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Culture

1838: South Indian Dancers Tour Europe

The bayaderes dazzled the French, delighted the English and influenced some of the leading artists, composers and choreographers of the 19th century

By Dr. Kusum Pant Joshi, England

Today, Indian dance has a distinguished place on the world map. Despite its antiquity, the first Indian dance performance in the West took place less than 200 years ago--in 1838 --when a group of devadasis set foot in Europe. These temple dancers were popularly known as bayaderes in France and elsewhere. The word--from the Portuguese *bailadeira*--names an ethnic or folk dancer.

Nineteenth-century Europeans knew about Indian dance through accounts such as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which included Polo's observations about the devadasis of Malabar in South India. Europeans living in India had also taken a fancy to nautch performances, a popular dance form different from the temple-oriented devadasis.

Western accounts of Indian dance in the 18th century veered from highly positive (Jacob Haafner) to extremely negative (Abbe Jean-Antoine Dubois). The early 19th-century Europeans tended to view India and other Oriental lands and people with wonderment and fascination. Irrespective of whether we call this tendency "Orientalism" or "Romanticism," a wave of curiosity about things Indian swept over Europe. It was on the crest of such a wave that the first troupe of Indian temple dancers was carried over the seas and cast upon European shores.

The French connection

Credit for bringing the troupe to Europe goes to E.C. Tardival, an enterprising

French impresario. It was natural that the initiative came from France, which had a special position in Europe as its cultural trendsetter. Alone among the countries of Europe, France had consistently acknowledged, in her own art, the existence of Indian temple dancers. The first European play ever written on devadasis was Antoine-Marin Lemierre's *La Veuve du Malabar* (1770); the first European opera on devadasis was Charles-Simon Catel's *Les Bayaderes* (1810); and the first Western ballet centered around an Indian temple dancer was *Le Dieu et la Bayadere*, with music by Daniel Auber (1830). Each of these emerged from France. Some of these creative pieces, such as *Le Dieu et la Bayadere*--rechristened as *The Maid of Cashmere*--and Antoine-Marin Lemierre's play--modified and renamed *The Widow of Malabar* by the English writer Mariana Starke (1762-1836)--were later staged outside France.

Tardival could hardly have chosen a better time to present the devadasis in France. In the early decades of the century, French appetite for the exotic East was obvious from the appearance of travelogues and new literature, as well the first French translation of Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, entitled *La reconnaissance de Sacountala*. This was written in 1820 by Antoine-Leonard de Chezy, the first European Professor of Sanskrit. With public curiosity further roused by exposure to Western versions of devadasis on the French stage, the time was clearly ripe for the real artists to be showcased before the French public.

Tardival took care to ensure the success of his program. Near the French base of Pondicherry in South India, he found a group of authentic devadasis linked to the Perumal temple of Thiruvanthipuram. He commissioned them for 18 months. The troupe of five female dancers and three male musicians consisted of Tille Ammal, a woman of about 30, and four female dancers under her charge: Amany, 18, Saoundiroun and Ramgoun, both about 14, and Veydoun, just six years old. In contemporary sketches, Veydoun, who appears dressed in clothes identical to the older dancers, looks like a mini version of the others. She was aptly and affectionately described by a French theater critic: "Imagine Cupid dyed in black. Veydoun is the most charming, mischievous and the brightest little devil."

Records indicate that Tardival offered the troupe an excellent pay package, agreeing to give each dancer Rs. 10 per day (a generous sum in those days), plus an additional 1,000 rupees--half at the outset of their engagement and the remainder when they returned to India.

"A sensation of dazzling light..."

Ammal and her troupe arrived in France on July 24, 1838. At Bordeaux, their first port of call, they watched a performance of the ballet, *Le Dieu et la Bayadere*. Even as members of the audience, the devadasis "excited the greatest attention," according to reports. A week later, they gave their first performance, a private one. Soon they arrived in Paris, where they were greeted with lengthy articles in the French media. The excitement augured well for the success of Tardival's ambitious program.

The Parisian response was vividly reflected by the city's prominent theater critic, Theophile Gautier. Regarding the prevailing mood, he wrote: "The very word bayadere evokes notions of sunshine, perfume and beauty even to the most prosaic and bourgeois mind. Imaginations are stirred, and dreams take shape. There is a sensation of dazzling light, and through the pale smoke of burning incense appear the unfamiliar silhouettes of the East. Until now bayaderes had remained a poetic mystery like the houris of Muhammad's paradise. They were remote, splendid, fairylike, fascinating. This scented poetry that--like all poetry--existed only in our dreams, has now been brought to us." After watching them perform in their residence in Paris, Gautier wrote that they were, "charming, unimpeachably authentic and exactly coincided with the idea we had formed of them."

Rumors that they were imposters vanished after a command performance before France's King Louis Philippe on August 19, where they were showered with gifts from the royal family. Now publicity surrounding the devadasis was so great that there were some real attempts to kidnap them. Tardival lodged them in a secluded but verdant spot by the river Seine in a special bungalow protected by a green shuttered fence with a soldier to guard the entrance. Being a dance critic, Gautier was permitted into the house and was accorded the privilege of watching the devadasis and their male musicians perform at close quarters.

Gautier wrote detailed descriptions of the dancers, particularly an extremely positive account of the grace, beauty and charm of Amany. From these reports and other sources, including a statuette of Amany crafted by French sculptor Auguste Barre, we can ascertain that the devadasis were adorned in traditional jewelry, including nose rings, bangles, waist belts, ankle bells and silver toe rings.

A distinct picture of the three male musicians of the troupe also emerges from Gautier's reviews and is fully corroborated by contemporary sketches. The grey-bearded dance master (nattuvanar) and senior-most member of the troupe,

Ramalinga Mudali, conducted the devadasis as he sang, chanted verses and beat the time (talam) with a pair of metal cymbals. The younger musicians, Savaranim and Deveneyagornam, played the bamboo pipes (tutti) and the rice-leaf drum (mattalam), respectively. (The musicians and their instruments are seen at left in the drawing on page 34.)

The devadasis' first public performance at the Varieties was completely sold out. When a short introductory piece without the devadasis was being presented, the crowd reportedly grew so impatient to see them that the management was compelled to stop the performance and allow the devadasis on stage!

According to an account of their reception in *Journal des Debats*, "Newspapers and magazines were replete with articles about them. Their dancing art was compared to the legendary Marie Taglioni, the ballerina who had played a fundamental role in the rise of romantic ballet with *Le Dieu et la Bayadere*. The dancers of all Europe dance with their feet, but that is all. The bayaderes dance in a different manner, with their whole frame. Their heads dance, their arms dance. Their eyes, above all, obey the movement and fury of the dance. Their feet click against the floor; the arms and the hands flash in the air; the eyes sparkle; the bosom heaves; their mouths mutter; the whole body quivers."

Then, perhaps capturing the element of divine inspiration behind their performance, the *Journal*, added: "The dance of the bayaderes is something strange, impetuous, passionate and burlesque. It is a mixture of modesty and abandonment, of gentleness and fury. It is a species of poem in which a Bacchante recites as she runs--a religious drama, which a young priestess delivers without a pause--as the god of the pagoda pursued her to the last."

In addition to public approbation, the dancers were given considerable recognition by French artists. Sculptor Jean-Antoine Barre (1811-1896) made the aforementioned statuette of Amany in a dance pose, based on one of her dance items called Malapou. He also began working on another piece modelled on Saoundiran. "The bayaderes," writes Gautier, "are therefore lacking in no type of illustration. Art, society and fashion are all combining to pay tribute to them; they are truly the lions of the season."

Across the channel...

Reverberations of the success of the devadasis were felt outside France. England was the first to spring into action. The initiative was taken by Frederick Yates, manager of London's Theater Royal Adelphi. Yates had an eye for "novelties," coupled with a fine business acumen. A discerning Scotsman and a comic actor himself, he seems to have sensed that the devadasis had every chance of catering to the British public's thirst for Oriental exotica and the mystique of India. He may have also seen this as a means of recovering the Adelphi's recent investment in refurbishing the theater. Yates made a quick dash across the English Channel to book the devadasis. His offer--5,000 guineas for the entire season--was accepted, and the Adelphi launched their program on the first day of October, 1838.

The devadasis were presented differently in London than in Paris. At the Adelphi, the first item was a prologue titled: "A Race for a Rarity," a comic piece where Yates, his actress wife and others characterized the way London's leading theater managers had made a beeline to France and were desperate to secure the devadasis for themselves. Then, instead of allowing the devadasis to take over the program, Yates treated them as supporting artists or auxiliaries. Instead of giving them the freedom to present their dance repertoire, their dance plots were cleverly allotted space within popular English themes or frames with a potential to trigger local public interest.

For instance, the devadasis' dance item entitled: "Law of Brahma," or the "Hindoo Widow" was incorporated into a scene set at a Hindu temple within *The Widow of Malabar*, a popular English play about the much-maligned practice of sati. Similarly, they were later on fitted into *Arajoon*, or *The Conquest of Mysore*. This highly popular contemporary drama celebrated the ultimate success of British arms over one of their most implacable enemies--Tipu Sultan of Mysore.

Between October and December 1838, the devadasis gave 55 performances in the Adelphi. In November and December, they also danced almost every day in Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly street, in the heart of London.

Some critics were initially skeptical about how the public would respond to them. There was a group of puritans who, presumably influenced by the negative projection of devadasis as "temple prostitutes," expressed fears that their performance might have a baneful impact on the "morals of the spectators." On the opening night, some of these puritans had insinuated themselves into the audience and begun a hissing campaign in an attempt to stir up trouble during the

performance. However, as reported in the London Times, their efforts failed. The great majority of spectators found everything worth appreciating and absolutely nothing offensive in their dance.

The positive response received from the public was reflected in various reviews of their London premiere. "The Bayaderes at the Adelphi have been completely successful, and are drawing crowds of inquisitive spectators," wrote one critic. "We are in raptures with the Bayaderes," gushed another in the Era. "Until now," he added, "poetry of motion has been a mere term, and grace, a beau ideal, existing only in the fancy. These Hindoo girls, however, embody and give life and portraiture to what has hitherto been but viewed with the mind's eye. Their forms are symmetrical to perfection. Every movement is exquisitely graceful, and the animation--the flash and soul which lights up the eyes of the dancers as they execute their fascinating evolutions, is absolutely magical. They are said to have sparked off "a trend among Adelphi actresses of dyeing their hair and eyebrows black, and eating olives, on the understanding that this would darken their skin." The devadasis' success in London led to tours both within and outside Britain. Before leaving for Europe, they also performed in Brighton.

Though popular, their Adelphi program in the long run did not reap a rich harvest for Yates. Some forty years later, Yates' son recollected caustically, "They were utterly uninteresting, wholly unattractive. My father lost #2000 by the speculation. In the family they were known as the 'Buy-em-dears' [not bayaderes!] ever after." It seems that, although their exoticism attracted the English public, their fascination was ephemeral. Without an introduction to even the bare basics of Indian culture and arts, audiences were simply not equipped to appreciate Indian temple dancing and music, much less to understand its profundity, meaning or intricacies.

A similar fate awaited the devadasis on their European tour, which included Germany, Austria and Belgium. In Vienna, then under Emperor Ferdinand, they were presented at the Theater an der Wien, billed as "Bayaderes and their Partners." Sadly, the Viennese public failed to respond positively. Apparently due to the troupe's outlandish appearance, unusual complexion, clothes, jewelry, makeup, tattoos, music and style of dancing, the Austrian press is reported to have gone to the extent of heaping ridicule upon the devadasis.

Nevertheless, they stirred the creative energy of some outstanding Austrian composers and artists. The same year that witnessed the failure of the devadasis in

Austria also saw Johann Strauss I (1804-1849) creating his "Indianer Galopp" under their inspiration. A galopp--named after a horse in a hurry--is a ballroom dance which later evolved into the polka. Similarly influenced, dance music composer Josef Franz Karl Lanner (1801-1843) composed his "Malapou Galopp," a love-dance of the Bayaderes. Both were well-received and are still extant. Further afield, conspicuous, tangible outcomes of the long-term impact of the devadasis included Gautier's massive ballet Sacountala (1858), choreographed by Lucien Petipa (1815-1898) and Lucien's brother Marius Petipa's (1818-1910) highly spectacular ballet La Bayadere (see photos at top of page).

Conclusion

The devadasis were a huge public sensation all over Europe, but the masses were unused to their culture and the profundity of Indian classical dance and music. The true devadasis soon slipped out of public memory and vanished into the limbo of history, and yet European artists continued to strut across the Western stage playing imaginary devadasis for years to come! It was only after the dawn of the new century that Indian dancing would once again draw public attention in the West.

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