

**ANOTHER STAGE IN THE LIFE OF THE NATION:
*SADIR, BHARATANATYAM, FEMINIST THEORY***

*A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN THE SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES*



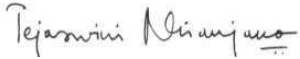
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FEBRUARY, 1997

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Ms. Srividya Natarajan worked under my supervision for the Ph.D. Degree in English. Her thesis entitled "Another Stage in the Life of the Nation: Sadir. Bharatanatyam. Feminist Theory" represents her own independent work at the University of Hyderabad. This work has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of any degree.

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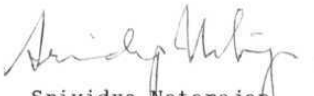
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To those special teachers from
whose lives I have learnt more
than from all my other education
put together:

Kittappa Vadhyar, Paati, Thatha,
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Contents	iii
Preface	iv
Notes on <u>Devadasi</u> , <u>Sadir</u> , and <u>Bharatanatyam</u>	vii
Chapter 1	1
Introduction	
Chapter 2	74
'A Most Objectionable Class of People': Nation Building and the Disintegration of the <u>Devadasi</u> Community	
Chapter 3	166
A Respectable Aesthetic: The Making of <u>Bharatanatyam</u>	
Chapter 4	245
Studying Culture, Performing Dance: Engagements with Feminism and Post-structuralism	
In Lieu of a Conclusion	323
Appendix: A Selective Chronology	339
A Select Bibliography, Including All References Cited	342

PREFACE

I have, in the first chapter of this thesis, offered what I hope are fairly respectable reasons for researching bharatanatyam in an English department. In the extra-mural space of this preface, it may be freely confessed that I also had an intensely personal reason for doing this: merely the fact that I have been involved with bharatanatyam as student, performer, teacher and now researcher, for some twenty years, and that is more than two thirds of my life. Dance has always claimed my primary loyalty, and if I have thought of myself as 'belonging' in any community, it has been in the community of traditional performers. This is a sense of location rather than a full identity; what with English education and a certain commitment to a 'modern,' non-hierarchical lifestyle, I was already too alienated a subject to feel entirely at home in the world my dance master inhabits.

This world has always offered serious temptations, however, largely because of the kind of person my master is. Thanjavur K.P. Kittappa Pillai has studied, written about and taught dance for most of his eighty five years. Kittappa is no naif, no one-dimensional figure who expresses the sweet simplicity of a pre-modern pastoral existence. He is, for example, as familiar with the interiors of international jet aircraft as the most up-to-date high-flying academic, his last two tours abroad being in Canada and Greece. But he can take 'modernity' or leave it; on the whole, he prefers to leave it. About eight years ago, his students spent the night around a radio set, waiting for the announcement of the names of those aboard the Kanishka from Canada that had crashed into the sea, because we knew he had been booked on that flight. It turned out that the mridangam vidwan had got lost on his way to the airport at the Canada end: Kittappa ruled out the idea of travelling without him, because it was discourteous ("we went as a group, we must come back as a group") and because the mridangist was particularly incapable of coping on his own with the protocols of international travel. At the expense of convenience, time and money, Kittappa's troupe had been rebooked on the next flight.

That is not a moral story. Its **significance**, for the purposes of explaining this thesis, is that Kittappa has been resolutely recalcitrant from the point of view of all those who have tried to modernize him: the government, the bureaucratic networks of art-promoters, dance '**connoisseurs**,' dancers who wanted a quick six-month bharatanatyam fix. But modernity's minions invariably misread his serene (and frequently, his ferociously witty) **evasion of** their demands. I have cooperated in an entirely grudging way with the efforts of 'senior' brahmin dancers, appointed by some government institution on a gross salary, to wring his knowledge out of him under duress, or to capture his five-century old familial heritage on some spools of tape. The barely disguised contempt these **dancers--some** of them his own students--displayed towards Kittappa was inexplicable to me then; now, with a better sense of the history of the brahmin encounter with the isai vellalar community, I know that contempt for what it is: a product of the merging of a poisonous upper caste bigotry and a distinctly modern bureaucratic rationality.

So my Ph.D. project had its origin in one of the many fits of outrage I felt on Kittappa's behalf, and on behalf of other isai vellalar teachers I knew and respected: the late T. Brinda, who taught me music for some years; T. **Balasaraswati**, whose student **Shyamala** taught me abhinayam. It also tapped into my feeling that the vitality of the dance was being choked out of it by the conventions and silly affectations that marked it as a brahmin practice. My project was sustained by a faith in the efficacy of theory: perhaps if I could understand what was wrong with the present **practice** of the dance, and why it was wrong, I might be able to connect up, through filaments of recovered history, with the richer and infinitely more interesting practices of the dancers of the past.

I am sure there will be those who still do not feel that all this adds up to a convincing reason for researching dance in an English department. But even the most resolute critic of cultural studies must have noticed the number of people of his or her acquaintance, in India, who '**do**' English **professionally** but '**really are**,' deep down, something else: activists, advertising **experts**, artists, break **dancers**, Carnatic **musicians**, coffee planters, cricketers, educationists, folk singers,

feminists, film makers, gays, gurus, jazz enthusiasts, journalists, nature lovers, performers, poets, priests, social workers, translators, travellers, to compile a **Borgesian** list from within my narrow circle of acquaintance. No one wants to define his or her essence exclusively in terms of academic work in English; to do so makes them feel ghostly and irrelevant when they go home to their families or when they share their pleasures with their peers. English all by itself is too alien, too closely identified with modernity, **and** modernity, after all, is something even people in English departments are ambivalent about. This ambivalence is what cultural studies captures and transforms into what can sometimes be genuinely engaged interpretation, **with** genuinely fascinating results: which may be reason enough to take cultural studies seriously.

NOTES ON DEVADASI, SADIR AND BHARATANATYAM

The origin of the practice of dedicating young girls to temples has been matter for wild speculation; the theories advanced have suggested everything from a nun-like order to tantric rites in which the devadasis tested the ascetism of their male sexual partners. For my purposes in this thesis, it is enough to note that the practice was widely prevalent long before the Saivite revivalists of the sixth century, in what is now Tamil Nadu, established offerings of dance or music by women as standard features of Hindu temple worship. Epigraphic evidence from this period onwards suggests that devadasis were wealthy, honoured and important members of the Hindu community.

The word devadasi literally translates as 'slave of god,' which is not a particularly appropriate capturing of what it implies. I am not sure why this word has come to be the generic term for women of this group; as is usual with such standardized usages, the reason may be sought, no doubt, in some colonial Census Report, which in turn no doubt reflected some colonial official's oscillation between moralism and fascination with the otherness of this community. Devadasis were known by many names in South India, names either specific to the region (for example, soole. nayakasani, or patra in what is now Karnataka; thevaradiyal in what is now Tamil Nadu; bhogam and saani in Andhra Pradesh) or specific to the tasks they performed (ganika. rudrakannikai . and so on). Devadasis came from many middle-level castes like the Nattuvan and the Melakkarar (castes whose male members were usually musicians or music and dance teachers), the Sengunthar and the Mudaliar. Early in this century, as part of a consciousness-raising exercise, these castes gave themselves, in Tamil Nadu, the designation isai vellalar (cultivators of the art of music) and in Andhra, kalavanthulu (artists).

The devadasis. it has been noted by many commentators, speak of themselves as following a murai or a way of life, rather than as belonging to a specific caste: i.e., their identity is conferred on them more by their practices, than by their birth. Dedication to a deity in a ceremony called, in Tamil Nadu, 'pottukattu' committed them in childhood to rigorous apprenticeship under a nattuvanar guru or a music teacher. They

became accomplished performers, their services being required in temples for tasks like the holding of the chamaram or ceremonial fan in temple processions, the carrying of hand-lamps, the weaving of garlands, and the kumbha-arathi (the ceremonial waving of the pot-lamp).

Dance and music, both contributions of the devadasis, were among the upacharas, ways of honouring the deity. The devadasis had special ritual dances to perform during festival cycles in the temple. In return for their services to the temples, devadasis and their families held tenure over lands (maniams) granted by the temples (or had rights to the produce of that land, or to its monetary equivalent). Usually, they were also entitled to cooked food from the temple kitchens, to free housing or housing sites near temples, and to provision for their training under nattuvanars. These entitlements could be taken for granted as long as successive generations could provide girls or women to perform the necessary services. Girl children were, **therefore**, prized by this community; talented girls meant, in addition to temple entitlements, the favour and patronage of private individuals and even of royal houses.

Devadasis also had secular roles. They were looked upon as nityasumangalis--women who were always **auspicious**--since they were wedded to the immortal deity of the temple; having special powers as a result of this bond with the deity, they mediated between ordinary mortals and fate itself, warding off bad luck, performing a range of tasks at private functions and during rites of passage. For instance, it was considered lucky if a bride's thali was strung by a devadasi, or if members of her community sang or danced at weddings. Such documentary evidence as we have suggests that devadasis were held in high esteem. Special honours were granted to them in their lifetimes and when they died, their spouse-deities went into mourning.

Sadir existed as a continuum from the '**possessed**' dancing of **cultic** significance to the ritual dancing in temples, from the celebratory dancing on secular occasions, to the sophisticated practice of the court dancer. In the period under study here, sadir was danced by devadasis in both sacred and secular spaces. In the 19th century, the nattuvanar brothers **Ponniah**, Chinnaiah, **Sivanandam** and Vadivelu adapted sadir for

the court-stage and set up its 'concert' format in the Maratha court at **Thanjavur**.

Sadir was also called dasiattam, and karnatakam; since it used the 'small **drum**' orchestra (which included the 'softer' instruments like the mridangam, the veena and the clarinet) it was called chinnamelam, as opposed to periamelam. the orchestra that usually got outdoor engagements and included instruments like the nadaswaram and the tavil.

By the 1920s, sadir had fallen into disrepute, most of its traditional performers either preferring or driven to marry 'respectably' or to use their talents in other professions. (Many of them turned to acting and singing for the newly created cinema industry.) Some version of the term bharatanatyam seems to have been 'officially' used for the first time in the early 1930s by members of the Music Academy of Madras, as part of an attempt to restore dignity and **acceptability** to the dying dance form. **Rukmini** Devi Arundale, who, along with a number of brahmin women, began to learn and perform sadir in the late 1930s, preferred to call the form Bharata Natya; in the text of my thesis, however, I have used the more current version of the term (bharatanatyam) except when referring explicitly to Rukmini Devi's usage.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Aesthetic and the Political: Problems in the Philosophy of Culture

The owl of Minerva flies at dusk; research projects, pale shadows of the original bird, yield up their animating ideas perilously near the last deadline. Under the impression that I was reconstructing a specific, neatly demarcated history--that of the transformation of sadir into bharatanatyam--I inhaled the dust of archives from time to time for some three years, browsing through speeches, documents, belles lettres. pamphlets and fiction; through anything, in short, that seemed to cast light on the subject. But with all my watchfulness, 'the subject' ramified, insidiously attaching tendrils to concepts (the bloated old chestnut 'modernity,' for instance, or 'aesthetics') that I would have been well-advised to avoid. Inevitably, by the time I began drafting this thesis, I was conscious of that sinking sensation familiar to academics everywhere, of having taken on infinitely more than I could handle.

More than halfway through the actual writing I worked it out that what I had on my hands was not so much the discursive elaboration of 'the Nautch Question,' as an abstract problem:

the relation between cultural production and its socio-political context; or, more **specifically**, the relationship between cultural artefacts and the power relations that control their forms, their audiences and the lifestyles of their makers. If one may think of something as a 'philosophical' problem without necessarily evoking transcendental overviews, the relationship between art and politics may be considered a problem in 'the philosophy of **culture**.'

There is some consolation in the fact that my thesis may have a bearing on this problem. To the extent that it addresses itself to studying something more than a particular historical conjuncture, it may be of interest to **culture-fanciers** of any persuasion. 'Cultural artefacts,' in the above formulation of this problem, could be read as shorthand for anything from high art to propaganda to popular cinema, and how the phrase is used would depend on the aesthetic and cultural predilections of the person who uses it; and depending on her ideological **inclinations**, '**politics**' may mean either power relations (oppressive, productive, or simply 'natural') or emancipatory practices, or both. She may agree enthusiastically with the idea that art is bound up with politics in this broad sense, or she may deny it vehemently; but if she is an artist or a performer, a historian or critic, a writer or cultural activist, her practice is irreducibly caught in the web of causality and correspondence that connects these two phenomena.

So by the light of dusk, rather late for the purposes of good organization if not for wisdom, I saw the **ramifications** of the problem I had undertaken to study. As a result, this thesis has one fixed eye (trained on sadir/bharatanatyam) and one roving one (glancing at English studies, the historiography of

culture and feminist theory). Hindsight suggests that the invasion of my '**subject**' by these disciplinary practices ought not to have surprised me: though what initially motivated my research was my interest in imagining, in as much detail as possible, a contemporary and feminist practice of bharatanatyam. it was the engagements between traditional English studies and feminist criticism that gave something like theoretical rigour to my obscure **dissatisfactions** with the current practice of classical dance.

These other subjects did not, it must be noted, crowd the history of sadir out of its central position in my argument. On the contrary, sadir functioned as the touchstone case for most of the issues that I wanted to consider in relation to English or to feminist cultural studies. In order to get a picture of what an alternative version of bharatanatyam might look like, it was necessary to work through

1) the relationship between the intersecting histories of nationalism and women's emancipation in India, since the campaign against sadir was avowedly pro-women, the product of a **proto-feminism** that became a reference point for most subsequent moves towards women's equality; and

2) the relationship between feminist practice and the aesthetics of dance (since some aesthetic codes would have to be decided on in the process of re-imagining the form), the idea of the aesthetic being the target of one of feminism's most convincing and timely critiques.

Though the relationship between cultural production and politics had been problematized by **marxist** critics, it was feminist criticism that really put it on the agenda of English

studies. From A Room of One's Own onwards, feminist polemics on literary norms have focused on the hidden political motivations behind the many ideologies of the aesthetic, ideologies so constructed as to make women's writing invisible, marginal, uncanonical, or just incompetent. These polemics, half-buried in oblivion in the decades since they were produced, were recovered and aired by the Anglo-American feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s. Since the post-sixties phase in the development of feminist criticism, the idea that 'the aesthetic' is an artificial construct, apt to enshrine the interests of those who invoke it, has passed into the realm of received wisdom for feminists. Contiguous theoretical/critical **developments--post-structuralism**, postcolonial theory, some African American criticism--have also taken the constructedness of the aesthetic to be a critical commonplace; in India, the nascent dalit critique would probably endorse this argument.

All particular versions of cultural production, or particular ideologies of the aesthetic, are undoubtedly 'socially constructed.' The unravelling of these ideologies, under the stress of recent critiques, **reinforces--somewhat** monotonously, perhaps, since one cannot scorn to repeat a point that ought to be so obvious but is so resolutely **disavowed--the** conviction that there is nothing 'behind' the construct. Since no 'essence' of beauty or taste can be proved to persist through historically contingent aesthetic codes, all ideas about the aesthetic seem reducible to power-play. That is to say, it becomes difficult to maintain a distinction, even for purely analytic purposes, between, on the one hand, philosophical aesthetics (which frequently sets itself to answer some such

question as '**What is Beauty?**,' hardly an auspicious beginning for a historicized or culturally situated study of perception) or the celebration of literary taste; and, on the other, 'the aesthetic,' if one wants to invoke for this word not the sedimentations of privilege, but the resonances '**kinaesthetic**,' 'sensory,' '**perceptual**,' 'affective,' or 'sexual.' The very contingency of the aesthetic, its dependence on social and political norms, becomes the theme to ruminate upon, and to posit or investigate the sensory, bodily or emotional dimensions of human response to cultural artefacts appears misguided, to say the **least**. Thus the cultural critiques I am concerned with in this thesis, critiques influenced by the theories of the contemporary academic Left, and produced under the rubric of cultural studies, tend to structurally exclude the investigation of the aesthetic except as a **manifestation** of ideological **investments**.

How does one work the concerns of artists or performers, compelled by the very nature of their practice to grapple with notions of the aesthetic, into the available models of studying culture, without abandoning hard-won insights into the politics of art? I had no desire to reify art in the typical and unprepossessing ways that a middle class background and an English education encourage. It did not seem self-evident to me, for instance, that art embodied universal values; that it was what special individuals, blessed with good taste, naturally created or appreciated; that it was uncontaminated by the sordid influence of the market or by the gross realities of power and politics. On the other hand I did not want to leave out of the reckoning too many of the **elements--grammar**, technique and

craftsmanship, training, style, emotional investments, perceptual and **kinaesthetic** and bodily responses—that go into the making and reception of works of art. These elements carry political traces too, as I will argue when I describe the aesthetic of bharatanatyam: but they are also, in a sense, the **undertheorised**, undecidable residue of 'subjective' feeling in the presence of art, and need to be dealt with as such, rather than as mere projections of the sociology, ideology, or post facto discursive **justification** of taste, objectively available for tabulation or **deconstruction**.

Significantly, and discouragingly for a feminist, the affective aspects of cultural production or reception have been most conscientiously and elaborately studied by critics one would describe (and perhaps regretfully reject) as either 'liberal' or '**conservative.**' For instance, the project that Elaine Showalter calls '**gynocritics,**' the constructing of aesthetically and politically sensitive responses to women's writing, has figured prominently in liberal feminist criticism. But liberal feminists doing gynocritics are tilling soil that has already been leached by more theoretically sophisticated feminists. Given the emphasis the most prestigious cultural critics now place on the hazards of any aesthetic judgement ('value' is out, even as '**pleasure**' creeps back in), the project of the post-sixties generation appears, by implication, anachronistic, politically dubious. Cultural critics on the post-structuralist, postcolonial feminist Left are in no mood to naively celebrate an alternative aesthetic, and they have logic on their side: to take the feminist critique of existing aesthetic codes seriously is necessarily to look with suspicion

on all ideas that rub shoulders with philosophical aesthetics.¹⁰ This justifiable suspicion is my point of departure in the consideration of the link between art and politics; only, unlike contemporary post-structuralist cultural theorists, I am not sure that it is my destination.

The academic Left's belated recognition of the persistence of culture as **affect**, despite the obsolescence of the intellectual categories used to describe this, is expressed in the new-found interest in the idea of 'pleasure.' The association of pleasure with subversion is made as a matter of course in French literary and social theory of the 1970s and early '80s. To perpetrate outrages through the uninhibited pursuit of eros is the **bohemian** avant-garde's answer to marxist praxis on the one hand and to bourgeois moral strictures on the other. Critics in the Anglo-American academy have been, on the whole, more sceptical than the French about the theory that one could topple class structures by challenging accepted libidinal economies, though some of them have nevertheless introduced versions of it into their own work. Barring French writers like Helene Cixous, feminist critics have taken up the question of pleasure, especially of sexual pleasure, in an altogether more responsible and more prosaic way, since it is so deeply implicated in the way women are perceived and treated in a world where ideas of what constitutes pleasure tend to be defined by men.¹³

I would take it as axiomatic that the expression of the sexuality or of the pleasure of a subordinated group is profoundly disturbing to a dominant group (as witness the middle class anxiety over the unreconstructed sexuality of the

devadasis), but I believe the question of pleasure has to be handled with the kind of caution feminists bring to it; it would be too easy to celebrate the devadasis as exemplars of French-style subversion through jouissance.

To recapitulate: imagining a feminist practice of dance has meant, for me, studying the area of convergence of three overlapping fields: that of the history of the dance in India, which adds to what we know about the way women and their bodies were represented and instrumentalized by the discourses of nationalism; that of the women's question in India; and that of feminist critical practice, which, as I encountered it, happens to be tethered to the discipline of English, but might function as a bridge to a contemporary rethinking of dance. This eccentric project involves different disciplinary spaces:

- 1) sadir/bharatanatyam, of course;
- 2) English studies in India, one version of which mediates the Foucauldian model of genealogy that I **find useful**;
- 3) the emerging field of feminist cultural studies in India, which poses the questions of history, politics and aesthetics within a large theoretical framework whose pivotal categories are gender, culture and the nation.

I will consider, in the rest of this chapter, how each of these fields in turn is implicated in my arguments about politics and art.

I also want to lay out, in some detail, an argument for studying the history of dance (or of similar cultural practices) alongside the history of English studies in India. What appears to be a startling juxtaposition of themes, I will argue, might begin to appear entirely sound if one could get out of the deep-

rooted, colonially inculcated, uncritical habits of reading that have been institutionalized in English studies. The point of entry into this argument is my own negative response to the idea of applying 'Indian **aesthetics**' to English literature. In a sense, this chapter is about the **admissibility** of such projects as mine in English departments; in other words, about the reasonableness of doing cultural studies as part of English **studies**.

The Nautch Question

The controversy about sadir developed in the context of both national and local power struggles. I will try to give, below, a quick overview of the cast of characters in this drama, the stakes they had in the issue, and their motives for favouring the positions they took.

Around the mid-nineteenth century the Christian missionaries in South India began to worry about the moral implications of the dance form called sadir. Sadir was traditionally performed by women (the devadasis) who, after being symbolically married ('dedicated') to the deity of the local temple, performed certain services for the temple and enjoyed customary honours as well as land tenure in return. The missionaries were shocked and disturbed by two features, culturally unfamiliar to them, of the devadasis' way of life: firstly, that they contracted non-conjugal sexual relationships with men; secondly, that they performed what appeared (to the missionaries, at any rate) to be '**erotic**' dances, in places of worship, in full view of a mixed audience that included the very young. The cry of '**religious** prostitution' went up among those who were concerned about the moral codes of the heathen, both in

India and abroad.

The missionaries had mixed motives in figuring **the** widely prevalent practices of dedication and temple dancing as coercive and evil. Genuine moral outrage, no doubt, was one of these. Missionary campaigners believed that the dance, and the non-marital sexual relationships that went with it, were repugnant alike to God and to European civilization. (Indeed, some of them liked to think that there was no difference between the last two.) The unregenerate cultures of the Orient were, on the whole, ripe for the righteous interventions of more civilized races; exemplars of this moral recalcitrance, the souls of the **'fallen'** devadasis simply called out to be saved. They were committed to their irregular lifestyles in the innocence of childhood, by indifferent or positively immoral parents; they could be made to see the light even in the fulness of their adulthood.

To the extent that the missionaries in the colonies were also imperialists, and that many of the battles between the colonizer and the colonized took place over the question of religious and moral superiority, the campaign against the devadasis served both the British empire and the Christian church very well indeed. In spite of the fact that relations between Church and Empire were far from harmonious in the colonies, both drew their legitimacy from the promises of the European Enlightenment. The authority of Christ, as missionaries frequently pointed out, was underwritten by scientific truth and enlightened morals, while Indian faiths were superstition-ridden, rankly amoral and therefore forever benighted: the devadasi murai illustrated these points most **satisfactorily**. The

missionary attack on sadir as an index of the degeneracy of Indian religion worried at a tender spot in the nationalist psyche. As I suggest in chapter 2, with reference to **Katherine Mayo's** book Mother India (1927), the discrediting of Hindu religion was a blow to the Indian nationalists, who held on fiercely to the notion of India's impeccable record in the realms of the spirit.

Oddly enough, the one party that might have been expected to capitalize on the campaign against sadir--the colonial **government**--did not put this issue on its civilizational agenda for a considerable stretch of the nineteenth century. The early generations of European settlers in India tolerated and sometimes patronized the dance, though one doubts that there was any informed appreciation in this quarter. It was all one to the nabobs whether the dancers were from Lucknow or from **Thanjavur**; happily indiscriminate, they applied the term 'nautch' (**from** the Hindustani naach. to dance) to all the highly **differentiated** classical and folk dance forms they encountered. Thus what they did contribute to the debate, initially, was a name: the controversy about the continued existence of sadir was **dignified** in the English language press and the Legislative Council debates by the rather unlikely title of '**the** Nautch Question.'

Though there were sporadic bursts of **anti-sadir** activity from the 1860s onwards, the official Anti-Nautch movement in Madras was launched in 1892. By this time nautch was already perceived as a '**national**' issue. William Miller (1838-1922), founder of the Madras Christian College, was a key figure in the initial stages of this campaign and many of his students went on to become anti-nautch firebrands in the next few decades.

By the **1890s**, with widespread conscientization about the Nautch Question, the missionary campaigners were no longer in a minority. The question brought to the fore deeply felt anxieties about the convergence, in Hindu practice, of religious ritual, art, and female sexuality. It also received publicity as an aspect of the woman question. The 'woman question' was, at least since the controversies over sati, the touchstone of governmental legitimation in colonial India: Hindu nationalists had to prove their concern for Indian womanhood while the colonial administrators **systematically** and complacently pointed to illiberal or cruel Hindu religious/cultural practices to justify the extension of their own rule. The intersecting of the religion question and the woman question in the nautch issue decided the identity of the group that would inevitably gravitate towards it: the advocates of social reform.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Hindu social reformers, shaken out of a cultural universe in which dance and religion mixed perfectly well, added their voices to the general clamour for the outlawing of sadir, and of those degraded women, the devadasis. Social reform groups (like the Women's India Association) in Madras, some (**though** not all) brahmin nationalists, the Madras Theosophists, the non-brahmin ideologues of the Suya Mariyadhai Iyakkam (E. V. Ramaswami Naicker's Self Respect Movement), and various caste associations like the Sengunthar Mahajana Sangam all climbed on the anti-nautch bandwagon in the next few crucial decades, wearing out the opposition. This opposition, represented chiefly by orthodox brahmin Madras Congress members under the leadership of **C.Rajagopalachari** and **S.Satyamurthi** in the 1930s was completely

overshadowed by the **'enlightened'** activism of the anti-naughters. Afflicted by a sense of their own retrogressive appearance, the members of the Music Academy of Madras, who were part of the cultural wing of the Congress, and who were projecting devadasis as performers of bharatanatyam, called themselves the **'pro-art** progressives.'

The person who, more than any other single individual, made sadir a cause celebre for nationalists in Madras was **Muthulakshmi Reddi**, Madras University's first woman medical graduate, social activist and Member of the Legislative Council between 1926 and 1930. **Reddi's** main argument for the abolition of sadir. partly borne out by fact and partly sustained by gathering prejudice, was that it was inseparable from prostitution. Using rhetoric whose shifts of register (**from** the pitying to the condemnatory) betrayed their ambivalence and anxiety about the issue of publicly visible female sexuality, she and her middle class compatriots made rapid and inexorable progress towards the abolition of sadir. The discourse of public hygiene and racial purity as well as the discourse of 'true' (i.e., 'spiritual') art contributed to this progress.

Despite the clear evidence of the wealth of the devadasis, despite their ritual status as nityasumangalis (ever-auspicious women) and their high social status in the secular world, the anti-naught reformers portrayed them almost exclusively as miserable victims needing to be **'rescued'** (a word most routinely used to describe them was 'wretches') or, occasionally, as scheming, degraded, uncultured deviants whose art was only a pretext for prostitution. The damage to the self-conception and public image of the devadasia was done over a period of some

decades by a particularly virulent rhetoric; legislation, when it came, only put a few finishing touches to what was already a damning and permanently disabling **indictment**. With the passing of the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act by the Legislative Assembly in 1947, these women, once powerful members of the community of artists, officially lost their livelihood and their hereditary rights. The reviling, ghettoizing and impoverishment of the devadasis were among the lasting practical effects of the discourses that led to the Anti-Nautch Act of 1947.

Throughout this period, and with heightened urgency as the campaign against them intensified, the devadasis made counter-arguments and appeals for assistance. The social reform arguments had, however, become such common currency that there was almost no public sympathy for the devadasis' side of the picture. Parallel developments such as the decline of princely patronage and of the aura of religious ritual, and the administrative regulation of **prostitution**, only hastened the legislating away of the devadasis.

The story might have ended at this point, with the decay of a community and the death of an art form, had it not been for two developments: the setting up of the Music Academy of Madras, and the appearance on the scene of **Rukmini** Devi Arundale (1904-1986).¹⁸ The Music Academy, an important institution for the promotion of classical music and dance started in 1928, took issue with **Muthulakshmi** Reddi and her adherents over her handling of the Nautch Question. Emphasizing the accidental nature of the 'evil' to which sadir had succumbed, the 'pro-art' activists of the Music Academy urged **that** the dance form be

restored to its earlier respectability. These activists--among them the Madras lawyer and theatre performer E.Krishna Iyer (1897-1968), brahmin dance teachers like **Bharatam Narayanaswami** Aiyar, and later, connoisseurs like **V.Raghavan--contributed** to this restoration by seeking out some of the numerous practising devadasis of exceptional talent and presenting them under the Music Academy's auspices, by writing about the form, and even by presenting dance recitals themselves.¹⁹

For a while, between 1930 and 1935, it seemed as if the tide of public opinion would turn in favour of the devadasis, though the opposition to the Academy's efforts at revival was bitter enough. But in 1935, a new factor emerged, which accelerated the pace of their decline as a performing class: a group of brahmin women associated with the Theosophical movement, who offered themselves as the ideal vehicles of dance-as-cultural- nationalism, and who, by emphasizing their **respectability**, effectively wiped out the competition over the next few years. They had the ideological support of such figures as Annie Besant and James Cousins, who were attempting to create a more 'Swadeshi' brand of cultural nationalism, rejecting the brand derived from Enlightenment discourses of human equality, freedom and self-determination. Swadeshi, as they mediated it, and as it was taken up by the brahmin dancers, had explicit allegiances to upper caste values; a fact that becomes significant when one contrasts it with **non-brahmin** protest, which at this time was deploying the language of political equality.

Thus even as the devadasis were being driven into the **margins** of society as defined by the emergent middle **class**, a

drastically modified version of sadir made its public appearance for the first time. Naming it 'Bharata Natya' and defiantly proclaiming their worthiness to rescue this form from its own 'vulgar' antecedents, these brahmin women, led by **Rukmini Devi Arundale** in breaking the caste taboo, began to present dance recitals. These recitals were woven into the politics of the time, and were framed by cultural nationalism on the one hand and an elaborate metaphysical-aesthetic doctrine on the other. As the mood took them, or as it was convenient, the inheritors of the form emphasized or disavowed the rupture between sadir and Bharata Natya: they alternately boasted of its unbroken 'two thousand year old tradition' and disclaimed all continuity with the practice of the devadasis. What is most interesting about all this is that the elimination of the devadasis from history and the recasting of the role of sadir/bharatanatyam in national and middle class culture turned on a new definition of correct gendering.

These parallel **discourses--one** seeking to dismantle the practice of sadir. the other seeking to give it a new respectability and social role--appear at a crucial moment in our history: the moment of the simultaneous formation and entry into modernity of the nation. The timing is what makes the points at issue so interesting.

A major part of my thesis, then, is devoted to examining the imbrication of the discourse generated by 'the Nautch **Question,**' approximately between 1850 and 1950 in what was then the Madras Presidency, in a series of interconnected events (the nationalist movement, the advent of the Indian 'modern,' the definition of the normative female citizen) and in certain

disciplinary practices (the classical dance form bharatanatyam, and the study of aesthetics, art and culture in the past as well as in the present). I want to place these events within the clashing or overlapping fields of force created by the colonial powers, the brahmin intelligentsia, the Christian missionaries, the Self-Respect Movement and the Theosophists.

Research relating the history of the devadasis to the nationalist movement has been going on in different disciplines. The devadasis have been understandably fascinating to ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists, and a good deal of extremely interesting work has already been done by women scholars. An important ethnographic study documents the lifestyle, social codes and the ethos of devadasis in South India: Saskia **Kersenboom-Story's** Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India (1987). **Amrit Srinivasan's** doctoral thesis, "Temple Prostitution and Reform: An Examination of the Ethnographic, Historical and Textual Context of the Devadasis of Tamil Nadu," summarised in "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance" (1985) is another outstandingly useful source.

The most substantial evidence for my arguments about the anti-nautch movement is provided by the Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council (cited in this text as **PMLC**) from 1927 onwards, and later, the Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Assembly (cited as **PMLA**), a collection that includes the Devadasi Act of 1947; and by the speeches, pamphlets and autobiographical writings of **Muthulakshmi Reddi**, chief architect of the Act. Other archival sources include the Native Newspaper Reports (documented in the text as **NNR**) for the first few decades of this century, since the Press made its presence felt

in this debate; the **journal Stri Dharma**, official publication of the Women's India Association, edited for some years by **Muthulakshmi Reddi**; missionary publications; memorials produced by devadasi associations; publications of the **Self-Respect Movement**; statements made by caste-organizations; and novels and short stories written in the period I am studying.

Secondary sources (including Census Reports, ethnographic studies and readings of temple inscriptions) provide information on the status of devadasis prior to the intervention of the **missionaries**.

So much for the discourses that rang sadir out. The literature that announced its **successor--bharatanatyam--** includes the writings of **Rukmini Devi Arundale**, in pamphlets and books put out by the Theosophical Society and in the **journal** published by her institute of dance (**Kalakshetra**), the **Kalakshetra Quarterly**. The Journal of the Music Academy, Madras, and Sangeet Natak, the journal published by the Sangeet Natak Academy, also provided useful **information**, especially about E. Krishna Iyer's and T. **Balasaraswati**'s contributions to the nationalist revival of dance.²³ A great deal of what I know about the **history** of the dance and its current practice comes from my personal interaction with the scholar and dance guru, Thanjavur K.P.Kittappa **Pillai**.²⁴

"What one would try to reconstitute would be the enmeshing of a discourse in a historical process" (Foucault, Power/Knowledge 38). The historical process started by the discourses of social reform continues into the present. The concepts that evolved in the heat of nationalist and regional politics at this moment (and that are exemplified in the

anti-naught controversy) are not merely of 'historical' interest in that they give us a glimpse of our past; they frame our thinking today no less than in **pre-independence** India, on a range of matters from national sovereignty to the women's question to aesthetics.

English Teachers: Orthodox **Brahmins** or Liberal Humanists?

On the face of it, bharatanatyam has nothing to do with English literature, and the meshing of themes in this **thesis--**politics, cultural history, English studies, dance--is an effect of my own idiosyncratic position. English professors of the old school, sorely tried by the new generation's violations of disciplinary boundaries, may be understandably outraged: whatever happened to Shakespeare and Milton? I would not, indeed, wish to evade the question of why I am doing this kind of study in an English department. I will also refrain from whipping out that serviceable weapon in the post-structuralist arsenal, the well-worn (but still pretty nearly irrefutable) argument about the fragility of the idea of the 'literary'; I will not ask, except in passing, the old question: if the Gettysburg Address and Areopagitica are literature, by what edict is **Muthulakshmi Reddi's** moving Legislative Council speech barred from being literature too?

English studies in India happens to be going through one of those (possibly epochal) convulsions in which disciplinary norms are disrupted anyway. This convulsion has nothing to do with the efforts of individuals. It has partly to do with the careers of alternative critical paradigms (**feminist**, post-structuralist, **postcolonial**, marxist) in British and American **academia** which

have the aide-effect, in India, of focusing uncharitable attention on the tattered remnants of the **'affectionate'** approach to English. These developments confirm what English teachers and students have always dimly suspected: that there is something odd and impractical about studying the literature of another country, in an alien language, in a nation which, strictly speaking, cannot afford to finance higher education in the humanities. And as it often happens when the future of an institution is uncertain, the recognition that something is definitely rotten in English studies has resulted in attempts to reconstruct its history. As studies of the history of English **proliferate--studies** which dwell on, rather than slur over, its embarrassing complicity in the colonial **scheme--major** changes in the discipline may be imminent. It seems a likely moment, therefore, for my project, which looks again at the history of English, but from a new angle: in its interactions with the history of sadir-bharatanatyam. In many ways, these histories were identical, and that fact is of some relevance to English.

The period in which sadir fell gradually from grace--the 1840s onwards--was roughly the period in which education in English came to stay in India.²⁵ The people who transformed sadir from dance form into social evil--the **missionaries--were** also the agents of this education. The introduction of English literature as part of the educational regimen took place in a particular context: the British government's proscription of open interference by missionaries in Indian religious affairs. Teaching Indian children (and later, Indian university students) English literature was a way of getting around this proscription; the discipline at once served the purpose of moral

uplift and did ideological work to the detriment of Indian faiths. The **transformation** of the '**native**' world view by these means was so successfully managed that when the missionaries began to clamour for reform, they could appeal to the values they themselves had helped disseminate.

The class that answered the call for reform was the class that had benefited from English education and from the kind of scientific thought that displaced religious faith. It would be accurate to say, then, that those who produced and consumed English literature in Madras Presidency at this time were as a class virtually coeval with those who produced and consumed **bharatanatyam**, but distinct from those who produced and consumed **sadir**. In a sense, sadir was driven out of the public sphere by the increasing availability of English as the medium in which subjects were schooled into modernity.

The values that the brahminical Indian intelligentsia could most easily assimilate to its own lifestyle and needs were those of the evangelical Victorian middle class. It is hardly surprising then that the class composition of both the social reformers and the producers of fiction in English, the overlapping constituencies that cleaved to English education, reflected this cultural predisposition. The names of the authors who were best known for their work in English, and who used their writing to promote social **reform--Panchapakesa Ayyar, K.S.Venkataramani, Manjeri Isvaran, R.K. Narayan--bespeak** their caste origins, as do the invariably brahmin themes and setting of their fiction.²⁸ The other category of writer who produced fiction in English was the convert to Christianity, whose origin was **also** often brahmin (Krupabai Satthianadhan is an obvious

example).

The interaction between Indian upper castes and European missionaries produced its own share of improving literature, by brahmin writers like the above. The fiction was set in local and familiar landscape, but embodied new moral values. The Indian middle class writer was responding for the first time, as Susie Tharu puts it, "to an ideological ambience in which a totally new sense of the responsibilities of the writer as well as the social function of literature and literary study figured prominently" ("The Arrangement of an Alliance" 168). The end-product was pre-eminently a literature of transition: the civilizational values that it purveyed were often partially assimilated, sometimes shown as clashing with hoary Indian traditions, at other times shown as identical or compatible with the latter. Whatever the case, it suited the missionaries that the native advocates of cultural reform should air their ideas, and the missionary presses promoted this literature.

One of the features of the **'modernity'** package that immediately struck a chord among the brahmin social reformers was the separation of the public sphere from the private one. To those who valued seclusion in order to maintain ritual purity, the demarcation of the domestic sphere offered, in all probability, the reassurance of the familiar. Urbanized and **professionalized** brahmins, especially, began to sanctify the domestic sphere in their writing, so that it was no longer merely the effect of a particular (sexual) division of labour (a division apt to be overlooked, in non-urban contexts, in the busy periods of agricultural work), but an ideologically saturated space.

The indigenous version of the domestic woman, formed in the crucible of social reform, was given definition and life in turn-of-the-century fiction in English. In the stories in which middle class heroes wrestle with the social problems of the **time--enforced** celibacy for widows, child marriage, **untouchability**, education of girl children, dedication of girls to temples: the woman question was ever a social **problem--one** institution comes shining through: the companionate marriage. The helpmate in this fiction is no rebel; she negotiates, gracefully, triumphantly, the minefields of ritual purity, caste segregation, sexual norms, and the **socialization** of children, while her male counterpart girds his loins to build the nation or to perpetrate reforms. Woman keeps the covenant with tradition while Man takes on the challenges of flux. This (natural) allocation of duties preserves the family and keeps Indian **culture--in** some people's view, keeps the cosmic order itself--safe while the nation itself negotiates the crisis of **modernity**.

Krupabai Satthianadhan's two novels **Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life** (1894) and **Saguna** (1895), the first novels in English by an Indian woman, demonstrate the connections between Christian evangelism, social reform, the woman question and English education. The novels were serialized in the Madras Christian College journal; **Kamala** in 1893, the year after the anti-nautch campaign was launched by William Miller, Principal of Madras Christian College. The introductory memoir (appended to **Kamala**) by Mrs. **H.B. Grigg** solemnly declares that Satthianadhan "will ever be a standing reproach to those who deny the effect of Western teaching and who would meet [sic] out

grudgingly to Indian women the benefits of Western education" (xxxv).

Female happiness is imaged in the new discourse as a sort of heroic but cosy **conjuality**: "There is a good deal to show that in Vedic times women had lived a free and healthy life," says Mrs. Grigg, "sharing often in the pursuits and interests of their husbands" (ii). Such enviable **felicity**, lost since Vedic times, is now recaptured, as "the work of enlightenment of women consequent on the spread of English education amongst men" gets underway (ii-iii). This kind of self-assurance and this effortless detection of continuities between mythic figures of the golden age and the kindly educational effort of the British missionaries and government were among the features common to the anti-naught campaign and English learning.

Having learnt from British models what fiction really meant, and especially what realist fiction meant, Indian writers in English took up the work of translating across cultures. Given the power relations in place under colonial rule, this invariably meant making Indian '**customs**'--quaint, mystical and charming, or nasty and retrogressive--intelligible to the European mind. Promoting Manjeri **Isvaran's** short story collection No Anklet Bells for Her (1949), John Hampson writes: "This volume should gain many new readers for Isvaran, among them, surely others like myself, specially **grateful**...for his exquisite interpretations of Southern life and custom, in a language which can play still an important and legitimate part in adding to the world's knowledge and understanding of India" (Hampson xvi).

A popular genre at this time was the vignette, the sketch

of a personality, custom, or scene which claimed to typify the Indian ethos. **K.S.Venkataramani**, author of the novels **Kandan The Patriot** and **Murugan The Tiller**, also produced a volume called **Paper Boats: Sketches of Indian Village Life** in which he presented for the western gaze a number of tropes for India from "The Hindu Temple" to "The Indian Beggar," from "Saraswati's Marriage" to "Village Cricket." "[N]othing so much actuates him," writes his friend and admirer K. Chandrasekharan, "as the desire to interpret every bit of our life and tradition to the outer world" (91). **Venkataramani's** sketches are steeped in nostalgia and in the peculiar ambivalence imaginable only in the situation of the native subject who is making his own dying culture intelligible, on their terms, to the very people who are destroying it.

The vignette also represents an attempt to document and preserve impressions of the organic society, displaced by the spread of urban-modern culture, as an inspirational resource for the writer's own people. Here is Chandrasekharan again, recalling that **Venkataramani's** prose "was like the shower of manna on the parched-up soul of South India. It cleansed our putrid notions.... Everything belonging to us assumed a dimension altogether different. Everything gained a prestige and value...(89).

As is evident from all this, the two structures of feeling and belief under discussion--brahminical Hinduism and European Enlightenment--were interlaced with each other, but in a very untidy way. The anxious desire to emulate or **claim** as their own what were seen as civilizationally more advanced values was offset, for upper caste Indians, by nostalgia for the organic

community and, perhaps more crucially, by the prospect of a loss of power in their own **immediate** context, if these values were to be taken seriously. Attempts in Indian art and writing to achieve a fit between '**modern**' values and Hindu lifestyles were defeated by the fact that most Enlightenment discourses about freedom and equality were by definition **unassimilable** to the caste system and to the maintenance of the range of hierarchies within which Indians had grown accustomed to functioning. This dependence on a notion of modernity that had its built-in reasons for certain kinds of conservatism (with regard to whatever was classified as inviolable tradition) is another feature that the discourses on sadir and the discipline of English in South India have in common; this being the effect, as I have suggested above, of their common roots in a colonial situation, in missionary programmes for social **transformation** and in the class composition of their purveyors. In brief, the overlapping histories of dance and of English studies in the South bear the marks of the needs, interests and beliefs of this half-Hindu orthodox, **half-westernized** cultural formation to which both belonged.

It would seem that such an argument is refuted by the kind of standard wisdom Indian students are fed, usually at the beginning of their English Literature course, about why they study English. The reason usually offered is that in literary work we are exposed to the most universally valid thoughts and emotions, so that we not merely tolerate or understand cultural difference, but actually welcome it, because we see so clearly the common humanity that binds diverse cultures into the Family of Man.

This kind of reasoning suggests that if disciplines were to be apportioned to the categories '**tradition**' (relatively closed, **culture-specific**) and 'modernity' (relatively open, liberal, **universalist**), the latter category would receive the 'humanist' discipline of English literature (dance, however, may be placed by some people in the former category). Some recent critiques of English in India have also suggested that English is a '**liberal humanist**' discipline; again, this would set the discipline squarely in the realm of the **democratic-modern**. Is this description, however, justified? Is there, inside the insular self of the brahmin professor of English, a liberal humanist struggling to get out?

Accounts of the recent history of English studies in the Anglo-American academy (such as feminist ones, for instance) have characterized the traditional practices and ideas associated with the discipline (close reading, dehistoricized interpretation, a belief in the '**human essence**') as liberal **humanist**. Of course, neither in the Anglo-American context nor in the context of the Indian academy do English teachers think of themselves as liberal **humanist--in** a range of locations from backwater to metropolis, English scholars have, on the whole, been innocent of any reflection on the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline. The label is thus usually applied to them, and applied **pejoratively**, by groups trying to enlarge the scope of the discipline or to make it self-critical.

There are degrees of criticism implicit in the description 'liberal humanist.'

1) There is the view **that the** discipline is insufficiently liberal **and humanist--i.e.**, that its liberalism does not run to

a capacity for fostering any genuine freedom of thought or expression, even **pedagogically** speaking, or its humanism to a genuine concern for any identifiable section of humanity.

2) There is the view that while English studies **is**, in fact, liberal humanist, neither liberalism nor humanism, inchoate and woolly as both world-views are, even begins to offer adequate ways of **understanding--leave** alone intervening in--realities other than those of a very small class of people. That is, well-intentioned though humanists are, they stupidly and sometimes perniciously assume the sameness of human nature all over the world. Linked with this idea is

3) the harsher view that '**humanism**' is by definition an exclusionary rather than an inclusive ideology, intended to enable the privileged to separate the grain ('the truly human,' which usually means the life and work of white males or other 'civilized' people) from the chaff (the sub-human, people from the margins). These critiques, whose common factor is the suggestion that the 'liberal humanism' of the English studies establishment is nominal rather than **authentic**, are obviously well founded, if the ostrich-like or affronted disciplinary responses to them are anything to go by.

At first glance, the origins of the discipline in the colony and its **institutionalization** in the British academy may seem to have taken place in identical circumstances. Both in India and in Britain, English studies was developed as a recuperative measure rather than as a revolutionary departure. In Britain, English studies **evolved--in** Sunday schools, in mechanics institutes, in women's colleges--out of plans for the moral uplift and social control of the working classes. The

middle class, as it demarcated the concerns of the discipline, was grimly conscious of providing against the cultural disintegration of a nation and, incidentally, against an erosion of **its** own new-found power. Literature was to bring the working classes within the 'human' fold, giving them stability and rootedness; it was to inoculate the middle classes against loss of faith.³³

While an amorphous sort of liberal humanism became, in this context, the unspoken **justification** of English literature, this formation, as it occurred in Britain, was not merely a **literary** ideology. It was an offshoot of a political Zeitgeist of **transition--of** the democratic and the industrial revolutions, of the discourse of rights, of the emergence of the individual self, of disenchantment following the waning of religious authority, of the 'discovery' of the unconscious. As Susie Tharu observes, liberal humanism represented "the ideas of freedom, equality and autonomous **individualism**" that grew out of the collapse of feudal and religious orthodoxies and alongside the definition of the interests of the new middle class. One might, precisely because of its origin in such a climate, contest the **finality** of what Tharu thinks follows from this: "a subordination and closing off of all other aspirations for liberty and equality as the bourgeois-mercantile (but also imperial and **patriarchial**) agenda of this emergent class is ... designated as embodying the aspirations of all humanity" (Tharu, "Government Binding" 8). In other words, liberal humanist discourse is indelibly marked by its inception at a particular political **conjuncture**, in that it sets up norms that eventually destabilize its own authority structures; and the organization

of modern societies in the West shows some of the signs of this **destabilization**.

What I want to consider here is how far the term 'liberal humanist,' which **may** be applicable in the Anglo-American context, can be appropriated, as it has been, to describe English studies in India. Do the normative or procedural or ethical checks and balances associated with liberalism and humanism, reference to which sharpens the critique of English studies elsewhere, really operate in the Indian academic context? In other words, does the idea that there may be a **shortfall**, that certain standards may not have been met, which would obtain in a context where liberalism was part of political culture, ever strike most teachers of the discipline in India?

If liberal humanist political norms had no resonances in the disciplines of English and dance in India, and if humanism entered the picture only as an aspect of **literary/artistic** culture, the reason must be sought partly in the way they were set up. The most obvious fact about the **establishment** of English as a discipline in India, was that (like English in Britain) it was intended to be an instrument of control; the story of how a comprador class was to be created through this educational instrument is too familiar to need rehearsing here. The strategy was to provide a conduit for moral instruction, as to Sunday school children, without necessarily placing in Indian hands the tools of political analysis or judgement. As Gauri Viswanathan notes:

What interested the British in the years
following the actual introduction of

English in India was Grant's shrewd observation that by emphasizing the moral aspect, it would be possible to talk about introducing Western education without having to throw open the doors of English liberal thought to natives; to aim at moral improvement of the subjects without having to worry about the possible danger of inculcating radical ideas that would upset the British presence in India. ("The Beginnings of English Literary Study" 15)

The educational effort was intended to harness whatever was most conservative and status-conscious in the Indian ethos to the pursuit of moral and social reform. Communicating a sense of the living conflicts within which European literature was formed, or encouraging independent critical enquiry were, therefore, never among the objects of English education (or of English studies) in India. This put the recipients of English education in a singularly disadvantageous position: in addition to feeling the compulsion to accept an ideology and a distribution of power that made European culture paradigmatic and the diverse Indian cultures 'inferior,' they also found that they had enough of the colonizer's language to speak but not enough to curse.

Annie Besant (1847-1933), a critical observer of British educational policy in India, and a key player in the sadir controversy, struggled during much of her Indian sojourn to persuade the '**natives**' that their culture (or whatever re-imagined version of it she had in mind) was superior to that of the **colonizers**. In a caustic mock-address to the British

educators, she enjoins caution upon them:

Stop all this revolutionary teaching of English history, and take care what you teach an Indian. Select your poetry carefully: Mrs. **Hemans**, now, is a nice safe writer; perhaps Longfellow; but no, he wrote about the Pilgrim Fathers—very dangerous. Have selections... selections are best for really no English poet is safe all through. "The Curfew Tolls" will do, and "We Are Seven." ("The Danger of Education" 142)

English teachers in India took her advice. In contrast to the conditions that influenced English studies in Britain, then, what was formative for English studies here, as for the discourse against sadir, and the aesthetic of bharatanatyam. was the logic of colonialism. For all the distinctly middle class overtones literary studies had in Britain, there was no great cultural gap to be bridged when it came to the actual contents of the texts, nor a sense of helpless subordination to unfamiliar values. The adoption of English and the making of bharatanatyam in India happened in the shadow of colonial oppression; the shape these disciplines acquired was, therefore, dictated by the exigencies of nationalist resistance.

The key move in the nationalist resistance to colonial domination was the separation of the public and conflictual sphere of politics and legality from the private sphere of culture and its affects. To the extent that sadir was banned in the name of national hygiene (there was talk of the 'racial

poison' of venereal disease), it appears as if a '**modern**' medical discourse was being put to public, political work, purging the nation of regressive customs; but one must not forget **tha'** this medical discourse in its turn mobilized notions about the '**traditional**' place of Indian women. We get a glimpse here of the **ramifications** of the century-old confusion arising from the **identification** of India as, on the one hand, a spiritually or mystically identified entity, and, on the other, a **scientifically** advanced modern nation.

However one reads the instance of anti-sadir discourse, it was clear at any rate that bharatanatyam and English studies had lodged themselves in the sphere of culture, which was unequivocally dedicated to the active invention of '**tradition.**' Thus, in spite of the fact that these disciplines were reshaped in the thick of the struggle against colonialism, they are both reference points for entirely quietist, conservative views on culture, gender and class. Far from registering the intensity of the agon of national self-determination, they actually thrive on the snob value of transcendental distance from all conflict.

What I am suggesting is that the discourses and disciplines of nineteenth and early twentieth century India could not in any simple sense offer an education in liberal humanist (**universalist**) principles, since these were continually undercut by the tremendous urgency of national **self-definition**, which required the mobilization of an exclusive tradition, distinct from that of the colonizing nation. The **nation-in-the-making** obviously needed discursive and ideological support, both in order to imagine itself as a unified whole and in order to set up relations of reciprocity with the colonizers **where there were**

only relations of domination and subordination.

Until the nation was imaged as a unity, its potential members could not recognize themselves as citizens. As Benedict Anderson observes, it is an important characteristic of nationality that it has to be sustained in the imagination of the citizens concerned: "The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their **fellow-members**, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson, 15). Nor was it enough to image this communion as taking place in the present; it had to be proved to have existed from the beginning of time. Anderson draws attention to the puzzling fact that regardless of the actual modernity of nations (from the point of view of their objective history) they are projected (**subjectively**) back into a hoary antiquity: "If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and historical, the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny" (19). It was also the destiny of the cultural productions of the incipient nation to provide the magical reassurance of great antiquity. Securing the past thus became the approved role of disciplines like bharatanatyam or English studies, subsumed under the category of 'culture,' since the sciences could only be indices of the nation's future achievements.

This circumstance has had its effects on the post-colonial trajectory of English studies as well. In independent India, most academic disciplines took shape within the logic of nation-building and self-consciously served this end. If active

contribution to nation-building, now marked as **'development'** rather than as 'self-determination,' was the **justification** of their existence and their methods, disciplines like the physical sciences and, to a slightly smaller extent, the social sciences, naturally took priority. English studies, like a few other colonial remnants, survived on in the decolonizing nation owing to a careful demarcation of the realm of 'culture' and owing to the idea that it was indeed only through this demarcation that contributions to the nation would be forthcoming from such fields. 'Humanism,' in this context, was not a sign of engagement with any particular human concerns, so much as a vindication for the very maintenance of English studies in the curriculum despite its signal lack of use-value.

To give a fuller answer to the question of why a normative liberal humanism never really took root in English studies in India, we have to relate this disciplinary division of labour (the past/the inner world of culture/spiritual investments vs. the future/the public world of the state/science) to the class privilege of those who embraced English literature here as opposed to that of the groups on whom it was imposed in Britain. As I have suggested in my argument about sadir/bharatanatyam above, what was happening simultaneously with nation-building in the nineteenth century was class formation. The feminist cultural historian **Kumkum** Sangari has noted "the close articulation of class formation with self designations of the early nineteenth century colonial state and with emerging cultural **categories--specifically** as these categories are constituted in descriptions of gender, definitions of literature and the situating of literary genres in India and **England**"

(Sangari, "Relating Histories" 32).

The interactions between British **nationalism** and emerging cultural nationalism in India, while consolidating the position of the middle classes, created "a cultural grid through which social practices [were] interpreted and notions of selfhood and culture [were] formed" (Sangari, "Relating Histories" 33). We might see the setting up of an ideology of the aesthetic in relation to both dance and Sanskrit poetics as part of the 'cultural **grid**' that helped the nationalist and social reform leadership consolidate its power over the **nation-in-the-making**. Many things were significant here: an English education first; an understanding of the moral responsibilities of the modern subject; a notion of who was to be identified with the projects of the nation; a notion of 'Beauty'; an idea of the role of English **literature**, which brahmins were assumed to have mastered.³⁸ Thus 'literature,' like **bharatanatyam**, was constituted as an object at a particular social conjuncture; in turn it helped constitute the identity of its (upper caste, middle class) consumers. As it happened, despite the occasional rebelliousness of a Derozio, and despite the occasional progressive writer who carried his copy of Dickens to work, the largely brahmin or Christian educators perpetuated the authority-reinforcing rather than the iconoclastic elements in the English critical tradition, because these elements chimed well with their own conservatism.

The label 'liberal **humanist**,' given this class's more or less conservative practices of interpretation and teaching, does not seem at all applicable, even nominally, to English studies in India. One sign, not always visible to teachers of English,

of the absence of liberal humanism even as court of appeal, is the inability of English studies to disturb the rigid institutional hierarchy of omnipotent teacher and powerless student. As far as pedagogic power relations are concerned, teachers rarely concede the existence, on the other side of the podium from themselves, of "the integrated unified Self that is the free agent of its actions and the source of meaning and knowledge" (Tharu, "Government Binding" 9) that liberal ideology is said to enable. Deference to the sanctity of the text and to the authority of the teacher's interpretation is preferred to critical thinking that threatens authority. The special position given to the textual explication produced by a particular caste was culturally familiar to brahmins; the idea of critical interpretation as the product of '**free,**' individual, meaning-producing enterprise was not. Moreover, as Gauri Viswanathan **suggests,**

... if in blurring the lines between literature and religion, the native ruling classes had arrogated all power to decipher texts unto themselves, would not an erosion of that power base ensue if the authority vested in the explicator were relocated **elsewhere--that** is, if authority were reinvested in the body of texts presented as objective, scientific, rational, empirically verifiable truth, the product not of an exclusive social or political class but of a consciousness that spoke in a universal voice and for the universal

good? ("The Beginnings of English Literary Study" 19)

The phrase '**liberal humanist**' must, then, be read as functioning in postcolonial critiques of English as a trope: it stands for the reconstitution of the traditional Indian subject (embedded in a complex hierarchy of caste, religion, linguistic group, gender, age, occupation and so on) as the unencumbered, **free-floating** modern subject.³⁹ This subject's **pre-modern** affiliations still benefit him socially, but the process of rearticulation renders them invisible, leaving him with no other mark than that of the 'self-made' (and therefore infinitely deserving) individual. The traces of political **conservativism** in English studies, including its perpetuation of caste, gender and class inequality, are obscured when it is served up as aesthetic fare in the '**modern**' academic context.

To summarise the advantages offered to the nationalist middle class by English studies, by anti-naught discourse, by bharatanatyam and by English fiction: these discourses were among those which filled out and vindicated this class's move to take over power from the colonial government. The problem of legitimation, for this class, was solved partly by the appeal to the correct sexuality of its women, as opposed to, say, the unregulated sexuality of the devadasis: partly by its cultural and intellectual capital, as exemplified by its absorption of modern values through the discourses of science and literature.

The factors (enumerated above) that shaped the disciplines of English studies and **dance--their establishment** as instruments of manipulation, their involvement in the process of national **self-definition**, their isolation in the apolitical sphere of

culture, their colonization by a conservative middle class—had consequences for:

1) the way women were imaged in the approved cultural productions. In general, as Cora Kaplan puts it, "the languages of class ...are steeped in naturalized concepts of sexual difference" (Sea Changes 11). In this instance, a particular model of upper caste, **homebound** and **motherhood-identified** femininity was set up as natural, as the norm for female citizenship; projected into a cosmic scheme, this figure gave rise to the trope of the nation itself as mother: Mother India. The second chapter of this thesis is chiefly concerned with examining how women were '**recast**' in these discourses.

2) the formal, aesthetic, pedagogic principles of the disciplines under consideration. Chapter 3 is an analysis of how this concatenation of circumstances affected the aesthetic of **bharatanatyam**: in what follows, I will consider briefly how it affects English studies.

One essential feature of disciplines shaped under the kinds of pressures I have been describing is that they structurally rule out all historicization of their own origins. Transparency about the colonial or class investments in maintaining these disciplines as pockets of privilege obviously does not aid their continuing to do so. This necessary forgetting of origins—the kind of forgetting that makes historical projects like mine anomalous—makes English studies ahistorical, uncritical, stagnant; periodization, **thematics** and methodology all encourage a strenuous and sustained denial of the reality principle.

The substantive content of an English Literature course is actually in conflict with the ideology it helps promote; it is

the interpretation of this discipline that is invincibly traditionalist in India. There is matter enough, even in the canon, for a genuinely liberal humanist critique to thrive on. For instance: Milton, when not engaged in justifying the ways of God to man, was producing on behalf of the Roundheads a piece of viciousness that we read as a '**classic**' prose text. Addison and Steele, whom we read as essay-specialists, were actually closely observing and **commenting** on the everyday life of their class in eighteenth century England. Shelley was advocating free love and revolution in writings we encounter as 'nature **poetry**.' Virginia Woolf was writing A Room of One's Own, about literary culture and the exclusion of women from higher education, and Three Guineas, about male aggression and war; but we read To the Lighthouse--as a study in **stream-of-consciousness** technique.

The English literary critics who had the greatest influence on academic curricula, and who took it upon themselves to comment critically upon European culture--Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, F.R. Leavis--have also been domesticated for use in English departments in India. While these writers are by no means revolutionary, and had limited ideas about what was '**human**' and thus worthy of '**humanist**' study, any reading of culture as a politics, even from a clearly articulated conservative viewpoint is, as a model, preferable to the kind of banality waffle that is produced when interpretation is divorced from history on the one hand and from conceptual **clarification** on the other.

Close reading was the obvious critical method to use in the circumstances, since it is the least connected with history. The words-on-the-page approach precludes any engagement with

concepts, while it nourishes the extraordinary **belief--** extraordinary because so patently false, given the second-hand nature of most scholarship in English studies--that students of English spontaneously and individually respond to texts.

A discipline that was so committed to escapism had to, sooner or later, find itself overwhelmingly in intellectual crisis. The derivativeness of most of the work produced in English departments is one sign of the stagnation of the discipline. Indian pundits, with only a very few exceptions, did with English literature whatever could be done with an alien literature whose moving forces remained opaque to **them--learning** by rote (there is an apocryphal tale about one professor in Madras who was famous for being able to recite Paradise Lost--**backwards**): respectful, sometimes sycophantic appreciations; rehashings of the 'critical **traditions**' around individual authors; dilettantish psychological studies of '**character**'--**all** the stuff, in brief, of the uncritical criticism familiar to anyone who has ever sat in an English Literature classroom in India.

Redemptive Discourse, Site of Privilege:
'Indian Aesthetics'

The '**legitimation** crisis' in English studies is of respectable vintage, though perhaps it was not mulled over, in the past, in quite the way it has been recently. A subliminal awareness of the discipline's origin and role in the processes of colonization and modernization has, no doubt, nagged its purveyors almost since its parameters were defined. The troubling implications of the contrast between the benevolence of the English studies project and the brute fact of colonialism

are habitually repressed, but might come to the surface with very little coaxing. Their need to protect the discipline by disavowing the epistemic violence at the point of its origin, as well as their habituation to close reading, makes most English teachers react negatively to projects such as my own.

My research is an attempt to contribute to the 'archaeology' of the discipline: i.e., it seeks to uncover the cultural substratum that caused its formation in a specific way; its choice of themes and techniques; the political, social, aesthetic assumptions shared by the constituencies that made this choice. This means, as I have suggested above, studying the complicity of English in the colonial project, its place in Indian cultural life, the authenticity of its universalist claims, the power relations set up, by its deployment, between different classes, and so on. Much more interestingly, it means studying how all these features of the discipline's history were disavowed or elided--i.e., (extending a Freudian notion that has already done service in many fields) studying the unconscious of the discipline.

What I have taken as a point of entry into the unconscious of English studies is a proposal that I encountered and found rather disconcerting a little while before I began this research, a proposal that also engages with the discourse of dance: to apply '**Indian aesthetics**' to English literature. The Natyasastra and its successor texts, reference points for '**Indian aesthetics**,' are, by the activation of this portmanteau idea, caught in the cusp of the two disciplines of dance and English; what is made of these texts expresses something about the political and cultural substratum of both disciplines.

This idea was not exactly a new departure. 'Indian aesthetics,' understood as a timeless and transparent category, has long been dear to the heart of one school of Indian academics in English studies. As they conceive it, 'Indian aesthetics' has these advantages: it is indisputably Indian, in that it invokes the textual authority of Bharata, who compiled the Natyasastra in the heyday of Hindu civilization (c. 200 A.D.), and whose name bears a convenient if accidental resemblance to India's other name (the sliding from 'Indian' to 'Hindu' marks an ideological blind spot, not malice aforethought); in that, moreover, it carries the weight of a '2000 year old tradition' and yet is perennially meaningful, as witness its (imagined) conceptual affinities with European concepts (**bhava** = 'psychological states', anukarana = '**representation**' or 'mimicry').

Indigenising old style English studies by filtering it through Indian aesthetics is a hopeful way of dealing with the former's terminal illness. Invoked to perform this task, '**Indian aesthetics**' may be read as a bid to achieve continuity; to smooth over all those kinks in the discipline that postcolonial theorists and post-structuralist critics have pointed up: the national history that the postcolonial subject can never view as a continuum; the universalist assumptions underlying English studies, as opposed to the national pride of those who profess it; the unfamiliar culture or sensibility that informs the canonical English texts as opposed to the realities of the lives of students who must read them; orientalist and indigenist perceptions of the past. Indian aesthetics presents itself as a likely alternative to the abrasive style of postcolonial or

feminist criticism; it is at least a more **demonstrably** home-grown product.

There are two questions to be dealt with here, even leaving in abeyance the problem of the cultural **misrecognitions** that will bestrew the path of the Indian scholar who brings the Abhinayadarpanam (**for** instance) into alignment with Look Back in Anger: first, what does 'Indian' signify in this context? Second, what are the associations of the idea of 'aesthetics'? It makes sense to answer the first question historically, rather than sub specie aeternitatis. As I have argued above, the definition of Indianness that remains with us emerged from the discourses of cultural nationalism in their nascent and decisive phase, which was also the phase that saw the consolidation of upper caste, middle class cultural dominance. Deployed against the **civilizational** claims of the colonizers, the idea of an 'Indian' culture was, and continues to be, a sign of liberation; but put to work against the right of marginal groups to express themselves, it has also been a sign of exclusivity and **intolerance**.

The same ambiguity may be found in the idea of the aesthetic. If we understand the discursive field of aesthetics in the broadest possible way, we may see its origins in the breakdown of the (more or less) consensual understanding of the relation between the sensate world, human sensations and the sacred: a process that threw the question of judgement into the lap of individuals, which in turn led to attempts to rationalise this type of judgement. Thus in Europe, it coalesced as a field of enquiry in the mid-eighteenth century; its home was Germany at a time when social authority that was rigid and lacked

consent left a frustrated middle-class contemplating the meaning of lived (therefore bodily) experiences of community or of personal **satisfaction**. Since the disenchantment of technological rational societies is endemic, and likely to intensify, the demarcation of a realm in which the alienated individual body is reconnected, through art, to the world of sensation or experience, can be seen as liberating.

On the other hand, cultural critics have noted how well a particular ideology of the aesthetic served the interests of the middle class in nineteenth century Europe. This ideology enabled, for this class, **self-definition** (and self-aggrandisement) in terms of a universalist framework which also concealed the violence of this class's rise to power. A plausible view of its ideological **motivatedness** would have it that aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, was merely the **formalization** of individual taste, which was projected as something one just naturally and instinctively had if one belonged to the right background. At the very least, having 'good taste' was a necessary element of a person's high social value; carried a little further, this could mean, as Tony Bennett suggests, that "the subject who fails to appreciate correctly is regarded as incompletely human rather than merely being excluded from full title to the membership of a specific valued and valuing community" (165).

In India, the purported pursuit of the '**aesthetic**' as an end in itself (rather than of aesthetic judgement or technique as an adjunct to theatre, art, literature or music) began when the traditional links between art and 'religion' broke down in the process of the transition from a feudal life-world to a

modern one. The aesthetic codes that dictated the lineaments of English studies and of bharatanatyam have historically been tied up with the normalization of the values and sexuality of the upper caste/middle class during the nationalist movement. In both, a 'classicism' that entails a reified understanding of Sanskrit poetics, coupled with a strong desire to repress the memory of the bodies and sexualities of less privileged groups of people led to the setting up, as I hope to prove, of a particular **caste-specific, 'spirituality'-based**, body-denying aesthetic which nevertheless claimed to be uniquely Indian. Aesthetic experiences that did not grow out of upper-caste norms for living, and by extension those who underwent such experiences, were marked as vulgar, lacking taste, contemptible.

In bharatanatyam (as will become evident in chapter 3) as well as in English studies, aesthetic codes show the influence of the cultural imperialism of the colonizers, **despite** the vociferously articulated claims to antiquity. Resuscitating the Natyasastra, for instance, **meant** not only ironing out the **irregularities** which are the traces of its many commentators, but also making its contents culturally intelligible in a completely different situation from the one in which the work was composed. Translators of the Natyasastra, then, were conveying concepts across cultures; as it usually happens in such cases, the descriptive and prescriptive concepts in the Natyasastra began to be **'adjusted'** against the conceptual vocabulary of modern European aesthetics, resulting in a blandly universal theoretical terminology unanchored in any specific cultural formation.

Angelika Heckel gives an example of the effects of such

translation: the interpretation of the key term rasa, which began to be identified, in nineteenth, century translations, either as what is 'produced' through the 'medium' of the play, or as what is subjectively 'felt' by the audience. These 'aesthetic' or 'psychological' explanations go against the Natyasastra's positioning of rasa in the space between the audience and the stage, an attribute of responses on both sides to the successful putting across of a narrative (Heckel, 34-35).

In the sphere of English studies, 'Indian **aesthetics**' has been adapted to fulfil the specific function of cathecting away the discomfort caused by the history of the discipline. As one might have expected, it is usually invoked to underscore the message that art is 'universal,' that differences between western and Indian cultural paradigms are of negligible importance, that in the realm of the aesthetic, all cultures unflinchingly understand each other.

No one reverts to the idea of the aesthetic melting-pot as insistently as **C.D. Narasimhaiah**, the eminence arise of Commonwealth Literature. But he is fastidious about what he will allow into the melting-pot: only high culture will do. "English is no more, if any, less, foreign," he proclaims, "to the highly educated modern Indian than Sanskrit which is our devabhasha and which in the past signified the first flowering of Indian sensibility and, in the centuries, when it spread, represents the mainstream of Indian culture" (8). The confident **identification** of classical (Sanskrit) culture as 'the culture of the **mainstream**' is the kind of characteristically brahminical touch familiar to students of English in India. Clearly, when we use the term '**Indian aesthetics**' quite casually to designate

what may more accurately be called 'Sanskrit poetics,' and when this label becomes a hindrance to **identification** with other kinds of aesthetics, also indisputably Indian, but not Hindu-Sanskritic -Brahmin-modern, we are dealing with the legacy of cultural nationalism in its formative phase.

Cultural Studies in India

The thoroughgoing displacement of the disciplinary boundaries around English, which happens when the 'archaeology' of the discipline is investigated, causes the traditional English teacher in India to suffer agonies of nostalgia. There was a time when the curriculum of English studies was autonomously defined; surely the 'crisis' in the discipline (being at least as old as the discipline itself), did not worry anyone too much until all the historians and sociologists suddenly began to ask overwhelming questions?

The upheaval that so depresses the good professor is partly the outcome, in India, of the emergence of what may be termed 'cultural studies' or '**cultural** history': a theoretical-interpretive enterprise with no specific disciplinary **affiliations**, which is burrowing its way into many disciplines, but most insistently into English studies. Work on these lines may well be the destiny of English departments. This body of theory interests me enormously, and if I '**place**' my own research anywhere at all I would place it--though with many reservations--within the framework of cultural studies in India.

The kind of cultural theory I am referring to is represented by the essays in the anthologies Recasting Women (Ed. **Kumkum** Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 1989) and Interrogating

Modernity (Ed. Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir and Vivek Dhareshwar, 1993); work by some of the same authors in the Journal of Arts and Ideas), and in the Economic and Political Weekly: Real and Imagined Women (1993), the volume of feminist '**theory**' by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan; and the Introductions by Susie Tharu and K.Lalita to the two volumes of Women Writing in India (1991/1995). There has been a recent attempt (in Seminar 446, October 1996) by some of these theorists to clarify and elaborate the **group's** agendas, after self-consciously assuming the mantle of cultural studies. What adds to the interest I feel in this group of critics is the fact that many of them are also English teachers, involved in the debate about overhauling English studies. This dimension of their theoretical effort is set out in the volumes Rethinking English (Ed. Svati Joshi, 1991) and The Lie of the Land (Ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 1992).

Being '**showcased**' together at seminars and in publications gives this group of theorists an appearance of consanguinity. There are however, other, more serious reasons why their work constitutes a problematic (i.e., a set of related questions) for students and theorists of culture in India, and I consider these reasons below.

What holds this problematic together is the group's common project of "thinking the nation out," of unravelling the themes of cultural **nationalism**. The second volume of Women Writing in India is called "Women Writing the Nation"; Interrogating Modernity is subtitled "Culture and Colonialism in India." Since studying cultural nationalism in its incipient phase has meant focusing on its engagement with **colonialism--i.e.**, on its effort

to realize the reversal of the logic of colonialism for the ends of the nation state, the theorists I am thinking of also gaze over their shoulders at the origin of these themes in the conflicts of the last century: Recasting Women is subtitled "Essays in Colonial History" and Real and Imagined Women "Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism."

There are many reasons for this renewed interest in the colonialism-nationalism complex. Globalization, as much a cultural and intellectual phenomenon as an economic or military reality, has complex effects in the academy. On the one hand it opens up opportunities for Third World intellectuals to interact freely with their First World counterparts. In this context 'studying the **nation**' takes on the aspect of a Third World 'speciality,' since for some unfathomable reason the once-colonized Third World is taken to have a monopoly on nationalism. It appears as if the area of intellectual expertise now labelled '**postcolonial theory**' could develop only out of a perspective external to each nation, in the mixing bowl of global '**theory.**' On the other hand, 'thinking the nation out' also assumes a perspective internal to the nation, since many of the problems cultural theorists are now concerned with have developed out of struggles--of minority communities, dalits, women--within the nation. Perhaps this is not a paradox after all: the very ability to identify with the subaltern implies an achieved disorientation from the project of cultural nationalism. The eminences of Anglo-American **academia** afford an unprecedented view of the subaltern's space, which Gayatri Spivak describes as "the displaced shadow space" that renders **meaningless** the terms of the "Empire-Nation reversal," thus

"undoing" the name "India," by its foregrounding of colonization within the nation. Mainstream Indian cultural historiography, at least before the publication of the Subaltern Studies volumes, barely paused to notice this **space**.

The cultural theory I am considering is topical in two contexts. In the Anglo-American academy, where **multiculturalism** is the keyword, it is a kind of protest against the excesses of post-Cold War capitalist triumphalism. In India and other nations beleaguered by **neo-imperialism**, it seems the moment to study the cultural logic of the old imperialism, and cultural studies in India shows a marked partiality for historical reconstruction.

Cultural studies is also involved in stepping back from and studying the issues raised by the spate of 'new social movements' that are threatening once-stable hierarchies within the nation. These movements express the legitimate but **conflict-producing** demands of subordinated groups for a full recognition of their citizenship. Reconstructing the ways in which these groups were subjugated or left out of the dominant projects of the nation is an intellectual contribution to the process of their self-assertion. Studying national cultural history is one way of answering the question: how do the groups that occupied most of the potentially democratic space of the nation (Hindus, upper castes, middle class men, professionals) justify their privileges and protect their territory? The self-**justification** of these groups invariably has a subtext: the appeal to, and the alignment with, one or the other of the variegated discourses of nationalism, which determined (and still determine, in Hindutva ideology, for instance) **the**

authorized version of the Indian.

The cultural theorists discussed above share a sense of **the** urgency of the tasks they are undertaking. The description of their goals and the tone of their writing suggests that this group of theorists is grappling with a **politics**: they close with cultural practices not to interpret culture but to change it. In the production of a programmatic cultural history that is at once scholarly and interventionist, rather than relaxed and contemplative, their predecessors in India might be writers like Jawaharlal Nehru, whose Discovery of India was an exercise in literary nation-building, consciously opposed to the images of India in colonial discourse; or **D.D.Kosambi**, who took on board the question of the **class-specificity** of Indian cultural forms.

To the extent that the theoretical resources contemporary cultural critics draw on are varied and colourful (much more so than those of their predecessors), they do not quite belong in the same framework as these predecessors or constitute an entirely coherent problematic among themselves. To give an idea of the plenitude in this area, one might point to the influence of: Marx and **marxist** critiques in the line through Georg Lukacs and the Frankfurt school on the one hand and in the line through Antonio **Gramsci** and the Birmingham School on the other; Fredric Jameson, who combines the ideas of French theorists (especially Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser) with those of the Frankfurt school; the theoretical/methodological model of 'history from **below**,' exemplified by the work of the British historians **Eric Hobsbawm** and Christopher Hill and by that of the Subaltern Studies collective; and, most recently, Jacques Derrida, Michel

Foucault, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, feminist literary theory and post-structuralist/psychoanalytic film studies. This sample collection also indicates that cultural studies in India draws on theoretical advances in, and political critiques of, several disciplines, from anthropology and history, to sociology and political theory. Many of the beliefs that have animated the various '**political**' movements in criticism such as the **marxist** and the **feminist--the** belief that texts and practices are material and have effects in the world; the belief that they can be read in ways that could change the existing order and that such a change is desirable--are tacitly agreed upon by these **theorists.**

The fact that most of the outstanding work of this kind is produced by feminists or is pervaded by an awareness of gender as an issue is, for me, its greatest attraction. The critics and historians whose work has influenced my research seek not so much to '**frame**' women by providing 'background,' as to actively intervene in the making of knowledge. The objectives are: one, to recover what Foucault termed 'subjugated' knowledges, the **self-definitions**, narratives and crafts of marginal groups, especially of the women of these groups; two, to "understand the construction of gender **difference--through** ideologies, concepts and behaviour--and their relation to class [caste] and colonial economy" (Sangari and Vaid 3).

A closer consideration of the trajectory of cultural studies in India suggests that something like a generational shift is already taking place in this newly constituted field. As I see it, feminist cultural studies in India is becoming **more 'theoretical'--i.e.,** it is responding to the pressures of post-

structuralism in the academy, and this is probably going to change its relationship with feminist praxis or politics. In fact post-structuralism redefines the very meaning of '**politics**,' taking it out of its original association with the State, the public sphere and class struggle, holding it poised in, for a moment, in the sphere of domestic relations or disciplinary formations, only to lose it again in a textual, self-enclosed pursuit that strangely resembles the reality-transcending self-referential work of aesthetic appreciation in English departments. The extension of the meaning of '**politics**' to include the power relations of everyday life or disciplinary and cultural conflicts is hard won. Feminists have legitimized such a broad usage in the face of bitter opposition or sheer contempt, from apolitical humanist scholarship on the one hand and from dryly economistic marxist **commonsense** on the other, the latter being particularly difficult to contend with since it occupied most of the available moral/political space. Paradoxically, given the largely textual engagements of their work, consideration of the politics of interpretation makes feminist post-structuralists in India reluctant to take up subjects that have primarily '**aesthetic**' resonances.

If the history of sadir that I am presenting here is to be 'effective' history, it should at least interrogate in its turn the theory that makes it possible. A crucial question that arises here, given that feminists seek to intervene in political issues, is: what are the political consequences of this history? The question becomes significant when one considers the textual turn given to feminist criticism by its alliance with post-structuralism. While post-structuralist theory usefully

deconstructs foundational thinking, western rationality, progressive models of history (which are mediated in our context by the 'development' model of social action), and the normativity of the essentially human but autonomous subject, it also raises serious problems for feminists: how will the goals of any interventionist efforts be determined, if not by reference to the wishes and choices of (agentive though not autonomous) subjects? With what degree of conviction could we intervene at all in 'women's issues' or in any other questions, if the binary regressive/progressive is completely discredited? What principles will underwrite democratic initiatives if the space of political modernity (of human rights, decisions through debate, the public sphere) has to be vacated? How can the ends of political justice be served by an analysis of power relations that elides the question of the legitimacy of those relations, that sees both legitimate and illegitimate power as 'productive' (where 'productive' is a neutral term to describe the causing of effects)? While one needs to complexify received ideas of historical causation and political motivation, how can one function entirely without ethical-political frameworks that apportion blame?

The answers post-structuralists offer to questions like these are barely satisfactory (I will try to explain why I think so in the last chapter). For this reason I would place my research on sadir outside strictly post-structuralist parameters, despite my heavy borrowings from Foucauldian methodology. Theoretically, I see my thesis as the beginning of my own project to articulate cultural studies with a kind of liberal-humanism-under-correct ion.

While it seems inaccurate, for reasons laid out earlier in this chapter, to describe either English studies or the English teacher as 'liberal **humanist**' even in a nominal sense, I believe it would be interesting and constructive to use this label as a political strategy in the present. In the restricted context of English departments, bringing liberal humanist norms to bear on pedagogic structures may help the student relate to the teacher on terms of parity. But liberal humanism, **conscientiously** enforced or applied, may have consequences for civil society at large that may be satisfactory from a feminist point of view.

I have pointed, in this chapter, to the **liminal** placement of the discourse of nationalism between tradition and modernity. The distinctly modern promise of political freedom

can of course be called 'resistance to oppression' [T]he formulation of the rights of man at the end of the eighteenth century was inspired by a demand for freedom which destroys the representation of power as standing above society and as possessing an absolute legitimacy.... Right and power are no longer condensed around the same pole. If it is to be legitimate, power must henceforth conform to right, but it does not control the principle of right. (Lefort, 31)

This disentangling of right from power is by no means complete in Indian civil society, with the effect that democracy and liberal freedoms remain constitutional guarantees rather than active social principles. Here, by and large, democracy

remains a governmental form that has failed to penetrate society as a whole, and the consequence is a range of attitudes and political positions with premodern, **prehumanist** survivals at one extreme, and postmodern **posthumanist** or **antihumanist** discourse at the other, with several shades of opinion in between. In practice, marginal groups already suffer from the exclusionary effects of the rationalizing of social structures that was part of the nation-building project (as the instance of the devadasis suggests); there is no reason why they should not draw political benefits from the percolation of democratic-modern norms. The posthumanist rejection of modernity thus makes sense as nostalgia, or, better still, as a warning against the relentless and inhuman logic of progress, but not necessarily as a blueprint for the reconstruction of social relationships. Indeed, precisely because the procedures or norms of liberal democracy may be one of the few **safeguards--however** tenuous or unreliable--against the overwhelming battery of modernization, a discourse that implies a fundamental rejection of these norms cannot provide the framework for a praxis. In any case, it is not as if the **possibilities** of either liberalism or humanism have been explored and exhausted; if we open up these formations, extending their scope and compensating for their inadequacies, they might yet function as instruments of political critique.

The most exciting and impressive efforts to extend liberal theory are now being made not in English studies, but in the field of political theory. Recent debates in this field, sparked off by the work of John **Rawls**, among others, are, to me, among the most stimulating and productive across the whole spectrum of

academic work in the humanities and social sciences. What **is** most interesting is the process by which defenders of liberalism have been forced to concede territory, negotiate, admit to weaknesses in their theories and so on by communarians, feminists, **poststructuralist pragmatists** and others who together constitute the formidable opposition to the refurbished liberalism. Liberal self-critique following from these interventions ensures that the formulations that are now emerging are distancing themselves from laissez faire theories, while maintaining their allegiance to the fundamental idea of political freedom. There is also a new tendency to balance the demands of equality and freedom, whereas in earlier liberal theory the primacy of freedom was unquestioned. What we have, as a result, is a liberalism that is, potentially at least, hospitable to the aspirations of both sexes or of different classes and castes, a liberalism that could certainly sweep away some of the self-delusions of English classrooms and present an intelligent alternative to the kind of post-structuralist theory that has flowed into the political vacuum at the core of disciplines like English and bharatanatyam. Both liberalism and humanism now, with the accumulated knowledge we have of their exclusions and the accumulated demands for genuine universality, may well come to express the needs of a politically-slanted cultural theory more completely than post-structuralism.

I would clarify my own use of the terms '**liberal**' and '**humanist**' in relation to a conception of democracy that is being widely debated in the field of political theory. If we see democracy as a form of society (instead of seeing it as a form of government) whose logic must extend into our **lives**; if we see

its goals as **freedom** and equality; then liberalism and humanism could function as normative and discursive mediators of these ideals, working them into the fabric of everyday life. A humanist cultural studies could explore the Utopian side of human freedom (creativity, emotional and aesthetic plenitude) without cutting these possibilities away from the exigencies of equality, i.e., from the political. In other words, in place of the shallow **aestheticism** of English studies, and complementing the political focus of some versions of cultural studies, we would have a discipline that can take account of the sphere of political norms, the power relations of everyday life, as well as the embodying in culture of human self-extension or **aspiration**.

If all speculation about 'human' creativity must be labelled **essentialist**, I want to be attentive in this thesis to the dangerous as well as to the productive uses of **essentialism**. My own reading of the history of sadir no less than the theoretical protocols of post-structuralist criticism enjoins vigilance against the occlusion of difference, or the assumption of the universality of cultural norms that actually embody the desires of a small class of people. I would not, however, entirely discount certain articles of humanist faith, and will continue—for instance—to talk of authors or performers or groups of women as agents, which assumes a form of '**personhood**'; or to assume that language communicates while taking seriously the idea that this communication is not simple; or to take for granted some universals, such as the rights guaranteed by democracy, or the common though differently nuanced experience of the body's materiality.

Methodologically, 'humanism' may be considered shorthand for a kind of scholarly generalism that can balance the claims of histories, concepts and texts; for an appreciation of context as well as of detail; for an awareness of mythic resonances and artistic traditions; for a taking seriously of the subjectivity of the artist and critic. I find such a method helpful in the context of my project for **reimagining** dance. The last chapter of this thesis should further clarify my reasons for locating myself on the borders of humanism rather than squarely within post-structuralist cultural **theory**.

A Note on Chapterization

Each chapter of this thesis is an attempt to develop a dimension of the problem I set out at the beginning of this chapter (how does the political relate to the aesthetic?). Chapter 2 ("A Most Objectionable Class of People") may be read as a narrative about the short way modernity, with its linear conception of history and time, has with the order of cosmology and the nuances of art-as-worship (**sadir**). The agents of modernity were, in this case, the Christian missionaries in South India, whose gross misunderstanding of the aesthetic of **sadir** neatly complemented their evangelical opportunism. When Indian social reformers inherited this misreading, the public campaign against the **devadasis** began in earnest. The replacement of the context in which **sadir** made sense (the pre-modern ethos, with the temple as the crucial site of economic, religious and emotional investments, where the aesthetic was not necessarily **an** end in itself) with the key installations of modernity

(science, nationhood, the domestic sphere, art 'for art's sake,' among other things) resulted in the complete subjugation of the traditional performers of dance in South India.

Chapter 3 ("A Respectable Aesthetic: The Making of Bharatanatyam") is about the honing and deployment of a particular ideology of the aesthetic as a mode of political intervention by upper-caste, middle class, English-educated women. This ideology allowed them to appropriate the dance without losing their status. It was probably not accidental that this intervention in the aesthetic sphere boosted the cultural capital this group already had, at a time when their fortunes were sagging because of hostile political activity. The right to pronounce on matters of taste and culture remained theirs long after their political power base was eroded. Conversely, the colonization of sadir by brahmin women transformed its aesthetic completely; its almost complete dependence on a very small, very exclusive, very status-conscious class of people has led to a congealing of the form. The ideological insularity of the upper caste group that now claims it as its own has meant that all change is regarded as sacrilegious; only a few maverick performers have really fundamentally challenged the reinvented 'tradition' set in place by brahmin exponents. (In this introductory chapter, I have suggested how the invention of a tradition for bharatanatyam resembled the invention of a tradition for English studies.)

In chapter 4 ("Studying Culture, Performing Dance: Engagements with Feminism and Post-structuralism") I return to the imbrication of aesthetics and politics as a theoretical problem: how does post-structuralist theory in India inflect

political practice, and how does it affect the relationships between teachers and students within the academy, and between critics and artists or performers outside it? Of more immediate interest to me, does it help me at all in imagining an alternative, feminist deployment of dance in the present, and in conceiving of an alternative aesthetic that must necessarily go with this?

What my chapterization reflects is the fact that my thesis remained a process and would not, to the very end, become a product. Exploring several disciplinary **areas--dance**, English, cultural studies, feminist historiography and theory--in their interactions with each other, I found that most of the opinions I formed about each of them had resonances for the others, which is one reason why my arguments in this thesis develop rather tortuously. It also complicated matters that this thesis, like most, was produced over a period of some years, and that nothing remained static during this period. The feminist criticism I was reading at the beginning of my research period was produced in somewhat different circumstances, and had different emphases, from the theory that is now becoming dominant, and that may dictate the framework of cultural studies in the next few years. I tried, perhaps **misguidedly**, to keep responding to these **changes--some** of them barely acknowledged as changes by the theorists themselves. This meant that there was little hope of triumphantly resolving the issues at stake and emerging with a finished product. I have made a virtue of necessity and let the rough edges stand, on the assumption that work-in-progress is usually interesting in a way completed work hardly ever is.

NOTES

1. I have borrowed this phrase from the title of **Kwame** Anthony Appiah's book: In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture. It suggests a **generalism** that is full of possibilities. Appiah's book was, overall, one of the most exciting ones I read in the course of my research.

2. I have explained the terms sadir and bharatanatyam in detail in my Note at the beginning of this thesis. I will not repeat myself here, except to point out that '**bharatanatyam**' (the commonly used name for the dance form in the present) is the usage of my choice; the form '**Bharata Natya**' is **Rukmini Devi Arundale's** coinage and is used in this chapter and in chapter 3 specifically to refer to her use of it.

3. Marxist writers from Marx onwards have displayed much insight into the embedding of art in the economy. Georg Lukacs is, of course, the classic **marxist** writer on the connection between art or cultural production and politics, especially as exemplified in the contrasts between the realist novel of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century modernist novel. See for instance, the essays in The Meaning of Contemporary Realism. The Frankfurt School critics, especially Theodor Adorno (in, for instance, The Dialectic of Enlightenment or **Prisms**) and Walter Benjamin (**Illuminations**), and more recently Fredric Jameson (in The Political Unconscious, for instance), have all in their different ways taken up this question. Pierre Macherey (A Theory of Literary Production) and Louis Althusser (Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays) applied ideology critique in a different style (that of the 'symptomatic reading,' a **structuralist/psychoanalytic** notion) to literary texts. Terry Eagleton gives a condensed but useful overview of the marxist contribution to theories of artistic and literary production in his Marxism and Literary Criticism.

4. I have in mind landmark feminist texts like Ellen Moers's Literary Women, Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Our Own. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Madwoman in the Attic, which represent the early liberal feminist recovery of a women's literary and political tradition in the Anglo-American world.

5. This is often the result of a two-step process. The first step consists in emptying art of all content except what belongs in the sphere of the cognitive; the second step is to declare that the cognition encoded in art is false, inaccurate. If art were cognition in any simple sense, we would have to consider it '**knowledge**,' but practically no one believes it to be so except in a very special sense. See Raymond Geuss's painstaking unravelling of the themes of ideology, cognition and belief in The Idea of a Critical Theory.

6. Michele Barrett suggests that the "dominant interest in cultural studies at the moment **is** in a conception of meaning stripped of traditional aesthetic questions, one that does not engage with the issue of the **senses**," because it has a

primarily **semiotic** focus ("The Place of Aesthetics" 712).

7. Marxist critics, starting with Marx himself (see The German Ideology), have refused to privilege certain human activities as '**mental**' or '**cultural**' and to devalue certain others as 'manual'; feminist critics have pointed to the continuities between women's work in the home or outside it and the art or literature women have produced. I see dance as interestingly located in the grey area between manual and mental labour.

8. This is a rather wild remark, but I am thinking of a writer like Martin Heidegger, whose Origin of the Work of Art is one of the most brilliant texts I know on the meaning and significance of art; or of a writer like Sigmund Freud, whose Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, for instance--rather than the works more conventionally associated with art and **artists--may** generate fascinating readings of cultural products. I am entirely sympathetic to aesthetic theories that pay close attention to the actual details of either the production or the **effects--bodily**, emotional, cultural, ideological--of art on its consumers. Merleau-Ponty's work, though by no means 'conservative', is generally neglected because he is not trendily subversive. I find his writing useful, and I state my reasons for this in the last chapter.

9. Showalter lays out this **project** in her 1986 essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics." Tharu and **Lalita** in their Introduction to Women Writing in India point out some of the limitations of Showalter's understanding of gender: her separatism, her tendency to pull gender out of the matrix of subject positions or identities within which women lead their lives (Tharu and Lalita, 18-19). Tharu and Lalita, interestingly, take issue with Showalter not for her attempts to arrive at aesthetic formulations, but for her politics; but after this entirely justified attack, leave the question of aesthetic projects such as hers begging, and the impression one is left with is that such projects necessarily go with dubious political positions.

10. This suspicion of the aesthetic is often expressed more through the omission of any consideration of the aesthetic dimension of texts than by actual repudiation. As Michele Barrett suggests, the "dominant influence of the concept of ideology" on the one hand, and the recent "**deconstruction** of the human subject that underlies the **reconstruction** of the text as subject" on the other, have both contributed to the repudiation of questions of reception and response to art ("The Place of Aesthetics" 699-700).

In this context see the response by Rajeswari Sundar **Rajan** to Susie Tharu and **K. Lalita's** Introductions to Women Writing in India, quoted at length in her introduction to her own book Real and Imagined Women. 2-5.

Some feminists do, however, explicitly **problematize** the whole realm of the reception of cultural productions, especially by women. Laura Mulvey, in "**Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema**" makes the most uncompromising version of the

argument (in relation to the cinema) that women have to inflict psychological violence on themselves in the process of consuming male-oriented art.

French feminist writing, especially as it is exemplified in the work of Helene Cixous, is centrally concerned with the **figuring** of an alternative aesthetic (*l'écriture féminine*) purportedly arising from women's 'writing their bodies,' producing '**female-sexed texts.**' But this kind of writing "is impossible to **define**.... It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can subjugate" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 313). The reader of Cixous's text encounters a welter of images for women's writing, both seductive ("flying is woman's gesture"; women produce "bisexual," "volcanic" texts, free from phallic logic, "heterogeneous," sweeping away syntax, "on the side of **jouissance**") and confusing (is 'feminine' to be identified with biological **women--in** which case, Cixous's position is more or less **essentialist--or** with an ontological or creative state that may on occasion emerge in men's writing as well as women's ?).

11. The **post-structuralist** celebration of the pleasures of the text make sense when they are seen as extensions of the romantic project of individual artist vs. social norms. If it is **normative--for example--to** respect copyright law, or to speak of the 'expression' of individual desire, the romantic (post-structuralist) writer will talk of the death of the author (without necessarily failing to collect his royalties) or of the impersonal, insatiable desiring machine whose frenzied working impersonally and insatiably expresses itself through human acts and texts. I am thinking of the late work of Roland Barthes, of Gilles Deleuze and Felix **Guattari's Anti-Oedipus**, Jean-Francois Lyotard's Libidinal Economies. Herbert Marcuse (Eros and Civilization), from a rather different angle, brought up the question of the repressive society's control over human desire; adapted to American conditions, he became the guru of the sixties sexual revolution.

12. See Fredric Jameson, "Pleasure: A Political Issue"; or Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late capitalism which is a sustained examination of how aesthetic/cultural forms change when the mode of production changes.

13. See Carole Vance ed., Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality or Cora Kaplan's essays in Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism. The French feminists, of course, have taken jouissance on board in a big way: see Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa."

14. One of Miller's students, Raghupati **Venkataratnam**, helped start the Social Purity movement in what later became Andhra Pradesh, along with Kandukuri **Veerasingam**. The movement aimed to put an end to **sadir** concerts, to dedication of girls, and to the drinking of liquor in Andhra. The princely states outside the direct jurisdiction of colonial law also began to respond to the anti-nautch rhetoric and by the turn of the

century many of them, including Mysore, Pudukottai and Travancore had passed orders banning **sadir**. The spread of interest in the question was made easier by the fact that the practice of 'nautch' had innumerable parallels, and the performers innumerable counterparts, all over the country. Frederique Marglin documents the ethos of the devadasis of Orissa in her book **Wives of the God-King: the tawaif of North India**, though not dedicated to a temple or deity, was also considered a custodian of the arts.

A good deal happened between the launching of the anti-nautch movement and Muthulakshmi Reddi's entry on the scene. For an abbreviated chronology of the developments in the period under review, see the Appendix at the end of this **thesis**.

15. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the daughter of a brahmin father and a devadasi mother, was a remarkably capable and resourceful woman. She insisted on studying medicine and, with the help of the Pudukottai Raja among others, had her way; graduated from the Madras Medical College and went on to spend most of her time on voluntary work in causes that involved women and children. She was nominated member of the Legislative Council in 1926, and was elected Vice President of the Council; was active in this period in getting the Sarda Act (**for** increasing the Age of Consent to 15 years for boys and 12 for girls) and the Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act passed. She founded the **Avvai Home** for widows; was part of a committee that demanded franchise for women; helped set up hospitals for women and children, and the Cancer Hospital in Madras; was member of the State Social Welfare Advisory Board between 1954 and 1957; and received the **Padma Bhushan** in 1956.

16. Muthulakshmi Reddi was an active campaigner for the Bill on the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic (passed in 1928). Like Josephine Butler in England, she fought against the forced examination of prostitutes by male officers enforcing state control over prostitution. Herself the daughter of a devadasi, she broke several rules by becoming a doctor. The parallel between her endorsement of '**modern**' domesticity and that of **Rukmini** Devi, another rebel, is an instructive one.

17. The devadasis did not constitute a caste by themselves, though they are frequently referred to as a caste. They were drawn from a number of middle-level **castes--melakkaras, nattuvargar**, and so on. They formed something of a professional community, however, with a well-regulated internal structure, which brought them into relationships with men of their castes--the gurus, **especially--** but also allowed them a relative independence. Their unusual lifestyle and codes, **Amrit** Srinivasan argues, were aspects of their professional need to specialize and evolve the best possible ethos for the perpetuation of their art. See the Note at the beginning of the thesis.

18. Rukmini Nilakanta Shastri shot into prominence when she was sixteen years old, in 1920, as a result of the scandal surrounding her marriage to George Arundale who, in addition

to being white, was about forty years old at the time. Protege of Annie Besant and Leadbeater at the Theosophical Society, **Rukmini** Devi was being groomed to take on the messianic role of World Mother, a project that did not quite materialize. In 1926, she met the ballet star Anna Pavlova during a voyage by ship to Australia, grew fascinated by the idea of dancing, and even had lessons from one of Pavlova's soloists, **Cleo Nordi**. In the early 1930s, Rukmini Devi watched devadasi performers of sadir at the Music Academy, and decided to learn the art and to use it as a vehicle of cultural **nationalism**. The rest of her story is laid out in chapter 3.

19. Krishna Iyer was a lawyer by profession as well as a trained musician and dancer, participating in amateur theatre in his college days (he usually took female roles) and going on to train seriously under **Madurantakam Jagadambal**, a famous devadasi performer and teacher, and under A.P. Natesa Iyer, a brahmin natyacharya. Becoming fiercely enthusiastic about the preservation of the form, he lectured on bharatanatyam and performed it in female costume. As a member of the Congress Committee, he was one of the moving forces behind the initiative to start the Music Academy of Madras. Krishna Iyer was partly responsible for Rukmini Devi's interest in sadir. and he persuaded the dance guru **Meenakshisundaram Pillai** to accept her as a student. From the 1940s onwards, as the revival gathered momentum, his influence on the Madras cultural scene gradually declined, though he continued to promote individual dancers and dance teachers.

20. Annie Besant, for instance, expended much energy in the early years of her sojourn in India trying to convince Indians about the beneficial rationality of the caste system; she found her audiences intransigent, however, and was forced to abandon this project. The person who made the most explicit connections between art and Swadeshi was Ananda **Coomaraswamy**, and he too tended to idealize and justify the caste system as creating a 'co-operative society' whose perfect harmonies he was even tempted to identify with the repose of the icon dancing Shiva-Nataraja (see The Dance of Shiva 19). His own aesthetic theory was beholden to Benedetto Croce on the one hand and to Sanskrit poetics on the other; he also hypostatized the '**spirituality**' of Eastern art in a way that had its uses for the brahmin bharatanatyam dancers of the 1930s onwards.

21. See **Srinivasan**, "Reform and Revival: The **Devadasi** and Her Dance". Economic and Political Weekly 20.44 (1985): 1869-76. Janaki Nair documents the somewhat different trajectory of anti-nautch legislation in Mysore state in her important article "The Devadasi, Dhanna and the State". Economic and Political Weekly 29.50 (1994): 3157-3167.

22. Theoretically there is no limit to the archive I could consult; if in practice there has been one, it has to be admitted at once that it has been arbitrarily set. Two things dictated the cut-off point. One was the practical consideration of the limited time available for research. The

other was a more respectable consideration. The early fixing and relentlessly monotonous occupation of positions on either side of the nauth question, I felt, relieved me of the responsibility of indefinitely researching my subject. When the shape of this controversy became so clear that more evidence could only reinforce the same arguments, I stopped rummaging in the archives. I am convinced that fresh material can only, if anything, throw up an exception or two to the general rule.

23. Thanjavur Balasaraswati (1918-1984), one of bharatanatyam's last and most celebrated isai Vellala exponents, was responsible in some measure for keeping audience interest in the dance alive even in its leanest years. She collaborated for a considerable stretch of her career with the Music Academy, where she eventually set up a school of dance.

24. Kittappa Pillai is a descendant of the Thanjavur quartette--the four brothers who established a stage-format for the dance in the Maratha court at Thanjavur. He is one of the few surviving isai Vellala teachers who continue to teach the form.

25. By this time the conflicts between the Orientalists and the Anglicists had been more or less resolved in favour of the former. **Macaulay's** Minute of 1835 was, of course, one decisive moment in this sequence of events.

26. Part of the understanding between the British crown and Indian subjects, as expressed by the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, was that religious tolerance would be extended to the latter. See Thomas Metcalf, Ideologies of the Raj, 47-51.

27. What the middle class established around this time and subsequently, were more or less brahminical values, refashioned to meet the demands of modernity. To refer to this class as a class/caste each time is cumbersome; to use only the caste designation without mentioning the class position of the group under discussion means buying into an 'outside' perspective of the kind that stresses the primacy of caste, and to stow away one's own professional class position beneath the politics of caste; and to use 'class' by itself suggests the resolute blindness, exemplified by certain orthodox **marxists**, to the caste composition of elite and subaltern groups. I have simply steered around this problem by using different terms in different places to refer to the patriarchal, brahminical bourgeoisie that assumed power in the wake of decolonization.

28. Some novel-writing contributors to social reform also wrote in Tamil, but were translated for the edification of English readers. A. Madhaviah, for instance, was the author of the historical novel Clarinda (1915); his Tamil novel Muthumeenakshi, written some years earlier, appeared in the Social Reform Advocate in 1915, in his daughter's English translation. **K.S. Venkataramani** wrote fiction and essays (Murugan the Tiller. 1927; Kandan the Patriot. 1932; Indian

Village: A Ten Year Plan. 1932) that popularized Gandhian thought, and was especially concerned with the village as organic community. Panchapakasa Ayyar also wrote a historical novel called **Baladitya** (1930), and several **volumes** of short stories. Manjeri **Isvaran's** short story collections, No Anklet Bells for Her (1949) and Angry Dust (1944) **also** comment on 'social evils'. Of the writers named, **R.K. Narayan** is the least inclined to preach; his sketches and novels may nevertheless be seen as part of the endeavour to capture in print a fading ideal of communal existence.

29. One might consider the number of books with eponymous heroines who are moulded, in the course of the narrative, into carriers of both tradition and modernity. This phenomenon cut across languages, as witness, strikingly, Madhaviah's Muthumeenakshi (Tamil); Chandu Menon's Indulekha (Malayalam) and Krupabai Satthianadhan's Kamala (English).

30. R.K. Narayan has produced similar collections of homely sketches in Malgudi Days, for instance, or in Swami and Friends, but without the disquisitions on the value of the joint family, Hindu tradition and so on that are part of **Venkataramani's** offerings.

31. See Susie Tharu, "Government Binding and Unbinding: Alienation and the Teaching of Literature."

32. See, for instance, Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction and Catherine **Belsey**, Critical Practice, published in the 1980s; or essays in Peter **Widdowson**, ed., Re-Reading English: in Svati Joshi ed., Rethinking English, and in Rajeswari Sundar Rajan ed., The Lie of the Land. The last two volumes are recent critiques specifically of English in India.

However, given the sheer vagueness of the term '**humanist**' and the energy of the recent debates in political theory around liberalism, what are our current referents for each of the words in the compound 'liberal humanism'? For that matter, do they always go together? There are, for instance, **marxist** teachers of English who are humanist but **anti-liberal**.

33. See Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, for instance. Chris Baldick gives a good account of how English was used in the strengthening of the establishment in The Social Mission of English Criticism.

34. Besant was of Irish birth and had lived in England for many years, involving herself in a campaign to spread awareness about contraception among women. She came to India in 1893, and initially her work was largely religious and educational in intent (she founded the Central Hindu College, now the Benaras Hindu University, in 1898), and in accordance with the doctrines of the Theosophical Society, of which she was President from 1907 until her death. In 1913 she delivered her famous "Wake Up India" lectures; for some years, from 1914 onwards, ran a journal called New India which had an astonishingly high circulation; in 1916, founded the **Home Rule Movement**, and in 1917 was made President of the Indirn

National Congress. In that year **sh.** founded the Women's India Association with Margaret Cousins, and campaigned, in India and in Britain, **for** women's suffrage. With the rise of Gandhi as a national leader, **Besant's** importance in the freedom movement diminished and she went into retirement in her later **years.**

35. Partha Chatterjee argues, in *The Nation and Its **Fragments.*** that this division was to be marked not in terms of the public vs. private spheres of liberal discourse, but as a distinction between the **'outer'** world where the rule of colonial difference had to be resisted, and Universalism demanded, and the **'inner'** world where difference from the colonizing culture was the saving barrier against total assimilation and was therefore fiercely maintained.

36. The **transmogrification** of English studies into cultural studies is a sign that the Nation beckons disciplines in a variety of ways. There is an increasing feeling that the discipline should align itself, in the way sociology or the natural sciences have, with the project of the nation (or with the project of the Left: which is in some ways the mirror image of the nation-building project). The move in the direction of cultural critique that **'thinks the nation out'** was, therefore, prefigured at the very inception of the **discipline.**

The entry into a field (the study of the nation) whose parameters have already been defined by the social sciences exerts specifically disciplinary pressures on English. The demands that it be practical and that it be political find English studies barren of theoretical models as well as of ways of reading; it has to borrow these from the philosophy or from the social sciences. The social sciences rely on progressivist theoretical models (of either national development or class struggle); they are also, in India, largely fact-based and intolerant of textual, speculative and interpretive labour. To the extent that English scholars-turned cultural studies specialists want full participation in the **nation-(re)building** project, they are under pressure to either accept the progressivist model or to set up a competing theoretical claim; and the turn to historical materialism or **post-structuralism** in cultural studies is at least partly a response to the demand for methodological rigour.

37. The restlessness of the middle-to-working-class teachers of this discipline is responsible for much that is dynamic in English criticism. **F.R.** Leavis's odd relationship with Cambridge, and, of course, Raymond **Williams's** pathbreaking cultural critiques are cases in point.

38. The connection English education (especially literary knowledge) had with the aesthetic/moral values that fed into the making of **bharatanatyam** is particularly obvious in the **memoirs** of S.Sarada. Reminiscing about the early **'dance dramas'** performed at the **International Academy of Arts**, which appeared to have been partly in English, she remembers being struck by **Arundale's** performance: she had to ask someone who

the fisherman was who "spoke in chaste English"(3). She also remembers Sankara Menon, one of the founder-trustees of **Kalakshetra**, as an expert on English literature--"he used to take classes on Shakespeare's plays" (39).

39. This is how I read the use of 'humanist,' in Tharu and **Niranjana's** essay "Some Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," to characterize the environment of the dominant **subject** not merely of the English classroom but of the nation at large.

I am not sure if this formulation is precise enough to capture the nature of dominance from the **feudal-agricultural** to the industrial to the **metropolitan-professional** settings. Thus if one were to use 'liberal humanist' to describe 'the dominant **subject**' the description probably needs to be qualified by a description of the provenance of the subject; i.e., 'liberal humanist' is not coeval with '**modern.**'

40. I do not think close reading in itself a bad thing. It is the method I use more than any other in this thesis, and it can produce extremely interesting results when used in the light of historical facts. Close reading in isolation from every other kind of interpretive effort, however, is usually both trivial and boredom inducing, a specialist's skill.

41. I have purloined the term 'archaeology' from Foucault (see *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*) but it is put to much humbler uses here than Foucault's grand methodology demands.

42. The proposal was made at a seminar on the Teaching of English Language and Literature in India, held at the University of Hyderabad (in Hyderabad), in the year 1991.

Comparative literature departments in many universities are preoccupied with underwriting authentic Indianness in their own way. The operative theory in this case is that one has only to scrape away the incidental crust of linguistic and cultural variations to recover the pure, shining core of our (pan Indian) culture. For instance, a set of Tamil texts may have very different formal features, histories and thematic concerns from a set of Gujarati texts, but their deep structure, revealed by the conscientious labour of the scholar, is one of geographical and temporal continuities. Thus a '**unified**' canon of Indian texts is obtained by what has been called 'the aggregative principle.' The government's endorsement of these exercises in cultural nationalism illustrates (in a very obvious way) one of the axioms on which my thesis is grounded: that cultural projects, such as the recovery of an aesthetic or the teaching of English are inextricably involved in negotiations for, and maintenance of, power, dominance and control.

43. See Eagleton's discussion of **Baumgarten's** aesthetics in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. 24. See also the Introduction to *Schiller's Aesthetic Education* by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby.

44. 'Religion' is not the right word to describe the complex transactions between myth, social institutions like the temple, the legitimation of kingship, the arts, and the everyday ritual that made up the Hindu lifestyle; nor does it express the types of activity that included everything from demonic possession to philosophical monism. However, I use this peculiar, colonially-derived term for want of a better one.

45. Angelika Heckel cites M. Ghosh's translation to make her point. But since cultural difference is the problem, the same negotiation between European and Indian categories may be found in any other translation.

46. Krishna Rayan's essay on "Rasa and the Objective Correlative" is an example of attempts in this style to update Sanskrit poetics.

47. I have found it useful to study the trajectory of this group in slightly greater detail; this is done in the first section of chapter 4.

48. See Susie Tharu, "Thinking the Nation Out: Some Reflections on Nationalism and Theory," for an overview of this project.

49. See Sumit Sarkar's critique of elite historiography in his Introduction to Modern India: 1885-1947.

50. See Kosambi's Myth and Reality, for example; or his Exasperating Essays, in contrast to the relaxed tone of a book like A.L. Basham's The Wonder That Was India. In his sharp analysis of Nehru's Discovery of India, Kosambi observes that the author "could have asked himself one question with the greatest of advantage, namely *cui bono*: what is the class that called for or benefited by a certain change in a certain period of history?" (12-13). An obvious anticipation, here, of one of the guiding principles of cultural studies.

51. Norberto Bobbio suggests the following connection between the institution of political rights (embodying freedom) and democratic procedures:

There are...good reasons to believe that
(a) the procedures of democracy are
necessary to safeguard those fundamental
personal rights on which the liberal state
is based; and (b) those rights must be
safeguarded if democratic procedures are
to operate (38).

52. The anthologies generated by the feminist revisiting of the work of major political theorists of the western world were among the most interesting texts I encountered during my research. See, for instance, Feminists Theorize the Political, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott; Feminist Interpretations of Political Theory, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman; and Feminists and Political Theory, ed. Judith Evans, et al.

The most interesting single author publication more or less in this category was Nancy **Fraser's** Unruly Practices.

53. See John Rawls's A Theory of Justice. Robert Nozick's Anarchy, State, Utopia. Communitarian critiques include Alasdair **MacIntyre's**, After Virtue and*. Charles Taylor's Sources of The Self. Among the most interesting feminist interventions are those of Nancy Fraser and **Seyla Benhabib**. **Fraser's** Unruly Practices, for instance, raises the question of women's disadvantaged and unequal access to the public sphere, the much touted locus of liberal debate.

54. One's time and location, naturally, dictate one's concerns. It is clear that the theoretical terrain I want to explore has already been mapped onto the discipline by forces beyond individual control, including, here, the crisis of humanism and theoretical developments elsewhere; I do not choose it of my own accord. No one can feel any longer that theoretical debates about power, about nationhood, about gender fall outside the field of English studies. It is clear too, that this theory will, or should, affect practice--the framing of curricula, the working out of relations between teachers and students, and so on, and that therefore the questions recent political critiques raise cannot be evaded.

CHAPTER 2

'A MOST OBJECTIONABLE CLASS OF PEOPLE': NATION-BUILDING AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE DEVADASI COMMUNITY

Which other woman of my kind has
felicitated scholars with gifts and money?
To which other woman of my kind have
epics been dedicated?
Which other woman of my kind has
won such acclaim in each of the arts?
You are incomparable,
Muddupalani, among your kind.

-- Muddupalani on herself,
Radhika Santwanam, late eighteenth century.

This Muddupalani is an adultress....Many parts of this book [Radhika Santwanam] are such that they should never be heard by a woman, let alone emerge from a woman's mouth. Using Sringara rasa as an excuse, she shamelessly fills her poems with crude descriptions of sex....She is born into a community of prostitutes and does not have the modesty natural to women.

- Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Andhra Kavula

Charitram. 1887.

...the fact that the Prevention of Dedication Bill...has received enthusiastic support from the entire public in this Presidency is a proof positive of the demand for the total abolition of this class of refined prostitutes ... who are a danger to society in general.

-- Muthulakshmi Reddi, Reply to a memorandum
against legislation written by the South
India Devadasi Association, 1939.

Between the composition of Muddupalani's sringara prabandham and Veeresalingam's diatribe on it, little more than a century had passed; and between that accomplished ganika's self-description and Muthulakshmi Reddi's denunciation of the devadasi community, less than two centuries. Two hundred years of decisive transformations: a period that witnessed the process by which a conglomeration of small territories and states first came under colonial domination and then set itself on the road to becoming a nation.

The British rulers in India displaced or transformed the irreducibly diverse, localized practices and knowledge systems of different regions by subjecting them to a standardizing administrative practice; the requirements of citizenship within the terms of the nation-in-the-making rendered these changes irreversible. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the agents of normalization were the missionaries, initially, and later, upper caste/middle class social reformers and nationalists who undertook the work of imagining and building the nation. While the latter were about this task, they also consolidated the power they had acquired as beneficiaries of British rule. As one might have expected, the features of the normative citizen, which became discernible as he emerged from the fog of tradition into the clear light of the national-modern, looked remarkably like those of the typical member of the class that produced him.

This chapter is an attempt to study the processes of displacement and normalization, unfolding over the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, by which the celebrated ganikaa of the princely courts and the devadasis attached to temples were re-imaged

as--and finally driven to **becoming--'a** community of **prostitutes,**' and by which upper caste social reformers and nationalists became the arbiters of **'Indian'** culture. What follows is an account of the destruction of the devadasis' world-view and way of life--both unwelcome under the new **order--** by the twin processes of nation-building and **class-definition.**

The Nineteenth Century:
the Prehistory of the Anti-Nautch **Movement**

Modernity was not, of course, welcomed with equal enthusiasm in every territory or by every community in South India. Until the last decade of the nineteenth century, what is striking is the unevenness, reflected in the fortunes of the devadasis and of sadir, of its effects. In the battle over the survival of sadir, the forces massed on either side of the **question--**individuals, communities, discourses and world-views--were fairly evenly matched, especially since the colonial government made it clear that it was not going to throw its administrative weight behind the anti-sadir camp.

Though there was a general falling away in the status of devadasis throughout this century, for reasons I will describe below, actual anti-nautch efforts were sluggish and purposeless, the successes unspectacular and far between. The lack of a consensus about the pernicious effects of sadir, and the persistence of a Hindu religious ethos which legitimized the lifestyle that went with this practice, helped the devadasi community stave off disaster until the 1890s.

With the launching of the official anti-nautch campaign in 1892-93, the anti-sadir forces finally prevailed. The pace of reform was stepped up and by 1947, when the Devadasi Act was

passed, Muthulakshmi **Reddi**, chief architect of the Act, could indulge in some justifiable **self-gratulation**: "...millions of our young girls have been saved from a life of degradation and have settled down in an honourable life. In these three decades, the Devadasis as a community have disappeared" (Autobiography, 73).

I have allowed the availability of material to dictate the shape of this chapter; thus the primary focus is the dense cluster of arguments set out by the reformers in the three crucial decades (1920 -1950) of the twentieth century. But I begin by describing the build-up to the controversies of this period, since it is impossible to understand the mood of the anti-naught agitators without examining the pressures on them of colonial ideology and missionary evangelism.

1) The Inexplicable Lethargy of the Colonial **Government** and the Zeal of the Missionaries:

In the mid-nineteenth century, when Indian nationalist indignation about sadir had not yet come to a focus, the debate on the devadasis and their art situated itself in the field of antagonisms between the British administrators and the Christian missionaries in India. The relations between these two agents of Empire, for all their uneasy cooperation, were never quite smooth; the missionaries frequently deplored the impiety and opportunism of the administrators. In the case of sadir. they had reason to feel particularly bitter. For the better part of a century their appeals for sanctions against it fell on deaf ears. The government was so incorrigibly evasive that the **message** eventually got through to the conscience-stricken: they **would** have to rely on other, **non-administrative** resources to

eliminate nautch.

In the event, the case of sadir turned out not to be one of those from which the British administrators extracted ideological support for the perpetuation of their own rule in India. Legislation was reluctantly approved by the colonial government only at the end of a formidable campaign in which the missionaries joined forces with Hindu social reformers.

The British reluctance to get involved in the sadir question needs explaining, given that they intervened in several practices that had comparable social significance and 'religious' import for their Indian subjects. I think there were three reasons for this fact. The first reason has to do with the British approach to legal agency; the second, with the policy of non-interference in religious affairs where this was, of course, compatible with liberal government; the third, with the colonizers' long-standing acceptance of--even affection for--nautch as a form of entertainment, and their inclination to count its practitioners among the sexual 'perks' of Empire.

Indigenous customary practices caught the eye of the colonial administration primarily when there was proof of abject victimization. In the case of sati, for instance, the possibility that widows might be forced to immolate themselves--a coercion tantamount to homicide--suggested to British officials the need for 'eyewitnesses' at the funeral ceremonies who could ensure that the satis were voluntary. The dedication of girls to temples as devadasis obviously did not have the blood-curdling aspect of practices like (forced) sati or child marriage.

If an official found it impossible to verify the agency of

devadasis in the matter of their being dedicated or of performing sadir, he would in all likelihood have turned to one of the well-known accounts, embodying the imperialists' knowledge-building effort, of Indian religious and cultural practices. If he had consulted the Abbe **Dubois's** monumental Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, for instance, he would have found that "no shame whatever [was] attached to parents whose daughters **adopt[ed]** this career" (593). Edgar Thurston, using the Census reports at the turn of the century, is more **explicit**:

At the present day they [the devadasis] form a regular caste, having its own customs and rules of etiquette, and its own **panchayats....and** thus hold a position, which is perhaps without a parallel in any other country Among the Dasis, sons and daughters inherit equally, contrary to ordinary Hindu usage.... (127)

Thurston records that devadasis are "the only class of women, who are, under Hindu law as administered in the British Courts, allowed to adopt girls to themselves" (151).

Most observers in the nineteenth century noted with some astonishment that devadasi girls were exceptionally well-educated, given the norms for Hindu women. The Rev. M. Philips remarks in his document on Hindu culture that "the dancing girls are the most accomplished women among the Hindus. They read, write, sing and play as well as dance." And any follower of the proceedings of the law courts, British or

Indian, could not have failed to notice that the devadasis took their rights seriously enough to be among the most litigious women in Hindu **society**.

Despite all these proofs of the skill, grace and independence with which the devadasis conducted their lives, the missionaries repeatedly urged that it was the moral duty of the colonial administration to '**rescue**' them. Assenting in a half-hearted way, the government made some provisions to ensure that minor girls were not adopted by devadasis for the purposes of dedication. The devadasi community had been traditionally exempt from the enforcement of Sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Penal Code, which restrained "the **transformation** of minor girls for immoral purposes" (Sundar **Raj**, 230); in 1878, the Secretary of State for India directed the Governor General in Council to bring them under the purview of these sections. This strategy did not work very well; devadasis simply moved outside British territory to perform the adoption and dedication ceremonies, or adopted majors instead of minors.

Since legal agency was the point at issue, the British also allowed devadasis to petition for permission to be dedicated, if they could prove that they were not being coerced. This resulted in curious documents like the following, recorded by Thurston (it is addressed to the Superintendent of Police and to a European Magistrate):

Petition of two **girls**, aged 17 to 19.

Our father and mother are dead. Now we wish to be like prostitutes, as we are not willing to be married, and thus establish our house-name. Our mother also was of this

profession. We now request permission to be
 prostitutes according to our religion,
 after we are sent before the Medical
Officer. (qtd. in Thurston 134)

Technically, the appellants had to prove that they were not being inducted into 'immoral traffic'; but it seems that in practice the Courts recognized the validity of petitions such as the above.

Such evidence that the devadasis were agents in their own right added to the colonial government's determination to apply here the rule of **non-interference** in specifically 'religious' questions. Even in a fairly clear case like that of sati the administration felt some scruples on this score; in the case of the dedication of girls and of sadir, whose effects were certainly not as drastic as those of sati, intervention did not seem warranted.

Missionaries and reformers in the nineteenth century, irritated by the studied indifference of the administration to the Nautch Question, accused the colonial officials of having a hidden motive: a desire to actively encourage this 'vice,' a result of their own weakness for the kind of entertainment the devadasis provided. This perception may well have been accurate. Nautch was patronized by colonial visitors, non-official settlers and administrators, in their official capacities as well as during their leisure hours; there is also reason to believe that some members at least of the devadasi community were favoured as companions and concubines by colonial officials. I will **briefly** describe both these investments (the official and the submerged) in the devadasi's art and body.

At the time when sadir was ubiquitous in South India, it was a favourite source of entertainment for British officials who had exhausted what the '**little England**' style of employing leisure could offer (hunting, bowling, riding, picnics). "To see a nautch was something like attending the ballet in Europe," Percival Spear writes, "with the difference that the troop always came to a private house" (35). "Hart in 1775 speaks of 'six or seven black girls being brought in after **dinner**,' when 'they sang and danced well,' and in 1778 they were still 'much admired by the European gentlemen'" (Spear, 35). The popularity of nautch among the official class remained **undiminished** even after enough European women began to arrive in India to make European dancing feasible.

Sadir performances **figured** prominently in the establishment of goodwill between wealthy Indians and British officials or visitors, until they eventually became a mandatory aspect of aristocratic Indian hospitality. They could be used, for instance, to demonstrate the esteem a princely court felt for the Crown: the repertoire of the dancers in the Thanjavur court included a version of "God Save the King," taught them by an English music master who was also an employee of the court. When the Prince of Wales visited India in **1875**, he was entertained **with** a nautch performance; so was his son, Prince Albert Victor, **in** 1890, though on this occasion there were protests.

Nautch was also introduced very early into colonial public **ceremony**. Here is the order, for instance, of the parade held to **commemorate** the Inauguration of the New Charter in Madras in

Major John Roach on horseback at the head of a Company of Foot.

Soldiers, and Kettledrums, Trumpets and other music.

The Dancing Girls and the Country Music...

and so on, with several important dignitaries following, until the "Chief Gentry in the town" bring up the rear (Spear, 21-22). Musically infelicitous as this arrangement must have been, it expressed something of the naturalization of sadir as a mode of symbolic exchange in colonial life.

Within the ranks of the colonial administrators, class position determined, to some extent, the flexibility of attitudes to sadir. The middle class officials were the ones most prone to be scandalized by the dance. The Tommies took all kinds of sexual liaisons with Indian women in their stride, and the aristocrats who occupied the higher administrative ranks and who considered 'nautch parties' a substitute for the theatre disdained to scrutinize the morals of the performers too closely. The British upper classes were, after all, familiar with the sexual licence granted to men and women who went on the stage in their home country; to expect chastity from Indian performers seemed to smack of intolerance and **puritanism**. Asked to respond to the launching of the official anti-nautch movement as late as 1893, Lord Wenlock, Governor of Madras, wrote to the Governor General, Lord Lansdowne: "I am rather puzzled as to **what** the best answer should be to these people, and of course I **am** not prepared to be more virtuous than you **are**.'" If such Puritanical principles applied in England, "'...**we** shall not be **able** to attend any theatrical performance till we have **satisfied** ourselves as to the moral character of all the **performers**'"

(qtd. in Ballhatchet 158). Even the starchy Lord Curzon, well known for his insistence that the colonial **officials** set a moral example to the subject race, recorded his indifference to the morals of devadasis: "The Viceroy is not himself interested in these performances; but he hardly thinks the matter is one on which he is called upon to make any pronouncements or to take any **action**'" (qtd. in Ballhatchet 159).

"It is their languishing glances, wanton smiles and attitudes not quite consistent with decency, which are so much admired," one Mrs. Kinderby writes of the devadasis in the **mid-eighteenth** century.⁸ In the private realm, devadasis were clearly part of the libidinal economy of empire. Though not all devadasis had the freedom to cohabit with white men (since many were restrained by ritual proscriptions regarding sexual partners); and though the custom of concubinage or marriage to a 'native' woman abruptly fell into disuse around the end of the eighteenth century, the effects of these relationships lingered.

Sexual adventure, as Ronald **Hyam** and Kenneth Ballhatchet have pointed out, was always one of the hidden motives of
 a
 colonization. The fantasy of Oriental sexuality was particularly attractive to those who were considered sexual deviants in their own countries. Homosexuals, pederasts, libertines, sadists, inveterate experimenters all headed East to indulge their forbidden tastes. A certain sexual licence, therefore, was always tacitly understood to be part of the experience of Empire, and devadasis, along with camp followers, young boys, native servants, minor girls and others, were objects of desire who fuelled what Ronald Hyam calls **the** 'sexual energy of Empire.' Morals in general being rather **lax** in the early years

of colonization, liaisons with devadasis would have merely been reckoned among the many venial sins of colonial adventurers.

During the phase in which the East India Company and the colonial government actively encouraged liaisons between Indian women and European men, with a view to establishing a Eurasian community, devadasis were highly prized concubines. **Hyam** offers the examples of Captain Edward Sellon, writing in the 1830s and 1840s, who praised the "cleanliness, the sumptuous dress, the temperance, ability to sing and dance" of the 'nautch **girl**' (qtd. 88); and of a Dr. J. Shortt who writes in the 1860s that the dancing girls of South India were attractive enough to "meet the admiration of the greatest connoisseur" (qtd. 89). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, open concubinage was no longer considered necessary or acceptable. The Company had prospered, official policy changed; new administrators felt that their prestige depended on keeping their social distance from the native population; improved living conditions allowed European women to sojourn in India; the Haitian rebellion and much later, the Indian Revolt of 1857, appeared to be warnings against miscegenation. So while actual sexual relationships between British officials and devadasis moved out of public view, there can be no doubt that such relationships remained possible. In any case, the interactions with devadasis as performers of sadir were not affected until the end of the nineteenth century.

When even these interactions were threatened by the gathering forces of adverse public opinion, the **reform-oriented** section of the vernacular press joined the missionaries in expressing a grim satisfaction with the fact that colonial administrators would now suffer some deprivation. One

commentator (in the **Sasilekha** of November 1894) approves of the decision of "some ladies and gentlemen of England" to "ensure non-attendance of Governors and other Government officials at **nautch** parties." He adds, resentfully, "that in the **mofussil** [,] people, unable to resist the bullying of the Collectors, entertain them at nautches at great expense and trouble to themselves. And the Governors ... go forth on tours through the districts seemingly to inspect the country, but really to gratify themselves with the singing and dancing of these fallen women; but their days of enjoyment and pleasure are numbered" (NNR 22, 1894: 426).

In the battle of attrition between the aristocratic heads of British government in India and the missionaries whom these administrators considered intolerant and moralistic, it was the missionaries who eventually won all the moral victories. Their disapproval was great and their stamina proverbial, carrying all before it. In 1914, J.N. Farquhar writes: "Missionaries have long protested in the name of morality and decency against the whole system [the devadasis'] gestures ...are lewd and suggestive; and their songs are immoral and obscene. Many a man has spoken of the dire results such exhibitions have on the young" (410).

Farquhar's vocabulary recalls the Abbe Dubois and his strictures: there is a **remarkable** similarity in the choice of adjectives. The Abbe describes the practice of dedication and the temple rituals in which the devadasis participated with admirable exactitude, but he also ventures comment:

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. They dance and sing within the temple morning and evening. The first they execute with sufficient grace although their attitudes are lascivious and their gestures indecorous. Their singing is almost always confined to obscene verses describing some licentious episode in the history of their gods. All the time they have to spare in the interests of the various ceremonies is devoted to infinitely more shameful practices.... (Dubois 592)

Already, in this earliest of missionary accounts, we see the **transformation** of an aesthetic confusion into a moral problem: the Abbe's obvious ignorance of the conventions of Sringara translates into accusations of '**lewdness**' and '**lasciviousness.**' '**Lewdness,**' '**obsenity**' and '**indecorousness**' occur frequently in subsequent missionary discourse: the Abbe Dubois obviously started a trend of response that the **missionaries** did not want to relinquish even in its finest detail. Here is another missionary description of sadir. this time in 1893: "A Nautch dance is performed by Hindu prostitutes, who usually sing songs of the most lascivious character, accompanied by gestures and movements of the body having an obscene meaning." (qtd. in Ballhatchet, 157). The odd thing about this particular vocabulary of condemnation is that certain sections of the Indian upper castes, without doubt familiar with

the erotic-religious significance of bhakti literature and with the concept and conventions of sringara, so completely took it over, along with the collapsing of the aesthetic into the moral that typified it.

The Abbe Dubois (c.a. 1770-1848) himself belonged to the first generation of European missionaries in India--the orientalist missionaries to whom we owe dictionaries, grammars of several languages and documents about several Indian practices. He thought of himself, no doubt, as an ethnographer, meticulously recording his observations. His moral confusion is disguised by the documentary mode of his writings. At one level he is fascinated: "...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...**" (594); at another, horrified by his own admiration: "God forbid, however, that anyone should believe me to wish to say a word in defence of the comparative modesty and reserve of the dancing-girls of India!" (594).

The effect of Christian missionary teaching in general was to spread a perception of Hinduism as corrupt, barbaric, superstitious, backward. Obviously nothing short of an epistemic shift would make this view acceptable to large numbers of people; generally tolerated cultural practices had to take on the aspect of '**evils**' in the eyes of the very people steeped in that culture. The discursive groundwork for this shift had been laid throughout the nineteenth century by religious reform **movements** like the Arya Samaj and the **Brahmo** Samaj, by democratizing and non-brahmin movements like that of the

Satyashodaks in Maharashtra, and by Christian **missionaries**. The instruments of change included: the education of Indians in English, the translation of English texts into the vernaculars and vice versa, the institution of a periodical press that churned out cheap and accessible tracts, papers and journals, itinerant preachers at 'wayside **pulpits**,' public meetings and, of course, legislation in either the national or the state-level councils. An apparatus was set up which could instantly respond to and disseminate the new ideas, as well as register the crumbling of the orthodoxy.

By far the most effective medium for the transmission of missionary views during this period was the vernacular press. In the tracts and periodicals that flowed from **mission-established** presses all over the country, a strategic and potent combination of evangelical Christianity and post-Enlightenment concern with science, reason and political rights was mobilized for the promotion of the Christian faith. As Rosalind O'Hanlon points out, these deeply divergent strains in missionary discourse came together effectively enough to undermine Hindu belief. Here is the **Darpan**, a reform paper started by **Bal Shastri Jambhekar**, in 1832, entertaining visions of a transformed, Christianized press "chasing away the mists of error and ignorance which clouded men's minds and shedding over them the light of knowledge in which the people of Europe have advanced so far before the other nations of the world" (qtd. in O'Hanlon 91).

Nautch was bound to be singled out by such periodicals for special condemnation. In 1832, the **Darpan** launched an attack on nautch: "...with Mussulmans and Parsies, as well as with Hindoos, Nautches are considered necessary, wherever the expense

can be afforded, to the celebration of rites **most** solemn; and with **Hindoos**, even those which are accounted most sacred are profaned and mixed up with such exhibitions" (qtd. in O'Hanlon 92). Several **journals** were started in Madras Presidency by missionaries or Hindu reformers, expressly in order to spread the message of **reform**.

By the end of the nineteenth century the missionary crusade against sadir and the practice of dedication was well under way. There had been a split in the ranks of the Hindu social reformers in Madras, the conservative faction parting company with the Enlightenment faction on the Age of Consent Bill. In 1892, William Miller took the second faction under his wing, helping set up the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association, which renewed the campaign to put an end to sadir. In May **1893**, Miller chaired a public meeting which officially inaugurated the anti-nautch movement, "an episode," as G.A. Oddie remarks, "which marked one of the high points of missionary-Hindu co-operation, at least in the south" (103).

In the same year a signature campaign was launched to stir up public feeling against sadir, especially among Europeans. The missionaries were particularly concerned about the backsliding of their own countrymen, since this could cause discontent among potential converts. A memorial addressed to the Governor General of India was signed by several anti-nautch agitators. Lord Curzon, as I have noted above, sent them a lukewarm and distinctly scornful response. Anti-nautch hopes were then pinned on the efforts of "certain ladies and gentlemen in England who **have** set themselves to ensure non-attendance of ...Government officials at nautch-parties" (**NNR**22, 1894). The Sasilekha of 16

Nov 1894 is reported to have said: "...when they have once undertaken the thing, the evil practices will soon be abolished" (NNR 22, 1894).

The missionary involvement with education gave them both an additional reason (apart from moral revulsion) and an opportunity to intervene in the lifestyle of devadasis. The education of the children of devadasis in mission schools was a subject of much controversy. Since '**respectable**' parents refused to place their female children in these schools, if it meant that they would have to share a classroom with devadasis, the taboos on female education were further reinforced, to the dismay of the **missionaries**. In fact the very idea of educating girls, associated as this was with devadasi culture, was repugnant to upper caste Indians. At the same time the mission-run schools and colleges became focal points from which anti-nautch discourse could spread. Miller, for example, was for many years Principal of the Madras Christian College and extended the college's goodwill and hospitality to the anti-nautch movement. This had a snowball effect. Raghupati Venkataratnam (1862-1939), who eventually helped launch the Social Purity campaign in Andhra, studied in the Madras Christian College during the Miller years and in turn taught at **Pachaiyappa's** College where he had a phenomenal influence on student opinion.

British women, some of them missionaries, also emerged as energetic anti-nautch spokespersons. Their role in India fitted into the larger effort being made at this time, in Britain, to **mobilize** women's philanthropy to solve the problems caused by Poverty and rapid industrialization. The list of problems women

were considered fit to handle included prostitution, naturally; but also the dismal condition of workhouses, poor public hygiene, **alcoholism**, single motherhood and so on. Women were believed to have a special part to play in rescuing other women; a dimly **proto-feminist** consciousness animated such efforts. Josephine Butler, one of **Reddi's** most important predecessors and role models, writes in a letter to her Countrywomen, "Dwelling in the Farmsteads and Cottages of England":

I daresay you all know that there are women, alas, thousands of women, in England who live by **sin....you** may have passed one such in the street and have shrunk aside, feeling it shame even to touch her; or perhaps, instead of scorn, a deep pity has filled your heart, and you have longed to take her hand, and to lead her back to a better and happier life. (151)

It has been argued that the experience middle class women gained in the course of these charitable works, and the political lessons they learnt, helped lay the groundwork for the Suffragette movement at the turn of the century. The notion of what was '**feminine**' came into play in the way women's '**missions**' operated--they had to display gentleness, endurance, self-control, modesty, and a certain amateurishness; but as Frank **Mort** points out, "**'feminine'** and feminist appropriations of evangelical religious morality proved especially important in Providing women with the voice to resist male professionals" (8). **Muthulakshmi** Reddi's own authoritative voice echoes the

confidence in the voices of doctor predecessors like Elizabeth **Blackwell** and Mrs. Mansell who called upon their Christian faith and their medical expertise at one stroke as they delineated the evils resulting from prostitution. Lecturing to a group of women on "Rescue Work in Relation to Prostitution and Disease," Elizabeth Blackwell begins with her **qualifications**: "... as a physician acquainted with the physiological and pathological laws of the human frame, and as one who has lived through a generation of medical practice amongst all classes of the community, I can speak to you with a positive and practical knowledge rarely possessed by women" (101); and ends with a rousing call to her audience of "Christian women" to overcome "the deep practical heathenism of our society--the heathenism of tolerating and protecting mercenary promiscuous sexual intercourse" (109).

These philanthropic efforts made by women were, however, often vitiated by their own tendency to moralize and to interfere in the lives of those they sought to help. The campaigners tended to belong to the middle classes, while the objects of their charity were working class women; the campaigns were inevitably conducted in such a way as to normalize middle class, usually evangelical values. For instance, Harriet **Martineau**, who opposed the Contagious Diseases Acts to regulate prostitution in 1863, did so on the grounds that these Acts "sanctioned vice." "There can be no resistance to seduction, **Procuration**, brothels, disease, and methods of regulation, when once the original necessity [for sexual contact] is granted" (89). Martineau cautioned against the granting of public money for "patronising and petting a class of sinners and sufferers

already provided for under the visitation of their **retribution**"(79) .

It must be noted, however, that all the women campaigners who provided models for **Muthulakshmi Reddi's anti-nautch efforts--Martineau**, Elizabeth **Blackwell**, Josephine Butler, Annie Besant--appealed at the same time to liberal and democratic values when they opposed the Contagious Diseases Acts. For instance, Butler points to the violation of justice implicit in the Acts, since "that has been ruled to be a crime in women which is not to be considered a crime in men" ("An Appeal" 113). Besant castigates the legislators for their breach of the "Anglo Saxon principle of liberty"; "I assert that the sacred right of individual liberty is grossly and shamefully outraged by this interference of government, and that, therefore, every soldier of liberty is bound to rise in protest against the insult offered to her" ("Legalisation of Female Slavery" 95). This liberal discourse, on the whole was not mobilized in favour of prostitutes and devadasis in India. Evangelical campaigners in India, confronted by the devadasi murai, reacted with predictable shock and outrage, and immediately started cleaning operations but these operations did not allow fully human status to the objects of reform.

Ashoke Chatterjee records that an "Englishwoman, Miss Tenant, came particularly from England to lead a crusade against temple dancers, gathering pledges from upper-class Indians that they would have nothing whatever to do with this anti-social evil" (5). Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller writes at length in The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood (1900) on the evils of nautch: "...that a temple, intended as a place of worship, ...should be so

polluted, and that in the name of religion, is almost beyond belief; and that Indian boys should grow up to manhood, accustomed to see immorality shielded in these temples with a divine cloak makes our hearts grow sick and faint" (120). The Victorian middle class ideology of family life is mined for emotive effect in several missionary accounts as is obvious from titles like J. Murdoch's Nautch Women: An Appeal to English Ladies on Behalf of their Indian Sisters (1893).

The moral pressure exerted by the missionaries began to produce results by the end of the nineteenth century despite relatively tolerant administrators like Wenlock and Curzon. Already during the visit of Prince Albert Victor in 1890, there were vociferous protests against his attendance at a sadir party; by 1900 it had become impossible to entertain visiting dignitaries with sadir performances. In 1902, T.E. Slater says in a speech at a missionary conference: "It was a noteworthy fact that throughout the tour of the Viceroy [Lord Curzon] in South India at the end of 1900, he was nowhere greeted by the dancing-girls, who used to be everywhere on railway platforms, in processions and at durbars" (qtd. in Oddie 107). Another Prince of Wales visited Madras in 1905 and was entertained with a programme that included "Herculean feats by **Ramamurti** (the Indian Sandow)," and "Magic and Conjuring by Professor **Swaminatha** Sastriar" but no sadir (**Ballhatchet**, 159). In the same year the Collector of Trichinopoly sent circulars to all **his** Divisional Officers requesting them to stop attending or encouraging nautch performances (**Sundar Raj**, 235).

By the 1920s and **30s**, the vengeance of anti-nautch public opinion was complete: even visitors who wished to see sadir

performances for the most unexceptionable reasons were disappointed. "There are no schools of dancing in India and it is an art in which nobody is interested," writes Victor Dandre after the tour his wife Anna Pavlova made of South India in **1922** (qtd. in **Khokar** 102). The American dancers Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn expressed a desire to see Indian dance "whenever our Hindu or Muslim hosts asked what they could do for **us...but** they were all embarrassed, and many said they had never seen any dancing in their lives" (qtd. in Khokar 102-03).

2) Loss of Patronage

Taking all these facts into consideration, then, it seems correct to say that the colonial government did not, until the early twentieth century, directly interfere with the lives of devadasis. Indeed one of the very few administrative measures taken against them in the nineteenth century appears to have been a half-baked plan to impose income tax on the devadasis of **Tirumangalam**, in view of "their excessive income" (**Sundar Raj**, 219). However no institution or practice in British-ruled India was entirely unaffected by colonial rule, and sadir was no exception. Its position in Hindu social life was indirectly weakened by colonial rule; this factor, along with the change in attitudes wrought by the anti-naught rhetoric, made the dispersal and impoverishment of the devadasi community inevitable.

The devadasis who bore the brunt of the changes that followed the transfer of power from Indian rulers to the colonial government were those dependent on princely patronage. The system fell into desuetude in many of the earlier centres of

the arts, not so much as a result of direct colonial intervention as from the general decline of the fortunes of these native states. For one thing, the inland towns declined in importance after the British administration was centralized in port towns like Madras. For another, the princely states, drained of revenues by the colonial power, gradually withdrew their support to temples and to temple and court functionaries like devadasis. By 1799 the revenues of Thanjavur, for instance, went entirely to the British; with its formal annexation in 1856, one of the few surviving princely patrons of the arts was no longer in a position to offer a living or a platform to devadasi performers.

Smaller courts like Ettayapuram and Pudukottai, and relatively prosperous states like Mysore temporarily offered hospitality to displaced devadasis. but eventually themselves succumbed to the pressure of the anti-nautch movement and prohibited the performance of sadir and the rite of dedication. The Pudukottai Raja prohibited the performance of nautch in private homes in 1892 and enfranchised devadasi manjams in 1930, releasing their possessors from their ritual duties. The Mysore Maharaja "purified all the temples [in his state] by driving out the dancing girls attached to them" in 1893; though with magnificent disregard for consistency he presented his royal person at several sadir performances subsequently. As a reporter for the Karnataka Prakasika maliciously remarked: "...those who expected that the Diwan and His Highness the Maharaja of Mysore would countenance the anti-nautch movement must have been sorely disappointed because at the marriage that took place...at the Diwan's house a nautch party was held at which His Highness the

Maharaja was present. It is foolish on the part of the anti-nautch agitationists to invoke the aid of Government in matters in which they must depend on themselves for any reform" (NNR 1893, 159). But the nautch virtually died out in Mysore after an order in 1910 prohibiting devadasi service (Sundar Raj, 235).¹³

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, therefore, and with increased momentum in the early twentieth, devadasi families took the only feasible option left to them: they migrated to the port cities and the new metropolitan centres established by the colonial government. Patronage now had a wholly new face for these dispossessed **devadasis**. In place of the aristocratic, learned, deeply appreciative protection of scholar- princes like the **Marathas** (of Thanjavur) and the **Wodeyars** (of Mysore), they had to depend on a class of wealthy merchants, zamindars, and occasionally, **professionals**, who had no particular partiality or passion for the arts. What the devadasis lived through, in other words, was the loss of an entire support **system--an** ethos for learning and perpetuating an art that had once had unquestioned symbolic and ritual **significance--as** well as of an audience alive to the **semiotic** nuances of their **performances**.

For the most part, however, upto the early twentieth century, devadasis attached to the temples continued to perform their tasks uninterrupted and those who enjoyed steady secular patronage continued to do so. The elimination of devadasis from temple ritual took place at an uneven pace over different parts of South India, though more rapidly everywhere after the 1920s. Even as the devadasi tradition declined in places like

Thanjavur, it was strengthened in places like Thiruvavarur and Cheyyur; indeed a famous scholar of the latter town, Cheyyur Chengalvaraya Sastri (1810-1900) actually developed a cycle of performance for the devadasia of the Cheyyur temple in the mid-nineteenth century. In most temples in Tamil Nadu devadasis continued to be called upon for traditional duties such as kumbha arathi (waving the pot-lamp), carrying consecrated water, inaugurating and offering ritual protection to temple processions, and so on.

In secular homes, devadasis continued to be important participants in social functions and rites of passage. Apart from giving sadir recitals on these occasions, devadasis in their role as nityasumangalis, performed such duties as stringing the bride's thali at weddings, singing or intoning certain ritually required verses; by their presence, they warded off the 'evil **eye**' and brought luck. Until the near disappearance of the ethos that sustained such ritual, devadasis were never quite redundant, and had their supporters right upto the time their community disintegrated.

Though the first signs of the decay of the devadasi community appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, there are also clear indications, around this time, of their continued power and prestige. I have mentioned one such indication above: the number of lawsuits in which devadasis prosecuted temple or secular authorities for the neglect of their '**rights.**' Customary rights and privileges had not been entirely eroded by the mobilisation of public opinion against the devadasi system; it was still expected that these rights would be respected and this expectation was still enforceable by law. Evidently these

devadasis were tenacious of their rights not merely because their incomes depended on them but also because they derived their social status and their pride in their independence from these rights. **Significantly**, some of them argued in a petition to the government that they did not want their maniam lands granted to them free: "...we venture to ask as to why our children and their children should be deprived of their means of honest living and reciprocal religious service" (G.O. 4079, 8, emphasis mine). Even at the turn of the century, then, many devadasis continued to be property-holders, and narratives about penurious devadasis who turned to prostitution (a favourite theme in later literature) were still very rare. The extent of their wealth can be inferred from the anxiety the devadasis themselves displayed (after the 1878 enforcement of **IPC** Sections 372-373) about the question of adoption. The anxiety had to do with inheritance; would devadasi lands which customarily passed down only in the female line revert to the Government if there were no female children?

Devadasis appear in the fiction of the late nineteenth century as seductresses and deceivers who siphon away the wealth of helpless men; in these representations they are more impoverishing than impoverished. More than one unscrupulous dancing-girl appears in **Krupabai Sattianadhan's** English novel Kamala (1894); one plot of the Tamil novel Dasigalin Mosavalai (The Trap of the Dasis) written in 1936 by **Ramanirtham Ammaiyar**, herself a devadasi, narrates the story of a foolish younger son of a wealthy **man** who is milked of his inheritance by a devadasi.

The Twentieth Century: Nation Building, Patriarchy and Class Formation

1) Rescuing the Wretches: National Self-Definition and The Woaan Question

Missionary polemics against sadir gave way to the rhetoric of social reform at the turn of the century, and the Nautch Question from this point onwards has to be seen within the problematic of national self-determination and reform; i.e., of the simultaneously occurring processes of nation-building and class-caste formation. The Nautch Question was a late developer as social issues went, becoming a full-blown controversy only in the 1890s; the nineteenth century was the era of social reform. The trajectories of debate on most issues, as I have suggested above, were fixed by the way the various reform movements had recast Hindu practices in this century, and to place the question of sadir in the context of reform, I want to backtrack a little, to the mid-nineteenth century.

Controversies erupted everywhere in the nineteenth century. The ferment of the times opened up the meanings of '**tradition**' and '**modernity**' for contestation in an unprecedented way. The revision of the meanings of these terms involved two tasks. First, a pan-Indian '**tradition**' in keeping with the norms of 'civilized societies' had to be invented, even if this meant displacing authentic--or at any rate, less dramatically **refashioned--traditions** that were still in place in pockets all over the country. Cultural and moral norms were redefined in accordance with the values of the class (upper caste/bourgeois) **most** closely identified with the colonizers; naturally, these norms chimed better with those of the British middle-class **than** **with** those of Hindu orthodoxy. Secondly, in a context in which

the unequal balance of power between colonizer and colonized **was** an inescapable reality, and in which the reified relations of commerce had begun to invade everyday life, a space had to be set aside where 'essential Indian **culture**' could be preserved inviolate. This space, as I shall explain below, was the domestic sphere. Cultural production itself was consecrated to the demarcation and safeguarding of this sphere, and was in a sense identified with it, as I suggested in the last chapter. Thus **Rukmini** Devi, for instance, making social reform and dance permeable to each other, symbolically positioned the dancer's body in the domestic space, as an aspect of its **beautification** or of the materialization of motherhood; mothering and the pursuit of beauty, conversely, were services to the nation.

The requirements of a pan-Indian tradition tended to coincide with those of a 'modern' nation in that both required a certain standardization. The process of classifying Indian populations and practices and standardizing public behaviour had, as everyone knows, been started under the pressures of colonial rule. Bringing an entire nation under a single juridical authority, which itself was dedicated to the protection of private property, required that diverse practices and lifestyles be described, documented and--often violently--slotted into manageable categories. The decennial Census was obviously one way of doing this. Practices that failed to mesh with the norms of citizenship in the modern nation-state had to be '**reformed**'; cultural differences tended to be ironed out. One of the problems that Census officials kept encountering in dealing with the devadasis was that of their 'marital status':

how was this to be described? Another problem was their ownership of property, which was perceived as irregular, since most Hindu women had no property rights. Regularization of these relationships and rights was part of the subtext of social reform.

It was impossible to stray near the borders of any nineteenth century controversy about culture or tradition without stumbling against 'the woman **question.**' As many writers have noted, the importance of this question to nationalists lay in the fact that it was the test case for the assertion of their cultural parity with the colonizers and, consequently, for the affirmation of national **self-sufficiency**. Relentlessly keeping the focus on certain highly restrictive, obscurantist and often brutal prohibitions and customs prevalent among the upper castes (**sati**, child marriage, enforced celibacy for widows, and so on), the woman question was a reminder, to both colonizers and their subjects, of the backwardness of the Hindus, of their unpreparedness for self-government and citizenship under a democratic order.

Like all the other '**issues**' that tested nationalist resources, the woman question had to be resolved in such a way that patriarchal power was not seriously threatened. The status of **women--or** of those women who were 'visible,' and the **devadasis** certainly fitted into this class, though for the wrong **reasons--had** to manifestly improve; but the authority of men had to be kept intact. When the status-of-women problem was placed alongside the problem of a viable tradition that would ensure the continuity of upper-caste male dominance, the result was the ideology of the domestic sphere. Thus the process of recasting

traditional patriarchal power for the purposes of modernity normalized **companionate** marriage and the domestic woman, and required the separation of the Home from the World. This crucial demarcation, and the conservation of the private realm as the space where the power of **colónized** men would remain unthreatened was an essential clause in the unspoken pact between the colonizers and the class that was both their collaborator and their enemy. To understand the enormous charge attached to the role of women in the symbolic order of nationalism, we need to place it in the context of this demarcation.

Since the woman-as-citizen was identified with the Home, the creation of the national-modern was a process that necessarily circumscribed the **role--and** the sexuality--of women. When the 'rational' ideal of the domestic woman as citizen was mobilized in tandem with the psychologically charged fantasy of nation-as-mother, it becomes obvious why female sexuality had to be controlled, regulated, reinscribed as motherhood or companionship, effaced from the public realm; and why asexual femininity had to be set up as exemplary.

The valorizing of chastity was also in accord with the gender ideology widely accepted in Britain in its own strongly nationalist phase during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. British anxieties about miscegenation, freshly formulated medical principles, and evangelical Christianity all reinforced this ideology. For instance: William Acton, who Played a key role in building England's public health system between 1850 and 1870, took women's careers outside the home to **be** signs of abominable female recalcitrance. Women who work, he avers, have no time to be "soothers of man's woes," and cause

"the most acute sexual suffering" (65-66). He wonders aloud what British educators should do with women: "The ready answer **is--TEACH THEM HOUSEWIFERY....** The vanity of girls and mothers must, it is true, be overcome, but the greater economy of the proposed education would go some way to carry the day in its favour..." (48).

The good woman, on the authority of both the church and the medical **establishment**, was the domestic woman, the angel in the house. The Hindu social reformers accepted and reproduced this ideology in India, with mixed results for women. The Stri Dharma, official organ of the Women's India Association, and edited for many years by **Muthulakshmi Reddi**, printed in every issue a manifesto that exemplifies these mixed results. On the one hand, it set itself to secure equal education for female and male children, and to secure for women the vote on the same terms as it was granted to men; on the other hand, it stated its intention "to help Women to realise that the future of India lay largely, in their hands: for as wives and mothers they have the task of training, guiding and forming the character of the future rulers of India" (Stri Dharma 1932, 1; emphasis mine).

The twist added to the model of public and private spheres, when it was used by the **nationalists**, was the introduction of the element of a distinctly eastern '**spirituality**,' identified with the Home and with Woman. The importance of female sexual **purity** was in direct proportion to the vehemence with which spirituality was alleged to be an essentially **Indian** trait, the feature most sharply distinguishing our culture from that of the **materialistic** West. And to the extent that spirituality was alleged to be not just a female trait, but a characteristically

Indian one, it gave positive value to the subject position of the colonized man as well, a subject position represented by the colonizers and psychologically experienced by colonized men as a feminine one.

The figure of the devadasi, of course, broke down the nationalist equation between home (essential India/woman/spirituality) and world (white man/deviant Indian woman/materiality). If the modern order depended on the creation of private and public spheres, with women being confined to, and representative of, the former, and being the repositories of spiritual values, then the devadasi committed offences against this order on three counts: a sexual transgression, since her sexual skills were publicly acknowledged and were even a matter of some pride; an economic transgression, since she was propertied and independent, thus taking over the function reserved for men in this order; and a religious transgression, since she was the remnant of a certain **this-worldly** approach to religion, centred on the temple as a replica of the royal court, which disturbed the **identification** between Indian spirituality and **other-worldliness**. Her presence was the site of the convergence of religion (Hindu agamic or cultic ritual), art (sadir, Carnatic music) and the economy (**feudal** patronage or concubinage). To counter this deplorable symbolic convergence, genealogies were written portraying her as a 'nun' in ancient times; the talk was always of the degradation of a practice that used to be **otherwise**.¹⁹

Since a reinvented Hindu culture was of considerable strategic importance in the struggle for cultural hegemony, the interface between Hindu religious practice and deviant female

sexuality, in the devadasi **murai**, made cultural nationalists particularly vulnerable to attack. In fact, reference to the disordered and retrograde sexualities of Hindus, as exemplified by the devadasi ethos, was as anxiety-producing for nationalists as the critique of practices like **sati** and child marriage. Both Christian missionaries and atheistic, rationalist Indian movements like the Suya Mariyathai **Iyakkam** constantly irritated this tender spot.

The debate on Katherine Mayo's Mother India, published in the crucial year 1927--the year in which **Muthulakshmi Reddi** brought in her first version of the Bill to prevent the dedication of girls to temples--is a case in point. Mayo, an American visitor to India, combined travel writing of a particularly sensational kind with sustained **lampooning** of Indian nationalist aspirations. Mother India was concerned with making what may be called **the** sexual argument for the continuance of empire: **ostensibly** an argument about the rampant sexual **desire** of Indian men and its horrible **consequences--child** abuse in **marriage**, gynaecological diseases, purdah, cruelty to women, unskilled midwifery. But at a deeper level, the book was a narrative about men who, debilitated by their own consuming desires and self-indulgence, had become too effeminate to save their languishing Mother India. "Inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigour itself--all are the traits that truly characterize the Indian not only to-day but of long past history," Mayo writes, "[h]is soul and body are indeed chained in slavery. But he himself wields and hugs his chains and defends them" (24).

Both sets of images—those depicting female suffering and those depicting male **impotence--were** intended to damage the nationalist cause, and as such were calculated to infuriate the nationalists in the context of the status-of-women debates. No fewer than half a dozen members of the Legislative Council in the November session of 1927 made references to 'Miss Mayo's book' in the course of discussion on the anti-nautch Motion moved by **Muthulakshmi Reddi**. Mr. Syed Ibrahim suggests to his '**enlightened** Hindu Brethren' that it is only because

the institution of Devadasis is being tolerated by the Hindu society that the true Hindu religion is in danger of attack, not only by missionary religious bodies in this country, but also by mischievous non-entities hailing from far off countries, who pose as reformers of humanity. I am referring particularly to the attacks of Miss **Katherine** Mayo**Unless** the Hindus with one voice rise and do away with this social canker and social leprosy of the institution of Devadasis, I am afraid the whole world, not merely a Miss Mayo, has got the right, nay, duty, to hold the finger of scorn against India, Hinduism and Hindus. (PMLC 1927, 523)

Mr. Ibrahim's Hindu brethren were already shrinking back from **the** finger of scorn: "Why should we sanctify vice by giving it

the cloak of a religious custom and allow persons like Miss Mayo to hold us up to ridicule...? " Mr. A.B. **Shetty--obviously** well schooled in missionary rhetoric--demanded of the Council (PMLC 1927, 519).

One obvious reason for the anxiety of the male legislators was Mayo's direct attack on their 'manhood,' against the background of a widely circulated belief that sexual excess meant loss of the virility of the entire race. No less a person than Annie Besant made such statements as the following: "National morality and national health go hand-in-hand; a vicious nation will be a weak **nation**....the wide prevalence of prostitution is ruinous to the physique of a nation" ("Legalisation of Female Slavery" 94-95). Many Hindu members of the Council registered cautious agreement with sentiments such as these. Muthulakshmi Reddi did not forget to mention Miss Mayo (PMLC 1927, 512), and the Women's India Association met in 1927 to condemn her unsubstantiated arguments.

The anger and defensiveness of the legislators are very interesting when one considers the fact that only about a page of Mother India is devoted specifically to the **devadasis**. The remainder of Mayo's purple prose is intended to highlight sexual abuse within married life, especially within the married life of upper caste Hindus. The anxious and apologetic reactions of the Legislative Council members, it is plain, exemplify a process of displacement: the discussion scapegoats the **devadasis**, repressing the entire question of the ethical dubiousness of all the other Hindu practices described by Miss Mayo. "The abolition of this custom will prevent the existence of at least one source of adverse comment from persons like Miss Mayo," says Mr.

Krishnan Nayar, hopefully, omitting to consider the dozen other abuses Miss Mayo lingers over so lovingly (PMLC 1927, 522).

Faced with the accusation, by a foreigner, of moral cowardice, the Council members came back with the mandatory references to ancient Indian spiritual traditions: "It is impossible to understand how this immorality is sanctioned in such a land, which can boast of innumerable saints, sages and rishis**Are** we, whose ancestors have practised the highest ideals of sexual purity which human nature is capable of and had attained the utmost height of spirituality, to be left behind and pointed out as a morally backward race? " (PMLC 1927, 516). Thus Muthulakshmi Reddi in an impassioned appeal to the Council.

Annie Besant had already prepared the ground for figuring the original devadasi as the Indian equivalent of the Roman vestal virgin or the Christian nun. Legislative Council members wishing to quell Miss Mayo eagerly seized upon and developed this interpretation. Muthulakshmi Reddi hints at the existence of "authentic records to prove these Dasi girls were pure virgins spending their time in religious study, meditation and devotional service akin to the Roman Catholic nun of the present **day**". During the 1927 session Mr. P. Anjaneyulu claims that the devadasis "were originally sent to be brought up in an atmosphere of purity and religion and innocence" (PMLC 1927, 518); and C.N. Muthuranga Mudaliar seconds him: "I emphatically contend that our religion does not sanction this dedication to our temples of prostitutes. It is only a lately grown up custom.... the Devadasis were originally maidens who took a vow **of** celibacy" (PMLC 1927, 521).

An ideology of gender that identified the spiritual with

the feminine and the domestic was both materially and psychically satisfying to upper caste, modernizing, mainstream nationalists, since it complemented their anxiety about caste 'purity.' The use of the giveaway term '**social** purity' to describe the goals of anti-sadir and anti-liquor lobbying in Andhra during the nineteenth century may be read as a sign of the overlapping interests and anxieties (about patriarchy, about ritual purity, about the potential for promiscuous or intercaste relationships in the wake of modernization, about colonial rule) that made brahmin nationalists so puritanical about public morals. As Raghupati Venkataratnam, father of the Social Purity movement, summed it up, "the maintenance of purity in the relations of the sexes is vital to national greatness and prosperity."

The requirements of purity were, predictably, much more rigid with regard to women than with regard to men, who were allowed the customary licence in these matters. The campaign therefore focused on the devadasis. as such social purges tend to do; though their male patrons were given stern admonitions, their privacy and livelihoods were not put at risk. The '**good**' women were clearly set apart from the 'bad' ones; there was no longer room for flexibility or confusion in this area.

The badness of '**bad**' women--the existence of deviants like the devadasis--remained to be accounted for in a way that did not jeopardize the picture of India as nourishing chastely spiritual ideals. The '**essentialist**' explanation involved outright rejection of the deviants: nothing was wrong with essentially Indian women. Those who followed primitive customs, or those who tolerated sexual promiscuity were not '**us**,' they

were '**others**,' repugnant even in 'our' eyes. Thus '**we**,' honest and virtuous Indian women, could be separated from 'them,' the relevadasis (among others: tribal women, lower-caste women, erring women of all kinds), who barely deserved to be granted human status, who had to be made to learn the merest **fundamentals** of human self-esteem. The '**historical**' extension of this argument was, of course, that the much debated evils were introduced into a pristine and gracious Hindu ethos by barbarous invaders. Set in this narrative, the devadasis were represented as not **embodying** Indian tradition at all, but as aberrations engendered when foreign invasions caused a gradual corruption of their (once-holy, once-celibate) **order**.

Social reform as a mode (as I will suggest in the section on class formation below) allowed the reformers to take up the woman question while discursively maintaining their own distance from the culture that was being attacked, and emphasizing the otherness of the practices under siege. Child marriage, prostitution and other issues were considered the proper objects of campaigns intended to bring women into the fold of modernity. The anti-nautch ideologue Kandukuri Veeresalingam, by the end of the nineteenth century, and certainly **Muthulakshmi** Reddi by the beginning of the 1920s could assume, as they stirred up anti-sadir feeling, that everybody who mattered was familiar with the idea of '**social** evils,' especially in association with the status of women. Most of the anti-nautchers were seasoned campaigners in the battleground of reform: Veeresalingam in the anti-liquor and anti-nautch Social Purity movement in Andhra; Besant, in Britain, in the campaign for women's free access to contraception; Reddi in campaigns for women's suffrage,

education for girl children, medical reform in government hospitals, widow remarriage, the raising of the age of consent and so on.

In a sense, the term '**feminist**,' though it was seldom used as a self-description, might be applied retrospectively to the campaigners in these issues. By the early decades of the twentieth century, organizations like the Women's India Association, set up in Madras by Annie Besant and other Theosophists, and led by Muthulakshmi **Reddi** for many years, were self-consciously demanding the recognition of women's right to equality with men, and this is reminiscent of the demand that emerged around the time of the French revolution, for the extension of the sphere of rights to include women: a demand that, as **Olympe** de Gouges or Mary Wollstonecraft made it, inaugurated the feminist project in Europe. Another important model for **Reddi's** womanly evangelism on the nautch question was Josephine Butler's campaign, in mid-Victorian Britain, against the Contagious Diseases Acts. But as Cora Kaplan points out in Sea Changes, while at one level this feminism made audacious claims on women's behalf, it was also peculiarly class-bound, indelibly marked by its own middle class origin. **Wollstonecraft** addressed herself to the creation of the middle class heroine of the revolutionary age; Butler's involvement with the Chartist movement as well as with the Social Purity movement was paradigmatic; Besant and Reddi campaigned for women's right to the vote but in the name of middle class motherhood. 'Feminism' in the Indian instance was a stray cross-current in the otherwise well-regulated flow of social reform.

What set the devadasi issue apart from the other issues

covered by 'the woman question,' and even from the issue of prostitution, however, was the fact that the **victimhood** of the devadasi was in serious doubt. The kind of access to literacy, **skill**, self-government, property ownership and personal freedom the devadasis enjoyed until the beginning of the twentieth century, would not normally have called forth either pity or reformist zeal. Nor, within the precolonial social system, was there any reason to look upon the devadasi as '**degraded**': the institution of dedication marked her off from other women as worthy of special honour, both for her ritual status and for her art; she was sought after as a participant in temple rituals and in religious ceremonies in private homes. No blame attached to either partner in the devadasi-patron relationship; indeed, it was expected that men of a certain status would patronize both the devadasi and her dance, making of this relationship something normative rather than deviant. As far as the temple was concerned, the devadasi "acted as a conduit for honour, divine acceptance and competitive reward at the same time that she invited 'investment,' economic, political and spiritual in the deity" (Srinivasan, 1870).

Given the lack of agreement between the devadasis' epistemic horizon and our own one, and the opacity of their subjectivities to subjects socialized into the national-modern ethos, value judgements about their status and **self-perception** are virtually ruled out. But however one assesses the actual facts of their lives, the course of anti-nautch legislation itself, marked as it is by a certain slackness for many decades, suggests that the condition of the devadasis was at least not as **object** as that of satis, that of child widows or that of child

prostitutes. Though the first decades of the twentieth century saw measures being taken by the Imperial Legislative Council to curb the practice of dedication, each of the resolutions or Bills circulated on this subject was allowed to lapse. The outbreak of the First World War aborted one set of initiatives; lack of time ended another; a third faded away into oblivion in the hands of an inactive Select Committee. Most of the anti-nautch measures proposed by the government proved ineffective. Almost until 1940, there was opposition to the idea of an anti-nautch Act from certain prominent though isolated political figures who drew heavily on sastric injunctions to support their arguments, and on a conception of tradition that had become outmoded.

1927 was the year in which the nautch debate, moribund since the turn of the century, was **revived--this** time in the Madras Legislative Council. This body had already witnessed some desultory and inconclusive discussions on the Nautch Question; but members who were unconvinced by the anti-nautch arguments and those who wished to delay actual anti-nautch legislation had acted as a counterweight to those who, like Muthulakshmi **Reddi**, had been eager to see an anti-nautch Bill passed. Certain events of 1927 dramatically changed the mood of the Council and tipped the scale in favour of legislation: the launching of '**Periyar**' E.V. Ramaswami Naicker's Suya Mariyathai **Iyakkam** (Self-Respect Movement), and the publication of **Katherine Mayo's** Mother India; but probably more crucial than either of these, Muthulakshmi **Reddi's** sustained and ultimately successful effort to convince the Council that the devadasis **were** indeed unhappy victims of a cruel social system. Though

Reddi's Bill to prevent dedication became an Act only in 1947, its material effects began to show when the devadasis' ethos, already eroded by the loss of patronage and by the advent of capitalist relations, became a burning political question; when public opinion about the practice of dedication, still so divided between acceptance and condemnation in the 1920s, became, by the mid '30s, practically unanimous.

Public conscience was pricked into protest by Reddi's exceptionally effective use of the language of **victimhood** to describe the devadasis' lifestyles. She was not the first to use this language; its strategic importance had been evident to the missionaries, and later to the social reformers. Some labour went into the honing of the narrative of victimhood, since what most people might have seen as agency had to be recast as helplessness. Independent women who were workers in their own right could not be depicted as requiring 'rescue.' The polemicists, therefore, vehemently insisted that the daughters of devadasis were utterly unhappy and much put upon. This insistence was not entirely a matter of bad faith: both the medical discourse of the time and the ideology of the Victorian middle class held that sexual agency was incompatible with femininity. The fact that the devadasis as a community customarily invited sexual relationships (rather than acquiesced in them, as the far more abject upper-caste girl-bride was bound to do) had to be interpreted as sexual exploitation **by** men **of** the devadasis: once this was established, the devadasis could be saved by right-thinking people. Throughout the anti-nautch campaign, and especially in the speeches of **Muthulakshmi** Reddi, **we** have the recurrent motif of 'rescue': upper caste,

enlightened people saving the devadasis from priests, from patrons, from older women in their community, from disease, from sin, from themselves.

To stress the irony of this vocabulary of '**rescue**' is not to romanticise the devadasi, transforming her into a sexually liberated woman in the post-sixties sense, but to point out that arguments about agency, used against a group of women who were relatively independent of the familial, economic, legal and ideological constraints operating on upper caste women in general, are suspect, to say the least, especially in a context in which the free flow of sexual desire was not encouraged in any woman.²⁸

The use of the language of **victimhood**, the reiteration of the they-know-not-what-they-do message, was what brought the devadasi issue into alignment with other kinds of social evil. It was also a polite cover for the hostility that resulted from the forcible discursive **identification** of devadasis with prostitutes. Once the devadasi was identified with the '**common**' prostitute, she became not so much victim as social deviant, and the target of strong middle class hostility. The ostracism she faced was disguised **punishment**, therefore, for her **offence** against the moral order relevant to reform. This **identification** of devadasi with prostitute and the animus it mobilized was what actually accounted for the anti-nautch success story.

2) **From Devadasi to Prostitute: Medico-Moral Regulation**

When the devadasi was designated a 'prostitute,' her lifestyle came within the purview of the updated medical science of Victorian Britain as applied in India, **and** of **its** concrete

offshoot, the public health system. Throughout the nineteenth century, in Britain as well as in India, there were dramatic developments in the field of medical science, especially in the area of women's health. An enormous body of medical literature about women--about their reproductive physiology and sexual urges, their nervous susceptibilities, their psychological traits, their mental illnesses, their life-cycle **changes--was** being churned out by 'experts' of every description. This medical discourse engendered, alongside verifiable facts about female **biology**, a plethora of ridiculous and often pernicious myths about women and about sexual difference; but since it had the status of science, and since it was assimilated to the projects of modernity, the entire package was sacrosanct. There was no questioning its impartiality, truth or benevolence.

Sexology was a newly instituted branch of this medical literature. The nineteenth century sexologists may be seen as falling into two camps, one focusing on the connections between sexuality and culture (especially in the area of religious practice) and the other highlighting the public danger of sexual deviance. In the work of **Krafft-Ebing** and especially of Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, religious feeling and mythology--even '**civilization**' itself--were seen as extensions, sublimations, or displacements of sexual drives. This set of connections was further reinforced by anthropologists and scholars of comparative mythology; they were set out most exhaustively, of course, in James Frazer's classic The Golden Bough. This body of theories to some extent naturalized what came to be called religious prostitution, by the accretion **of cross** cultural Parallels including the Egyptian and the Greek. Though these

sexologists defined normality through the description of deviance, they did perceive sexual drives as existing on a continuum from the normal to the abnormal, and their output tended to be tolerant of deviance.

It was, however, the apocalyptic discourse of public danger, irrevocable moral degeneration, venereal disease, and racial decrepitude as a result of unregulated prostitution that prevailed outside these circles, especially among medical professionals who advised the government on policy. The public health system was being regularized in Britain, under the supervision of William Acton, among others, and it was waiting for just such a discourse to justify its authority and interventionist!.

The colonial government in India tried to regulate the sexuality of 'common' prostitutes in the lal bazaars of cantonment towns, because there appeared to be some connection between the free flow of their favours and the startlingly high incidence of venereal disease in the British army. The connection was never quite established beyond dispute, but statistics flew back and forth between the colonial administrators and Her Majesty's government back in Britain. Some sort of decision had to be reached, since there was a matter of economics involved: the British army incurred vast expenditure, both within Britain and in the colonies, controlling venereal disease in the armed forces. The 'lock hospital' system was a hotly contested case in point: the ~~foratible~~ confinement of prostitutes was strongly urged by Anglo-~~Indian~~ officials writing to the British Government; despatches ~~from Her~~ Majesty's government sometimes approved the measure and

sometimes pointed to the inhumanity of compulsory quarantining.

The themes of racial purity and social contamination by venereal disease were pretty thoroughly ventilated throughout this period from the medico-moral point of view and with reference to lal bazaar prostitutes. The rhetoric became especially persuasive when it became necessary to justify the Indian Contagious Diseases Act, passed in 1868, to regulate the movements and bodies of such prostitutes. The Friend of India in 1870

provided unctuous reassurance. Those in charge of Lock hospitals were 'medical men, enthusiastic, sternly and gravely enthusiastic in their profession.' At the Calcutta Lock Hospital there could not be seen 'anything to call forth an improper thought or anything to degrade the women subject to the Act. There is cleanliness, fresh air, proper treatment, sometimes character raised, and very frequently life saved.' (Ballhatchet 44)

There was also compulsory medical examination, forcible confinement and treatment of women found to be infected, and **mandatory** registration of prostitutes and brothels. The talk of fresh air and soul-saving, however, presented medical science and medical legislation in an entirely altruistic and benevolent light; there was, it seemed, no application of force here--and **if** there was, it was so patently for the benefit of the fallen women that no one could object to it. Medical science's own

potential for malice and sexism was entirely unacknowledged.

Given these developments, Muthulakshmi Reddi could capitalize on her authority as a 'western' doctor when she used the racial purity and medical arguments against the devadasi community, and she could take it for granted that her audience knew and valued the benign influence of science. By the turn of the century, for the class she represented, 'education' meant a modern scientific education in English; Reddi herself was proud of her achievements and believed that education should reach all women. The traditional skills and scholarship of the devadasis were by now at such a low premium that Reddi could make a very effective contrast between the 'uneducated' devadasis and the "enlightened section of the aggrieved communities . . . whose rightly developed moral sense naturally revolts at the practice [of dedication]. . .; and [whose] . . . persuasive methods and educative propaganda work among those illiterate" required government support (PMLC 1927, 415). The suggestion that large sections of the devadasi community were 'illiterate' was particularly ironic when one recalls that devadasi girls were among the tiny number of female children who had any formal education in India.

The South India Devadasi Association, by the 1930s, was itself persuaded to accept the distinction between the enlightened and the traditional sections of the community: "We beg to state that even amongst us, social improvements in the modern sense are dawning.... Many get married and get absorbed in Society as Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddi herself is an example for the same" (G.O. 3210, 16). Reddi, herself the daughter of a devadasi, may have had very personal anxieties about her origins

that were expressed in her strictures against the community; but integration into '**Society**' so generally signified a modern education and a regular marriage that no one thought of **Reddi** as overreacting to the irregularity of devadasi lifestyles.

Reddi's audience, at any rate, did not dream of questioning the medical side of her polemic:

...modern science has proved that continence is conducive to the health and well-being of the individual, the family, and the future race, and that sexual immorality just like any other antisocial habit like theft, drink, and murder is productive of much harm to the individual and to the community. Statistics in other civilized countries reveal that venereal disease, the produce of sexual promiscuity, is responsible for more than 50 per cent of the child blindness and deafness and for a large percentage of insanes and imbeciles in the country and for many of the disabling diseases such as paralysis, liver, kidney and heart disease in the old as well as in the young. In women it accounts for 50 to 75 per cent of abortions, miscarriages, sterility and is the chief cause of most of the gynec disorders of our family women. Above all it is a racial poison--capable of being

transmitted to one's children the second or even the third generation. (PMLC 1927, 515)

Muthulakshmi Reddi more than any other anti-nautch activist insisted that 'devadasi' was synonymous with '**prostitute**,' and she was undoubtedly conscious of the consequences of doing so. The repercussions this created for the devadasi community demonstrate the efficacy of the strategy. Apart from a general social revulsion from their cause, these consequences included, concretely, the abrupt cessation of legal and governmental leniency towards their community. By the 1930s, neither the colonial government nor the general public was willing to grant them the special status they had traditionally enjoyed. As long as they were considered as belonging in a class by themselves, they were not subject to the inimical **officiousness** of the public health authorities; once the public identified them, as they did 'common' prostitutes, with disease and with danger to public hygiene, they became vulnerable to the same level of interference as prostitutes. The government went ahead with legislation (discussed below) which assumed that devadasis were indeed prostitutes. The first consequence of this was the surveillance of devadasis under the Madras Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1930. The police conducted raids on devadasi households, took some of their occupants away by force, confined them in '**homes**' and generally subjected this once **powerful** community of women to harassment and humiliation. "The Present state is so terrible," the devadasis pleaded, "that if we have a separate **place...to** colonize one would adopt the course. But we do not **want...to** leave the **Punya-Bhumi** or

Bharata-Bhumi of which we hope we still are the shining ornaments" (G.O. 3210, 8). And again: "We beg to **submit--Could** it be the intention of anyone to crush **us--to** wipe **us--completely** out of existence...?" (G.O. 3210, 12).

The **identification** of devadasis with prostitutes had to be carried through in direct contradiction to the devadasis' own self-descriptions and in defiance of many people's perceptions. The devadasis themselves were at pains to emphasize their distinctness from prostitutes. In the memorial that the South India Devadasi Association sent to the government in **1927**, they offered the following definition of their identity:

The community which dedicates their women to temple service are known as DEVADASIS. It is a compound of two words God and Devotee and means the devotee of God. Dasi is the feminine of the word Dasa occurring in such words as **Ramadasa**. Popularly our caste is styled by the name of dancing girls probably due to the reason that most of our caste women are experts in dancing and music. Such a hoary name is now **unfortunately** mingled up and associated with an immoral life. It would, we submit, be easily conceded by every one that the institution of dedicating one's life to a temple has nothing to do with prostitution. This is not merely our own **self-glorified opinion....**no less a person than **Mr. Justice Muthusamy Iyer...laid** down in a

case...'that it should not...in the case of dancing girls be confounded with prostitution which is neither its essential condition nor necessary consequence.' (G.O. 4079, 2)³³

"Hence," say the devadasis. "we make bold to question the implied identification of Devadasis with prostitutes" (G.O. 4079, 3). In the 1939 memorial they say again that they "...beg to emphasize that [they] are poles asunder from prostitutes and prostitution" (G.O. 3210, 14).

There were members of the Legislative Council who were willing to endorse the self-perception of the devadasis. In 1930, Rao Bahadur Natesa Mudaliar sardonically remarks:

However much we would like that it [the devadasi caste] has not come into existence, yet it has come into existence, and we have to regard it as a caste till it is wiped out by the exertions that Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi is making now. They are there, and they lead a respectable life. They take to a man for life and if he dies they observe widowhood; and sometimes they are more faithful than some of the married wives themselves. (Laughter). (PMLC 1930, 974)

Natesa Mudaliar's was not exactly a voice in the wilderness; Rao Bahadur A. P. Patro supports him: "They are women leading pure and honest lives. They may be under the protection of one man

only, but they are not the class of people which Dr. (Mrs) Muthulakshmi or Dr. James have in mind. Why do you disturb the social conditions of these people? " (PMLC 1930, 975-76).

Muthulakshmi Reddi appears to have prevailed in the end by dint of repetition. In the 1930 session of the Legislative Council, she observes: "The Devadasis may call themselves respectable. Of course I would not blame them, because they imagine that religion sanctions such a conduct on their part..." (PMLC 1930, 972). In response to the devadasi memorial of 1939 she writes:

In the first place it is well-known that the very word Devadasi has come to mean a prostitute. Therefore I cannot understand how a petition from an Association of such women could be countenanced and sent out for opinion from others. The fact that one or two devadasis out of hundreds and thousands have made a name in the world of music and dancing does not disprove that 999 out of 1000 are prostitutes and 1 in a 1000 the mistress of married men. (G.O. 3210, 21)

Obviously, if it was proved that devadasis were prostitutes, they were not entitled to so much as a bare hearing. No less an authority than Mahatma Gandhi believed that where devadasi appeals were concerned, "the opinion of the parties concerned in the immoral traffic cannot count, just as the opinions of keepers of opium dens will not count in favour of their

retention, if public opinion is otherwise against them."

The devadasis were conscious that their case was being judged on the basis of prejudice: "We want that we should be heard. The fundamental maxim of law and justice is that one should be heard before anything affecting him is passed and we therefore pray that we should be heard and full justice rendered to us" (G.O. 3210, 17). Not only did **Muthulakshmi Reddi** do her best to make sure that they were not heard, she also disingenuously represented them as eager to be reformed. At a conference of devadasis in Andhra in 1932 she remarks:

... I have had the joy of knowing some of the **Kalavanthulu** [devadasis] women who, having given up their traditional mode of easy and luxurious living have of their own choice taken up to a very simple but to an honourable mode of **life....I have found...that** they are as good and pure as any women could be but only **custom--wicked** custom has made them otherwise. I found them clean-hearted, earnest and anxious that their children should lead a different life from theirs and be made good, pure and respectable women. ("Andhradesa Kalavantulu Conference," 609)

This representation of the devadasis as desiring aid clearly contradicted their own response to government interference. For instance, at the time of the **Kumbakonam** Circle Temple Committee's resolution to stop the custom of dedication,

the Committee's President was asked about the views of the devadasis themselves. "The President quoted many letters from Devadasis and trustees of temples protesting against any such legislation, as it interfered with **'time-honoured** traditions and customs.'" And in the 1927 memorial, the devadasis registered that they "emphatically raise[d] [their] voice to **protest...** against any attempt at legislation which has for its object the stopping or prevention in any measure whatsoever of the dedication **of...young** women to Hindu **temples**" (G.O. 4079, 1). There is a certain pathos in these protests by the devadasis, since in retrospect it is evident that they were bound to go unheeded. As I noted earlier in this chapter, the powers arrayed against the devadasi ethos were no mean ones; they represented the relentless machinery of modernity. This machinery, when it began to work, ground exceeding small, and the effects were irreversible. Janaki Nair, commenting on a petition sent to the ruler of Mysore by the devadasis of **Nanjangud**, writes: "Between the tremulous signatures of the devadasi women affixed to a handwritten Kannada petition and the typed government orders ... in English lay a chasm that separated prevailing notions of **dharma** ... from the modalities of modernity..." (3162).

3) Tradition, Social Reform and Class/Caste Politics

The social reformers, struggling against colonial **as well** as indigenous powers, had to simultaneously prove the nation's right to exist and **their own right** to govern it. **They staked out** territory for their class within the reform movements; they used the impetus of these movements to displace traditionally

dominant (**feudal**) groups from the centres of power. In the process, they drastically affected the patterns of distribution of wealth and power, the place of religion in social life, the flow of desire, attitudes to science and technology, art and culture.

Did the reinscribing of tradition for nationalist purposes involve an epistemic 'rupture'? In a limited sense it did. Some of the practices that had buttressed feudal power in the earlier ethos resisted easy assimilation into the new cultural matrix, and had to be disavowed completely, even at the cost of the sense of cultural continuity. This tended to happen, for instance, to residues of **matrifocal** or matrilineal organization in some communities (like the devadasi community), and to other recalcitrant practices that clashed with national-modern values.

Some '**traditions**,' on the other hand, did not pose a threat to the nation-building effort, because they did not contest the **terrain--of** government, education, the press, cultural production; in brief, of the public **sphere--where** crucial issues of legitimacy were decided. These practices were allowed to subsist--in some occupational or geographical pockets of the country, still subsist--in the interstices of the changed ethos. Still other traditions, sometimes authentic, but mostly fabricated, actively aided the assumption of power by the emergent class, and the leaders of this class were naturally reluctant to discard them. Thus, though the **telos** of the social reformers was 'modernity,' it was not quite the '**modernity**' of Europe, but a curious amalgam, thought up by men who were hopeful of achieving something through scientific thinking, religious reform and egalitarian legislation, but, in the

absence of widespread consent to their views, worried that they would destabilize their own authority.

When one looks at the situation impartially, it becomes obvious that there was no good reason for either the colonizers or their subjects to wish for more comprehensive change in the process of modernization. Actually handing the discourses of Enlightenment over to the '**natives**' was no part of the colonizers' plans, since these resources could be deployed against them, casting a shadow on their own legitimacy. Nor did the rising middle class want to share too much of its new-found power. As far as this class was concerned, enough had to be borrowed from the discourses of modernity (science, reason, political rights, the nation as natural social unit) to support projects of reform among the '**backward,**' and perhaps to shake the imperial throne; but not enough to threaten the ground of its own power.

Power within the middle class tended to be concentrated in the hands of men, in spite of the fact that a significant number of the social reformers were middle and upper class women. The prominence of the women campaigners worked in an interestingly oblique way to reinforce patriarchy within the middle class. Many of these campaigners, both Indian and European, were highly educated; some of them were **professionals**. But given the middle class coding of almost all female professional aspirations and all female visibility in public life as deviant, women legislators, activists and **professionals** were constantly involved in a process of compensation which made them as conservative as their male counterparts. **Muthulakshmi Reddi**, for instance, though not a brahmin herself, emphatically endorsed

brahmin/middle class gender ideology in her speeches on the devadasi question. In other words, the ostensible class position of a woman who entered the public sphere had of necessity to be aligned with that of mainstream **nationalists**, no matter what the woman's own '**real**' position was.

The women campaigners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thus became simultaneously symbols of freedom and self-determination (since most of **them** were highly educated and articulate) and norm-enforcing exemplars. They endorsed middle class and patriarchal values, though they spent much of their lives mobilizing sympathy or aid for non-middle class women. There is, consequently, a palpable tension between class and gender positions in most of the debates around the woman question, especially in the debates on prostitution and on the devadasis. The gender of the women campaigners allowed them --it was believed--to feel for the supposedly miserable devadasis; but since they were anchored to their superior caste/class position by their impeccable morals (which so usefully secured middle class cultural domination), this sympathy was prevented from becoming identification. The result was that their attitude to the objects of their altruism was invariably patronizing or censorious.

Both men and women of the class that was to rule independent India went about the work of ushering in modernity with an eye to the preservation of their own claim to leadership. Doing this meant carefully slotting issues into discursive frameworks. One might take '**the woman question**' as an example of an issue that required such a **classificatory** exercise. If the woman question were brought, with all its

ramificationa, into **the** realm of the political/public, if it were placed squarely in the discursive framework of democratic rights or of egalitarianism, gender relations would have to be reorganized on a grand scale. Caste/class relations, moreover, would be affected in their turn, since the logic of democracy would inevitably extend into inconvenient areas. On the other hand, if the woman question were situated in the framework of reform, with middle class altruism and middle class marriage as defining poles, the logic of democracy—invoked on behalf of women, in the issue of the vote, by the reformers themselves—would be prevented from infecting institutions and hierarchies that the mainstream, middle class nationalists jealously guarded.

This fact has had effects that are still in evidence in the functioning of independent India. Here, no doubt, is the origin of the mode of political thinking that recasts huge structural problems as issues. The kind of solution that would involve large-scale revamping of social structures is indefinitely evaded by this means; each problem arising from the persistence of social inequality on a massive scale (in the caste system, in class structures, in gender relations) is treated in isolation from all other related problems. Thus the nationalists, like present day governments in India, responded to the colossal problem of gender inequality by dealing with the 'issue' of sati or the 'issue' of devadasis. It was easier to explain away 'issues' like this as quirks of history, accidental effects of the Muslim invasions in India; by this means, essential India, Vedic India, or at any rate pre-Islamic India, could be shown to have enshrined 'civilized' values that were compatible with

those of nineteenth century Britain, or 'spiritual' values that were superior to the latter. By this means both patriarchy and class/caste hierarchies, vital to the dominance of the numerically disadvantaged brahmin intelligentsia, could be spared the effects of the changing juridical and political order.

In the crucial years (the 1920s) in which the fate of the devadasis was sealed, the celebration of India's 'spiritual' claims to civilization was not the only route to political self-assertion. The non-brahmin Justice Party, formed in 1916, in the context of the reforms that were partial concessions to Indian demands for self-government (from the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909 onwards), had appropriated the discourse of democracy to demand something that was more egalitarian in intention and more concrete in its effects: 'communal' electorates for non-brahmins for Legislative Council seats and 'reservations' for brahmins in governmental offices (i.e., to limit their number). These demands arose from the Justice Party's feeling that communal representation was the only way to prevent brahmins from assuming power under the new constitutional regime to be inaugurated by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms announced in 1918. The government responded by providing for a reservation of seats in the Legislative Council for non-brahmins. which, though it was a distinct watering-down of the Justice Party's argument, nevertheless made a political step towards egalitarian reform on its terms.

Voted to the Legislature in 1920, the Justice Party had, during the years 1920 to 1926 made a concerted effort to acquire more administrative power. The party had used this power to

raise and resolve in favour of non-brahmins not only the question of communal representation, but also that of administrative control over the many temples and **mathams** in Madras Presidency.

The first two decades of the twentieth century also saw the development of a narrative of Dravidian supremacy and a Tamil cultural revival which provided ideological support for the Justice Party's political claims. Aided by Christian missionaries, non-brahmin scholars like **Arumugha** Navalar, **P.Sundaram** Pillai, **Kanagasabai** Pillai and others prepared printed versions of rediscovered palm-leaf texts, wrote histories reconstructing a Tamil golden age, explicated **Sangam** classics: efforts that helped promote a view of 'Aryan' brahmin/Sanskritic culture as inferior and of brahmins as culturally impoverished interlopers. These were, on the whole, bad years for brahmins in Madras Presidency.

By 1927, the watershed year for the anti-nautch movement, brahmins were no longer hopeful of securing the kind of power that had seemed within their grasp in the first two decades of the twentieth century. These decades had promised the **consolidation--through** the political intervention of the Home Rule League, powerfully backed by the 'Mylapore brahmin' clique--of the advantages brahmins had enjoyed under colonial rule. The brahmin presence in the Legislative Council had been steadily growing stronger with each election until 1919, the candidates using their educational **qualifications**, their virtual monopoly over the legal profession and therefore over public debate, their powerful hold over the press, and their extended and affluent family networks to put the non-brahmin contenders in

their place. Annie Besant, at the head of the Home Rule movement, had felt that upper caste Hindus in Madras Presidency-should be considered "important majorities," and that the voting system should be organised to favour a sort of oligarchical rule by brahmins. She had taken her advocacy of brahmin rule seriously enough to campaign for it in her daily New India. By the early nineteen twenties, however, Annie Besant had dropped out of political life, and the Justice Party had made notable electoral gains.

In the years following this loss of political power, the brahmin intelligentsia fell back on the resources it did retain: accumulated over the centuries, considerable intellectual and cultural capital; a virtual monopoly over scholarship, whether in Sanskrit or in English, and a less secure, but reasonably powerful hold over the arts. The late 1920s and the 1930s, therefore, were the years in which major organized initiatives were taken by brahmin and other upper caste artists, performers and patrons to standardize, expand and hegemonize the arts. The Music Academy of Madras, started in 1928, belongs to this set of initiatives. In the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant and another Society member called Eleanor Elder were already experimenting with hybrid versions of Indian philosophy and dance, all of which would influence Rukmini Devi when she started the Kalakshetra in 1935.⁴³

By 1927, when caste conflict was out in the open and when brahmins had begun to feel the weakness of their political Position, a new enemy had appeared on the scene: the rationalist Self Respect Movement whose affiliation to the politics of the Enlightenment was even stronger than that of the Justice Party.

Spearheading the Suya Marivathai Iyakkam's assault on tradition was a non-brahmin leader: Periyar (E.V. Ramaswami Naicker). Periyar had, between 1925 and 1927, grown disgusted with the Indian National Congress, under whose banner he had embarked on political activism some years earlier. He had been organizing the Self Respect Movement through speeches and meetings all over Tamil Nadu, initially as a sort of parallel activity alongside his work for the Congress. The idea central to the movement was that inequalities and injustices within Indian society had to be eliminated before the demand for freedom from the British could become valid. Superstitions, and distinctions based on birth, were to be resisted through the elimination of brahmin priests from social events and rituals, through the public staging of Self-Respect marriages, through the eradication of untouchability and, importantly for the nautch debate, through the granting of equality to women. Another dimension of the movement was the promotion of a specifically Tamil culture, language and identity, in opposition to both Sanskritic-brahmin and Congress versions of pan-Indianism. Periyar's radical views were publicised in a Tamil weekly he edited and published from Erode: the Kudi Arasu.

The contrast between the way upper caste political groups handled the nautch issue and the way the Self Respect Movement handled it is instructive, since it points to the distinctness of the ideological resources each group depended on. The relationship between upper caste nationalists and the much larger number of lower caste Indians was roughly analogous to that between the British rulers and their Indian subjects: that is, they could lay claim to superiority in certain areas of

public life, in the fields of education and the arts, on the basis of which they established a shaky and limited cultural dominance. The strength of their position was largely symbolic; it was based, among other things, on the correct sexuality of their women. When in the 1920s a group of prostitutes and devadasis decided to seek office in the Congress committees, the largely brahmin membership of this party was deeply affronted. Devadasis were called upon to be 'rescued' by right-thinking people, not to be participants in the political process; Gandhi himself, faced with this unexpected display of agency and decision from the devadasis, turned squeamish and wrote them a public letter in Young India rebuking them for making such embarrassing and impossible demands.

Some brahmin leaders of the Madras Congress, including C.Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthi formally registered their disapproval of the anti-nautch campaign, arguing that the devadasis were a ritual requirement for the perpetuation of the agamic Hindu temple tradition, and custodians of a valuable art form. Satyamurthi even recommended that devadasis train as many young girls in the art of dancing as possible; a position compatible with the cultural initiatives of the Congress, in the work of the Music Academy, for instance. But the dissenting voices in the Madras Congress were drowned out by the wave of anti-nautch sentiment expressed by the national party, and by the press, both local and national.

Devadasis were thus caught in a bind. On the one hand, Political parties and anti-nautch reformers urged that they leave their 'immoral' traditions behind; on the other, these very reformers and politicians disowned them once they had cut

themselves loose from their cultural moorings, proving that their '**corruption**' was essential rather than contingent, and usually belying every '**democratic**' ideal the party professed.

The Suya Mariyathai Iyakkam, uniquely among South Indian political organizations, offered devadasis who had left their '**profession**' a platform. This platform was to be used strictly for political purposes, of **course--Periyar** was an atheist and a rationalist, with little sympathy for either sadir or for the religious traditions that the devadasis cherished. On the other hand, he was outspoken on the issue of women's subjection and saw karpu (chastity: a concept associated with womanhood, and charged with affect) as the ideological force that kept women in bondage to men. He neither fetishized nor ignored the questions raised by female sexuality, and for the first time since anti-naught propaganda began to vilify the devadasis, they were given the option of politically and publicly commenting on their own history and its relation to the subordination of women.

The acceptance offered by the **Self-Respect** Movement, not only through public **representation** but also through the politically charged Self-Respect marriages the organization conducted, was clearly the best bargain the devadasis could get. Devadasis like Moovalur **Ramamirtham Ammaiyar** proved to be, in the event, among the most dedicated activists in the movement, becoming important decision-makers and close associates of Periyar.

The Self-Respect Movement organized several Women's Conferences (**from** 1930 onwards) convened, chaired and addressed by women, some of them devadasis. Devadasis who spoke at these conferences were, naturally, expected to denounce religion and

the exploitation of women, whatever their personal experience of either had been, and to present narratives of how they had freed themselves from the clutches of Hindu society. The expectation that they would renounce their professions was a very general one by this time, however; the fact that the movement was willing to absorb them and publicly acknowledge them as members already made it a far more attractive proposition than the Congress, for instance.

The Self Respect Movement was perceived by most brahmins and other upper caste leaders as radical, iconoclastic and threatening. It was also widely perceived as regionalist, since it promoted an exclusive Tamil identity, and as pro-British, since it withheld its support from the khaddar movement and from Congress nationalism. All this may have had a good deal to do with the abrupt swinging of upper caste public opinion away from the devadasis, who were now seen as under the patronage of this primarily lower caste movement.

If the rationalization of social relations as applied to the devadasis by the **Self-Respect** Movement benefited them, the advantages were offset by the effects on the devadasi castes of the rationalization of property laws. The resentment caused among the men by the wealth and status of the women of the community was sharpened by the general trend towards gender-based **regularization** of property relations.

As **Amrit** Srinivasan points out, there was always a certain amount of strife between the men and the women of this community. In the heyday of sadir, the female dancers of the community were conspicuously more powerful than their male counterparts, the nadaswaram players and temple functionaries.

"The artistic and monetary dominance of the female art for*" was perceived as "the effect of an unfair advantage arising out of the natural attraction of women" (Srinivasan, 1871). Added to this 'disadvantage' the men suffered were two other facts that contributed to male resentment: one, that the devadasis were structurally unavailable to the men of their own community; two, that devadasi women had full control over their property, either gifted by patrons or enjoyed for life through the offices of the temple. In most fictional narratives involving devadasis, interestingly, a devadasi of the older generation, a mother or an aunt, is the actual focus of authorial hostility.⁹ The corruption of an innocent young woman by a scheming female relative who then 'manages' her life is a motif that recurs in several devadasi stories. The archetypal quality of this figure testifies to male aggression towards the older, powerful matriarchs of this community.

The South India Devadasi Association, protesting against Reddi's Bill of 1927, noted the operation of vested male interests in decisions on their future:

You are well aware that under the law of inheritance and succession as administered to us at the present day, a female succeeds in preference to a male; and hence a few male members of our community actuated by self interest are trying to sow dissension amongst us.... Hence any opposition from that quarter ought not to be considered against us. (G.O 4079, 11)

The fervour with which male members of the devadasi community denounced the morals of the sadir-performing section of the community was a sign of this 'self interest.' In 1906, for instance, in Andhra, men of the kalavanthulu community swore that they would no longer play the mridangam (drum) in accompaniment to dance recitals.

The castes from which the devadasis were traditionally drawn formed associations like the Sengunthar **Mahajana Sangam** in Coimbatore, the **Isai Vellalar Sangam** in **Thanjavur**, the Muthuraja Mahajana Sangam in **Thiruchirapalli**. A large number of these associations coalesced around Muthulakshmi Reddi's introduction of the 1927 Bill to prevent dedication in the Madras Legislative Assembly, and were used as platforms for the voicing of complaints. Tracts and pamphlets were published in which caste honour was shown to be jeopardised by the devadasis, and ways of saving this honour were explored. Men even took 'vows' to stop assisting the devadasis **professionally**. Conferences were held in which various castes formally disowned their devadasi members or denounced them for impeding caste progress.

Property management among the devadasis being what it was, the men of the community had everything to gain and nothing to lose from a changeover to a different, more 'regular' system. The process of converting hereditary rights to pattas proved tedious and costly to the devadasis; their own access to the legal status (through valid marriages, formal inheritance, **enfranchisement**) that would entitle them to own land was insecure. In the meantime, control over property passed from women's hands into those of the men.

The Devadasi Act of 1947

The years between **Muthulakshmi Reddi's** introduction of the Bill to prevent the dedication of girls to **temples** and the actual passing of the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 saw several scattered and abortive attempts to get the Legislative Council's approval for versions of Reddi's Bill. While the Bill was being debated, the devadasis came under the jurisdiction of the Madras Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1930, which, as I have noted above, treated them as identical with prostitutes.

By October 1947, the stage was set for the Devadasi Act. The Bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly by **P. Subbarayan**, and passed into a law with barely one or two dissenting voices. It declared that the dedication of a woman as a devadasi was unlawful, and that such dedication would no longer render her incapable of entering into a valid marriage; it also, **significantly**, applies the prohibition of nautch only to certain specified castes:

Any custom or usage prevailing in any Hindu community such as the **Bogum, Kalavanthalu, Sani, Nagavasalu, Devadasi and Kurmapulu**, that a woman of that community who gives or takes part in any **melam (nautch), dancing or music performance** in the course of any procession or otherwise **is** thereby regarded as **having** adopted a life of prostitution and becomes incapable of entering into a valid **marriage, and the performance of any**

ceremony or act in accordance with any such custom or usage, whether before or after the commencement of this Act and whether the woman concerned has consented to such performance or not, are hereby declared unlawful and void.

Significantly, brahmin women who had begun to appear in public performances of a reinvented **nautch--bharatanatyam--were**, by implication, exempt from the prohibition on dancing. That this was a deliberate omission on the part of the members of the Legislative Assembly, is suggested by the number of references to the 'glorious **heritage**' of dance, and the need to preserve it, made in the Assembly debates of 1947. In uncanny **symbolization** of the brahmin takeover, in the very same year a rising brahmin star called **Kamala** appeared as the sister of the protagonist and a young dancer in the A.V. Meiyappa Chettiar film Nam Iruvar. The film's theme was the return of the **prodigal**: a young man becomes corrupted by depraved (westernized) friends whom he picks up in the course of an adventure in--of all **things--film-making**; he loses all the money he steals from his brother (the male ideal) but is eventually received back into his family's gentle and incorruptible bosom. **Kamala's** dances include one ('Mahan Gandhiye Mahan') in adoration of a statue of Gandhi framed by an iconic painting of Mother India: a neat condensation of women's roles in the **symbology** of cultural **nationalism**.

When the Devadasi Bill became an Act in the same year, the **devadasis** lost what little was left of their public status. An intervention by a member makes it clear that by 1947 the

devadasis did not have very much to lose: "But why have this big stick to beat such a small **community**? After all, devadasis have faded out--I am asking the Honourable Leader of the House whether he **can** produce some devadasis here (Laughter)" (PMLC 1947, 646-47).

Modern Selves, Bodies and Spaces

The contesting of the ideological effects of the devadasi murai took place in the context of a changing perception of selves and bodies, and of the spaces these would occupy.

Selves for the nation: The matrix of discourses in which 'tradition' was mobilised for the nationalist cause brought into being a new **exemplum** of selfhood. If the missionaries, the colonial administrators and the atheistic indigenous movements were united in representing Hinduism as a coercive religion, as denying human autonomy, one form of recuperation was to show the new individual as free agent, inserting himself or herself into the reinvented and vastly accommodating Hindu cultural matrix. By this device, the autonomy of the self stood revealed; at the same time, the milieu of the refashioned Hinduism was shown to have fortuitous continuities with the older feudal form. There was, in other words, either no essential conflict between tradition and modernity, or else it was an agon that ended in a happy resolution.

The modern self was capable of fashioning its own identity, but still held on to its traditional moorings, so that individual identities were also essentially Indian identities. It could assert its autonomy from religion in so far as this meant freedom from obscurantism and **superstition**, but it was not

the less '**spiritual**' for all that. The female version of the new self had its work cut out and it is not hard to guess what this was going to be: the maintenance of national '**honour**' by exemplary devotion to domestic, conjugal and maternal tasks, and thus, obliquely, by the embodying of the essence of Indian culture; the underwriting of the middle class's dominance, by becoming the embodiments of the morality of this class.

The process by which individuals '**found themselves**' somewhere along the continuum from tradition to modernity was dramatized in the fiction of the time. **Self-definition** in the modern ethos meant, among other things, an initiation into a sexual ethic of moderation and conjugal happiness, as the following example shows. The short story "Sense in Sex" (1948) by Panchapakesa Ayyar is about the education of Sadasiva, a young brahmin who lives happily with his wife until "... modern civilization [begins] to penetrate" his quiet village, bringing with it "sexual literature." This last consists of how-to-do-it manuals ("advocating sense in sex"), not, as the label might lead one to suppose, pornographic effusions. The books represent a modernity that is clearly coded as '**western.**' Sadasiva is at first 'ashamed' to read the book he has ordered, but then becomes 'excited' by it. In this frame of mind, and under the influence of a worldly-wise friend, he has a chance encounter with a devadasi, Anandi. He helps her find a straying cow, follows her home quite innocently, and is '**hooked.**'

In Ayyar's story **Anandi's** mother sets up the predictable sexual trap into which the hero (predictably) falls. His wife rejects him; he meditates on female fallibility, running over, in his mind, passages on the futility of jealousy from his book

on 'sense in **sex**.' He is in the throes of rebellion against the **classification** of people by birth: "'Anandi's only fault is that she belongs to the dancing-girl caste. Will it not be cruel if all decent men refused even the smallest help to people simply because, by the diabolical working of an unjust social system, they happen to belong to a degraded **caste**?'"(21). Some episodes later, Sadasiva comes to his senses, and effects a **reconciliation** with his wife. At which point he declares to Anandi: "'I consider the worst shrew of a wife to be heaven itself compared to such as you'"(25).

This sentiment is evidently shared by the author, who underlines the connection between '**modern**' ideas and moral degeneration with a marvellously heavy hand: "'Those wretched pamphlets advocating sense in sex were the cause of all this,' said he to himself. 'Their ridiculous exaggerations and pretensions have brought me all this misery and shame. I must burn these sinks of obscenity at **once**'"(27). Not wanting to keep the smallest part of the action from his reader's view, Ayyar invites us to watch as the sinks of obscenity go up in flames, Sadasiva's wife assisting **companionably**.

The interesting thing about this narrative is that it aligns **companionate** marriage with '**tradition**' and sexual promiscuity with western modernity (books on sex), reversing the general understanding that **relationships** with devadasis were traditionally acceptable, but repugnant in the national-modern ethos. The devadasi's machinations are now synchronized with the corruption of young men by a new immorality set in place by colonialism. The happy resolution becomes possible only when the **misguided** upper **caste**, middle class hero, seeing the error of

his **ways--of** his attempt to undermine caste **structures--returns** to **his** 'traditional' marriage and his natural Indian spirituality. Even the devadasi knows **this**. Anandi, watching the books burn, remarks sotto voce : "'Even a fool can find happiness, provided he holds to his moorings'" (30).

Women were invoked in the discourse of nationalism either as emblems of chastity or as mothers. The correct sexuality of women was a much-debated subject in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both in Britain and in India. Christianity and science came together in the medico-moral discourse of the nineteenth century to pronounce on the nature of women's sexuality. Women, in their joint opinion, were essentially asexual creatures; William Acton, the **expert** whose opinions on female sexuality we have already had occasion to encounter, maintained that

...the best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they **feel....As** a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual **gratification** for herself. She submits to her husband's embraces, but principally to gratify him; and, were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions.
(Acton 62)

As I have suggested above, entire cultures and communities

stood or fell by the chastity of their womenfolk; sexual 'purity' was of the essence both in the nationalist struggles against colonial cultural dominance and in struggles for caste/class hegemony. Every group stood to gain something from emphasizing the chastity of its women; and to the Hindu upper caste **nationalists**, poised between emulating the **colonizers'** culture and discrediting it, between negotiating with the colonizers' power and establishing their pre-eminence among the Indian castes, female sexuality was of urgent and abiding interest. Chastity, then, was the defining factor in the identity of the traditional female self, which embodied spiritual or ascetic ideals:

...we all know how sexual promiscuity, either in men or women is condemned by all religions and by all good people of any country or race, and in our own country, chastity in women has been looked upon as the supreme virtue of womanhood and even supernatural powers have been ascribed to such virtuous women by our poets and philosophers (Reddi, PMLC 1927, 515).

Muthulakshmi Reddi's history of virtuous womanhood was promptly and piously endorsed by **fellow-legislators** who gestured towards indispensable Sita and Savitri. By this time mythological figures were reflexively invoked to reinforce Hindu nationalist arguments about the status of women. Anjalai **Ammal**, for instance, claimed that India was "the land of Savitri, **Damayanti**, Nalayini and other great women." Deviations from the

mythic norms caused unanalysed **discomfort**: "The land that was such and has now come to this, women losing their chastity and taking low prof **essions**. . . if we see this we are sad." Anjalai Animal also felt that adult women ought to be barred from dancing and that since the cinema was becoming popular, moral standards should be maintained by legislating that nothing but Bhakti cinema be produced (PMLC 1947, 650).

Motherhood is the other acceptable role for women-citizens of the new nation, and it is as mothers that Muthulakshmi Reddi hails the devadasi community in her many speeches to its members: "I appeal to you who are mothers to make the future of your children bright, happy and glorious and make them respectable and useful citizens" ("Andhradesa Kalavanthulu Conference" 614). In speeches to the Legislative Council, she stresses the idea that the devadasis' maternal emotions were the most important motivating factors behind their desire for anti-nautch legislation. The bright side of the picture is that there is a concern, arising from a peculiarly modern conception of the sanctity of childhood, with the prolongation of the 'innocence' of the devadasi; Reddi appeals to her compatriots on behalf of the 'helpless and innocent children' whose freedom to make their own life-choices was restricted by the practice of dedication.

But a sinister connection is also established between women's sexual conformity and their rights over their own children. When Reddi suggests that the children of devadasis, removed from the influence of their mothers, "would become virtuous and loyal wives, affectionate mothers and useful citizens" (PMLC 1927, 417), she is not only normalizing the middle class family, but also advocating State intervention in

motherhood where the biological mothers of children disqualified themselves from performing their natural roles by sexual delinquency. Reddi approvingly cites British governmental action in this direction: "I may point out in this connection that in England even before 1885, a mother who was living a life of immorality would not be entitled to the guardianship of her child" (PMLA 1927, 513).

Good mothering is class specific: the working class makes ungentle mothers, unfit for their task. A short story by Manjeri **Isvaran**, ("No Anklet Bells For Her") exemplifies the kind of middle class representation of working class motherhood that was calculated to evoke revulsion. Isvaran's story dramatizes a moment in the life of a child (Annakili) whose great desire is to be a dancer. The scene is set in the slum where she lives; it is populous with women, "some suckling babies, some picking lice from the head of one another and squashing them . . . same as monkeys do, chatting, gossiping, quarelling, cursing obscenely..." (1)

Annakili, finding a spring of creativity in herself even in this barely human environment, begins to dance. Her movements become frenzied as her imagination, stimulated by her reflection in the metal of a parked car, supplies the freedom and fantasy that her life denies her. The thread of her fantasy is abruptly broken by an **unmaternal** explosion:

Her mother's temper rose; sewer slang and
brothel oaths tumbled and wriggled like
maggots out of her mouth, and the world for
a frightful instant seemed to have shrunk
to such narrow proportions as to be

dominated by everything vile and coarse in
 the female of the species. "Come, you
 harlot, I shall peel the skin off your
 back. Want to be a dancing girl, do you?
 One day I'm sure you'll go on the streets."
 (12)

As in **Muthulakshmi Reddi's** evocation of the devadasi's innocent child, Annakili's predicament, underscored by the contrast between her harmless delight and the shrill viciousness of the mother, engages our sympathy as much as the predicament of the mother repels it. Bad mothering, bad language, bad guidance: the natural consequence of these for the low caste child, the writer suggests, is the life of the prostitute.

Bodies: if we may see nationalist ideology as a form of war declared on colonialism, we might see why bodies had to be marked symbolically, as injury or killing marks them physically in war. The publicly visible, sexually defiant, performing body of the devadasi carried a weight of obscene significance in excess of its actual materiality. It was therefore stigmatized in anti-nautch discourse. Not only did the material presence of the devadasis as a community have to be counteracted, so that instruments of potential national **self-definition** (like religion or art) could be freed for use by nationalists; but the body Politic had to be exorcised of the historical **significations** of their individual bodies, so that the figure of **nation-as-mother** could do its emotive work as a trope for national rebirth, and so that the domestic **woman** could be set up as **the** universal norm.⁵⁵ As **Somnath** Zutshi suggests,

...the casting of woman in the role of nation resulted in ideological struggles being fought out on the terrain represented by woman. Though ostensibly the debates touched upon every aspect of a woman's being, the hidden agenda was always that of control. Behind this urge for control lay a fear of the powerful forces that lay buried within woman as well as nation--sexuality in the one case and the demand for social justice in the other.... Resolving the 'Woman **Question**' in this sense meant that control of the nation (the body politic) was linked to the control of woman (the female body). (85)

Thus, in the social reformer's imaginary, the desirable, seductive, auspicious dancer of temple or court was replaced by the diseased, physically corrupt prostitute. In practice the devadasis were subjected to physical control in an unprecedented way: the **paternalistic** State examined them **medically**, proscribed their public appearance, threatened to take over guardianship of their children.

While **Muthulakshmi** Reddi was recasting the devadasis as susceptible to reform because of their essential maternal feelings, **Rukmini** Devi was already identifying the true (brahmin) female artist as "she who mothers her nation" and conversely the mother as an artist:

Is there a greater artist than the artist who has deep understanding, who can bring happiness to the **world?**....I see women in modern life who take up different professions, carrying the personal motherhood they express in their home to the greater motherhood which they express to their country, to all the nations of the world. Such **compassion...creates** the greatest artist who is the mother, and such motherhood is the very soul and essence of womanhood. (Woman as Artist 7-8)

The space of the nation: spaces were redefined in the ethos of modernity. As feudal culture broke down, the art of the devadasi was no longer celebrated as an enactment of the power and presence of god or goddess and king. The devadasi was banished from the temples. But the desacralization of sadir did not mean that dance became a commodity under a new capitalist order, because bharatanatyam was symbolically assimilated into that other newly created space: the private realm, the domestic realm, defined as feminine. Bharatanatyam then became what girls of 'good families' did, at once bearing testimony to traditions several centuries old and displaying skills that were strictly ornamental, a hobby, the cultivation of '**Beauty.**' It was the artistic parallel to the kind of faith that flourished in the domestic space, sustained by the simple and demure rituals Performed by chaste upper-caste wives: no tantra here, no body-displaying evocations of god as lover, no demonic possession or other primitive and disreputable phenomena.

The devadasis' earlier unquestioned community privileges came into question and as certain forms of land tenure ended they no longer had a public role as propertied individuals. Control of wealth in the community passed to the men. The actual private space of the devadasis was invaded: their houses were raided, they were sent to reform 'homes' after being subjected to systematic police harassment.

As the controlling of public morals set individual desire in opposition to public welfare, the legal definition of the devadasi's status changed: legislation declared all irregular expressions of sexuality unacceptable. The conjugal bed was the only regular and legitimate **place** for sexual intimacy. Legal change also reciprocally affected morality, so that the values of the middle class became applicable by law to all communities. The blurring under the feudal order of private and public spaces suddenly became archaic. While it was established that the domestic space represented the feminine essence of both family and nation, constraints on behaviour in the public sphere became more severe. The relationship between devadasi and patron/king/god, libidinal yet status-enhancing for both parties in the older order, now became an illicit one; there was no longer sanction for the kind of libidinal relationship that flouted the codes of public morality. The taboos in this sphere were, consequently, no longer exclusively those of caste and obligation; a sexual morality was set up that specifically opposed all individual desire to the public good, so that desire became something that needed to be continually regulated, by the State if need be. This tension between individual and collective desire is the characteristic condition of modern societies.

The devadasis forfeited the right to appear as performers in the masculinized public sphere. If women did appear in the public sphere, the sphere of the political, of citizenship, it was in capacities that were an extension of their roles in the home: as mothers, daughters, wives, goddesses. It seems as if symbolic space was filled and emptied according to a hydraulic model, as if the national-public could not stand the presence of both mothers and 'others.' If Rukmini Devi was being groomed by the Theosophical Society to be a World Mother, and the nation itself was a huge household, then the devadasi was the homebreaker, the much feared outsider who had to be prevented from upsetting this peaceful domestic economy.

By the 1950s, if even the shadow of the devadasi was suffered to fall across mainstream nationalist discourse, it was only to point a moral. In these two centuries of social reforms and other upheavals, **Muddupalani--poet**, singer, dancer, scholar, courtesan, philanthropist—became a mere '**prostitute**', a woman without shame; and the only socially approved woman, indeed the only 'natural' woman, to use **Veeresalingam's** term, was one who could be identified by her 'modesty' or asexuality. In social reform tracts, in fiction, in countless film narratives, her **unregenerate** sister appears as the Other of, and a warning to, all the virtuous (domestic) heroines. Her scantily clad, grossly **material, vampish** body, against which the middle class heroine's **Presence** shines forth in all its (well-clad) spirituality, is a condensation of the horrors of **outsiderhood**.

My reading of the processes by which the devadasi community was discredited owes a great deal to Foucault's methodology, as I noted in the first chapter. I wanted to follow

the process by which the discursively produced devadasi moved towards, and finally merged with, the 'real' **devadasi**; but the weight of this series of events, as far as I am concerned, lay in the distance between the 'prostitutes' of the discourse and the interests and needs of the living community of women. Thus, sections of this chapter represented **un-Foucauldian** attempts to counter mainstream perceptions of devadasis with their own self-perceptions, which I have presented as more accurate than the former; they also refer to the material conditions which, as much as the narrativizing of the **devadasis**, inscribed the trajectory by which the discursive versions converged on the living ones.

By the 1950s, the practice of dedicating girls to temples died away in most parts of Tamil Nadu and Andhra; the devadasis sought other professions, or were '**respectably**' married. The final irony of the whole exercise of legislation was that it drove many devadasis into penury and prostitution: a survey in **Kamatipura's** red light district, in Bombay, in the 1960s established that about a third of the residents were ex-devadasis . A proverb grew out of this in Tamil: "the devadasi who scorned the sacred rice of the temple now turns somersaults in the street for a beggar's rice."

NOTES

1. This text has, of course, been elaborately commented upon by Susie Tharu and **K. Lalita** in *Women Writing in India* Vol. 1. The passage (translated by B.V.L. Narayana Row) has been taken **from** this anthology (116), as has the quotation from **Veerasingam's** *Andhra Kavula Charitram* (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita, Introduction 3). Muddupalani was a renowned and highly successful *ganika* in the **Maratha** court of **Pratapasingha** of Thanjavur, in the eighteenth century, and a contemporary of the brothers **Ponnaiah**, **Chinnaiah**, **Vadivelu** and **Sivanandam**.

2. To say this is not to attribute some evil design to this class; no doubt its members were, at one level, unaware of how the new order was going to prove advantageous to themselves and their posterity.

3. There was a corresponding reluctance to intervene in the absence of such strikingly obvious signs of cruelty or coercion. For the most part, British imperialists had no stake in disturbing the peace of indigenous patriarchs. Their relationship, as far as the run of issues was concerned, was one of collusion; it could even be one of active cooperation when it came to the dismantling of a matrifocal tradition (as in the case of marumakkathayam among the Nayers of Kerala).

4. The British response to *sati* was a blend of curiosity, admiration, horror and revulsion; the disinterested desire to ensure justice was probably not the only reason why the officials of the Raj foregathered at the pyre. Lata Mani (see, for instance, "Contentious Traditions," 90) notes that the administrative **investigations** of the scriptural position on *sati* set up exchanges between colonial officials and Hindu pandits; these exchanges enabled the British to question the very premises of Hinduism, and enabled the brahmins to redefine tradition in the process of redefining women's roles; Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak ("Can the Subaltern Speak?") observes that the trope of rescue—white men rescuing brown women from brown men—was used to considerable ideological advantage by British administrators.

5. This description is from **Philips's** *Evolution of Hinduism*, and is quoted by Thurston in *Castes and Tribes of India*. 131; details of the source are not given.

6. Thurston offers several examples of cases filed by **devadasis**; see pp. 145-50 of *Castes and Tribes*.

7. In the Legislative Council debate of 1930 **Muthulakshmi Reddy** complained that "...a large number of women adopt girls, take them to temples and make them undergo the ceremony of dedication, even after the age of 18. There is no religion. These women do it purposely, with a view to make those girls

lead an immoral life" (PMLC 1930, 992).

8. See Ballhatchet 149.

9. See Ronald **Hyam**, Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience and Kenneth Ballhatchet, Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj.

10. The devadasis were objects of fascination for western travellers many centuries before the advent of the missionaries. For example, Marco Polo's 1298 account of his travels in India contains a description, **significantly** unmarked by moral judgement, of devadasis as 'consecrated **damsels**.' The figure of the devadasi as nun or vestal virgin was schematically presented in several European paintings and illustrations for travelogues through the intervening centuries. The fanciful reconstructions by European artists of the devadasis' appearance involved no attempt at authenticity; they were frequently portrayed in the costumes of European nuns, which may account for Annie **Besant's** later references to their celibate past. See Partha Mitter, Much Maligned Monsters.

11. The Hindu religious movements were themselves partly a response to the delegitimation of Hindu practices (more matters of attitude and lifestyle than '**religious**' practices) by Christian evangelists in India. See, for instance, J.N. **Farquhar's** Modern Religious Movements in India (1914). The author displays a certain complacency about the changes his own faith has wrought in the Indian religious scene.

The role of the press in the development of the non-brahmin movement in Maharashtra has been documented by Rosalind **O'Hanlon** in Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao **Phule** and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Western India (1985). Similar non-brahmin protests were taking place in Madras Presidency; Eugene Irschick gives an account of these in his Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s.

12. The Social Reform Advocate, the Indian Social Reformer, and, meant specially for women, the Indian Ladies' Magazine, and Stri Dharma, all published from Madras, are examples from the early 20th century.

13. The situation in princely states like Mysore, Travancore, **Pudukottai** was thus different from that of the colonially governed territories: the 'native' rulers of these states did **not** have to go through such tortuous negotiations with **Prevailing** customs as seemed necessary to the colonial power and could, if they wished, take shortcuts to modernity.

14. These rituals were intricate and complex, their correct Performance being considered vital to **the** well-being of the

entire community of the village or town. See **Kersenboom-Story**, 87-127 for a detailed reconstruction of the devadasi's tasks and their **significance**.

15. Thurston mentions several such lawsuits as do **S.K. Singh**, (**Devadasi System in Ancient India**, p. 14) and **S. Ramakrishna** (**Social Reform in Andhra**: especially in the references to the Indian Law Review and to the Proceedings of the Bombay and Madras High Courts). Arjun Appadurai gives a detailed example of temple litigation in Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule. Under the British administration in India, and especially after the formation of the Board of Revenue in 1789, the government officials and later the law courts intervened in the affairs of temples when invited to do so, but without, on the whole, becoming involved in matters of ritual **significance**. Government control over temple administration gradually increased until roughly the mid-nineteenth century; after this, the work of arbitrating in temple property and other disputes was taken over by the judicial wing of the government. In 1817, for instance, the Collector of Madras was asked to intervene in a land dispute:

The land in question was assigned to a dancing girl attached to the temple, who, unable to perform her duty, had sold her land (and her right to a share of the dancing performance) to another dancing girl, who had in turn let the land out to some tenants. These were all seen to be legitimate transactions. But when the second dancing girl wished to build a house on the property and evict the tenants in accordance with the original agreement, the tenants not merely refused, but said they had applied for a notice of ejectment to the Supreme Court of Madras.... (Appadurai, Worship and Conflict 115)

The Collector was asked by the government to make sure that the dancing girl's land was restored to her.

16. See the elaboration of this argument in Partha Chatterjee's The Nation and its Fragments, especially "The Nation and its Women," (116-34) and "Women and the Nation" (135-57).

17. The Women's India Association was started by Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins in 1917, and **Muthulakshmi Reddi** was later **Vice-President** of the association.

18. See Ashis Nandy's argument in The Intimate Enemy, that Indian men were perceived as peculiarly effeminate by their colonial rulers; Gandhi's deployment of satyagraha mined this **feminization-effect** for ideological and political gains. See also Albert **Memmi's** The Colonizer and the Colonized.

19. The devadasis were also a material threat to the new hierarchy: as powerful people with markedly different values

from the nationalist ones, they could come in the way of the latter project. For instance, propertied devadasis wielded some power at the level of local government, a fact that was deeply resented by male administrators who had to accede to their wishes in some matters.

20. Gandhi is said to have called **Mayo's** book '**a drain-inspector's report.**'

21. Mother India 52. Miss Mayo alleges that devadasis became the 'priest's own prostitutes' by the age of five, when they were considered most sexually desirable; and that on retirement, they were turned out to beg for their living after being branded with the name of their deity.

22. Janaki Nair calls attention to the Mysore government's attempts to research this matter and the subsequently included clause in the royal order concerning the devadasis there: celibacy, and not the mere performance of their ritual duties, was required of them in exchange for their continued enjoyment of temple grants (Nair, 3163).

23. For an idea of normative assumptions about women in Britain from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, there is no better source than the 'conduct' books which were written by both men and women to help women remodel and regulate their behaviour. The authors seldom mince their words. Here is Wetenhall Wilkes, author of A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady: "She who forfeits her chastity, withers by degrees into scorn and contrition; but she, who lives up to its rules, ever flourishes, like a rose in **June**, with all her virgin graces around **him...**" (qtd. in Jones, 301).

William Acton, whose medical text Prostitution Considered in Its Social and Sanitary Aspects (1870), which had an enormous impact on Victorian attitudes towards prostitution, writes: "What is a prostitute! She is a woman who gives for **money** that which she ought to give only for **love....a** woman with half the woman gone, and that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity" (Acton, 42).

Throughout this period, in Britain, novels of all kinds (see Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth, for instance), plays, magazine articles, pictorial depictions like lithographs, illustrations, oil paintings and so on, imaged the 'fallen woman,' that deviation from the domestic norm, as repenting of her sins and dying in some **uncomfortable** locale.

24. Venkataratnam, in "Social Purity and Anti Nautch Movement", quoted by V. **Ramakrishna**, 134. Details of source not **given**.

25. See Muthulakshmi Reddi's autobiography, for instance. V. Ramakrishna's Social Reform in Andhra documents the course of the Social Purity movement. There are obvious resonances with Purity movements elsewhere, in the United States of America, for instance, or in Britain. See The Sexuality Debates, ed. Sheila Jeffreys.

26. For instance, when the Madras Congress was voted to power in 1937, C.Rajagopalachari managed to stall legislation on the sadir issue (which appeared imminent at the time) for the period of his tenure as Chief Minister. See S. Anandhi, "Karuppu Pengal" and "Representing Devadasis."

27. The Legislative Assembly that year was a curious body, with a large number of members, including Muthulakshmi Reddi, nominated by the British Government. The Justice Party could not prove a majority in the House, and the Congress was internally divided about contesting the elections, since one faction within it felt that the party should boycott the electoral system until self-government was granted to Indians on a more comprehensive basis.

28. Amrit Srinivasan points out, for instance, that the devadasi, once she was dedicated, was not permitted to marry. Her sexual partner was chosen by 'arrangement,' and an older female relative usually had the veto on her choice. "Alliance with a Muslim, a Christian or a lower caste man was forbidden while a Brahmin or member of the landed and commercial elite was preferred for the good breeding and/or wealth he would bring into the family" (Srinivasan, 1869). S.Anandhi makes this point much more strongly when she claims that it was "not a free flow of the Devadasi's desire which marked out the system, but its almost exclusive control by the landed patrons" ("Representing Devadasis" 739). As feminists who endorse the freeing of sexual relationships from traditional regulations we might see the point of making the devadasis entirely free agents with respect to the choice of sexual partners. But it must be remembered that the reformers were not in favour of anything like this free agency for women in general, since it would also destroy the other hierarchies that they were anxious to preserve; they wanted the devadasis to renounce their non-conjugal, relatively free relations with their patrons so that they could be assimilated into a far more coercive, strictly regulated marital economy.

29. See Jeffrey Weeks, Sexuality and its Discontents, however, for a consideration of the continuities between the work of the sexologists and the penal regimes set up by the discourse of public hygiene.

30. The Contagious Diseases Act was passed and repealed in Britain several times since 1864. As William Acton observes: "At length...the injury inflicted by this apathy on our soldiers and sailors, and the loss sustained by the public

purse, **seem** to have touched the conscience or the cupidity of the legislature, and in that year an act was **passed...** having for its object the remedy of the evils to which the army and navy are exposed" (49-50). This Act provided that women suspected to be prostitutes "be subject to a periodical medical examination by the visiting **surgeon...for** the purpose of **ascertaining...whether** she is affected with a contagious disease..." and that any woman "found on examination to be diseased, may either go herself, or will be apprehended and sent, to some hospital certified for the reception and detention of government patients" (50).

31. After the first Lock Hospital was established in Madras in 1805, the system was supported and abolished several times in succession, depending on whether the army spokesman was eloquent or not on the subject of the "misery" of the soldiers; whether the Civil Surgeon and the Medical Department were convinced or not of the link between deregulation of prostitution and epidemics of VD in the army; and whether or not the government was in a mood to legislate on the question. Eventually, there was some sense that a measure of **coercion--in** the form, usually, of publicly appointed 'matrons' and the police--was not incompatible with concern for the liberty and welfare of the prostitutes, and regulation came to stay, with the lock hospitals being revived from time to time during epidemic outbreaks of **VD**.

32. Indeed, to do her credit, she was worried about these consequences: she wanted, for instance, to make sure that the devadasis were integrated into society, and not ostracized; she was concerned about the possibility that they would lose incomes and lands through anti-nautch measures; and so on. However, in spite of all her reservations, she pushed the legislation through.

33. Such petitions were written up all over South India. Janaki Nair mentions one such "spirited challenge to the new situation from the 12 devadasis ...at Nanjangud [Mysore state].... [reminding] the sovereign of his duty towards protecting hereditary occupations such as theirs" (3162). These petitions, Nair points out, express considerable anxiety about the preservation of the art forms the devadasis practised.

34. See the Stri Dhanna 15.11 (1932): 613.

35. Quoted in News and Notes. Indian Ladies Magazine 4.1 (1930):44-45.

36. This is the gap Partha Chatterjee identifies between the thematic of the nationalists (the legitimating ethical and Political discourses of the Enlightenment) and the actual realization of these in the problematic of everyday practical

politics. The idea is elaborated in Chatterjee's Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?. One **might** also observe the operation, here, of what he calls "the rule of colonial difference" in The Nation and its Fragments: the differential entry into modernity of the metropolis and its colony.

37. In late eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, there was a widespread understanding that there was a special **moral** force in 'women's mission to **women**'. A number of women took up philanthropic work, such as the rescue of pro.-titutes or the amelioration of conditions in **workhouses**; private charity was believed to be gentler than the public welfare machine.

38. Responses to the problem of legitimation posed by the women's **question** invariably appealed to Ancient India. Har **Bilas Sarda**, author of the Sarda Age of Consent Bill, makes the following argument for Hindu Superiority in the scale of nations, in 1906: "In Ancient India, [women]... not only possessed equality of opportunities with men, but enjoyed certain rights and privileges not claimed by the male sex. The chivalrous treatment of women by Hindus is well known to all who know anything about Hindu society" (82). The authority he quotes most copiously in support of his argument is, amusingly, **Manu**.

39. The predominantly brahmin trustees (appointed by the operation of a nepotism that had already been the subject of adverse comment in the press) of the temples and mathams and their representatives in the Legislative Council resisted the Hindu Religious Endowments Bill, intended to drastically curtail their administrative powers and their control of temple **funds**. Nevertheless the Bill became an Act in 1927. The '**reservations**' issue was also resolved in a way that threatened brahmin hegemony in government service: in 1928 it was provided that out of every 12 government posts "five had to go to non-Brahmin Hindus, two to Brahmins, two to Muslims, two to Anglo-Indians or Christians, and one to the Depressed Classes (Harijans)" (G.O. 1129, December 15, 1928, Public Service Department).

40. The odd brahmin scholar like U.V. Swaminatha Iyer and the odd rebel figure like **Subramania** Bharati did help build up the discourse of Tamil superiority.

41. She was lampooned as an '**Irish** brahmani' in the non-brahmin press (see **Rajaraman** 58, 74).

42. The Tamil **Isai** Movement was one of the cultural offshoots of the non-brahmin movement and set itself to promote research and performance of a specifically Tamil music and dance in conscious opposition to the assumptions that informed brahmin deployment of cultural capital.

43. Throughout the 1940s and '50s, this brand of brahmin-identified cultural nationalism acquired definition and extended its effects in various arts and professions. For instance, David Lelyveld, documenting the broadcasting work of the All India Radio, draws attention to the influence of Dr. B.V. **Keskar**, brahmin Minister for Information and Broadcasting from 1950 to 1962, on the programming choices made by that government-controlled organization. **Keskar's** choices favoured the 'Hindu' stream of Hindustani music over the Muslim dominated styles that were taught in the traditional gharanas; the latter were associated, predictably, with loose morals and prostitution. Since the government had determined--when Vallabhai **Patel** became minister for information and broadcasting, in 1946--that such 'impure' elements would be eliminated from the classical music scene, it became necessary to check on the private morals of those who were employed by the AIR as public artists. A large number of the artists inducted into the staff of AIR during these decades were brahmins, products of voluntary associations to preserve music, or of government-established schools of music.

44. **Self-Respect** marriages went against caste and other taboos (on widow remarriages, for instance, or devadasi marriages). There were eight thousand such marriages between 1929 and 1932.

45. The exchange took place in Young India, in September 1921.

46. While a genuine desire to preserve the art may have certainly formed part of the motivation of this group, some critics have identified other, less disinterested motives for their support of the devadasi system. S.Anandhi, for instance, suggests that the fervent protection offered by conservative nationalists to 'essential Indian culture' as embodied in temple rituals was a result of their desire to preserve the brahmin priesthood, under attack by the **Self-Respecters** among others ("Representing Devadasis" 740).

47. V **Subramania** Aiyar, editor of The Hindu at the turn of the century, for instance, was fiercely opposed to the devadasi tradition and carried several articles in his paper condemning it. See **Rangaswami** Parthasarathy, A Hundred Years of the Hindu, 73-74.

48. Periyar had also decided to support the struggle of the 'untouchable' castes in Madras for political representation, and the proportion of the scheduled caste membership in his Party was notable at a time when even the non-brahmin Justice Party was reluctant to take up the question of untouchables. This may have been another reason why the party was portrayed as being outrageously radical.

49. See my summary of the short novel Devi the Dancer in chapter 3. Also see Kasturi Srinivasa Iyengar's novel of 1976, called **Devadaasi**. The unsympathetic figure of the devadasi mother is also a familiar fixture in any number of films.

50. Reported in the Krishna Patrika of April 5, 1906; cited in V. Ramakrishna, p. 143.

51. G.O. 23 1948, Law [legislative] Department.

52. **Kamala**, famous as a child artist ('**Baby Kamala**' and later '**Kumari Kamala**'; in adulthood, Kamala **Laxman**, and now Kamala Narayan) was a student of Vazhuvoor **Ramaiah** Pillai. Her nritta or pure dance was highly acclaimed; more importantly, she was a figure with whom several brahmin girls of her generation identified strongly. See Sujata **Vijaraghavan**, "Kamala the **Dancer**."

53. The lyrics were poems by **Subrahmania** Bharati, Tamil Nadu's nationalist poet-hero. The songs from this film became state-wide hits, associating Kamala indelibly with the glory of achieved Independence.

54. Panchapakesa Ayyar, "Sense in Sex" in Sense in Sex and Other Stories of Indian Women 1-12.

55. Interestingly, the Kudi Arasu of December 18, 1927, which marked **Periyar's** decision to abandon Congress ideas, carried on its cover a picture of Mother India "standing beside a map of India on one side and a person weaving cloth by hand on the other. It also contained the motto, '**Long live khaddar...**'" (Irschick, 90). By the time the next issue came out, this kind of imagery and this kind of activism had both been rejected in favour of the more iconoclastic agendas of the later Iyyakkam. The image on the cover of Kudi Arasu was an obvious reference to the title of Katherine **Mayo's** 1927 book Mother India.

56. One might even see this imagery as arising from a sort of oedipal or sexual conflict between colonizer and colonized over the 'possession' of women. Many of the writings of this time represented the nation as a woman (Mother India) raped and humiliated by the usurping **father-figure** of the colonizer while her sons looked on impotently (see, for instance, Katherine Mayo's Mother India). Real women were, naturally, **urgently** required to demonstrate that they were entirely under the sexual control of men of their own caste, locality, race.

57. See A Study of Prostitutes in Bombay by S.D. Punekar, 12-

CHAPTER 3

A RESPECTABLE AESTHETIC: THE MAKING OF BHARATANATYAM

You say that the devadasis are bad people and affect the morality of the people who see them dancing. What about all those who practise **the art** of dance, those family women who dance for two hours sometimes practically naked? Are you improving the morality in Madras by allowing this art to be cultivated more and more by the so-called fashionable ladies right from A to Z?

--P. Natesan, Question to Legislative Assembly members, during the debate on the Devadasi Act, 1947.

Sir, you know there are many amateurs who are taking part in the art of Bharatanatyam. It has a peculiar feature in Tamil Nad and people coming from Tamil Nad are adepts in this art; I can tell you that our ancient culture had developed certain arts which even today western nations might very well envy. ... I am one of those who feel that this art should be developed and maintained in this land. It has been said that the Kalakshetra in Adyar and other institutions are doing excellent work in this direction.

--P. Subbarayan, (Speaker), Reply to P. Natesan's 'flippant remarks'; Legislative Assembly debate on the Devadasi Act, 1947.

Production produces not only an object for the subject but also a subject **for** the object.

--Marx, Grundrisse.

When the consensus that sustained sadir broke down, putting an end to the easy coexistence of eros and art, an 'aesthetic' of spiritual dance—and with it the very idea of an 'aesthetic' distinct from the traditions and techniques of the form—came into being. At the very moment that the magical, propitiatory, ritual, sacerdotal functions (taken both literally and symbolically) of the devadasi were rendered obsolete by a new moral order, the dance was hailed as 'divine,' 'revived' in accordance with this aesthetic, and assimilated into the projects of cultural nationalism. Cultural nation-building also provided an ethos and an audience for the reception of the transformed dance.

The Restoration and Recasting of Sadir:
Historical Developments of the 1920s and 1930s

Two major contestants emerged as spokespersons for the art of dance in the 1920s and '30s: the Music Academy of Madras, set up in 1928, and its dance-enthusiasts, E.Krishna Iyer and V.Raghavan, on one side; the Kalakshetra, established in 1935, and its founder, Rukmini Devi Arundale, on the other. A range of rhetorical styles and of cultural/artistic investments fed into the construction of bharatanatyam. depending on who was speaking/performing. The Music Academy consisted of largely male critics and scholars who, perhaps since they had no stake in performance themselves, were eager to create conditions under which the devadasis could once again appear on stage. Rukmini Devi, on the other hand, was a performer herself; she was interested primarily in legitimizing her own public appearance as a dancer, in the face of caste taboos, and not at all in

providing a platform to devadasi performers.

Muthulakshmi Reddi had spoken against nautch from the platform of science and **modernity--indisputably** gifts of the colonizer. The Music Academy stood for concern with the more or less practical and immediate need to save a dying Indian art form, and **Rukmini** Devi Arundale launched her campaign for the reclamation of sadir from the plank of Eternal Hindu values which were also, providentially, the very values that could provide against the crass materialism of the modern age. **Muthulakshmi's** version of the future opened out of a rejection of an undignified past; Rukmini Devi's out of a continuity with a (partly invented) spiritual tradition supposedly **millenia-old**; the Music Academy's out of a sense of the dance's 'belonging' to the devadasis.

This discrepancy in their motivations probably accounted for the initial antagonism between the two heroines of Madras nationalism, at a time when they literally lived next door to each other (**Muthulakshmi boycotted Rukmini's performances**); and between Rukmini Devi and the Academy. But the eventual achievement of neighbourly good relations all round is a familiar replay of the conflict and paradoxical coexistence in nationalist discourse of the 'traditional' and the 'modern.'

An interesting development took place between the dying out of sadir performances in temples, courts and private homes, around the 1920s, and the revival of this form with the organized institutional support of the Music Academy and the Kalakshetra in the 1930s. From the turn of the century onwards, when the anti-nautch campaign was making it impossible for most living devadasis to pursue their profession, dancers from Europe

and the United States were showing an intensified interest in Indian dance, or at any rate in their imagined versions of it. This '**orientalizing**' phase in the history of the art saw several attempts at '**recreation**' of the sadir style by Indians and visiting performers from abroad. The hybrid style which sprang up as a result had very little to do with the local traditions from which sadir had developed; at best, it presented the conventions of sadir or reconstructed movements from a study of sculpture in an entirely schematic way; at worst, it consisted of notable misapprehensions of the original form. This style, exemplified, for instance, by the dances choreographed by Ragini Devi, Uday Shankar and his partners, La **Meri**, Ram Gopal and others, was, however, the closest thing to an attempt at a 'modern' practice of dance in India. Though much of this work was an eroticized, ersatz version of typical '**Hindu**' themes, (**Shankar's** dance-dramas, choreographed largely in Europe, with European partners, were presented under the banner '**Hindu Dancers and Musicians**'), some of it was concerned, for instance, with the alienation that arose from technological change or with the cultural change that was a result of **colonization--themes** that would not have suggested themselves to the traditional dancer.

The tours by European and American performers, meanwhile, familiarized Indians with the tradition of half-borrowed, half-**improvised** oriental themes and movements in western ballet. European borrowings from '**Oriental**' themes and traditions in the nineteenth century included the Romantic Ballet's use of reconstructed Indian movements and stories in ballets like Le Dieu et La Bayadere, very popular in the 1830s, and Marius

Petipa's La Bayadere (1877). The bayadere was obviously a figure that could, by gesturing towards the exotic and stirringly romantic otherness of the East, provide **justification** for a range of classically unacceptable movements, thus allowing for the expansion of the technical vocabulary of the ballerina; she was also a pretext for the extension of the stage imagery of sexuality. Petipa was the first choreographer to actually replicate some movements from Indian dance forms, where his predecessors used mainly approximations to Indian costume. Interestingly, many of the movements devised for this ballet came in useful for the choreography of the classic Swan Lake.

When Anna Pavlova came to India in 1922, it was not surprising that she wanted to see and study Indian dancing, but her husband Victor Dandre records that their hosts in India were too embarrassed to present any sadir dancers. Pavlova, however, teamed up with the dancer Uday Shankar whom she later advised to reconstruct or learn the authentic classical dance of India.

Ruth St. Denis considered her performance tour in India in 1925-26 an opportunity to find authentic choreography to supplement the imagined version of 'Indian **dances**' that she had been performing since 1906. Among St. Denis's more popular 'barefoot **improvisations**' (she was resisting the balletic emphasis on points) were the dances called Nautch , Incense and Radha. A dance called Black and Gold Sari (1922) is reported to have caused riots when it was performed in India.

Though Uday Shankar did learn sadir from Kandappa Pillai of Kanchipuram, he, like many of his contemporaries (Ragini Devi, **Menaka**, La Meri, **Ramgopal**) presented the hodge-podge of styles that went by the name of 'Oriental Dance.' Thus when **Rukmini**

Devi began to perform in 1936, the dominant and most visible dance form outside the sadir that was presented by the Music Academy was the result of an Orientalist **(mis)interpretation** of the themes and techniques of Kathak and sadir. This form was bound to have had an effect on **Rukmini** Devi's work, though her arrival on the scene and her greater claims to authenticity all but wiped out this form. For reasons I consider below, which had to do with the caste/gender position of Rukmini Devi and her disciples, the experiment with modernism that was an aspect of the 'Oriental **Dance**' came to an end with the discrediting of this mongrel form. It is difficult to assess the effects these orientalized versions of Indian dance may have had on the Indian cultural scene in the 1930s; the renewed interest in the art of sadir undoubtedly had something to do with the the brahmin intelligentsia's discovery of the possibilities of high classical European forms like ballet, and with the interest of foreign-retuned Indians in Indian forms. Shankar's company, when it toured India in **1932**, was greeted with much enthusiasm by an audience that had lost touch with indigenous practice, and was intrigued by the **possibilities** of a '**respectable**' dance. Rukmini Devi, at any rate, was familiar with the dancing of Uday Shankar and Ram **Gopal**.

One lasting effect of the interactions between Oriental Dance and sadir was a **universalized** perception of dance that proved useful to Rukmini Devi and other brahmin exponents of bharatanatyam. The reviews and the fiction of the 1930s and 40s, for instance, registered the equations between the dance forms of the East and the West. For example, describing the abandoned dancing of the slum child in "No Anklet Bells For

Her," Manjeri Isvaran writes:

No ballerina that pirouetted on a stage that changed under changing lights and shadows, and an auditorium bewitched before her starry **eyes...**, no devadasi that did her natya in the temple in the presence of the decorated idol of god or goddess could have been so ecstatic as was this child of the gutters. (3)

The two situations and the emotions appropriate to them are made to look equivalent by careful juxtaposition. Difference is maintained in the different motivating factors (material ones in the case of ballet and spiritual ones in the case of sadir) and the two locales; but aesthetically, it is implied, the two styles merge in the body of the dancing child, and they have the same experiential weight. There are clear resonances with Rukmini Devi's 'humanist' understanding of dance as communicating across barriers, which was to become such a familiar theme for dancers that they were described, and projected themselves, as 'cultural ambassadors' in India's relationships with other nations.

Reform and the Arts

The devadasi was displaced from Indian public life in the course of a great upheaval in Indian history, a redefinition of the moral universe as well as a shift of political-juridical paradigms. The transformation of the moral universe so that sadir ceased to have social sanction was, as I have noted in the

last chapter, largely the work of **Christian** missionaries and of nationalist social reformers who took **their** cues, especially in matters related to gendering and **sexuality**, from the British middle class.

The shift in the juridical system was coeval with that in the religious/ethical system, and was what made the latter effective. The installation of a new legal structure based on private property in place of the older feudal structures of religious or secular patronage stripped the devadasi community of its actual social power. The intervention of the law also affected desire itself: following the attempts to prevent dedication and following the **identification** of the devadasi with the prostitute, the hitherto sanctioned sexual relationships with devadasis became available for public surveillance and censure. It was one of the exigencies of the nationalist movement, as I have suggested, that private morality had to mesh with politics. This was the key factor in the quest for political as well as cultural legitimacy, and it left no space for the devadasis. Their public visibility became a scandal, their sexual/social codes were outlawed, their property rights rendered invalid.

One consequence of the arrival of private property and its legal outwork, Gillian Rose suggests, is the conflict between this law and what is perceived as 'instinct' (defiance of the law, insubordinate drives). The sexuality of men, but to an infinitely greater degree, the sexuality of women, was recoded **as** transgressive: not merely transgressive when it crossed certain carefully marked boundaries of caste or community, but transgressive **in essence**. Thus the discourses that led to the

dismantling of the sadir tradition traded especially in the denunciation of the vulgarity, the bad femininity, the undesirable physicality of the devadasis. In this chapter I want to show how this conflict between '**vulgarity**' and public morality (with the gendered norms set in place by 'modernity') is played out at the level of the aesthetic.

The exigencies of creating the **episteme** of the national-modern inevitably had complex effects on the arts. The crucial substitution of royal/religious patronage with private funding or government sponsorship meant that the arts in general shifted the ground of their existence from the realm of the sacred to the realm of the secular. The order of cosmic time, in which the devadasi functioned, was not, however, thoroughly made over into the order of history; while history replaced cosmology as a **disciplinary/metaphysical** framework, and while 'religion' was ruled out, by constitutional decree, as a governing principle in the (secular) public sphere, it was still a dominant feature of the social imaginary. Indeed, to the extent that nationalism itself was vested with the emotive and sacred charge of making possible a "secular **transformation** of fatality into continuity, contingency into **meaning...**"(Anderson, 19), Mother India inherited the fantastic power to mobilize devotees that most Hindu gods and goddesses wielded. Thus, initially at least, as with the Bengal Renaissance or the Kalakshetra version of bharatanatyam, the arts did not quite shed their sacred aura: instead of serving the Hindu deities, they served the new gods of nation and of nationalism. Their sanctity and their significance now came from their imbrication in cultural nationalism, from their becoming signs of the continuity and

splendour of the 'Indian' heritage.

Different arts, however, were **transmogrified** in different ways to serve the ends of the nation. As the two competing discourses of nationalism and an internationalist modernism, available for the first time as part of the transition to modernity, exerted contrary pressures on the arts, the response of artists working with the visual media (painting, sculpture,, photography, cinema) diverged from that of performers of classical dance and music. If the visual arts embarked on a struggle to create a viable modernism that also held steady to national self-determination as a reference point, bharatanatyam and Carnatic music derived their legitimacy crucially from their continued association with the '**sacred**' values of Hinduism. An art that was **re-legitimized** as an emblem of preeminent spiritual achievement could not fully follow the logic of secularization. This however, does not mean that dance was **reimagined** entirely outside the context of the '**modern**': in fact the **undifferentiated** 'humanism' of Rukmini Devi's discursive interventions replicated the thrust towards indiscriminating '**modernization**' in the social reform movements: the one destroyed a dance form, as the other destroyed the conditions of its practice, by a process of normalization or over-generalization. However, though it was clear that the brahmin practice of the form necessitated radical changes, these changes were made in the name of a putative tradition many centuries old; indeed, **Predating** the practice of the devadasis.

The preservation of bharatanatyam as a cultural relic entailed two claims on its behalf: antiquity and moral acceptability. While the form had to be celebrated as ageless,

it also had to disown its historical associations with female sexual availability and prostitution. If the nation was to have an 'unbroken heritage' of great artistic achievement it required the erasure from the art of the presence of the devadasis of recent memory, those embodiments of retrograde (lower caste?) sexuality, and purveyors of degenerate art. Predictably, certain aspects of the content of bharatanatyam--the artistic/erotic conventions of sringara, which called for the delineation of the **moods** of the lover--had to be carved out of the whole and discarded, or at least played down in the new version.

The **hegemonizing** (in terms of actual demography) of what used to be sadir by upper caste women added to the urgency of this call for correction. I would argue that the caste/gender composition of its performers, given the vital link between upper caste femininity and spirituality, was largely responsible for bharatanatyam's inability to make the leap--once it had abandoned the sadir tradition--towards either a secular modernism or avant-gardism. The Devadasi Act itself proscribed the performance of this form, as I have shown in the last chapter, **by certain castes**: the legislators were fully conscious of its new role as a symbol of cultural resurgence, and of the need for conservation. Written into the Act is a loophole for the brahmin takeover of sadir: it was all but declared a legitimate pursuit for 'respectable' women.

The rest of this chapter is concerned with the manoeuvres by which the upper caste appropriation of sadir was **managed--manoeuvres** carried out in discourse, in performance and on the body of the dancer. Extending the metaphor of the paradigm shift, I want to show how the idea of the 'aesthetic' as well as

an actual aesthetics replicated its logic in the realm of dance. The idea of the aesthetic had, here, the role that art critics have assigned to the categories of 'genius' or '**inspiration**' in the context of European Romantic art. Max Raphael, for example, points out that the **mystificatory** view of art, embodied in such terms as 'inspiration,' "is nothing but an illusion on the part of the most barren class of modern society, an illusion which rests upon the distinction that arose in the nineteenth century between socially mechanized production of material goods and individual craft production of spiritual goods."

For the same reasons that prevented brahmin women from experimenting with modernist innovation--their caste and gender **position--bharatanatyam** stopped short of becoming an individualized, 'romantic' practice. Being female itself meant that full individuation in the mode of the modern subject was impossible. Certainly, as women performers who were upholding caste morality and were, moreover, living down the unsavoury historical associations of the dance form, **Rukmini** Devi and her brahmin successors could not venture too far out of range of social or artistic conformity; the postures of romantic rebellion were not for them. Thus the renovated art form of bharatanatyam did not follow the trajectory of European art after the Industrial Revolution and its disenchanting sequels: instead of opposing the misunderstood, uncompromising, rebellious individual (male) artist to his social milieu, it projected the inspired, but **socially--and this meant **familially--integrated**** female artist as a role model. Thus in the writings I will consider below, Rukmini Devi constantly refers to the **female** artist as a mother. The upper caste female colonization

of bharatanatyam was also responsible, no doubt, for the fact that it did not exemplify what is clearly the obverse of romantic **individualism**: the commoditization of art. Bharatanatyam could not be refigured, then, as a practice meant for a market: as I shall argue below in the context of a fictional account of the revival of dance (Devi the Dancer) economic independence was not an attribute of the acceptable **feminine**.

A sustained movement to create a modern secular dance was thus delayed in South India until almost the 1960s or even beyond it: though choreographers like Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal had a certain degree of formal influence (even, perhaps, on **Kalakshetra** productions, since **Rukmini** Devi was aware of their work), choreographic initiatives built on a systematic rejection of 'tradition' had to wait for an iconoclast like Chandralekha, whose lifestyle also bespoke rejection of **brahminical-feminine** values.

'Pro-Art Progressives' and the Music Academy of Madras

A personage whose role in the remaking of sadir was arguably as important as Rukmini Devi's was E. Krishna Iyer, a well-known Madras lawyer and Secretary of the Madras Music Academy at the time of its foundation. Iyer's will to save the art from extinction was so strong that he performed bharatanatvam in female costume, besides helping promote devadasia who still professed the art.

His contribution was made largely in the years 1927-1936, though he continued to be active after this period; this was before **Rukmini** Devi and **Kalakshetra** moved into the spotlight. In

this section, I will consider this contribution in its theoretical and practical forms, along with the contribution of the institution Krishna Iyer helped found and worked with: the Madras Music Academy.

The idea of establishing the Music Academy was publicly **mooted** at the All India Music Conference held alongside the 1927 session of the Indian National Congress. A (largely brahmin) group of music and dance enthusiasts and scholars, E. Krishna Iyer prominent among them, turned this idea into reality within a year; in August 1928 the Music Academy was formally inaugurated. Krishna Iyer was one of its secretaries at its **inception**.

The Academy's aims were clearly specified: to promote the study and practice of classical music and dance, by the **establishment** of a library and music and dance schools, by the institution of scholarships and awards for performers and scholars, and by the organization of recitals and annual conferences to facilitate debate on music-related subjects. The Journal of the Music Academy. Madras. which commenced publication in 1930, sought to mould public opinion on these subjects and to create an informed audience, and was evidently one of the forces that created the conditions of possibility for **bharatanatyam**. It also made explicit the links between cultural nationalism and the classical arts in South India.

No attempt was made to disguise the hegemonic intentions of the Academy, of its annual conferences or of its journal. Indeed, the self-imposed task of educating the audience was seen **as** a laudable expression of the Academy's cultural nationalism: '...it is high time," the report of the 1927 Music Conference

declares, "that an earnest attempt is made to improve the conditions around the national heritage of music" (Report of the All-India Music Conference 16). The national scale and self-consciousness of the standardizing operation it undertook was to distinguish the Academy from all other **sabhas**, which merely presented performers to audiences. Its association with debates on the national scene was also made through its early ties with the Congress (many of the Academy's sponsors, including T.T. Krishnamachari, occupied ministerial positions in post-Independence Congress governments) and with the activists of the Theosophical Society, including Annie Besant and, later, with Rukmini Devi Arundale. The inaugural issue of the Journal of the Music Academy had a message from one of the Vice Presidents of the Academy, Margaret Cousins, also an activist associated with the Theosophical Society, congratulating the Academy "on the way it is moulding public thought regarding the revival of Indian Music on a basis of **commonsense**, reform and popular **organisation**" (Cousins, "Cultural Nation Building" 75). Cousins found the Music Academy's cultural nationalism familiar enough, having lived through "an exactly similar revival of national art and arts-crafts in Ireland" (74) thirty years earlier.

The inaugural issue of the Journal also carried an article by Venkatarama Sarma of the Madras University, titled "Bharata Natya." This appears to be the earliest '**official**' use of the new name for sadir. The flexibility of the new usage may be inferred from the mutually contradictory definitions Sarma offers for it. He begins with a vague description of '**Bharata Natya**' as "an elaborately discriminative and expressive action, **which** creates a responsive feeling to the human sensation, and

the term is also applicable to the Science of Music, Scenic Art or Dramaturgy" (32); and goes on to identify its practice with the performances of the Chakkiars in Kerala. He then tries an etymological definition:

...it becomes obvious, that the word 'Bharata' holds two senses, the one is the name of a sage, and the other is, it seems to me, an imaginary ascription rendered by a process of syllabification, given by later authors and commentators, because every syllable of the word 'bha,' 'ra,' 'ta,' it is stated, denotes 'bhava,' 'raga,' and 'tala,' respectively. The latter explanation is plausible and quite relevant to the context, because the 'bhava,' the 'raga' and the 'tala' are inevitable to dancing. (32)

'Bharatam,' initially, simply meant 'actor'; later, significantly, it was a prefix regularly used by brahmins who taught dance or were dance scholars, or exponents of the harikatha tradition. The nomenclatural shift was an important move in the redefinition of the aesthetic of the dance. Renamed, bharatanatvam had none of the connotations of sadir. koothu. chinna melam, dasiattam or any of the names by which its association with the devadasis was made patent. What it acquired was a set of nationalist resonances, partly because the new name suggested a direct derivation from the 'Bharata' to whom the Natyasaatra is popularly ascribed, and partly because it sounded

like Bharat (as in compounds like 'Bharat **Mata**' etc.). The name proved so felicitous that several persons (including **Rukmini** Devi) claimed credit for thinking it up.

While the **brahminized** name was in all likelihood the Music Academy's contribution to the recovery of sadir, this institution certainly did not envisage a practice that by definition excluded the devadasis. Indeed, under E.Krishna Iyer's guidance, it promoted performances by them under its banner; called in speakers who made the point, at the annual conferences, that the dance should be restored to its former status by its former practitioners; honoured them as experts on music or dance. The year 1931 was a hopeful one for sadir performers, and there is a hopeful report in the Journal of the Music Academy which covers the most significant event of that year:

An entirely new note was struck this year with the Academy commencing its season with a Bharata **Natyam** performance by Kalyani Daughters of Tanjore. It has almost become a fashion nowadays to condemn the Indian nautch and look askance at it. In our view this condemnation is least deserved....We are glad that the performance served as an eye opener to those who came to witness it. We hope that in the days to come public opinion will veer round and give unto Abhinaya its proper place. ("**Bharatanatyam** by Kalyani Daughters" 78)

The Music Academy, in fact, made its displeasure about social reform of the devadasi tradition explicit. As late as the year 1974, when the isai vellalar star Balasaraswati was made President of the Music Academy's annual conference, the report on the conference excoriates "[o]bscurantist Indian social reformers of the last century and the early decades of the current century [who] had sought to kill this art as it flourished mainly in the leading temples of India" ("The XLVIth Madras Music Conference" 4). In 1932, E.Krishna Iyer and **Muthulakshmi** Reddi exchanged angry letters in the pages of The Hindu, with Krishna Iyer condemning **Reddi's** ill-considered canvassing for the Devadasi Bill.

The Music Academy featured several isai vellalar performers--both musicians and dancers--in its annual events, though the scholarly exposition of the techniques and sources of sadir was undertaken largely by brahmin enthusiasts like V. Raghavan and V.V. Narayana Iyengar. Mylapore Gowri **Ammal** performed sadir in 1932; in the same year, Veena **Dhanammal** gave a veena recital; in 1933, the year in which the isai vellalar musician Ponniah Pillai was made the President of the annual Music Conference, the Kalyani Daughters danced again; and Balasaraswati, **Varalakshmi** and Saranayaki were all featured in Academy **programmes**.

At the annual conference of 1933, a Mrs. Stan Harding urged that the Music Academy start a dance school with the assistance of isai vellalar teachers. She is reported as follows in the **Journal**:

If the art of dancing was to survive [she said], the artistes must first be suitably

rewarded and respected. As regards the ritual dance, she said that it was of vital importance that it should not be transplanted because it had struck roots deep already...the private life of the artists was not a concern of the public. The requirements of the art itself would make it imperative that the artiste should keep away from self-indulgences or excess, as a self-indulgent life is incompatible with the art.... Although there might be no living demonstrator of the art, it could still be preserved, by getting young pupils trained by the old teachers. The first thing necessary to keep up the art was to make the artistes independent in life so that they might be in a position to concentrate on the art. ("The Madras Music Conference, 1933" 120)

When the idea of building a dance school did materialize eventually, it was under the directorship of **Balasaraswati**, who had by this time embarked on a collaborative effort to produce a book on bharatanatyam with V. **Raghavan**. These collaborative efforts between devadasis and brahmins were a far cry from the rhetoric of purification and purging that surrounded **Rukmini Devi's** version of bharatanatyam, and that may still be found in the pages of souvenirs put out by Kalakshetra, and in the Klakahetra Quarterly:

By entering the shadowy world called the domain of the devadasi, she [Rukmini Devi] tore down an ugly visage putrefying the face of one of India's greatest arts--the dance. Impurities can creep into any profession, like corruption in business or politics. (Chattopadhyaya 5)

Such rhetoric, however, prevailed over the milder arguments of the Music Academy in the changing political climate of the 1930s, and with the arrival of the brahmin dancers, around 1935, the space cleared by the Academy for the devadasis was swiftly occupied by the intelligentsia of Adyar.

**From Temple to Institute:
A Fictional Account of the Modernization of Sadi**

In 1937, a slim novel by a writer who called himself 'Deisvi' appeared on the Madras market. An unremarkable piece of writing on the whole, though enlivened by charmingly naive illustrations; and an uninspired title: Devi the Dancer. I glance at it here because it was one of a dozen or so attempts to narrativize an event that had captured the public imagination: the making of bharatanatyam.

Devi is born out of the union of a devadasi and a (brahmin) temple priest. Her messianic role in the cultural field is prefigured in her miracle-birth: she is conceived as a result of Penances her mother undertakes in the temple, long after the couple has become resigned to barrenness. Her mother, a dancer herself--but of indifferent mettle--cherishes ambitious plans for Devi's career as a dancer.

Devi is taken to Madurai Mudaliar, a dedicated but embittered dance teacher who "in a life of three-score years ... [had] found not a single **Dasi-girl** who would learn the art for the art's sake, or evince an interest in its deeper realities" (7, emphasis mine). A sociological aside accounts for this evidence of the depravity of the dancing-girl community: "... **Dasis**, as a class, were gravitating towards the metropolis and were busy becoming permanent and exclusively kept mistresses of moneyed **men**"(7). Devi, of course, is an exception to this general process of degradation; when she does begin her training, after some intervening adventures, even Madurai Mudaliar, cynic though he has become, is astonished and enthusiastic. Devi, though tender in years, indubitably 'evinces an **interest**' in '**art** for the art's sake'--which taxes our credulity somewhat, since the particular ideological formation that goes with such aestheticism was being shaped by the brahmin dancers, not by Devi's community. When Devi is fifteen years old, the pottukattu (dedication rite) is arranged in the village temple. An old schoolmate of hers (Seenu), who has grown to manhood in the city, pays Devi a visit at this moment. Seenu's progressive notions and his romantic interest in Devi contribute to his regret that "so fair a maid should be destined to be knocked down to the highest bidder"(19). They discuss love. Seenu: "'**What** did your mother tell you about love, Deva? There used to be a tradition about the mothers of all young **dasis** initiating their young ones into the intricate art of **gold-digging**'"(22). Devi's answer has an unexpected dignity that is clearly to be attributed rather to her own charming innocence than to her mother's moral instruction: she has been taught, she

says, that "any man whom we receive with a full heart, who steps into our bedroom, ought to be loved and revered as a husband"(22).

Since Seenu has love and high ideals but no income, Devi is 'knocked down' to Rao Saheb **Balasundaram** Chettiar, Honorary Presidency Magistrate for Madras. Though singled out from among Devi's suitors because of his reputation for princely living rather than for his **companionate** potential, the Chettiar turns out kind-hearted enough. Devi's comfortable and artistically productive life with him comes to an abrupt end, however, when he discovers her in flagrante delicto with Seenu, who has once again strayed into her life. She returns to her village in **disgrace**.

After a further series of adventures, Devi and Seenu are married. Flash forward: Devi has not only become a successful performer (a review says, "Devi the Dancer has divinity behind her") but has also started a dance institute called (alas, too predictably) '**Nataraja** Nilayam.'

Three things seem to me particularly interesting in this narrative: the writer's handling of the question of caste or birth; the role of money in the narrative; and the unspoken aesthetic assumptions that underlie Deisvi's treatment of the whole ethos of **nautch/bharatanatyam**.

To what caste does Devi belong? By customary usage, of course, she is a **devadasi**, being born to a **dasi**. But the author appears very keen that we have a more ambiguous sense than this of her origins. As miracle-baby, if not as daughter of a brahmin Priest, she has (it appears) some claim to honorary upper-caste status. Moreover, she is instinctively 'refined'--i.e., upper-

caste--and is therefore throughout her childhood disturbed by the (equally 'natural'?) coarseness of her '**class**', especially as embodied in her mother. Instinct is at war with instruction in a dozen instances; and instinct dictates that she love art for its own sake, that she reject the 'gold-digging' aspirations of her kin, that she desire **companionate** marriage, that she be uninitiated in the art of (physical) love.

Devi's birth signifies that she is poised between the old and the new: as bearer of a caste-stigma, she conveniently points a moral about outdated practices like dedication; elevated into respectability by marriage (to a brahmin, a social reformer) and by the founding of an 'institute' (a far cry from the other kind of establishment, the one with the red light hanging over it, this 'institute') she becomes a sign of national cultural resurgence. The miracle-birth signifies, too, her links with the ancient forces of '**Indian** spirituality'; the up-to-date dance school denotes her links with the kind of modernity that would be approved according to the '**universal**' values set in place by the missionaries, the colonial government and the **nationalists**. Devi's art and life close the circle opened up, historically, by the Christian missionaries.

In nothing is Devi so at odds with her upbringing as in the **matter** of money. Money and the pursuit of it are identified, in this narrative, with the devadasis. They cultivate the art of 'gold-digging,' forsaking their real **vocation--dancing--for** comfortable concubinage. Devi's mother trains her daughter to perform with an eye always to the main chance; Devi's dasi friend, **Neela**, "a thoroughly sophisticated girl, typical of the vamping variety of the community," declares that relationships

mean nothing: "'It is cash that counts, **ultimately**'" (31). There is no suggestion of malice in the writer's portrayal of the **devadasis**. What comes through, however, is an unmistakable shift in the ideological resonances of money and property in relation to women. Economic **transactions**, according to the order Deisvi represents—the order that feels contempt for 'dasis as a **class**'--are to be kept far from two things: Love and Art. The labour of upper caste women, and therefore the cultural production of one who is moving into that stratum of **society**, as Devi is in this narrative, does not fit into the sphere of **exchange**; it is purely reproductive. Women may embody both Art and Love, as long as they are in a strictly penurious condition. The dancer shall perform not for the sake of an income or to maintain her hereditary rights; she shall perform '**for art's sake.**'

One idea that gestures towards the nascent aesthetic of bharatanatyam in the novel is the idea of '**art for art's sake**'. Obvious financial gain is the very antithesis of art; but art, according to the ideology of the middle class, does not need to have any other material purpose or context either. The institute in the city, along with the proscenium stage, is the new privileged locus of dance; with the progressive turn away from dedication comes an aesthetic that is metropolitan, even cosmopolitan. This aesthetic signals itself by the absence of a terminology: in the universal mode, in the **art-for-art's-sake** mode, there are no precise words for the technical achievement of the dancer or for the affective response her dance evokes, and feeling is encapsulated in words like '**divine**' or '**beautiful.**'

Devi the Dancer is interesting because it is a 'true story'. The event that the story dramatizes--the appearance of ihharatanatyam on the cultural landscape of the nation, after the eclipse of sadir, an event supervised by another 'Devi,' Rukmini Devi Arundale, three years before this book was published--is far more interesting than the rather pedestrian novel. But as I look at that event through the writings of its protagonists, I want to point out that the striking features were the same: a caste-question; a money-question; anaesthetic. Each of these is etched a little more clearly in real life than in fiction, each of these is resolved in the same fashion, and is part of the legacy of bharatanatvam today.

Rukmini Devi's story was, of course, the central 'real-life' story in the annals of bharatanatyam. the one that captured the public imagination. The heroine indubitably had a greater impact on the shape and content of bharatanatyam--the specifics of its practice, including stage-setting, costume and so on--than any other individual or institution; and I will return to the details of these contributions later in the chapter.

The Messiah and **Dance:**
Rukmini **Arundale** and Kalakshetra

1) Theosophy-Beauty-Dance:

The seed of the art-as-spiritual-exercise theme was planted in Rukmini Devi's imagination as she sat at Annie Besant's feet, in the groves of the Theosophical Society. It was one of the themes Besant herself introduced into the Society's agenda in Madras. A quick glance backwards, at the Society's agenda and at Besant's agenda as part of it, is in order here, to fill in the

background to **Rukmini Devi's aesthetics-as-politics.**

While the early Theosophical movement founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1837-1891) and Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907), which established its headquarters in Adyar, Madras, in 1878, was interested chiefly in promoting occultism and 'cosmic wisdom' without too much regard for national boundaries, Annie Besant formulated a more activist programme for Indian Theosophists when she became President of the Society in 1907. Theosophy was to help rescue India "from the materialism which was strangling her true life by the revival of ancient philosophical and scientific religions" (Besant, India 42). The renewal of India's spiritual life was to lead, among other things, to her freedom from the 'British yoke,' since the radicalised Theosophists **found**, says Besant, that "patriotism was aroused by pointing to the splendour of Indian religious and poetic literatures, and that 'religion must inspire nationality'"(43).

It must not be forgotten that Besant was a prime mover in the Home Rule movement, and, in the years preceding her Theosophical phase, a campaigner for women's suffrage in her own country. The significant positions occupied by women in the Theosophical **movement--some** of them already politically experienced in other struggles--probably accounted for the easy acceptance of these and other women as contributors to the nationalist **cause.**¹³ Besant's casual use of female images to underscore her point about the nation coming into its own is a **sign** of the pivotal roles played by women in **sustaining** Theosophical ideology: "Deep in the heart of India's daughters arose the Mother's Voice, calling on them to help her arise, and

be once more mistress in her own household" (India 205). The ideology in turn **endorse**d the efforts of women who participated in **cultural-nationalist** programmes, valuing these contributions equally **with** the contributions of people doing more straightforwardly political work. In this sense the Theosophical movement, though it used a vocabulary and a scale of values very far removed from those current feminism identifies with, anticipated the contemporary feminist concern with cultural production as a site of social change.

For the Theosophical Society in Annie **Besant's** time, putting together the fragments of India's racial memory was not just an assertion of internal historical continuities. Since the fundamental intention of the Society was still to "bind East and West together in partnership," resurgent India would also have to, ultimately, give an account of itself to the world at large. Whatever projects Theosophists took up in the fields of literature and art, they had to keep in mind this task of defining and projecting 'universal' **values--especially** universal spiritual values--towards an eventual renewal of the entire globe, through the universal dissemination of these values. This basic requirement had, as I will show, important consequences for the aesthetic that grew out of Theosophical doctrine.

In a pamphlet on "The Future Development of the Theosophical Society," G.S. Arundale (**Rukmini** Devi's husband) refers to four interpretations of Theosophy that had become current by his time: Blavatsky and Olcott's 'cosmic wisdom'; **Besant's** 'will and activity'; Leadbeater's '**larger science**' and J. Krishnamurti's '**individual uniqueness and self-sufficiency**' (2). The fifth interpretation, "Theosophy in its

aspect of Beauty, through the great arts," he says, is about to become the new focus of the movement in Madras. "The Beauty Aspect of Life will be much more definitely stressed," he declares (3). He names the person who will embody this aspect from that point onwards: **Rukmini** Devi.

Arundale's strenuous efforts to yoke Theosophy and Beauty together bespeak his awareness that Rukmini Devi's efforts were being made in a hostile environment. He ventures to think that "only those who are well acquainted with the science of Theosophy are in a position to perceive the nature of those essential principles of colour, of sound, and of form, which constitute the root-being of evolving life" ("The Future Development" 4). **Theosophy's** service to Beauty would be repaid with interest when "public work" on the fifth interpretation, to be undertaken by Rukmini Devi, began in earnest: "This will be a new form of that which is essentially Theosophical propaganda, a form so far neglected among us, to the very definite detriment of our work of winning the world to Theosophy" (7).

The Beauty Aspect, though it did not get special consideration before the advent of **Rukmini** Devi, was not altogether neglected by her predecessors. Besant herself encouraged the pursuit of the arts and Eleanor Elder made the first experiments, in the 1910s, with the actual bodying forth of Theosophical ideology in drama and dance. Elder, a member of the Theosophical Society and a friend and mentor of **Rukmini's**, was associated with a group called the Arts League of Service, which sought to make art accessible to the poor. Elder is a crucial figure in this history because besides directing performances at **Adyar** of a kind of hybrid 'Greek' dance, à la Duncan, she also

wrote what may be considered the manifesto of nationalist (artistic) reform of sadir.

Elder's experiments in choreography were carried out in the light of a firm conviction that the world in general was in the grip of a conflict between the 'vulgar' and 'ugly,' on the one hand, and Beauty on the other. It was the business of cultured people to tip the scales in favour of the former. No sphere was organised in such defiance of Beauty as that of the education of children; physical cultivation, in particular, was neglected: "Think of a world in which every child went through ... a school... where the art of expression in colour, sound, and form was taught as a matter of course; would the future generations be content with the ugly world most of us live in?" (Elder 13).

Elder drew on ideas about physical culture that were general Theosophical currency in **Besant's** time, and contributed in her turn to the **establishment** of the norms that moulded the aesthetic which went with Theosophical doctrine and influenced **Rukmini Devi**. These norms had to do with the physique of the dancer and with the artistic (or religious) aims of dance in **general**.

Elder's ideal of physical beauty may appear strange to a generation that has grown accustomed to muscle-bound male heroes. It required a genteel sort of cultivation of the body, with "no abnormal development of the muscles, or any straining of the laws of nature" (2). While undesirable and excessive musculature was associated in Elder's mind with the requirements of western ballet, underdevelopment was the besetting sin of the working-class body. The working-class, in Elder's opinion, believed that physical degeneration was good for the soul.

"Perhaps the appalling joy and pride taken in sickness and disease by the lower classes," she suggests, "is a relic of **this teaching**"(12).

Whatever Elder's precise standards of excellence for the human frame were, they precluded sympathy for the dance of the devadasis. When she turns her attention to Indian dance and considers the possibility of its revival, she deplores the practice of these '**vulgar**' representatives of the arts:

The remnants of the true art of the Natya Sastras are only to be seen in a debased form nowadays in the nautch, and here again it is becoming Westernised. It is a tragedy indeed that such an art should be allowed to die out and it is to be hoped that Indian artists . . . will come forward and take up the subject seriously before it is too late (27).

"It is not possible to go to the nautch for assistance in a revival of the old religious Natya of India," Elder states, "the system must be built up afresh" (27-28). She mentions the sources that will supply the material for this revival of dance: the sastras and sculpture, those symbols of the unbroken and 'pure' tradition Rukmini Devi was to draw on in preference to the sampradaya (the living practice or traditions) of sadir. The **investigation** of Indian sculpture is to be undertaken on the lines of Isadora and Peter Duncan's quest for visual images in Greek sculpture. And the mention of the sastras leads, by an association by now almost natural, to the inevitable reference

to the ancient glory of the form: "...if we go to the Natya Sastras, we read there that dancing is of divine origin, and that in ancient days it was held to be akin to Yoga" (27).

Elder was conscious of clearing the path for the future reform of the dance. The **messiah**, the one who would actually take on this task, was yet to appear; but her pedigree, her strategies and her role in the freedom struggle were dimly presaged in the writing of the forerunner:

To create a system of Indian National Dance Drama from the study of these works [the sastras] and that of Indian sculpture and music, is a great work which awaits some skilled artist to take it up. It must be created by an Indian, and be truly expressive of Indian life and character; and it is now that it is needed, when fresh life is pouring into the Nation through its spiritual and educational awakening, and it may be through drama and this sacred art [that] India will find a means of delivering her message to the world. (28)

The hour produced the woman, and she did not make her advent without fanfare. Strikingly lovely in appearance and inclined to take her Theosophy very seriously, **Rukmini** Devi became synonymous with the cultural ambitions of the Society in Madras. Her mentors and friends could not speak of Beauty in the abstract any **more--could** not think about 'the Beauty Aspect'—without immediately invoking its **personification** in Rukmini

Devi. It was plain from the beginning that Beauty was to be her **portfolio**:

I make ... no apology for bearing what T regard as an entirely unbiassed, eager and most grateful testimony to the beauty which radiates from **Rukmini**, and I know that there are very many others whose testimony will be no less wholehearted. (Arundale, A Fragment 30-31)

Thus George Arundale. A more detailed and exact description of this 'beauty' that emanated from Rukmini Devi is not forthcoming at this stage; indeed, this beauty never actually finds verbal correlatives in the writings of her followers, but an unspoken aesthetic comes to be associated with her presence and her performances as the years pass. The novelty of this aesthetic becomes obvious when one considers how much discursive **justification** it seemed to require.

The young star was carefully groomed to take over the Beauty department by George Arundale among others; but the most important influence was Annie Besant herself. In an interview given towards the end of her life, Rukmini Devi recalled **Besant's** charismatic presence: "She gave me the real understanding of India because at that time young people used to think that everything in the West was superior. She made me feel the other way. I discovered India partly through her." ("Rukmini Devi on Her Life and Art," 59). Elder's influence is also obvious in the actual moves Rukmini Devi made towards the renewal of sadir. And James H. Cousins, art historian and

theosophist, appears to have been the person who "mooted the idea that she start an institution, where Bharata Natya would be taught, in the purified and refined way in which she was presenting it **herself**" (Sarada, 37).

Rukmini studied the art of sadir from isai vellalar teachers including the redoubtable Pandanallur **Meenakshisundaram** Pillai and Mylapore Gowri **Ammal**, until she was prepared to perform in public. She appears to have presented recitals to small and intimate audiences to begin with. However, the fifth interpretation of Theosophy formally began, as George Arundale wrote, "in Adyar on March 15th 1936, when **Shrimati** Rukmini Devi gave a public Classical Recital of Indian Dancing before a very large and distinguished audience" ("The Future Development" 18).

For a brahmin woman to perform sadir in the 1930s was, of course, extravagantly daring. Before she could harness the prestige of her own caste position to the dance form, Rukmini and her supporters had to fight off the opinion that she was stooping, that she had lost caste. The sensation of incurring the wrath of the orthodox was not new to her: she had already been sufficiently **non-conformist** to marry a foreigner much older than herself, which had occasioned a minor scandal in her circles. The factors that worked immediately in her favour must be noted here; the rest of the story is about her gradual reshaping of the form itself until it has become, in the **Present**, quite the thing with which young brahmin girls occupy their time.

The factor that most obviously helped create support for Rukmini Devi's project was her position and her husband's in the **Theosophical** Society. As President of the Society after Besant's

death, and as a campaigner for India's spiritual regeneration and freedom, George Arundale had a fairly extensive and loyal following, especially among the brahmin intelligentsia. Sarada (an old associate of **Rukmini Devi's** and one of the older teachers at Kalakshetra) observes that many **brahmins** attended **Rukmini's** performances because George Arundale "had worked tirelessly for national education and India's liberation from the British" by spreading the message that "a revival of Bharatanatyam based on religion and spirituality would help the regeneration of India" (43-44).

At Rukmini Devi's debut, the changes on the 'religion and spirituality' theme were rung with a thoroughness truly befitting the place and the occasion. George Arundale asserted that such recitals would serve Theosophy: the "diamond of Theosophy" (it was the year of the Society's Diamond Jubilee) would shine in all its facets. Rukmini Devi herself pointed out that dance recitals would serve the Nation: "Unless India learns once more to reverence her own splendid standards in the Arts, neither will she be worthy of Swaraj, nor will she be able to take her rightful place among the nations of the world" ("Theosophy as Beauty" 27). The splendid standards, which had their place in religious life in antiquity, had--Rukmini Devi implied--all but been forgotten for centuries and were finally being reinstated:

In Ancient India, the Arts were
incarnations of Divine Truths. Inevitably,
as the centuries passed, the Arts have
tended to lose their link with their
ensouling realities, though by no means to

the same extent as has been the case **with**
 their western counterparts since western
 Arts lost their religious idealism.

(Arundale, "The Future Development" 6)

The long historical interlude during which the devadasis considered themselves the 'guardians' of the arts does not, of course, bear mention in that sensitive situation; nor, in subsequent years, does the discourse widely associated with **Kalakshetra** and its graduates acknowledge the debt to these artistic predecessors.

George Arundale's eloquence on the occasions when Rukmini Devi performed (the Madras brahmin always had a weakness **for** English) was clearly a **crowd-pulling** feature. Among Sarada's memories of the bliss of that particular dawn, his '**chaste** English' as especially indelible.

Rukmini's caste position was undoubtedly a recommendation of her art. Reviews of and articles on her performances sometimes mentioned her caste and at other times made oblique or **metonymic** references to her 'culture and education'; but clearly the cultural capital she possessed, by birth, was being invested in the **transformation** of the dance. A review (in The Hindu) of the 1936 performance is a typical instance of the appreciation of this investment, and an early example of the confusion of aesthetic categories and caste position that was to be naturalized in bharatanatyam criticism:

The occasion was notable as marking the
 public debut of an educated and cultured
 lady outside the professional ranks, whose

disinterested love of a great **art** has led her to study its ... technique, and to attempt ... the difficult and delicate task of portraying emotions through gesture and expression.... (qtd. in Arundale, "The Future Development" 21-22)

A whole new vocabulary --of 'delicacy' and 'disinterested love of the **art**'--was in the making in this kind of criticism; a vocabulary which was clearly distinct from the one used to describe the sadir recitals of the now despised '**professional** ranks,' the devadasis. Evidently much could be overlooked, forgiven or reinterpreted in the public appearance of a brahmin woman who was, to put it crudely, not getting any money for her 'service.' As Margaret Cousins, theosophist and co-founder (with Besant) of the Women's India Association, expressed it:

The dance recitals of Shrimati **Rukmini** Devi of Madras are a spiritual experience. She is an exponent of genius of the ancient art of Bharata Natya and has made it her dedicated service of renascent India to restore the joy of the dancing God Nataraja to the life of the Indian people. Herself a Brahmin and the wife of the President of the Theosophical Society, a woman of much travel and culture, she has raised the whole atmosphere, environment and reputation of the public performance of music and dance by young **women.**(Indian Womanhood Today 107-08)

The worthy George **Arundale's** own review of **Rukmini's** maiden performance exemplifies, better than any other piece of writing, the peculiar running together of high seriousness and social snobbery that accompanied the **transmogrification** of **sadir**:

The theme of the dance recital was an emotional **interpretation** of the aspirational outpourings of the Soul, and an ecstatic **identification** of these with the very Soul of the Universe itself. . . . Every movement, every gesture, every pose, each song, expressed an aspect of such union so that the whole Dance became a symbol of a Soul's Awakening to its Divinity.... The Mayor of Madras, a number of His Majesty's Judges of the High Court, and many other leading citizens, both of Madras and other cities were present at the Recital. ("The Future Development" 19-20)

In the throes of passionate advocacy, Arundale is touchingly unconscious of the sublime absurdity of the fact that the '**Mayor of Madras**' found it convenient to witness and approve the 'Soul's Awakening.' In the subsequent discourse generated by the International Academy of the Arts (**Rukmini** Devi's 'institute'), soon to become Kalakshetra, the blending of paeans to divinity and attention to soul-making on the one hand with a finicky care for social status on the other becomes so standard that the bathos ceases to be noticeable. Dance is finding its place in **upper-caste** culture.

**Rukmini's Version of Bharatanatyam:
Theory and Practice**

It must be remembered that what appears on the surface to be a counter-campaign to the anti-naught movement--Rukmini Devi's attempt to revive the dance--was actually founded on the same assumptions as those of the nationalist reformers. The manoeuvres that Rukmini Devi and E. Krishna Iyer (especially the former) went through in the course of harnessing sadir to nationalism are central to my study because they were most directly involved in the definition of both the new aesthetic and the subjectivity of the class/caste that was to inherit the colonizers' power. The vectors that converged to shape the aesthetic of bharatanatyam, and to create a discourse about it, included, then: 1) the vindication of 'national' culture, figured in Rukmini Devi's discourse as high art devoted to spiritual uplift; 2) the transformation of a sacred temple-based pre-modern art into a secular, modern one, at home on the proscenium stage; 3) and, of immediate import, the justification of the use of sadir for the education of upper-caste girls from 'respectable' families.

No less a personage than George Arundale held that "the art work of Rukmini Devi was for the welfare of India. The work would advance the emancipation of our Nation" (cited in Viswanathan 5). He asserts that she is "arousing India to a remembrance of her past greatness and is helping her to tread a new way of unfoldment" ("Introduction" 1). The affiliation with cultural nationalism is indicated by a two-step process. Firstly, India is unvaryingly represented as the birthplace and home of a 'pure' spirituality, which extends into the arts:

"India is the very home of the great and spiritual" (Rukmini Devi, Woman as Artist 8); or: "We must show the spiritual aspect in the dance, because all our arts in India are spiritual, and if dance is not spiritual. it is not Art at all, and it is not Indian either" (Rukmini Devi, "On Understanding Bharata Natya" 25; emphasis added). Secondly, certain special people (brahmins, the elite, the 'pure') were privileged to embody this spirit of ancient India in the present, and the glorious task of restoring the (straying) arts to their former spiritually elevated status was rightfully theirs. And this task would help reeducate not only the nation, but entire continents, for "there is no barrier of nationality when greatness and beauty come into the world" (Rukmini Devi, The Message of Beauty 13-14).

The formless 'spirituality' Rukmini Devi was invoking obviously referred to an orientalist or Christian outsider's view of what a religious attitude ought to be rather than to any recognizable Hindu reality. The notion that the dance once represented, and ought once again to represent, asceticism and self-denial rather than eroticism or plenitude probably arose out of a European misunderstanding of the devadasi tradition that goes as far back as the thirteenth century A.D. In Marco Polo's description of his travels along the Coromandel coast, in 1298, he mentions the 'consecrated damsels' who dance in "certain abbeys," "before the idol[s] with great festivity." As Partha Mitter notes, this led to an illustration for Lie Livre Des Merveilles. called "Danse des Servantes ou Esclaves des Dieux," probably executed by the **Boucicault** Master in the early fifteenth century; in keeping with the convention of '**schematic**' Painting (with no attempt at realism or accuracy), the devadasis

were visually transformed into nuns, complete with head-dress (Mitter 3-4). Europeans travelling to India--and no doubt Annie Besant, who bequeathed to her followers a mythology of a pure and spiritual past for the devadasis, was one of **these--were** apt to arrive with somewhat confused images and expectations.

Whatever the origin of the myth of the devadasis' erstwhile asceticism, it led Rukmini Devi to announce imminent global transformation following the revival of the true and original spirit of bharatanatyam. Evidently, her 'art work' was no mundane activism; it was a crusade, a mission to the world, the dawn of a new era. So we understand from Rukmini Devi's account of the launching of Kalakshetra: "There was an atmosphere in those days... of a great pioneering spirit. There was a feeling that we were on the verge of some new revelation, some new spirit that was to be born again in the world" (qtd. in Ramani, 11). She has grandiose visions of what will come to pass: "We cannot fully react to beauty unless those who are leaders in the life of the nations react to art and appreciate art.... We must once more bring into the world the true religious spirit that goes hand in hand with art" (The Message of Beauty 8). She waxes poetic:

I hold that India can teach the world that
the true Dance is an art which, like the
white light of the Sun, draws into itself
the rainbow of other arts, and which as an
art can be one of the greatest achievements
of humanity. (Dance and Music 8)

In brief, as George Arundale modestly put the case: "India, as

we not only hope and believe but are certain, will renew the world and Kalakshetra shall be a force in the renewal, not merely of India, but of the whole **world...**"

The consciousness of a '**renewal**' in the offing lends urgency to the project of reshaping the aesthetic of sadir. with two potential audiences in mind: the indigenous brahmin intelligentsia and the international constituency of Theosophists, connoisseurs and '**humanists**' of every stamp. In actuality, this audience was not very large, art being extraneous to bourgeois society in a way artists or craftspeople of an earlier age, sustained by the cosmic or ritual significance of their work, could scarcely have believed possible. The talking into being of bharatanatyam, in a language of interiority and inwardness ('spirituality,' 'art for art's sake') on the one hand, and of millenarian 'world-renewal' on the other, was at one level merely nervous compensation for the sheer **expendability** of this form. But the renovated verbalization of the ends of the dance form also signalled a fact about the new audience for the dance: the fact that it was a mixed or cosmopolitan audience.

The quest for a viable 'modernity' for art forms in general, as Geeta Kapur points out, led Indian artists to negotiate between the idea of national self-determination and the need to speak a universal or international artistic language.¹⁸ In Rukmini Devi's case, it is evident that such a negotiation was made doubly necessary, since in addition to a search for a 'modern' language of dance, she had put dance on the agenda of the Theosophical Society, which already had a Philosophical investment in a judicious admixture of nationalism

and internationalism.

I have mentioned, above, the lectures and sermons at the Theosophical Society (part of the '**theory**' in which bharatanatram grounded itself) that helped create an audience for the new aesthetic. What needs elaboration, however, is Rukmini Devi's own version of evangelical aesthetics, her contribution to the '**theory**' that framed the practice of the new style: a discourse touching on the interests that her two kinds of audience had in common, which served to align them with each other as putative consumers of bharatanatyam. Rukmini's version of Beauty, though it does not deviate in any great measure from the well-established Theosophical pattern, demands closer analysis, since it is inextricable from her practice, and since it offers insights into her reasons for modifying specific aspects of sadir.

As I remarked in the context of Devi the Dancer, this aesthetic distinguishes itself by the singular inchoateness and generality of its terminology; words like '**Beauty**' or 'Spirituality' are flourished in the air without any clearly identifiable referents. The vocabulary that Rukmini Devi's adherents bequeathed to writers, performers and teachers is mystically evocative rather than descriptive; it is quite unlike the precise technical terms dance gurus of an older generation, for instance, used, in order to signal their demands to students, or to the vocabulary of everyday aesthetic enjoyment. For instance, in a statement such as the following: "In ancient India, as can be seen through a study of the classic books, the dance had the highest conception of beauty" (Rukmini Devi, Dance and Music 2), most elements are open to free interpretation,

since there is no attempt to specify any of them; how far back is '**ancient**'? What are the names of the 'classic books'? What might the 'highest conception' represent? And '**beauty**,' that trademark of Kalakshetra **discourse--what** are its actual visual or auditory **manifestations**?

"What is beauty?" Rukmini Devi asks, rhetorically, on another occasion. Is the **word--one** wonders--about to acquire material or conceptual content at last? The answer, as it turns out, leaves us no more enlightened than before: "It is the manifestation of the **Divine...in** all things" (The Message of Beauty 1). Confusion is further confounded: "We have to learn more and more of the beautiful Myriads of ugly things exist, but these will go as we learn to react to beauty perfectly" (8). Beauty is self-evident in this discourse; or, at any rate, the best people have **unmediated** access to it, and will educate the rest of the world.

Given that many Indian 'classic texts' tend to be exact in their descriptive detail, whether they are invoking conventional typologies or affective states, they are obviously not the sources of **Rukmini's** aesthetic jargon.¹⁹ Her terminology is puzzling, until one reflects that it is in fact the free-floating quality of such descriptions of the new aesthetic that helps decontextualize sadir, legitimizing its transfer from **locality-based** traditions into a universalist aesthetic paradigm (a section of the booklet The Message of Beauty to Civilization is subtitled "No Nationalism in Beauty"). The aesthetic of bharatanatyam, precisely because it is heralded by, and hedged around with, this abstract, universally resonant, inauthentic terminology, answers the call of modernity on the one hand

(since it was presumably made intelligible, by **non-referential**, **non-culture-specific** terms like 'beauty' or 'classic' to a mixed or even an exclusively international audience, not just, or not at all, to traditional connoisseurs) and of **nationalism** on the other (since India was to be identified with her spiritual/**mystical** past). As Amrit Srinivasan observes: "The re-classification of regional, artistic traditions within a unique **territorially-defined** framework of unity was now proposed in terms of spiritual and **civilisational** advantages of Indian and eastern philosophies and techniques" (1874).

The verbal **transformation** of the relevant aesthetic vocabulary had its parallel in a process of standardization which pieced **bharatanatyam** together out of fragments gathered from geographically scattered styles of dancing. Styles of sadir were defined according to locale (the Pandanallur style, the Vazhuvoor style, and so on); a rich variety of performing modes had acquired, by the nineteenth century, distinctive and **territory-specific** characteristics, some considered unique and some more prestigious than others.

The slow rhythms of **cross-fertilization** and exchange between these styles gave way, in the period of the brahmin takeover, to the abrupt disturbance and acceleration that **marked** the advent of the universal modern: grossly **undiscriminating** hands rummaged through finely nuanced regional forms, selecting a theme here and a movement there, to produce the hegemonic version of **bharatanatyam**. The paradoxical consequence of the collapsing into each other of different dance styles, and of the reshaping of the form, given the need to disavow of the violence of this process, is the protection of the new hybrid form **from**

'degenerative' influences that threaten its (postulated) purity and classicism. The museum of dance claims to house "the various dance and theatrical styles . . . as part of some long lost, common, pan-Indian tradition rather than as diverse expressive forms tied to unique systems of thought" (Puri 22).

The adaptation of sadir to serve Beauty and Nation exacted a price: its dissociation from the memory of its most recent **performers** and its teachers, the devadasis and the **nattuvanars**. Before sadir could enter upper-caste consciousness as a form fit for well-brought-up young women to practise, before it could be claimed as national heritage, it had to be washed clean of the stain of its association with the devadasis, a delicate operation. Rukmini Devi writes:

What I wanted to prove was that what was wrong was not the dance itself but the circumstances surrounding it and what people had done with it. So I tried in many ways to reform it, to clean it.... But when I say 'clean it,' I do not mean that the dance was **unclean**--I considered it like a great jewel which had been encrusted by dirt.... The only thing that was needed was to remove what did not belong to it, to reveal the beauty of the jewel **itself**.

(qtd. in **Ramani** 11)

When Rukmini Devi and her supporters had done with the form, both theoretically and practically, it was **transfigured**; the typical performer was no longer the '**professional**' from the

devadasi 'ranks,' but the 'artiste' of middle-class brahmin origins. The moves by which this was accomplished, considered below, may be seen as representing a ferociously focused attempt to put as much distance as possible, in every detail of its practice, between bharatanatyam and the devadasi tradition.

The practice of sadir involved the knitting together of a community-based organization, locality-based aesthetic codes, a ritually derived **semiosis**, and individual performing bodies and selves. The devadasis traced their personal and artistic ancestry back several generations through women relatives or male gurus: the genealogy or paramparai was a source of great pride to them. For instance, Balasaraswati, in her Presidential Address at the Music Academy in 1974, is at pains to acknowledge her lineage:

Although it is known to many that my grandmother's grandmother **Kamakshiammal** danced and sang at the court of Tanjore, it is important to point out that my great-grandmother **Sundarammal** was a musician, as were my grandmother **Dhanammal** and my mother, **Jayammal**. ("Presidential Address" 15)

The living traditions or sampradayam of sadir that had been handed down through the devadasis and their isai vellalar teachers was definitely not what **Rukmini** Devi wished to lay claim to. At the same time, there was no cachet in presenting bharatanatvam as a radically new art, since the proof of its antiquity was its highest recommendation. The tension between the claim to antiquity and the desire to blot out the isai

vellallar interlude led **Rukmini** and her adherents to make extraordinary claims for her own creative vision, which allowed her to be more traditional than the devadasis, while virtually eliding the large contributions made by nattuvannars like **Meenakshisundaram Pillai** and **Chockalingam Pillai**, kathakali asans like **Ambu Panikkar** and **Chandu Panikkar**, devadasi performers like **Gowri Ammal**, and members of traditional performing families like **Bharatam Natesa Iyer** to **Kalakshetra's** basic repertoire.

One way of disavowing the connection with the isai vellalar community was to claim that the repertoire was recreated directly from the sastras. Thus even as Rukmini Devi began to learn the art from an isai vellalar natyacharya--perhaps the greatest teacher in his generation, Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram **Pillai--she** was invoking the textual authority of the sastras for her practice, especially the authority of the 'Fifth Veda,' the Natyasastra which, she says, is like an ocean. To dance well it was not enough to learn the skills that the devadasis had mastered; the additional component of '**knowledge**' is required,

a knowledge not only of the books which in India are unique, but also a knowledge of great philosophies, literature, poetry, music and religion, a knowledge by which the mind transcends itself in the world of wisdom. When this is achieved, Bharata Natya is justified by the **dancer...the** dance becomes a Veda and the dancer a Yogi.

(Woman as Artist 6)

In an unprecedented move, dance becomes essentially an exercise of the mental faculties rather than a practice of the **body**. Mental training is traditionally the provenance of brahmin men; but this catholic mode of knowing, encompassing "great philosophies, literature, poetry, music and religion," was the peculiar territory of the **English-educated**, humanist, universal brahmin intellectual, a subject position open to female occupation by the mid twentieth century. This 'sanskritization' of the art was extended into other areas, with the privileging, at **Kalakshetra**, of practices like vegetarianism, pūjā on stage and so on.

Appealing to the authority of the Natyasastra led imperceptibly to the question of renaming the form. **Rukmini** Devi was anxious to claim credit for this stroke of genius, and some of her associates give it to her, in defiance of the evidence of the dates (see the section on the Music Academy above). Sarada notes in her documentary study of Kalakshetra that "[it] was Rukmini Devi who first called this dance Bharata Natya as it originated from the great sage Bharata" (43). Rukmini herself writes: "This name f sadir kutcheri] had its own associations because of which I preferred to call my recitals Bharata Natya recitals" ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 24).

Even the sastras were not, in this discourse, specific in their reference: a vague gesture towards the '**sacred** texts' usually sufficed to include all kinds of texts, whether mythological narratives or treatises on dance, dramaturgy, 'aesthetics' and ritual. If the word sastra denoted the Natyasastra, it would be easy to show how spurious the textual authority for '**spiritual**' dancing was; because while this text

specifies the details of **invocation**, realization and presentation of mythic narratives in the ritually appropriate framework, it does not make any claims for the spirituality of this exercise. It is, on the contrary, a wholly practical manual, concerned with effective dramaturgy (which is not, of course, to be interpreted as '**realism**,' but as successful enactment of the narrative, the bringing-into-being of its experience, which then enabled the enjoyment of rasa). As Angelika Heckel notes: "The relationship with the world and its history, and not with something other-worldly, is that in which and out of which theatre and rasa takes **place--according** to the description offered by the Natyashastra" (41).

Whatever the actual content of the word '**sastra**,' it served **Rukmini** Devi and her followers as a trope for the direct connection between the revived dance and antiquity, a connection, moreover, that bypassed the entire history of sadir. The manoeuvre is, of course, reminiscent of the **hypostatization** of the Vedic past, the Golden Age, by the Orientalists in India; the unspoken intention in this case was to legitimize a class's hegemonic power through a particular appropriation of that invented past. One of the effects of this understanding of the dance's history is the bharatanatyam dancer's peculiar inability to address the present in any way **in her dance**: unlike in the instance of, say, Indian painting, the very entry into modernity was achieved through a denial of that modernity, a disavowal of all historicity and an evocation of a timeless present that was never really there.²¹ The entry into modernity was to be effected, then, not through a consciousness of the historical development of the dance: but by the consciousness of its

historic (cultural) role in the present, as a component in the nationalist struggle. The project of dance, in this context, like that of the other arts, was to "[materialize]... the idea of a golden past and then [to induct] this into a national project" (Kapur, "Ravi **Varma**" 59).

The ideal ground on which to work this project was, of course, Hindu mythology; the product was the well-known dance-drama, a staple element of **Kalakshetra's** repertoire. The narrative drama fulfilled **cultural-nationalist** requirements excellently well: it 'brought alive' India's past in stage-events that aroused national pride (in the spiritual tradition it brought to mind) but, in the Kalakshetra version, also signalled its own modernity by an unprecedented smoothness of presentation. As George Arundale wrote: "We hope to encourage Indian artists to write plays embodying Indian themes, full of inspiration and beauty, and we shall hope to produce them on the most modern scientific principles of production" ("The Future Development" 38-39). The golden past and the **revolutionary** present were thus connected up not only by the appeal to high textuality, but also by this work of bodying forth mythological narratives in the new form--the dance-drama--adapted for the purpose. "According to Sarada Hoffman [an associate of **Rukmini's**], **Rukmini** Devi had a lot of young people to work with and she thought that, by involving them in artistic activity such as producing these elevating stories, the public could get some motivation, some inspiration to cultivate bhakti in their lives" (**Ramnarayan**, "Rukmini Devi" 32). A sample of the dance-dramas Kalakshetra produced after the Tirukuttrala **Kuravanji** (1944), its first venture: Kalidasa's **Kumarasambhavam** (1947),

Seeta Swayamvaram (1954), Usha Parinayam (1959), Maha Pattabhishekam (1970).

The initial construction, at Kalakshetra, of a formal vehicle for **the** popularization of elevating mythological stories, is a typical instance of the interaction between **Rukmini's** school and traditional teachers of dance, and of the subsequent disavowal of this interaction in statements that attribute the success of the project almost entirely to Rukmini Devi. Discussions by Kalakshetra artistes of the influences under which the dance-dramas were produced frequently raise the question on which everything seems to hinge: who is to have the credit for these productions? The tension between ideology (**genius-at-work**, creation ex nihilo) and practice (first, reconstruction of what was available and then **transformation** of it in accordance with Rukmini Devi's notions of good taste), while it is belied by the bland **self-gratulation** of Kalakshetra veterans of this period, surfaces in the very persistence with which this question is addressed.

The antecedents of the celebrated Kalakshetra dance-dramas are probably to be sought in two phenomena: the amateur productions of the Theosophical Society, English plays on Indian themes performed for a cosmopolitan audience; and place-based traditions of mythological drama like the Bhagavata Mela tradition of Melattur. The broad vision that animated Rukmini Devi's dance-dramas may be traced back to the kind of west-influenced **subjectivity** that produced Bheeshma and Edwin Arnold's The Light of Asia in English for the **edification** of **the** Theosophists. Eleanor Elder's experiments, and her suggestion that it would be "through drama and this sacred art

[of dance] that India will find a means of delivering her message to the world" (28) hover in the background, as do Elder's injunctions on taste. The actual repertoire of movement, as anyone who has choreographed a dance would know, could not be conjured up out of the void: this, it would seem, was provided by the Nattuvanar teachers, the Kathakali performers, the Melattur artistes and other masters of already extant traditional modes of dramatic presentation and of gestural vocabularies. The records of the choreographing, especially, of the early dance-dramas of Kalakshetra obliquely suggest the centrality of the **contributions** by these teachers to **Rukmini Devi's** style.

But the very idea of 'choreography,' the individual's visualization of how a dramatic performance will look or be organized, is, of course, entirely new in Indian dance: traditional theatrical presentations developed partly through accretion, partly through the dictates of ritual enactment, and bore no signatures. What Rukmini Devi added to the material she gathered from these traditional sources was a sort of **rationalizing** vision. All those elements of the older styles that looked out of place on the proscenium stage were weeded out: acting in the round, with musicians walking behind the dancers, the lack of a fixed perspective that identified the space of 'the audience,' casual, informal and interrupted **presentations**. Costumes were redesigned according to the requirements of 'taste,' or to suit the bodies of individual **performers**; music was commissioned from expert vidwans like K. **Krishnamacharier, Papanasam** Sivan, Mysore Vasudevachariar and Tiger Varadachariar; the choreography was made more symmetrical

in its detail; the duration of each performance was cut down drastically. **'Taste'** was of the essence: there is nothing here of the narrative and visual mess, the garish costuming, the haphazard lighting, the random and **repetitive** movement, and all the other elements, anomalous to an eye accustomed to the finish of western ballet, that typified indigenous narrative theatre, whether it was the therukoothu or the bhagavata mela.

The art of **'polishing'** for a cosmopolitan audience productions that had existed in regionally defined forms for many decades was acquired at the Theosophical Society. **Rukmini** Devi, however, is canonized for far more than **co-ordinating** or adding finishing touches to the **Kalakshetra** dance-dramas. As Dr. James Cousins wrote in Swatantra in 1946, of the Kalakshetra production of Tirukuttrala Kuravanji, its first dance-drama:

the rescuing from oblivion of a long forgotten work... would itself be an event of much importance to Tamil scholarship. But the artistic eye of **Srimati** Rukmini Devi saw the possibility of the revival of the forgotten dance-drama, not in the sense of putting new wine into old bottles, for no vestige of the exhilarating elements of music or dance remained; nor in the sense of putting old wine into new bottles for no modern dance or music had any affinity with the old Tamil verses. ... [But] the result has been a first class **demonstration** of what may be figuratively called artistic reincarnation, through which the spirit of

tradition finds new life. (qtd. in
Ramnarayan, "Rukmini Devi" 27; emphasis
 mine)

The genre of dance-drama under discussion--the **Kuravanji form**--was part of a living tradition, which Rukmini herself had been introduced to in Thanjavur by **Meenakshisundaram Pillai**. While Rukmini probably deserves credit for bringing the form to the metropolis and to the proscenium stage, the claim that she virtually recreated it was untrue and arrogant; but such claims are frequently made, without any sign of embarrassment, by **Kalakshetra** acolytes. It was necessary to establish, for the sake of **Kalakshetra's** continued hegemony, that Rukmini Devi had a special ability to embody the 'spirit of tradition'; the operative word being, of course, 'spirit,' since there were rivals (like Balasaraswati or any of the isai vellalar teachers) with an infinitely more solid claim to embody its **form**. Thus Sarada Hoffman: "'Rukmini Devi's dance-dramas are not traditional in any literal sense. They are traditional in that they carry the traditional spirit. We must give credit to her originality," (qtd. in Ramnarayan "Rukmini Devi" 28). It is instructive to contrast this talk of the 'spirit of **tradition**' with the more literalist and more concrete definition of the word by an isai vellalar teacher. Here is **Mahalingam Pillai**, asked by an interviewer what he thought of 'tradition':

Tradition has as much to do with
 maintaining the quality of the art-form as
 it has to do with its core values and
 substance. For example, in Bharatanatyam,

the upper torso should be kept in a static position, the body should not be subjected to undue movement, and the sthayi for abhinaya **should** be maintained.... (Krishna, 11).

The construction of a subsequent (projected) dance-drama in the bhagavata mela style hints at the multitude of never quite acknowledged contributors:

As a first step and as suggested by E. Krishna Iyer, **Rukmini** Devi invited **Balu** Bhagavatar, who was the leading performer of Bhagavata Mela... at Melattur and **Saliangalam**... to come to Kalakshetra. Kalyani **Ammal**, daughter of **Bharatam** Natesa Iyer, one of the traditional Bhagavatars also came to help.... music for some [lyrics] was composed by Turayyur Rajagopala **Sarma**. Sarada herself put in a great effort But all aspects were guided and supervised by Rukmini Devi who herself introduced changes such as the cutting down of the number of **Tiraiseelai-s** or hand-held curtains used for the entrance of characters because they interfered with the smooth flow of dramatic presentation. (**Ramnarayan**, " Rukmini Devi" 31)

Among the modernizing moves made in the interests of **taste** was, crucially, the reinventing of the dance costume.

The old costumes carried the marks of the devadasi's history: they were sometimes in organza, sometimes in some other diaphanous material like muslin, and worn over (usually satin) pyjamas-accretions, no doubt, of a colonially dominated period. All this produced a look that was obviously not sufficiently indigenous. "The traditional costume seemed to me to be too much a mixture of styles" (Rukmini Devi, "Bharata Natya Sastra" 23). The upper caste body of the bharatanatyam dancer had to appear in attire that did not too closely resemble the devadasi's; yet it had to look 'Indian' in a general sort of way, and be made of authentic material. To find a design for the new costume, Rukmini Devi consulted temple sculpture. Presumably the models were some of the few sculpted female figures that were not semi-nude, since the result was a kind of pleated and shaped pyjama-cum-sari executed in Kanjeevaram silk.

Gendering the Dancer's Body:
Bharatanatyam as Hone Economics

The hidden agendas of Rukmini Devi's aesthetic discourse are, as I have noted, the suppression of the devadasi's role in dance history and the underwriting of brahmin authority in the sphere of culture. A particular kind of gendering was to help place the brahminical stamp on the practice of bharatanatyam: it would simultaneously assert the **caste-identification** and determine the aesthetic compulsions of the new form. The ideal female sensibility was defined in turn by these. Understandably, in the circumstances, the devadasi community was the great Other, the entity against which this definition took place: whatever that community represented, the femininity encoded in the dance was to represent its very antithesis.

I will return to the gendering of the dance and the dancer through the themes I had marked as significant while discussing Devi the Dancer: sexuality, money and the **aestheticism** of art for art's sake.

The devadasi's body was the focus of a particular conjunction of sexual desire, ritual functions, economic transactions and '**aesthetic**' codes--a conjunction which, as I pointed out in the last chapter, the modern upper caste sensibility simply could not stomach. Her body represented desire in two ways: firstly by being publicly visible as a vehicle of the dance; secondly by being privately available to a man, even if only one particular man, outside marriage. To be a woman, in the modern upper caste ideology, was to repudiate sexual desire, or at least to rewrite it as something **else**--God, Love, Companionship, Motherhood: "The **psychoanalyst** says that all love is **fundamentally** sex. Up to a point he or she is right, but has forgotten that all sex is **fundamentally**...the power of God in its physical **aspect**" (Rukmini Devi, My Theosophy 9). Rukmini Devi's attempt to erase the devadasi body from the nation's memory starts by emphasizing the norms for a correct (upper caste) female sexuality:

Woman needs to know the sacred place of sex. It is a vessel filled with divine life and she may bring down this divine life into ordinary life.... It is not something to indulge in. It is something that we should approach with worship, and delicately. (The Message of Beauty 16)

Not only must women (**specifically**) deny, repress, or simply not have '**vulgar**' desires, they must in fact provide the counterweight to (untrammelled) male desire. This is their '**civilizing role**' in the world; and they fail in this role when they fail to understand that "sex is one of the greatest sacraments ... [that] is supremely a matter for reverence.... Irreverence and vulgarity in relation to sex are nothing short of blasphemy and degradation" (Woman as Artist 9-10).

Oddly enough, given her extensive meditations on the '**spirituality**' of bharatanatyam, Rukmini Devi familiarized her public with the courtly repertoire of sadir rather than its temple-based practice. The latter, though it included lyrics of an erotic nature, also embodied the ritual functions of dance as a way of bringing auspiciousness, warding off evil, or, on festival days, enacting an event of special mythic **significance**: functions irreducibly bound up with a **pre-modern**, culture-specific sense of the sacred that was not translatable into the nebulous language of 'spirituality,' and therefore of no particular value to Rukmini Devi's project. What she had to modify, then, was the stage-format given to sadir by the four brothers known as the Thanjavur Quartette. These brothers (Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, **Sivanandam** and Vadivelu, court **musicians** and dance teachers in the reign of the Maratha king Serfoji II [1798-1832]) had arranged the lyrics that made up a recital in a meaningful sequence (**from** Alarippu to Tillana) that allowed **for** the sustaining of audience interest as **well** as a full exposition of the dancer's abilities.

What then, was to be done with the erotics of the court-based repertoire--which placed Sringara or sexual love at the

centre of its aesthetic--traditionally presented with the devadasi's characteristic and unashamed candour in matters sexual? The emphasis on Sringara. Rukmini Devi admits, was embarrassing; therefore it entered the art--it must have 'crept in'--when the spiritual guardians of the art were not looking, i.e., when the devadasis had a monopoly on its **practice**. "I had definitely decided that the dance was essentially spiritual," Rukmini declares, "and I could not accept that it had gone away from the true spirit of Bharata Natya. In the Sanchari Bhava used in the varnams and padams there was much that was undesirable not only in the actual movements and hastas but even in the subtle abhinaya, eye movements, lip movements etc." ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 22).

Being the kind of woman she was, Rukmini Devi did not let embarrassment daunt her; she set about studiously '**cleaning**' the art. The moves here were of three kinds: the replacement of Sringara with bhakti as the key emotion in **bharatanatyam**; the omission or **bowdlerization** of padams or varnams that delineated erotic relationships; and the **establishment** of protocols about what could be depicted on the stage, and how it could be depicted.

"It was not difficult for me to convince my teacher, Meenakshisundaram Pillai that I would not be able to learn such an aspect [sringara] and so my dance took another turn and I worked entirely for the **spiritualisation** of the art" ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 22). Sringara is not wrong in itself; but. it has to know its place, she says: "There are certain types of **pada**-s I have objected to. From one vidwan I learnt the old **padam** Tamarasaksha... the languishing navika describes not only

her love, but the whole process of physical contact and in gestures at that! To depict such things is unthinkable to me..." (qtd. in **Ramnarayan**, "A Quest for Beauty" 73).

One may contrast all this soul-searching with the untroubled acceptance of Sringara by a performer in the devadasi tradition:

Sringara stands supreme in this range of emotions. No other emotion is capable of better reflecting the mystic union of the human with the divine. I say this with deep personal experience of dancing to many great devotional songs which have had no element of Sringara in them. Devotional songs are, of course, necessary. However, Sringara is the cardinal emotion which gives fullest scope for artistic improvisation, branching off continually, as it does, into the portrayal of innumerable moods full of newness and nuance. (Balasaraswati, "On Bharatanatyam" 10, emphasis added)

Balasaraswati is not contesting the idea that Sringara is a **metaphoric** presentation of a relationship with the divine; what she **is** saying is that **sringara** offers the ideal thematic ground for the dancer's exploration and communication of her skill and emotive power, which is, in turn, crucial to the evocation of **awe** and pleasure in the audience. A dancer who has trained her body well and can make it express her dedication to the art,

Balasaraswati notes, "will feel no need to 'purify' any item in the traditional order of Bharatanatyam" ("On Bharatanatyam" 11).

Rukmini Devi objected particularly strongly to lyrics in which secular heroes and patrons figured: "I found the King described as if he were God.... As my heart went more towards the devotional aspect of the dance, I included in my programmes only those items that had a beautiful meaning and excelled from a musical point of view" ("Bharata Natya Sastra" 22). Patronage, of course, was part of the life-world of the devadasi; what was considered normal in her repertoire--the praise of a generous donor--came too close to expressing the economics of the devadasi tradition for **Rukmini's** taste. A great many old numbers had to be rewritten with offensive parts excised; and the pieces of choice for fresh choreography were, very often, bhakti-oriented lyrics by composers like Thyagaraja or **Muthuswami** Dikshitar, who had been conventionally thought of as part of the South Indian musical tradition, not the sadir tradition.

Certain movements had to be eliminated so that decorum could be maintained. Rukmini Devi was offended, for instance, by the fact that sadir performers gestured or pointed equally with both hands: she felt that the left hand, considered ashuddham (unclean) by the upper castes, ought not to be used. The centuries-old rule of symmetry in sadir was **sacrificed--the** indecorous left hand ceased to point. In general, the changeover from an aesthetics of enactment or allegory, as in the practice of sadir, to a pictorial aesthetic adapted to the proscenium stage harmonized with two other factors--the relatively asexual appearance of the dancer's full-face appearance and the iconic ('spiritual') value to be extracted from it, in the context of

nationalism--to produce choreography that emphasized a bland **frontality**.³⁰

The idea of the uncleanness of the left hand leads one to consider the obsessive sense of 'dirt,' associated in the modern brahmin's discourse with the devadasi. What was more disturbing than the mere sexual presence of the devadasi was the fact that this sexual presence was tied up with monetary transactions: between the dasi and the temple or king on the one hand and between the dasi and her private patron on the other. As a community-based practice, sadir was supported by complex social arrangements--such as the positioning of the women of the devadasi household vis-a-vis the families of gurus, and **vis-a-vis** their own taikizhavis or matriarchs; such as the provision of cooked food and housing by the temple and the royal patron; such as the administration of their lands by the temple, and the payment of allowances, that freed the dancers precisely from the domestic duties that **Rukmini** Devi so persistently associated with the image of Woman. Though the economic relation in each case was a feudal one, and therefore not obviously '**commercial**' in the (capitalist) sense of '**commoditized**,' it still stipulated the devadasi's body as essential to the transaction, as materially present dancer, as concubine or mistress. If the publicly visible body were not scandal enough, the introduction of money into the frame made it absolutely unbearable from the point of view of the different class/caste-position of the 'modern' subject.

In the last chapter, I touched upon the gendering of this **subject--on** the expectation that the woman would be characterized by the modest desire to fill and beautify the Home

while the sexually charged, conflict ridden World remained a male domain. The very appearance of women in public violates these codes; but the violation is more shocking when an income hinges on it. And not only did the devadasi, functioning within a problematic that could not recognize this violation, embody the physicality of sex; she actually sang and danced it. A padam like Yarukkagilum bhayama, for instance, is performed from the point of view of a woman who has found a rich and handsome patron; the town gossips about her, but she is defiant, attributing the malice to envy. If in this context the word for 'man' (purushan) might be interpreted as 'lord' or 'husband' (though one should remember that given who was performing this padam--the devadasi--and given that marriage was not especially liable to cause gossip in ordinary circumstances, it makes sense to read it as 'patron'), the lyrics of "Kayyil panam illamal variro" ('So you have come to me without money in your hands'; it ends: 'I must send you away unsatisfied') leave no room for ambiguity about the kind of relationship being described.

Significantly, the really conservative brahmin, whose position was exemplified to some extent by the Music Academy's activists or by Congress leaders like S. Satyamurthi, was not hostile to the presentation of erotic lyrics on the stage; only the modernized brahmin, conscious of living under western eyes, felt obliged to display his disgust. Brahmin composers of the nineteenth century, for instance, by no means thought it beneath their dignity to create lyrics for the devadasi dancers of their time: Subbarama Iyer, for instance, authored several well-known padams, including the controversial "Kayyil panam illamal variro." mentioned above; Mahavaidyanatha Sivan (1844-1893)

composed **tillanas**; and even at the beginning of this century, **Patnam Subramania** Iyer (1844-1902) was writing **padams** and **javalis** for the dance, including, famously, "**Smarasundaranguni sariyevvare**" for Veena **Dnanammal**. The Music Academy was also responsible for a renewal of interest in the sexually explicit **padams** of **Kshetrappa** in the **1930s**.

What conservative brahmins might have thought of their own women performing dance at all, let alone to such lyrics, is a moot point. Rukmini Devi was breaking a **caste-specific** taboo on public appearance; obviously she had problems peculiar to both her caste and gender positions in performing **bharatanatyam**.

The shocked response of (modernized) upper caste audiences to the women's depiction of sexual desire may be explained in terms of the need to perpetuate certain useful social relations such as those that subordinated women to men. The woman who strayed from the reproductive sphere into the productive was inadequately feminine, was an outcaste by its standards. It may also be explained as a psychic phenomenon. Freud calls attention to the curiously anal imagery evoked by money (as in phrases like 'filthy **lucre**' or 'yellow dirt') and suggests that, to the unconscious, money is excrement. This equation is read historically by Norman O. Brown as a psychic **manifestation** of the Protestant ethic--he cites Martin Luther as the test case. The 'excremental vision' of the devadasi practice would be a psychically appropriate **characteristic** of the class that was involved in **nation-building** in India; a class that, moreover, consciously modelled its ethics on those of evangelical Christians in India and in Britain. A puritanism that paralleled the puritanism of Protestants in Britain appears to have gone

into the making of the **'modern'** moral universe in India, under the influence of the missionaries.

The obsession with the diseased body of the prostitute, and the projection of this obsession onto the devadasi's body, as I observed in the last chapter, already characterized **Muthulakshmi Reddi's** discourse. The imagery of filth appears again in the writings of **C.R. Srinivasa Iyengar**, a brahmin critic who wrote a series of articles on dance in The Hindu, between 1929 and 1931, with a view to 'reviving and **elevating**' this art. "The once lofty and spiritual conceptions of love as between man and his ideal, have been dragged down into the filth and mud of carnal, sexual, unholy and unbridled passions," he writes, by "the **unmentionables**"(171). We have already noted **Rukmini Devi's** own images of dirt and cleaning: "What is worse in the world than vulgarity expressed in art? I am sorry that in modern times there exists so much vulgarity and ugliness alongside some very fine conceptions expressed in works of art" (The Message of Beauty 11). The casual evocation by the devadasi of the relation between the body and money was, in this upper caste, modern imaginary, literally unthinkable.

Thus one more barrier between the devadasi practice of dance and the brahmin one was the contrast between the economically viable organization of the former, and the amateur, strictly non-economic nature of the latter. Indeed, bharatanatyam was held up for commendation precisely **because**, as a financial proposition, it was a notable failure. Its lack of economic feasibility did not merely mean that it failed to find a place in the **'market'** for art; as a **domestic/feminine** practice (as opposed to the practice of arts dominated by male artists,

which could support the idea of commercial success) it had to be **by definition unproductive.**

One sign of the success of **Rukmini** Devi's strategies of **sanitization** was the virtual disappearance of the devadasi and the isai vellalar community from the practice and teaching of dance. This triumph is reflected in a statement by Rukmini Devi, quoted by Sarada:

One great new thing ... is the complete separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers. It is a well-known fact that they are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anyone else to conduct a dance performance. I have always had a determination that this must go. . . . Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent **dancers**.
(qtd. in Sarada, 50)

But like the repressed, the memory of the dasi's body returned to haunt bharatanatyam--a flaw inherent in the form itself, in the irreducible residue of physicality that remained in the dance. The simple fact of the dancer's physical presence on the stage, in public, could not be disguised. Much of **Rukmini's** troubled musing is about this taint, this '**coarseness**': "...the dance is an expression by the physical body.... The weakness of the physical body is its coarseness and **vulgarity**..."(Dance and Music 5). Upper caste disapproval of any such appearance went very deep, and Rukmini Devi's reclamation of bharatanatyam was undoubtedly received by many critics as an outrageous and

disruptive act. The elaborate discursive strategies that pulled together the unfamiliar practice of the dance and the familiar jargon of brahmin asceticism must, then, be read in the context of a continuing search for **legitimacy**: "...for those who have a higher knowledge, the body can fulfil its highest **Dharma...** by giving through the very physical being itself an embodiment ... of Cosmic Being" (Dance and Music 5). The infringement of caste-**dharma** implicit in the practice of dance by brahmin women had to be covered over with the appeal to a higher dharma that charged the female body with divinity, with the dignity of a higher **purpose**.

These themes may be summed up in Rukmini Devi's own dicta for womankind from The Message of Beauty to Civilization. The task is to produce a prescription for normative womanhood; the tone is urgent, heroic. The 'women of the West,' doing, one presumes, unspeakably material things like earning a living, are the Other of 'real' womanhood:

The women of the West... do not
realize...what womanhood really is...If
 only woman knew what her own way is!
....What is her place? Is it merely to be a
 copy of man? It is to be herself more than
 anything else, to be divine in her own
 being, to be a piece of art, not only an
 artist. For the true emotional spirit of
 art is one with the true emotional spirit
 of woman, and if these two can combine,
 whether in the home or in politics, ...even
 at a typewriter, then woman can be her real

self and express herself through all the graces of life, the beauties and refinements of life and the influence she can bring upon her surroundings. And that influence must be entirely cultural, entirely refined. (The Message of Beauty 14-15)

In setting up an opposition between the 'women of the West' and the heroically spiritual women of the East, Rukmini Devi was only extending a theme that had already been developed by her mentor Annie Besant.

"The spirit of Womanhood is the spirit of the artist," Rukmini Devi says in what promises to be an exciting manifesto or **justification** for women's **participation** in the arts. The explanation belies the promise of this grand statement. The real woman is ornamental, domestic (the working woman's typewriter is the ultimate symbol of horror) and modestly outside the productive sphere. Her proper task is the cultivation of graces and refinements that will make civilization itself tolerable--a kind of interior decoration on a cosmic scale. This task belongs to every woman, not just to artists or **writers--because** it is also woman's lot to be the 'Universal Mother'--who, it turns out, has the same duties as the artist. "[Woman] must express the true life of the Divine Woman She must refine life. . . . Does woman realize that whether she is a mother or not Physically, she is the mother of the whole world? She must contribute this spirit of motherhood to the world in every department of life" (The Message of Beauty 15). Rukmini Devi, it **must** be remembered, was being groomed by the Theosophical

Society to take on the messianic role of World Mother, as J.Krishnamurti was prepared, some years earlier, to be the World Teacher.³⁷

The political **possibilities** opened up for both art and women by Rukmini Devi's figuring of art as nationalism were vitiated from the very beginning by the strategies she deployed for survival and **self-justification**. The question of women's possibly radical political participation was decisively resolved, in the **event--betrayed**, some would say--by its absorption into the 'inner' world that was an adjunct to the dominant nationalist struggle, and its gradual obliteration from the frame of the independent nation. As **transformation** of women's roles ceased to be a major issue under the new **dispensation**, their cultural space, increasingly defined by exclusively 'aesthetic' considerations, narrowed and lost its **significance**. The result is the position in which the dancer in the present finds herself: **commoditized**, subsidized, showcased on television, sent to festivals of India in sundry places, but ultimately disempowered except as a reference point for a nationally approved middle class femininity.

In the model of cultural nationalism set up by Rukmini Devi, art never becomes cultural production. It becomes, instead, a kind of special work women do to embellish the national domestic **establishment**. This drastically limited what could be done with the aesthetic she deployed. The sacred and social **justification** of the devadasi's performances, the cosmology and the aesthetics that supported this, no longer obtained in the regime of modernity; nor was any other **justification** sought or given. Rukmini Devi could not appeal to

either of the two kinds of investment modernity brought into play: the bourgeois-individualist, romantic, rebellious subject position could not be occupied because of the inherent conservatism of the revival she was responsible for; nor could an aesthetics of cognition, that went with **marxist** literary and artistic movements, be set in place, because making reference to the cognitively available features of the dancer's everyday life or even to national culture was incompatible with the amorphous pieties that justified the revival of dance.³⁸

Elizabeth Dempster writes, "dance is in the world, refers to that world, but also creates its own reality. It is not simply a reflection of a current social reality but can be a gesture towards some other; it is able to project other possibilities, alluding to a future, to a past, to another present" ("Profile: Russell Dumas" 48). Hobbled by the painful associations of its own tradition (and therefore unable to refer to its past) and by the sheer externality of art to bourgeois culture (which required elaborate **justification** of its mere existence in the present), the reinvented dance form was fated to lose such vitality as it briefly had under the influence of the **millenarian** enthusiasm of Theosophy. Grounded neither in sadir's aesthetic of identity and social assimilation nor in a romantic aesthetic of rejection and **separateness**, bharatanatyam in the form **Rukmini** Devi gave it quickly reached the end of its creative potential; it could no longer bring about a sense of its own 'truth,' Martin Heidegger's term for the effect of a successful work of art. The practice of dance, therefore, remains in this cosmetic limbo, an **advertisement** for the 'refinement' of national civilization, as may be inferred from

the fact that '**India**' is frequently represented iconically in travel brochures or on the covers of inflight magazines by a dancer in bharatanatyam costume. This conclusion is what makes it impossible to celebrate the pragmatism of **Rukmini's** invented tradition as Geeta Kapur celebrates the makeshift, non-metropolitan and workable aesthetics Third World artists generate for their unique purposes. The recognition of the poverty of the style, in the present, has triggered off researches into its history on the one hand and creative work that rejects the brahminical baggage on the other.

Since the nationalist struggle was the moment at which many kinds of modernity were defined, arts like bharatanatyam also became fossilized in narratives that were exclusively about 'our great tradition,' about 'eternal **India**,' about 'ancient Indian heritage.' The dance in India is so congealed in this alliance with the 'tradition' and the disabling aesthetic **(re)invented** by brahmin activists that it is hopelessly incapable of adapting itself to address the ethos of the modern.

The recovery of some of the power of a radical cultural practice (which bharatanatyam by brahmin girls in the 1930s and '40s undoubtedly was, in the context of prevailing cultural taboos) without necessarily celebrating its brahmin/bourgeois orientation is a difficult, and perhaps ultimately unrealizable project. There is no ready solution to this problem: one can only identify and name it, contributing **thus--one** hopes--to the creation of the critical conditions under which it can be resolved. I will return to this problem in the last chapter, laying out my personal--and very temporary--solution to it.

NOTES

1. European borrowings from Oriental traditions in the nineteenth century have to be placed in the context of European Romanticism and its **revolt** against the dry formal classicism of academic styles. 'Primitive cultures,' eastern civilizations and their art forms had tremendous appeal for artistes whose own cultural resources seemed tired and jaded. The East, to dancers (as to artists and writers of this period), **was** a bank of fresh and exotic themes and images that subverted what had become the empty virtuosity of classical ballet. Choreographers like Marius Petipa (**Le Dieu et La Bayadere**[1877]), composers like **Rimsky-Korsakov** (**Scheherezade** [1910]) and later, Igor Stravinsky (**Le Sacre du Printemps** [1913]); and dancers like Anna Pavlova and Isadora Duncan (who turned to a reconstructed 'Greek' dancing to counter what she saw as ballet's abuse of points) all looked to non-European sources for inspiration and visual vocabularies.

2. The **Everyman's Encyclopaedia**, for instance, has the following entry on bayaderes:

Bayadere... is the name given to the trained dancing-girls of India, the nautch girls. They are usually selected from the lowest class of people, and their dancing has a decidedly immoral tendency. Some of the pantomimic dancers are attached to the Hindu temples. (Vol. 2, 193)

3. Pavlova and Shankar partnered each other in two 'Indian' ballets, **Krishna and Radha** and **A Hindu Wedding**. Shankar went on to set up an academy of dance (The Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre) at **Almora**, to which he invited various traditional Hindustani musicians, and dance teachers from all over the country. Kandappa Pillai, **Balasaraswati's** teacher, taught at this institute for some years.

4. St. Denis, an American modern dancer, brought her company (Denishawn) for a tour of India between January and May 1926.

5. **Black and Gold Sari** was built around the figure of a shopgirl who, displaying a sari, begins to fantasize herself wearing it, the fantasy being enacted in dance. A contemporary dancer reports on the filmed version that the images of St. Denis, "frozen from another era in celluloid, show a knock-kneed woman staggering on stage in what is considered underwear by Indian standards" (Coorlawala 13).

6. Anandi, personal communication. The link is partly through Anna Pavlova: **Rukmini** Devi had become fascinated by ballet after watching Pavlova dance, and had wished to **learn** the form: Pavlova even recommended a teacher and later advised Rukmini Devi, as she had advised Shankar, to learn the forms of her **own** country. Shankar, as I have mentioned, partnered Pavlova.

7. See Geeta Kapur: **"Ravi Varma"** and **"The Place of th. Modern."**

8. Of course, Sringara still provides the substantive content of much bharatanatyam. but in **Rukmini** Devi's own dancing, its importance was minimized.

9. Raphael, "Demands of Art," trans. Norbert **Guterman**, London: **Routledge** and **Kegan Paul**, n.d., 207; qtd. in Michele Barrett, "The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Criticism," 702. Without quite making the kind of connection between art and swadeshi that someone like Ananda Coomaraswamy made, Rukmini Devi invested in the mystique of craft production: as part of **Kalakshetra's** effort to reform taste, it included a weaving section where refurbished 'traditional' saris were designed and woven on **handlooms**.

10. The report of the 1927 Music Conference, where the decision to set up the Academy was made, lays out its objectives: they include the bringing together of "scholars and musicians... to consider the problems in the theory and practice of Indian music with a view to improve and standardize the same" and the improvement "of public taste" (Report of the All India Music Conference 16).

11. Cousins's husband, James Cousins, was an art enthusiast who was also associated with the Theosophical Society; he encouraged Rukmini Devi to start her institute of dance in the 1930s.

12. The patriotic but relatively uncontroversial cultural activism of the Music Academy was expressed by such actions as the institution of a prize, in 1931, for the composer of "the best **kriti**, in praise of Mother India, personified as a deity, with no reference to matters communal or political, in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, **Malayalam** and Kanarese..." (**JMAM** 2.1 [1930]); it was also probably typical of the Academy's approach to the politics of region and culture that a Sanskrit composition eventually won the prize.

13. The Theosophical movement was started by a woman: Madame Blavatsky; among the Society's prominent members in the early decades of the twentieth century were Besant herself, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Margaret Cousins, Rukmini Devi, and Radha **Burnier**.

14. Kalakshetra observers recall how most of Rukmini Devi's recitals were preceded by introductory lectures by Arundale, lectures which did the work of justifying the art to fresh **initiates**.

15. Elder's own experiment, if the pictures in her book are anything to go by, and in spite of her claims for it, was not such a signal contribution to the furtherance of Beauty's cause. The photographs from her production of Sarojini Devi's (sic) "Harvest Song" show a group of unhappy people, spindle-shanked and acutely **uncomfortable** in their **mongrelized Greek-cum-Indian** costumes, striking desperate attitudes intended, no doubt, to convey Divinity, but achieving a look of collective anxiety about loss of dignity. **One** would be hard put to find a more absurd image of

miscegenation or a better image for the 'ugliness' of failed attempts at cultural translation.

16. Arundale mentions the friendship between these two women without any reference to an artistic debt, but that this debt existed is beyond doubt.

17. Quoted in a report in the Kalakshetra Golden Jubilee Year Commemorative Booklet; source not identified.

18. See **Kapur's** "Place of the Modern in Indian Cultural Practice," where she seems to suggest that this applies especially to Third World art. In India, she points out, "**nationalism...** is at the very least a foil to the universal modern" (2805).

19. See the quotation Balasaraswati uses from the Tamil classic Silapadikkaram, to illustrate her demand for a fine discrimination between the requirements of different kinds of dances:

[Madhavi's guru] knew when only one hand had to be used (**pindi**) and when both hands had to be used (**pinaiyal**). He also knew when the hands had to be used for exhibiting action (**tolirkai**) and for graceful effect (**elirkai**). Knowing as he did the conventions of dancing, he did not mix up the single-handed demonstration (**kutai**) with the double-handed (**varam**) and vice versa.... In the movements of the feet also he did not mix up the **kuravai** with the **vari**. He was such an **expert**. (qtd. in "On Bharatanatyam" 12)

Or see the precise descriptions of bodily movement or expression required by convention for the communication of moods or states of being in the Natyasastra or the Abhinaya Darpana. The contents of the Natyasastra include, among other things, chapters on the mythic origin of theatre, on the construction, consecration and purification of the playhouse, on literary form, metrical rules, prosody; on vocalization, the staging of plays, musical instruments, **talams**; on typologies of dance movement divided according to body parts. The sections on audience response are intended to help the performer judge whether or not his play has been successful--he is told to watch out for such signs as **horripilation** during thrilling scenes, exclamations of **kastam!** during pathetic scenes or **aho!** during spectacularly successful scenes. A precise and entirely practical '**classic book**,' in other words, containing nothing susceptible to a 'spiritual' interpretation.

20. The kind of training that involved fine detailing of affect on the body's surfaces and muscles passed out of vogue with the devadasis. Shanta Rao, speaking of Kalyani Ammal, whom she saw when the latter was 70 years old, was awestruck by the sensitivity with which her face could register emotion. "She was a **revelation...**Kalyani Ammal showed us the full agony and suspense of Radha with just a flicker and trembling of her **nose-jewel**. Not a muscle moved elsewhere!" (qtd. in Chatterjee 10). **Kalyani's** daughter, **Jeevaratnam**, was

eenakshisundaram Pillai's favourite pupil; she died of smallpox at 21. Pillai said of her: "The cymbals in her hand would drop into my lap as I sat cross-legged conducting the **music**. I used to get carried away by the beauty of her acting. I cannot imagine ever again seeing such perfection of expression..." (qtd. in Chatterjee 38).

21. It is as if Ravi Varma's school were to represent all the experiments with modernity that had ever been carried out in the field of Indian painting. Geeta Kapur points out that Indian painters resolved the problem of the modern by drawing eclectically on both Indian and western resources; but this eclecticism also conveyed a "struggle to become historically viable," and sometimes led to the resuming of a "lapsed commitment to history" ("Ravi **Varma**" 60). Bharatanatyam performers could not acknowledge either their historical **roots--except** by dissembling--or their eclectic borrowings from cultures other than Indian ones.

If the gesture that virtually erases the entire devadasi-dominated period from the history of the dance were unique to **Rukmini** Devi and her immediate circle, it would hardly be worth considering in such detail. As a matter of fact, a decorous silence on the devadasi tradition has become so natural that speakers at conferences, for instance, drop their voices when they have to make reference to it; the very word '**devadasi**' or '**devaradiyal**' has largely pejorative connotations.

Even supposedly scholarly histories of dance gloss over the actual process by which the devadasis were deprived of their professional status. See, for instance, Lakshmi **Viswanathan's** *Bharatanatyam: The Tamil Heritage* (1984), in which she speaks of the "fading away" of the community after the abolition of dance in temples. Viswanathan's recent choreography for a history of *bharatanatyam* in dance (**Vata Vriksha**, 1996) produces unintended hilarity in its attempt to slur over the contribution of the devadasis. As a critic reports the sequence of events:

A doctor [Dr. **Muthulakshmi** Reddy] was passionate in seeking to abolish the system of devadasi dedication in temples; the doctor and another player [E.Krishna Iyer] fought [back to back, on the stage!] over the issue [resulting in the latter being thrown literally off the stage]; dance was about to 'die a silent **death**' when it was rescued by Rukmini Devi who brought about its renaissance, first by learning the art after watching two devadasi-s performing it, then by excelling in it, and finally by establishing Kalakshetra. (Mayakoothan II 10)

After such insults, what forgiveness?

22. In the visual realization of mythological narratives, Kalakshetra had models that had already captured the Indian imagination: Thanjavur paintings, which were sometimes an explicit point of reference for the tableaux on the stage; the **mythological** paintings and oleographs of Ravi **Varma**. The frontal tableaux and **stage-composition** of the dance-dramas clearly bore traces of the influence of the visual arts, even

down to the tasteful ceremonial umbrellas and cloth-covered thrones.

23. One dance enthusiast of the generation that watched devadasi performers informed me that the dancer would frequently chew vethalai (betel leaves) while performing, and interrupt her performances to spit out the juice to one side, or, occasionally, on a member of the audience with whom she had reason to be annoyed. My own master, **Kittappa Pillai**, thinks nothing of taking such vethalai breaks, making casual comments on the stage, or ruining the '**finished**' effect of a performance by asking the dancer to repeat a failed theermanam (a set piece where danced steps and spoken syllables have to be co-ordinated) on stage.

24. Though **Rukmini** Devi was known to advise her students not to adopt a 'scientific' approach to dance, and though by and large her own creative efforts relied heavily on her intuition, she was also conscious of making bharatanatyam more 'rational' than **sadir**, both at the level of individual movements and at the level of finished choreography.

25. The version she saw (**Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji**) was performed in the Brihadeeswara temple at Thanjavur, and was scripted by one of **Meenakshisundaram's** ancestors in honour of the Maratha king **Serfoji II**. **Rukmini** professed herself uninterested in this version, since it was written in praise of a mortal king, and not of a deity; as such, it was not an effective vehicle for the exhibiting of India's 'spiritual' past.

26. In 1952, **Balasaraswati** played the kuravanji in a production of the Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji. staged at the Tamil **Isai Sangam**.

27. **A.S. Altekar** expresses his agitation, in his famous Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, over the "phenomenon of women appearing without any clothing over the upper person in the sculptures and paintings of Central and South India" (283). He ventures various explanations: perhaps the sculptors were not skilful enough to represent the upper garment? Perhaps the women are in their private apartments? Perhaps the sculptures represent Dravidian culture? Perhaps it is an artistic convention, excusable because women were to be considered clothed in the sanctity of their motherhood? Only dancing girls would not have the sanctity of motherhood as protection, he concludes. "As a consequence we usually find dancing girls appearing with a full dress covering their entire person from their necks to their ankles" (289).

28. The brothers were the ancestors of **Rukmini's** dance guru **Meenakshisundaram Pillai**; the **latter's** grandson, **Kittappa Pillai**, happens to be my master.

29. This notion has so passed into popular history that the then President Venkataraman could echo it in 1987: "In the realm of dancing... Bharatanatya had existed for centuries but as a **form** that had lost the pedestal on which Bharata had placed it. **It** had fallen so low as to be regarded as an **accomplishment** of only **Devadasis**" ("President's Address").

30. In this context, see Geda Kapur's argument about the centrality and nationalist overtones of the iconic presentation of the main character in the **Damle-Fattelal** films, especially in **Sant Tukaram**, in "Revelation and Doubt".

31. The padam is in the ragam Begada, Misra Chapu talam, and was composed by Subbarama Iyer. I have translated the sahityam as follows:

1. Why should I be **afraid** of anyone?

Let them talk; is this [**relationship**] a secret? Let them talk'

2. Victor in war, my Lingadurai; having won his favour,
am I not lucky, my friend?

4. I have consented [to take him as lover], why should other people grudge me this? And once I have entry into the palace, who will say anything to block me? Woman, would one ride on an elephant's back and then creep in by the bylanes and back-gates? Indeed! I sought this handsome lord (**purushan**) and won [became united with] him; what have I done that is wrong, that makes people whisper enviously about me in the middle of the **street**?

The tone is one of defiance and pride, not at all one of anxiety.

32. This padam is set in the ragam Saranga, to Atatalam, and was composed by Subbarama Iyer.

33. This revival took place in 1932: see "Notes and Comments," Journal of the Music Academy Madras 3.1 (1932), 181.

34. See Freud, "Character and Anal Erotism," for instance; and Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death, especially the chapters on Martin Luther and Jonathan Swift. This kind of thinking, especially Brown's, is, of course, not very fashionable in the present intellectual climate, tied up **theoretically** as it is with an **un-Foucauldian** repression theory and historically with the mood of the Sixties and sexual liberation. Nevertheless, I find it a useful and at any rate an interesting way of explaining the acute anxiety about money in relation to women and the persistent imagery of dirt that went along with this in the **anti-naught** discourse.

35. See, for instance, the huge commercial success of Ravi Varma's painting and oleograph studio: commercial success was not incompatible with religious feeling in the field of calendar production.

36. In her lecture "Indian Women," for instance, Besant deprecates the attempt to make Indian women more assertive or more like western women:

One might as well picture Savitri in a divorce court, or Sita suing the cobbler for damages in a libel **suit**....We have women enough who are brilliantly intellectual and competent; let us leave **unmarred** the one type which is the incarnation of spiritual beauty. (113)

37. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival" 1874. There is very little information on **Rukmini** Devi's messianic role, though Krishnamurti's became subject of a full blown controversy in 1911.

38. One might contrast Rukmini Devi's style of activism with that of the Indian People's Theatre Association, for instance, to arrive at a sense of the various **possibilities** that a revival of bharatanatyam could not explore. See, in this context, Malini Bhattacharya, "Indian People's Theatre Association: A Preliminary Sketch."

39. Heidegger in "The Origin of the Work of Art" uses this as shorthand for the setting up of complex interactions between art-work, the 'earth' or material out of which it is made, and the 'world,' with which he suggests it is in a state of constant striving: the 'truth' that we perceive emerging in the very process of this unresolved striving.

40. See the ethnographic work of Saskia **Kersenboom-Story**, for instance, or the experiments made by Avanti Meduri in Chicago; or the radical choreographic efforts of Chandralekha or **Mallika Sarabhai**.

CHAPTER 4

STUDYING CULTURE, PERFORMING DANCE: ENGAGEMENTS WITH FEMINISM AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

It is certainly easier to create without
answering to life, and easier to live
without any consideration for art.

-- Mikhail Bakhtin, Art and Answerability.

Given my disciplinary training, my attempt to make dance answerable to life could begin within one of two worlds. The first world is one in which artists, performers or art historians are at home, in which art is critically examined or refashioned, but in which some value, however problematic, is **granted** to art. This is not the world in which I find myself. I want, therefore, to consider the possibility of a practice of dance which begins within the space--the second world--in which feminists theorize the political. The worlds of performer and theorist are not mutually **unintelligible**; but they lie on either side of a fault line that makes it impossible for their concerns to coincide. Living in the second world means doubting everything, and especially doubting the transparency of whatever is marked 'private,' 'cultural,' 'aesthetic.' Imagining an '**alternative aesthetic**' does not sufficiently answer the demands of this world; as I suggested in the first chapter, one has to

begin with some such question as: is there such a thing as 'the aesthetic'?

Since I am interested in a practice of dance that engages with the sceptical (and expanding) feminist theoretical tradition in India, rather than in offering up something that is too facilely and arbitrarily designated a 'feminist' practice, I have to work through the theory to the question of dance. This is a project that chronologically succeeds the act of historical **reconstruction** (with which I was concerned in the first three chapters of this thesis): it requires engagement with the present. The 'present' is clearly a time of transitions and of inconclusive debates; of struggles, individual as well as collective, to redefine relationships with the social and the political. Feminist theory bears the marks of these struggles. Mapping the terrain of feminist cultural theory in India, which is the object of this chapter, may help clarify the nature of the conjuncture within which a feminist practice of dance might develop.

Problems for Feminist Theorists:
Models of Selfhood and Politics

I find the work [Radhika Santwanam] immensely beautiful, and as it has been composed, not only by a woman, but a woman of our community, I felt it was necessary to publish the proper work.

--Bangalore **Nagaratnamma, Preface,**
Radhika Santwanam.

The feminist critical project Susie Tharu and **K. Lalita**

undertake in Women Writing in India announces itself with a stunning, almost outrageous, genealogical coup. The women editors, collating and arranging, in the era of late capitalism, texts by Indian women through the ages, claim an ancestry that includes two devadasis: Muddupalani, star of the Thanjavur court in the mid-eighteenth century, and the formidable Bangalore **Nagaratnamma**, who went to battle over the reprinting of **Muddupalani's** erotically explicit Radhika Santwanam at the beginning of the twentieth. The contests over the issues of female sexuality and aesthetics that took place when **Nagaratnamma** was preparing the sringara prabandham for republication frame the feminist problematic Tharu and Lalita go on to outline. The editors are obviously hostile to **Nagaratnamma's** British and middle class Indian antagonists and make no secret of the sympathy they feel for the two female progenitors they have claimed. The editorial narrative suggests that this sympathy for Muddupalani and **Nagaratnamma** is based on admiration for the outstanding artistic achievements of these ganikas, and identification with their woman-oriented, sexually candid, unembarrassed aesthetic preferences.

This is implied, at any rate, when Tharu and Lalita cite **Nagaratnamma's** reason for republishing Radhika Santwanam; that it was a perfect creation, "as adorable as the young Lord Krishna"(2). A young, human/divine, male body: the unexpected concreteness of this referent for **Nagaratnamma's** delight in the sringara prabandham stands out in Tharu and **Lalita's** text as belonging to an irrecoverably lost, pre-modern sensory-sexual economy. So also--obviously--does **Muddupalani's** appreciative rendering of her heroine's active sexual passion, her

'masculine' ability to demand appeasement. Given how startling or even unthinkable these features are, and given that Tharu and Lalita call attention to their symbolic significance for women, their editorial sympathy momentarily presents itself as the starting point for an exploration of sexual/textual politics in the Indian cultural context.

Astonishingly, then, the theme of the sexually independent woman and the question of aesthetic criteria both disappear from the Introductions. Only one lesson from the Muddupalani-N'agaratnamma parable is carried over into the remaining sections of Women tfr i t i n g's critical outwork: the idea that we need to be attentive to the politics of reading. But while Tharu and Lalita work on this distinctly late-twentieth century motif, the bravura effects of the Nagaratnamma story remain with the reader, intimations of the possible plenitude of feminist critique.

Have the devadasis been brought in merely to point one more moral, or to fill out a genealogical fantasy? It becomes obvious on reflection that Tharu and Lalita could not have accommodated them within their critical frame, precisely because of the history I have looked at in this thesis. Not all the will in the world could have kept the devadasis steadily before our eyes as icons from a pre-rational, pre-individualist sexual/artistic Utopia, in defiance of the long intervening narrative, by now a part of the social imaginary, of their sexual victimhood. Nor could Tharu and Lalita, feminist inheritors despite themselves of the modernity that in a sense 'produced' the devadasis' victimhood, claim the devadasis' sexual ethic as their own without the saving distance of fantasy: complete identifi-cation

with the devadasis' subject position would in all likelihood be politically suicidal within the straitlaced milieu of modern middle class feminism.

Tharu and Lalita's feminist critique straddles two political/theoretical formations--nationalist/marxist and poststructuralist--and each of the two corresponding interpretive models would rule out the choice of the devadasi as a symbol of sexual agency. The unlikeliness of the choice has a distinct reason in each case. On the one hand, there are the conflicting but also uncannily similar images of the devadasis produced by the middle class nationalist narrative about them (which Tharu and Lalita explicitly set themselves to repudiate) and by the marxist-progressive narrative (which does have a place, however ambiguous, in the theoretical model they construct and deploy). Both nationalist discourse and the Nehruvian state that was established after Independence drew on a Hegelian-progressive model of history; according to this model, the devadasis were rescued from shame and degradation under a feudal regime by the legislative powers of the state. Many features of this model are endorsed by the Left in India, which also deems the devadasis exploited, and deserving of commiseration but not interest. Both nationalist and marxist discourses privilege asceticism over consumption and have no language for the theorizing of any pleasure, let alone 'aesthetic' pleasure or female sexual pleasure.

On the other hand, there are the compulsions of post-structuralist, postcolonial theory, which militate against the accepting of any norms, including colonially-influenced sexual ones, at face-value: since norms are generally given (it is

argued) by some theory of 'essence' or some notion of 'morality.' Such a contention leads to efforts to lay bare the assumptions underlying notions of value and therefore suggests a reading of the devadasi as a pawn in a semiotic game rather than as a 'person' whose life (and aesthetic preferences) might be of interest to contemporary women. In the (post- humanist) post-colonial critic's frame of reference, agency, and the subjecthood that agency rests on, are **fundamentally** undecidable problems, appearing in the discourse, if at all, embarrassedly, modestly, sous rature.

Neither of these models (progressive/post-structuralist) that inform Tharu and Lalita's work, then, has any theoretical room for an active (agentive) demand for sexual or aesthetic pleasure, for the 'taking control of one's **sexuality**' idea, especially in relation to a woman. What is it that facilitates and frames this historical reconstruction of Muddupalani's or Nagaratnamma's (no doubt genuinely untroubled) acceptance of their active sexual and aesthetic pleasures, blurred as it is by many decades of a **caste-specific** but also politically circumspect repudiation of women's sexual agency? I would suggest that it is a third kind of political milieu--the one associated with the new feminist movement of the 1960s, which coincided with the **individualist**, Marcusean/Reichian/ hippie politics that **characterized** the American New Age. **Interestingly**, the sixties agenda of sexual liberation was absorbed into precisely the kind of naive **individualist** feminism that Tharu and Lalita disown in their **Introduction**.

I think of Tharu and Lalita's genealogy as **a coup** because **of** the casual way in which it holds these two-- or perhaps

three-- distinct and divergent political programmes and their corresponding theoretical models together, with no trace of strain. What would, in lesser hands, have been a fissured text, acquires an elegance and an **unwrinkled** flow that must be attributed to the expertise of the authors rather than to the intrinsic **compatibility** of the theoretical elements they draw upon. What would the effect be of unpacking these elements in recent feminist cultural theory, isolating the trajectory of the **marxist/feminist** politics of '**progress**' from the post-colonial/post-structuralist/postmodern politics of emancipatory aesthetics, discursive and epistemic **breakthroughs**, textual **disruptions**?

Is There a Feminist Cultural Studies?

The Anglo-American academy has, in recent years, registered a change in interventionary style that has been spoken of as a generational shift. This is Andrew Ross's description; he speaks of his own book on popular culture (No **Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture**) as spanning

a history that includes the last generation of American intellectuals to swear unswerving allegiance to the printed word and dictates of European taste, and the first generation to use their involvement with popular culture as a site of contestation in itself, rather than view it as a **objective** tool with which to raise or improve political consciousness; the last

generation to **view** culture in the polarized **marxist** terms of a universal class struggle, and the first to accept the uneven development, across a diverse range of social groups and interests, of the **contradictions** of living within a capitalist culture; the last generation of whom the heroic mythologies of the unattached dissident intellectual could still be acted out, and the first to insist **that** the institutionalizing or the commercializing of knowledge does not seal the fate of political criticism; the last to devolve its politics solely upon the mind, and the labor of production, the first to appeal to the liberatory body, and the creativity of consumption. (11)

Ross, studying the view from the very heart of (unabashedly 'commercialized') post-structuralist **academia**, sees subversion as having moved out of its old sites--party office or student common-room or street march--to new ones--the classroom itself, the text, the **critique**, the lifestyle. He notes that the cultural product itself has changed its role or function, from being a means to a particular social end to being in itself a disputed object, or even a politics.

I am interested in the possibility that this shift is being replicated in Indian cultural theory, because if it is, it will undoubtedly have a bearing on the question that has been with **me**, **subliminally** if not overtly, throughout the researching of

my **subject** and the writing of this thesis; the question, namely, of the relationship between dance, feminist politics and feminist cultural theory. How will my re-reading of the history of the devadasis impinge on **my** practice of dance, and on my understanding of myself as located somewhere along the continuum of feminist politics? Would an approach to cultural production that still sees it as instrumental in consciousness raising (obsolete, according to Ross's model of the generational shift), aligned with a politics, naturally, that marks the subject-as-consciousness as the locus of change (also obsolete) be viable in the present; and, to put it briefly, would feminist cultural theory be a means to that **consummation** I have devoutly wished--a feminist practice of dance? In other words, can one have a cultural '**politics**' that does not abut on a democratic building of equivalences between subjects? And if one reads art as being politically effective in the framework of a **psychological** relationship with notions of truth or justice--a relationship of faith, even when the contingent nature of these notions is **admitted--and** conversely, both truth and justice as concepts that make one act in relation to a (provisional) notion of totality, would the **deconstruction** of totalities end the motivation to produce politically effective art? Would not such a development then either throw the artist back on aestheticism ('art for art's sake' coming in again by the back door) or force her to rely exclusively on critical readings of her work as politically subversive?

A brief glance at any of the texts I identified (in the first chapter of this thesis) as my reference points for cultural theory in India is enough to show that there has been

no **'shift'** here of comparable decisiveness--not yet, **anyway--** though there are signs of the incipient opening up of a generation gap. In a sense, cultural theory in India is increasingly subject to the progressive political imperative, if **'progressive'** is construed in its familiar sense of 'moving towards democracy or equality.' It is understood that cultural theory should result in, or itself be, a praxis in consonance with larger social goals. The renewal of interest in the nation as cultural project may be seen as a **manifestation** of this imperative, though there is, also increasingly, disagreement about the substantive content of 'progress.'

Nationalist and **marxist** goals (and, to some extent, also feminist ones) were defined in relation to a 'progressive' or Hegelian scheme, premised on the idea of a universal history whose **telos** is the development of human freedom and whose processes are in accordance with a higher Reason. To this scheme Marx, as everyone knows, added two crucial ideas: firstly, that the Reason of world history works through development in modes of production, with justice being realized in a classless society after the collapse of capitalism; secondly, that the agents of development, going beyond mere study of the patterns of history, ought to actively cause (or help) the revolution to **happen**.

While the discourse of the **'progressive'** in India by no means follows these schemes in every detail, it does take over the central ideas of increasing freedom, of **egalitarianism**, of rational **intervention**, of the importance of the world-out-there. The Left, of course, also assumes a class struggle which will end with the triumph of the working class--the foundational

subject of history. In this political formation, on the whole, structural change in civil society is usually instituted by the State, or, in the **marxist** model, follows (automatically?) **from** economic change.

The women's movement has added to this formation (thus changing its contours) the **problematization** of a range of practices that subordinate women to men, including the gendered division of labour, sexual violence, unequal pay, personal laws and so on. While women have occasionally been seen as antagonistic to the structure of the family, or to religious or party loyalties, the more systematic protests have also positioned them in opposition to the State itself, since the latter has sought to regulate their bodies through medical (**contraceptive**) intervention, sanctioned custodial or caste-based violence, or publicly countenanced **gender-discriminatory** legislation and court judgements. But it has also been through the agency of the State that the remedies were to be applied. Models of activism on behalf of women are either of protest or of melioration in a 'social work' mode, and these models are not always distinct from each other. Familiar modes have included **dharnas**, sit-ins, street marches; medical, journalistic and legal crusades; and literary or cultural work that raised **consciousness** among women and publicized issues like dowry, **sati**, rape. Academic work has been part of this large endeavour.

Historically, the political matrix constituted by nationalism and marxism has been the ground of **interventionist** work in India, whether this work was activist or academic. The thinning out of the discourses of the nation in the age of global capitalism and the dissolution of the marxist alternative

(with the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity), have, therefore, snatched crucial rallying points away from progressives of every stamp, and post-structuralism (which both promises a new political imaginary and offers itself as a '**politics**') comes to occupy this vacant place in the social imaginary. Intellectual production is showing the effects of being thus untethered from **nation-building** and class struggle by turning to new objects of critique (the saturation of everyday life by the media is the chief source of new grist to the theoretical mill) or to novel modes of interpreting the rather **disheartening** facts about the nation, democracy, secularism, gendering and so on.

Post-structuralism, in this context, may be read as a sign that a politics that has neither nation nor Marx as parent-figures is struggling to be born. It has been claimed for the set of theories produced under this sign, in the western context, that they are a political response to the recognition that the **Hegelian-Marxist** project is no longer viable. For example, it has been suggested that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, theorizing **post-structuralism** as a political praxis, are celebrating the very unrealizability of the single '**end**' of history as a guarantee of plural futures. **Post-marxists** in the West have called attention to the political lessons to be learnt from the eruption of 'new social **movements**' that no longer submit to the idea of the one foundational revolutionary subject/class, or to the logic of equivalence, "a logic of comparison of subjects that are essentially construed as equals, through ... [a] discourse of '**rights**,' '**liberty**' and '**equality**'" (Barrett, The Politics of Truth 71). In the Indian context, the

liberatory possibilities opened up by the loss of the nation as sovereign space or subject--the spaces and politics of **subalternity**, once swept under the large Nehruvian **carpet--offer** themselves for analysis as the spaces and politics of **difference**. amenable to **post-structuralist** decipherment.

But there is a sense in which even now, with both Nation and Left in disarray, the structures and vocabularies available for political praxis are still largely those of the Nehruvian socialist **establishment** and those of the Left. Whether or not political destinations are clear, the signposts are in the language of humanism, democracy, and distributive or political justice, and serious **interventions** still have to locate themselves somewhere along the road to socialist utopia. This last is the reason why cultural theory in India, or at least that part of it which explicitly aligns itself with a politics, reads **palimpsestically**. It cannot simply follow the logic of post-structuralism--as it has been followed elsewhere, if Ross is to be **believed--and** vacate the domain of humanism and democracy; subtly incoherent though the theoretical results are, most of the critics I am referring to struggle to keep up establishments in both territories. I will consider, below, how this equivocation affects feminist theory in particular.

Feminist Theory in a Time of Transition

Perhaps the earliest sign of the arrival in India of a new way of reading women's history is the loss of faith in the **'development'** model of history. This is linked to an increasingly acute awareness of what is probably the single most

obvious fact about women's history: that in most societies, neither **'tradition'** nor **'modernity'** inspires unqualified hope of emancipation. In the immediate context of feminist cultural history in India, the sense of disillusion with the grand narratives of nationalism and of nationalist historiography has actually led to the excavating of a whole range of ideologies, social practices and **relationships**, all of which point to the **instrumentalization** of 'the woman question' in various struggles; symbolic victories (usually for the middle class) in these struggles did not necessarily improve women's lot in any real way.

The story of the transition from sadir to bharatanatyam is, of course, a case in point. The broad tenor of my argument in the preceding chapters has been that the transition from **'tradition'** to 'modernity' was a painful one for the devadasis. They were forced to trade the freedom to practice their art, a degree of power unusual for women anywhere, and a staunch pride in their female family traditions for the dubious joys of domesticity under the watchful eyes of a modernized and refurbished patriarchy. The other side of the coin is that once individual freedom was established as a possibility, it would only have been a matter of time before the rules and rituals that structured the lives of devadasis (i.e., their **'traditions'**) became impositions that restricted their access to the promises of modernity. In any case, the tradition of the devadasis is available to us through several layers of mediation, whose effect is, on the whole, to reinterpret it for Patriarchal use even in the present.

Feminist historiography, and, by extension, feminist

cultural theory, bring with them a promise and a proviso. The promise is an undertaking to study the past not as empty time, but as pregnant with meanings for the present, especially for **women** in the present; the proviso is that such historiography, while providing "overarching theoretical **formulations**," needs "constant testing and overhauling by historically and materially specific studies of patriarchal practice, social regulation and cultural production" (Sangari and Vaid, "Recasting Women" 1). But paradoxically, as feminist research becomes both more vast and more detailed, it undermines feminist theory's ability to fulfil its initial promise. Simplified and sorted into the categories 'tradition' and 'modernity,' for instance, many practices are available for moral or political judgement (the 'modern' practices are good when democratic; the 'traditional' ones are usually bad, 'feudal'); close up, considered in their actual complexity, most of them move out of the circle of certitudes. Given the ambivalent relationship women have with both sides of the **tradition-modernity** question, and the real difficulties involved in 'choosing' between them, one of the **preoccupations** of feminist cultural critique in India has been to find ways out of this binary.

One way of doing this has been to deliberately tie feminist theory to a current political project within a broadly democratic framework. The implicit claim of feminist theory, seen in this light, is that its problematization of the development model will help distinguish between 'good' modernity and 'bad' modernity from the point of view of their effects on women, while reading 'tradition' itself not as a homogeneous, unchanging and self-evident entity that just existed before

modernity, but as something contentious, as something created by societies, and above all as something that irresistibly interpellated women.

The feminist cultural theory produced early on in India may be read as an attempt to grapple with modernity in this way. For instance, when Sangari and Vaid write in "Recasting Women: an Introduction," in 1989, that "we can perhaps make a broad distinction between the '**modernizing**' of patriarchal modes of regulating women and the '**democratizing**' of gender relations both in the home and in the workplace" (19), they are separating the bad modernity (updated patriarchy) from the good (democratic **relationships**: the democratic revolution, categorically applied both to the public sphere and to **relationships** is a distinctively modern development). This establishes a relationship with a praxis, since it implies a goal, a **telos** (not necessarily a naively progressivist one either): women may demand **democratizing of relationships**. The rhetoric proclaims Sangari and Vaid's text itself a product of modernity, devoted to the enlargement of the sphere of rights (what Laclau and Mouffe call 'the **egalitarian-equivalential logic**') that in a sense **characterizes** this socio-political formation.

The kind of feminist framework Recasting Women exemplifies would be the one within which my own reading of the history of the devadasis would fit most comfortably: not surprising, this, since it was very much part of my own immediate frame of reference. As I have noted in the preface to this thesis, what **motivated** my research was my sense of the cultural snobbery and illiberality of the bharatanatyam **establishment** as it now stands, and my consequent desire to reconstruct the ways in

which this social exclusivity was built on the ruins of a female community's life and practice.

In the years since I began my research, this feminist theoretical framework has lost some of its initial coherence. The sense of the complexities of the tradition-modernity model has been sharpened by the crisis in 'nationalism' itself, brought about by recent disruptions (Ayodhya and liberalization, for instance), and this has prepared the ground for certain **post-structuralist interventions**. In feminist theory that has been produced since Sangari and Vaid's pathbreaking anthology, the turn towards **post-structuralism** makes itself known not so much by explicit statement (though perhaps the increasing number of references to continental icons like Derrida or Foucault or to feminists like Judith Butler or Gayatri Spivak are fairly obvious indications of which way the wind is blowing) as by the positioning of feminist cultural theory vis-a-vis feminist politics. Sangari and Vaid's Introduction to Recasting Women identified the anthology, and feminist theoretical endeavours in general, as adjuncts to feminist politics. The intention was to contribute, for example, to a clearer understanding of why certain political initiatives in the past (in the nationalist movement or in Orientalist discourse that hypostatized the Aryan woman) failed to meet the high expectations that were built around them. By extension, since there is always some hope of learning from history, such theorizing aimed to contribute to clarity of vision on political options in the present.

In their Introduction to Interrogating Modernity, four years down the line, Niranjana, Sudhir and Dhareshwar, after

marking "the growth of the women's movement" as a moment in the culture of modernity that they wish to interrogate, withhold comment on how they place this moment politically (emancipatory, neutral or retrogressive?) or how they place their own theory in relation to this moment.⁶ Tharu and **Niranjana's** valuable synoptic essay "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," which lays out the rationale for changing the object of feminist enquiry, and which I will consider in greater detail below, may be read as another text of the transition. Since the modified framework that is emerging now will have an extended effect on the way feminists theorize the political and therefore (as I have already said), on the way feminist artists theorize the politics of their practice, I want to follow the track of this new feminist theory.

Especially for feminists whose disciplinary starting point is English studies, the logic of the turn to **post-structuralism** seems irrefutable, since it was here that the alliance between feminism and **post-structuralism** was forged. This alliance was built not on any necessary concomitance between the political initiative and the discursive field, as on their joint declaration of hostilities against the **aestheticized** liberal humanism of English studies. The bond was reinforced by two modes, inaugurated by the theory, of doing politics by discursive means:

1) Disciplinary **metacritique**, or the politics of theory, a relatively new possibility that arises out of the Foucauldian insistence on the question: who benefits from this particular way of structuring knowledge? Rigorously applied and tied to a Praxis, such a metacritique can enforce intellectual

accountability, both to students, within the academic context, and in a larger context, to the various people affected by being in one way or the other objects of academic discourse or **manipulation**.

2) The deconstruction of dangerous or disabling representations of women, which acquires the allure of the **end-in-itself**, since post-structuralism unties ideology-critique from the idea that the superstructure is determined by the base 'in the last instance.'^a Releasing the concept of **representation** from the vestigial authority of reflection theory certainly widens the feminist critic's canvas and **significantly** extends her specialized vocabulary of protest. Feminist **professionals**, no doubt, found this theoretical bait difficult to refuse; and it may be justifiably claimed for the resultant critiques that they are momentous, once the current importance of the media in the reception and mediation of political questions is granted.

Thus in Real and Imagined Women, Sunder Rajan defines the task of the feminist critic as a particular kind of textual engagement:

If we acknowledge (a) that **femaleness** is constructed, and (b) that the terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of ideology (patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism), and (c) that therefore what is at stake is the investments of desire and the politics of control that representation both signifies and serves, then the task of the feminist

critic becomes what Jacqueline Rose describes as 'the critique of male **discourse**' born of 'a radical distrust of representation which allies itself with a **semiotic** critique of the sign.' (129)

Such a definition of the feminist critic's task, however, does not specify the theorist's perception of the relationship between theory as politics ('the critique of male **discourse**') and other political moves, such as those that might concern themselves with putting an end to certain kinds of **representation** (the glorified images of satis, perhaps, or sexual harassment offered as harmless entertainment in films); or between theory and the building of a feminist practice of **representation** (what would a '**female** discourse' be?).

It seems, then, as if feminist cultural theory in India is in the process of morphing: from a more or less humanist, historical materialist paradigm to a post-humanist, post-**structuralist** one.

The logic of alliance with what are still among the few available alternative **interventionist** movements--the **marxist**, the **non-conventional** Left, the **Left-feminist**--requires that **post-structuralism** be presented as an instrumental discourse, a theoretical supplement to a more or less democratic praxis. Since 'politics' has **traditionally** meant something other than the semiotic revolution or the serious critique of transcendence, feminist critique, in so far as it is still attached by its cord to the mother-body of feminist politics, can be **post-structuralist** only in the extremities; the trunk is still humanist-modern. This schema must not, therefore, be read

as delineating an achieved **transformation**, such as the one Ross looks back on, or the one that many First World theorists describe as the postmodern rupture with earlier normative narratives. This section represents, if anything, speculation on a hypothetical future for feminist cultural theory, not on a fait accompli. This future, moreover, is much under discussion in the realm of oral exchange--seminar talk, corridor talk, informal planning--and since it is not altogether **documentable**, I have added an admittedly sketchy **counterfactual** at the end of it, invoking Gayatri Spivak, to suggest one possible destination.

The very fact of theorizing in a moment of transition exerts contradictory pulls on feminist cultural critics, and these contradictions are reflected in the way they address questions of politics, texts, history, culture, sexuality. So there is still talk of rights or civil liberties; there are demands for distributive justice and for the restoration of the dignity of personhood; there is still an **ethical-political** imperative to change the condition of oppressed or subordinated groups on the basis of a humanist discourse of amelioration or even, **occasionally**, of revolution. On the other hand there is the rejection of normative or Utopian discourses, including, presumably, the discourse of liberal democracy (in the Indian case, partly because this discourse is **colonially-mediated**), and there is the critique of the subject. Neither of these two latter staple themes of **post-structuralism** would be radically new except for one thing: that as they are processed by **the** American academy, they claim not to be a part of efforts to make humanist democratic projects more **just or** inclusive, but to be

delegitimizing these projects themselves. and to be inscribing themselves in a space outside modernity. Thus, as a counter-movement to the logic of alliance with political movements or groups there is the irresistible pull, for Indian critics as well, of post-structuralist theory's internal logic.

I am, as is clear from the above, invoking that ancient and contentious distinction between 'feminist activist' and 'feminist critic': a distinction I myself only half believe in, but one that nevertheless lurks in the shadows even when continuities are noted between these two identities, and sometimes even when the same person represents both identities. The subjectivity of the 'critic' is the site of the potential splitting off of feminist 'theory' from feminist 'politics.' It might be possible to wonder, without underwriting reductionist and **literal-minded** descriptions of what 'real' politics means, why recent feminist theoretical **interventions** in India seem especially unwilling to clarify two points: first, their debt to **post-structuralist** theoretical models, marking their relationship to (as well as distance from) some of the central preoccupations of that theory (**preoccupations** with epistemology, for instance, or with the subject as an 'effect' of construction, which insists on the **non-reciprocity** of its relationship with its world); second, their relationship with what are still considered respectable though non-theoretical models of public intervention by women. As I see it, in so far as the '**traditional**' mode of political functioning might endure a while longer, creating something like a political contradiction at the site of theory, there **may** be a gradual opening up of a gap between feminist politics and feminist

theory or cultural studies, and the latter might become a sanctuary for **post-structuralist** work.

To state my problem once again: it appears to be time to ask for clarity on the relationship between feminism and post-structuralism. Is post-structuralism a way of expanding and critiquing (more or less) **humanist-democratic** emancipatory discourses like marxism and feminism, deepening the meanings of equality, justice and freedom as they are realized in these political movements or is it a part of an attempt to constitute an altogether new discursive field which will displace humanism and therefore politics as we know it?

A demarcation of the space in which **post-structuralist** theory might serve feminism, rather than dictate to it, is important partly because it is generally understood that feminist theory has a special relationship with practices in the '**real**' world. The requirement (of dialectical engagement) is a useful reference point, though it obviously should not be so rigidly enforced as to make feminist research into 'danger areas' (research that does not yield immediate political gains) a taboo, since the long-term consequences of new knowledge are strictly incalculable. Oddly enough, feminists who would want to foreclose on the possibility of a feminist **psychoanalytic** theory--for example--because psychoanalysis bears the traces of its Victorian bourgeois **masculinist** origin, welcome the **post-structuralist** intervention, whose political effects are equally unforeseeable. This happens because, unlike specialized discourses like psychoanalysis or **sociobiology**, which are transparently dubious, **post-structuralism** appears (in the work of some western theorists like Judith Butler or even Foucault

himself) to have a significance precisely as a mode of political intervention; sometimes, indeed, as the only mode for our time. What, then do feminists make of the **post-structuralist** claim, part of its **self-definition**, that it is also a theory of politics that irreversibly displaces '**politics**' as we know it?

There is obviously a prior question to be asked here: in what way does **post-structuralism** claim to have displaced humanist politics? Foucault offers an answer that, moving outwards from disciplinary critique, finds '**Man**' as such on the verge of extinction: hence the focus on strategies of power rather than on its provenance, or the **intentionalities** behind it; the substitution of '**subject-effects**' for rational subjects; the rejection of the single point of condensation for politics ("Marx doesn't exist"). I will, however, look at Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's answer in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, in which the authors, proceeding inwards from the emergence of new social movements and antagonisms to the theoretical need to register or construct a correspondingly new political imaginary, explore the **possibilities** and the limitations of **post-structuralism** as a means to political ends.

Laclau and Mouffe describe themselves as '**postmarxist**'; they apply themselves to the task of formulating a mode of political practice in a world in which universal history (**for** both epistemological and political reasons) is dead, but in which the 'democratic revolution' (a term they borrow from Tocqueville) is actually a reality. As they perceive it, this revolution is carried forward by struggles incapable of reaching the degree of confluence that would allow all social antagonisms

to be set up in terms of two (and only two) opposing masses, as in the formulation 'aristocracy vs. the **people**' (the Jacobin imaginary) or in the formulation 'capitalist class vs. working **class**' (the **ma'xist** imaginary). Nor can the diverse struggles that make up this revolution, once the 'radical indeterminacy of the social' is granted, be taken as pre-existing their construction through the discursive **transformation** of relations of subordination (relations until that point naturalized in that context) into relations of oppression (preparing the ground for protest, **intervention**).

At the beginning of their excursus on the current political conjuncture, Laclau and Mouffe are at pains to note that many local antagonisms do not develop according to an **ideology** of a 'human **essence**.' They offer examples of the '**new social movements**' (the struggle against **statism** and bureaucracy, the ecology movement, sexual **liberation**, etc.) which are, according to them, **discontinuous from** the orthodox democratic **imaginary**. The **articulation** of these discrete political upheavals into a hegemonic alliance, which is the authors' central **preoccupation**, is imaginable, they note, primarily because **postfoundational** history "transforms into social logics what were previously foundations "(183).

In brief, taking post-structuralism seriously--thinking of politics as actively constructed, and celebrating rather than suppressing alterity, or the idea of constitutive differences between **subjects**--expands the field of contestatory Possibilities and so 'deepens' the democratic revolution. From the point of view of feminists, it is advantageous in that

1) it **problematizes** areas of social existence (inter-

subjectivity, the domestic sphere, the field of knowledge, culture) hitherto untouched by the discourses of **humanism**. These discourses have historically normalized male rationality; the new democratic impulse to equalize relationships therefore, has to be actively extended into these areas so crucial to women's lives. In Laclau and Mouffe's language, **post-structuralism**, by stressing difference, allows the relations of **subordination** at these sites to be transformed into relations of oppression or antagonism.

2) It opens up **possibilities** of new alliances, alliances unthinkable in the regime of the single **revolutionary** subject or the single political antagonism.

Arguably, these important political effects may be arrived at through trajectories other than **post-structuralist** ones. If **post-structuralism** beckons Indian theorists, the reasons are, clearly, to be sought elsewhere. I want to examine, in relation to Tharu and Niranjana's essay "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender" how the political problematic Laclau and Mouffe set out (new fields, new alliances) is complicated by **considerations** that arise in the different **geo-political** terrain Tharu and Niranjana occupy.

Recommending a **reconstitution** of the object of feminist enquiry, Tharu and Niranjana consider the consequences of the female subject's coming to occupy the 'modern' position in the comfortable and exclusionary way hitherto reserved for men. Reviewing the feminist political initiatives of the 1970s and '80s, they suggest that a wide range of issues "rendered critical by feminism **are** now being invested in and annexed by **projects** that deflect and contain" those initiatives (233). This

has led to a '**hegemonic mobilization**' of a '**humanist-feminist**' subject, who is characterized by her 'human core.' Produced by law, political theory, and even by **marxist** and feminist discourses themselves, this (fictional) human core precludes enquiry into the construction of this subject by processes of social **stratification**, and therefore into her 'upper caste, middle class, Hindu' coding. The composition of this subject, whose present striking visibility across a range of discourses proclaims her the true '**feminist**,' forecloses the **possibility--** Tharu and Niranjana argue--of alliances with 'other subaltern forces.' After the events of the late '80s and the early '90s, including the **Ramjanmabhoomi** movement, responses to the Mandal Commission Report and the massacre at Chunduru, they suggest, "we face a whole new set of political questions" (234), questions of alliance with newly assertive subaltern groups and of the effects of **liberalization**, and, more crucially, of the colonization of liberal democratic space by the (pseudo-) secular subject.

As Tharu and Niranjana outline their '**metonyms**' for feminist **consideration**, they seem to be offering an overwhelmingly compelling argument for exiting from the contaminated space of modernity. Though they bracket this question, the justifiable aggression and contempt with which they delineate the process of the constitution of the citizen (according methodological priority to the structurings of caste, class, gender, religion; identifying 'humanist' and 'modern,' in a sustained way, with the paradigmatic citizen's **self-promotion**) makes humanism itself sound like the enemy.

One might take issue with the presentation of this as a new

problematic: have the 'new' political questions quite replaced the old ones? The developments of the 1980s and '90s that present both urgent problems and opportunities for feminists-- Hindu **majoritarianism**, liberalization, the dalit **movement** --are certainly 'new' in that they are the most recent and therefore the most newsworthy, but not by any means because the older types of struggles, between women and men, or between classes, have suddenly ceased altogether. It would also seem as if, all impressions of the visibility of the female citizen notwithstanding, her actual situation has not changed substantially; the old problems persist beside the new ones, giving continued relevance to the modes in which they were addressed. But the implicit invocation of the idea of a paradigm shift ("a whole new set of political questions") in Tharu and N'iranjana's essay is precisely what interests me, because it highlights the tension within which its theoretical speculation is produced: the tension between an angry rejection of humanism on the one hand, and a commitment, on the other, to political change on the basis of what are, after all, discursive grounds historically associated with **Enlightenment** humanism, democracy, the emergence of rights.

What are the grounds of the rejection of liberal humanism? At the risk of repeating myself I will lay these out once again:

Firstly, the affiliation Tharu and Niranjana have to postcolonial discourse makes it impossible for them to ignore how the ideas of the 'human' of the 'modern' are encrusted with associations with the European **Enlightenment**, itself used most illiberally by the British, on occasion, to bludgeon its colonies into subjection.

Secondly, the bulky figure of the **'modern'** humanist, who appropriates the discourse of rights or of equality, obscures the vast numbers of small and unassuming people who cannot then present their claims to the benefits of modernity. This middle class male subject's complacent possessiveness about modernity not only allows him to lose all traces of his social structuring and to become paradigmatic, but also justifies the increase of his power and privilege. This citizen, exemplified for his feminist antagonists mainly by the upper caste professional or government official, but also, sometimes, by the marxist comrade (who will not forswear foundational history), can hug his **'modernity'** to himself in this **proprietary** way largely because of the inequalities (of race, caste, class, gender) that **characterized** the moment of its inauguration and of its absorption into Indian life. Post-structuralist approaches to the critique of the category of the subject recommend themselves precisely in this context, as ways of dissecting the idea of selfhood that guarantees this citizen's real power.

More pertinently and more annoyingly, the discourses of liberalism and humanism now appear folded into new kinds of illiberal politics--the Hindutva type, the **anti-Mandal** or **anti-dalit type**--that disguise their illiberality by parading their enlightened credentials. The factor common to these three reasons for rejecting liberal humanism is, in short, that it is not protected from abuse: that it may be used for legitimate as well as illegitimate ends.

One might clarify the third reason by taking a brief look at the ways in which some of the new political movements Tharu and Niranjana refer to are deploying the discourse of liberal

humanism. The prominence in recent years of symbolic struggles points to the reconstitution of group identities in the field of the political. The Shah Bano case and the **Roop** Kanwar case may be taken as typical instances in which questions of group identity (**Hindu**, Muslim, Rajput) have been hung upon isolated events where women have been instrumentalized. Another example is upper caste mobilization around caste **reservations**, which from the upper caste point of view is also symbolic, because what is being contested is by no means employment for everyone, but only for a small section of each community. The assertion of group identity has both **traditionally** been (in the formation of caste-associations, for instance, which were prolongations of **pre-modern** self-identification through kinship; or in the non-brahmin movements, in which **caste-feeling** and a modern consciousness of equality met each other) and has become, in new ways (as with the autonomous women's movement itself or with the dalit struggle), the path of intervention in public affairs.

A theorist conscious of difference as a legitimate analytic category would treat such assertions of identity without the kind of dismissive scorn the comfortably **difference-blind** middle class liberal humanist (whose **difference-blindness** is a mark of his singular feeling of being at home in the world) reserves for it. The **political** weight of post-structuralism seems to lie in its offering a subject position from which identity politics (as asserting 'difference': i.e.. social **structuring**) may be endorsed. though with the theoretical **stipulation--usually unobservable** in practice--that 'identity' be kept distinct from '**essence.**' The centrifugal effect of this theory then acts as a valuable corrective to 'modern' self-complacency.

But does post-structuralism (characterized by many critics as politically neutral, anarchist or even nihilist) offer a substantive alternative to the political framework that it thus demonstrates to be vulnerable to abuse? Could the legitimization of all 'difference,' all claims to identity, be the option we might prefer to the legitimization of the 'universal' norms? If we relate the privileging of difference to identity politics, it becomes obvious that 'difference' itself is as neutral a category as 'universal' or 'essence': there is obviously (at least from a feminist point of view) an illegitimate politics of difference (the Hindutva type, the anti-Mandal type) as well as a legitimate one (the women's movement, the dalit movement). Indeed part of the trouble is that 'difference' (as antagonism) is not unmarked: the question is who is marking it, where it is marked, whom it divides. Increasingly, Tharu and Niranjana's analysis suggests, difference may not be marked between men and women (though as I said earlier, it is far from being the case that this representational ploy, by means of which every group legitimates itself, reflects an achieved transformation) but between Hindus, and Muslims; or between dalit men and upper caste women.

The feminist theorist is called upon, in this situation, to distinguish the legitimate politics of difference from the illegitimate ones. Tharu and Niranjana's post-structuralist affiliation becomes visible in the way they negotiate this imperative: by identifying the illegitimate uses of difference (by the new anti-Mandal subject of 'feminism,' for instance) as at base universalist. The crux of their argument, its most compelling point, is that the Hindutva movement or the anti-

Mandal struggle are actually deploying universalist egalitarian discourse **punitively**, against other **groups**, stigmatizing the latter as backward, pre-modern; being modern and egalitarian then becomes (as it did, for instance, under colonial rule, and as it does in the World Bank's dealings with underdeveloped nations; or as it does in Tharu and Niranjana's example of the allegedly happy and, what is more, liberated Hindutva '**family**' which points a finger at gender relations within the Muslim community) another route to **self-aggrandisement** and an instrument for garnering more power. What develops out of the Hindutva appropriation of Enlightenment discourse is indeed an identity politics: but one that can effectively bury the pre-modern associations of caste or communal identities, presenting itself as a 'universal' politics.

It **seems** to me that if one steps back from Tharu and Niranjana's specific project and therefore from their presentation of what 'difference' and 'universalism' mean, what one gets is actually a set of mirror images: Universalism and difference both being deployed both democratically and undemocratically. Tharu and Niranjana, however, do not examine such a possibility. Having piled up the negative images of the age--Mandal, Hindutva, Chunduru--they suddenly switch tracks, presenting the trope of the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh. The government, the Press in several languages, mainstream and alternative political commentators all alike insist upon seeing this movement of rural women as pre-political, as familial; Tharu and Niranjana reinvest it with a Political charge and set it up, moreover, as a model of a truly radical politics. Especially in the face of male (and sometimes

female) stupidity about the political charge of this movement, one is drawn to this inspired construction, tinged with strong feelings of solidarity and, perhaps, just a little romantic sympathy, of an alternative subject of **feminism**.⁶

The persistence by implication, in Tharu and **Niranjana's** text, of the idea of a deeper '**humanism**,' and the other sign in it of the endurance of universalisms--the punctuation of it by the idea of a feminist politics that has a bearing on '**women**'--are, however, clearly departures from post-structuralist **themes**.⁷ The authors appear to be suggesting that 'feminism' itself needs to be conserved as a radically democratic practice (with all the protocols that this implies), which is the only safeguard of its continuance in the '**egalitarian-equivalential logic**.' To untie it from this project would be to turn it loose for the use of practically anyone who wishes to **instrumentalize** the gender question, including all the **anti-democratic** groups that have been laying claim to it.

Both the theoretical impulses of Tharu and **Niranjana's** text (the critique of the subject, the critique of the Enlightenment) and the reining in of these impulses by a steady attachment to a political context are the effects of a location peculiar to a certain kind of feminist cultural theorist in India. This is partly within, or in sympathy with, the women's movement in India; partly within, or in dialogue with, 'global' developments in theory.⁸ Given that the global location (or the Anglo-American one) increasingly holds out temptations to the feminist in her subject position as 'critic,' the proportion of '**theory**' to '**politics**' in the usual feminist compound might change drastically; what I have referred to as the internal logic of

post-structuralism may become decisive for feminist theory and perhaps, in ways that cannot be foreseen, for feminist practice.

The way problems are delineated and dealt with in the field of **post-structuralist** theory in the western academy may be exemplified by the question of '**essence**,' which recurs with monotonous persistence and which is problematized by several classic meditations on **epistemology**. From a feminist political point of view, as Diana Fuss points out, there are essences and essences; while it is true that some have proved signally pernicious for women, others may even prove serviceable (Fuss xi). The point is that '**politics**' itself is a practice open to contingencies, not concerned with solutions that are internally coherent or valid for all time. But reading certain post-structuralist theorists, one might be forgiven for thinking that essentializing, or forgetting to use the approved language of the '**politics**' of difference, is something on the scale of a cardinal sin.

The relationship between post-structuralism and feminism requires **clarification**, in the final analysis, because of this play on the word 'politics.' Post-structuralism comes to represent politics by re-presenting it in a certain way (to borrow **one** of **Spivak's** favourite constructions), owing to the unresolved tension between its primarily epistemological compulsions and the compulsions of humanist-democratic **politics**.²⁰ It begins by offering itself as a supplement to already existing modes of political practice; it becomes by degrees 'a **politics**' and then, gathering momentum as it rolls down the declivity of epistemological revolution, becomes '**politics**' **as such**, which seems to obviate the need for post-

structuralists to define their relationship once and for all with politics as democratic struggle.²¹

The example I will offer in passing of the telescoping of post-structuralist epistemological concerns and **more** straightforwardly political ones is Spivak's magisterially presumptuous reading of the work of the Subaltern Studies group "against the grain of their self-representation." In the essay "Invitation to a Dialogue," Dipesh Chakrabarty sets out the (early) problematic of this group as concerned with the contradictions between elite political language, which is Hegelian-nationalist, and the subaltern pre-colonial political languages, which, though modified by the colonial encounter, nevertheless remain tied to precolonial forms of power and authority. The intention behind studying these contradictions is "to understand the consciousness that informed and still informs political actions taken by the subaltern classes on their own, [relatively] independent of any elite initiatives" ("Invitation" 374). Spivak interprets what the Subaltern collective sees as difficulties in its project (the lack of direct access to a subaltern consciousness, its availability only through filtering narratives of counterinsurgency, and so on) as insuperable theoretical obstacles, so that the specific problem the members give themselves (the recovery of the subaltern consciousness) becomes a theoretical exercise in proving that such, a consciousness cannot exist. This makes the object 'subaltern consciousness' paradigmatic of consciousness in general, proving the post-structuralist axiom that consciousness is a subject-effect; and by this token the Subaltern group either deliberately explores the futility of attempts to pin down the

elusive subject or naively **misrecognizes** the objectives of its own project.

Spivak herself embodies, in a sense, the tension between feminist as critic (in the western academy) and feminist as activist (in her case, on behalf of the erased **epistemes** of postcolonial nations). The brilliance and the irony of her work may indeed stem from the postponing of foreclosure, the refusal to splice together the split halves of her subject position: self/other; critic/activist. Polyglot eiron of postcolonial theory, the tone and content of her **argument--trenchant, sardonic, demanding** that the Subject of the West behave itself--is marvellously at odds with her style--narcissistic, treasonably sophisticated, unable to help embodying mastery of languages, concepts, jargon.

Both the excesses and the glamour of post-structuralism as a substitute for politics come from a profoundly reductive presentation of the opposition's views, and of the principles of competing discursive paradigms in general. Not all those who embark on emancipatory or egalitarian political endeavours are entirely devoid of a sense of the provisional and makeshift nature of either their discourse or their actions. But the language in which post-structuralism caricatures them is hyperbolic and flamboyant, and while it may have no particular resonances for a generation that has grown up within humanist mental frameworks, it is particularly enticing to students who can combine, through a use of this language, a form of political correctness with either heady romantic rebellion or sheer intellectual **dandyism**.²² The Foucauldian project, as has been repeatedly pointed out (and this also applies to Derridean

deconstruction) offers no elaborate alternative models of politics that take their justification from the democratic imaginary rather than from libertarian impulses. Nancy Fraser expresses this idea rather more colourfully when she points out that Foucault has all the interestingness of a lover and none of the virtues of a husband.

Thus one might ask: if humanism, democracy and secularism are indeed dead (I am not so sure about this) why do post-structuralist politics (the deconstruction of the subject, the assertion of difference) so insistently present themselves as the inevitable option in the Indian (academic) context? There are, for instance, alternative models of engagement with modernity which are allied to the German intellectual tradition rather than to the pessimistic French one. In Andreas Huyssen's map of the postmodern, the background to Foucault, Derrida and other post-structuralists is the

French vision of modernity [which] begins with Nietzsche and Mallarmé and [which] is thus quite close to what literary criticism describes as modernism. Modernity for the French is primarily--though by no means exclusively--an aesthetic question related to the deliberate destruction of language and other forms of representation. For Habermas [in the German tradition], on the other hand, modernity goes back to the best traditions of the Enlightenment, which he tries to salvage and to reinscribe into the present philosophical discourse in a new

form. (203)²⁵

In other words, why is Foucault a feminist resource in India and why is Habermas (or feminist revisionist readings of his work) not?

As a theoretically coherent and specialized discourse, post-structuralism sustains and is in turn sustained by certain professional investments (made largely by academics). This is bound to push the theory in the direction of self-**referentiality**, particularly in the absence of reminders that specializations are (to use a phrase from Lukacs) a 'partial function of society.' ²⁶ If the rules of the post-structuralist game hold, the changeover to this discourse should be a 'paradigm **shift**' and the discourses and strategies generated by modernity should be decisively and irredeemably displaced at some point in the future. At the moment the **pressure** to 'go post-structuralist,' though perhaps stemming primarily from attempts to imagine an alternative politics, is stepped up, at any rate, by new-wave thinking and disciplinary changes in the western academy, changes that are leaning on cultural theory in many parts of the world. The disciplines undergoing transformation include philosophy, English and anthropology; the problems include the apparent **self-enclosedness** of languages, the epistemological confusions resulting from relativism or the perception of differance. the difficulty of separating the effects of discursive regimes from effects that arise in the '**real**' world, the very uncertainty about the reality of this world itself, and of the self-presence of the **subjects** who Populate it.

Post-Structuralism in the Indian Academy

The academic orientation of recent feminist theory—towards debates in continental philosophy, English, anthropology, for instance, rather than towards analytic philosophy or political theory, to think of two options at random—facilitates post-structuralism's opportunistic occupation of the space created by disillusion with both tradition and modernity. This section is an attempt to trace, very schematically, the trajectory by which post-structuralism arrives in India, in order to offer tentative answers to the question of why these disciplines become decisive rather than certain others; and to the question of what the effect might be of these changes on the Indian academic scene, on English studies (since this, as I explained in the first chapter, was also my starting point) and on feminist cultural theory. I am gesturing towards the fact that an honest genealogy of post-structuralism in India remains to be written, rather than actually writing one, which would be a foolish undertaking for a student located in the Third World. The purveyors of the theory are the only people, in a sense, who are really in a position to **objectify** their own practice, though the obligation to do so, embodied in the idea of '**self-reflexivity**' and rooted in **marxist** self-critique as well as in Foucauldian genealogy, is usually honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

The audience for post-structuralism in India is being created by a whole generation of academics, who also, crucially, adjudicate on theoretical alternatives on behalf of this audience. The metal of the filter not being altogether inert, new power relations result from this. A demographic profile of

this group would be most illuminating. These academics are, by and large, Indians who got their doctoral degrees in British or American universities in the last ten or fifteen years, and came back to India--usually temporarily, but sometimes for good, though with renewable contacts abroad--to write, teach, publish. Mapping their road to post-structuralism would take some guesswork, since a considerable stretch of it has been traversed in Anglo-American academia where the landmarks (baffling to students here) include professional turf-battles, political struggles around race and gay rights apart from those around indefinitely factionalizing feminisms, and carefully staged run-ins with conservative authorities on television. No doubt most of these academics read Marx before leaving India ('reading Marx' being a trope here for a whole process of feeling dissatisfied with existing social arrangements and for finding a vocabulary and perhaps a practice in which to express this dissatisfaction) and had political commitments. Most of them also obviously experienced post-structuralism as both intellectual and political breakthrough, the full force of the partnership between post-structuralism and feminism or black studies in the academy hitting them when their teachers were riding the crest of the theory wave. As a redemptive discourse, post-structuralism must have seemed to be a definite improvement on marxism.

For these academics, post-structuralist theory meshed with social critique not so much along its feminist face as along its postcolonial one. To consider the trajectory of post-structuralist theory in India, therefore, one has to take account of the investments of postcolonial theorists in this

theoretical discourse, which **necessitates**, at this point, a circuitous diversion through the field of **postcolonial** theory. To minimize the tedium of this digression I will glance at the debate over Aijaz Ahmad's critique (in his book **In Theory**) of Edward Said and Fredric Jameson, featured in the journal **Public Culture**.³¹ Read symptomatically, the responses to Ahmad's 'attack' on these two figures, seminal for postcolonial theory, might illustrate the vectors of material interest and psychological identification that characterize the 'postcolonial' as a subject position.

The point is that what Ahmad says about Said and Jameson is by no means wounding or even controversial from the perspective of the Third World critic. As a historically informed scholar, Ahmad takes quite justifiable exception to Said's one-sided presentation of the exchanges between the Orient and the Occident. As a dialectical materialist, he denounces the 'idealist metaphysic' that leads to methodological and historical confusions, in Said's text, about the genealogy of Orientalism (is it an eternal attitude to the East or a historically determinate formation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ?). As for Jameson, the colossal arrogance and staggering naivete of his argument ("all third-world texts are necessarily ... to be read as ... national allegories"), with its collapsing of the heterogeneity of Third World economic and cultural formations into the idea of a single Third World 'form' of literature, positively beg for the kind of criticism Ahmad levels at it. Indeed the number of pulled punches in Ahmad's critique suggests caution and moderation rather than a desire to be wantonly destructive.

And how do postcolonial intellectuals respond? For the most part with a sustained vituperation that barely takes time off to respond to the core of Ahmad's arguments. There are displays of condescension and cries of 'unfair!' As Ahmad points out in his riposte, the same interlocutors who accuse him of virulent aggression towards Said and Jameson in their turn accuse him of wanting to start a 'jihad,' pronounce on his psychological maladjustment, question his right to attack anyone, ~~accuse~~ him of cheating, deceiving, plagiarizing, feathering his own nest, and so on, giving no quarter. The whole attack on Ahmad expresses a degree of professional outrage that is puzzling to anyone who has taken postcolonial valorizing of subaltern, earthily anti-bourgeois disruptions seriously--surely professional etiquette of the kind Ahmad is said to have violated is an aspect of western-bourgeois ethics, and anathema to the Third World marxist, the postcolonial, the flaneur, the Foucauldian, or any other subverter of western norms, to whom all is fair?³⁴

The charged and, ironically, unprofessional tone in which Ahmad is denounced makes sense if one reads his polemic as lese majeste. Nothing less than the discursive terrain of postcoloniality itself is under siege, along with its theoretical hinterland, post-structuralism; the theorists defending these owe fealty to Said, of course, and behind Said looms the figure of the suzerain, Foucault. When Said's Orientalism provided the intellectual grounds for constituting postcoloniality as a discursive field, obviously well-meaning intellectuals from decolonizing nations, Indians among them, finally found a way of studying their own spaces, identities and

cultures without exiting from the western academy.

The fact that Foucault was one of Said's intellectual mentors was probably partly responsible for setting up an early connection between Foucauldian methodologies and postcolonial theory, though there was sufficient reason, in the general atmosphere of the intellectual make-over of the Anglo-American academy, to find Foucault seductive even without Said's advocacy. Gayatri Spivak, meanwhile, eloquently made the case for cashiering Foucault (she finds him conserving 'the West as subject') and setting up Derrida, whom she had been translating, as the prototypical theorist of difference.

The end result of these transactions appears to have been the global generation's strong identification with post-structuralism and its continental progenitors. The call to identify with Foucauldian or Derridean theoretical models was evidently given by more than just overlapping concerns: the very formation of the discursive field of postcoloniality, hooked onto this theory, was at stake, as were, in a sense, various theoretically adjacent projects of the intellectual Left in the Anglo-American academy.

From the number of times actual places or theoretical spaces are mentioned by both parties in the Public Culture debate over Ahmad's book, we might deduce that location is the hidden signifier of prime importance in postcolonial theory. Cities and states ('Delhi,' 'Calcutta,' 'Hyderabad,'; 'Kerala'); professional spaces ('Rutgers,' 'JNU,' 'New Left Books,' 'postcolonials in India'); discursive spaces ('theory' itself, that space Ahmad so rashly tries to storm); countries ('India,' 'Pakistan,' 'the United States'); continents,

intercontinental spaces, 'First World' and 'Third World,' even 'the globe'; the spaces demarcated by political parties, groups, movements ('feminism,' 'Greenwich Village,' 'Third International Marxism,' 'the CPI'): all are places which come up, after all, as open to intellectual occupation. The focus is on the meanings of exile, diaspora, and vagrancy; on nationalism and internationalism. Should this concern with spaces be read, as Arif Dirlik reads postcolonial self-promotion in another context, as the conservation of the territory of a comprador intelligentsia that has arrived in the West?

Dirlik contends that "there is a parallel between the ascendancy in cultural criticism of the idea of postcoloniality and an emergent consciousness of global capitalism in the 1980s" and that "the appeals of the critical themes in postcolonial criticism have much to do with their resonance with the conceptual needs presented by the transformations in global relations caused by changes in the capitalist world economy" (331). Postcolonial criticism's complicity with the hegemony of contemporary capitalism is revealed by a sin of omission (its silence about "contemporary problems of social, political, and cultural domination") and a sin of commission ("its obfuscation of its own relationship to what is but a condition of its emergence ... global capitalism"). Postcolonial theorists like Gyan Prakash, Dirlik alleges, celebrate a postfoundational history which "repudiates any fixing of the Third World subject and, therefore, of the Third World as a category," (335), and, as they affiliate with minorities in the First World, "a politics of location takes precedence over a politics informed by fixed categories" (336). Such a discursive **thematics** may

actually exclude from its scope "most of those who inhabit or hail from post colonial societies....[since it] does not account for the attractions of modernization and nationalism to vast numbers of Third World populations" (337). Dirlik leaves us with a gloomy description of postcolonial discourse as "a discourse that seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of intellectuals who view themselves ... as postcolonial intellectuals" (339).

Whether or not one endorses this stinging tautology, there is a point to be taken in Dirlik's argument, which is that the politics of location in the First World or in the liminal spaces between First World and Third World inflects what we hear from the postcolonial critic about the political/theoretical options suitable for subalterns in the Third World. Thus, for instance, while feminists in India may have grave reservations about democracy as mediated by colonialism or about the political residues of the Enlightenment, those who are not postcolonial theorists may not be as sure as the latter are that we have altogether done with either modernity or Enlightenment.

While Dirlik's view of postcolonial theory might be accurate, as far as it goes, his materialist explanation of the attractions of a postfoundational politics given by location does not cover all the possibilities. What is left out of his account is the psychological significance, for the liminal intellectual who is radically unhoused by a refusal of bourgeois citizenship, radically disembodied by a refusal to identify with the national body, radically unanchored by an abdication of the middle class vanguardist role, homesick in the metropolis for India and in India (or in any of the provinces of the Third

World) for the metropolis, of diacuraive territory as possession or fetish.

The problem of liminality ~~is~~ complicated by the desire to occupy the space, subtly barricaded against Third World invasions, of the intellectual metropolis--which is not quite the same thing as being in an Anglo-American university. The viciously disabling feeling of being structurally relegated to some epistemic backwater or the other is indubitably accentuated for Third World intellectuals by the tantalizing proximity of this intellectually prestigious space; that is, by exposure to First World epistemological battles in the First World.

Poststructuralism then invites postcolonial intellectuals in continued contact with the First World to use it to lever the transcendental subject (always and indelibly imprinted as western and rational) out of his central place in the territories of the Enlightenment. Postcolonials who strategically appropriate Foucault (or who, less convincingly, despite Spivak, use Derrida) in order to 'provincialize Europe,' are, in a sense, performing exercises in decolonizing the mind. In this context, with these personal investments, decolonizing the mind becomes a politics in itself; and the intellectual, disciplinary and professional labour that this calls for, in the highly professionalized western academic setting, precludes identification with now obsolete dissident or heroic stereotypes (the marxist intellectual, the Gandhian intellectual). Conspicuous consumption is scored into the very grain of academic exchange: intellectual authority, now granted to Third World intellectuals, cannot coincide with such elaborate gestures of renunciation as made an earlier version of the

intellectual at home in her world or endowed her with moral authority.

But the endeavour to decolonize the mind is inescapably subject to the approval of the First World. The irresistible pull of the metropolis, where value stubbornly seems to inhere, despite all efforts to detach it, is consequently also the reason why the postcolonial intellectual cannot straightforwardly grant the possibility that local settings might give meaning to theoretical work. Trapped in the familiar spiral of aspiration and exclusion, she feels the enormous psychological pressure, arising from the effortless and enduring intellectual self-valorization of the West, to make herself intelligible everywhere, and especially there. Precisely the real possibility of equivalences between the intellectual concerns of all the significant corners of the globe vitiates, in the age of late capitalism, work that has purely indigenous or, worse still, local value. Thus even if the starting point is a local one, the problem has to translate into a universal language.

What may be of the greatest moment about the discursive domain of postcoloniality is that the segregation and devaluation that constitute the immediacy of the Third World academic's experience of the West in the present are worked into the theoretical apparatus as a retrospective repoliticization of the colonial period. Appiah suggests (as does Dirlik) that the postcolonial intellectual may feel a disproportionate anxiety about colonial remnants, including that large loose package that is called 'modernity,' with its concomitant, 'humanism' (Appiah 149). From the perspective of the colonized country, despite its

having been inducted into universal history without benefit of choice, and perhaps because the negative logic of this induction, represented by vulnerability to neo-imperialist designs, cannot be reversed, it might make more sense to **make** shift with the incidental benefits of modernity. In any case, for the less-mobile citizen of the decolonizing country, a less-anxious subject position may seem more natural; and the audience for postcolonial critique, apart from cheering on the assault on English and its attendant privileges, may stifle its bafflement about postcoloniality's more bizarre projects with recollections of the general good intentions of its representatives.

Indeed, the problem is made more acute by the fact that postcolonial intellectuals can no longer directly address or identify with such audiences. These theorists sometimes explain their avoidance of the local or indigenist theoretical frames (as opposed to practices) in terms of their intention to evolve a theory of the nation without arriving punctually at the bourne of 'indigenism': which sounds as if all theories that lingered over or privileged local intellectual or cultural formations were to be marked as 'indigenist,' but perhaps merely signals their lack of interest in the indigenous setting as discursive limit to their own work. In any case what gets instituted is a 'double exclusion'--from global context as well as from local one. Svati Joshi suggests that part of the fallout of the formation of the national intelligentsia around English is that "[t]he contemporary intelligentsia, in a much more decisive way than the earlier intelligentsia, is cut off from linguistic communities with whom it can speak or share its knowledge, and this has, paradoxically, rendered it **marginal**" ("Rethinking

English: An Introduction" 24). If one substituted 'global' for 'national' in this formulation, and 'theory' for 'English,' one would have a fairly clear impression of the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual. Even in the age of multinational capital, when nearly everyone is dispossessed in some way, the subject position of the postcolonial intellectual stands out as acutely alienated--an alienation masked, however, by the brisk attentiveness to local cultural practices.

Significantly, the need to adopt a 'local' space as a sort of sublime object, as well as the compulsion to interpret that space to the white western academy, are most urgently felt by postcolonials who have firm commitments and have enjoyed a measure of success in the West. No one speaks more lyrically of the space of the subaltern--"the habitat of the subproletariat." "the space of active displacement of the Empire-Nation or colonialism-decolonization reversal"--than Gayatri Spivak, who is both the quintessential postcolonial abroad and something of a special case, since she has successfully and irreverently pitched her tent in the metaphysical centre of western academic terrain while keeping up a conversation about the people of the margins. What needs correction, then, is the illusion created by the postcolonial appropriation of post-structuralist theory--the illusion of the First World's sudden, unprecedented, amazing attentiveness to the Third World intellectual's voice. In the bright flattening glare of global theory we seem to see the silhouettes of the two academic*, face to face, engaged in conversation; if depth is returned to the picture, it becomes evident that one is talking past the other, that both are distracted.

The point of all this is not to set up **'location'** as the new brand of politics, but to pull the question of the genealogy of post-structuralism up to the surface, which might then lead to a clearer view of what inflects or distorts the theory being produced about cultural formations in India. If a discourse is to fulfil a critical function, its genealogy needs to be examined; and in this discourse we may see the operation of certain large structures of power--that between First World and Third World intellectuals in the western academy; the creation of a (possibly) comprador intelligentsia; and another unequal relationship between this intelligentsia and its audience in the Third World. The discourse and its peripheral implications depend crucially on this intelligentsia's becoming self-conscious about the new power relations it is setting up. In other words, we need to reflect on the politics of postcolonial theory and on the conflicts around post-structuralism in the present, rather than accept either as **'natural'** to the Indian context.

Indian students interested in these conflicts can read about them, but mainly in conservative or radical **polemics** on the subject, and these, understandably, offer mutually exclusive facts and figures and conflicting interpretations of them. Students, moreover, are encouraged to consider such reading superfluous; the academics who bring post-structuralism to India, preferring to stem curiosity about its **'original'** context, foreground its concomitance with postcoloniality, which in turn is naturalized as addressing the anxiety and anger about **colonialism** that Third World subjects are assumed to **feel**. In the absence of familiarity with this original context, **Indian**

students receive **post-structuralism** as the only option for theoretical or political intervention, rather than as one tradition among many; and they would certainly be unable to account for the way it is transforming their own academic setting. The answer to the question why Foucault rather than Habermas, then, is that postcolonial theory mediates post-structuralism; that the anti-foundationalism of the latter is congenial to postcolonial theorists for whom western intellectual production is both Superego and Other.

In a sense, what I am making is an extended plea for the diversification of theoretical and political resources in the Indian context, so that both the 'humanist' or Enlightenment developments (Habermas, the liberal-communitarian debate) and the post-structuralist, post-humanist critiques are available for evaluation against each other: as our access to the debates stands at present, via English, at any rate, the post-structuralists have it all their way. In this case one might ask if one would choose a different theoretical tradition if questions of epistemology and of the intellectual dominance of the West did not loom so large.

The power relations in which post-structuralism is embedded are bound to have an immediate effect on pedagogy, perpetuating an unequal relationship between teacher and student, since the student's ignorance of developments in the First World makes her an uncritical consumer of the theory. The question to ask is: does postcolonial theory really put the tools of critique into the student's hands more readily than, say, English studies did?⁴⁴ If it does not--and what can we know of **post-structuralism** who only **post-structuralism** know?--it will demand as much

mediation on the part of teachers as any of the canonical English texts. If the idea is to displace a hegemonic discourse like traditional English studies with a critical one, it would defeat the purpose to have other unexamined hierarchies (between Theory and practice, between teacher and student) installed in the place of the old ones.

It is particularly disquieting that post-structuralism should institutionalize new, more rigid relations of dependence or thralldom because its initial attraction for students in the Indian context was largely its irreverent and authority-challenging aspect. Intersecting with the genealogy of the postcolonial theorist is the genealogy of a particular type of student--the kind of student who might yet make a real contribution to the reconstructing of disciplines. Since post-structuralist theory arrived in India tied up with postcolonial and feminist challenges to disciplinary structures, the students who occupied more or less oppositional positions naturally cleaved to it; and in a context where many teachers lacked even the bare professional commitment to make their scholarship match their authority--English teachers being peculiarly culpable in this regard--it seemed fair enough to mobilize the resources of post-structuralism against the petty tyrannies of the classroom. The bitter polarization of opinion that attended the entry of post-structuralism into some English departments in India is undoubtedly a reaction to the erosion of the traditional teacher's authority.

The student who is typically drawn to post-structuralism as a subversive discourse (rather than as a clever or intellectually exacting one) might have, if she had been of the

last generation, 'read Marx'; if she is now 'reading Foucault,' it is partly because, like the theorists who encountered post-structuralism some ten years ago in the western academy, she is struck by the previously unimagined political possibilities poststructuralism appears to open up, and perhaps also hamstrung by the shrinking options for the instituting of large-scale social change outside the academy. The woman or dalit student, and sometimes the maverick middle class male student, might harness the restlessness and the volatility of his or her subject position to disciplinary critique, making the classroom or the academy a potential site of social change or at the very least of disciplinary disruptions. I am suggesting that the articulation of certain students' needs with post-structuralism as an oppositional discourse, rather than anything intrinsic to the theory, sparked off interest in theorists like Foucault and Derrida. Which means that these writers were sometimes assimilated to projects quite incompatible with some of their theoretical propositions: politicized despite themselves. To recapitulate:

- 1) The conduits for post-structuralist theory, as far as the Indian context is concerned, are postcolonial intellectuals.
- 2) These intellectuals have a political and professional investment in postcolonialism that takes priority over the kinds of professional and political investments intellectuals or activists who are outside their particular 'global' context might have.
- 3) Postcolonial theory is raised on the rock of post-structuralism; postcolonial intellectuals therefore have an

additional stake in the latter theory, especially in its anti-foundationalist, anti-humanist arguments, since these delegitimize the colonial project most drastically; and this accounts in large measure for why they offer it as the only option that suitably addresses the politics of our time.

4) The exclusivity of this option (given the Indian student's lack of access to competing theoretical models that also address current issues but in relation to traditions distinct from the continental one) and its naturalization (since the many intelligent critiques of this discourse are also not easily available) set up new power relations and exorbitates the role of the mediators. In a sense, post-structuralism has not really been 'tested' as a political option, since the accidental and opportunistic alliances within which it has enabled disciplinary challenges have come out of its audience's structurally limited knowledge.

5) Post-structuralism is not merely promoted in a disciplinary context, where a Foucauldian critique may be entirely appropriate, but also in the context of politics at large. The question then is: can post-structuralism itself be a politics?

Poststructuralist 'Politics': Two Problems

To answer this question, I want to consider, in this section, certain large problems post-structuralism raises when it steps in with its promise to remake the political imaginary; that is, when its theoretical logic urges the displacement of the humanist democratic imaginary.

The opening up of the field of political contestations, precisely through the interventions of marginal groups that are now asserting themselves in both First and Third Worlds, has led to conflict on an unprecedented level. In India, groups that were already established as competitors have been made more aggressive by the liberalized economy; but the gradual percolation of democracy as a social form has also brought forth new rivalries, since it has enabled the articulation of demands that did not dare give themselves a distinct name under even **the** national-modern dispensation. This has several consequences, two of which become important: first, the paradoxical but apparently inevitable fracturing of political identities. Groups excluded from the **project** of the nation by their cultural or other **disqualifications** have formed new groups; those groups shatter into smaller fragments, following the inexorable logic of the democratic revolution. Secondly, the problem of **legitimation** (related to the problem of the separation of justifiable uses of humanist discourse, or of the discourse of difference and identity, from the **unjustifiable**): if the new identities, mobilized in recent struggles, are creating new and far more complex antagonisms than were experienced earlier, what are the common grounds for arbitration between members within each group or, more importantly, between members of different groups? That is, to use one of Tharu and Niranjana's examples once again, what rights does the dalit man have against the middle class woman (since clearly this relationship can now be marked as an antagonism) or, what is equally important in my view, the middle class woman against the dalit man? This question also touches upon the problem of alliances: if one of

the reasons for critiquing the humanist **subject** is indeed the possibility of hegemonic alliance with other **subaltern** groups, on what basis is the alliance going to be built, given that the logic of autonomy (presumably endorsed by post-structuralism) pulls these struggles in the opposite direction from the logic of equivalence (set up by democracy, humanism) between all human subjects?

1) Post-structuralism and the problem of factions:

The 'women' that feminism addresses itself to may be seen both as metonymy for a politically mobile Universalism and as a site of a potentially enabling atomism. Both are double-edged, as everyone knows. The women's movement in different parts of the world attempted to create a universal subject for feminism. Where the leadership was middle class, the leaders, with the blindness typical to this class, saw themselves everywhere: the result is that the theoretical paradigm which arose from this version of feminism comes up, sooner or later, against its inherent inability to address the specificity of the needs and problems of women from different backgrounds, and this calls for a rethinking of the universal subject for feminism. The atomism, which might pull women's lives and identities away from the blanketing effects of class, caste, joint family and so on, making possible a freedom not experienced by many of them even at that classic site of individual choice--the voting office--is reinscribed in elite discourses as an individualism that cannot acknowledge its allegiance to any collectivity, and certainly not to the collectivity 'women.' For these reasons, there is some force in the post-structuralist argument that there are no 'women' as such: that 'women' is a concept that functions as a

suture, and that there is an obligation to unpick this **suture**.

If one wished, however, to preserve these concepts ('women,' 'human') that figure at the seams of different identities, while acknowledging this obligation, what might the reasons be? Firstly, the very existence of a pole around which the political interests of women as a group could condense may have an emancipatory force that has not quite become expendable. The autonomous women's movement was always, in some **sense**, an anomalous moment--for what is women's class consciousness?--that briefly held out the promise of an identity for women distinct from their class/caste identities. This autonomous women's movement seems to move at a tangent to women's involvement in other struggles (labour movements, caste/class struggles, and so on). The identity created by it, though riven by the contradictions inherent in this project, at least represented opposition to the welding together of class interests and women's interests, or, rather, to the presentation of women's interests as indistinguishable from class interests. The 'women' of the women's movement (like the 'human' in the 'humanist') was thus an invitation to the female subject to break out of the isolation of class, caste or religious subjectivity, and a promise of collectivity based on a newly constituted definition of interest. But the 'women' in the women's movement, the subjects of 'feminism,' were also inevitably markers of the fact that women's interests were themselves divided: not merely in the sense that desire was often opposed to interest, but that their interests as class subjects were opposed to their interests as female ones. The loss of the (universal) pole of 'women' then means the loss of the unprecedented realm of

emancipatory possibilities that it brings into being as well as of the complex model of female subjectivity that it holds in place, leaving women identified only in terms of class or caste.

One might argue that it is only in the context of a still alive democratic consensus that even the work of dismantling universals acquires its significance. These terms are actually indefinitely subject to modification, since they are indefinitely subject to imperfection and closure (all nomenclature, as Judith Butler points out in Bodies that Matter, involves demarcation and therefore exclusion); but it is obviously their negativity that allows them to continue to invite identification, in the first place, as it also makes for the dissolution of identity. Women's struggles acquire the rhythm of this dialectic between identification and factionalization, and the withdrawal of the fictional pole of 'women' would throw this dialectic out of gear. Thus what one might preserve is not a literal-minded insistence on the sameness of women's interests regardless of their other affiliations, but this play or dialectic of identity and universality. The universal subject may thus be the necessary opposite of the concrete individual, the 'women' addressed by the women's movement the necessary complements to embodied female citizens, both abstractions sustaining the demand for a generalized weighing of interests.

2) The Problem of Legitimation:

While one may distrust norms that claim to pre-exist social movements and therefore to have universal validity, there is no doubt that the discursive grounds of mediation between different social groups or identities, sites of new antagonisms, need to

be actively constructed. **As communication** is revolutionized, not even the most remote struggles can remain isolated: all conflicts inevitably impinge on a news-consuming audience, on public policy, on proximate movements and interests. To withdraw in such a **context--as** post-structuralists tend to do--from **the** extended discussion of legitimating narratives common to as large a number of people as possible may have two results: first, to make political decisions, including decisions about hegemonic alliances between political groups, depend (sometimes defiantly and transparently depend) either on self-interest or on opportunism; second, and more importantly, to make power prior to **justification**, since **justification** can only take place in the space of, and by reference to, a common understanding of politics as the struggle for democracy.

What may be lost in the process of too aggressively dismantling universals is precisely the concepts (**for** which no substitutes are forthcoming yet) that function as common languages between groups or discourses: i.e., the more or less '**universalist**' ideas that in fact set up the equivalences between human subjects. It is not clear, for instance, why concepts or subject-models that underwrite democracy, admittedly constituted in the process of many **excursions**, cannot be made more widely applicable or available. Sabina Lovibond's question about one such **concept--'Reason'--is** a pertinent example: are such concepts inherently gendered? If they are not, and many feminists would vigorously dispute the idea that '**Reason**' is 'masculine' in essence, is there any danger that feminists will meekly accept patently male-oriented forms of modernity or rationality, given, as Lovibond points out, that there is "a

measure of consensus within feminist theory that rationalist values are in crisis--that the very arrival of **women** on the scene of intellectual activity necessitates a reappraisal of those values" ? (Lovibond "Feminism and the '**Crisis of Rationality**'" 72)."

In the process of dislodging the linear model of progress, post-structuralists displace the historically accumulated (rather than 'natural' or 'essential') grounds for arbitration between the new antagonistic positions, or for the building of equivalences between different subjects and groups. To 'start all over again,' without a history, is characteristic of totalitarian societies, as Lefort observes, rather than of democracies. In the absence of explicitly stated grounds for mediation, only one political identity can be addressed at one time, which becomes a major theoretical problem for post-structuralist feminists.

Post-structuralist critique that consistently presents itself as undertaking an analysis of representation has a ready-made response to this problem: to turn the question of 'is this use of power legitimate?' into the question 'who says it is (or is not) legitimate?'. This has the effect of transferring a contentious issue from the binary within which it makes its appearance, where it has an uncomfortable effect--an effect that would call for normative languages similar to those of the Enlightenment--to another, where naming the enemy may cause less discomfort. For instance, if the debate on 'the fatwah against Salman Rushdie' is placed by, say, the 'liberal' press within the binary 'Islamic power vs. freedom of **speech**,' and if Islam is seen as a beleaguered entity, the question can be

transplanted to the binary 'western orientalist projections of Islamic fundamentalism in the media vs. Third Worldist critique of orientalism.' Both binaries are equally valid; the second one has a resonance for Third World subjects that the first one does not have (I am not too sympathetic to Rushdie myself); and the issue travels from one binary to another, while the question of whether the infringement of 'freedom of speech' is a bad thing at all is bracketed as unanswerable, or worse: unaskable.

The problem of legitimation may be further exemplified by the case of the Hindutva use of the language of 'modernity,' as a way of attacking 'backward' Muslims. This was perhaps only to be expected. There is that, however, within the egalitarian imaginary itself, which should see this as unfair, to the extent that it is partly a mere pretext to oppress or deny benefits to certain communities or groups; but to the extent that the pressure on the Muslim community to subscribe to the idea of democratizing gender relations comes not from a power-seeking body (such as, for instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party or the American government), but from a legitimacy-enforcing one (the Muslim women's movement, for instance), it may be celebrated as a way of translating relations of subordination into relations of oppression, which may then be challenged. The 'neutrality' of groups claiming to make neutral judgements may be assessed, and indeed, this is an important task for the cultural critic; but it becomes an impossible task if the very concept or possibility of, or framework for, neutral judgements (i.e., judgements according to the logic of a 'genuine' universalism or a 'genuine' humanist democracy: unspeakable only because of epistemological protocols, but always recognizable in practice)

is exploded."⁶

The absence of normative discourses would dissolve the differences between power-seeking and legitimacy-enforcing bodies, since there would be no checks on the 'free' play of power. In which context, it might be well to recall that Foucault has been extensively criticized for his prevarications on the subject of norms, including such norms as would problematize unequal gender relations; and that Nietzsche, coherent prophet of the 'might is right' school, was Foucault's guru.

Laclau and Mouffe themselves, somewhere in the course of their argument about postfoundational politics, end up acknowledging not only that many current movements continue to arise out of the egalitarian thrust of liberal democracy as instituted by the European revolutions, but also begin to worry about how, if plurality or difference were the only pole, hegemonic articulations between movements might be made. If the logic of the equivalence of subjects is to pervade new areas of society, they conclude, "the task of the Left ...cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy" (176, emphasis in the original).

A broadly democratic framework, which maintains tenuous but definite links with the legacies of the Enlightenment, is outlined in the course of Laclau and Mouffe's narrative. Minus naive views of 'human essence' and the 'privileged points' of class or people, this historically constructed and continually negotiable framework can function as the ground both for the establishment of larger collectivities, and, though they do not

bring up this idea, for the legitimation of social practices. This conjuncture, characterized by the demands for both equality and liberty, counters the internal tendency of the new movements to push for autonomy from all other such movements; at the same time, it contains the principle of unity that allows the enactment of a positive reconstitution of the social, a 'construction of a new order' that would go beyond mere opposition or destruction of the old order through opportunistic alliances. Laclau and Mouffe outline, in brief, a way of holding on to the benefits of modernity--a common court of appeal, principles of equality and liberty that can be applied at short notice to any human institution--without hanging these on the peg of a Hegelian-progressivist teleology.

NOTES

1. In the course of writing my thesis, I was asked by more than one reader why I did not simply set up '**an** alternative **aesthetic**' that would more closely reflect my own politics, based (it was suggested) on the work of Chandralekha or Geeta Kapur. Both Kapur and Chandralekha, however, work within a context in which the value of art is not fundamentally challenged.

2. Quoted by Tharu and Lalita, "Muddupalani" (headnote to **Radhika Santwanam**). Women Writing in India vol 1, 118.

3. Hegel writes:

That world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational **process**,--**whose** rationality is not that of a particular subject but of a divine and absolute reason--this is a proposition whose truth we must assume; its proof lies in the study of world history itself, which is the image and enactment of reason. (Hegel, An Introduction 28)

4. In a sense, Marx left this question sufficiently open to cause disputes among his followers (Luxemburg vs. Lenin, Luxemburg vs. Bernstein); but one might draw some conclusions from his dictum on the philosopher's obligation to change the world.

5. There is a general consensus about the themes of post-**structuralism** (in a nutshell, **anti-essentialism**, anti-humanism, **anti-foundationalism**; the construction of subjects in language, texts, culture; the genealogies of disciplines; the critique of **modernity/Enlightenment**); and its key theoreticians (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan).

6. Sangari and Vaid write:

Both tradition and modernity have been, in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies. As such neither is available to us in a value free or **unproblematic** sense, nor is either, as they are usually conceptualized, necessarily the solution.... We think it is time to dismantle this opposition altogether and to look at cultural processes in their actual complexity. (17)

7. See the very first page of the Introduction, for instance:

...our political understanding and experience as observers and participants in women's protest movements of the seventies has left us, like many others, bedevilled with a host of questions about the nature of the social and cultural processes within civil society which determine the working of patriarchy in the daily lives of women. We feel that the implications of the reconstitution of patriarchies in the colonial period bear **significantly** upon the present, and this, in fact, is the **justification** for this venture. (1)

8. Niranjana et al place this Moment within "the astonishing proliferation of seemingly disparate phenomena," the variety of signifying practices that make up what they designate a.m 'culture,' but set it off from the rest, along with certain other politically inflected moments (regionalism, the dalit movement), as less 'visible' than the visual images industry or the ethnic clothes culture (Introduction 1).

9. Sunder Rajan, quoting Judith Butler, suggests that a critique of representation "can be used as part of... a radical agenda" (11). The 'vacating' of the 'space at the centre' offers an opportunity (to feminists, among others) to install a 'resisting subject,' who will "enact more contingent, varied and flexible modes of resistance" (11).

10. This is not a solitary example. One might consider, for instance, the focus on 'signifying practices' (i.e., obvious further references to semiotics, the critique of representation) in Vivek Dhareshwar and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Kaadalan and the Politics of Resignification: Fashion, Violence and the Body" and Mary E. John, "Feminism, Culture and the Politics of Signification," especially p. 27. Interestingly, the women theorists who publish as part of this theoretical 'generation' display, in their choice of resources, their engagement with 'real' events. Consequently their theoretical conclusions display significantly more conflict and equivocation than the do those of the men, who see more possibilities of grand (theoretical?) breakthroughs in the emerging social conjuncture. See, for example, Vivek Dhareshwar, "'Our Time': History, Sovereignty and Politics" and "Postcolonial in the Postmodern; or, the Political after Modernity."

11. See Peter Dews, Logics of Disintegration. There are any number of sources for this theory of a coupure that marks entry into the postmodern, including Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition.

12. See Seyla Benhabib, Situating the Self; Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," and Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity and Postmodernity."

13. Habermas (see "Modernity vs. Postmodernity"), or Charles Taylor (see Sources of the Self) would claim that the extension of democracy into the 'private' sphere takes place automatically, with the creation of the 'modern' self consequent to the breaking up of the single legitimating structure of religion.

14. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," Subaltern Studies IX; Writings on South Asian History and Society (ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996).

15. The road not taken in their critique is the readily imaginable humanist evaluation of the legitimacy of political projects according to whether they are coherent in their Universalism. Critiquing something as 'falsely' universalist or neutral (which is the substance of Tharu and Niranjana's

argument, but a substance belied by the tone, which implies rejection of humanism) would perhaps more carefully conserve something that may be marked 'true' Universalism.

16. But is the choice of the anti-arrack activists as paradigmatic of radically democratized feminism too simple? It may be read as a sign that what is being sought is an uncontaminated area of the political imaginary for feminist occupation, or an untainted language through which feminists can forge bonds with other subaltern groups.

17. For instance, Foucauldian 'politics' is dedicated to showing how the construction of the 'consensus' about a concept like 'democracy' or 'humanism' is arrived at; not to thinking out or encouraging the thinking out of any alternative construction, since all such constructions have an element of the 'positivity' he rejected. Thus, the substantive positive content of feminist thinking, something like a goal-oriented thinking gets left out: an alternative is imagined in the most schematic and unsatisfactory way, or not at all. Foucault sometimes makes what sounds like a demand for historicized 'politics'; but the operative word is 'practice': which is clearly to be distinguished, for instance, from the generalized 'praxis' of marxism, and applied to a disciplinary domain, Foucault's happy hunting ground. He seems to reserve the idea of 'progressive' politics for his own genealogical method, i.e., for genealogy as politics.

18. Unmarked in Tharu and Niranjana's text is the space they share with, say, Spivak: the market of western intellectual production, where certain historic epistemic shifts, consciousness of which appears to have buried in the former colonies themselves with the dismantling of imperial rule, are being excavated and studied.

19. The play on 'essence' is post-structuralism is like the play on 'truth,' a deliberate saturation of a concept with an untenable meaning and with metaphysical rather than everyday significance (for example, 'truth' is said to present itself as 'unchanging') so that the concept can then be disowned. Thus the emphasis on 'the new commonsense.' Progressive movements in the past have, of course, sought precisely to stand facts on their heads, but have done so in a way the true-blue post-structuralist would find thoroughly contaminated by positivism. Alternative facts, which challenged received ideas, were dredged up and offered as truths, hitherto obscured, and were accepted as such. Thus marxist commonsense (Gramsci, it may be remembered, stressed the value of this; and see Marx, see Lukacs, see Bakhtin, their efforts to ground the movement in science, in dialectic, in dialogue) made immediate sense to a mass of people who accepted it as an alternative truth. The early women's movement in the west and the non-academic one offer truths about men, about women--we have more endurance than men, a historical Marie Curie discovered radium, there is no such thing as the vaginal orgasm and so on. The strength of consciousness-raising seems to have been in the speaking of truths hitherto unspeakable--truths about men, truths about women--with epiphanic suddenness, sharpness, **starkness**: these

truths hitting home and precipitating the crises that women looking back on that time claim changed their lives.

20. The epistemological concerns of post-structuralism nudge it into a flip-flop mode: a complete theoretical dissociation from earlier models of subjecthood, consensus, debate, undergirded democracy. There is the strange spectacle, consequently, of a programmatic anti-essentialism cramming social practice into its models. The trouble with the flip-flop type of change is that it segregates the theorists who have espoused the position of extreme reaction; when their position becomes untenable (as such positions tend to do) a great deal of energy or cunning are required to covering the tracks of embarrassment by retraction or disavowal.

21. The question famously posed by Spivak in the eponymous essay: 'can the subaltern speak?' reflects, once again, the compulsions of epistemology (knowing the subject) as well as the feminist compulsion to read resistance. The choice of sati as a subject of investigation leads to some uncomfortable consequences: no one can ask the sati whether or not she wanted to die; Hindu orthodoxy claims that she did, progressives claim that she did not.

Firstly, there is the problem for postcolonial critics that it was, after all, the British government that banned the practice. Spivak turns this problem to feminist critical advantage by using it to suggest that the colonizer's transactions with the orthodoxy was represented by a male-male allegory (white men saving brown women from brown men) which effectively silenced the subaltern woman. Lata Hani ("Contentious Traditions") wants to argue that the sati is unequivocally a victim, but sees this argument as replicating the British denial of agency and subjectivity to women. However, to assert that the women were agents in their own right then diminishes the force of the critique of patriarchy as enacting violent repressions on women's bodies.

The question now is: does the sati have agency or does she not? Sunder Rajan ("The Subject of Sati"; in Real and Imagined Women: page references to the latter text) deals with this problem by "shifting the emphasis from sati-as-death ... to sati-as-burning" (19), which foregrounds the pain of the sati, physically repellant even to those who condone the practice, and needing to be marked as not ontologically different from ordinary human pain. To see sati as burning is also to see the female subject as having a 'will,' in a sense, since "the subjectivity of pain ... needs to be conceptualized as a dynamic rather than passive condition, on the premise that the subject in pain will be definitionally in transit towards a state of no-pain (even if this state is no more than a reflexivity)" (22).

Put simply, this might mean: sati hurts, therefore it should not be allowed. But what applies to pain ("sheer aversiveness") applies equally to death. That is, sati kills, therefore it should not be allowed. Sunder Rajan's argument does not really serve to show why sati should not be sanctioned; and if Nietzsche is to be believed it is quixotic to assume that pain is not a pleasing spectacle to some.

22. For instance, Michele Barrett speaks of the post-structuralist registering of "the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture" (The Politics of Truth 78). Much of the finality of the usages in this formulation seem entirely unwarranted. The ideas repudiated produce a caricature of a dogmatic and idiotically optimistic activist who, mouth agape, pursues visions of the "single definite end to world history," while complacently putting in "ultimate sutures."

23. Fraser, Unruly Practices 65. Fraser, reading Foucault against the grain as a 'humanist,' makes a considered reply to Habermas's contention that he is a 'Young Conservative.'

We could take the late text "What is **Enlightenment**" to be an attempt to explicate the connection between Foucault's method and his program for the self. The bridge between the two appears to be a notion of radical freedom. In this text Foucault sees "the entire history of Western societies" as a "struggle for freedom" with a **corresponding** attempt to disconnect the growth of **technology** ("capabilities") from the "**intensification** of power relations" (47-48).

The labour of developing a historical critique of social formations, part of the project of attaining freedom, is to help identify the limits of possibility for selves (disciplinary, social, historical etc.). The purpose is to experiment, to extend the possibilities of selfhood by breaking down historical limits: Foucault's project may be read as a radically libertarian rather than an egalitarian one. Thus Foucault towards the end of his life--some would say throughout his **life-offered** as a philosophical and political project precisely what for an **earlier** generation would have been the project of the aesthetic, the transcendence of the limits of human possibility, outside the ambience of rationality.

24. Lyotard, of course, suggests that the German intellectual (philosophical) tradition, inseparable from totalizing schemes such as that of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, is just as discredited as the other grand narrative he **identifies--that** of "Humanity as the hero of liberty." The German tradition stands or falls by a philosophical metanarrative whose project, according to Lyotard, is "to restore unity to learning" by linking the sciences together "as moments in the becoming of **spirit**" (31-32).

Thinkers in the German tradition (Habermas, Peter Burger, Andreas Huyssen), with less dramatic effect but more plausibility, trace the French strain of post-structuralism back to modernist avant-gardism and its 'cult of the **new**'.

25. As Huyssen points out, his 'map' is complicated by the fact the Frankfurt School, though German by nationality, is French by virtue of its pessimism. One answer to the question of why Foucault seems interesting in India and not Habermas lies, of course, in the stubborn resistance of Enlightenment-derived discourse to the kind of pluralism that goes beyond the merely **anthropological view**, or to attempting genuinely broad definitions of political or social rationality. This, and the history of imperialism and colonialism which cuts through the very heart of the Enlightenment project, lead to a perfectly

understandable knee-jerk reaction against even the bare mention of the idea; to sift through the lessons of the Enlightenment and select currently usable ones would require, given how the Third World has always played Other to the West's Self, remarkable forbearance.

26. Lukacs is talking of the reification of the division of labour which

enables the artificially isolated partial functions to be performed in the most rational manner by 'specialists' who are specially adapted mentally and physically for the purpose. This has the effect of making these partial functions autonomous and so they tend to develop through their own momentum and in accordance with their own special laws independently of the other partial functions of society.... the more highly developed it is, the more powerful become the claims to status and the professional interests of the 'specialists' who are the living embodiment of such traditions. (History and Class Consciousness 103)

27. A genealogy of a subject or a phenomenon must attempt to present an account of that subject in its determinateness, whether one takes 'determinateness' to mean cause-and-effect or is only willing to venture a theory of correspondence. Determinateness is usually framed within a history-of-ideas model, which to some extent has been the model of choice for the self-objectification of post-structuralist theorists in the Third World; a materialist model, describing the subject in relation to the material conditions of its existence; and a psychological model, which explains the subject in terms of its psychic history. No doubt one could hold all these types of explanation together by pleading some such theoretical nostrum as 'overdetermination,' but as Marx and Freud set up the paradigmatic instances of the last two frameworks, each of them, in spite of careful repudiations of this possibility, has become a 'total' system that competes with the other. Genealogy becomes a fraught exercise, with accusations of 'economism' and 'reductionism' on the one hand and of 'personalization' or 'psychologism' on the other, all of which may be directed towards hostile critics of the phenomenon.

The exchange between Aijaz Ahmed and his critics has been peppered with mutual accusations along these lines. Ahmad is found guilty of vulgar marxism, naive realism, etc.; his interlocutors stand accused of mystifying their material stakes in post-colonial theory. Interestingly, Arif Dirlik's more cogently argued article describing these stakes has not become the focus of debate. I discuss both interventions later in this chapter.

28. The fact that genealogical protocols are not followed by postcolonial theorists itself indicates the magnitude of the investments in this field: as Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests, "... the demands of agency seem always--in the real world of politics--to entail a misrecognition of its arteneajs; you cannot build alliances without mystifications and mythologies" (175). Postcolonials are in the process of strengthening their alliances and are, consequently, in no mood to dismantle the

myths that sustain their practice.

29. One fascinating point of dissemination of Foucauldian or Derridean theory, distinct from the academy, is that of the alternative vernacular journal; fascinating because poised between being exercises in male self-fashioning in relation to avant-gardist interpretation of post-structuralist texts and being political interventions that seek to transform a small audience. My thanks to S.Ravindran for drawing my attention to this phenomenon and for lending me his copies of the relevant journals.

30. From the tone of books like The Politics of Liberal Education (Ed. Glass and Herrnstein-Smith 1992) and English Inside and Out (ed. Gubar and Kamholtz, 1993) it is now time, even in the U.S. academy, for backtracking. The neo-conservative critique of post-structuralist positions (and also, of course, all other positions of the academic Left) has begun to have an effect on the public image, and consequently on the funding policies, of American universities. Jane Gallop, for instance, counsels strategic retreat and consolidation of feminist gains (see "The Institutionalization of Feminist Criticism" ; Christopher Norris, once celebrated popularizer of deconstruction, now writes of "the self-engrossed frivolity of current postmodernist fashion" (177). Radical post-structuralist positions no longer have the cachet they used to have; theorists (Derrida himself) are manouvering to get some distance between themselves and notions like 'il n'y a pas de hors texte' ("Derrida never quite said that!"). John Searle has an amusing description of the deconstructive game: there's the bit where you say it, and the bit where you take it back ("Literary Theory and Its Discontents" 665).

31. The debate was featured in Public Culture 6.1 (1993); Ahmad's interlocutors included Michael Sprinker (Ahmad's editor, and perhaps the one commentator in this group who retains his sense of proportion), Talal Asad, Vivek Dhareshwar, Partha Chatterjee, Nivedita Menon, Marjorie Levinson and Andrew Parker. My intention is not to make a hero of Ahmad: I am much more interested in the debate itself than in his own literary critical output.

32. Ahmad's credentials as a historian come up for much unkind scrutiny; but one argument against him, which undercuts the implication that he has his facts wrong, is that all his anti-Said arguments have already been made--presumably by more able scholars. (Said himself acknowledges, in Culture and Imperialism, that the traffic between Orient and Occident ought not to have been presented so unilaterally.) The lesson one may draw from this questioning of 'credentials' is that the politics of Third World origin or location may indeed be eclipsed by the claims of First World scholarly excellence.

One might quarrel with Ahmad (and several people do) over his tendency to trot out vulgar marxist resolutions of the various theoretical problems he considers. His naivete, at times, and his occasional bursts of marxist moralism, are indeed quite startling, but his opponents make infinitely too much of the fact that he refuses to succumb to the lure of a more

sophisticated theoretical line. 'Theory' appears in the debate like the holy book in the courtroom; recusant that he is, Ahmad is called upon by several stern judges to place his right hand on it and testify.

33. Here are some samples:

"What interests me is the hostility that functions as the formal signature, marking it as harangue, jeremiad, flyting, ethnic cleansing; not to make a mystery of it, jihad" (Levinson 101). "Ahmad's stance is clearly that of the ideological militant in an imaginary party (or, perhaps, not so imaginary, if we were to read between the lines), and the militant, as all of us know, never questions the party line" (Dhareshwar, "Marxism, Location Politics" 52).

34. The debate is particularly interesting because it reads like an extended 'Freudian slip': the participants appear to have lost control of their emotions, and with this, their sense of the coherence of their own arguments. Critics at the cutting edge of theories of intertextuality and capillary politics, masks off, exculpate Jameson for having written what he did in a "minor piece," and Said for having "tossed off" his observations, as if the absent-mindedness with which they produced their solecisms on the Third World made these less regrettable. Ahmad, in his turn, duly gloats over these instances of self-betrayal.

35. See Ahmad's history of this field, potted but useful, in "Disciplinary English: Third Worldism and Literature," (especially p. 225). Crudely put, one can now work in Chicago on the problematization of Indian citizenship, in Columbia on the sastra-sampradaya debate, in New York on the subjectivity of the sati; apparently more usefully than one could work anywhere else in the world. This was not necessarily the result of intentionalities: an incidental but useful convergence of interests allowed the elite upper caste Indian student, who was going abroad in any case, to corner an intellectual/theoretical market, but at the same time to be a political subject after a fashion. Some generations earlier the committed might have gone to do 'grassroots work,' now genuinely not a viable option, since so much grassroots work is supervised by dubious non-governmental organizations.

36. See "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 291-293. Lacan, who usually makes up the trinity of post-structuralist gurus along with Derrida and Foucault, does not seem to have built a noticeable following in India, except for a small number of theorists (Veena Das, Ashis Nandy) who are situated somewhere between sociology and psychoanalysis.

37. Appiah, for instance, sees postcoloniality in the African context as antagonistic to the themes of postmodernism, and writes that what needs to be recovered "within postmodernism is the postcolonial writer's humanism": i.e., humanism as a politics that derives from the African writer or critic's identification with the suffering of her country (see pp. 148-55 of In My Father's House).

38. The postcolonial critic will certainly not recognize such speculatively reconstructed motivations. Talal Asad refutes Ahmad's sketch of postcolonial psychic history thus: "We are told that in Britain and America Third Worldist ideology ... is defended by middle-class immigrants from Asia and Africa, for whom it is a way of addressing personal identity problems. Unfortunately, this kind of familiar rhetorical move will not do because it attempts to assess the soundness of ideas by reference to their supposed psychological function" (34). Presumably 1) middle class immigrants who do Third Worldist work have privileged access to rationality, since they have 'ideas,' not 'ideologies'; and 2) 'ideas' have no relationship with psychic histories.

39. See, for instance, Vivek Dhareshwar, "Valorizing the Present."

40. Addresses to the World or at least to the West in this grand style, in a language calculated to erase local specificities, were last met with in this thesis, it may be remembered, in the discourse of the Theosophical Society. I find this a curious but instructive parallel. In the case of the postcolonial intellectual, the aspiration is not merely, as I noted earlier, to power or prestige, but also, among other things, to the aura of cosmopolitan circulation-citizenship of the world--or of publishing in the West; or even aspiration to the luxuries of unrestricted access to libraries and to intellectual dialogue with peers, imponderables all.

41. If 'indigenism' is either the fascist version of Hindutva that appears on the streets or some recast brahminical version of it in academic work, it is obviously necessary to maintain a distance from it. Simple-minded denunciations of new theories because they do not subscribe to postulated 'indigenous' norms are especially routine when middle class male academics meet feminism, and I would not in the least wish to align **my** arguments with theirs. One might take Harish Trivedi's polemic on Women Writing in India ("Theorizing the Nation") as an example of the kind of phallic critique that capitalizes on the nation-as-fetish, erasing the conditionalities under which citizens, especially if they are marginal citizens, might accept the idea of their nationality. Trivedi makes spiteful use of a drearily familiar ploy: he taps, on behalf of a reified 'nation,' all the irritation that post-structuralism (anti-national western theory) calls forth among the multitudes of scholars who have no access to it or cannot follow the arguments; following this up with an equation between feminism, post-structuralism and anti-nationalism, he mobilizes anger against feminists.

But not all indigenist scholarship need reify the nation with such regressive political ends in mind. If the term 'indigenism' is not used in a nuanced way, a great deal of Indian language scholarship, for instance, which may be enabling for the Indian student faced with negative value judgements of her own culture, may be discredited. Indigenist scholars may be performing the work that Kwame Anthony Appiah, speaking of the teaching of African literature, recommends:

...stress that the continuities between precolonial forms of culture and contemporary ones are...genuine [i.e., despite the colonial encounter] and thus provide a modality through which students can value and incorporate the African past); and... challenge directly the assumption of the superiority of the West, both by undermining the aestheticized conceptions of literary value... by distinguishing sharply between a domain of technological skills in which ... comparisons are possible, and a domain of value, in which such comparisons are by no means so unproblematic. (69-70)

42. The phrases I have quoted are from "Woman in Difference," but this valuable space is a recurrent theme in Spivak's oeuvre. The fetishizing of the 'space of the subaltern' in the home country is obviously related to the globally mobile academic's guilt (Spivak agonizes about her 'liberal guilt') about her professional class position. Establishing a class solidarity with the subaltern and 'speaking for them' in the western academic context helps define a peculiarly unassailable subject position for the Third World critic, since she acquires some of the pathos that would actually surround the figures of the underprivileged in the Third World. There is some bad faith involved here: the genuine lack of 'choice' in the life of the oppressed in, say, India, no longer stands starkly over against the real abundance of professional or locational choices available to any Indian who has arrived in the western academy. The real deprivation of some people is transformed, by the dogmatic insistence on 'the construction of the subject,' into the ontological condition of all human beings.

43. The best-known neo-conservative critiques of developments in the American academy are Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind, Roger Kimball's Tenured Radicals, and Dinesh D'Souza's Illiberal Education. For these writers, post-structuralism is only one of many evils that need to be eradicated in order to make the world safe for democracy; the others include feminism, the rights of coloured people, gay rights and so on.

The Left in the U.S. is itself divided over the issue of post-structuralism and postmodernism. There is a growing perception of post-structuralist and postmodernist theory as self-indulgent and a vehicle for academic self-aggrandisement. Russell Jacoby, for instance, cannot see the connection between Fredric Jameson's marxism and the eponymous essay in Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Jameson celebrates the 'hyperspace' of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as a brilliantly subversive architectural response to late capitalism. Jameson considers the near-invisibility of the entrances of this hotel part of the effect of hyperspace. Jacoby retorts:

Not quite. [The entrances] are small and unmarked to keep out the local population, predominantly poor and Hispanic.... for the Bonaventure, built on urban renewal land, is not for local inhabitants; the real entrances are by automobile for visitors and businessmen. That a leading Marxist critic can wax

eloquent about the "insertion" of the Bonaventure into the city without stumbling on the fact that it expressly excludes, as well as devitalizes, the city suggests that the Marxist theoretical "explosion" has the force of a seminar coffee break. (171-72)

44. One theory is that the very passion with which the Indian student engages with postcolonial theory will make it easier for her to master its technical points, an advantage absent in classroom interactions over the alienating discipline of English. But engagement, however passionate, will not even begin to supply the place of vocabulary or linguistic competence, and postcolonial discourse demands a much higher level of such competence than even English studies does.

45. Once these theorists are enshrined in the critical canon, and appear as more compulsory reading, a rather different kind of student is likely to be attracted to post-structuralism: the kind who might take Foucault on board not as an iconoclastic figure, but as someone who offers a stylish (Foucault had plenty of personal glamour, a fact that this type of student is quick to appreciate) and difficult way of engaging with texts and ideas. This student may want 'good grades' and may well think that 'oppression' went out with khadi kurtas and chappals. There were also, undeniably, students who 'read Marx' as an exercise in self-fashioning, and their counterparts in the next generation may extend the definition of intellectual machismo by reading Foucault or, more effectively, by reading Derrida. The more esoteric and difficult, the better.

The post-structuralist abdication of the role of public intellectuals is by way of being an oblique comment on their perception of the relationship between their theory and identifiable political practices. None of the major theorists--Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Barthes--wrote or writes for a general public; nor do their acolytes, by and large, and this includes postcolonial theorists. "Younger intellectuals," Russell Jacoby writes, "whose lives have unfolded almost entirely on campuses, direct themselves to professional colleagues, but are inaccessible and unknown to others. This is the danger and the threat; the public culture relies on a dwindling band of older intellectuals who command the vernacular that is slipping out of reach of their successors" (x).

46. The most interesting of the critiques I have encountered include Seyla Benhabib's Situating the Self; Nancy Fraser's Unruly Practices, Gillian Rose's Dialectic of Nihilism, and Peter Dews's Logics of Disintegration.

47. All this is, no doubt, most upsetting to the good 'humanist' who cannot see why so many people are becoming so quarrelsome so suddenly when they were quiet enough before. He takes quietness for contentment; he says petulantly that the new groups are taking over the world; forgetting how all the members of his family are at the moment comfortably settled in well paid jobs, some here, some in the U.S.A., he sees dreadful visions of the job-market overrun by women, backward castes, dalits, Muslims and all the other riff-raff whose merit is undoubtedly not the same as his.

48. See Betty Friedan's The Second Stage, which **may** be read as the classic text of the horror with which middle class feminists may view the forces unleashed by their own efforts, if these forces seem to be driving towards the rapid and unexpected empowering of groups not originally seen **as** wanting a slice of the feminist cake.

49. Historical accounts, both in the western context and in the Indian one, of attempts by women to create movements of their own, suggest that this has always been an extremely difficult task. The fate of **Olympe** de Gouges, denounced by her own supporters and executed after the French revolution for asking for equal rights for women, is exemplary. Traditional perceptions of women's essential **secondariness**, part of the definition of **'femininity' itself**, have time and again forced women to articulate their protests with 'larger' movements--the class struggle, nationalist movements, black rights, the peace movement, the environment movement and so **on--and** to accept the assurance that when the group achieved liberation, women would automatically benefit. This has been a promise seldom kept, of course. In the Indian context, collections like We Will Smash This Prison (Gail Omvedt, 1979) and A Space Within the Struggle (ed. **Irina** Sen, 1981) mark the emergence of the autonomous women's movement out of labour movements, class/caste struggles (**Wynad**, Telengana), environment movements (Chipko) and so on. The relationship between this movement and its predecessors remains a troubled one: is a **'feminism'** that addresses itself to 'women' rather than to these other affiliations by definition a 'western' or at any rate middle class idea?

50. See Bodies That Matter, p. 10, for instance. In any case, identity need not be given, as it is in in Slavoj Zizek's reading of the political signifier, by **fantasmatic identification**, but can be a rational and agentive choice--but post-structuralists would not allow this, because of the 'risk of essence' inherent in the idea of agency. See Zizek, For They Know Not What They Do. pp. 15-20.

51. The playing of one pole against another may be a matter of tactics, of course: one may stress the universal subject against the tendency to **fragmentation** within political groups, and, conversely, emphasize identity-politics to batter down the complacencies of the **self-satisfied** humanist; but the destruction of the dialectic is likely to be, in the long run, to the disadvantage of the already weak.

52. See Gillian Rose's Introduction to The Dialectic of Nihilism for an elaboration of an argument along these lines; and **Seyla** Benhabib, Situating the Self. 4-7, for scrupulously clear arguments for **reformulating** the 'universalist **tradition**' without a commitment to "the metaphysical illusions of the Enlightenment."

53. One might, along these lines, ask if concepts are **inherently** caste-identified: the dalit political presence, one might **argue**, will leave nothing in the public sphere **unmarked**.

54. **Lefort**, Democracy and Political Theory: see pp. 19-39.

55. Any number of parallels may be discerned, especially where alliances between feminist struggles and other struggles (minorities, African **American**, class, caste) are at stake, and where, therefore, a certain caution about the condemnation of '**fundamentalisms**,' or even of sexism within these movements appears to be required.

56. Tharu and Niranjana ("**Some Problems**") seem to be suggesting that the promises of modernity are tainted by their Instrumentalization for the ends of power-blocs. Non-neutral figures like the '**Hindutva woman**,' who confidently claim neutrality, deploy them against their (Muslim) enemies, making them entirely unavailable for feminist use. The very fact that the authors themselves make a judgement on the sham 'neutrality' of the Hindutva woman shows that ideology-critique is not entirely unequipped to separate the retrogressive uses of modernity from the progressive uses, and indicates that this degree of anxiety about being tarred with the same brush as, say, the Hindu Right, is perhaps uncalled for.

57. Nietzsche develops the arguments against 'slave morality,' relevant here, in Beyond Good and Evil, and Genealogy of Morals. See The Philosophy of Nietzsche. 369-616 and 617-807.

What Jonathan **Arac**, among several others, has noted about the specific role of ethics as Nietzsche conceived it, is also relevant in this context, and applies to the sphere of 'progressive **politics**' in general:

... Even as a means of legitimating domination, ethics of nature was not imposed from above. Ethics, we recall, is a tool of the "slave", not of the "master", and it offered standards proposed to the **masters**.'" (Arac, 266).

That is, feminists, as speaking for women, who have certainly been on the '**slave**' side of this conflict rather than on the 'master' side, perhaps cannot afford to succumb to the dazzle of Foucault's dissembling **identification** with the Nietzschean dismissal of legitimating narratives ('ethics'). Sabina Lovibond pursues the theme of Nietzsche's unabashed celebration of power further, linking it with his scorn for the 'weakness' of reason:

Now, it is well known that any expression of moral revulsion against war is for Nietzsche, a 'symptom of declining life' but there is, perhaps no branch of life in which rationalism and pacifism are more offensive to him than in that of sexuality. The force of his conviction on this point suggests to Nietzsche an intimate, even a quasi-conceptual, connection between the idea of an **emancipation from reason**, on one hand, and that of an **end to feminism**, on the other. This connection is mediated by his concept of virility, the quality supposedly expressed in a love of '**danger**, war and adventures' - a refusal 'to compromise to be captured, reconciled and **castrated**.' (Lovibond "Feminism and Postmodernism" 399)

From this angle reason (under revision, of course) may be seen as friendly to feminist ends.

58. They suggest that movements are built through hegemonic articulations: that is, there is no essential or prior connection (in the absence of a common struggle on behalf of essential humanity) between, say, the women's movement, anti-capitalism and the ecology movement; an articulation of their concerns has to be forged, and renewed frequently through negotiation.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION
In Search of a Viable **Aesthetic**

To return to the question I asked at the beginning of this thesis--the question that started off the entire process of writing it: how can contemporary feminist cultural theory help **reimagine** dance? The answer is that it perhaps cannot, since it is encumbered by both historical materialist and post-**structuralist** strictures on aesthetics, and since it engages with cultural production in India primarily through a politics of reading.

Historical materialists did not repudiate aesthetics--indeed, as Tony Bennett points out, **marxist** criticism was the last bastion of philosophical **aesthetics**--but tended, on the whole, to curtail its purview by applying to it requirements that were more appropriate for epistemology. That is, marxist critics from Marx to Althusser considered aesthetics primarily in relation to literary texts, and considered those texts primarily in relation to an aesthetics of cognition: value was assigned according to the ability of the work of art to aid the dispelling of false consciousness, to function as an adjunct to **ideology-critique**.¹ The sustained playful relativism of poststructuralist theory goes very far, though in another direction, towards destroying the grounds for aesthetic judgement altogether, and towards cutting the text off from the reader's subjectivity, as it harps on **the** themes of intertextuality and on **the self-referentiality** of language.

When **marxists** or post-structuralists who are also feminists take up exegetic **projects**, they have something else to contend with besides these theoretical protocols. The idea of the aesthetic or of particular aesthetics can never come up for feminist appraisal on its own, but only as inserted in a **semiotic** cluster that usually includes pleasure-desire-sexuality-body; attempts to isolate any one term from this cluster for analysis are bound to fail, since the proximity to each other of these terms invariably starts off a chain reaction of negative connotations. Trying again on aesthetics means disentangling the **significations**, for women performers, critics, readers or audiences, of each of the terms in this complex. This is a complicated and challenging task, and what might flow from actually taking it on board would probably fill a couple of volumes on its own; what I want to give here, therefore, is an impressionistic and attenuated picture of the possibilities such a task might take into account.

1) Aesthetics:

The pressure to engage with the aesthetics of dance arises, for me, from my being also a performer. Aesthetic codes, applied in an entirely practical fashion to choreography and to the dance itself, are part of the performer's craft or stock-in-trade; subliminal but always present, they blend so imperceptibly into her everyday practice that she seldom pauses to so much as translate them into their verbal equivalents, let alone to **problematize** them. They become problematic, however, when the form is in crisis, as it was, for example, at the moment of the transition from **sadir** to **bharatanatyam**: the process of reinventing the form involved, at this juncture, a

conscious reappraisal and remaking of its aesthetic assumptions. **Bharatanatyam** is, in its turn, undoubtedly in crisis at the present moment. The crisis has been precipitated by its objective and material unfeasibility in the age of cable television, as well as by the **subjective** feeling of alienation from its current practice that is the experience of an increasing number of its performers, both male and female. This sense of crisis has been articulated in terms of doubts or anxieties about the '**relevance**' of bharatanatyam.

One way of solving the problem of relevance has been the adaptation of dance to express 'social' themes. But convincing performances cannot be merely '**socially**' useful or justified; their coherence would depend crucially on the existence of an audience (impossible to guarantee in the face of competition from the mammoth entertainment industry) as well as on the performer's ability to capture that audience's imagination (which calls for technique and stagecraft on the one hand and an ability to tap into something of that audience's desired **mode** of **self-objectification** on the other). Both the audience's and the performer's **imaginaries**, subject to change over time, and dramatically altered by **Rukmini** Devi's ministrations, have gone through another **transformation**. The symbolic space to which Rukmini Devi consigned dance (the home, the nation); the tasks she set the dancer (**beautification**, mothering); the genteel visual evocation of spiritual femininity: these fixed points in the imaginary she constructed no longer appear compelling to either audiences of the new generation or to many performers.

The fact that I have to mark my performer's interest in dance as a special case draws attention to the global shift of

interest, coeval with the media explosion, within which the discursive domain of cultural studies comes into being: the shift from the site of production to the site of consumption. In relation to the study of culture, this manifests as a swing from interest in culture as labour or production (which is how it appears from the performer's or writer's or film-maker's perspective) to concern with the subjectivity, desires and construction of the putative consumer of the cultural product (i.e., the critic's point of view). The dyad producer-critic should not be misread as the dyad producer-consumer: the critic has distinct professional investments in cultural theory, for instance, which makes this subject position not quite the same as that of the consumer, even granting that this consumer is genuinely critical rather than passive.

Seen from the angle of the critic, the formal or technical considerations that allow aesthetic conceptions to become manifest are, understandably, of small consequence. Feminist cultural critique, like a great deal of work in cultural studies that is done by people who are not also performers or writers or **film-makers**, on the one hand declares a moratorium on all attempts to address the aesthetic (except those that decode it as an aspect of the sociology of culture), by alleging that any such attempt is trapped in the fatally exclusionary jaws of the high culture-low culture distinction; and on the other hand proclaims, sometimes with unnecessary **defiance**, the equal status of author (or artist or **performer**, all of whom, no doubt, were equally killed by Barthes's edict) and cultural critic, in order to demystify the concept of 'creativity.' Each operation, one resulting in virtual silence on the site of the production of

art and the other erasing, along with the mystery, even **the** mere **specificity** of the artist's or performer's concerns, and obliquely claiming text-generating powers for the critic, contribute strangely to the apotheosizing of this very critic.

To work from the performer's angle towards re-imagining **bharatanatyam** in the current crisis, one has to reject the critic's stance, while keeping in mind her cautionary adumbrations of the deleterious uses of aesthetics. Why would a performer wish to have a theoretical understanding of the function of aesthetic codes when these are **uncomplicatedly** part of the intuitive, unspoken, but continually active visualization that constitutes the practice of the dance? In a sense, a theoretical understanding simply means verbalization: of the substantive content of the art, of the criteria for judgement, of the performer's imaginary, necessary in a phase of decline or of retrenchment, as a bridge to a renewed practice. If I wish to address the question of the aesthetic, it is partly to act as a corrective to the interiority and flaccidity of the vocabulary that framed the practice institutionalized by Rukmini Devi and her followers.

It might help in this context to mark the specificity of the levels at which the aesthetic functions, noting also that the levels interact:

(a) As the ideology of the aesthetic: the definition of '**the aesthetic**' as something to be pursued in itself, which, paradoxically, opens it up for **instrumentalization** in the cause of some related social privilege or **affectation--an** exaggerated version of the high art-low art divide, class/caste superiority, a postulated spirituality or moral eminence--actually interrupts

the exchanges between the performance and its world, and can be shuffled off without regret.

(b) As codes specific to certain art **forms**: these can be verbalized if necessary, are sometimes codified, or as in the case of bharatanatram can be elicited for appraisal from the followers of a sampradaya: i.e., they are available as text, though their effect on either performer or audience is not.

(c) As an aspect of the phenomenology of perception, affect, **self-fashioning** or of the relationship with something one may call 'nature' without necessarily filling out this term with contents that are ideologically contaminated--in fact, without filling it out at all, since I want to use it here precisely to represent the things that are not dreamt of in our philosophy.

Insofar as the last level can be investigated at all, it would belong in the field that Maurice **Merleau-Ponty** called '**aesthesiology**,' situated in the space of the conjunction of several disciplines including, possibly, psychology, **psycho-analysis**, **neuro-physiology**, art, criticism, history, sociology: absurdly vast and engaging with any number of unknown quantities.

The actual interpenetration of specific aesthetic codes and physical/mental phenomena that register the affective dimension of art may be expressed in the psychosexual relationships both audiences and performers have to the codes themselves, as well as to their realization through performing bodies. Both of these in are in some measure distinct from (a) the **intersubjectivity** that characterizes art as an irreducibly social activity, and (b) the material conditions under which art is produced. The distinctness of the manifestations of the aesthetic drive from

these other modalities in which art is situated is suggested by the fact, for instance, that the former elude the frameworks of a sociology of taste or surveys of preferences.

For performers, the aesthetic codes that frame specific dance forms function something like the image Lacan calls the 'Ideal I,' the **larger-than-life** reflection that the child identifies in the mirror. The aesthetic code allows the visualization of an '**ideal**' image of the performer's body, a gestalt that, like the child in the mirror, is more stable, more symmetrical, more poised and more effortlessly mobile than the imperfect corporeal original. The gestalt facilitated by the aesthetic stretches the capacities of the performing body by defining, just beyond the horizon of the possible, the ideal towards which it strives; and also conveys, perhaps better than any audience, the degree of convergence with the ideal that has been achieved.

To the extent that the audience is moved by the gestalt expressed by the aesthetic, the latter represents the '**world**'--to use Heidegger's vocabulary for what the work of art brings into being--that the dancer is trying to create, out of the intransigent 'earth' of her art-material, which happens to be a set of human limbs, a trained but still recalcitrant neuromuscular system. If the 'truth' of the work of art (the performance) is to be measured in terms of the conflict between 'earth' and '**world**,' the aesthetic code has the entirely utilitarian role of a yardstick.

The gestalt of the performing body, conceived of as something that evolves in transactions between the performer and the audience and expresses the desires of both, is a promising

site for experiments in transforming the aesthetic of bharatanatyam. The historical development that has to be immediately inscribed on this figure is the one that **Rukmini** Devi and her brahmin followers, talking under the trees at Adyar of the divinity of the dance at the very moment that divinity became unrealizable, most signally neglected to take note of: the loss of its aura. The authority of the dancer's body as art-object is even more comically undercut, if anything, in the present; both by unwitting excursions into coy self-parody and by the thick overlay of references to, and associations with, the dancer's body in the popular cinema. Serious pastiche suggests itself as the only way out of the unproductive image-traps that these resonances have set up.

2) Pleasure:

There is something irreducibly illicit about female pleasures. The history of the devadasis drives home the point that the recasting of tradition for modern use interpellates women as stoical bearers of morality; if female moral standards drop, the entire nation may run to seed. But there is also a feminist work-ethic which declares certain female pleasures out of bounds, since these pleasures invariably emerge along the axis of desire, and in contradiction to women's interests.

Female pleasures are particularly conflict- or guilt-producing because they are seldom imagined in isolation from female sexuality. Cora Kaplan writes: "How difficult it is to uncouple the terms pleasure and sexuality. How much more difficult, once uncoupled, to re-imagine woman as the **subject**, pleasure as her object, if that object is not sexual" ("Wild Nights" 15). Moralists fear the loosening of the bonds that keep

this capacity for sexual pleasure in check, and entertain visions of the contamination of the entire socius by this apparently uncontrollable force; feminists dread the **reinforcement** of women's subordination by their continued subjection to heterosexual and sexist norms. Tharu and Lalita may well celebrate **Muddupalani's** anomalous composition: there are virtually no models for women's comfortable taking of pleasure, sexual or otherwise; for their taking of pleasure as by right, without apology.

Bharatanatyam performers, notwithstanding **Rukmini Devi**, represent the taking of sexual pleasure as well as of other pleasures--of listening to music, for instance, or of play, or of conversation--on the stage. The delineation of pleasure by the female performer is always shadowed by the confusion between subject and object: at the very moment when she is experiencing pleasure as subject, she is aware of herself as object of the audience's gaze, conforming to the unspoken laws of decorum. The relationship between her subjectivity and the source of her pleasure, which can only be represented as intensity or concentration, comes through as narcissism instead; the audience sees itself watching her rather than sees her enjoying herself. Female pleasure is never full, never deep in itself: it is also always female **self-objectification** for the gaze of the other.

3) Sexuality:

What is more strikingly in contradiction to liberal ideas of self-determination, liberty or privacy than women's physical subjection to men, whether in the ideologies of beauty, or in the structural relationships set up by the everlasting possibility of rape, or by the playing out of other radical

inequalities such as those of caste or class on the terrain of sexuality?

Sexuality is peculiarly problematic for feminists because twentieth century feminism itself is instituted within the boundaries of the nature-culture debate, almost to the exclusion of any other framework. In **conjunction** with the ideas of nature and of essence, sexuality has been the terrain on which women's subjection to men has been secured and perpetuated; but in the sense that there really is a fundamental difference in the way human beings are **sexed**, adumbrated despite the overwhelming superimposition on it of the way they are gendered, the problem of sexual difference cannot be resolved through constructed parallels with class struggle or any other struggle that obeys the principle of democratic equivalence. Nor has the 'social **construction**' model, which has been deployed by feminists in India to analyse the construction of the female subject across a range of practices, managed to smooth out the irregularities and aporias suggested by female sexual agency, since this at any rate cannot be slotted into either the category '**natural**' or the category '**socially** constructed' (i.e., historical or technologically **manipulable**). The consideration of the coercion of women through rape or the beauty **myth** has therefore been a necessary but one-dimensional approach in the field of women's sexuality. The absence of any identifiable goals for sexual '**liberation**,' which term itself strikes a vague and self-indulgent note, makes this secondary to other more definable or viable feminist labours.

The problem of female sexual agency has a long history in **feminist** discourse. Cora Kaplan suggests that Mary

Wollstonecraft, demanding women's participation in the rational project of the **Enlightenment**, sees women's sexual self-expression as rankly disruptive, distorting their own development and **disqualifying** them from the kind of citizenship she covets for them. Constrained by her own middle class sexual codes, she repudiated the codes of the aristocracy on the one hand, since they produced unmanly men and wanton women, and the mass violence of mobs on the other, which she read as arising from the sudden lifting of extreme repression. **Wollstonecraft** is hamstrung, Kaplan writes, by "the romantic theory of the unconscious, its operations laid bare [in her text] to draw a particularly bleak conclusion about the fate of women" ("Wild Nights" 26).

There is not that much difference between **Wollstonecraft's** model of the unconscious in the 1790s and Constance Penley's in the 1990s, which perhaps goes to show that sexuality stubbornly resists being prised out of the mind-body frontier that many feminists find too disturbing to contemplate. Penley, speaking from a psychoanalytic theorist's point of view, finds herself having to deal with the limitations on the idea of 'social construction' and, related to this, since all is social and therefore available for change, a simple voluntarist politics. She writes:

...such theories [of sexual difference such as psychoanalysis] do not always contribute to the reconstruction of a new feminine or feminist subject because these theories take as their primary focus the role of the unconscious in the constitution

of sexual difference. The psyche is not
 Utopian: in fact, it is quite conservative"
 (xiii-xiv).

For the women who set up the aesthetic of bharatanatyam, as for the middle class feminists who put in women's claim to rationality and Enlightenment, female sexuality was associated either with slavery or with depravity. The gestural vocabulary for sexual pleasure, after many decades of use by a class of women who were standing in for nation, motherhood and chaste spirituality, is outstandingly inauthentic and devitalized, the visual counterpart to Rukmini Devi's strictures, cited in the last chapter, on sex as sacrament. Vitality might be returned to the delineation of female pleasure not by frantic exaggeration (which is one well-tried and desperate way of displaying conviction) but by the infusion of humour, perhaps, of sauciness, dignity and defiance. Eros need neither be trivialized nor spiritualized. There are padams enough, if they can be excavated, to allow the exploration of these emotions in relation to female pleasure.

4) Body:

Neither of the two fields of reference that feminist cultural theory draws on--historical materialism and post-structuralism--has very much to say about the body; both trajectories carry the traces of the Cartesian privileging of the cogito. Mind is elevated into the ground of human subjectivity or essence; by the time of the Enlightenment, Reason was the force that framed the human subject in the eyes of the law. Human consciousness as manifested in the will becomes the deciding factor in the resolution of legal problems.

In the progressivist episteme, constructed, as I have pointed out, under the sign of universal Reason, the associations of the body—the irrationality of drives, the experience of desire, the irreducibility of pain—have no place. The collective will is a rational force; distortions of its purpose arise not from unreasonable desires, but from ideology--'false consciousness' --**which** is basically faulty cognition. Volition is set right once the science of marxism has made possible the correct 'class **consciousness**,' and once the procedures of the dialectical method are accepted as a safeguard against future false cognition.

Women's bodies are demarcated as reproductive, not productive; medical science and familial ideology compete with each other to provide technologies to facilitate, control, celebrate reproduction. Consumer culture, and a great deal of feminist cultural critique, therefore, focuses on the woman's body as also a site of desire or consumption, or of construction through desire. But Marx's focus on the worker's body offers an opening for a reconsideration of performance as labour. To see performance as labour or production is to leave it unmarked in terms of gender, which is a refreshing variation from the pattern of the insistent gendering of the **bharatanatyam** performance through simulations of maidenly femininity.

Elaine Scarry, re-reading Marx's Capital, remarks that the making of material objects is a mode of human self-extension. Conversely, "[t]he presence of the body in the realm of artifice has as its counterpart the presence of artifice in the body, the recognition that in making the world, man remakes himself..." (251). Dance extends the material body's world, both for the

performer and for the audience, in time (music, rhythm) and in physical space (whose de-realizing emptiness is filled by human movement). Attending to the body as both instrument and product takes the focus away from the body as the site of reproduction or of difference. The process of rethinking dance as a cultural practice may offer feminist cultural theorists, as Elizabeth Dempster suggests, "the possibility of a distinctive mode of action, ...[one] that embraces a concept of the body that is not shadowed by the habits of thought based on Cartesian dualism" (39).

Coda: Turning the Angel of History Around

A Klee painting named "**Angelus** Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly **contemplating**....This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past.... The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

--Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the
Philosophy of History"

One way in which feminists have been deciphering political and cultural formations in the present moment of transition is by re-reading their history. The historical project is designed to deal with the cryptic and the undecidable. Since the impossibility of a '**choice**' between tradition and modernity, between different blueprints for the future, is underscored with each account of **women's** history, **and** with the accretion of

cultural formations studied, history itself **becomes** a practice of the gap, a playing for time, a building of a fence on which to balance, postponing the descent into the chasms of **the** tradition-modernity binary.

History may be vital as a practice of the transition, **but** in order to become critical it must turn towards the future, not the past. Janus, who **resourcefully** looks both forward and back, is an even better prototype for a feminist performer than Benjamin's angel, who is facing the wrong way as he is blown away, or any of those mythological figures, like Lot and Orpheus, who lost their women by looking over their shoulders.

Having played for time by attempting to write a history of **sadir/bharatanatyam**, what I want to do is translate this narrative into dance. I have in mind a script informed by my passions and angers both as feminist and as dancer, presenting a narrative that summarizes not only the **transformation** of sadir into **bharatanatyam**, but also the present contradictions--the homage to tradition strangely aligned with the CD ROM disk **now** available to young green-card Indians who wish to learn dance through their computers--through which bharatanatyam survives, **regardless.**

NOTES

1. Marx's own theories of the aesthetic are schematically laid out, in the Paris Manuscripts, in the idea of the fully realized, unalienated human being's freedom to extend his self through play; an idea that he **adapted** from Schiller.

Lukacs may be taken as the locus classicus of a theory of aesthetics that assigned to the artist the larger share of the responsibility for engendering the correct class consciousness, literary value then being judged according to how effectively the writer exposed the false consciousness that kept subordinate classes ignorant of how things stood with them. Macherey attached this cognitive responsibility to the reader, who, breaking down the 'recognition effect' that seduced her into identifying with the subject position demanded by the realist text, would read **symptomatically**, uncovering the text's hidden meanings in its omissions and rough patches. Althusser, despite having (perhaps unintentionally) done more than almost any other critic to apply ideology-critique to art or literature, actually took his cues from Macherey when he conserved a space for '**great**' art in the work of exposing ideological investments.

2. This is an amorphous but generalized perception (individual dancers sometimes talk of being tired of the nayaka-nayaki narratives whose demure expressions still form the staple of the **bharatanatyam** performance) that would benefit from verbalization.

The arid and devitalized space of the proscenium theatre too, is no substitute for the plenitude of temple or court performance.

3. For Lacan, the Ideal I as the child experiences it is "precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of **identification** with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" (**Ecrits** 2). He goes on to note that the

mirror-stage is a drama whose thrust is precipitated from [the] **insufficiency** [of the **still-foetalized** infant] to **anticipation--and** which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial **identification**, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality.... (4)

4. See Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art."

5. Penley goes on to observe that the picture of human subjectivity that emerges from psychoanalysis is not easily compatible with that espoused by American feminism, in particular, which is grounded in idealism, voluntarism of the will, and a traditional American strain of **utopianism** (its equal commitment to pragmatism notwithstanding). No political movement or ideology could generate itself without an idealistic sense of political will and a vision of a better future. But American feminists have often been reluctant to confront theoretical evidence about the limitations of those idealist and Utopian

ideas which are fundamental to feminist ideology and practice. (xiv).

Jacqueline Rose, among other feminist writers on psychoanalysis, endorses this view when she sees women as partly responsible for the 'misery' within their own psyches (See: "Where Does the Misery Come From?"). Are women, then, 'constructed' to feel aggression towards other women--for instance--or to live out roles that go against their real interests? If we argue for women's participation in or consent to manifestations of patriarchy, are we making concessions to the mentality that says: 'she asked for it'? There is very little theoretical room for manoeuvre between a sort of **Lysenkoism** and a giving away of feminist gains.

APPENDIX: A SELECTIVE CHRONOLOGY

- 1565-1856 A.D. Thanjavur under the Marathas becomes a centre of Hindu culture in South India, a focus of courtly and temple patronage of the arts, including sadir.
- 1856 Thanjavur is annexed by the British; the decline of feudal power begins as the treasury is emptied by tributes and taxes.
- 1868 Missionary campaigns against sac begin.
- 1893 The official anti-nautch movement is launched with a public meeting in Madras, presided over by William Miller.
- 1906-1907 With the signing of the International Convention for the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Children the government in Madras considers legislation against the custom of dedication.
- 1910 The Mysore Government prohibits dedication of girls to temples by a government order.
- 1912 Three members of the Imperial Legislative Council bring Bills to suppress dedication; with the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Bills are dropped.
- 1915 Annie Besant launches the Home Rule **Movement**.
- 1920 The non-brahmin Justice Party formed in 1916 comes to power in the elections in Madras. The next year they issue a Communal G.O. to increase the proportion of posts for non brahmins in government offices.
- 1922 Dr. H.S. Gour moves a resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council, recommending the banning of nautch and the tightening up of the provisions in the Indian Penal Cod against the adoption of minors.
- 1924 The first Act (XVII of 1924) is passed by the central administration to suppress dedication, along with amendments to sections "2 and 373 of the IPC.
- 1926 Pe. Var is disillusioned with the Congress, breaks away to lay the foundations of the Suva Mariyathai Iyakkam or Self Respect **Movement**.

1927

1) **Katherine Mayo's** book Mother India is published.

2) **Periyar's** Self Respect Movement takes off.

3) The Madras Legislative Council passes a resolution recommending that the Madras Government intervene to prevent dedication. After V.R.Pantulu is told by the central Legislature that the devadasi issue was a regional one, Muthulakshmi Reddi renews the Madras campaign against it; she helps convene and addresses several conferences by members of the devadasi community to debate the issue. The Motion Regarding the Dedication of Girls to Temples is put by Reddi in the Madras Legislative Council.

4) **Devadasis** from all over the South protest against it, sending a **memorandum** to the government signalling their outrage.

5) The first All-India Music Conference in the South is held in Madras, and passes a resolution that an Academy to standardize the practice of music and dance be set up.

1928

1) The Music Academy is established as an offshoot of Congress nationalism, with E. Krishna Iyer as one of its Secretaries.

2) A Bill for the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic is passed in the Legislative Council.

3) An amendment to the Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1926 enfranchises **devadasis**, '**freeing**' them from service in temples, and granting the lands to them permanently.

1930

Muthulakshmi Reddi presents her draft of A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to Hindu Temples in the M.L.C., making dedication punishable; by the time the Bill is circulated for comment, the session ends, and it lapses.

The devadasi system is abolished by fiat in Travancore State.

The Music Academy's Journal speaks of the art of '**Bharata Natyam**': this could be the first 'official' use of the new name for **sadir**.

- 1931 The Music Academy of Madras presents a sadir performance by the Kalyani Daughters, the first of a series of programmes that marked its campaign to preserve sadir. Devadasi service is abolished, and maaniams are enfranchised, in Pudukottai State.
- 1932 Muthulakshmi Reddi and E. Krishna Iyer have a heated debate over nautch in the Hindu. Uday Shankar makes a triumphant tour of India, bringing a package of 'oriental dances' that Rukmini Devi sees.
- 1935 Rukmini Devi launches the International Academy of Arts which will become Kalakshetra the next year.
- 1937 C.Rajagopalachari's Congress government is voted to power; the devadasi question is shelved for a while.
- 1939 The debate on the Devadasi Bill is revived. The South India Devadasi Association renews its appeals to the government, asking to be let alone, in a memorandum.
- 1946 Rukmini Devi produces Thirukuttrala Kuravanji, her first dance-drama.
- 1947 The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Bill is made into an Act by the first post-independence Legislative Assembly in Madras. Kamala, a young brahmin girl, makes waves by dancing to Subramania Bharati's patriotic songs in the AVM film Nam Iruvar. an event that also signals the almost complete taking over of the sadir form by brahmin girls.

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