CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: SAMPRADAYA IN A CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC PRACTICE

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The following article draws upon materials in an archive collected by the family and friends of musician and dancer T. Balasaraswati, whose biography, Balasaraswati: Her Art & Life, was published in June 2010 by Wesleyan University Press. Among the contents of this unpublished archive are transcribed, and in some cases translated, interviews with many of Balasaraswati’s contemporaries, and public statements by Balasaraswati. These translations and transcriptions are the source of several quotations without citation incorporated in this article. The details of the interviews excerpted here are fully cited in the bibliography of Balasaraswati: Her Art & Life.

As a student of a particular family practice of music and dance from South India for several decades, I have had the opportunity to observe a hereditary artistic process as it is affected by and affects other performance practices. I have had a personal relationship through a marriage with Balasaraswati’s daughter, Lakshmi, and observed the process of absorption of the family style of music and dance by our son, Aniruddha. While delving into archival material and researching available secondary sources during my authorship of Balasaraswati: Her Art and Life, I have found that the subtle changes that take place within the rules and conventions of a family art are largely unrepresented in the documentation of the dance and music of bharata natyam.

It has been widely asserted that the traditions of the performing arts in Tamil Nadu had been forced out of use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, necessitating the creation of institutions to “rescue” the art from oblivion through processes of “regeneration”. The object of this article is not to deny that a modernized form of bharata natyam was invented through an institutional “revitalization”, but rather to examine how the practice of bharata natyam changed and had in fact survived, from the perspective of a traditional performer, through its confluence with an increasingly diverse audience, and through evolution of the role of dance in the larger community. I have been a witness to and participant in the intra-family transmission of music and dance of the Dhanammal (Balasaraswati’s grandmother) parampara. Balasaraswati and members of her immediate and extended family are the source of my understanding, and I quote several of them in the course of this article. They are among the most distinguished of hereditary artistic families in India. And they represent the vanguard of traditional performers who spread their art from the confines of community and language to national prominence, and then international distinction, constantly facing the challenge of influence from outside.

Balasaraswati was a seventh generation performer from a professional matrilineal community. Balasaraswati’s family is remarkable not only for maintaining a continuous performing arts practice with stylistic continuity, but also for learning from and being influenced by composers, musicians, and dancers from outside of the family, including artists from outside of the regional music culture, and adapting that body of music to the evolving family style. The extended family’s repertoire of more than one thousand orally retained compositions and intimate knowledge of the performance of more than one hundred ragas embraces the core of the South Indian musical tradition. The family’s greatness is also measurable by its artistic persistence during a period of profound cultural shifts. Artists of distinction populated each generation; the style of music was maintained by an extended family that in 1938 boasted of more than a dozen artists.

One of the questions that surround the concept of “traditional” practices is whether or not the practice can thrive outside of a circumscribed cultural setting. The careers of Balasaraswati and her family stand as examples in response to this question. The rules and conventions that were at the heart of her art, and the belief systems that surrounded it, were learned and reinforced within her family and community.
She was an advocate for both the matrilineal *devadasi* system and her linguistic heritage; she advocated for Tamil culture, although not for the exclusion of other languages or family systems. She was simply an advocate for her own community, in the midst of many.

Bala’s life in retrospect is a window into the spread of the performing arts of India from regional practice to national, and then international, practice. Balasaraswati’s first appearance outside the cultural and linguistic boundaries of Tamil Nadu was in 1934. India was still divided by language and cultural diversity, and the performing arts could not become India’s pride, as they did during the 1950s, until they had migrated from one part of India to another. Bala was one of a number of distinguished traditional artists from all over India who participated in the All Bengal Music Conference in Calcutta in December 1934. There she met Ali Akbar Khan who, as a twelve year-old boy, was accompanying his father, Allaudin Khan. She also met Satyajit Ray, and again saw Ravi Shankar whom she had first met in 1932. She was particularly impressed with the *kathak* dancer Achchan Maharaj. She was surprised that a man was dancing a traditional form.

Satyajit Ray remembered meeting Bala for the first time at that concert. “This was the first performance of *bharata natyam* in Calcutta and I happened to be present in the audience, as a schoolboy of about fourteen or fifteen. That was my first exposure to *bharata natyam*. Everybody was tremendously impressed with this very young girl who performed with such grace, charm and confidence. I was very struck by this completely new kind of dancing. I’d never seen anything like that before, the music and everything. It was already announced in the papers beforehand that this was a new kind of classical Indian dancing; and to be performed by one of its best exponents.” Ravi Shankar also recalled the concert: “It was something out of this world, even more so because Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet, was there, sitting in one corner of the stage on a special chair. I remember Bala was so excited.”

When Bala’s troupe was in Calcutta, they stayed with Venkataraman “Chinnanna” Sastri, whose nephew, Shambu, a musician and film actor, was a family friend. Shambu taught “*Jana Gana Mana Ati*,” a song of Tagore’s, to Bala and her mother, Jayammal, and they began the process of recasting the tune in the family style, giving it their traditional shape of melodic phrasing and specific forms of ornamentation. Musicologist T. Shankaran, Bala’s cousin, commented in a letter, “I don’t remember if Shambu taught it the way in which Bala and my mother were singing.” Balasaraswati’s youngest brother Viswanathan added in an interview, “I was very young when they were learning. They sounded totally different from when I heard it later on. [They] interpreted it into the South Indian style. The question is: the original tune. Was it closer to the way Jayammal was singing, in the Bengali style?”

In 1934 Bala performed “*Jana Gana Mana Ati*” in Calcutta; two years later she would perform the song again in Benares at the All India Music Conference, and once more at the Indian National Congress Exhibition in Madras. These were the first, and likely the last, times that the song that became the Indian national anthem would be danced in *abhinaya*. Viswanathan commented on what would be, in retrospect, a historic event. “We didn’t know [the song] would become the national anthem at that time, in the thirties. When they performed in Calcutta the audience liked it so much. They were thrilled to hear South Indians singing a Bengali song.”

In the house next door to Venkataraman Sastri’s house, a college principal named Ram Pai lived
with his two teenage daughters, who were Bala’s age. Pai’s daughters were fascinated to meet Bala and spent as much time as they could with her in Sastri’s small house. In their play, they taught Bala a bhajan in Hindi. Pai’s daughters also taught Jayammal and Bala, at their request, some folk songs in Bengali. Jayammal and Bala worked together to interpret these songs in the karnatic music style, identifying a raga that matched the feel of the melody of the songs. They explored the exposition of their choice of raga, emphasis on certain resting tones, and other considerations involved in the setting of music with text according to a vast, intuitively executed set of conventions and rules. Bala’s ensemble would perform these pieces at the end of the concert. Audiences in the north loved the inclusion of the Bengali bhajans, and Bala’s concerts were wonderfully received.

How did this process of change and adaptation occur within a recognizably coherent style of performance? For that matter, why did it change? Authenticity in bharata natyam became an issue for debate when the art form became detached from its creative source, but the controversies raised within artistic communities themselves are of a different sort. They are descriptors of the process of change of a traditional practice within the confines of its own integrity—within the aspects of the practice that seem to defy emulation and nonintuitive, self-conscious imitation.

Many years later Viswanathan described the process of musical transformation and maturation: “In her early days, thirty or forty years ago, [Bala] worked on padams and javalis which had become obsolete. In fact, we worked together to revive those rare songs. I was impressed with her incredible sense of beauty and her aesthetic sense for music. As we worked I noticed that she would concentrate on a particular song for several weeks. We exchanged ideas concerning the ways in which a word or line might be interpreted. She thought constantly about that material without actually practicing the song or the abhinaya for the song. However, she would sing the song we were working on. I think she was trying to decide how variations should be interpreted in the music, what contour—shape—would best communicate the meaning of each particular word or line, through the music. After a long exploratory period, examining the possibilities of a song, it would appear in her concerts where we could, finally, see it performed. This process applied to lyric items only, not compositions with nritta.

“It was incredible how she communicated her ideas through abhinaya and music, blending [them] both so beautifully. This was the reason she was considered one of our greatest dancers, because of her ability to blend music and dance. We took a particular word or line and tried to see how we could interpret it musically to convey the meaning of the song; how many varieties could you have, how many ways you might express it through abhinaya; or, take the musical phrase and see how it influenced the dance musically and vice versa. Finally, we would decide certain things about contour, range, all sorts of things related to dance. We would then arrive at certain conclusions. Still, she thought of other possible variations. So many surprises would appear in a concert that were amazing.”

Everyone in Balasaraswati’s ensemble responded to the demands of the change in the audience as they first traveled outside of the south. The capacity for adaptation, and the comfort with inclusion and modification of material used for performance that is by some definitions “borrowed content,” characterized Balasaraswati’s family’s artistic culture. And the capacity to understand another culture became a great strength for all of the members of Balasaraswati’s family when they began teaching in the West three decades later.

Another mark of the traditional artist’s capacity to evolve can be observed in Balasaraswati’s

![Photo courtesy of Douglas Knight](Balasaraswati and Lakshmi singing in Middletown, CT)
teacher's approach to the art of nattuvangam and his conception of bharata natyam that he realized through Balasaraswati’s extraordinary capacity and commitment. Kandappa Pillai had been a great admirer of Vina Dhanammal, and it was her sense of refinement in music that was reflected in and distinguished his ensemble. The modifications he introduced are significant for what they tell us about what motivates the processes of change within artistic traditions.

Kandappa Pillai introduced a variety of changes, some of them imposed by the new social and performance environments, and some representing expansions of the traditional framework and material he inherited. His radical definition of the pure dance of bharata natyam was consistent with his family’s legacy. This was the opportunity perceived and seized by Jayammal and Kandappa. The musical sensibilities defined by Dhanammal’s family, the extraordinary musical repertoire of bharata natyam the family possessed and was expanding, and the remarkable cohesion of several artists from one family sharing a common musical core—drummers and dancers as well as melodic musicians—made possible a unique capability in performance. It may not be said that Jayammal and Kandappa intended to resurrect the practice as it had existed, although they may have had a strong instinct among those lines. They were simply acting out of an entirely contemporary urge to make new art. This was “tradition” in its most dynamic form.

When Bala had performed her arangetram in 1925, the outdoor concert platform was illuminated with oil lamps. Each performance had a basic drone pitch that was made with a small bagpipe called tutti. In Bala’s account, three or four male musicians in red or green turbans stood at the rear of the stage to her right, and the drummer stood behind her, drum slung on a sash around his neck and waist. As the dancer moved, the drummer would shadow the dancer’s movements. In the traditional setting, this would mean not moving very far; dancers and their ensembles performed in confined or roughly defined open places. There was no concept of “using” a stage. In particular, the relationship of the dancer and the drummer was musically very close. At some times during a performance, the entire ensemble moved with the dancer. The musicians sang at a high pitch in order to be audible without amplification in large open spaces.

As concerts began to be performed in enclosed spaces, Kandappa lowered the pitch at which the drone was tuned, and therefore the pitch at which the ensemble performed, allowing himself and other male musicians in the ensemble to sing within a range better suited to the male register. This change also allowed Kandappa’s performance of nattuvangam to be heard over the music of the ensemble without being too loud; customarily, the dance masters had to shout until they were hoarse as they performed nattuvangam. Kandappa also used a tambura for a drone instead of the raucous tutti, and having changed the pitch in the middle of the concert, he broke with convention and presented female singers in the second half of the performance.

During most of the 1920s Kandappa used several drummers on different occasions, including Munuswamy Mudaliar and Govindaswami. Kanchipuram Kuppuswami Mudaliar became Balasaraswati’s mridangam player during the early 1930s and was with her for the following fifty years. Kandappa Pillai replaced the mukhuvina with the flute and/or clarinet. He had three fine clarinetists: early in Bala’s career, on several occasions, the legendary accompanist Balaraman Naidu, who was from Mylapore Gauri Ammal’s ensemble; later Kuppu Rao of All India Radio; and eventually Radhakrishna Naidu, who also had a distinguished solo career. The capacity to perform beautifully as both a soloist and
A dance accompanist was rare, but Balasaraswati’s musicians—including her brother Viswanathan, who began to perform with Bala in the 1940s—were also known for both. One of the vocalists in Kandappa’s ensemble was Kanchipuram Ellappa Pillai, who would become Balasaraswati’s nattuvanar following Kandappa’s death in the early 1940s. When Jayammal performed with the ensemble, Kandappa moved the musicians from a standing position behind the dancer to a seated position to the side of the dancer. (It is sometimes claimed that the seating of the musicians was an innovation introduced by Rukmini Devi, but there are photographs and reviews documenting the change in the early 1930s before Rukmini Devi began performing.) One of the reasons that he seated the musicians, was out of respect for Jayammal and other women who joined her as accompanists, whom he would not permit to stand and sing on a performance platform. Turbans had traditionally been worn as a sign of deference to the royal family. He objected to the extension of that deference to patrons who simply had the means to support performances. Kandappa also did away with the male musicians’ upper-cloth, which had been the appropriate dress in a temple, in the presence of the image of the Divine, but was not appropriate for the performance platform. He replaced the upper-cloth with a shirt, the same garment concert musicians wore. There were critics who found these changes impertinent, but Kandappa would have expected that.

In traditional practice, at least in the 1920s, dance performances would begin with a composed section of drumming called melaprapti, sometimes accompanied by melodic instruments. It was short and called attention to the beginning of the performance. This announcement was necessary when the performance happened on the mandapam in a temple, where other activities could be expected to compete with the performance. Kandappa felt it unsuitable for the concert stage. Another concert practice that has disappeared, and was disappearing when Bala started to perform, was the inclusion of a drum solo after the varnam. Kandappa felt it unsuitable for the concert stage. Another concert practice that has disappeared, and was disappearing when Bala started to perform, was the inclusion of a drum solo after the varnam. Kandappa felt it unsuitable for the concert stage.

As a reconstructed style of bharata natyam emerged, one area of experimentation was the use of musical compositions that were not from the repertoire composed for dance. Bala objected: “Yet it is not just dancing to the words in their superficial meaning alone. Nor is the music itself detached from the words and their full inner and outer meaning.” Most practitioners and teachers from the traditional professional community agreed that pieces not composed for dance could not be suitably substituted for those that were.

The great nattuvanar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, in a speech reproduced in Kalakshetra Foundation’s publication Rukmini Devi Arundale Birth Centenary Volume, remarked: “Departure from tradition, the inclusion of totally unsuitable pieces in the name of innovation only lowers the standard of this art. I am not against change. There is bound to be change and new ideas. But these can be called by a different name and not brought under the name of Bharatanatyam. Such innovations make a sublime art ridiculous. ...Bizarre costumes and inappropriate themes will only lead to destruction of this art.”

However, as traditional professional musicians were replaced as accompanists for dance in the 1940s, musicians with a different repertoire took their place and these new musicians introduced the song form kriti (and the virtually identical kirtana) into bharata natyam concerts. Today, kritis have become standard features of bharata natyam performances. This development is significant; the poetry of kritis is in general more abstractly philosophical and the pacing of the text leaves relatively little room for narrative interpretation by a dancer. In contrast, in padams, the simplicity of the language and the pacing of the syllables in music leave more room for gesture in narrative dance.

Bala expressed discouragement about changes to the repertoire that was performed, not for the sake of continuity of the history of the dance form, but rather because of the logic of the repertoire. Often, Bala’s apparently conservative attitude about what repertoire was most suitable for dance, was
interpreted as an insistence on what was old or original. It was not. She was speaking of what music best suited the dance form the way she understood it. Bala’s accompanist Leela Shekar recalled: “She was ever ready to learn, ever ready to absorb new things, new ways of music. When she liked something very much, she was the first one to go and try it. But she was a stickler, remaining very original, very classical; she would not go beyond the classical mould.”

Balasaraswati described the logic of the traditional concert format: “At first, mere meter; then, melody and meter; continuing with music, meaning, and meter; its expansion in the center-piece of the varnam; thereafter, music and meaning without meter; in variation of this, melody and meter; in contrast to the pure rhythmical beginning, a non-metrical song at the end. We see a most wonderful completeness and symmetry in this art. Surely the traditional votaries of music and dance would not wish us to take any liberties with this sequence.”

Balasaraswati’s family moved from a national onto a global stage at the beginning of the 1960s. The fortunes of the family were cast in part by achievements in the United States and elsewhere outside of India, that began for Balasaraswati in 1961. Although her circumstances changed, her audience changed, and her sources of income and professional support changed, Balasaraswati remained deeply rooted in the world of South Indian tradition. That landscape for her was constant, and her dedication and purpose were constant, an extension of what she had been taught: to be unperturbed by the comments and circumstances that swirled around her. Bala was fascinated by the wider world, ever curious and respectful. But she was not a part of it, and it was not a part of her.

In 1961 Bala was invited to a festival in Tokyo called the East-West Encounter, facilitated by the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the City of Tokyo. She first performed in North America at Jacob’s Pillow in 1962, and went on to tour throughout the country. Over the next twenty years, she performed several hundred concerts in North America, some of which have become legendary. She performed at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland in 1963, where again she and her musicians, some of them family, were in the company of distinguished artists from India and the West.

Bala was ideally suited to this new environment. She was both entirely accessible and recognizably unaffected by Western expectations of Indian dance. Kapila Vatsyayan commented in an interview on why she thought Bala found a following in the West: “Anyone who is sensitive to movement and the perfection of movement would be moved, even outside a cultural context. ...There was too the personality that Bala brought and communicated. Apart from her being a very successful performer, in limited groups or audiences, she was a stupendous teacher; that was what gave her the students and admirers that she has [in the United States]. She’s in a class by herself. People abroad were also attracted by the fact that she, almost by volition, was not glamorous; there was a certain type of austerity, a straightforwardness about her. These can be endearing qualities, especially for artists who rise to such heights where you expect there would be a public and private image. But [instead] you get a simple person like Bala. She was very complex at other levels, but in life and great performance, this was no doubt a very unique experience for people; therefore they were committed to it.”

Perhaps it was her teaching that made most people in the US aware of her artistry. John Bergamo, the percussionist, teacher, and founder of the percussion program at California Institute of the Arts, said, “That’s what teachers do, we give up what we know so that someone else can take it somewhere else. We don’t keep secrets.”

Kapila Vatsyayan commented: “Ted Shawn has spoken of Bala as the messenger of peace and amity. When one great artist says that about another great artist, one should consider that a great compliment. And [coming from] a person like Ted Shawn, with his experience and exposure and having been a bridge between or among dance cultures both in terms of what he did and what he promoted, this remark can have many meanings. One, naturally, was that a person so beautifully and richly rooted in her own tradition carried that message as easily to the United States, where she worked for many years. Not for a moment was Bala affected by the U.S. or [did she lose] her own security in herself, and this is what peace is all about. That you recognize the otherness of the other, be yourself and yet be able to make your dialogue. For a person of Bala’s caliber to be able to do this showed both the strength of the tradition and her own
strength, because a lesser artist could have been blown off their feet as many others have been.”

The challenges that faced Balasaraswati in teaching non-Indian students were manifold. Perhaps most difficult was that Western students had been trained to learn music and dance through notation. Their minds and memories worked differently. A mind trained to learn, aurally absorbs material faster and more permanently than a mind trained with notation. Bala was distracted by any student who was taking notes rather than watching her. She wanted students to be registering and absorbing directly what she was demonstrating and explaining. “Why don’t you watch me? The more you see the less I have to teach,” she once exclaimed.

Luise Scripps watched Bala teach many different students in the United States, including small children. She observed, “When she taught small children, which she loved to do, she...would sit on the floor and speak very softly to them. And say, ‘Now darling, you must do this and you must put your sweet feet this way and hold your arms,’ and she was very gentle. And very carefully and slowly and softly mold them.” Bella Lewitzki commented that on the occasions when she observed Bala teaching, she never heard her say “good” or “bad.” “It was just amazing. She had finite answers; you do it this way. ‘That is wrong, this is right’; or, ‘This is bad and this is good’ and ‘the quality is lacking.’ She never used the word quality. And since this woman personified quality I was fascinated with this dichotomy in the teaching. You had it there as a vehicle; as far as Bala was concerned, I would judge this to be true. The vehicle was there, it was very clear. . . . It was not that Bala did not expect things to be correct; she did. But she did not use the Western benchmark [or] standard.

“One of the things I realized, in watching her teach, was the difference in Western teaching and teaching from other countries; our vain assumption that teaching is only one thing, one way. [Her teaching] was very full of information. She gave me a lot of information she did not know she gave me.” Bala did understand how much she was imparting, but she tried to let her students feel that the information they received was already in their possession. “[When] I saw another teacher from another culture repeating this, I was reminded that there are very many different ways you come at teaching. In the Western world, [touching a student] used to be a no-no; you do not invade people’s privacy. But with her, yes, you push the hands back. You physically manipulate. I now do that and I’ve seen Donny [McKayle] do that. So I know we both do it. But I hadn’t done that and I wouldn’t have [if it hadn’t been for Bala].”

In an interview years later, Lewitzki recalled where the idea to have Bala come to CalArts started: “Bala was part of a dream that I had dreamed, which was...that history should be taught by a living person so that it was a totally encapsulated story one got. Instead of anecdotes, reading about, or dry pages and facts, one would live, as it were, with the individual that was deserving of being recorded in history. And, certainly, Bala was that. ...At California Institute of the Arts, fortunately, we had the right to shape our program with very little interference, so we did just that. We shaped it as we thought fit.

“It was decided that those students in the School of [Theater and] Dance who wanted to learn from Bala, and were accepted by Bala, were excused from the rest of their program, except for the academic programs to meet accreditation requirements. ...They were able to focus almost all of their attention on learning from Bala. . . . I think she must have taught something like three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. Our object was not to exhaust her, nor to deprive her of all her information in one fell swoop, but was to expose our students to her. ...In my own mind, I think I reconfirmed something I already knew—that within the art form itself, lies something so beautiful that if you devote yourself to it fully, out of it comes the flowering that looks like a Bala. All those years, all of that input, resulted in Bala. And it was, for me, very confirming. I don’t think it needs to be done with quite the severity that this woman had to undergo, because she apparently has not practiced that with her daughter. She wanted to see a little more freedom with her daughter, she told me.”

Donald McKayle had very specific recollections, partly because he had already brought the aesthetics of Indian dance into his own work—and because he had seen Bala previously: “I remember being tremendously impressed with the expressive dance. I just thought it immediately opened a whole picture of life that she was trying to get across. I was completely carried away by it. I had studied Indian dance prior to this so that maybe why I had some
inkling of gestures that the other people didn't have. But, I don't think that was necessary in order to get a real feeling of what she was trying to express.”

“But a lot of the things I learned from her became incorporated in my work, like the sound of the feet on the floor. I would do things where I would lift the toes and get a certain sound and let them slap onto another. ...It is just the whole use of the back, the arms, the head, the neck. ...I robbed her warm-up [alarippu] for my class because I felt that it extended the energy all the way out to the extremities. Also, it gave them a very different use of their bodies, so they didn't have a face that was observing the rest of their body, which was dancing. It became a much more total look.”

“I've found over the years, that those people that have worked with me a long time have a very different way of performing than those who come to me at the beginning and don't have it. So I feel that that was one of the things I got from working in this art form and Bala was a very important force of that. ...And there is belief behind it. There is actual performer belief behind it. That conviction cannot be imitated. It is very strange. Even if they don't feel it after the moment is gone. It doesn't matter, it is in the dance.”

Bala embodied a different vision of the performance traditions of South Asia than had been seen previously in the West. For some, including much of the American professional dance community, a renewed search for understanding of the traditions of India was informed by Bala's quiet and entirely self-assured presence. In meeting or seeing her, one was left with no doubt about her certainty of purpose or her clarity about her art.

Inevitably, in hindsight, the apparent conservatism of Balasaraswati’s perspective looks, particularly to young performers, as if she were insisting on an old way of conceiving the art. But Balasaraswati was herself a revolutionary, an entirely modern dancer; the same thing can be said of any traditional artist. Reflecting on her mentor, Mylapore Gauri Ammal, Bala said, “The initial inspiration for me to take up dancing came from seeing performances of Gauri Ammal when I was very young. If this lady had not brought the dance to such a stage of development, the combination of music and dance that I have attempted to realize would not have been possible.”

It was Mylapore Gauri Ammal’s conception of the dance that was the basis for Bala’s practice, not the shape or rendition.

Charles Reinhart, now director of the American Dance Festival, declared, “Modern dance didn’t come full sprung into the world. There was this great antecedent. We owe a great deal of debt to the classical art forms of Asia, and of course, Bala was the queen of her classical art form. ...She was a very important part to show the quality of what existed in Asia.”