

## **‘Dancing to Male Tunes’ - A Critical Note on Male intervention in Mohiniyattom**

Dr. Divya Nedungadi  
Dept. of Dance  
Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit  
Kalady, Kerala, India  
Email: [mohiniyattom@gmail.com](mailto:mohiniyattom@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*Be it language or literature, politics or police, film or fine arts, the hegemonic masculinity is visible in all walks of women’s life. Men left no space for any identity dialogues even in traditional art forms such as Mohiniyattom. Men named it ‘dance of the enchantress’ and went on historicizing that Devadasis danced Mohiniyattom at temples. The dancers were called ‘Attakkaris’ and further endorsed with ‘loose character’ and lineage of heroines of Manipravala and Chamбу literature! What not, Maharaja Swathi Thirunal wrote over 65 Sringara padams which supplied a strong literature base for the dance form. The renaissance of Mohiniyattom started at Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930s; however, the stories were more or less same there as well. The ‘enchantresses’ were made to dance to male tunes quenching the lust of male eyes. And even after 70 years post-independence, the practice of sexual objectification femininity in the classical dance form of Mohiniyattom continues on and off the stage.*

**Keywords:** Masculine hegemony, Devadasi System, Mohiniyattom, Manipravalam, Swathi Thirunal

As communication being a conscious effort, every language with which communication is achieved, has been constantly evolving with the evolution of mankind. According to Noam Chomsky “Language is not just words. It’s a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that what a community is. It’s all embodied in a language.” On a closer reading of Chomsky’s statement we notice on the usage of words such as ‘a culture’, ‘a tradition’ and ‘a community’ rather than ‘the culture’, ‘the tradition’ or ‘the community’. Every language is different and represents a particular culture and its traditional practices and such language unifies the community by interacting with it at all times. Hence, ‘universality’ is a notable limitation for a language and the discussions around an ‘all-inclusive-global-language’ embodying all the emotional transactions of mankind is an unreasonable idea. In a way, every language reflects the socio-cultural ecosystem in which it has been evolving. And the language tends to damage heavily if it is taken out of the socio-cultural premise in which it has evolved. The language of a given community is greatly influenced and shaped up by the cultural and traditional practices followed by such community which, in the course of time sets certain standards and levels of communication. This creates further segmentation

and subdivisions in the same language and as a result of which, we have the ‘language’ for the upper and the lower, master and servant and even for males and females. This hegemonic interest, of upper over the lower or strong over the weak, gains a kind of socio-political recognition over a period of time. And by now, the entire ecosystem, be it parliamentary politics or police, language or literature, film or fine arts, is greatly damaged by the hegemonic masculinity leaving no space for any equality dialogues.

Mohiniyattom, the dance tradition of Kerala suffered most from this hegemonic masculinity than any other classical dance form of our country. In all the discussions about the origin of this dance form, we often come across the expression ‘the dance of the enchantress’. *Mohini* is a beautiful woman and *attam* is dance and it is only the dance of a beautiful lady. Here the dancer gets importance but not her dance! The insertion of the expression ‘dance of the enchantress’ was deliberate and aimed at the objectification of femininity which the feudal class were known for, at that time.

So, for a very long time, we were taught that Mohiniyattom is an evolved form of *Devadasi*-dance tradition which existed in Kerala. But, there is no convincing evidence to establish the existence of Malayalam speaking *Devadasis* in the state or to relate their dance with the dance form of Mohiniyattom. Unlike Tamilnadu or other states in the country, we do not have any unquestionable proof so as to establish the existence of *Devadasi*-dance tradition in the state of Kerala. Kerala did not have any massive temple-cities or a temple-centric social life in the past as seen in places like Madura, Chidambaram, Tanjore, Rameswaram and Puri even today. Even though Padmanabhaswamy Temple is located in Kerala geographically, by and large the temple followed the Tamil tradition. Furthermore, many of Kerala temples adhere to the Rig Vedic cult which insists for pin drop silence inside the temple and its premises.

The *Chokkur* inscription of 898 A.D is the first of its kind to talk about the *Devadasis* of Kerala. Renowned linguist and historian Dr. Puthusseri Ramachandran writes:

“The communities like *Valanchiyas*, *Cholas*, *Cheras*, *Nattu Chettiars*, traders, carpenters and *Nangayars* etc were associated with the temple. But, it is uncertain whether *Chittayil Nangayar* was a dancer of this temple”<sup>1</sup>.

K.K.Pillai, adds to this view:

“*Devadasis* of Suchindram temple were brought to Padmanabha Swami temple during festivals. If *Devadasis* were in service in Padmanabha Temple, during this period, what is the point in bringing *Suchindram Devadasis* for the

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<sup>1</sup> Ramachandran Puthussery, Dr., *Kerala Charitrathinte Adistana Rekhakal*, (Mal), Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2009, p.384

festivals in Padmanabha swami temple? The presence of *Devadasis* in Padmanabha Temple is therefore improbable.”<sup>2</sup>

Further, Dr. K.N. Ezhuthachan another reputed historian states:

“It is uncertain whether the system that could have existed widely in Kerala was the same *Devadasi* system that was associated with the temples of Chalapuram, Kanyakumari, Sucheendram etc. These temples more or less belong to the Tamil culture and tradition, though historically they had been in Kerala for long. However, it cannot be claimed that our inscriptions say much about the *Devadasi* dance in Kerala Temples. Similarly, the heroines of *Manipravala* literature in Malayalam cannot be presumed to be *Devadasis* or dancers”.<sup>3</sup>

The ancient foreign travelers, who visited the state on various occasions and wrote detailed travelogues, did not mention about the existence of *Devadasi* tradition in Kerala. Buchanan who visited Kerala in 1800 and 1801, wrote on *Kanjipuram Devadasis* and Abdul Rasaq who wrote on *Vijayanagara Devadasis* did not talk about Kerala *Devadasis*. Saikh Sainuddin, a Muslim Scholar and historian who lived near Ponnani in the 16th century did not make any reference on *Devadasis* or their dance in Kerala temples in his book ‘*Tuhafath-ul-mujahiddin*’.

Prof. P. Soman in his scholarly article states:

“*Devadasis* extensively feature in temple tales and ancient works like *Kathasarith sagaram* etc throughout the country. But, *Devadasis* depicted as loose characters in *Manipravala* literature did not even get any mention in the ancient Kerala social history, folktales and songs, temple legends, *Aithiyamalas*, ballads of Kerala. Kerala did not have a temple structure and civilization suited to the *Devadasi* system. The ancient shrines and small temples of Kerala point to the simplicity of peasant life and mother-goddess worship. Keralites preferred temples rooted to the earth rather than the ones towering into the skies to reach God up in heaven. Goddess shrines did not have even roofs; most of them were worshipped in their abodes under trees. Most of the temples we see today are not very old”.<sup>4</sup>

In the preface of the book titled ‘Mohiniyattom’, authored by Kalamandalam Kalyanikkutty Amma, eminent scholar N.V Krishna Warriar denies any similitude of Mohiniyattom with the dance performed by Konkani Brahmin Girls in Thrippunithura temple. He states:

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<sup>2</sup> Pillai.K.K, Sucheendram Temple, p.285, Madras, 1953

<sup>3</sup> Ezhuthachan.K.N., *Muthum Pavizhavum*, (Essay in Mal), SPCS, Kottayam, p.110, 1974,

<sup>4</sup> Soman.P.Dr., *Devadasikalum Sahitya Charithravum*, (Mal), Kerala Bhasha Institute, p.36

“It was unfortunate that the Mohiniyattom tradition was not preserved in any village of Kerala, unlike Bharatnatyam in Pandanalloor of Tamilnadu. We have no idea about the form of Mohiniyattom that existed before Vallathol brought Sri. Krishna Panicker Asan to Kalamandalam. I have watched the dance of Konkani-speaking *Devadasis* in Thrippunithura temple, Kochi. My untrained eyes could not perceive any relationship between this dance and Mohiniyattom or any other dance form”.<sup>5</sup>

*Devadasis* simply meant servant to God and in the ancient times, *Devadasis* were simple girls performing dance in the temples and helping out with other rituals in the temple. During medieval times, the affluent people who ruled temples abused these irresistible poor girls. Having lost their social recognition and status, they were eventually ousted from temples. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968) who was an eminent medical practitioner and social reformer (later a Padmabhushan awardee) introduced a bill for the prevention of dedication of *Devadasis* to temples in the Madras Legislative Council in 1930 and Madras *Devadasis* (Prevention of Dedication) Act came into force with effect from 09.10.1947 which put an end to this practice in major temples of South India.

The *Manipravalam* is a separate literary practice consciously introduced by the elite and feudal class during the medieval times. It is a poetic mixture of more than one language with Malayalam. Similar branches of literature can be seen in many other Indian and foreign languages. Harini Raghavan, an eminent researcher in this branch of linguistics writes:

“Malayalam language which belongs to the Dravidian group of languages evolved from Tamil. Malayalam remained in the shadows of Tamil till 10th century. The efforts of powerful ‘*Namboodiris*’ metamorphosed it into a highly sanskritised one. Thus Manipravalam style, a hybridization of Malayalam and Sanskrit, was a result of the predominant *namboodiri* influence.

The early literary works of Kerala are all in *Manipravalam*, of which ‘*Vaisika Tantram*’ (13th century) is the earliest. ‘*Achi Charitam*’ (tales of courtesans) and ‘*Sandeha Kavyas*’ (message poems) are the most representative of the early *Manipravalam* works. Manipravalam looked to Sanskrit for models of literary works. These works appealed to the “upper class reading public” of those days.”<sup>6</sup>

*Manipravalam* is defined in *Lilatilakam* as “*Bhasha Samskrta Yogo Manipravalam*.” From other Indian counterparts, *Malayala-Manipravalam* differed heavily in the subject matter and format of presentation. All the *Manipravalam* works recovered from Kerala are exclusively poetry. In other South Indian languages, we find prose works in abundance. The

<sup>5</sup> Kalyanikutty Amma, *Mohiniyattom* (Mal), SPCS, 1978, p.5

<sup>6</sup> Raghavan Harini, *Ananya Abhivyakthi*, Web journal [www.nadasurabhi.org](http://www.nadasurabhi.org), 2006  
<http://nadasurabhi.org/articles/7-manipravalam?format=pdf>

exclusive usage of Sanskrit meters signifies the authorship and ownership of the feudal and the imperial class. We do not see the *Manipravalam* poetry quarrelling with any of the socio-cultural issues prevailed at that time; rather it ran parallel with the superfluous erotic psychology of the elite class of that time. The objectification of femininity to this extent is not seen anywhere in other Indian counter parts of *Manipravalam*.

K. Chidambara Vadhyar states that Swathi Thirunal (1813-1846), King of Travancore believed to have composed over 65 *padams* exclusively for choreographing dance items.

“Of the Maharaja’s compositions, under this head, 10 are in Sanskrit, 5 are in Telugu, 50 are in Malayalam. They are supposed to be addressed, either directly or through (*Sakhi*) lady messenger, by a lady to her lover, at whose separation she mourns and pines. The metaphor of beloved and lover will most effectively convey in human language the ardour and earnestness of devotion or Bhakti towards God.”<sup>7</sup>

Vadhyar goes on saying that the King’s *padams* are all addressed to his family deity Sri Padmanabha and have the same esoteric meaning as the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva. I doubt this viewpoint. If the compositions are like ‘Songs of the Solomon’ and embellishing the *Jeevatma*’s longing to be in unison with *Paramatma*, why *Jeevatma* has to be a mourning lady always? Why the god in portrayal is always a ‘masculine’ incarnation? Why not there a *padam* where a male devotee portraying his Bhakti (longing?!) in the same way towards Kali or Saraswathi? Out of the musical compositions numbering 312, there are many such pieces seen composed in praise of Lord Siva, Ganesa, and Devi but the chauvinist objectification of femininity is seen only in the *padams* written for Mohiniyattom.

King Swathi wrote all the 50 Malayalam *padams* in the *manipravalam* style of literature which was noted for erotic and sensual objectification of femininity at that time. Also, it is important to note that the author didn’t use the same style while attempting the rest of his compositions. Hence, Vadhyar’s view of comparing these *padams* with *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva for their esoteric and spiritual significance lacks any substantial merit. From a feminine perspective this can be viewed only as the Kings gesticulation where the beautiful women in the royal custodianship were compelled to choreograph and dance to his erotic tunes in his private court. This can be recognized as the King’s private affair. However, even at secularist times of post-independence, the selective intention behind setting such erotic *manipravala padams* as the literature base for the dance form of Mohiniyattom and one step further, historicizing such past private performances as Mohiniyattom performed by *Devadasis* of Sri Padmanabha temple can be viewed only as a deliberate attempt to venerate the masculine hegemony which was in existence for centuries.

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<sup>7</sup> K. Chidambara Vadhyar, *Swathi Tirunal Maharaja Sangita Kritikal (Mal)*, CBH Publications, Second Reprint, p.7, 2000

The renaissance of Mohiniyattom started in 1930s with its introduction in Kerala Kalamandalam. The *Kalari* was disrupted twice in the initial years of its inception in Kalamandalam and the third *Kalari* that we see today, started in 1950 under the tutelage of Thottassery Chinnammu Amma. A couple of antique pieces such as *Swami nine nammidira* (a varnam in raga *Yadukulakamboji*) and *Cholkettu* in raga *Chakravakam* were said to be recovered. Majority of other items presented worldwide, are composed and choreographed at Kalamandalam or by those who trained at the *Kalari* adhering strictly to the Kalamandalam style and format. However, the renowned Gurus of Kalamandalam *Kalari* also preferred to walk on the same path that Swathi and *Manipravala* poets traveled adopting more or less similar methods in craft and imagery.

Even after independence, the historians constructed the history of Mohiniyattom resorting heavily to *Manipravala* heroines, *Devadasi* system, and also by blindly copycatting the history of other neighbouring provinces of South India at that time. This route was much easier for them to effortlessly reproduce the history of Mohiniyattom. They also failed to arrive at a logical conclusion to the widely asked questions which are pertinent even today. If *Devadasis* are believed to have danced in Kerala temples, which community / caste did they belong to? Who trained them? Where did they dance inside the temple? What happened to those communities after the Act came into force? These questions are left unanswered even today.

Besides the literature part, the hegemony giftwrapped the dancer in white *Sari* having golden *Kasavu* borders and decorated her with traditional ornaments such as *Palakkamala* and *Ilakkathali* which only the affluent feudal Nair and Brahmins could own at that time. She's put on a specialized heavy hairdo on her head and to have this hairstyle done, the dancer 'must-have' long thick black hairs which has become an inevitable '*natyalakshanam*' (feature) of *Mohiniyattom* dancer. They went one step ahead by restricting the limb movements of the dancer and re-designating her character in tune with ruling Victorian morality.

So, from mythological origin to historical evolution, from the literature base to the selection of *nayika*, from format to presentation, from the costume design to very characteristic movements and *Abhinaya*, every aspect of this beautiful dance form is noted for the masculine interests and interventions. Secular institutions also failed to bring about any change in any of the aforesaid areas till today. More than the policy part or its failure to implement secularist ideals and equality principles enshrined in our constitution, what is painful is the male dominated mindset of the people-in-power who stand in the way as giant walls, resisting any socially reformative change to have its effect on the society in this direction.

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