Dancing off-stage: Nationalism and its ‘Minor Practices’ in Tamil Nadu

Dance scholarship in India over the 20th century has been impeded by weaknesses that has rendered it unable to realize the exciting potential it holds. That potential is nothing less than achieving the synthesis of social theory with an appreciation of embodied aesthetics.

The body of work produced within the professional field of dance performance, by professional dance criticism and writing, creates its own particular limits of discourse. Dancers themselves have dominated the production of discourses on dance. In what appears to be a possible contrast to dance discourse in the west, a long line of professional dancers have led the way in writing books on dance, from Mrinalini Sarabhai (1986), to Yamini Krishnamurti (1995), Leela Samson (1987), Kanaka Rele (1992), Padma Subrahmanya (1979), and others. In a corpus that fully deserves the title of ‘a body of work’, these texts pay attention to the lines, stances, postures and characteristic movements of each style. The writing is lit up from within by the luminous aesthetics of Indian dance traditions. But the very tightness of the embrace between dancer and discourse means there is virtually no space there for the potentially unsettling questions of social theory, those that concern the wider social, political and historical horizons within which these traditions are shaped and re-shaped. The world of ‘the arts’ becomes the defining and taken-for-granted world.

A version of the relationship between India’s past and present has become an ingredient of the Indian middle-class ‘common sense’. Yet in the absence of tools equipped to interrogate that version, the field of dance writing simply reproduces that common sense. What is by now common sense has flowed from more conscious and improvised responses forged by Indian nationalism to the challenges posed by colonialism. Dance choreography and dance writing were themselves a constitutive element of that nationalism. I refer here in particular to the contribution of Bharata Natyam. This dance form has occupied a privileged position on the stage on which a broad and diffuse nationalism performs its claim to a live and continuous Hindu tradition. Many of the common figures of discourse through which every representation of the relationship between Bharata Natyam and sadir attam seem destined to pass, were constructed in the early part of the twentieth century. A dozen
examples could be taken from books and spoken preambles to performances by way of illustration. This is Leela Samson:

Until the early years of the 20th century, dance was still a vital part of temple ritual. Traditionally, the temple was maintained and patronized by the local ruler or chief. During British rule, however, a period of degeneration set in. Devadasis began to dance in the courts of princes and in the homes of rich landlords. The religious significance of dance was forgotten. Poets began to write eloquently on the greatness of their patrons and dancers began to interpret these poems. The temple dancer became a court dancer, often of ill repute. (Samson 1987:30)

Such a narrative goes back to the founding moments in which dance was ‘rescued’ from such degeneracy. Rukmini Devi’s first two productions are Kutrala Kuravanji (1944) and Kumarasambhavam (1947). The first represented a significant re-working by Rukmini Devi of an existent piece that was still being performed by devadasis, entitled Sarabhendra Kuravanji. Dissatisfied by the fact that this piece was performed in honour of the Tanjavur ruler Sarabhoji, she searched for years until she found the “right” and “original” kuravanji - one which celebrated God (Ramnarayan 1984:27). Yet her aversion was hardly in keeping with the ‘tradition’ it sought so ardently to re-validate. That tradition had been shaped by quite the opposite set of values. Tamil elite culture is the product of a long and rich history of mutual interpenetration between courts and temples, between the model of the king and the model of the male deity. This history extends from imperial eras of the Cholas (850-1279 AD) and Vijayanagara (1336-1565 AD), reaching its apotheosis in the Nayaka kingdoms of Tamil Nadu, in the sixteenth century, and continuing until their annexation by the British in 1865 AD. By the time of the Nayakas, ‘temple and court, once similar but separate, ...re-defined themselves as explicit images of one another’ (Narayan Rao et al. 1992:187). Indeed, even a cursory reflection by those who are ready to admit that temple and art required ‘patronage by the local ruler or chief’ should lead them to wonder how dependency on such patronage could have left temples and artistic traditions untouched.

It is precisely at this point of instability that feminist scholarship, Marxist and post-colonial cultural studies have made their incisive intervention. What has mattered to intellectuals in this field, as opposed to the field of dance scholarship, is the construction of a gendered middle class respectability that is simultaneously upper caste, Brahmanic, modern and westernised in its sensibility (Sangari and Vaid 1989, Kaviraj 1995, Sinha 1997). Dance participates in this field only insofar as it provides a further instance of the complex negotiations between nationalists, colonial agencies, and social reformers over the
constitution of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. But the work in this field has elicited a rich understanding of the relational character of the way in which middle class culture has been constructed – not as an autonomous entity, but through relationships of exclusion and inclusion with other caste communities, creating new forms of marginalisation for the professional dancers, the devadasis (cf. Srinivas 1985, Anandhi 1991, Nair 1994).

Investigations in other parts of India have similarly explored the new tendencies of marginalisation, which began to afflict particular styles of performance. The mix of eroticism, professional identity, and public performance was destined to fall foul of the new morality of a respectable nationalist construction of “Indian culture” (see for example, Oldenburg 1991 on the tawaifs of colonial Lucknow).

Yet for all its insights into the political construction of gender and nationhood, this body of work betrays a singular imperviousness to the aesthetics or the embodied experience of dance or performance. The politicised treatment of performance draws on a tradition which, for all its more sophisticated manifestations, has little time for embodied aesthetics, except insofar as it reveals something about power relations between the elite and the subaltern, or allows the researcher to adjudicate between the progressive and the backward tendencies of politics. Yet politics, as the language of manoeuvring, shifting, and taking up of ‘positions’ itself implies, relies implicitly, on having a body and being in a body.

Since my own earlier attempts to bring the two strands together (see 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2005) the outlook has changed, as this volume and its antecedent in the conference of 2006 testify. Writers have appeared who are both trained in Indian dance practices, and have a wider range of critical theoretical tools at their disposal. The recent publication of O'Shea’s book (2007) represents a logical culmination of a succession of enquiries into the construction of ‘Bharata Natyam’ by writers themselves trained in the discipline (Meduri 2005, Coorlawala 2005, Gaston 1996). New attention is paid to the choreographing of dance pieces as active sites in which wider historical and political processes can be seen at work.

Yet we have a considerable way to go in developing the kind of theoretical framework that will allow dance and other embodied forms of experience to properly illuminate the fact that ‘the body’ is not some kind of technical tool for our various projects. The body does not simply occupy ‘space’ like any other object, nor is it a ‘container’ in which an inner “I” resides. We are our bodies. “The body” is not somehow mysteriously identical with us and our projects; it is above all, the very basis for our sensory connection with the world, for our having a world at all. Dance, with its mobile and labile qualities, emphasises
that ‘the body’ is not a static entity. It is though the process of moving and sensorily exploring the world that we come to know and constitute both ourselves and the world around us.

There is another fundamental theoretical weakness. We have not sufficiently allowed Indian dance and performance traditions to inform our epistemology and methodology in the social sciences and humanities. Reflected on carefully, these aesthetics and performance values hold rich lessons in understanding, and in instructing us on the nature of human subjectivity in more general terms. The supreme emphasis implicit in all performance traditions in India on communicating to an audience, in addressing others – writ large, for example, in the importance of facial expressivity and narrative performance in so many of the traditions – ought to heighten our awareness that subjectivity is shaped and shared in relationships with one another and to the material world. It is not an expression of an ‘inner’ non-material essence residing inside a container-like body:

A meaning which touches the heart creates rasa; the entire body feels the rasa like fire consuming a dry stick (Natya Sastra, Rangacharya 1996:65)

Dance in the form of a Minor Practice

I turn in this paper to that even more neglected sphere of subaltern aesthetics that have been consigned to the realm of ‘folk’ practices, to see what might we learn from non-Sanskritic traditions that inform and are vital to present day cultures of dance and performance. I have had the privilege, as an ethnographer, of inhabiting for a time, a habitus very different from the one into which I was born. Thanks to ethnography, I have been exposed to versions of what it is to ‘dance’ that have challenged to the very core, my assumptions about religion, gender, illness and affliction, which I inherited as an upper caste urban Hindu woman. Since the 1980s I have lived for periods of time in Kanyakumari District (Tamil Nadu) as an ethnographer of the Mukkuvar fishing caste, the Nadar agricultural castes who live in the hinterland away from the coast, and later, in the nineties, and to a lesser extent, the Dalit agricultural labouring castes in Chengalpattu District of Tamil Nadu.

According to the formulations of elite culture, this subaltern world is allowed at best to produce ‘folk’ (‘natu’) dances and music– a classification that consigns these life-filled genres to a past that has already receded. But if we were to view elite nationalism from the perspective of these subaltern castes, the entire debate around the re-constitution of ‘dance’ in Tamil Nadu and Indian classical tradition would be shown to have presumed far too much. The arena for that debate is that already provided by nationalism, and by nationalist
constructions of what constitute significant events. The frame within which we contest this nationalist history – despite the defining manifesto of subaltern studies – has been overwhelmingly determined by the archives of the colonial and postcolonial state. The figures whose significance we debate, such as Rukmini Devi Arundale, Dravidian nationalists, Tamil Brahman revivalists, social reforms, and even the relatively subaltern figure of the devadasi, are in a sense spotlighted on the stage of nationalism by the gaze of the state, whether colonial or post-colonial.

The practice of ethnography is not to be opposed to working with archival texts, but does open up possibilities of bringing into our re-evaluations of the present, practices that are consigned to the past even though they are in fact part of the fabric and texture of everyday rural life. The practices I wish to discuss receive no form of recognition whatsoever. But it is this very lack of recognition which might allow us to produce fresh hypotheses and interpretations that challenge the disabling mixture of historicist, evolutionary and rationalist understandings we have inherited and which we continue to reproduce as a way of understanding our past, present and future.

I take inspiration from Michel de Certeau’s methodological orientation, which is to write against the grain of Foucault’s monumental studies on governmental modernity. Instead of writing about the sites privileged by modern panoptic apparatuses, he asks:

What is the status of so many other series which, pursuing their silent itineraries, have not given rise to a discursive configuration or to a technological systematisation? They could be considered as an immense reserve constituting either the beginnings or traces of different developments. (1984:48):

de Certeau designates such practices as ‘minor practices’. In this paper I consider attam as a minor practice. Attam is an integral aspect of the history of Tamil constructions of the body, yet is not a figure on the stage of nationalism, either at the regional or at the national level. In his study of the Tamil ritual theatre form called terukkuttu, Frasca describes attam in the following terms:

*Attu (or attam)* is a nominal form derived from the Tamil verb meaning ‘perform’ or ‘dance’. The derivatives of this verb have a general sense of ‘performance’ that must be qualified by a descriptive or taxonomic item preceding it. (Frasca1990 :15)

Thus attam may occur in *sadir attam*, the polished dance performances of courts and temples that formed the precursor of Bharata Natyam, but it may also occur in very different ritual contexts as *veri attam*, the dance associated with *veri*. *Veri* is described by Frasca as
... a term that to this day has an important and specific meaning in the context of Tamil culture. It carries the sense of a frenzy, a sudden, often violent fury that can overtake an individual. This frenzy can occur at any time but has a particular application to the possession rituals still extant in Tamilnadu today. In these ritual contexts the onset of veri is understood as a violent, powerful possession by a specific deity or spirit. (Frasca 1990:15)

Dance and swinging recur constantly in the field notes I took down in the course of witnessing my first experience of a day long ritual festival honouring Icakki Amman, sovereign deity of the fertile heartland of Kanyakumari. Her shrine, at Muppandal koil, greets the worshipper outside the temple precincts with fierce clay dolls that are an immediate challenge to 20th century upper caste Hindu aesthetics. But far more of a challenge is to unfold in front of the somewhat bemused gaze of the upper caste ethnographer:

By afternoon, a crowd has gathered around these performers [the performers of the villu pattu or the bow song genre, epic songs dedicated to the birth of the goddess or the death of local heroes who turn into deities], and a swing has been erected, decked with flowers. We are told the Amman will swing on it. In front of the singers, dance some women. The very presence of dance among women in a public place signals the ‘presence’ of possession. An old woman dances with her tongue clenched between her teeth. A young woman dances, her hair out, talappu [upper part of sari] tucked at the waist, later she jumps on one spot, her hands outstretched and clenched. A young woman has brought with her a garland, a red towel and a turmeric coloured cloth. She joins the dancers late, after placing these items around her neck and hitching her sari at the waist. Her expression may be one of suffering – the rest just seem rapt. An old woman in a white sari, and no blouse, and another older woman wearing a saffron sari, holding the goddess’ vepe ellai [margosa leaf] dances rhythmically, and offers the leaves to onlookers. My friend Stella later recounts she saw a woman clasping her hands like an empty cradle, and rocking it. I think of all the reproductive disasters that seem to inevitably accompany women’s possession in the village. The women among the onlookers ululate from time to time, covering their mouth while doing so – I recall my grandmother reproving me when I did this, telling me this was inauspicious, done only at mourning – but here it is part of worship. Then a man comes through, who has been worshipping Cutalai Matan. His body is smeared in viputhi [sacred ash], his white vetti soaked after a ritual bath, carrying a vel [the goddess’ trident], a val [curved sword], and a thick club tender his arm. He looks gaunt and fierce. Later, a male priest comes out in a state of possession. He comes in front of the villipattu [bow song] singers and dances - first barely twitching, then more vigorously. His feet are planted firmly apart, bracing his body, and he mainly shakes his head. At one point he lurches towards the swing, and is helped to sit on it. Other priests push from behind and the women sing an uncal patttu [swing song]:

Amman is on the swing
She will answer and banish our woes
Celebrate the Amman on the swing
The swing stops and there is a stampede to have the goddess tell ‘kuri’ or prophesy. The possessed priest places his hand on the head of different individuals, randomly, and tells ‘kuri’ after ‘kuri’ [prophecy]. Then when he seems to run out, the swing is re-started. The swing is like the dance of possession – a kind of mechanical dance, which supplies the rhythm and fuel. From time to time there is ululation, but intent on the kuri and the swing, I have not noticed what is going on the right. I turn around and experience shock – the ground runs red with rivulets of water turned red with blood. The ‘Cutalai Matan’ worshipping priest is standing with his val in hand, and there are two headless black goats lying on the ground. A third black goat is held by two men. It stands still – and then, ‘Ore vettu’ shouts someone admiringly, ‘[In just] One stroke!’ – the head has been severed with one blow, evidently regarded as a worthy skill. Several chickens are slaughtered by the same man. These are also offerings brought by worshippers. He charges a few rupees and takes the head of the creature as commission. I am soaked with rain and sickened by the blood, so I wander off. I find another hub of activity at the next shrine. A giant pot of water, thick with turmeric is slowly heating up over a smoking fire, a slow fire in all this rain. Round it dance a man and woman holding a bunch of coconut fronds and flowers, the man is bare-chested and the woman wears no blouse. Inside the shrine, the drums, nadaswaram [oboe like instrument] and bells are all created a rhythmic music to dance to. The drums subside and then rise to crescendo. The two dance at varying tempo as well, the man occasionally dipping his hand in hot liquid and flourishing his hand at the crowd. He smears the liquid on his face, and his face is also red with kum kum powder, as is his tongue, which he brings out occasionally. He plucks the veppa ellai off branches he carries and throws it in the pot. A long while later, the pot finally comes to a boil and the crowd begins to surge forward and ululate. The two begin to dip the flowers into the boiling liquid and slap their heads and bare backs with it. The liquid sprays, steam rises off their bodies and the fronds, clearly visible against the overcast sky. They dance around the pot, and another goat is sacrificed. The crowd melts away within minutes. (Field notes 1991)

**Attam as a Bodily Technique for Breaking with the Body of Habit**

Dancing and swinging are themselves part of a very specific sensory milieu that is deliberately heightened as a way of arriving at an emotional climax. It is a milieu made up of the heady mix of the sonorous portentous sound of the tavil drum, the piercing high pitch of the nadaswaram, the contagious tensions in the crowd leading up to the severing of the heads of the goats, the smell and look of blood, the ululations from the women.

Moreover, there is no tight boundary that seals this experience off from other experiences in which some of these ingredients repeat themselves: the unmistakable sound of the nadaswaram is used in that most significant of life cycle ritual occasions, marriage, and it accompanies ritual processions that take the deity out of the temple to stake the claims of sovereignty over the territory of the ur. Narrative performances charged with the emotions of
unjust murder, rape and the bloody revenge of the goddess by professional performers of the *villi pattu* genre link the context of temple festivals to the affective world of popular cinema and everyday popular notions of justice and injustice especially in the realm of gendered embodiment (see Ram 2008). But what makes these connections between different contexts far more efficacious than a series of sensory echoes, is the capacity of rhythmic dance and swinging to actually alter our kinaesthetic sense of bodily boundaries between self and the world and all that it contains. In the context of subaltern rituals in Tamil Nadu, ‘dance’ or *attam* is valued not simply as performance, but as a tangible, material means of breaking with the everyday forms of bodily comportment, of breaking with or altering the body of habit. Our everyday psychological and social sense of stability is supported, quite literally, by certain habitual postures. Exploring the work of Merleau-Ponty in relation to Schilder’s work on the body image, Weiss (1999) describes those primary postures which are physiologically most comfortable and maximally effective in achieving perceptual goals, such as an upright posture with the head facing forward in alignment with the rest of the body. Breaking with our everyday ways of relating to the world can therefore be effected by deliberately breaking with these postures, by not allowing the body to stay in a relaxed familiar position.

In *attam*, the postural schema of the body which is centrally related to the role of gravity and balance becomes singled out for explicit attention. Of particular importance here are two categories of sensations – those associated with exterceptive sensations, which provide a person with information about external objects, and those linked to proprioception, which provides ‘a person with information about the state of her deep tissue, her own movements and activity, and the effects of her own displacement in space’ (Guerts 2002:9). We are dealing with ‘bodily techniques’ in Mauss’ sense of the term ([1934] 1992), for altering or modifying the sensory modes in which we normally establish and maintain our self/world relations. In an ethnography of the Muria people of Bastar who also experience trance states at the height of their rituals, Gell (1980) explores the way in which some of the activities of play in children, such as swinging, can be deliberately used as ‘bodily techniques’ in order to effect entry into states that go by the general name of ‘trance’. Drawing on Diekmann’s research on meditation, Gell describes the break with the body of habit as ‘de-automatisation’. Actions and percepts normally carried on un-reflectively are reinvested, by subjects engaged in passive meditation experiences, with a heightening of awareness. The forms of play that the Muria of Bastar engage in are described as deliberately inducing a state of becoming ‘vertiginous’. In such forms of play, the quality of ‘equilibration’ is taken out of the habituated and taken-for-granted role it has in our everyday activities:
Swinging and riding make use of a physical support whose independent activity permits the behavioural abstraction of equilibratory skills: Muria trance is only more complex than this in that it is the body itself, in its own semi-autonomous role as a vibrating, shuddering entity that has been separated out, and divorced from its normal integral place in consciousness. (Gell 1980:237)

Such vertigo-inducing movements form a central part of Tamil ritual performances that are used to ‘call’, summon or invoke deities. In his ethnography of the rural Tamil Terukkuttu performance style, Frasca draws our attention to the central use of a spinning movement called the kirickki, which he traces to the onomatopoetic root kiru-kiru, whose primary meanings are ‘to be confounded, disconcerted, confused, giddy.’:

[The kirickki] is considered the male movement par excellence for two important reasons. First, its kinetic focus is not just the feet but the entire body. Second, and most essential, its nature as a continuous, rapid, almost frenzied spin makes it the terukkuttu step most expressive of power, violence, heroism, and anger… It is particularly important…that the kirikki be forceful and continuous…During all sequences for which it is used the music and rhythms employed are of a very abstract nature…According to performers, these particular moments of musical and kinetic abstraction when the kirickki is executed are the most directly linked to the occurrence of possession. Possession can manifest itself among performers or audience members, but is most predictable among the former. (Frasca 1990:103-5)

In South Asia, it is not only human beings who enjoy the altered sensations of swinging, dancing and play. The deities and supernatural beings also deliberately engage in these activities, excel in dance, and enjoy being swung in temples. I do not have to re-elaborate certain well known features of South Asian deities, their legendary prowess and pleasure in performing dance and music, their love of food, their enjoyment of sexuality and so on. The point that needs to be made rather is that these shared aspects of ontology between humans and deities also facilitates a particularly fluid set of ontological exchanges and shifts, so that deities and spirits can readily find a ‘home’ in the human body on occasions when the body is at its most porous. Indeed, subaltern deities seem to positively desire such experiences. Such a conjuncture occurs precisely at the height of ritual performances such as Terukkuttu and Villu Pattu, where not only performers but spectators may have been engaged in attam. The altered ontology of the body is signalled by the ‘collapse’, often a literal swooning, of the human subject and the acquisition of powers which, being well beyond the normal capacities of the human subject, are understood as the presence of the deity or spirit.

But the fluidity of meanings attached to attam does not stop here. The meanings of
‘religion’ are fluid in ways unfamiliar and alien to the upper caste version of Hinduism, especially as this has been re-constituted in the 20th century. For in this world, the attributes of deities are not sharply distinguishable from those of demons, blessings from the deity are not to be understood as the opposite of illness and misfortune, and the rituals for ecstatically welcoming deities into one’s bodies are not markedly different from the rituals of exorcism to drive unwanted spirits out of the body. The missionaries perceived goddesses like Icakki as demons and called the bow song cult "demon worship". They were half right. The distinction between good spirit from evil spirit or pey is particularly blurred in rural Tamil Nadu. The woman who dies in childbirth may be described as "pey" or dire spirit, but her behaviour as pey is not very different from Icakki’s behaviour as goddess. This blurring of meanings is old in Tamil Nadu. Drumming is later overlaid by the hierarchies of caste and becomes polluted by virtue of its association with leather, but derives its original significance from its association with power which is both sacred and dangerous. Such meanings are thoroughly unfamiliar to the Indian middle class. They require us to recognise elements that are alien to not only to Sanskritic values, but also to bhakti or devotional worship. Bhakti has a long history in Tamil Nadu, going back to the saint poets called the Alwars, who worshipped Krishna with poetry and song in the eighth and ninth centuries AD (Hardy 1983). But we are not dealing here with the more familiar divide between Brahmanic religion and bhakti. The cult of Icakki Amman for example, repeatedly foregrounds narratives and experiences to do with disease, sterility, birth and death to highlight the maverick and arbitrary quality of power, leaving human beings no recourse to either dharma or bhakti as a means of securing divine favour. Instead, all that can be done, by someone marked out by the ambiguous attention of such deities, is to acknowledge the uncontrollable nature of this power, to try to cool down the ‘hot’ desires of the deity or spirit, and, in the case of exceptional individuals, to try and channel that power through their body.

In this sense, attam is the sign of a wanted presence – as in the culmination of rituals of propitiation. But it is also a sign of an unwanted or undesired presence of a spirit or deity in one’s body. This was particularly brought home to me by living in the villages, away from the spotlight of ‘performance’. Here, I came across many instances of attam as a fundamental feature of the body’s way of evincing the presence of an unwanted, maverick and volatile being. This move away from ‘performance’ to trying to achieve a broader understanding of everyday experience within which performance is located, also allows us to shift our attention from the sphere of attam in which men predominate – the ritually valued forms of dance and possession that occur at the climax of ritual worship – to the world of women’s
attam, which is less valued and a sign of trouble. Women may certainly become possessed as members of the audience in ritual temple performances associated with possession, as we saw in my description of the rituals at Icakki Amman’s temple. However, they seldom take up the central positions of value in these performances. In the world of the villages, hidden from the gaze of the Indian upper class and from ethnographers who restrict themselves to formal ‘performance’, attam and affliction lodge themselves at the heart of what is culturally constructed as the embodied ontology of what it is to ‘be a woman’, that is, in the capacity to be a mother. The presence of an unwanted spirit is suspected, typically, through its effects on the body of female fertility, in disasters that overtake the capacity of women to conceive, to give birth and to successfully nurture the child through the critical years of early infancy. To give just one example, a coastal woman called Santi had seen spirits from the time she came as a young bride to her husband’s home, known to have been built on the site of an old Hindu temple. As she matured, the spirits interfered cruelly with her capacity to become a mother:

I lost two more babies to the spirit, one at four months, the other at two. The abortions were cured only after a vaittiyar [doctor] gave me a kotal [charm] with medicine in it. But I lost one of my babies to mulai kachal [brain fever], not because of the spirits. I also had trouble urinating. After the last birth, I had such a bloody and massive flow that it was as if I had given birth to ten babies.

In an effort to find cures, Santi was taken to many Catholic shrines as well as to the temples of Icakki Amman, where the spirits would ‘dance’ her. Such dance – as indeed, the dance of those who ‘seek’ divine presence – can play havoc with the body to which the human subject later ‘returns’. Santi relates the dance of the spirit hurling her against the stone walls of the shrines, or driving her into the surf that pounds right next to many of the shrines of Catholic saints in these villages:

I went to all the shrines of importance: Raja Ur where I stayed for one month, Manlikarai, St. Michael of Trivandrum, where I stayed for three months, the shrine of Amman in Mandaikkadu. Wherever I went there was atam. At Manalikarai [a coastal village], the atam would take me and fling me into the surf [kattale tuki kondu podum].

Finally, at Vialiathurai, a healer told me that it was a temple spirit which had me, and that it would take its own time to leave. (Field notes 1991)
Santi eventually reached a kind of accommodation to the presence of the spirits. When I last saw Santi, in 2006, it was one year after the tsunami. The baby that survived the departure of the spirit, Cinci, was now a young woman.

The troubles and afflictions unleashed by unwanted spirits follow the contours of gendered embodiment. The reproductive troubles of women’s spirit attacks have no parallel in the cases of male experiences of affliction by spirits, and such attacks are in any case far less numerically salient.

However, I have also argued earlier that swinging and spinning movements of attam alter the sense of bodily stability which literally supports everyday social relations. The potentialities of de-automatisation in attam also allow women to effect a break with the gendered body of habit. In the shrines of saints and goddesses where the possessing spirit ‘comes out of hiding’ and makes its identity felt, striking transformations take place in the bodily comportment of women. The sari is transformed from a modest garment to its athletic version, ready for the strenuous dancing that will follow. The talapu, normally trailing over the shoulder, is tucked into the waist. The sari is hitched to the waist, occasionally by accompanying people acting in the role of care-takers, as the women turn into acrobats. One woman called Sugandhi took matters a step further and wore her husband’s clothes when she danced in the shrines, much to his dismay. Language, which must normally express the restraints of femininity, now expresses coarse and foul abuse. Deference to mothers-in-law, to elders, to saints and to men generally, is transformed into vilification. The female body runs, jumps, leaps in the air, shins up pillars, and makes men afraid. As one man described it to me, women suddenly possess ‘the strength of tigers’. In the shrine at Raja Ur in Kanyakumari groups of young adolescent girls run in packs, shining up pillars, swinging off them, turning acrobats, allowing the play of young children to re-enter their repertoire at precisely the time when social pressures to mould their bodies into contained forms of speech and comportment are at their most acute.

When men get possessed in the context of affliction, their bodily behaviour and break with the everyday gendered body is less dramatic, precisely because the daily disciplines of containment in movement, gaze and language, the disciplines of how the body inhabits the materiality of place, are less salient in the first place.

The politics of rationalism and religious nationalism.

The categories that attam in rural Tamil Nadu embodies are not the fixed and static categories
of ‘ritual’ or ‘religion’, as these have come to be framed by Oriental and nationalist discourses. Although we are, by now, with more than a decade of scholarship on bharata natyam behind us, well aware of the all the editing that had to be done to make even the ‘ritual’ dances of the ‘high’ temple traditions of Tamil Nadu fit the rubric of pure spirituality, attam remains, quite simply, unknown in the canons of both regional and national tradition. Yet in terms of the yearning for an unbroken continuity with an honourable past that nationalism feeds on, attam could have supplied rich fodder for a different genre of nationalism. The early Tamil texts that have been such an integral part of Tamil literary nationalism (Ramaswamy 1997) are rich in descriptions of worship remarkably similar to the practices conducted at the shrine of Icakki Amman. This is Clothey (1978) on early Tamil poetry’s description of worshipping deities such as Murukan, still the centre of richly emotional cults in Tamil Nadu and in the Tamil diaspora:

There is evidence in the early poetry that religious practices associated with Murukan were fairly widespread, at least among the hill tribes. In Narr 288 a priestess (kattuvicci) is asked for a diagnosis of a maiden’s languor. The diviner, be it priest or priestess, is believed to be possessed of the god and thus have access to the god’s will (Tol. Porul 115)… In one such ritual of divination, the site is spread with sand and decorated…with red kantal flowers. Before the dance the priest offers an invocation to the hills. The dance is accompanied by musical instruments and songs. The priest elevates a puppet to take the illness from the maiden; a ram is sacrificed and its blood offered to Murukan. The staff of the velan is then held up over the kalanku nuts as if in benediction. The priestess…is dressed in two colors. She is given paddy which she throws into the air. She perspires, shivers, smells her palms and starts her rapturous singing in praise of Murukan. The paddy is counted by four’s. If one, two or three paddy grains are left over, Murukan is believed to be the cause of the malaise; if the count is even, something else is the cause. (Clothey 1978:27)

The similarities with the practices of worship, possession and divination I have described as occurring at the shrine of Icakki Amman, even down to the terms used today to describe the dance of possession – ‘veriatam’ – are striking enough to potentially fund an alternative version of Dravidianism which could have found in possession an equally unbroken and authentically Tamil ‘tradition’. Yet attam lacks representation at the level that matters most to postcolonial intellectual life. It lacks any presence at the level of discourses about state and nationhood. How has such a situation come about? Through what kinds of discursive division of labour is it possible for the attam of possession to lead such a marginal existence on the modern Indian stage?

The history of transpositions between upper caste hierarchies of religious practices
and evolutionary rationalism is yet to be fully explored. At least one of the key moments in this process can be located in the work of A.K. Iyer in the early 20th century. I turn to his work for two reasons. He is one of the earliest Indian anthropologists to write about the south of India. Secondly, he is my maternal great grandfather, and his work therefore is directly a part of my own postcolonial genealogy. Iyer’s work centred on the ‘princely’ states of Cochin, Mysore and Travancore, and spanned the turn of the nineteenth century and into the 1930s. I have explored his work elsewhere (Ram 2007), and will confine myself here to his essay on Religion in the third volumes on the state of Mysore, published in 1935 (vol. 3, 111ff). The essay effortlessly absorbs an evolutionist schema, while maintaining for Brahmanic religion its place on the top of the ‘Indic’ civilisational ladder. But in order to achieve this under modern conditions, Brahmanism is distinguished from the religion of ‘lower castes’ and ‘tribes’ in new ways that draw on specifically anthropological contributions to the colonialist enterprise. Brahmanism is now distinguished from the provinces of ‘totemism’, ‘magic’, ‘sorcery’ and ‘animism’. The religion of the upper castes consists of named, organised bodies of thought. It includes the hymns and sacrifices of the Rg Veda, the philosophy of the Upanishads, doctrines of karma, as well as the challenge of organised discourses such as Buddhism and Jainism, the advaita philosophy of Sankaracharya. Magic and sorcery on the other hand are nominated as the province of non-elites:

Primitive tribes all over India and other countries of the world believe that magicians and sorcerers can assume the figure of any animal they like. The Parayan and Panan sorcerers have powers of witchcraft. The Mundas of Chota Nagpur have similar beliefs in transformation...The Todas and Badagas are mortally afraid of the Kurumbas who are believed to possess the power of destroying men, animals and property by witchcraft. Thus, sorcery is a living article of faith among the ignorant and backward people as also among the jungle folk. [1935:275]

With this manoeuvre, the elite re-establish their respectability in colonial terms. However, with this increase in respectability came a loss, not only the obvious loss to the non-elites who are thereby robbed of cultural capital, but a lesser cost borne by the elites themselves. As ‘magic’ is exorcised from social practices and projected on to the ‘animism’ and ‘spirit cults’ of the non-elites, Indian elites lose the capacity to acknowledge, at least in official discourse, the patently magical elements in their own Brahmanic practices such as ‘the hymns and sacrifices of the Rg Veda’ or the doctrines of karma, in favour of a purely intellectualist understanding of religion. Henceforth, ‘Hinduism’ can be defended, only in terms of metaphysical doctrines, as true ‘beliefs’, or, as with the discourse on a ‘Hindu science’, as so
many pre-figurations of ‘science’ from the time of the Vedas onwards (Prakash 1999).

Most critiques of orientalist nationalism stop with a critique of Brahmanic constructions. What is less often noted is that the sundering of local meanings has also affected the avowedly ‘anti-Brahman’ Dravidian versions of religion, which in the twentieth century attempted to distance themselves from village practices such as possession and the use of animal sacrifice and liquor in worship (Ramawamy 1997). In an inversion of Sanskritisation, these features have been projected on to the coming of the Aryans to southern India. If a Brahman intellectual such as Iyer mapped out an intellectualist history of Hinduism through the Rg Veda, the Upanishads, the advaita philosophy of Sankara etc., then Dravidianist intellectuals mapped out equally intellectualist understandings of south Indian religion based on the metaphysical philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta. One of the earliest ways adopted by Tamil intellectuals to defend ‘Dravidian’ culture from the charge of primitivism was the ‘neo-Saivite’ revivalism, declared by Tamil intellectuals to be the authentic, non-Aryan religion of the Tamil people. It was not only ‘Aryan’ elements that had to be purged from this definition of Tamilness. Along with this essentialist identity came a need to expunge practices that could not be defended as ‘rational’. Popular practices of worship became particularly indefensible. An instance of this is the way in which middle-class film critics write about Tamil popular religious cinema (Ram 2008).

Intellectual representations of possession cults and of the attam that is a central component of them, are to be found scattered, dismembered in various dusty corners reserved for the bypassed and superseded aspects of the past: in collections of ‘folklore’, in anthropological studies of performance and ritual, in religious studies in western universities where there are flourishing scholarly accounts of the myths, legends and textual accounts of ‘demon deities’ of southern India. At the level of science, it exists as a medicalised discourse on psychiatric disorders. At the level of a popularized elite sociology, this division is translated into an association with sections of the population pre-designated as backward: ie., the poor, the ‘uneducated’ rural masses, women, the lower castes.

**Performance and nationalism: agency and the involuntary entry of the world**

The newly honed modern cultural distinctions between upper and lower castes are centrally at stake in the disappearance of attam from the stage on which nationalist-inspired
versions of culture are performed. Yet this language of ‘performance’ which we use to describe dance in India is inadequate for characterising attam since it does not entail subjects who are entirely conscious, nor, in the manner of rasa aesthetics, fully deliberate, at the moment in which they exercise certain emotional effects in their audience. The emotional flows of attam are, if anything, even more intense than in rasa aesthetics, and they may be the culmination of highly professional performance practices, as in terukuttu and villu pattu traditions. But the goal of these practices is to lose control and consciousness, and the audience’s reaction to this culminating moment is equally, a loss of control. In attam, bodily movements of spinning, swinging and convulsive twitching movement are valued precisely as the bodily techniques that accompany extreme emotion to produce the excesses of veri and avesam, another Tamil word that describes extreme excitation. Veri and avesam have the capacity to contagiously leap the boundaries between body and body, between performer and spectator, between human body and the deity. While the charged moments may be the climaxes of performances of the epic exploits of the goddess or local heroes who die unjust and gory deaths, I have emphasized what I have also learned as an ethnographer – that attam can erupt also as part of the lived tragedies in the lives of ordinary women, whose afflictions and disorders cut to the heart of what it is to be a woman. In their lives too, attam is simultaneously an expression of disorder, of being ‘danced’ by the random forces of life’s affliction, and an expression of the spirit’s identity, a step towards a cure from affliction.

A more accurate characterisation of the phenomenology of attam can help to alter the way we speak not only of ‘performance’ but of the various realms of practice to which we have begun to apply the term ‘performance’ in the social sciences and humanities. We now speak of culture as being performed, and we talk of nationalism being ‘performed’ and ‘constructed’. While such transpositions of the terms bring a certain agency to the discussion, just what kind of agency are we inferring?

Let us consider agency in the context of attam in order to clarify this question. Attam entails radical transformations of ontology. It cannot be taken out of its sensory context. Guerts uses the term ‘sensorium’ to indicate a ‘pattern of relative importance and differential elaboration of the various senses, through which children learn to perceive and to experience the world and in which pattern they develop their abilities’ (2002:5). The sensorium, among many subaltern communities of southern India, is one that centrally invokes and allows a transformation of embodied ontology, as women and men become deities, and spirits. But at the very moment of transformation, they are no longer agents in the sense we commonly attribute to the term. This is no longer ‘performance’ in the prevailing sense, since in attam
men and women are ‘danced by’ the agency of the occupying spirit or deity. The shift of agency away from the human subject to the occupying spirit is of central importance. This transformation of ontologies is achieved, not at the level of mental will, decision or choice, but the adoption of meanings that are appropriate to and which match the involuntary effects that flow on from bodily techniques that work to alter the sensory basis of subjectivity. Although some have argued against the term ‘possession’ as Eurocentric, preferring a semantic domain that connotes attachments (Hancock 1999:172, fn10), we have to reckon with the fierce ‘claiming’, the desirous marking of the body of the human being which is characteristic of the subaltern goddesses and spirits. These goddesses are known as much through the marking of the body by the heat of smallpox, as by their capacity to imbue the bodies of their devotees with unnatural powers. They desire in ways that are volatile, unpredictable, and not always desirable from the perspective of humans. Attam reflects and engages all these meaning. It may come as the culmination of rituals in which devotees enter with conscious desire, but the desire is to ultimately relinquish their own agency, to become one with the deity; or attam may come unbidden and unwanted, as the culmination of a series of afflictions, part of a cure in which the superior powers of a higher deity or a mantravadi flushes out the presence of the afflicting spirit and makes it declare its identity and demands.

I have argued that dance studies needs to take larger lessons, methodological ones, projecting these from its study of dance into the sphere of social theory. Attam offers a potentially different way to understand the relationships between human beings and the world. It emphasises and values the involuntary aspects of our relations to the world. How does this alter our analysis of nationalism as ‘performing culture’? It suggests that even a practice such as Bharata Natyam, that has been given full spotlight on the stage of nationalism, is not the pure ‘performance’ of ‘culture’. Caste and gender are as much a matter of involuntary embodied ‘taste’ as conscious pure distinctions. Bodily tastes are not a “substantialisations” of class and caste as is suggested in some recent formulations (see Hancock 1999), formulations that still manage to make it sound as though class and caste are constituted somewhere else, other than in the body. Marxism has had a ready answer as to where this ‘somewhere else’ might be located – in the relations of production, economic and political power. But is it possible to conceive of ‘relations’ that fail to pass through bodies? Do they not entail practices that build up bodily qualities and tastes?

The challenge ahead of us in studying dance is to use it to overcome a series of destructive polarisations between politics and agency as pure conscious decision making, and
body as non-agential materialisation of a ‘social’ that is constituted elsewhere. Caste and class enter into one’s primary socialisation to become part of the body itself. They are part of the sensorium. As such they represent enduring aspects of one’s being and bring with it strongly affective orientations – tastes, disgusts, that which we can bodily ingest and incorporate, that which we spit out, find repulsive. At the same time the body is not fixed forever by these habits. Over time, new tastes can be created, new forms of repulsion engendered. But such fresh constructions take place within limits. The story of the transformation from the sadir attam of the devadasis to the Bharata Natyam of Brahman women, can be told in two quite different ways. At one level, the story is one of dramatic transformations in the habitus as dance moves from the devadasis to the Brahmans. Yet at another level, it is the story of dance being changed to accommodate patterns both pre-existent and emergent in the Brahmanic-middle class habitus of Madras Presidency. Rukmini Devi’s re-choreographing of Bharata Natyam was not only shaped by conscious choreographic decisions. It was also shaped by the strong involuntary affect of disgust and aversion. We have glimpsed some elements of this aversion at the start of this paper – the horror at the ‘mixing’ of pure religion with the sullied elements of worldly power in the dances and songs that praised rulers and gods indiscriminately. Equally striking is her aversion and disgust when presented with the mixture of religious piety and the expression of sexual desire which characterised the dance styles of the devadasis:

Perhaps my interpretation of sringara was different from the way in which most people conceived of it. Sringara is not sensuality. It also means a love of a great kind, such as the love of Radha for Krishna as depicted in Gita Govindam. In fact devotion itself is love in a higher form. Even sex is not coarse in its right place. Children are born of sexual relationship, but it is not only sex but love that creates a child. So if it has been said that I am against sringara, I can only say that the inference is wrong. But there are certain types of pada-s that I have objected to. From one vidwan I learnt the old padam tamaraksha with a lot of sanchari bhava-s of the languishing nayika [specified category of heroine in the typology of heroines] separated from her lover. She describes not only her love but the whole process of physical contact and in gestures at that! To depict such things is unthinkable for me. A famous man gave me a book on sanchari bhava. When I read it I just felt sick.

(quoted in Ramnarayan 1984a:23, emphasis added)

To explore all the elements in this extraordinary speech, to trace it to the different styles of being in the world that characterise caste differences, is beyond the scope of this paper. We can take away with us a more general lesson to apply the next time we are told that culture is
a performance. As with Rukmini Devi’s version of Bharata Natyam, cultural processes are a mix of voluntary decisions – in this case to eliminate certain gestures particularly involving the mouth and lips regarded as ‘lewd’ (see Gaston 1997:43) – and certain involuntary, affect-laden tastes which do not have to be thought in order to exist and to exercise powerful effects. Such elements may be politically adjudicated as so many attestations to the obduracy of power inequalities. But they are also a testimony, as dramatised by attam, to the involuntary way in which the world we live in, and all it contains, is able to enter into us and enjoy there a live presence.

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