The Kalavantulu Body and Repertoire as Signifiers of Resilience

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Abstract

This paper investigates the embodied knowledge, historical erasure, and aesthetic resilience of the KalAvantulu women—hereditary performers from coastal Andhra Pradesh—through an ethnographic and autoethnographic lens. Using oral history as a foundational methodology, the research uncovers how the repertoire of the KalAvantulu, particularly through compositions like the padam, varnam, jAvali, and swarapallavi, functions as an archive of marginalized histories. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from performance studies and feminist historiography, including the works of Diana Taylor, Susan Foster, and Uma Chakravarti, the study foregrounds the KalAvantulu dancing body as both a site of resistance and a medium of cultural memory. The repertoire is analyzed not merely as artistic expression but as an assertion of agency against colonial, nationalist, and patriarchal redefinitions of Indian classical dance. Through the author's embodied engagement with the repertoire and intergenerational knowledge, the paper presents a critical reclamation of a performance tradition that continues to challenge systemic erasure and re-inscribe matrilineal memory.

Keywords: KalAvantulu, embodied memory, devadasi repertoire, feminist historiography, performance studies

Introduction

Ammamma was almost a hundred years old and confined to the bed in 2008. She wouldn't talk much by then. However, when I asked her about her paternal grandmother, Madhuravani, she had a flood of memories to tell me. Chinagandham Kausalya, my maternal grandmother was a little girl of about seven when she was tempted to watch the *MezuvAni* performance where Madhuravani danced and Picchayi, her sister, sang mellifluously. She and her sisters would watch stealthily as they were not allowed to be a part of these performances.

Ours is a large guild of hereditary professional women singer-dancers, called the *DevadAsi* and *KalAvantulu* (bearer of arts) in particular in the Coastal Andhra region in South India. Generations of marginalisation prompted these families to grab every possibility to change their identity and ensure assimilation in the mainstream society. My family is a part of this history. I became aware of my roots in my teens and began to reclaim them through practice and research. I am given this information in fragments as I piece them together and look at the socio-political history of the *KalAvantulu* through their repertoire. I see her stance and posture as a reflection of her power and position in society. I trace my journey as a female dancer, finding my roots in the memory of the disavowed *DevadAsi* families I am a part of, questioning the concept of caste and the seeming matriarchy in our families. These families and their repertoire were a crucial part of and even a decimated part of Nation building. Their lives and repertoire are the foundation for most of the neo-classical dances that took shape to meet European sensibilities and nationalists' demands. Their history is woven into the repertoire-not as choreographed pieces, but as powerful, aesthetic conversations with the audience. This article journeys through the complexity of their lives of resilience, strength, and subjugation while interrogating one set, of the many on songs

they perform in a typical *MezuvAni* performance. Braided into this narrative is my lived experience

This work draws from oral history, ethnography, and autoethnography to uncover and interpret the lived experiences, memories, and embodied knowledge of the *KalAvantulu* women. The repertoire is not merely a performance archive but a deeply situated embodiment of history, gender, caste, and resistance.

This research uses oral history to retrieve generational knowledge passed down through women like Ammamma, whose narratives become entry points into a cultural past both erased and remembered. Oral testimonies act as performative expressions of identity and memory, revealing how marginalized voices challenge dominant historical narratives. Ethnographic engagement is crucial in understanding the socio-cultural context in which these performances exist. Participant observation, field visits to temple spaces and sabhas, and interaction with contemporary *KalAvantulu* performers provide rich contextual grounding. Ethnographic methods are deployed in alignment with Pallabi Chakravorty's (2008) view that performance is both the object and method of cultural inquiry. Observing the *KalAvantulu* women and their performance practices offers insights into how art sustains and resists gendered and caste-based hierarchies. Autoethnography anchors the researcher's subjective engagement with the repertoire and the personal reclamation of a disavowed heritage. Following Urmimala Sarkar's (2006) methodology of 'embodied ethnography,' my own body becomes a site of inquiry. By dancing the repertoire, I re-enact memory and history, allowing the physical act of dancing to lead inquiry. These methodologies allow for a layered understanding where memory, embodiment, performance, and politics are in constant dialogue.

This article is framed by a multidisciplinary intersection of performance studies, feminist theory, and subaltern historiography. The theoretical underpinning lies in the understanding of performance as an archive of embodied knowledge. Diana Taylor's (2003) conceptual framework of the "archive" and the "repertoire" is central. While the archive comprises enduring texts and objects, the repertoire enacts embodied knowledge passed down through oral and performative means. The *KalAvantulu*'s repertoire—whether a *padam*, *varnam*, or *jAvali*—constitutes a living, breathing feminist history.

Susan Foster (1995) expands this view through her idea of kinesthetic empathy, where the viewer's understanding is formed through bodily resonance. Here, watching the *KalAvantulu* perform is not passive; it evokes memory, resistance, and recognition. The repertoire becomes a feminist historiographic tool that engages the senses and the intellect. Uma Chakravarti's (1993) feminist readings of caste and memory foreground the structural erasures faced by women, especially from marginalized communities. Her insights help frame the repertoire as both a site of agency and a target of nationalist erasure. Chakravarti's assertion that patriarchal narratives erase women's public roles is exemplified in how the *DevadAsi* was systematically de-sexualized, de-politicized, and disowned by her own community post-1947. The nationalist and reformist co-optation of the *KalAvantulu*'s repertoire re-scripted the dancer's body into sanitized, upper-caste aesthetics. Further, the writings of Urmimala Sarkar and Pallabi Chakravorty bring a South Asian feminist lens to performance studies. Chakravorty's (2008) concept of "politics of aesthetics" becomes useful to understand how shifts in patronage, public space, and caste status affected the physical vocabulary and symbolic meaning of performance. The repertoire, therefore, is not just artistic output but a political act.

Through this framework, the repertoire is read not only as cultural memory but also as feminist resistance, and performance politics. These perspectives enable the research to

engage with the *KalAvantulu* body as a site where history, identity, and resistance are continuously performed.

SwAri VeDalenu VArijAkshulu

The song you just heard was sung around the 19th C in the *Uregimpu melam* (procession) in Balipadu, Madanagoplalaswami temple, by the dharmakartas and the *KalAvantulu* women. The song always reminds me of ammamma's fragmented narrative of Madhuravani and Pichayamma. They were connected to a temple authority and to the zamindarof the Annavaram temple. They were not a part of the temple rituals, but were under the patronage of a temple authority. Madhuravani danced while Pichayamma sang. So proficient were they, that poets and story writers mention the beauty of their art.

SalAm Daruvu

The repertoire of the *KalAvantulu* also reflects the patronage of the day. The courtly culture and temple culture co-existed, supported mainly by the king. The king being elevated to or looked upon as god was also part of the rules. They became an integral part of the temple services through a certain ritual called *Katti KalyAnam* in Coastal Andhra. This was considered dedication to the temple and as Amrit Srinivasan observes (1985), these unmarried women were custodians of land given to them by the king or later, the zamindar who was also generally her patron. Her family survived on the produce of the land.

The temple dance repertoire did not differ from that of the court in many ways except for the rituals. *SringAra* or eroticism was a natural base for the expositions. The *salAmdaruvu*, '*Pari pari vidhamula prahlAduDu ninu'* from the Godavari region and is reflective of Colonial Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu, South India. The first two verses are addressed to Pratapa Ramaswami, worshiped in an 18th C temple on West Street in Thanjavur, today known as the Vijayaramaswami temple. These verses date back to the rule of Pratapasimha, who was the patron of composers like the Telugu brahmin composer Melattur Veerabhadriah (c. 1700-1770). Significantly, the name of the deity, Pratapa Rama is also applicable for the king, Pratapasimha.

The *salAm daruvu* is performed for the deity and/or the king and later, the zamindar, addressing him in lyrics and movement. Seamlessly weaving a little technique into the lyrics, the dancer extols the patron through straightforward movement and gestures representing the meaning of the lyrics. In this particular song which goes '*pari pari vidhamula prahlAduDu mimu…*', the former two stanzas are addressed to the Maratha king, Pratapasimha or God Pratapa Rama. The first one equates him with God Narasimha who vanquishes the evil enemy on the appeal of his devotee. The second stanza sees the dancer take a little liberty and admiringly describe his physical attributes. The third stanza, which seems like an add-on to the first two stanzas, bears a romantic angle, where she expresses her desire for the patron and demands as to why he does not respond to her.

A significant feature of the *SalAm daruvu* is the salAm or salute. Tanjavur was a melting pot of Tamil, Telugu, Mughal and colonial influenced Maratha cultures and this reflects in the repertoire of the *DevadAsi*. The colonial salute performed to the Persian word *Salaam* in the midst of a Telugu composition from Coastal Andhra, performed across Madras Presidency is a perfect example for the multiplicity that prevails in the lives of these dancers. Their repertoire is an embodiment of their histories and this is the history I carry on my body when I perform it.

Swarapallavi

The *swarapallavi* is a short, choreographed dance piece constructed purely on the technique of the form. It was a crucial component of the temple repertoire, performed during the ritual of *Bhogam* and even of the *mezuvAni*. I must mention here that *bhogam*, meaning pleasure or a sumptuous meal was a term used for the *DevadAsi* even when she was a part of the temple rituals. The term acquired a disparaging meaning during the nationalist movement

prompting the families to change the name of their families to a more sanskritised, '*KalAvantulu*' or bearers of art. This too was changed later to a masculine gendered term, '*Surya Balija'*, leaning towards agricultural communities. In short, there is a constant effort to conceal identity for acceptance.

The movements are at leisure, reflecting the lush green Konaseema on the banks of the Rivers Godavari in Coastal Andhra. The dancer is in full cognisance of the pulse of the audience and controls the tempo of the *swarapallavi* accordingly. The movements are uncomplicated and blend with the catchy tune. There are no complicated mathematical complications or cross rhythms.

The energy in the usage of the body is a natural flow with no effort to impress through show of stamina or hyper femininity. The spine is straight, but not unnaturally arched. Shoulders are open with conviction, but not to the point that the chest is projected. She is absolutely comfortable with her femininity, gradually drawing the audience' attention towards herself with a virtuosity attained through sheer organic practice.

When Pottemma (alias Manepalli Ratnakumari) taught me a *tilla na*, she would not hear of me pushing my waist to a side to make a point of my femininity. '*ADadAnivega*?!' (Aren't you a woman already?!), she exclaimed, as if to say I should not go out of the way to impress. I should be myself and allow the grace to flow through my body. How liberating!

Padam

The *padam* is an intensely erotic composition and a crucial marker of the *mezuvAni*. She performs these compositions in a seated position, mentally placing the hero or the person she addresses as one in the audience. She looks directly at the audience and communicates the content through her virtuosity of expression. Her life's experience, the intelligence of her body, her innermost emotions, and inner strength come across as she explores and presents the layers in the lyrics in a most uncomplicated exposition. The casual music only enhances the human experience. The *padam* chosen for this article is '*RAyabAramampinADa RAnu RAnu RAnoyanumI'* (Did he send a message through you? Tell him that I will never come).

"Did he send a message of truce through you? Tell him that I am just not coming. That Muvvagopala! The conjurer! One can never believe what he says. His heart is with the other woman but always wears a smile with me. He seems committed to me, but his feelings are all for her. He flirts with a different one every hour; if she is brazen, she is a treat for him. His path is twisted (his actions are crooked), but his tongue is smeared with nectar! (Sugar-coated words).

To Krishna(reverie/message to him): The love we made then is enough, my body does not harbor any yearning for you, Oh trickster, my Muvvagopala! I have had enough.

She says to the messenger: Tell him I will never come to him."

The eroticism in the songs in accessible Telugu language worked against the *DevadAsi*. The nationalist period saw the *DevadAsi*'s unmarried status and her position in society as a performer and bread-winner of the family as a threat to the image of the Nation which was at the threshold of independence. The indigenous language of Telugu made it necessary to direct all human emotions to god and maybe even create a male religious figure as the author of the songs, which were possibly written by women on women's desire (Kamath, 2019).

The *padam* was the marker of their virtuosity and the women who danced were very proud of it. I remember Maddula Janakamma challenging non-dancers from outside the *KalAvantulu* families who proclaimed themselves as bhogam or *KalAvantulu* women and began organised sex work. "*Okka padam pattamanu, Appudu oppukuntanu*!". (Ask them to perform one *padam* and I will accept them as one of us). Between anger that their lives too have been appropriated by other women and admiration for her strength and pride, I chose the latter. The stigma we suffer due to this form of appropriation even to this day is appalling.

However, Maddula Janakamma's challenge proved that the dancing body may not be wealthy, but is rich in courage from experience.

The *KalAvantulu* woman's dancing body did not dance in the modern meaning of the word. The power in her seated position was evident in her posture. The posture was unique to each dancer as it was her own life that manifested through her artistry.

The nationalists found themselves uncomfortable with the freedom and power that she held on stage. A reform movement was initiated. Alongside reform, was revival of the song and dance. Attempts to teach the art to upper caste bodies was initiated to 'preserve' the art, the origin of which was now believed to be Nataraja and the Sanskrit text, NATyasAstra (Allen,1997; Sarkar,2022).

Varnam

Ammamma was about a hundred years old and confined to the bed in 2007. She wouldn't talk much by then. However, when I asked her about her paternal grandmother, Madhuravani, she had a flood of memories to tell me. She was a little girl of about seven when she was tempted to watch the *MezuvAni* performance where Madhuravani danced and Picchayi, her sister, sang mellifluously. She and her sisters would watch stealthily as they were not allowed to be a part of these performances. As ammamma continued, I asked her about one particular composition, the Navroj *Varnam* that they were known for. Ammamma broke into a song with her aged voice and sang the long composition with her eyes closed before she slipped into slumber.

The musical composition called *Varnam* has a specific structure with two lines in the beginning and stanzas that follow with solfa syllables and lyrics in alignment to the musical pattern of the syllables. This is an important component of South Indian music and like most other genres was meant to be danced. Originally, the *varnam* was almost always based on eroticism where it is either the heroine pining for the person she loves or the friend of the heroine coaxing him to go to her. The *Varnam* carries the exciting complex history of the hereditary dancers at the crossroads of aesthetics, power, agency and the lack of it, caste, class and gender politics.

The friend asks the hero, a zamindar, Bangarecha, probably from the Vizianagaram district, if he has no mercy on her friend who pines for him. She desires you because you are good at heart. This is the right time to call her yourself. She is suffering the onslaught of arrows from the god of love; I swear on your feet! The bees torment her with their buzz. Take advantage, hug her close to your chest, and whisper into her ear! I have never seen a girl like her.

Her taut body shines brighter than the moon. She is the best for you. The moonlight is poking fun at you for not going to her! Her dark curls, nectar lips…she has no equal.

Her full breasts, mirror-like cheeks, fragrant navel like the *ponna* flower, elephant trunk-like thighs, sweet words, star-like nails, she is the best star, Dear friend! Go and make her yours.

As in the *padam*, the dancer is in a seated position as she cajoles, reprimands, and convinces the hero (seemingly situated in the audience) to go her pining friend. The tune is Navroj, a product of Persian influence. The dancer is expected to sing along with the accompanying singers, particularly, the solfa syllable patterns and perform to the lyrics. During the Colonial rule, a few dancers chose to perform a few movements for the solfa patterns through simple uncomplicated technique, eventually adding the practice of dancing on the edges of the brass plate and other acrobatic acts that attracted the attention of the audience. This change in their dance was construed as an off-shoot of fallen values and virtuosity. In fact, this is the narrative I was told by my own immediate family who knew close to nothing about the art. I was aghast! How is it that men and women born into the families of singer-dancers were so ignorant of the richness of the art? Constant, patient interaction revealed to me that these families chose to forget and disown the art, which was

life itself, when the Madras *DevadAsi* (Prevention of Dedication) Act was passed on October 9, 1947. The Act (1947) was a product of patriarchy and colonial approaches towards gender. The Act declared that the very act of dancing by these women was unlawful and these women could not be dedicated to temples or dance on any occasion, whatsoever. As a result, the non-dancers who camouflaged their identity by managing to register themselves under other castes to be educated and assimilated into mainstream society spoke differently from the ones from a lower economic status and continue singing (not dancing) in temples and religious gatherings. However, now the songs are all devotional. These women have no qualms in saying '*memu bhogam vallamu'* (We are from the *bhogam* families). However, the requirement to dance and move on stage may have also been a result of changing tastes and ability to comprehend the nuance in the audience. The audience were not the connoisseurs who were knowledgeable of and had an affinity for the indigenous language of Telugu and of Telugu culture, but those who saw the performance from the lens of Victorian Morality and patriarchy. By the early 20th century dance moved from the intimate confines of the zamindari to the cosmopolitan city of Madras where the women found employment through the gramophone record and cinema. The performances were now in public spaces called the *sabha*s for a varied audience. They were tailored to suit the stage where the dancer is at a height and distance from the audience. The wider space occupied by the audience and their varied nature could have been another reason for change in the stance of the dancer who now moved around on the stage, letting go of a part of the power she held when she sat at one place and commanded the attention of the audience.

JAvali

The *jAvali* is performed to simpler language and a catchier tune. The dancer is constantly moving back and forth, using spontaneous, gestures and ideas while performing. The *jAvali* is a clear product of colonial influence which comes across in the music, colloquial language, and gestures. Yet, expression of female desire is not compromised in these endearing compositions.

When I learn these *jAvali*s from the ladies and discuss the piece from just about every perspective, a small, light piece of love literature which I would have otherwise looked down upon, now becomes laden with historical significance. The song carries the words of the women. It may have been scripted by another, but it is owned by them and made a part of their lives. When I perform the piece, I am performing a slice of their lives to an audience they may or may not have approved of.

The piece becomes an invaluable possession for me. With this methodological approach, every performance is a pleasure. It is my privilege to be taught by them personally and told that that particular *padam* or *jAvali* is their family heirloom that they are passing on to me.

The *JAvali*, is a genre that came into existence in the 19th Century when the nationalists were beginning to project the Indian woman and so India as a pious land. The Indian woman was the 'chaste,' religious, domesticated homemaker. And here we have these *bhogamvallu* dancing to free-flowing, bouncy, playful, erotic songs in the heart of the colonial cities, much against the *padam*s written and performed in temples and courts, written and watched by the elite class! To make it worse, the popularity of the *jAvali*s during this colonial period rose.

The *jAvali*s were spoken as a reflection of women's morality! It is ironic that here they chose to equate the dance with what they portrayed as the dancer, but later the dance and the dancer were seen as distinct from each other to facilitate the appropriation of the art under the term revival to construct the neo-classical dances we have today.

It was almost like a snare!

The *jAvali* chosen here is '*Samayamu manchidira'*

This is an auspicious time, my love, rise and come to me. I am tired of the arrows of Manmadha.

My heart harbours so many desires. My handsome! I shall not disappoint you.

I have you tucked away in my thoughts for so long, describing your beauty,

My breasts swell and I sweat with longing for you, Oh! Ruler of Suryanagara!

The *jAvali* and the *mezuvAni* performance ends with a short, sprightly burst of spontaneous dance to the percussion instrument of table and violin. This is the *Gaptu varusa* or just *gaptu* to wind up on a happy note. The uninhibited flow of movement and the understanding between the musicians and the dancer gives a finale of abandon to the *mezuvAni* performance by the *KalAvantulu* women who I reiterate were addressed as *bhogamvaAru*.

In tracing the repertoire of the *KalAvantulu* women, I have not merely studied performance—I have lived it. This journey has revealed that what may seem like fragments of music and gesture are, in fact, embodied histories of caste, gender, and resilience. The *MezuvAni* performance, with its layered expressions of desire, devotion, and defiance, stands not only as an aesthetic experience but also as a radical act of memory. The body of the *KalAvantulu* dancer, situated between reverence and stigma, reveals how art can be both a site of oppression and a tool of resistance. Through oral histories, ethnography, and embodied autoethnography, I have come to understand that the repertoire is not static tradition but living testimony—an archive etched into the body, passed down through silence, struggle, and survival. To dance it today is to honour a lineage that refuses to be forgotten, and to reclaim the space.

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