial and post-colonial context (Western ballet productions romanticized the *Devadāsī* figure as *La Bayadère* (The Temple Dancer) (Venkataraman 2015). There is quite a rich literature on the *Devadāsī*, from various perspectives, though some scholars argue that 'the *Devadāsī* has a manifest in the Hindu caste and temple structures, but then fails to capture the various expressions of the culture' (Vijaisri 2004), as represented by the Indian temple system.

To understand why and how the *Devadāsī* is still present in the imaginary of the contemporary practitioners, we will first go back in history and try to understand the context and development of the so-called '*Devadāsī* system', which has been for a long period of time part of the socio-cultural institution of temple, and of the religious services, as the temple itself was an essential part of the early medieval Indian social and economic formation (Prasad 1999: 129-136).
Devadāsī (as well as the *Maharī*) temple system as a religious practice started in the early medieval period, in South India, between the 3rd and the 6th c. C.E. (Orchard 2007: 3-27), consisting in the votive offering of girls to the deities in Hindu temples, with the purpose of providing ritualic service (as mentioned in the *Purāṇas*, 4th – 5th c. C.E., cf. Sharma K. 2007). The dedication of a woman to a deity involved a ritual marriage, she was thus free from widowhood, and devoted her life to the service of God and the temple (Anandhi 1991: 739, Nair 1994). However, according to some researchers, if the concept of 'divine femininity' and the custom of dedication are to be considered in a historical perspective, the practice can be traced within the dynamics of a multicultural context dating back to the proto-historic Indus-Valley period (Basham 1953, Thapar 1968, see also Ramberg 2004, Srinivasan 1985). Saskia Kersenboom-Story traces the origin of the *Devadāsī* system in the *viṛali-pāṭiṇi* female bard figure of the 3rd century, turned into the courtesan *gaṇikā* (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 40).

However, this practice became important in the Middle Ages, when 'the God in his temple was treated like an earthly king; he had his wives, his ministers and attendants, and all the paraphernalia of a court including his attendant prostitutes' (Basham 1953). This is to be understood in the context of the 5th - 6th c. C.E. period (Sharma 1974: 7) which marks the transition from the classical period/ancient India (imperial Gupta) to medieval India (equated by some scholars with the Paurāṇic description of *Kali Age,* see Sharma 1982), a period which witnessed the rise of the *bhakti* cult (Velutha 1987: 155, Ayyar 1962: 253), the worship of Vishnu and Shiva as 'service to gods', but also the Purāṇic and tantric influences (see for example Bagchi 1975). According to J. Gonda 'the exercise of sacred prostitution by the *devadāsīs* was a half-religious function whose origins are to the traced back to the

incorporation of *Śakta* ideals into medieval *Śaivism*. These figures of dancer-prostitutes were believed to irradiate joy and bestow prosperity thanks to the magical power inherent in ther sexuality, which was regarded as an earthly reflex of the energy of the supreme Śakti. Their role was conceptually akin to that of the *yoginīs* of the *Kaula* tradition, with the important difference that the *devadāsīs,* unlike the *yoginīs,* did not operate in an esoteric context '(see Das 1981: 122-123, Gonda 1960, 1981: 76-77, in Bringhenti 2001). These women dedicated to the temples came to be known as *Déva-Dási / Devadāsī* (*Dāsī* means 'servant' of a *Deva*, God) a Sanskrit term that can be literally translated into 'slaves of god' (see Thurston 1909), and though other names were used in different situations and different parts of India (like *Devagaṇikā* in Sanskrit, *Nāchuni* and *Māhāri* in Oriya, *Sānulu* and *Sānuvārulu* in Telugu, see Patra 2004: 159-72), designating castes, sub-castes, profession (Parker 1998, see also Srinivasan, 1985), *Devadāsī* became the generic name for this occupation. While some researchers state that the *Devadāsī* came from lower casts or backward classes (Torri 2009: 31-48), but as temple servants they were placed high in the social hierarchy (Shivasharanappa & Srinivasa 2012), others contest this notion of societal honor and privilege, that believe that the ritualistic status of the *Devadāsīs* did not ensure a higher social status and that these women were generally treated as "impure women" (Anandhi 1991: 739, see also Srinivasan 1985).

A *Devadāsī* typically sang, danced and performed various rituals in temples, some of which could be conducted only by them (Orchard, 2007: 4), for example the *rangabhoga*, the ritual when women danced, sung and performed *arati* (waving the lamp) in front of the sanctum-sanctorum of the temple like in the kingly palace (see Reddy 2003, Chidambaranathan & Paul 2009, Parasher & Naik 1986: 67-76, see also Narayanan 1994: 222-223, Prasad 1999: 129-136, Nair 1994: 3159). Becoming a '*nityasumangali'*, an ever auspicious woman, the *Devadāsī* 'was to deal with the 'dangerous divine', a role that was only later overshadowed by her artistic performances in the temple and in the court' (Nair 1994: 3159, Kersenboom-Story 1987: 135-42). In a document from 1906, the *agamiks* explained that in the *Śastras (agamaśatras,* the *śastras* that outline the temple rituals) like 'Shaiva Agamas', 'Pancharatra', 'Vykhanasagamasastras' the *Devadāsīs* had specific services to render the temples:

From the moment they woke up, bathed and put on fresh clothes and adorned themselves with flowers, they spent the day participating in temple rituals, which included waking up the deity with song and dance rituals, lighting the lamps in the evenings, and performing prescribed musical and dance oblations at set times. In addition, the scriptures required them to perform a series of special rituals on specific days throughout the year. In turn, Devadāsīs *were entitled to a share of the offerings as a temple honour and to payments from temple revenues. Indeed the non-performance of these duties by the* Devadāsīs *was deemed so grievous a violation of the temple code that the priests were required to perform rituals of atonement*. (Nair 1994: 3162)

This temple system became largely adopted in southern and eastern sides of India, so as before the British domination of India,

there were in every region highly skilled female performers who not only danced, but variously sang, acted, played instruments, wrote music, songs and poetry (erotic, devotional, satiric), performed acrobatics, did scholarship, taught intellectual and artistic sophistication to young men and advised their fathers, but were not part of the domestic order. Their social identity was clearly distinguished from women who simply sold sexual services, but under the British this basic distinction collapsed over time (Spear 2013: 117, see also Kersenboom-Story 1987, Meduri 1996, 2019).

Devadāsī from South India had a very different history to *Maharīs* from Orissa (East India) and to the Nautch dancers from the North. Primarily, Nautch dancers were not linked to temples, and any existing patronage from kings had already dissipated by the 1880s (Srinivasan 2009: 3-22),
A specific caste of women, including naach *performers,* maharis*, and* devadasis*, lived and worked as courtesans, temple dancers, and cultural workers practicing their performance forms in the nineteenth century.* Nautch *is the anglicized version of the Hindi word* naach*, which the British applied generally to characterize all types of dance forms and dancing women from India'* (Coorlawala 1992: 123-52)

Given her status outside the domestic and social marriage paradigm, the *Devadāsī* or the *Maharī* enjoyed privileges for educational and vocational training, not available to the women bonded in marriage. However, 'the West had no category for holy public women' (Gadamer 1999: 277-90), thus 'both in British colonial context and in the post-colonial India, whether understood as exploitation or emancipation, her sexuality was a cause of anxiety and led to her eventual historical marginalization and exclusion from the public sphere' (Sarkar & Boyce 2014: 131-151), their agency and legitimacy denied. Despite some dance aesthetics accounts (see Charry 2000: 3-12), 'The key British assumption about dancing girls was that they were essentially prostitutes and only incidentally artists, the dancing girl was 'the brown woman as corrupting seductress' (Spivak 1998: 297, 1990), or even 'wiles of witchcraft'' (Sherwood 1857: 422, in Spear 2013: 122). The account that Abbé J. A. Dubois gives in his *Description of the character, manners, and customs of the people of India* (1817, 1879), remains an example of colonialist gaze, moral condemnation of a religious practice and of the religion itself, being however a kind of European reconstruction of exoticism (see for example Segalen 2002):

Next to the Sacrificers, the most important persons about the temples are the dancing girls, who call themselves Devadasi*, servants or slaves of the Gods […] Such are the loose females who are consecrated in a special manner to the worship of the gods of*

India. Every temple, according to its size, entertains a band of them, to the number of eight, twelve or more. The service they perform consists of dancing and singing. The first they execute with grace, though with lascivious attitudes and motions. Their chanting is generally confined to the obscene songs which relate to some circumstance or other the licentious life of their gods. (see Dubois 1879, Murr 1977, Apffel-Marglin 1985: 4-5)

The representations in colonial, but also vernacular literature convey the *Devadāsī* - courtesan with an 'ambiguous social and moral status' (Soneji, 2012). In the perspective of 'European engagements', modernity, Victorian morality, Christian evangelicalism, colonial anthropology and imperial medicine, the moral reformation of women from different communities, the *Devadāsī* came to be associated with moral degeneration and by the late nineteenth century most temples had stopped recruiting dancers (Nair 1994: 208). In the context of the late 19th century, which saw India emerge as the spiritual capital of the world (Verter 2003), 'the cleansed and moralised forms of temple dance came to be viewed as its spiritual, embodied practices, and dance became an object of cultural exhibition' (see Inoue 2005, ˙Singh Johar 2019). It led to a lately scrutinized and criticized '(re)construction of a categorically-sacred dance practice, emblematic of an imagined "authenticity" that was eternally pure and morally chaste' (id.).

3. Devadāsī*: mytho(poetics) of nowadays dancers*

This section of the paper gives place to voices of dance practitioners, in order to explore how the contemporary exponents of Indian classical dance position themselves and relate to the legacy of the *Devadāsī* system, in their practice that they often define between professional and '*saddhana'* (spiritual exercise). If dance is a choreographed practice driven by social traditions, what is the relationship of the individual dancer to the dance, its roots, its meaning, its history, its myths and narratives, as a cultural imaginary? The figure of the *Devadāsī* belongs to the (mytho)poetic cultural imaginary (Levy-Strauss 1978), ingrained in the cultural imaginary associated to the Indian classical dance (and music) (see also Frye 1957). We considered Saskia Kersenboom-Story's affirmation that the *Devadāsī* 'is a very expressive *semiotic unit* signifying the mythical-aesthetic-cum-ritual object residing in the collective consciousness of Hindu tradition' (1984, 1987: 3), while investigating what *She* still means for the contemporary Indian classical practitioners. Relating to a myth of origin, its narratives creates a sense of belonging, and relatedness, but also a justification for the present-day dance form as an ancient, immemorial past rooted tradition. Hall emphasizes the notion of 'meaning' and the process that comes with the production and exchange of 'meaning' within a society and culture (Hall 1997). I chose as methodological instrument the semi-structured interviews with long-time *Gurus* (most respected teachers) and practitioners of Indian classical dance.

Guru Smt. Kumkum Mohanty, Padma Shree Awardee, the founder of the prestigious Odissi Research Centre, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, explains the historical background and relates on her own extensive researches on the last living *Devadāsīs* as well as *Gotipuas*. Her vision encompasses both the social reality of the temple system, and the myth of the *Devadāsī* as the one who sang and danced for the God in the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of the Jagannath Temple in Puri:

This is a phenomenon which has started from South India. They had temple servants called Devadasis. But in Orissa they were called Maharīs*, as far as I read, from the 7th Century, when the Brahmeswari temple was built. The first* Devadāsī *was Padmavati. That's what the books say. But nobody has documented at the time. They were dancing inside the temple, as temple ritual, but what is happening in the* sanctorium *nobody knows. It's only God who sees them. No human being is allowed to see. It is believed so, that way it is a myth. At the same time, it is true. The system was there. Why this system? I always question myself. Why girls,* Devadāsīs*, used to engage as a ritual? Why not a boy? Is it that God wanted girls only? What is this relationship? If you take Krishna-Radha, Radha is supposed to be the auntie of Krishna, but her devotion turns into love. That sort of devotion it is! Thousands and thousands of songs have been written to that devotion! Ultimately, it's the devotion! You take Jayadeva, he also worked out of devotion, but the scene is so sensuous, so sensuous, it gives the peak of reality, what is happening in this world. Why he wrote like this, I can't say. Radha and Krishna, so vividly he has described the erotic part of it in* Geeta Govinda*. And it is famous throughout the world. But* Devadāsīs *were not dancing on those songs, as far as I know. The last two of the* Devadāsīs *in the Jagannath temple, were really living inside the temple. When I started the Odissi Research Centre, I first documented them. One was 80, one was more than 70 years old at the time, Kokila* Maharī *and Dunguri* Maharī*. These were the real* Devadāsīs*. They were hardly dancing, eighty percent of the dance was music only. Because after the Muslim and British came, they stopped the dance, they were only allowed to sing. When I documented them, Dunguri* Mahari *started dancing. And told the* bols*. Those* bols *could not be played by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, so he recorded them, and then she danced on the recording. This is the proof that they were dancing as well. Kokila* Maharī *performed an* Abhinaya*, by sitting. But it must be the reality also that some were used, because they were dancing inside the temple, they were very poor, so the* Zamindars *could afford to have affairs with them, to help them, this maybe by the 18th and 19th C. This is the reality. The myth part is that the dancing inside the temple nobody saw. This much I know. I take them as the living tradition, the* Gotipuas *and the* Maharīs*. The system of dance was prevalent and respected in the society, that is why you find it in the temple sculptures, which I call 'the frozen tradition'. The dance of the* Devadāsīs *and* Gotipuas *is the crude form, which was distilled into the Odissi dance form.' (July, 2019, recorded interview, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India)*

Guru Smt. Sharon Lowen is from Detroit, US, studying and living in India since 1973, trained in modern dance, ballet, mime and theatre, with a degree in Humanities, Fine Arts, Asian Studies and an M.A. in Education and Dance. She arrived in India on a Fulbright scholarship in 1973 to study Manipuri dance, she also trained in Mayurbhanj Chhau, and Odissi under Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, emphasizes the spiritual learning that relating to this tradition might bring out:

When we start learning we understand about the Maharī *and* Gotipua *tradition, bringing it out with the Bhakti movement. We know there was dance (in temples) from maybe the 8th century (Shaivites). But I am also aware that there was Buddhist dance, yoginīs dance - we have the extent Yoginīs temple […] To me, the idea that Odissi and all the classical dance forms come from a spiritual consciousness means that you are aiming at more than entertainment. It means that when you are performing you are hoping that the audience is having a collective non-selfish, shared experience. If the intention has a content that elevates you, spiritually metaphysically, there is some light grasp of transcendent love, the Indian aesthetics is using the metaphor of mundane love for the Divine. I emphasize when I talk about the* Geeta Govinda *that Radha was at such high level, still she cannot feel unconditional love when Krishna is with other* Gopis*. I realized that when he makes all these excuses, he is not doing it like a childish Krishna, he is doing it because he wants her to learn, and not to suffer. Basically, drawing on that tradition, you have an opportunity to try to go beyond, deeper, to touch people. We know that in understanding Dharma we need compassionate wisdom. Every step helps, everything that makes a person more ready, more spiritual, helps an artist grow, it is worthwhile. I think that from the* Devadāsī *tradition we have that intent.* (March 2020, recorded interview)

Dr. Aparupa Chatterjee, Ph.D. AD-COM/ALEC, Artistic Director of non-profit dance company, Texas, US, finds her connection to the spirituality of dance in the roots of Odissi as a temple practice:

Being a Dāsī *meant to belong to the temple. As you know, at those times, Odissi was not Odissi at all. All the big Gurus, among which Guru Kelucharana Mohapatra, have taken that form, which was inside the temple, out, and evolved it into a dance form. Now, I am just one of the thousands of dancers who are leading this dance ahead, the main rule is that it is part of our everyday life. It's like the devotional aspect of it, the spirituality. I would say that I have to take forward this legacy, which I learned from my guru, who learned at his turn from his guru, and so on… which takes us back to the* Devadāsī*. Whoever is committed to the dance is attached to this spirituality. When you learn this dance, you are connected to that root, and we are also connected to everyone in this environment. It's a cultural environment that we grow out of Odissi dance. That gives you the spirituality.* (February 2020, recorded interview, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India)

Śri Rahul Acharya, Odissi Dance and Research Academy, Orissa, recalls the mythological accounts of the *Maharīs* in Jagannath temple in Puri:

There are six classes of Maharīs*, there is a prostitute class also, but they are not inside the temple. The* Bhitara Gauni *were the most pious, they had to be, because they were supposed to be sleeping inside the Sanctum. Before there was a legend that circulates within the* Maharī *families (now we don't have anybody). I have heard the story from one of the last* Maharīs*, Sashimani, she told me once that those days they used to sleep under Jagannath's courts. They used to dress up like nuns, wear ocre robes and as jewelleries the alaka flowers (*alakas *are poisonous flowers offered to Shiva, a symbol of austerity). This particular* Maharī*, because they had to adopt daughters to carry on the tradition, so she had two daughters, and they were very poor. The king had secretive affairs with all these* Maharīs*, they were basically concubines. Except those inside, who were not looked after, so they were very poor. So this particular* Maharī *prayed to Lord Jagannath: 'I can satisfy my hunger just by staring at your eyes, but unfortunately that's not the case of my daughters; I have no means to feed them. In a dream, Jagannath told her: you take my gold plate, sell it and feed your daughters. She took the plate, but the next day there was a huge enquire in the temple: where is Jagannath's gold plate? They found it is with her, and they put her behind bars. But the Gajapati King had a dream, where Jagannath said: this plate does not belong to your father, it belongs to me, and I've given it to her. So she was released and the King said: this plate was given to you. But she went to Jagannath and said: I have been through a lot of controversies because of your plate, you take back your plate! Jagannath said: no, do not sell the plate, melt the plate, it's your right as a woman to wear ornaments, make gold ornaments and wear them. She answered: no, if I decorate myself, people will look at me, then people will want to touch my body. Jagannath said: so be it, let my priests touch your body. In a way, that is definitely not true! But in a way, to give her religious sanction to what you can say as 'sacred prostitution' or 'religious prostitution', because generally, socially, prostitution is not right. However, before the British arrived, the prostitutes enjoyed a very high social status, very rich and independent women, and enjoyed a lot of respect of the society. They were very educated, if you are not educated, how do you become an expert in all the sixty-four arts? You have to start with the Kama Sutra. You have to know the techniques. But nobody wanted to build families with them, because they were independent women. These sterile Christian ideas created a complete havoc, they destroyed the entire* Devadāsī *tradition with the* Nautch Bill *(1893) and Post Independence* Act Anti Devadāsī *(1947). But in Puri, the tradition just died out. Nobody wanted to continue the Seva, because it was very very difficult to the temple to take care of these women. They have their own locality where no man is allowed to stay. They all lived in that community. When they came out they were not allowed to talk to any man. Because they believed during those days, if they saw the face of any man, it was doomed to be their husband. This dance, first of all,*

comes from the temple. Whether you accept it or not, the temple is a religious place. In the 17th C. a Royal order was passed, that only Geeta Govinda *will be sung within the temple. In 1996, Sanjukta Panigrahi made a request as an aspiring* Maharī *to come and serve there.* (recorded interview, Feb. 2020, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India)

Varda Arjun Vaishampayan is an Indian classical dancer, teacher, choreographer, however a continuous dance student, as she defines herself, in Pune, Maharashtra, trained both in Bharatanatyam and in Odissi dance forms. Her vision is pedagogic, relating temple architecture, the Indian theory of aesthetics related to dance (Rasa), and the history of the Devadāsīs to the present dance forms, in their 'traditional' legacy:

When we learn about the history of Bharatnatyam and Odissi, both classical dance forms, we understand that Devdasis *are a very important part of chain of evolution of these dance forms. Dance was one of the offering or part of the ritual to be performed in temple, and the* Devdasis *were appointed to temple for those rituals. They used to sing and dance in front of the Deity, worship the Deity by performing dance. The* Devdasis *were married to the temple Deity, so compositions were mostly in* Bhakti *and* Shringar Rasa*, as it is the* Geet Govind*. Still we can see maximum traditional compositions are either in* Bhakti *or* Shringar rasa*, in both styles of dance. This shows connection of these styles with* Devdasis *and temples. These dance styles are connected with temple not only with the context of* Devdasis *but Sculptures too. In Bharatnatyam different* Karans *are used, which one can actually see in the sculptures of South Indian temples. The basic stance of Araimandi (half sitting) is quite visible in these sculptures. Same is in the case for Odissi. All the sculptures of Orissa temples we feel are alive when we see Odissi dance on stage. Today's Bharatanatyam and Odissi dance styles are a result of the evolution of dance for centuries, but still from the items presented traditionally we can understand that* Bhakti *and* Shringar Rasa*, traditional literature are indicating towards* Devdasis *and Temples for its origin.* (online discussion excerpt, 20 September 2020)

4. Beyond Devadāsī: *stepping into another culture*

Discussing with Gurus and long-time practitioners only opened my interest to explore deeper into the enormous source of knowledge that is the Indian philosophy and arts tradition. As a practitioner and as a researcher, one has to envisage dance as "both a product (particular dances as realized in production) and a process (dancing, the historical conditions of possibility for the production and reception of such texts and processes, as well as the articulation of systems of value. To think of the relationship between product and process, to interrogate when, where, how we dance, with whom, under what conditions, what gets danced' (Desmond 1997: 2 *apud* Pine & Kuhlke 2014: vi). But when, as a foreigner, one steps into such an intricate territory as that of the Indian Classical dance, this cultural field needs be

encompassed in a larger perspective, including approaches that are inherent to the specificity of the India classical arts and culture. Learning (about) Indian dance means 'to step into […] the sway of radically different configurations and possibilities for thought and being. It means entering a new landscape, in which we are ourselves made new' (Anderson Sathe 2010: 319-329). While entering this complex network of cultural meanings, the neophyte has to confront, understand and move beyond phenomena like orientalism, exoticism, but above all acquire and assimilate concepts connected to the aesthetics of dance, *Rasa* and *Bhava, Bhakti* and *Śṛngara,* and look deeper into the philosophical and religious system that gave birth to what is now the Indian classical dance.

The Indian classical dance, in its becoming a worldwide praised phenomenon, with exponents in almost every country of the globe, could not escape the 'orientalist' representation (which happened across genres, in literature or film as well) as for the past century orientalist and exotic dance productions have flooded dance production (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003: 13-27, see also Khokar 1961, 1996, Warren 2006). Yet, orientalism 'is the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsession, and requirements (Bhabha 1994: 71), while 'Exoticism is a practice of representation through which identities are frivolously allocated' (Savigliano 1995: 189). Sachs defines Orient as the site of two opposed poles: sexuality and sensuality on one hand, and on the other hand religious fervour and spirituality (see *World History of Dance,* 1937, chapter 'The Evolution of the Spectacular Dance and the Oriental Civilization', pp. 218-236). As Said says: 'The orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (Said 1978: 1).

The love-life stories of anthropomorphic gods, as portrayed in dance, may evoke erotic fantasy, provide avenues for repressed and suppressed energies, and allow women temporary escape from human toil (and, a feminist perspective, from male dominance) through identification with the prestige and freedom of the *apsara* or *devadasi* (Singer 1972: 235, Shankar 1990). To this account, Judith Lynne Hanna provides feminist perspectives on the classical dances of India: 'Indian dance include aphrodisiac performance, pre and extra-marital entertainment, art and artifice, erotic fantasy, sex role typecasting, […]. Sex, gender, divinity and dance conflate' (Hanna 1988: 97, 1998). Further, 'More than providing sanction for gender-related behavior, dance offers opportunities for fantasy' (Yati 1979: 15), as men also relate to Krishna as *gopis* (Hanna 1988: 111).

To understand Indian dance means understanding concepts like the *Bhakti* path, learning deeper about the Indian philosophical traditions, reading into the Radha and Krishna narration, going through pan-Indian and local mythologies. Jayadeva's work *Geeta Govinda* is 'a work overflowing with lush language […] a wholly sensual and

particularistic theological discourse of emotional response. But behind this 'affective' dimension stands a systematic philosophy of reason and reality. The philosophical theology of Radha reflects a metaphysics that […] deals with non-dualism (Halbfass 2007: 175). To explain,

The social context of the poem reflects an intense period of interaction between the diverse religious cultures (including Muslim, Buddhist and Jain elements) that for convenience we call now 'Hinduism' in its syncretic medieval stage. The elevation of the incarnate form of the deity Vishnu, and the proliferation of Tantric traditions which used the body as a spiritual tool, coincided with a flourishing of the visual, literary, and musical arts as a canvas for religious-philosophical reflection. Concurrently, the 'pure-consciousness' ontology of the Advaitic *(non-dual) strand of Indian thought was synthesized with the more pluralistic and energetic metaphysical scheme of the* Sankhya *school of philosophy.* (Flood 2005: 29).

In the Vaiśnava tradition, in which the *Geeta Govinda* poem was developed, influenced by the theological narrative of the *Bhagavata Purāṇa,* 'which introduces passionate emotionalism into the world of intellectual Krishna-bhakti' (Haberman 2007: 409), devotees aimed to become *sahṛdayins* – 'those possessing hearts', and *rasika-jana* (see *Gita Govinda*, 12.9 in Miller 1977) – 'people with highly cultivated emotion' (Frazier 2010: 199-217). To note also that the *Bhakti* traditions considered women as exemplary *sahṛdayins* (Wulff 1986: 40), yet both men and women aspired to the feminine subjectivity of Krishna's lovers (Frazier 2010: 199-217). Thus, 'the practices developed to facilitate this inner transformation focused above all on the arts and their affective capacities and the result was a flourishing of poetic forms aimed at shaping into new […] divine ones' (id.). Such synthesis found a medium and a motif in the poetry of Radha,

'which negotiated a curious place between tradition and socio-cultural innovation, unification and pluralism. For almost the first time a body was an intrinsically good thing to have – after all, divinity had acquired one as a spontaneous expression of its essence. […] insofar as one worshipped the incarnate divinity, one worshipped incarnation itself' (id.).

In the context of the *expressive* Indian culture, where the visual plays an important role (see the notion of *Darśan* also, when the worshiper gazes at the image of a deity, that might be seen as symbolic 'veneration', see Eliade 1959, Ricoeur 1970: 31, Eck 1996), shape is given to what cannot be seen. Through the concept of *mūrti*, the deity is embodied in the human body which is therefore also divine (Waghorne, Cutler & Narayanan 1985, Price Grieve 2003: 57-72).

5. Conclusion

Our exploration shed some light on the myth of the *Devadāsī* temple system, by giving voice to the present-day gurus and practitioners themselves, and emphasizing their connection to the legacy of the *Devadāsī* temple system. Each dancer interviewed relates to one or another aspect of this historical and mythological figure, which stands as an archetype that defines the roots of the Indian classical dance. The historical investigation, very short, is an aid to understand her role and evolution throughout history, as the scholarly accounts present her. The *Devadāsī* remains a figure on the poetic and mythological realm, to which the dance practitioner relates in her/his dance practice, sometimes objectively (history, teaching), sometimes subjectively (a form of spiritual evolution, we are *Devadāsīs*). As a researcher and practitioner, coming from a different cultural background, the *Devadāsī* became an entry-gate for further understanding and deepening various aspects of the Indian philosophy and culture, and the possibilities of assuming, embodying and evolving in the frame of this cultural imaginary.

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