

# Jatti Thayamma - New References on Her Art & Life and it's Significance on Bharatanatyam History

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**Abstract**— Bharata Natya is considered as the origin from the Southern state of Tamil Nadu, specifically Thanjavur. But, in Karnataka, the art of Bharata Natya had its own identity and tradition. Mysore state became a centrestage for innumerable cultural activities. During Krishnaraja Wodeyar's III reign (1831-1868) a distinct style began to emerge which is now known as 'Mysore Style' of BharataNatya. During the rule of Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the dance was in its peak. His greatness can be seen in abolishment of Devadasis practice way back in 1909, well before it was banned in Madras, and parallelly encouraging and flourishing Classical Music and Bharatanatyam in Mysore State. Four distinct traditions of Mysore Bani existed during that time, viz Muguru tradition, Nanjangud tradition, Mysore tradition, Kolar tradition, with stalwarts behind their prominence. The gurukul system of education was strictly followed in all these traditions. Jatti Thayamma was one such stalwart, hailing from a wrestler's family, but made great contributions to BharataNatya in the pre-Independence era of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Jatti Thayamma actively danced for almost 75 years of her life, and this is one of the greatest achievements. Jatti Thayamma was not a devadasi [1]. This paper is dedicated to the Art and Life of Jatti Thayamma, to clear the myth about her being told to be a devadasi and provide some new interesting aspects that were not previously known, including her caste (unknown earlier), and the way it affects the history of Bharatanatyam itself.

**Index Terms**— Jatti Thayamma, Mysore Style of Bharatanatyam, Bharatanatyam Mysore Bani, Bharatanatyam Upper Class performers, Bharatanatyam in Colonial era, Unseen photos of Jatti Thayamma, Devadasis torch bearer of Bharatanatyam, Bharatanatyam in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Religion and Bharatanatyam, Performing Arts India, Classical dances of South India redefined, Bharatanatyam origin.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Jatti Thayamma (1857-1947), the inimitable stalwart of Mysore style of Bharata Natya, plays a pivotal role in enlightening us with the Mysore Bharata Natya Bani. The Mysore tradition of Bharata Natya is also known as the Rasabhinaya tradition[2],and it was formulated by Jatti Thayamma. Thayamma believed that Rasa& Abhinaya werethe soul of every dance, and the spirit of art comes from the heart of a dancer.

Thayamma was appointed as Asthana Vidushi in the Royal Court of Mysore by the then king Chamaraja Wodeyar X,



Fig 1 : Jatti Thayamma

when she was just fifteen years old [3].Thayamma was highly learned in many disciplines of Art, Poetry, dance, literature and language. Thayamma had a sound footing in Sanskrit, kannada, Telugu and Hindi. She was well versed with both Carnatic and Hindustani classical music. She had a very strong hold in Abhinaya, and she drew largely from Amara Shataka, Krishnakarnamrithamand Geeta Govinda and Kalidasa's works for her abhinaya. As anindebtedness to the contributions of Bharata Muni for Natyashastra, she introduced the choornika in dance, a prologue in Sanskrit describing the achievements of Bharata Muni. She was an expert in Manodharma Abhinaya, where she presented her creative side, a quality immensely respected by the Scholars. 'Jaaradavu', or the formation of pose by sweeping of the legs, rather than hitting the legs on the floor, was one of her contributions to BharataNatya.[4]

## II. HER CHILDHOOD AND LIFE

Jatti Thayamma belonged to the family of wrestlers. Her original name was Laxmiddevamma [5]but was called as Mother (Thayi) by all. Her father, Dasappa was a wrestler with patronage of the Mysore King Krishnaraja Wodeyar III. Thayamma lost her mother at a very young age. It is believed that Dasappa had migrated to Mysore from the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh where Kuchipudi (dance-drama mostly done by Brahmin men) and other classical arts prevailed. Thus, at home, the language of communication was Telugu. Dasappa himself was an amateur musician, with a keen interest in Music and dance. He had deep respects for the Vidwans of the Court. He was the first music teacher to Jatti Thayamma. Seeing her aptitude, he decided to make her

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proficient in Sanskrit & dance, and sent her for formal training in music and dance from Guru Upadhyay. Later she learnt dance from Subburaya, & Chandrashekhara shastri. She learnt Abhinaya from Kavishwara Giriappa and Karibasappa Shastri. She completed her Sanskrit education (mostly pursued by the upper class) from Guru Sringeri M Subramanya Shastri. She was one of the most learned persons of her times.

again offered the post of the Asthana Vidushi. Veteran composer Mysore Vasudevachar was highly impressed by her Abhinaya, and honoured her with 'Vamanastotra' in Ragamalika [6]. Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal, the famous International Oriental dance artists, also learnt Bharatanatyam from Jatti Thayamma. She was conferred the title of NatyaSaraswati in the year 1945 by Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan at a function in Mysore Maharaja College, where he saw her performance of BharataNatya at the age of 88 years.

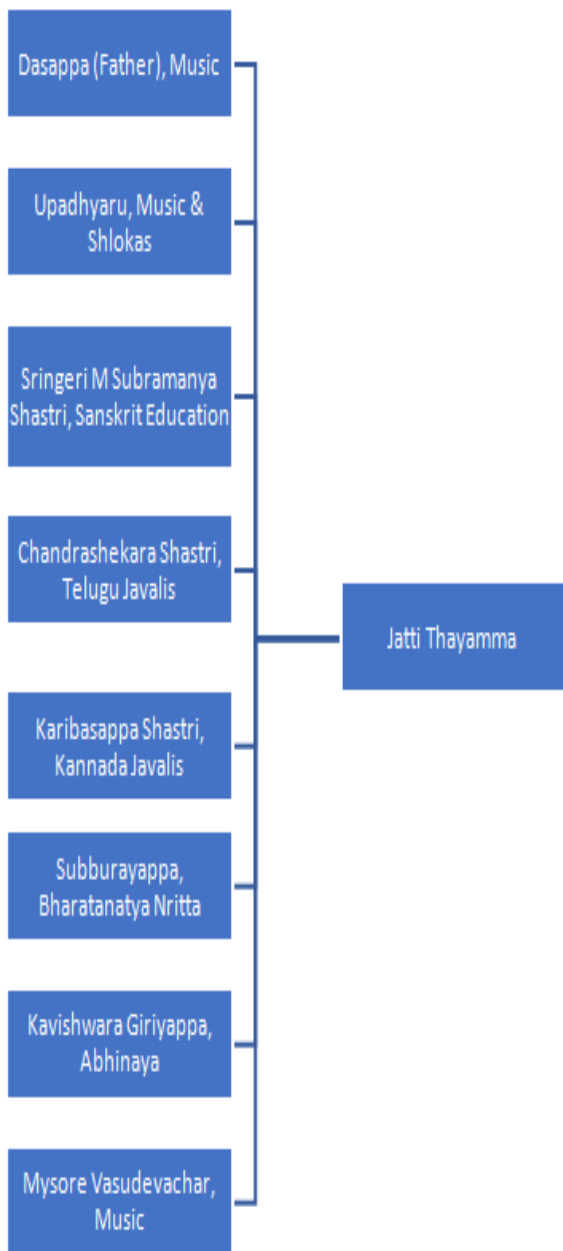


Fig 2 : Gurus of Jatti Thayamma

Her expertise at dance landed her the most prestigious post of Asthana Vidushi, or the 'Stalwart of the Court' at a tender age of Fifteen. In the year 1876, she was married to Sanjeeva Jatti. Post marriage, she resigned from her job as well as all the public performances. Her daughter Ranganayakamma was became proficient in dance, and performed alongwith her mother at various occasions. During the rule of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, she enthralled the court with her dance, and was

### III. CURRENT MYTH ABOUT JATTI THAYAMMA AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HER ORIGINS

Jatti Thayamma is said to be hailing from a Jatti Community of wrestlers. She is also told to be a devadasi, who was dedicated at the Parthasarathy koil temple[7], Neelamangala, a suburb near Bengaluru. Also, in many references, she is mentioned as a courtesan and a Palace dancer serving the Mysore Palace. Also, only one known picture of her exists in the records, as shown in Figure No. 2, which is more of a painting, rather than a photograph.

It is said that Jatti Thayamma was a beautiful woman, with a good height [8]. Being learned, she was a very strong, confident and creative woman. She was highly disciplined and woke up at 4 am in the morning. Her class started at 4:30 for her disciples, and it continued the entire day, with a hectic routine. She taught as per the Gurukula system. She believed in making her students both physically and mentally strong, and gave high importance to physical exercise, Adavus and Classical Music.



Fig 3 : Mysore Nautch Girl, approx. ~1910. p.c : Sareedreams.com

To clear some of the myths, I am presenting two more photographs of women (Figure 3& Figure 4) from different texts of the society, till now un-related to each other. The similarities among these women will be studied. The woman

in Figure 3 comes from a Saree blog sareedreams.com, probably taken from a vintage post card.

earlier photo of Jatti Thayamma in Figure No. 1 and Figure No. 3.



Fig 4 : Brahman Lady, by FM Coleman, 1897.

This Figure mentions the woman as a 'Nautch Girl' of Mysore[9]. The approximate date of the photo is mentioned as 1910. This is the time when Jatti Thayamma was the Asthana Vidushi of Mysore Court. The fearless stance is a characteristic of a highly confident woman. But, if it is considered as a photo dated ~1910, Thayamma could be 53 years old, which seems unlikely from the photo, as the woman seems to be in her late thirties. Yet, from the similarities of the face, the hairdo, the extensive ornaments, and the title of a 'Nautch Girl', which seems to be ignorantly given by the British historians, one can conclude that the woman is none other than Jatti Thayamma. The woman in Figure 4 has been clicked in 1897 by FM Coleman, the then managing partner of The Times of India Newspaper, who was also an ace photographer. This photograph seems to have been later hand painted, as the technology of colour printing had arrived in 1893, but colour photography was still under development.

Titled 'Brahman Lady'[10], the book in which it has been printed reveals the dress codes of the men and women belonging to the different communities in India. The woman is richly adorned in jewelry and having a Royal appeal. Though the mention of photo is 'Brahman Lady', it speaks a little more about the lady herself, that caught my imagination.

Mr. FM Coleman mentions that during those days, it was very difficult to photograph as woman of the upper caste, but after a lot of persuasion, the woman agreed to the photo session. It seems, that Mr. FM Coleman was sure about the caste of the woman and was impressed by the unique gracefulness of the woman, that made her the representation of the Brahmin woman in his book. After taking a closer look at the photo, a lot of similarities have been observed with the

The above comparative figures provide the similarities of the facial characteristics, as well as the extensive jewelry of same type being worn (Figure 5).



Fig 5 : Facial comparison

The expressions of confidence are unique in all the three photographs. The hair style, the position of the bindi, the ear jewelry seems to be contemporary to each other. Both the photos (Fig. 3 & 4) show the woman having longer eyebrows (Figure 1 is re-touched). The Brahman Lady has similar features with the Nautch girl, as well as Jatti Thayamma. The nose jewelry in all the three photos are exactly the same.



Fig 6 : Finger rings and Anklets

The finger rings are surprisingly in the same set of fingers, with the no ring present in the middle finger (Figure 6). The same can also be observed on the other hand. Also, one need to observe the anklet bells being worn, both by a dancer, as

well as a brahmin woman during those times. One can also observe jewelry on the feet/fingers.

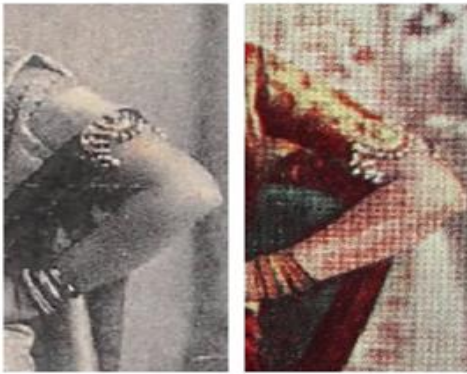


Fig 7 : Hand Jewelry

The bangles, the Arm jewelry, as well as the hand dimensions seem to be exactly similar (Figure 7).



Fig 8 : Fearless Posture

Finally comes the comparison of the fearless attitude in both the photos (Figure 8). The way the woman has characteristically put her one hand on her waist, and a foot resting on the thigh of other feet in the sitting position, shows the unique and assertive position, only possible by a strong and determined woman like Jatti Thayamma.

It has to be noted that both these photographs have no relevance to Jatti Thayamma yet anywhere in the texts, or the Internet. But, it seems that Jatti Thayamma, a dancer from Mysore, belonging to a Jatti Family, was also a Brahman Lady, or the lady from the upper caste.

#### IV. THE JATTI (JETTI ) WAY OF LIFE

It is said that the Jatti's are the wrestler community. Some of the highlights of the Jatti community living in the region of Mysore are : They closely follow the Brahmin way of living. They have rituals exactly like the Brahmins, and one of the distinguishing similarity is that a young brahmin undergoes a Upanayana, or the Thread ceremony. They perform their Sandhyavandana after that. They shave their head and carry a 'Jutta' (pony) like a typical brahmin priest. By profession, they are kshatriyas, but by tradition, they are Brahmins. They adopt Brahmanical gotras. The attire of the Jatti women resemble that of the Brahmin women. The Jattis are high up in the social scale of castes, and without doubt are a part of the Upper class [11].



Fig 9 : A Jatti as described in the Ancient texts holding a vajramushti.

#### V. CONCLUSION

We can unquestionably conclude that the woman in all the three photos are the same and is none other than the inimitable Jatti Thayamma. All these photos are taken at the same time, i.e. 1897, when Jatti Thayamma was about 39 years of age. Going by the published book of FM Coleman on 'Natives of India', one can conclude that Jatti Thayamma belonged to the Upper Caste and was not a devadasi. Also, as her father was a wrestler, the question of her being a devadasi does not arise, as she belonged to a patrilineal hierarchy. As Jatti Thayamma had lost her mother in her childhood, there is no possibility of her being a devadasi.

After searching the different temples of Neelamangala, no temple by the name Parthasarathy Koil exists, that was mentioned as the temple where Jatti Thayamma served. Also, both 'Parthasarathy' and 'koil' belong to the Tamil native vocabulary, and unfamiliar in Mysore of Karnataka. Neelamangala, a small suburb town is incomparable to the

grandeur of Mysore, and no logic fits of Jatti Thayamma, a grand lady, and a daughter of a wrestler, with no devadasi family tradition, serving in an unknown faraway temple to become a devadasi. Neelamangala those days was a full day journey from Mysore. Further, it should be noted that Jatti Thayamma became a Palace Artist at the age of 15 after spending her childhood in education, and married at the age of 18, not to any God, but to a real human being. Thus, the theory of her being a devadasi is defunct and void.

From the days of colonial era and even today, it is a common belief that the devadasis were the torch bearer of today's Bharatanatyam, and the upper class took away this art from the unfortunate devadasis and made it global. Jatti Thayamma is an example of the pursuit of BharataNatya even by the women of the Upper class. Jatti community undoubtedly belongs to the upper class of Society. Probably, this was the reason why Jatti Thayamma is being tagged by some historians as a devadasi, so that the idea of devadasis as beholders of Bharatanatyam remains intact.

Jatti Thayamma's Life and Art is the most important facet of Bharatanatyam History, as it has the potential to question all the studies that have otherwise scorned the upper class to have hijacked the art of the devadasi. Jatti Thayamma not only performed, but also propagated Bharatanatyam during the colonial era, when it was considered a challenge for a female artist to showcase her talents.

Jatti Thayamma fills the gap in those times, that are considered as the hibernation period of Bharatanatyam, i.e. the latter part of 19th century and the early part of 20th century. Infact, she has ushered a lot of possibilities of breathing life into Bharatanatyam prevalence during the late 19th century and also the so-called revivalist period, where a long list of renowned Bharatanatyam gurus like Minakshisundaram Pillai, Kitappa Pillai, K Muthukumaran Pillai, Kolar Kittappa, Muguru Amrutappa, Subburaya, Subramanya Iyer, T Balasaraswati, K Lalita, K N Dandayudhapani Pillai, Mylapore gowriammal, K Kandhappa pillai, Vedantam Laxminarayana Shastri, Bharatam Natesa Iyer, Mangudi Dorairaja iyer, Subramanya Kaushik and many other contemporaries existed and propagated Bharatanatyam to what it was earlier and now, un-adulterated and unassociated.

Thus, calling Bharatanatyam as a recent terminology for the devadasi dance of Sadir holds no relevance. Bharatanatyam never ceased to exist, and never was it ever out of vogue. It always was present everywhere, except into the history texts, just like any other ancient Indian arts and sciences like the Yoga and Ayurveda, that propagated not through texts, but through the guru-shishya Parampare.



Fig 10 : Students of the Maharani college, 1890

This photograph in Figure 10 is taken in the 1890s, showing the pupils attending Maharani's Girls' College, Mysore This photo is taken from Lord George Curzon's Collection 'Souvenir of Mysore' [12]. It reads, "This College, named in honor of H.H. the Maharani-Regent, was established in 1881. The institution is unique in its class in Southern India, educating, as it does, young ladies of the middle and higher classes of the high caste Hindus, and providing new walks of life for their widows."

One can see the active participation of the upper caste women in the 1890s in the Music scenario.

Finally, Art is not bound by any religion, neither upper class or lower class. Jatti Thayamma had disciples of all classes of society. Her favorite disciple, K Venkatalakshamma belonged to the Lambani nomadic tribe, yet went ahead to become one of the most revered dancers of Bharatanatyam.

Jatti Thayamma is an example of the rich presence of Bharatanatyam in the Mysore state well before the revival story. She proves that dance never degraded, and remained in its highest form of glory, always.

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