

A Time of Passing Things:  
An Exploration of the Decline and Disappearance of the Devadasi Tradition  
Through the Medium of Historical Fiction

By

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 2000

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS in THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE  
STUDIES

(Department of Women's Studies)

We accept this thesis as conforming  
To the required standard

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 2002

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Date April 23, 2002

### **Abstract**

Written in the form of an historical fiction, this thesis explores the multiple influences that were active in the lives of temple dancers in Southern India from 1861 to 1947. It addresses the question of whether or not the devadasis were prostitutes, placing this debate in the context of conflicting colonial, Hindu and reform movement pressures, influences directing the decline and disappearance of the temple dancing tradition. In gathering information about this period, I have drawn from three main sources: colonial literature of the time, modern feminist research, and dance scholarship on the nature and history of the technical aspects of temple dancing. My aim has been to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, a close approximation of a devadasi's life, and to compare how it differs from those lived by previous generations of temple dancers.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
Acknowledgments .....	iv
Dedication .....	v
Introduction .....	vi
CHAPTER I      Inheritance .....	1
Cinnaveedu, Early Autumn, 1917	
CHAPTER II      Nityasumangali, The Ever Auspicious .....	15
Cinnaveedu, Early Autumn, 1917	
CHAPTER III     A Mother's Gift .....	35
Cinnaveedu, Early Autumn, 1917	
CHAPTER IV      Sowing the Seeds of Dance .....	50
Gurukulam, Winter/ Early Spring, 1918	
CHAPTER V       Worship of the Ankle Bells .....	64
Gurukulam, Late Winter/ Early Spring, 1925	
CHAPTER VI       Tying the Tali .....	84
Cinnaveedu, Late Winter/ Early Spring, 1925	
CHAPTER VII      The Bodies of Women .....	100
Cinnaveedu, Spring, 1930	
CHAPTER VIII     Divine Beloved .....	114
Cinnaveedu, Late Summer, 1930	
CHAPTER IX       When Grandmother Gave Birth to God .....	125
Cinnaveedu, Monsoon Season, 1930	
CHAPTER X        At Vishnu's Feet .....	135
Cinnaveedu, Summer, 1931	
Epilogue .....	153
Bibliography .....	155
Appendix I .....	158



### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge the Department of Women's Studies for giving me so much leeway in the creation of this project. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Valerie Raoul for being open-minded about my proposal to write my thesis as an historical fiction, despite her fears that I would develop writer's block and fail to graduate! I am also indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Mandakranta Bose, for so many long hours of her time, and for sharing her huge wealth of knowledge with me. Without her expertise, this project could not have been completed.

I am grateful to Madhavi Mudgal for making the time to see me when I was in Delhi, and for inviting me to observe classes going on at her dance college. The interview she participated in gave me a better understanding of the tradition of classical dance in modern times, and helped me to reconstruct the social climate of the dance community with greater accuracy.

I would also like to thank my beloved partner Rowan for making sure I remembered to eat in the past three months, and to my family for their support and encouragement.

Beloved,  
when I see the word  
written  
my heart swells,  
joyous  
and filled with thoughts of  
You.

## **Introduction**

### **Contributing Something to the Field:**

#### **Why A Novel?**

When I first proposed an historical fiction as an idea for thesis research, it raised a lot of eyebrows and caused skeptical looks to be cast in my direction. Novels are for creative writing, aren't they? What place does a piece of fiction have in an area where 'real' research is expected, where the way in which we deliver our arguments essentially follows a set format, a canonical formula for acceptable presentation?

The idea to write a novel first came to me when I was in Delhi in November, this past year. Although I had already completed the bulk of my research on the topic of devadasi, I had yet to find an acceptable method of not only presenting but also demonstrating my argument. What I wanted to discuss in my research was essentially this: the ways in which devadasis are portrayed in research, whether favourable or critical, are lacking in that they always approach temple dancers as objects of analysis and historical interest rather than as real women who actually lived in a particular place and time. Although different texts and articles I came across focused on different aspects of the devadasis' way of life, there was no one piece of research I found that described the life of a devadasi in its entirety.

There is a great deal of research on the topic of temple dancing which is very negative in its outlook on the devadasis. This research, predominantly dating to the period of British occupation in India, strongly preferences the critical position of the colonial observer, a position I felt was often ill-equipped to accurately understand and interpret the complexities of the temple dancing system. I found that research of this kind did not even attempt to represent the

voices of these women, instead describing their lives from an outsider's perspective as "adulterous and amorous"<sup>1</sup>, "voluptuous and often irreligious"<sup>2</sup>, thereby creating blanket statements that were almost entirely unsubstantiated and upheld only by the author's personal, and often ignorant, opinions. Although I initially rejected this type of research as more propaganda than fact, I later went back to it as a valuable source of information on the types of prejudices that these women faced from the men of their communities.

It was not only the negative portrayals of the devadasis' lives that I found to be lacking in their depictions of a temple dancer's way of life. Works such as Kersenboom-Story's Nityasumangali and Marglin's Wives of the God-King are excellent pieces of research on the subject of the ritual roles that temple dancers played in their communities, and also include a number of interviews with actual practicing devadasis. However, despite the extensive detail of these works, they fail to address the political climate of India at the time when these dancers practiced, placing them in a sort of independent 'bubble' away from what was going on around them. Alternatively, authors such as Amrit Srinivasan have written a great deal on the political climate surrounding the devadasis, both within a Hindu and a colonial context, but have failed to draw links between the ritual significance of the duties a devadasi performed and the ways in which her community received her. A third area of focus on the subject is that of dance, one which has largely been ignored by the other two fields of research but is an essential and indivisible component in the life a trained devadasi would have led in the period prior to Independence. Dance historians have not approached the areas of ritual and political climate, whereas other researchers have almost

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<sup>1</sup>Prasad :118

<sup>2</sup>Prasad :119

entirely ignored the topic of dance, an oversight which seemed to me to be both strange and obvious considering that the devadasis were temple *dancers*.

Using historical fiction as my vehicle of presentation, I felt that I was much more able to create a piece of research which not only addressed but also included these conflicting and incomplete visions of the life of a devadasi. The fiction format allows these different perspectives to be represented by individual characters, characters who interact with each other in complex relationships that mirror the multiple aspects of the research itself.

### **Challenges and Limitations of the Historical Fiction Format**

Although the historical fiction format allowed me to explore the complexities of multiple interacting aspects of a devadasi's way of life, it also brought with it significant limitations. The most important challenge I faced in writing a novel was the question of whether or not I was just 'making it all up'. How could I, a white woman living in Canada in the year 2002, have a clue about what was in the minds of temple dancers in Southern India in the 1920s?

The question is one of vital importance, one that I struggled with constantly as the writing progressed. Descriptions of events, such as marriage ceremonies, dance training and significant historical dates, were easy enough to include, but the voice that I gave to them, the ways in which characters perceived these events and responded to them, are based on my own interpretation. In order to back up the choices I made in the text, I used extensive footnotes which not only referenced the sources for the material I was relying on, but also gave a brief 'academic' description of the event, ritual or (character) sentiment being portrayed. In response to the question of authenticity, I can only say that I did my best to use the voices of devadasis that came to me through the interviews of other researchers, using them as my guide. These women expressed a sense of

pride in their profession, viewing it as a legitimate and lifelong identity, something I have tried hard to convey in the novel through the voices of multiple generations of women.

### **Challenges and Limitations of My Position as the Author**

Beyond a doubt, the most difficult aspect of writing my thesis as an historical fiction was working in the medium of a culture I hadn't grown up, or spent any great deal of time in. Not only did this present language barriers, but it made creating scenarios between characters highly complex. A simple line, such as "Padma said 'thank you' ", would often betray my position as an outsider to the community, a position which constantly threatened the integrity of both the script and the research. In India it is uncommon for people to express verbal thanks, preferring instead to use their body language to convey such a gesture. Although I was well aware of this from my travels in India, when the time came for the actual writing, I constantly found myself being tripped up by my own desire to superimpose Western exchanges between characters onto India mannerisms. Another place this manifested strongly was in the level of public (and private) affection characters demonstrated towards each other. Coming from a background where women frequently hug each other, and men often touch their women friends in common, everyday gestures, I found myself quick to assume that similar behaviour would be practiced by the characters. I was wrong. Even in cases where I was aware that there were certain restrictions, such as a man touching a devadasi, or the way a man and woman greet each other differently, I still found that I had a tendency to casualize these interactions, failing to observe the 'strict' restrictions that would have been common in Southern India during the period the novel covers.

One of the other key areas that I had difficulty in was creating an accurate setting. Everything from the building materials used in houses and roads to the number of rooms, levels, stairs, etc. that a house was likely to have, had to be carefully examined by Dr. Mandakranta Bose for her approval. For example, one of the earlier edited versions of the novel included a description of a wooden staircase and dance floor located in the gurukulam, the dance school Padma attended. This brought an immediate response from Dr. Bose, who informed me that wood was rarely used in building in the South because it rotted so quickly in the hot humid air. This passage also sparked a book search for the correct materials with which to 'build a stage', materials I could then use to create an accurate feeling for the dance platform in that era and region in India. The struggle to find correct building materials for the setting extended from the road surface in the market to the walkway in the temple gardens, one which provided me with countless rewrites and wasted paragraphs of what I felt was beautifully written, and now totally useless, setting material.

Although I found working in the context of an Indian setting extremely challenging, pushing myself to take on a project like this has dramatically improved both my understanding and my appreciation of the South Indian cultures that formed the community framework of the novel. I feel I have learned a great deal about the everyday world in which the devadasis lived in the earlier part of this century, a vision created by many hours of painstaking research and editing guided by the constant assistance of Dr. Mandakranta Bose. The effort has resulted in what I feel is a significant contribution to the field of research on the lives of devadasis in the earlier half of this century. No other work I have come across has offered a picture of their lives beyond descriptions of their roles in ritual and sexual liaisons. I firmly believe that in order to perceive these women as real people who occupied a particular space in the history of India, it

is necessary to envision their lives for what they were to the women themselves, not just in the ways that they affected others in their community. As a result, I struggled greatly in the novel to create a balance between the characters themselves and the historical events that they experienced.

### **Prostitutes and Nuns:**

#### **The Celibacy Debate Revisited**

It is important to note, before I begin this discussion, that the words 'prostitute' and 'common' are ill-fitting English approximations of the ideas I am trying to express. Because of the difficulties in translation, not only between languages but also between cultural expressions, I have fallen back on these terms for lack of finding better ones in English. However, because I am relying on these words, it is important for me to explain the context in which they are being used and the meaning I am trying to convey. As I will soon be discussing in detail, India recognizes distinctions in its 'personal entertainers'. Devadasis are servants of the God, residing in the temple. When I make reference to 'common prostitutes', I am not intending to indicate that there is anything ordinary about them as individuals, but am trying to express the distinction between devadasis and the alamkaradasis, women who had sexual relations for money with a man from any caste. Because of the tightly structured nature of Indian society at the time the novel takes place, a comparison of devadasis with 'common prostitutes' is only meant to indicate the break down of the rigid rules that prevented a devadasi from having relations with a man of the non-Brahmin caste, something which was a service provided by the alamkaradasis. Having no fixed caste system in the West, the term 'common man' is meant to indicate a man belonging to a non-Brahmin caste; it is not meant to convey a value judgment on the personal worth of such men. Having provided a closer



understanding of what I am intending to convey with these terms, I will now proceed with the discussion.

The debate which has formulated the bulk of the research available to me on the topic of devadasi centers on whether or not the temple dancers were really temple prostitutes. Texts such as The Devadasi Cult: A Sociological Analysis and The Devadasi System in Ancient India assume without question that the devadasis were in fact prostitutes, and therefore approach all their research questions from this angle. Leslie Orr, in her book Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God, quotes from several sources which demonstrate this obvious predisposition to write negatively about the devadasis. These quotes are selected from both European and Hindu sources, demonstrating that it was not only explorers and colonizers from Europe who viewed the dancer as prostitutes. K. Rangachari wrote that "Deva-dasis are dancing girls attached to Tamil temples, who subsist by dancing and music, and the practice of 'the oldest profession in the world.'"<sup>3</sup> J.N. Farquhar observed "how foul the atmosphere is in which this custom thrives may be realized from the hideous sculptures visible on the gates and walls of many Hindu temples in Central and Southern India."<sup>4</sup> These quotes are only a small sample of what has been written concerning devadasis and the question of their involvement in prostitution.

Although many women authors of the present have aggressively sought to unpack and disprove the automatic assumption that all temple dancers were prostitutes, it still persists widely in India. The attempt to explore the topic of devadasis and prostitution within a culturally specific context is further complicated by the fact that the system which surrounded and supported the devadasis no longer exists. "Much of our understanding of the temple women of

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<sup>3</sup>quoted from K. Rangachari, in Orr 2000:3-4

<sup>4</sup>quote from J.N. Farquhar, in Orr 2000:3

India is derived from the representations of these women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in ethnographic accounts and in the decisions and debates about their character that took place in Indian courts and in the press."<sup>5</sup>

Because of the one-sided nature of many of these accounts, accurate information about women of this period is hard to come by. What remains of the temple dancing tradition in the present has done little to prompt the majority of researchers to rethink the analysis of their earlier peers. The dedications of dancers that go on today are performed illegally<sup>6</sup>, and the women involved never receive either dance training or the support of the temple, two aspects which formed the backbone of the devadasi way of life for eleven centuries. As a result, women today who considered themselves to be devadasis are in fact prostitutes in the normative sense of the word, and are subject to great abuse due to their vulnerable positions in their communities.

The question of whether or not the devadasis were in fact prostitutes in an earlier period is further complicated by another aspect of the debate. A popular idea that the devadasis were once virgin brides their entire lives clouds the scholarship being produced on the subject of prostitution. One side of the 'origins' debate maintains that these women, once virginal and pure, now exist in a sort of 'fallen' state. "It is well-known that in ancient times women were dedicated to the service of temples, like the Vestal virgins of Europe. They were held to be married to the god... and were generally patterns of piety and propriety. In the present day they are called by the same name but are rather slaves to the licentious passions of the profligate Brahmins of the temples."<sup>7</sup> The European bias is obvious in this quote, which states erroneously that "it is well-

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<sup>5</sup>Orr 2000:4

<sup>6</sup>The Madras Prevention of Dedication Act was passed in 1947. All dedications to the temple after this time are subsequently illegal. There are no recognized or legal rights and protections for these women, unlike those enjoyed by devadasis of previous times. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:xxi)

<sup>7</sup>quoted from M. Montier-Williams, in Orr 2000:4

known" that devadasis were once virgins. This point is one of the unknown, and highly debated 'facts' concerning the origins of the devadasi tradition. However, the author does relate that Brahmins were the ones to seek favours from the dasis, something which Srinivasan's detailed research<sup>8</sup> also concludes. In many other accounts, the devadasis are said to offer their favours to anyone on the steps of the temple, another pervasive and erroneous assumption.

The other side of the debate concerning origins of the tradition believes that the devadasi system, rather than being once virginal, always included some practice of sexual expression for temple dancers. "When temples of Hindu gods came to be built, some people began to feel that there should be singing girls attached to shrines to play music on the occasions of the different services and worships of the day... The introduction of dancing girls in temples tended to lower their moral and spiritual atmosphere."<sup>9</sup> This representative quote demonstrates the kind of ignorance which has so pervasively plagued research on the lives and history of devadasis. Not only does this account assume that these women automatically lowered "the moral and spiritual atmosphere" of the temples, but it states that these girls were brought in to play music. Any dance scholar can easily confirm that although women danced in the temples, it was highly irregular for women to play musical instruments, a role which was seen to be a male position. It was also unusual, in the context of temple performances, for women to sing.<sup>10</sup>

My personal perspective on this is that there is currently no factual evidence available to answer the question of 'virgin' origins. Therefore, attempting to prove the 'moral status' of the dasis' current situation on the basis of an uncertain historical 'fact' makes for faulty logic and weak research. In the

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<sup>8</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1869-70

<sup>9</sup>quoted from A.S. Altekar, in Orr 2000:4

<sup>10</sup>confirmed by Mandakranta Bose

novel I have included both perceptions of the original state of the devadasis, and have endeavoured not to engage in the 'fallen' versus 'always lowly' debate. It is my personal feeling that any 'falling' the devadasis underwent occurred primarily during the century prior to Independence, when the tradition was widely observed to suffer great decline as the Raj and the temple structure that supported the dancing community collapsed.

The debate over whether or not the devadasis once occupied a virginal state as wives of the god has wide-reaching ramifications in the way that today's writers have approached the topic of prostitution. As Srinivasan has widely discussed, the question of 'celibacy' is subject to the colonial and Hindu perceptions that a woman must be either a saint or a demon, a dutiful wife or an adulterous temptress<sup>11</sup>. Originally, Hindu tradition recognized three distinct branches of dancers/ female servants: rajadasis (courtesans, court entertainers), devadasis (temple dancers, wives of the God) and alamkaradasis (common prostitutes accessible to the common man)<sup>12</sup>. However, as time progressed, these lines became blurred in both the communities themselves and in the research which sought to discuss them. I have relied on Mandakranta Bose's analysis of the different types of dancers (court, temple and common), a perspective which comes through the dance historian and has been widely ignored by other authors. If nothing else, I hope that this added perspective will help to bring the little-explored idea of different types of dance to the foreground, something I feel significantly affects the debate on whether or not all dancers are prostitutes. Although Leslie Orr, in her attempt to define and explore 'temple women', has observed that not all women mentioned in connection with the

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<sup>11</sup>Srinivasan 1998:106

<sup>12</sup>Bose 2002:11

temples were actually 'temple women'<sup>13</sup>, she is either unaware of, or does not pursue the distinction between devadasis and alamkaradasis.

In order to recreate the climate of Southern India in the 1920s and 30s, I have given preference to Srinivasan's perspective on the issue of prostitution. Her research states that rather than being common prostitutes, devadasis enjoyed sexual relations by choice with a patron, a man with wealth and appreciation of the arts from the Brahmin class.<sup>14</sup> Although not without its problems, I have found that Srinivasan's articles do a tremendous job of unpacking the stereotypes associated with devadasis, in order to understand the temple structure that they participated in maintaining during this period. She is also constantly aware of the social ramifications of the celibacy/ prostitution debate, and has also analyzed the economic role of devadasis played in their communities, something unique to her study on temple dancing. I feel that Srinivasan's works provide the most accurate and well-researched picture of life during this period, a topic which has been largely ignored as simple 'prostitution' by other authors.

### **Reform Versus Revival:**

#### **Groups Opposing Temple Dance**

Generally, two distinct branches of reform developed around the topic of dance and devadasis in the century prior to Independence. One group argued that the tradition was one of loose women and that it should be done away with altogether. The other group maintained that the devadasis were victims of a harsh culture, and that they should be rescued by having the tradition ended and the art of dance transferred to respectable women where the art itself could be

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<sup>13</sup>Orr 2000:6-7

<sup>14</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1870-72

salvaged, even though the artist herself disappeared into history. These reformers theorized that the removal of the temple dedication system would ensure that no future women would be subjected to the life of a temple prostitute. The later opinion (in favour of preserving and transferring the art of dance) finally won out, although its success was almost entirely dependent on the wealth, influence and political power of the Brahmin families who took it up as a cause in the larger Reform Movement.

The significance of these groups in relationship to the devadasis themselves is that neither side saw fit to protect the dancers in the position they currently held at the time when reform movements first began. From the very beginning, the term 'reform' applied only to the art form of dance itself. As far as the artists were concerned, reformers actively sought the eradication of their position. There was no lobbying group active at the time to which the devadasis could turn for assistance.

### **Creating a Voice:**

#### **Devadasis Speak**

One of the main things noted by Srinivasan<sup>15</sup> was the lack of protest by the dancers themselves over the forced disappearance of their tradition. Although researchers such as Kersenboom-Story, Marglin and Mudgal have conducted interviews with the now elderly surviving dasis, there is virtually no account of devadasi voices during the time when their decline was rapidly occurring. Devadasis themselves have not spoken out on the subject, making it difficult for me to put words into the characters' mouths.

I can speculate that there were several reasons for the devadasis' lack of public voice on the subject of their own futures. I believe that they had virtually

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<sup>15</sup>Srinivasan 1998:98-99

no vehicle for their expression to effectively counteract the negative publicity they were receiving from so many other places. I also believe that they saw themselves as having little power to prevent the decline and disappearance of their tradition. This is, however, merely my own speculation. Debates concerning the degree of victimization experienced by devadasis<sup>16</sup> have raged for decades, debates to which I can see no easy or obvious conclusion.

Although I have included passages which describe the victimization of the temple dancers, I have also tried to portray them as women active in their own futures. Despite the fact that the concept of women's agency is a modern one, that doesn't mean that women actively influencing the course of their own lives is either modern or belongs exclusively to the field of Women's Studies. Although the concept of examining agency hasn't been pursued until relatively recently, it is my contention that women's agency did exist in earlier times. Srinivasan's research on the economic and local power that devadasis exercised would indicate a significant amount of what we now term 'agency'. My aim has been to strike a balance between modern concepts of women's agency and the degree to which the devadasis faced limited options and some level of victimization. The perspective I have chosen is that it is possible for women to be victimized without necessarily becoming victims. The characters face negative situations, situations where they find themselves at a great disadvantage as women and temple dancers, but they respond to them without surrendering themselves to these events.

By choosing the historical fiction format, I was hoping to create the impression that these women were real and that the situations they faced were moments of actual occurrence, not just events that authors of the present struggle to put one spin on or another. I recognize the difficulties in this because

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<sup>16</sup>Srinivasan 1998:98-99

I too am an author trying to depict the lives of the devadasis in a particular way. But the novel format, I feel, has allowed me to voice contradicting opinions and ideas as a unified whole. Fiction is almost more 'real' in this sense than non-fiction because, like life, it includes contradictions, multiple truths and occasional moments of unity.

### **Creating the Setting:**

#### **Choices of Location and Community Structure**

Although Marglin's book, Wives of the God-King, is a wonderful source of information on Saivite devadasis in the Puri area of Eastern India<sup>17</sup>, the majority of sources I found discussed the Vaishnavite devadasis of the Madras area. I have therefore set the novel here, where I found the most information and the incredibly important Prevention of Dedication Act was enacted in 1947. I have therefore been careful to analyze the references I used for differences between Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions, and have focused the historical information on this specific region of India.

### **Creating a Timeline:**

#### **Historical Significance of Dates Corresponding with Characters' Lives**

I have carefully placed the novel between two significant dates, 1910 and 1947. In 1910 public dedications were stopped<sup>18</sup>, marking the first significant date in the decline of the devadasi tradition. Although there are dates relating to the decline previous to this, they pertain to steps taken by those outside the tradition, such as protesters and reformers. The end of public dedications was a

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<sup>17</sup>Although the majority of devadasis in this region of India are dedicated to Jaganattha, the Lord of Dance, Marglin chose to research a group who worshipped Shiva.

<sup>18</sup>Srinivasan 1998:100



step taken by the devadasis themselves<sup>19</sup>, and so it is the date I chose to place emphasis on. The first scene opens in 1917, with the main character, Padma, celebrating her seventh birthday. Padma's birth coincides with the end of public dedications in 1910. The other significant date is 1947, when the Prevention of Dedication Act was passed in Madras, marking the official end of the tradition. Devadasis dedicated after this date received little or no formal dance training and were not supported by the temple structure that is discussed in detail in the novel. Although the story itself concludes in the mid 1930s, when the tradition effectively, if not legally, ended, there is an epilogue describing the tradition up to and beyond 1947.

### **The Cast of Characters:**

#### **Voices Representing Significant Aspects of Devadasi Life**

In my analysis I recognized three distinct periods in the history of the devadasis: the ancient, mythological era; the historical (Chola) period; and the modern period (1850-1950). As a result, I created three characters to represent these stages. Gauri, the grandmother in the novel, represents the earliest period. She is full of stories and behaves unpredictably. She is representative of the uncertain tradition in which the devadasis find their origins. The mother, Kamala, is scientific and logical. She represents the historical period and her voice speaks for the tradition when it was at its peak. Padma, the daughter whose story the novel traces, is symbolic of the modern period. Her birth coincides with the time when public dedications were stopped, marking her life as one which occupied the end times of the tradition. She is uncertain and shy, a mere shadow of what her mother and grandmother were, although she too learns to come into her own. She is representative of the tradition in its final

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<sup>19</sup>Srinivasan 1998:100

days, and also speaks for the transition of the art of dance from its place in the temple to its place in the hands of the public. Padma's miscarriage late in the text is symbolic of her position as the last of the devadasis, a line which will no longer extend beyond her lifetime.

Other characters have also been included for their significance. Padma's guru, Madhavan, represents the canonical teachings of dance. His is the male voice of authority, and he speaks for the tradition of men who taught women to perform. His eventual union with Padma's mother is symbolic of the harmony achieved between the dance masters and the temple performers in an earlier period, one which is then recreated differently in a modern setting in the new art of Bharata Natyam.

Padma's uncle, Sundaram, is a violent and jealous man who covets Padma sexually. He is representative of what Srinivasan identified as gender tensions in the household, arising from the dominance of women in the cinnaveedu (the temple housing complex), a dominance that was at odds with normative traditions of gender structure in India<sup>20</sup>. His wife, Vimala, is representative of the few women in the cinnaveedu who were not dancers and who therefore performed household duties such as cooking and cleaning.

Vimala's closest friend is Uma, a woman who was adopted into the temple. The creation of her character is simply to demonstrate the unusual privilege of adoption that the devadasis enjoyed. Uma is brought into the family by Minakshi, a woman with no children of her own. Minakshi's relationship with the other women in the cinnaveedu is also strained and, like Sundaram, she represents the jealousies and tensions that were active in the everyday realities of the temple dancers.

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<sup>20</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1871-72

The priests in the novel have no voices and no names. Although the priests were the supreme authorities in the temple, I did not feel compelled to make this a novel about their participation in the tradition. Although they appear active as a united whole, thereby simplifying their position, I saw fit to reduce their importance. After all, a thesis can only be so long, and I felt that their position could easily be addressed by a few short passages. I saw no need to develop elaborate individual characters.

There is also Mr. N. Iyer in the story, a man who becomes Padma's patron. He receives no first name (all other characters have only first names) to indicate his outside connections to the temple. He and his wife share a name, one which Padma does not. Although patrons were close to the dancers, they were not family. This is why I chose to avoid giving him a first name.

Madhavan's mother, always referred to this way in the text, also is symbolic of something important. The gurukulam (dance school) was very different in size and gender structure than the cinnaveedu (the household of dancers). Unlike the matrifocal temple house which was demographically dominated by women, the gurukulam was patrifocal and had relatively equal numbers of men and women. I have tried to convey this by electing to refer to the guru's mother only in her relationship to him, indicating that her identity was essentially bound to her son's, something which was the opposite for temple dancers.

### **In Conclusion:**

Although there is no way to include all that there is to say on the dancers and their histories, I have done my best to provide a broad and detailed look at the major components and events in their lives, and to place it in a specific and vital historical period. The object of this was not to present just one argument

but many, and to bind them all with the idea that no matter which perspective on their lives might be favoured by an individual author, the most important thing to remember is that the devadasis were, above all else, real women.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Inheritance**

#### **Cinnaveedu, Early Autumn 1917**

Dawn was still two hours from rising in Madras when the sound of chanting and drums erupted in the mud brick streets. The noise rose like the flight of Garuda<sup>1</sup>, sweeping over the walls of the temple compound and in through the glassless windows of the cinnaveedu<sup>2</sup>, home of the temple dancers. When it arrived, it found a companion waiting, for Padma had been awake all night. The child's tired eyes flew open, meeting the arrival of the sound with sharp awareness. Even though the darkness of night still swam around her, she knew the utsava<sup>3</sup>, a day of festival, had started.

Padma was filled with nervousness and apprehension. No matter how hard she had tried to fall asleep, thoughts of the utsava had crept into her mind and prevented her from escaping into dreams of other places, other times. She was so tired, but despite her long vigil, Padma leapt up quickly at the sound of people in the streets. Their arrival marked the official beginning of the celebrations and the end of Padma's long and sleepless night. Her anxiety made her feel claustrophobic in the house and she rushed out to the dark gardens that lay enclosed between the temple buildings and the cinnaveedu where the dancers lived. Somewhere just over the horizon the light of the sun was racing towards her, eager to shine on a day of festival that Padma would gladly have never seen.

Bare feet slapped on the cold stone of the temple grounds<sup>4</sup>, carrying Padma outside to the inner courtyard. There she paused under the branches of a tree and was lost to anyone who might pass by, a shadow hidden in deeper shadows. In the sky above her there was no moon<sup>5</sup> and Padma steered her course through the darkness by the guidance of cold stars burning silently in the fading night. The year was 1917.

Across India the same cold stars shone down on the blue ice of the Himalayas, the great living body of the Ganga river, the sacred Golden Temple of Amritsar. Here violence and slaughter would erupt amongst the people in the

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<sup>1</sup>Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu, was the great bird who carried Rama, an avatara of Vishnu, in the battle against the demon Ravana to rescue his beloved wife Sita. In other accounts he is recorded to be an asthra (arrow of supernatural force) who took the form of an eagle and fought for Ram in the battle. (Narayan 1972:157)

<sup>2</sup>The cinnaveedu was the home of a family of devadasis. It was located close to the temple and was gifted to a family of dancers as part of their earnings for temple service. The cinnaveedu did not remain with the family in perpetuity, only as long as there were dancers of the family line who still performed for the temple. (Srinivasan n.d.:207-209)

<sup>3</sup>utsava - Tamil or Sanskrit word for festival

<sup>4</sup>Temple dancers and their children were housed in the cinnaveedu that was part of the larger temple complex. It was considered appropriate, understandably, for wives of the god to share his house. (Srinivasan 1999:206)

<sup>5</sup>The festival of Dipavali occurs at the time of a new moon in late October/ early November. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:132)

years to come, letting loose a burning anger that pushed and bubbled ever closer to the surface like the scalding lava of a volcano seeking a crack in the fragile crust of the earth. But for the child in the garden, these things belonged to another people, another India. She was too young to understand the leaders rising up, answering the cry of a nation suffocating under foreign rule, forgetting itself in an effort to shatter the glass ceiling that was cutting off its air. But somewhere in the course of Padma's life, in the wake of the struggle between a nation that was dying and a nation seeking to be born, she would find that visionaries had sacrificed her future in order to rewrite their past. The tides were turning against the temple dancers. Although nobody could say for certain what would happen, a feeling of uneasiness had become a familiar companion to each of the women in the temple. It was something they had ceased to question, something that was part of their everyday lives like breathing and the march of seasons.

The sound of the cymbals and drums<sup>6</sup> pursued Padma as she moved through the gardens, growing louder as the crowds outside the temple increased. However, now that she was up and moving, Padma felt a small relief. She walked carefully in the garden, not wanting to wake the water lilies swaying slightly in the morning air. They stood silently, damp with dew and pink like the soft skin of her mother's lips. On the surface of the pond below the lilies, white lotuses opened their ivory petals, peeking up at the child in the garden from the mirror surface of the pond. Standing amongst the silent and sympathetic flowers, Padma willed herself to calm down. She shook her body, flinging drops of anxiety off her fingertips like beads of water, and the earth under her naked feet absorbed them silently and without protest.

Padma tried to keep her mind off the festival, but the utsava was only a symbol of her problems; they ran far deeper than a single day of celebration. In her mind words her mother had told her ran over and over again, looping back on themselves like the turning of a wheel. They were the words that explained her existence, her place in the world, the last daughter in a line of devadasis<sup>7</sup> that stretched back for centuries, women who were dancers of the temple and wives of the god.

"It's important to know who you are, why we dance in the temple, why we offer ourselves as brides to the divine. In the beginning, there was no dance on earth. It belonged only to the gods. But the great Lord Siva knew what a gift it would be for all people and so he told a devout and learned man named Bharata<sup>8</sup> the secrets, and Bharata wrote them for us. And so it is written in the Natya Shastra, 'The Vedas are not to be used by women or sudra<sup>9</sup> castes.

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<sup>6</sup>These instruments are traditionally used at this festival. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:122)

<sup>7</sup>Devadasi is a word meaning "servant/slave of the god". Dasi is loosely translated as 'dancer', although it indicated a woman in service to something. Rajadasis were servants of the Raj (king/court) and devadasis were servants of the temple. (Bose 2000:12)

<sup>8</sup>Bharata was a sage who wrote the Natya Shastra on the arts of drama and dance in the 2nd century C.E. (Bose 1991:109)

<sup>9</sup>lower caste

Therefore, create another Veda, meant for all varnas<sup>10,11</sup> And so it was that dance was given as a path of devotion to all people who couldn't read the Vedas, the books of religious teachings. And in return for this gift from the gods, we give ourselves. And we celebrate this exchange of our love with dance, for it pleases the great Lord Siva to see us fulfill his wishes for our happiness."

As she sat alone in the dark garden, Padma listened to her mother's words echoing in her head. She chanted the story to herself like a mantra, willing its power to sweep across her like a rainstorm and cool her sweating anxious face. The story was Padma's oldest memory, although she had heard her mother tell it so many times she couldn't say when it was she had first heard it. She only knew that it was the first thing she had ever known, a story woven into her being, part of her very fibers. Her mother had likely told the story when Padma was still in her womb; perhaps she had told it to her even before, in a past life<sup>12</sup>.

Padma sat alone in the garden of the inner courtyard that day of all days because she was in hiding. The tension in the air flooded in through the trellised gates from the street on the other side of the temple walls. The crowd gathered before the stone gates, waiting for the time during the utsava when the god Krishna, a manifestation of Vishnu, would be paraded outside the temple grounds<sup>13</sup>. Padma had counted up to the arrival of Dipavali<sup>14</sup> by the beads of sweat on her brow, and as the date had grown closer, so had her turmoil. The monsoons had ended and left in their wake a pleasant but intensifying heat and the dust of a respite from the torrential rains. The gentle winds of early autumn whispered through the town, rustling trees and plants that were bursting into bloom. Dipavali was a celebration held in the month of Aippaci macam to honour Sri Krishna's victory over an asura, the demon Narakasura. The festival was always held at the time of a new moon after the rainy season was over. Dipavali marked the time when the forces of light began to overcome the forces of dark, and the cosmic power struggle shifted to bring the people sunlight and

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<sup>10</sup>Sanskrit, meaning groups or levels of caste

<sup>11</sup>Natya Shastra 4. 12-13 (Bose 1991:108).

<sup>12</sup>As Vaishnavites, worshippers of the Hindu god Vishnu, Padma and her family would believe in reincarnation. The Hindu faith holds a belief that the number of lives a person lives is dependent on their behaviour in each life. Leading a good and dutiful life and following the laws of karma results in a higher rebirth. "Eventually, after many lifetimes, a person will reach the level of spiritual perfection in which she or he can follow the path of knowledge and reach spiritual perfection." (Ludwig 1996:112)

<sup>13</sup>During festivals the deity was paraded out of the temple and around the streets while special dances and ceremonies were performed. This was true of most festivals, and is not specific to the Dipavali festival being described in the opening chapters. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:124-126)

<sup>14</sup>Dipavali is a festival of lights. For Tamil worshippers, Dipavali is held in honour of Sri Krishna's victory over the demon (asura) Narakasua. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:126) For Telugu people in the South it is held in honour of Sri Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity and fertility. Both her and her husband Vishnu are honoured. The festival, held at the time of a new moon, is a new year's festival. In other parts of India, other gods are worshipped at this festival. It is held in Aippaci macam, a lunar month roughly corresponding to mid-October/early November in the western calendar. (Kinsley 1988:37)

crops in place of torrential thunderstorms, floods and smallpox. Although still in the dangerous or dark period of the annual cycle, the Dipavali celebration brought people the reassurance that goodness was winning; the gods, devas, were triumphing over the anti-gods, asuras<sup>15</sup>.

The arrival of Dipavali also marked the beginning of Padma's seventh year. Born to a prestigious and honoured line of devadasis, Padma was well past the time when she should have been asked to begin her training<sup>16</sup>, to be chosen as a bride of Vishnu. But her anxiously awaited sixth year had come and gone as quietly as a shadow disappearing at sunset. In a family where her mother and grandmother had both begun training at the age of five and generations of women before them had been given to dance and to Vishnu, Padma was being left behind.

While Padma sat, lost in her own thoughts, someone had come through the complex lighting the torches on the walls. The newly lit lamps splashed light through the tree branches beside her, forming large splotches of shadow that wriggled up and down her bare arms in the early morning breeze. Padma watched them move, aware that each leaf print barely fit across the width of her skinny arm. She sighed deeply, noticing again how there was far too little difference between the shadowed patches and the light; she had been born darker than both her mother and her father. Her long hair hung down her back in a *veni*<sup>17</sup>, a single thick braid. It matched the black bushy eyebrows perching high above her long skinny nose. Her dark eyes were full of curiosity and wonder, but her shy nature hid them under a downcast stare.

Padma was not a beautiful girl, but neither was she unpleasant to look at. She belonged instead to that category in which most people find themselves, a part of the indistinguishable middle. Padma went unnoticed in a crowd, and rather than being noticeable in any way, she was one of those people against whom others seemed to naturally stand out. Because she had neither beauty nor ugliness, she attracted no attention, for it is human nature not to notice that which can be found everywhere, everyday.

Thoughts of the festival began to crawl under Padma's skirt like ants, wriggling between her and the stone bench where she sat until she could no longer hold still. The stars that had hung high above the courtyard walls paled and shrank as the sky overhead pulsed into a livid, waking blue. Soon the hot sun would be beating down on her until she was flattened like rice under a pestle. A sense of urgency whispered to her and Padma knew it was time to go.

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<sup>15</sup>The Hindu calendar envisions time as a perpetual struggle for balance between the forces of light and darkness, gods and anti-gods. As with many other religions of the world, the concept of a greater cosmic struggle between good and evil is used to explain seasonal cycles. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:103)

<sup>16</sup>Dancers traditionally began training anywhere from the age of five to the age of seven. It was preferable that a girl begin training in her fifth year. (Srinivasan n.d.:211)

<sup>17</sup>Sanskrit word for a thick unadorned braid.



The noise of the chants and the drums was with her again like a spirit, and taking Padma under her arms, it lifted her gently but firmly from her stillness. She collected her skirts and headed for the women's quarters. Shapelessly thin and too tall for her age, she always found that her clothes hung in huge loose folds around her. Her height made her look older than she was, a further shame to draw out the fact that she was too old to sit at home untrained. To complicate the situation, her gaunt frame stole from her the promise of a dancer's body and instead left her with the appearance of a young boy. In her head Padma could hear the voice of her mother.

"A dancer must be full-figured, with firm round breasts, a tight waist, and large hips. She must have a beautiful face, sensual lips, and an air of grace."<sup>18</sup>

Padma sighed and waved her hand in front of her face, as though she could push the thought aside with her body, forcing it from her mind. She walked towards the house with reluctant feet.

The lush plants and stone trellises of the inner courtyard yielded to a shadowed archway, marking the entrance of the women's common room. Padma stood in the doorway, cooling herself in its shadow, drinking in deeply its promise of dusk and an end to her private day of reckoning. Inside the room the women were awash in a churning current of colours and sounds. Bright oranges, saffrons and pinks like flowers freshly opened after the monsoons, swept past the doorway in the arms of the dancers. Ankle bells<sup>19</sup> tinkled and rattled. Faced with their delicate vibrancy, Padma felt even more awkward, as though she was carved of cumbersome dull grey rock.

"You won't always feel this way," said a soft voice behind her. Padma turned suddenly in the tight space, startled by such an otherworldly response to her thoughts from the shadows behind her. Stepping forward into the light of the doorway, Padma's grandmother appeared like an apparition out of the dark air.

"Patti<sup>20</sup>! I didn't mean.. I didn't say...," started Padma, but she didn't know what it was that she hadn't meant or hadn't said, and so she couldn't defend herself. Her grandmother had an uncanny talent for looking into people, even in unlit, dark corridors. She unnerved people. Many thought her crazy and avoided her. But Padma had always known that what ran in her grandmother was not insanity, but a touch of divinity. It had always drawn Padma to her, and so they were a pair; a shadow and a ghost, standing together in the doorway.

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<sup>18</sup>Bose 2000:8

<sup>19</sup>Ankle bells are given to a devadasi in a ceremony on the occasion of her final dance lesson. This usually occurred one week before a dasi was fully initiated in to the temple service and recognized officially by the state as a qualified devadasi. A dasi was not permitted to appear in ankle bells for any type of performance during her training. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188)

<sup>20</sup>Tamil word for grandmother.

"One day you will be unveiled, eli<sup>21</sup>, my little mouse, and that will be a sight worth seeing," her grandmother said with a gentle but stern confidence. she opened her mouth and spat a line of red betel juice into the corner. "You won't be a stone cracked open, eli, but a beautiful statue revealed slowly by sand in the wind. You're invisible now, but one day you'll shine out like the temple lamp at night and people will wonder how it was that they didn't see you sooner."

Padma sighed deeply, hopefully, and leaned in close against her grandmother's sari and her prophetic promise. Putting her arm around her, Padma's grandmother led her into the light of the common room.

The women inside didn't see them at first, caught up in their whirling tapestry of cloth. But Padma's grandmother's silent and powerful presence soon made itself known. As for Padma, she could have stood awkwardly in the door most of the day and gone unnoticed, unless someone had perhaps wanted to get by her. And then she would have been rapidly forgotten, out of their mind as soon as she was out of sight, and sometimes even before.

"Oh, there you are old mother!" cried one of the girls fondly. "And look, you have our little mouse with you! We were wondering where she'd gotten to."

Padma smiled with relief as she recognized Vimala in the swirling tapestry of fabrics and faces. The young woman was Padma's sister-in-law, married to her uncle Sundaram, her mother's brother. Vimala was seventeen, old enough to be well-liked by the more mature women and young enough to play with Padma in the gardens when she wasn't busy cooking or doing housework. Although none of the devadasis performed household duties, Vimala was not a dancer and so she had all the regular obligations that came with marriage to a mortal man. For the temple dancers, wifely duties could only be performed for Vishnu, their husband, and so they were released from doing any of the normal household chores<sup>22</sup>. A devadasi cooking would have been highly improper, something Padma always regretted. Although she didn't have a great desire to spend all day in the hustle and noise of the huge house kitchens, she had always loved the smell of food. One of her biggest secret wishes was to one day be able to create on her own the aromas of sweet spice simmering in the pan, teasing the tongue with its prickly touch. Such an ability, she thought, would be truly divine.

Her attention returned from thoughts of mysore pak<sup>23</sup> and savory dosas<sup>24</sup> to the room around her. Somewhere here, under the silks and the saris, was Padma's mother. She slipped carefully through the busy throng to find her.

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<sup>21</sup>Tamil word meaning a female mouse.

<sup>22</sup>"As god's wife, the devadasi was excluded in principle from the obligations and privileges of the Hindu grihasta code which, strictly speaking, referred to the house holding life based on the sacrament of marriage between a man and a woman and the rights and duties - domestic, conjugal and caste - that flowed from that fact. The devadasi, for instance, was not allowed to cook, an emblematic activity for the Hindu housewife." (Srinivasan 1998:100)

<sup>23</sup>A sweet made of gram flour.

Padma, despite her thin shape, had always felt that her presence in a crowd was unmistakably huge. While others, even close members of her own house, barely noticed her, Padma felt that she was the most visible person in any room, marked out by her awkwardness. Her shyness, her only shield, was also the greatest betrayal of her body, a betrayal that had been with her all her life.

"Padma! Here, help me put this on," said a voice behind a huge hanging wall of shining hair.

"Amma!" cried Padma happily in a small but joyful voice. She went straight away and flung her arms around the graceful neck emerging from the dark hair.

"Oouuuff, Padma," her mother said, picking her up, "you are getting so big. Here, if I put you up on this, can you help me set my hair?"

She deposited Padma on top of a small stool. Padma, now in her mother's presence, seemed to come into her own and she worked quickly to braid the long tresses of her mother's thick hair into a neat dhammilla<sup>25</sup>, the decorated braid a dancer wore for performances. As Padma attached the gold plates that adorned the braid, she thought how her mother's plait reminded her of the back of a snake, linked scales sliding across each other to produce a fluid, swishing motion. After the dhammilla was in place, her mother then passed her up her head decorations, a surya<sup>26</sup> and chandra, sun and moon for either side of her head. When these were in place, she handed Padma a rope of pearls and gold to place on the part of her hair. As Padma laid it across her mother's head, she noticed how delicate and elegant the decorations looked. It was as though the night sky had come to nest in the black silky tresses of her mother's hair, sun and moon glimmering brightly across a horizon of tiny ocean pearls, stars plucked from the sea. Down her amma's back Vasuki, the great cosmic serpent, stretched himself, writhing with energy as Padma's mother moved.

After she was done with her amma's hair, Padma fixed the clasp of her mother's mango design necklace<sup>27</sup> around her elegant neck. The mango was a symbol of immortality, its fruit being so delicious that it was believed to bestow the gift of eternal life to those who consumed it. When Padma was done fixing the paisley design mango necklace, she leant forward onto her mother's back and Kamala gently lifted her daughter off the stool and placed her on the ground.

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<sup>24</sup>Savory crepes made from a batter of lentil and rice flour.

<sup>25</sup>Sanskrit word for the thick braid a dancer wears. (Bose 1991:79)

<sup>26</sup>Surya is Sanskrit for sun. The surya was worn opposite the chandra, Sanskrit for moon, on either side of the dancer's head in Bharata Natyam performances. (Ragini Devi 1990:46)

<sup>27</sup>Ragini Devi 1990:46

"Beautiful amma," smiled Padma proudly. "Vishnu will be so pleased with you."

"And with you, my little daughter. It won't be long now until it's your turn," returned her mother before stooping down to adjust her ankle bells.

Padma sighed sadly, fearing that her mother's kind confidence was misplaced. She looked up enviously at her mother's beauty. Kamala was a dancer of the highest caliber. Unlike her grandmother, whose fire had made her dance performances so close to divine that people became nervous, Padma's mother demonstrated a mathematical precision with every movement. She was reassuringly human, but brilliantly exact in each gesture and facial expression. Her beauty and natural grace made people feel as though they were watching a character from an epic. Kamala was always gentle and enigmatic, like Lakshmi<sup>28</sup>, the goddess of domestic order and prosperity. In sharp contrast to her daughter, Padma's grandmother often showed aspects of Kali<sup>29</sup>, the battlefield goddess of destruction, and in her youth she danced so that the full power and chaos of the divine bubbled far too close to the surface for comfortable viewing.

On the other side of the room, still standing by the doorway, Padma's grandmother was helping the dancers prepare. She wore a crisp green and turquoise sari over a blue blouse. Because they were married to Vishnu and gods did not die, devadasis were never widowed. As a result of this they always wore a blouse under their saris. They were nityasumangali<sup>30</sup>, ever auspicious, and never performed customs of widows<sup>31</sup> such as going without a blouse or removing their toe rings. Padma looked closely at her grandmother, observing the way she moved, her soft and subtle hand gestures. From under the vibrant material of her sari, the light of her skin seemed to shine out, a soft flame dancing under blue silk.

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<sup>28</sup>Lakshmi is the goddess associated with domestic order, wealth, prosperity, fertility and good fortune. She is the wife of Vishnu. In some parts of India, Dipavali, the festival being held in this chapter, is the most important festival in which Lakshmi is worshipped today. (Kinsley 1988:37)

<sup>29</sup>Kali is the battlefield goddess, associated with war and chaos. She appears as a frightening, demon-like woman and has no male consort in this form. At other times she is held to be a manifestation of the goddess Parvati, dutiful wife of Siva. In Bengal, Dipavali is celebrated with a blood sacrifice to Kali. However, this is not performed in the region where the novel takes place, in the southern province of Madras (now Chennai). (Kinsley 1988:116)

<sup>30</sup>Under normal pan-Indian custom, to be widowed is considered unfortunate, unlucky. Devadasis, because they were married to the divine, could never be widowed and were therefore considered to be lucky women in the community. It was part of the devadasi's role to bless the marriages of other women, in hopes that they could pass on their luck in avoiding widowhood to others. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:xix)

<sup>31</sup>In many parts of India, when a woman is widowed she goes without the blouse commonly worn under a sari. Often these women will wear only a single wrap of white cloth to indicate their loss. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:83)

'It's understandable,' thought Padma to herself. Her grandmother's name was Gauri<sup>32</sup>, meaning golden or bright one. She was named after the goddess Parvati<sup>33</sup> who, in her other forms, was sometimes Kali, the goddess of war and destruction. In Hindu mythology Kali was often pictured wearing severed human body parts around her waist and wrists, riding the back of a hungry ghost and living in the cremation ground, dancing and laughing madly<sup>34</sup>. 'That suits her too,' thought Padma, well aware of her grandmother's many shifting moods.

"She used to dance so wonderfully," Kamala said when she noticed Padma observing her grandmother. "It would take my breath away to see her. It was like watching a thunderstorm in the monsoon, or the light of god shining back at you from a rip in space, a rip in the shape of her body."

Padma's mother sighed and turned away. "Now all she does is chew betel and stain her teeth red. What a waste of her beauty."

"Why doesn't she dance anymore, amma?" Padma asked with timid concern. She was very protective of her loved ones, and wanted to know what had stopped her grandmother from joining the others in the festival.

"Others forgive her refusal to perform, her early retirement, as a sign of her age and her madness, but all of us in this room know that her pretended craziness is no excuse. I'm not even sure why she stopped dancing, but her last public performance was held in the year I finished my training."

Kamala sighed wearily as she looked at her mother, wishing she understood better the choices Gauri had made and the person she was now. Gauri, sensing eyes on her, looked up to meet Kamala's gaze and smiled. Kamala held the look for a moment and then relaxed, feeling comforted that although she didn't fully understand her mother, Gauri understood her.

Padma's grandmother was the Taikkizhavi<sup>35</sup>, or 'old mother' of the cinnaveedu. As a dancer of high renown in her own times and now retired, Gauri

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<sup>32</sup> Gauri is a manifestation of the goddess Parvati. Upset with Siva's chiding about her dark complexion, Parvati discarded her dark outer skin (which then became Kali, the dark goddess) and revealed the brightness of her beauty underneath. In this form Parvati is known as Gauri, the golden one. (Kinsley 1988:46)

<sup>33</sup> Parvati is Siva's wife and consort, corresponding to the partnership between Vishnu and Lakshmi. She has very little in the way of stories concerning only her own mythology; nearly all stories of Parvati also contain Siva. In her other forms she is Kali, Gauri, Sita. She represents marital devotion and motherhood, as well as the creative powers of the universe. (Kinsley 1988:35-46)

<sup>34</sup> Kinsley 1988:116

<sup>35</sup> "The Taikkizhavi or 'old mother' was the senior-most female member (of the cinnaveedu). (The matriarch) was normally one of the more renowned dancers of her time who, after retirement, exercised control over younger members (of the temple community). The strict discipline of this old lady over both the private and professional lives of her relatives, her control over joint income, its pooling and expenditures provided the fundamental source of unity for the dasi household." (Srinivasan 1985:1872)

was responsible for the welfare of the other dancers in the household. The matriarch's title afforded Gauri a rank of high prestige within the family community, but it also brought with it a lot of responsibility. The Taikkizhavi was in charge of all the money earned by the women; it was her job to see that it was shared among them and that a portion went to the girls' gurus and to entertainment for the elite who attended dance performances. All in all, the world of the devadasis was a highly lucrative one<sup>36</sup>, but a world where money flowed out in lavish expenditures as quickly as it was received from generous patrons.

Although Kamala knew the strength of influence her mother still had over the household, Gauri's eccentricities made others look to Kamala as the head of the family. It was widely believed that Kamala would be the next Taikkizhavi and many treated her as though this was already the case. When Gauri was at her most outrageous, it seemed to others as though Kamala was mother to her own mother, mediating the situation and instructing Gauri on better behaviour. However, despite what onlookers believed they were witnessing, the mother-daughter relationship between them was far more complex than what could be observed on the surface.

Kamala knew Gauri's mind was still as quick as a striking snake, and recognized her mother playing the clown for deeper reasons than the madness of age. Kamala was very aware of the side of the old woman that ran the household so subtly that few were able to perceive her hand in it. She recognized the ways in which Gauri's supposed madness gave her freedom of movement in the cinnaveedu and an added edge of control over the respect people gave her. They remembered Gauri's performances as a dancer and were not keen to tangle with the old woman who wielded so much divine influence.

There was also another thing that proved to Kamala that Gauri was far from senile. She recognized the mathematical precision and clarity of her mother's mind, put to good use over hours of calculating household finances like a banker counting his coins and weighing them against his debts. It was in these hours spent tallying the earnings and expenses that Kamala felt closest to her mother. Although Gauri's flamboyant, spontaneous nature often put her at odds with Kamala's acute sense of order and logic, in this they were able to work together. The affairs of commerce brought them a common ground, a mutual understanding of how one small corner of the world functioned the same way for both of them.

"I wish she wouldn't do that," Padma's mother said, nodding her head towards the place where Gauri was spitting betel juice into a bucket. "It's such a nasty habit."

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<sup>36</sup>"The excessive lifestyle and lavish spending on hospitality, food and clothing rarely left anything over to be invested in more profitable ways." (Srinivasan 1985:1872)

"Patti says that it's the privilege of a devadasi to chew betel in front of the king. Only dancers and wrestlers are allowed, not even the priests," Padma said, defending her grandmother.

Kamala sighed. What was her mother teaching her daughter?

"Off you go, Padma," Kamala said with a soft smile. "We're all set here and I think if you hurry, you might be able to convince your patti to take you to the festival."

Padma gave her mother a huge hug, feeling that something was amiss because of her questions. She wanted her mother to be happy, especially today.

"Smile, amma," she ordered, beaming at her mother. And with that she scurried out of the way because her mother, without explicitly saying so, had asked her to leave. Kamala watched her go, thinking that despite any other failings, Padma had enough love in her to equal Lakshmi. 'She will be a bride one day,' Kamala thought to herself. 'Vishnu has given her a heart large enough to rival his very own.'

Gauri and Padma made their way through the temple complex towards the festival. As they walked through the torchlit stone corridors, Padma slipped her hand into the crook of her grandmother's arm.

"Patti, will you tell me about Jiv Gosvami<sup>37</sup>?" Padma asked, not because she didn't already know the story of the man's life, but because she loved to hear her grandmother's response. She didn't want to hear about the famous sixteenth century sage from Brindavan<sup>38</sup>; it was another story entirely that she was after.

"Jiv Gosvami! Hhhmmph!" her grandmother answered emphatically. "I tell you, eli, I do not remember the names of men anymore. They have their own historians; let them teach about their own lives!"

Padma waited, a slight smile creeping across her lips. She pretended to hide it and her grandmother pretended not to notice. This was a weekly ritual they enacted; it was Padma's way of asking for a story of some rebellious, radical woman or another, someone whose life story would be told very differently by a guru or her mother. The stories Padma liked best were the ones about courageous women who gave their lives to devotion; women who, like herself, sought to be numbered among Vishnu's beloved.

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<sup>37</sup>Jiv Gosvami lived in the 16th century and was famous, during that time, as a great sage and Krishnaite theologian. However, despite having a strong reputation in his own right, he is well-known in modern times for a dispute he had with Mirabai over women's participation in religious discourse. (Hawley & Juergensmeyer, 1988:126)

<sup>38</sup>Even today, Brindavan is a site that draws Vaishnavite and Krishnaite devotees because it is said to be the place where Krishna was raised. During Mirabai's time, the place attracted a large number of sages, poets and devotees, becoming a sort of open school for discussion and learning about Krishna and Bhakti, the path of devotion.

Feigning a recovery from her pretended offense, Gauri answered with a slight smile of her own.

"I tell you, mouse, I will tell you instead about someone far better than any Jiv Gosvami. I will tell you about Mirabai<sup>39</sup>, the great devotee<sup>40</sup> who gave her love and her life to her precious Mountain Lifter<sup>41</sup>, Krishna. That will be a far better thing to tell a young girl about than any hairy old Jiv what's-his-name!"

Sharp responses to simple things, rapidly shifting moods and a ghostlike presence that disappeared and reappeared at will, even mid-conversation or mid-meal, were Gauri's trademark characteristics. Unconventional and unpredictable, Padma's grandmother displayed a madness that made others think she'd been touched by her devotion. They said her religious nature had gone to her head, that she could no longer distinguish reasonable behaviour. Padma knew better. Her grandmother's religious life hadn't confused her head; it had purified her heart. And Padma knew deep down that behind her grandmother's clowning antics, she observed and understood far more than any other person in the house.

"Now listen carefully, little one," her grandmother always began, "because if women forget how the stories really were, if we forget the lives of our mothers, then no man will kindly restore them to us. They have their own ways of telling, their own versions of our histories. A woman must be a saint or a demon to them<sup>42</sup>. And I tell you, little one, we are all just women.

"Now Mirabai, my Mirabai, was a woman of the north, where Krishna is very popular to the people. And this Mirabai was not any woman to be told what to do by any man! She made a point her whole life of being disobedient to those earthly fathers and husbands because she answered to a higher love. You see,

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<sup>39</sup>The following retelling of Mirabai's life can be found in Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:124-129

<sup>40</sup>Devotees of the divine followed the path of Bhakti, liberation through loving surrender to the god. Followers of Bhakti was known as Bhaktas. Because access to the path of knowledge was limited to men of high caste, women and men of lower castes could not achieve release from samsara, cycles of rebirth, in their present lifetime. Bhakti was first introduced in the Bhagavad Gita, part of the epic the Mahabharata, which was compiled between the 2nd century B.C.E. and the 2nd century C.E. After its initial introduction, the path of devotion as a means of achieving liberation from the cycles of rebirth (samsara) made its reappearance in the medieval period. It was during this time, with the popularity of the puranas, ancient stories of devotion and the divine, that Bhakti came into its own. From that period onward, the path of Bhakti (self-less devotional love and surrender to god) was seen as a legitimate path of achieving liberation and oneness with the divine for people of any gender or caste. (Ludwig 1996:93)

<sup>41</sup>This title is given to Krishna because of the time when he lifted Mount Govardhan above the people and cattle in Braj to protect them from the rain god Indra. This image of Krishna, holding aloft his protection and love, was a favourite title of Mirabai's and appears widely in her poetry as a name for Krishna. (Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:124)

<sup>42</sup>This polarization of women into saint or demon is a widely observed point in modern Hindu scholarship. Although there are many footnote references available as illustrations of this, I will attribute the observation to Mandakranta Bose, because it was during one of her lectures on Women in Hindu Religion that I was first introduced to the idea.



eli, Mirabai, without dedication or ceremony, married herself to Vishnu when she was very young. And nobody, man or woman, could divorce her from him. But many tried very hard.

"They will tell you now, Padma, about what a wonderful devotee and example of virtue she was<sup>43</sup>, but in her own time they called her demon or worse! She was trouble, and you must remember always that what people condemn in their own time may go on to be hailed greatly in the future.

"Now Mirabai, little one, was a princess of Merta<sup>44</sup> who was married young and against her wishes to a prince from another Rajput kingdom. But she never considered the marriage binding, and refused to perform wifely duties to her new family<sup>45</sup>. And nobody today will tell you that demure and well behaved Mirabai flatly refused to share her husband's bed!<sup>46</sup> She wouldn't obey her father-in-law, the king, and refused to give up the company of other Krishna devotees and poets that wandered into the kingdom. As the story goes, she became such a source of shame to her new family that they tried to poison her! What shame did she bring on her new household, I ask you? Only that she would not give up her love of Lord Krishna for some mortal man!

"When they couldn't poison her, for her Mountain Lifter turned the poison to sweetest nectar, Mirabai left and went to Brindavan where the great lord Krishna was raised. And there she met Jiv what's-his-name who wouldn't let her speak with him about holy things because she was a woman! He didn't want to be distracted by her! He was worried he couldn't keep his parts or his mind quiet with her around! Some wise sage, is all I have to say about him! Always a woman's fault when a man can't keep it down!

"But Mirabai was smarter than the great sage, and don't ever let anyone tell you less. She told him that there was only one man in Brindavan, the great Lord Krishna, and before him we are all wives and lovers.<sup>47</sup> And Jiv was so

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<sup>43</sup>Some of the many ways in which the original story of Mirabai have been edited to instruct young women of today in lessons of conformity and duty are described in Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:120-128.

<sup>44</sup>Merta was a Rajput kingdom in what is now the area of Rajasthan in modern day India. (Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:121) Ironically, Rajasthan is one of the few areas in India today where Mirabai is not a widely celebrated religious figure. Because of her wild and rebellious life, the people of Rajasthan have concerns about Mirabai's place as a role model for women, concerned that her influence will not be good for their impressionable daughters.

<sup>45</sup>Mirabai would not bow before her mother in law or the house goddess or behave with proper conduct. She refused her husband's bed and would not listen to the orders of her father-in-law. She associated with wandering devotees and poets, bringing shame on her new family. (Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:125)

<sup>46</sup>This point is highly edited from modern popular culture accounts of Mirabai's life. Because she is held up as a model of devout womanly behaviour, all aspects of her highly controversial life that do not fit this model have been carefully edited in many modern sources. (Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:128)

<sup>47</sup>Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:126

embarrassed before his colleagues, for he had shown his own ego to be greater than his understanding of devotion<sup>48</sup>, that he took back what he had said and invited Mirabai to join him in discussion. But she was tired of silly men playing sage and went to look for her Love elsewhere.

"She went instead to Dvaraka, to the great Krishna temple. Mirabai prayed before the statue of her beloved Mountain Lifter. And it was there that she was absorbed right into the image of Krishna himself. She never really died, you see. She just dissolved into love."

Padma stared at her grandmother, wishing that she too could be worthy of such an honour. Gauri smiled and reached out to touch Padma's cheek.

"Don't feel lost, eli. We all get there someday," she said with a smile as they finally arrived at the festival.

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<sup>48</sup>Jiv Gosvami did relent the point and invite Mirabai to join them, but his own personal response is my own interpretation, and is written in this way to elaborate on Gauri's character, rather than to be disrespectful to Jiv Gosvami.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Nityasumangali, the Ever Auspicious**

#### **Cinnaveedu, Early Autumn 1917**

The streets surrounding the temple were packed with jostling crowds of devotees, all trying to push closer to get a better view of the parade route. It wouldn't be long now before the god Vishnu, in the form of Sri Krishna, would emerge from the temple, a massive stone statue seated on an elaborate palanquin<sup>49</sup>. The litter would be carried by several men, each lending a shoulder to support the weight of the two long brass poles on which the platform and the deity sat. The method of attaching the poles was a great secret, carried out under a sheet to protect the hidden knowledge of the utkattalai trustees, a family whose special job it was to prepare the palanquin for the deity<sup>50</sup>. A tremendous number of people were involved in the preparation and execution of the festival. Members of many different varnas took part in the technical side of the event, as each task, no matter how small, was attended to by family experts.

Lost against the size of the crowd, Padma bobbed her head, trying to see past the chaos of arms, torsos and saris to the path the puja would take around the town. The narrow streets were littered with marigold flowers<sup>51</sup> and the red stains of betel<sup>52</sup> juice.

"Look, eli! See where the bija<sup>53</sup> have been put into the soil," said Gauri, pointing to a place just inside the temple grounds. "All things that bring forth fruit must begin with the planting of seeds<sup>54</sup>."

Bending down over the newly turned soil, Padma tried to imagine the tiny hard shells softening against the moist ground. Each was a tiny cosmos buried

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<sup>49</sup>It was customary for the deity to be taken around the town to a prearranged site that had been ritually prepared and purified. The deity was placed on a decorated palanquin, a box-like structure that was carried on two long poles. He was accompanied by objects of ritual significance, such as banners and symbols of the god, as well as offerings. (Kersenboom Story 1987:123)

<sup>50</sup>"The method of fixing the platform to the poles is secret and known only to the utkattalai trustees (trustees of internal management). They effect the solid fastenings while hidden under a large sheet. When the sheet is removed, the devotees are ready to lift the structure carrying the deity." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:142)

<sup>51</sup>These yellow/orange flowers are an auspicious colour and are often given as an offering during both daily rituals and festival celebrations.

<sup>52</sup>Paan is a mixture wrapped in leaves usually containing betel nut, aniseed, lime and other spices. People chew the packet, spitting out the juice when they are finished, much like raw tobacco is used in the West. It leaves a red stain on most things: fingers, teeth, stone paved streets, etc.

<sup>53</sup>Sanskrit word for seeds. Kersenboom-Story, in her notes on this section, refers to these seeds as ankura, a word referring not to seeds but to the stage where a seedling's first greens pop out of the soil. This vocabulary error in Kersenboom-Story's text has been verified by Mandakranta Bose and affects the following footnote reference.

<sup>54</sup>It is a belief in the general Hindu tradition that any ritual which is to be successful must begin with the planting of seeds. As such, preparations for any festival are preceded by this ritual observance. They are to be planted before both the festival and the pre-festival announcement, marked by the parading of the deity's banner around the town. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:120)

in the earth, holding the promise of new life. The shoots breaking out would bring with them auspicious energies<sup>55</sup> and Padma wished silently that they would grow strong. Around her the city was in bloom, bursting into life after months of monsoon. Deep in the soil moisture was hidden, storing itself to endure the long summer heat that would have to be survived before the next monsoons.

Festival preparations had begun long before Dipavali arrived. Planting the seeds had only been the first step in a long series of rituals, pulling together all aspects of the sacred into a tapestry of purity and celebration. Drawing out these cosmic energies was dangerous, and cleansing rituals accompanied everything. The devadasis were an essential part of this balance, using their auspiciousness to ward off any evil energies that might invade the festival<sup>56</sup>. Padma understood the seriousness of worship that underlay the gaiety of the utsava. Just as a cloth parasol must be held by a bamboo frame, ritual was the binding force that provided structure and support for the religion and the community. It awoke but held in check the force of the divine.

Ritual in Padma's world wasn't something performed; it was lived and breathed. Every aspect of her life, and the lives of all those who surrounded the temple, was intangibly woven into the sacred. The food, the water, what she wore, where and how she moved, all these were dictated by ritual. Padma was a devadasi in waiting, living among other temple dancers, and because of this the separation between the human world and the divine was so thin that she could almost wave her hand through the veil and touch the other side. Padma moved through ritual as though it was stalks of grass in a field; it brushed past all sides of her, steered her course, was both behind and before her. As Padma looked towards the horizon of her future, the smoke of ritual fire blurred the boundary between earth and sky. She couldn't tell where one began and the other ended.

Padma turned from the place where the bija were buried and looked up at the stone walls. After the seeds had been planted the day before, purification rituals and fire offerings had been held in the temple<sup>57</sup>. Vishnu was woken and bathed<sup>58</sup>. Because of their involvement, the devadasis, musicians and their instruments also had to be purified<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup>This ritual, if performed correctly was believed to bring luck, auspiciousness. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:120)

<sup>56</sup>The devadasis were considered indispensable in their role as protectors of good energy. Without their presence, it was believed that malignant forces could erupt at anytime, ruining the festival and bringing ill-luck to the participants. These malignant energies could manifest themselves as everything from a clumsy day to the death of a family member due to illness or accident. Because of the underlying seriousness attached to the festival, the presence of the devadasis was greeted enthusiastically by everyone. They were more than an element of entertainment; they were the unlikely defenders of the participants' luck and futures (Kersenboom-Story 1987:151)

<sup>57</sup>(Kersenboom-Story 1987:120-121)

<sup>58</sup>(Marglin 1985:185)

<sup>59</sup>(Kersenboom-Story 1987:118-123)

The first cleansing of the instruments and the musicians had taken place the day before the utsava. It was held in the main room of the temple and Padma had watched the ritual performances with nervous excitement. As much as she never wanted her seventh birthday to arrive, she couldn't help but anticipate the moment when she felt the fabric of the world stir, and the divine waking beneath its mirrored<sup>60</sup> face.

The ritual itself was held in place by the awesome power of sound. Padma knew the strength of it, the force of rhythms and silences echoing in her body, carving out caverns and deep hollows where the divine reverberated. At the center of this sound was the bheri<sup>61</sup>, the drum, whose force was said to be so strong it vibrated all of creation. Before the drum could even be stuck, the gods had to be evoked in an elaborate order. First, the drum itself was bathed, and then beaten with sacred darbha grass three times by the desika, an initiated Brahmin officiant. After the three beats, it was passed to a skilled musician who himself had been purified for the ritual. Padma had watched a Brahmin priest hand the head musician a flower. The man took it, and held it a moment in reverence, before placing it gently down onto the drum.

Padma had held her breath in awe as her favourite part of the ritual approached. As soon as the velvet skin of the flower touched the drum, the Brahmins began their incantations<sup>62</sup>. Siva<sup>63</sup> was called to reside in the center of the bheri, a whirling cosmic force of beauty and destruction. Vasuki<sup>64</sup>, the great cosmic serpent lent his sinews to the straps and the nine planets were called down into the ropes. The pegs that fastened the ropes tight became a temporary home to the Saptamatrkas<sup>65</sup>, the seven little mothers. Padma paid special attention to this brief but essential invocation. She was frightened to think of these tiny women holding in the power of the universe, reveling in its force, its wildness. They were harbingers of death and disease; they were the cause of the grief of childless mothers. Praise was given to them only in hopes that they could be persuaded not to attend the festival. It was against their fury

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<sup>60</sup>In order to bathe and make food offerings to the deity, a system of mirrors was set up in the temple each day. The reflection of the deity would then be bathed, rather than the statue itself. (Marglin 1985:186)

<sup>61</sup>The bheri, or ritual drum, was of special significance in the festival orchestra. Elaborate rituals, described in the text below, accompanied both the preparation and the playing of the drum. It was an essential part of the festival. Before it could be handled by a musician of non-Brahmin caste, Brahmin priests cleansed both the drum and the musician with ritual. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:121-123)

<sup>62</sup>This list of invocations can be found in Kersenboom-Story 1987:121

<sup>63</sup>Siva is the god of destructive energies, but he is also the god who introduced dance to humanity. Siva is associated with ascetics and ritual meditation. (Kinsley 1988:39-48)

<sup>64</sup>Vasuki is the great serpent whose body was used by the gods to play tug of war. This conflict led to the stirring of the waters of creation, where Vishnu was able to bring forth both the world and the goddess Sri Laksmi, who emerged from the churning waters. (Kinsley 1988:27)

<sup>65</sup>Saptamatrkas translates to mean "seven mothers". The Matrkas were goddesses who always appeared together and brought with them ill-will and inauspicious tidings. They were said to be the cause of mothers being childless and infant deaths. Worship of them at festivals was primarily designed to appease them so that they would be persuaded not to attend. (Kinsley 1988:151-155)

and ill energies that the devadasis danced, and Padma knew that without her mother and the others, chaos would erupt and devour the ceremony.

"Keep us safe, amma," Padma had whispered silently, as she watched the devadasis moving carefully and gracefully around the sacred body of the temple.

After the rituals inside the temple had been performed, the ensemble had moved outside to parade around the town, proclaiming a festival the following day. The Brahmins had carried a banner<sup>66</sup> bearing the symbols of Sri Krishna and the great god Vishnu around the village to usher in Dipavali. The banner's progress had been announced by the sound of the bheri and the pounding feet of the temple dancers as they moved through the puja. The procession had also included the royal parasol, ornately decorated and adorned with feathers. The sounds of the bells from the night puja had been heard all over town, and the smell of ritual incense dusted the walls with the promise of deepening mystery. Padma had watched the devadasis and the musicians accompany the smaller evening procession, just as they would on the day of the festival.

Suddenly Padma's remembrance of the day before was shattered as the cheers and chattering of the pulsing crowd brought Padma's attention back to the present. She was standing by the temple gates with Gauri, facing a surging jumble of bodies and intense sound. Everyone was waiting eagerly for Sri Krishna to appear. Somewhere inside the walls of the temple, rituals were being performed so that the statue of Krishna could be moved<sup>67</sup>. The god needed to be given his weapons before he could leave the stronghold of the temple, in case any demons should come across him outside the walls. The Brahmin priests also made offerings of water, fruit and camphor, which were carried on the palanquin along with Krishna's entourage<sup>68</sup>.

Padma's grandmother took her by the hand and led Padma around to a place just outside the walls of the temple compound. When the people saw them coming, they made a place for Gauri. Her divine madness was known in the community, as was her history as a dancer. Despite the tight press of the crowds, space cleared around them quickly and silently. The onlookers moved like a swarm of beetles running before a flame, scuttling out of Gauri's way, trying to avoid being burned by her touch. Following closely in her footsteps was Padma, unnerved by the crowds and trying to stay very near to her patti.

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<sup>66</sup>It was customary for every festival to be preceded by a banner carrying puja that moved through the town the day before the festival in order to officially announce its arrival to the people. The banners were different for each festival, and bore the symbol of the god or goddess in whose honour the festival was being held. The procession also included other ritual and symbolic items, such as the royal parasol, indicating the king's support and the greater kingship of the deity. Items specific to the deity were also carried, such as the conch, representing Vishnu, or the trident, a symbol of Siva. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:120-121)

<sup>67</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:123

<sup>68</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:122-23

Suddenly all attention was on the road as a great rush of skin surged out of the temple gates. The crowd spread like a flash flood across the dirt road, Vaishnavites<sup>69</sup> cheering as they led the way for the palanquin. The Vaishnavites worshipped Vishnu as the preserver of the cosmos and all creation, and the amorous god Krishna was believed to be a manifestation of Vishnu. Because of this, the celebration of Krishna's victory over Narakasura was especially dear to them and the town rejoiced at its arrival. Everyone understood that the battle marked a turning point in the cosmic battle between light and darkness, a victory that would result in a time of gentler weather and bountiful harvest.

After the devotees had passed, the lead musician appeared in the procession, playing the bheri. He was easily distinguished from the other players by the sacred flowers the Brahmin priests had given him for the utsava. He also wore an uppercloth, and across his chest the Brahmins had placed a sacred thread<sup>70</sup>. Behind him came the other musicians, men playing cymbals and vinas, festival lutes. After the musicians passed by, an emissary of the king appeared in the procession, meant to embody the presence and support of the royal court at the festival. Immediately following the king's representative came the devadasis<sup>71</sup>. The order of the procession was intended to indicate the close ties that existed between dancers of the court and dancers of the temple. The art form of dance had flourished and established itself as a result of the cooperation and interwoven relationships between these two houses of power, those of the king and the god.

The devadasis surrounded the front of the palanquin as it emerged from the temple like a river breaking over rocks fixed in its course. They were fluid energy, their arms and legs pulling behind them tendrils of divine space. Their sharp staccato movements pulsed in time with the rhythm of the drumming, anklets adding the crack of silver on silver to the cacophony of sound. On the palanquin above them Krishna sat, decorated with flower garlands and vibrant orange cloth. His benevolence smiled on the people, and those who adored him received the bounty of his compassionate gaze.

Although their beauty and skill was what held the crowd mesmerized, the devadasis performed a far greater role than one of simple entertainment. They were forever auspicious, nityasumangali, and because of this, their presence was a safeguard against evil forces and inauspicious energies that might find their way into the festival. Everyone looked forward to the dancing because the entertainment was unparalleled. But underlying the beauty of their performance,

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<sup>69</sup>word meaning devotees of Vishnu. Devotees of Siva are called Saivites.

<sup>70</sup>It is customary that only men of the Brahmin caste may wear a sacred thread across their chests. However, this footnote is given in specific relation to the head musician who was granted a temporary elevated status in order to enable him to play the bheri, the sacred ritual drum. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:122)

<sup>71</sup>The exact order of the procession was very specific. All participants had a place in the physical order of the festival, one which represented a miniaturized recreation of the larger world order dictated by the gods. Diagrams of this processional order can be found in Kersenboom-Story 1987:123.

these women created a tangible force of goodness and balance. At an unspoken level, people greeted their dance as the march of soldiers, defenders of the auspicious energies that held their lives in order and prosperity<sup>72</sup>.

Padma watched the dancers go by, spotting her mother at the front of the group. Kamala's face was lit up with a beautiful smile, every muscle responding to her command. Her expressions swung with the music and the story it held, each feature adding a heightened animation to her gestures and movements. Behind the palanquin, the priests and Vedic scholars walked, ushering the procession forward under their direction<sup>73</sup>.

"She is very beautiful, that daughter of mine," Gauri said with pride. "But so serious, so precise. She doesn't laugh enough. Come eli, let's see what else can be seen. Here in this crowd the whole of the world is laid out before you."

Padma smiled up at her patti and they began to move down the parade route after the palanquin. The wall of bodies closed in around them and soon the path was nothing but a jungle overgrown with limbs. The Vaishnavites moved like a giant serpent, one body swaying side to side as it slid after Sri Krishna on his palanquin. Then suddenly, up above the moving crowd, Padma noticed a stagnant fixture, a rigidity in the flux and flow of faces.

"Patti, who are they?" Padma shouted over the noise, pointing at a group of people on the raised platform. "They have such unhappy faces, and all of them whiter than rice flour."

Gauri looked up along the line of Padma's raised arm, and her smile faded quickly. Her eyes spoke recognition, but Padma had never seen the strangers in the streets or at the temple before<sup>74</sup>.

"They are the British, Padma," Gauri said in all seriousness, with none of her usual eccentric speech. "And they haven't come to worship, they have come to stare. Their gaze is judgment, and they see only as far as themselves. Their ways are not our ways, eli, but the time is coming when we may not be able to tell the difference."

"Patti, I don't understand. Why would they come to the festival if they didn't want to see it?"

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<sup>72</sup>see footnote 56

<sup>73</sup>see footnote 71

<sup>74</sup>As a dancer, Gauri would have been exposed to the British early, especially because her performances were held in such high regard and her dance was famous in the Madras area (now known as Chennai). However, as a girl child still untrained, Padma would rarely have had the opportunity to come in contact with the Western world. Because she lives in a smaller community, where she would have been raised primarily within the temple walls, her first encounter occurs at the age of seven.



"They don't entertain themselves by participating, eli. They entertain themselves by watching others participate. To them, we're here for their amusement, like roosters in a cock fight or exotic birds in a cage.

"You must understand, eli, everything in our world is in motion. We're constantly changing, becoming, unraveling the mystery that is this life. But to them, this chaos is to be conquered, not understood. They're afraid of it, of movement, and so they try to hold everything down, still, quiet. They try to hold us down too, little one. Be careful and watchful. They've already sacrificed so many of our own, our men disappearing in foreign places. At home they offer us the railway but they pave its path with the bodies of our workers and the history of our people.

"When the time comes eli you must remember this, you are an offering for the gods, water in the ritual bowl. You are fluid, not solid. Nobody can push over the water. If they try they can only pass their hand through it. If you're water instead of stone then the sands of time won't wear you away. Be aware that whatever time reveals it can also erase."

Padma stood with her grandmother staring up at the white faces who never noticed them. Around them the crowd swayed and pushed past. In the midst of the chaos Padma and Gauri stood motionless, observing the observers, static in a sea where everything else rushed forward with the human tide.

Far above the cacophony of Tamil voices, the papery dry sound of English was carried on the warm breeze along with the dust raised by the pounding, sweating feet of the devotees. The onlookers were too far from Padma for her to have ever heard them, and even if she could, she wouldn't have understood. However, her lack of comprehension would have run far deeper than matters of translation. The British were a different people, and their perspectives were not Padma's. They saw the world as though they were the only ones in it. Against that sea of millions of brown faces, where gods and ghosts swam in on the tides of thousands of years gone by, the British still maintained that they were the only real people in India. They looked in the window glass and saw nothing past it but their reflection; their gaze never penetrated beyond a simple trick of light.

"Have you ever seen such a chaotic mess? I think it's totally disgraceful they way these savages carry on!" one of the English women said with disgust, waving a limp wrist at the joyous crowd.

"Graceless and hedonistic," answered her companion, a tall thin man in a slightly dusty suit. "And the women, Miss Phillipa! I blush at the thought of you seeing others of the fairer sex behaving in such a way. Not, that is to say, that I could ever compare you with that brown rabble down there. They're not savages, to be precise, not of the same base nature as the savages of Africa or the cannibals of the Pacific. But it must be stated that in the great chain of being, an Indian is nowhere close to an Englishman!"

Miss Phillipa blushed politely, but not out of discomfort. Encouraged by Mr. Potter's response, she ventured out farther.

"Well, I find it absolutely shocking," she answered with a sharp intake of breath and a slight shudder for effect. "Just look at the women in these crowds. Dressed in rags and pushing through the street! They look like common dustmen, parading around in that attire! And the dancers look like circus clowns!"

The assembled group of white faces burst into smiles and snickers as they gazed out at the Indian crowd. Mr. Potter fingered his thin greasy mustache, causing it to fall even more limply across his chinless jaw.

"Have any of you seen that scandalous historical account of these people, the publication from Abbé Dubois<sup>75</sup>?" Mr. Potter asked with a malicious grin.

"Isn't he that French chap, the one who lived here for so long?" offered another man in the group.

"That's the one! Made quite a study of that lot down there, the dancers in particular," Mr. Potter responded. "That is, if you could consider that stomping and arm waving to be dancing! The Marquis of Hastings said that 'nothing can be more tiresomely monotonous'<sup>76</sup> than their dance!"

The group snorted its approval. Miss Phillipa blushed furiously in support.

"Do you know what Dubois observed?" Mr. Potter asked with wicked glee. "He wrote that these women consider themselves to be slaves of gods, but he

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<sup>75</sup>Abbé Dubois was a French priest who lived in India for 31 years. His book, Moeurs, Institutions et Ceremonies des Peuples de l'Inde, (Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies), was published in 1879 in both English and French (reprinted from the original written in 1817), and would have been in popular circulation at the time the novel takes place. His cultural observations provide a useful, if prejudiced record of practices at the time. Kersenboom Story finds his work to be of great ethnographic value. Frederique Marglin, another prominent scholar on the subject of devadasis, found that his remarks were a prime example of the "paternalistic gaze of the colonialists" and sites several of his more judgmental excerpts in evidence of this. Although I can see the value in Dubois' work, just as Kersenboom-Story did, I must confess that I find his observations to be offensive not only against women but also against the Indian people as a whole. I find his remarks to be both racist and sexist, beyond a measure of what may have been considered acceptable at the time. In comparison with other writers of the period, I have found Dubois to demonstrate an even greater sense of racial and gender superiority, illustrated primarily by his choice of adjectives for the devadasis and the Hindu faith, one that I feel must significantly compromise the quality of his observations and comments.

(Kersenboom-Story 1987:46,81)

(Marglin 1985:2-6,305)

<sup>76</sup>From an excerpt in Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *A Various Universe* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 338, quoted by Bose 2002:13

recorded, and I quote, 'that they are known to the public by the coarser name of strumpets<sup>77</sup>!' "

The assembled onlookers looked suitably shocked, and stared down at the devadasis with contempt. In front of the palanquin, Padma's mother smiled and whirled. Her chandra, the moon decoration, never slid down her hair, and her motion was controlled with the precision of a swordsman and the grace of a queen.

"I've heard they go to the bed of any one who calls," Miss Phillipa reported, before turning completely red for offering such an unladylike comment. She had been raised to know that even being in possession of such a fact would be considered highly improper. She glanced nervously at Mr. Potter to see his response. Rather than being put out, he grinned even wider at the sport and ventured farther into the journals of Abbé Dubois.

"Mr. Dubois also added that, in his opinion, 'a religion more shameful or indecent has never existed among a civilized people<sup>78</sup>.' He even recorded that as a tool of winning favours, these temple dancers slyly hide their best attributes. He noted that 'they are so nice in covering every part of the body, to excite more strongly the passions they wish to inspire, by carefully veiling a part of the charms<sup>79</sup>.' These primitive people really are wonderfully entertaining. I find their mating rituals so amusing!" Mr. Potter finished with a final snicker and a subtle covetous glance towards the young dancers rippling past the stands.

"I can never understand you men!" interjected another woman in the group, who up until now had observed the behaviour of her companions from a distance. "If they expose themselves, women are being licentious. If they cover themselves, they are trying to tempt. How, Mr. Potter, would you have us dress? Or do you assume that there is no state in which a woman may exercise due modesty under the gaze of a man?"

Her sharp remarks quieted the crowd. Mr. Potter was taken aback. He hadn't expected that anyone might respond to his opinions with anything but more sarcasm aimed at the people below. Angry and embarrassed over the scene he felt the woman was causing, he murmured something unintelligible about newcomers fresh off the boat and turned away. Miss Phillipa glared heatedly at the woman who had spoken.

"And on another point," the woman added with slow and deliberate defiance, "I find the dancers, for that is what they are, to be very beautiful. And full of grace," she added pointedly.

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<sup>77</sup>Dubois, from Marglin 1985:3

<sup>78</sup>Dubois, from Marglin 1985:5

<sup>79</sup>Dubois, from Marglin 1985:5

Her final comments silenced the discussion. The onlookers glanced away or amongst themselves, embarrassed like school children who had overstepped their bounds. Below the stand, the crowd was beginning to disperse. The palanquin had moved off into another part of the city. Padma and Gauri took one last look at the strangers on the platform, and turned back towards the temple.

As they made their way back through the gates, Padma and her patti talked about the devadasis. For the people of Madras, the performances of the temple dancers were the highlight of the utsava. Their repertoire was vast and varied<sup>80</sup>, and their dances told the stories of the gods and goddesses the people adored. Because of this the dancers too were adored, becoming in those times the closest thing to a living, breathing deity walking amongst the people. Although the role of the Brahmins was of ultimate importance, the dancers drew the largest attending admirers. And it wasn't just for festivals, but in all aspects of worship that the temple dancers drew crowds. It was often said in the community that without the dasis, who would bother to come to the daily puja?<sup>81</sup>

Padma and her grandmother wandered back through the now empty hallways of the temple to the main room of worship. There they waited for the procession to return. Deep in the inner sanctum of the temple, where even the dasis were forbidden to enter<sup>82</sup>, a few Brahmin priests had been left behind to conduct rituals in the absence of Krishna, defending the space he occupied in the temple from evil and unlucky energies. After the god had been paraded around the town, the priests and musicians would return him to his house, where he would be welcomed back by his wives, dasis of the temple. The rituals involved in returning the god to his home were as elaborate as the ones involved in removing him in the first place. In all this the devadasis played their roles, as loving and devoted servants of the god-king.

After waiting some time for the parade to return to the temple, Padma and Gauri heard the sound of chanting and cheering in the street. It wasn't long before Sri Krishna was carried back into the inner sanctum, to be once again restored to his place. In celebration of his return, the dancers made offerings of flowers, *puspanjali*<sup>83</sup>. Accompanying this, they made offerings of light, *arati*<sup>84</sup>, holding up the *kumbhadipa*<sup>85</sup>, the ritual pot lamp that removed evil influences.

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<sup>80</sup>Kersenboom identifies three distinct "types of tasks performed by the devadasis during festival ritual." She classifies these as propitiatory tasks, ritual tasks and the aesthetic and artistic entertainment function. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:150)

<sup>81</sup>This is in reference to a saying used by Smriti Ranganayaki. In speaking of the participation of the devadasis in temple events, Ranganayaki said "who would come for the daily puja?", implying that without the presence of the dasis, nobody would attend. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:151)

<sup>82</sup>Marglin 1985:72

<sup>83</sup> *Puspanjali* is an offering of flowers to the deity in a ceremony.

<sup>84</sup>*Arati* is an offering of light.

<sup>85</sup>The *kumbhadipa* was the ritual pot lamp offered to the deity. It was considered to be synonymous with the goddess and as such removed evil influences and was offered to the god. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:60-61,119) This was considered a special rite that only a devadasi

They sang cradle songs, bridal songs and boat songs, and fanned the god<sup>86</sup> as he returned<sup>87</sup>. When Krishna was content in the temple once again, the dasis performed the catir kaccheri, a dance concert saved only for festival occasions. It was for this operatic ballet that the people crowded in. The dance of the devadasis, performed before the main idol of Vishnu in the largest public temple space, was not to be missed. Their passion and talent brought alive the great epics Ramayana<sup>88</sup> and Mahabharata<sup>89</sup>. They celebrated the stories of the Bhagavad-Gita<sup>90</sup> and Giva Govinda<sup>91</sup>. The faces and gestures of the devadasis made onlookers weep at the separation of Rama and Sita, feel Radha's pain at Krishna's abandonment. The dasis reminded the people of the connection between their own souls and the vast divine soul, a unity so painful in separation, so joyous in the greatness of its love<sup>92</sup>.

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could perform. It was one of high importance, without which no other rituals could proceed. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:119)

<sup>86</sup>Fanning the deity with a peacock feather chamara was a special privilege conferred on certain devadasis (Kersenboom-Story 1987:143)

<sup>87</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:150-151, referring to the types of songs sung, the dance concert and the duties a devadasi performed at the return of the deity to the temple.

<sup>88</sup>The Ramayana is made up of 24,000 verses and is believed to have been originally composed by the poet Valmiki, although many versions of this popular story exist. Valmiki's version of the tale is held by some to have been written in the 4th century B.C.E., although this date is uncertain and contested. The Ramayana tells the story of Rama, an avatara of the god Vishnu, and his struggles to fulfill both obligations of honour and kingship. Much of the story revolves around Rama's marriage to Sita and her subsequent abduction by the demon Ravana. The abduction gives Rama reason to go to war with Ravana, thereby defeating him and restoring cosmic order. The relationship between Rama and his most devoted wife Sita is one of the most heralded stories in the Hindu faith. Sita is a symbol of the ideal dutiful wife, but she is also a figure of great sympathy, as Rama puts her through huge ordeals in an effort to protect his own honour in the eyes of the people. (Narayan 1972:xi-xiii)

<sup>89</sup>The Mahabharata is believed to have been compiled between the 4th century B.C.E. and the 4th century C.E., although some sources date its composition as narrowly as circa 200 B.C.E. to circa 200 C.E. This epic poem is exceptionally long, comprising almost 100,000 verses. The Mahabharata is the story of the five Pandava brothers who face war against their cousins who rule over northern India. Unlike the Ramayana which deals with issues of cosmic struggle and balance (good versus evil, gods versus demons), the Mahabharata focuses on issues of dharma (duty) and family. When the hero, Arjuna, is faced with a battle against cousins and friends, he is overcome with grief and declines to fight. At this point in the story, divine intervention occurs as the gods offer Arjuna council about managing seemingly conflicting duties to both family and kingdom. (Narasimhan 1998:xix-xxix, Ludwig 1996:90)

<sup>90</sup>The Bhagavad-Gita is part of the great epic the Mahabharata. Believed to have been composed some time around the 1st century C.E., the Bhagavad-Gita is Krishna's counsel to the prince Arjuna in time of war. Advice from the god Vishnu, in the form of his earthly avatar Krishna, helps Arjuna balance his conflicting duties to both kingdom and family and to understand the nature of this duty in a greater cosmic order. The Bhagavad-Gita remains, to this day, one of the greatest sources of advice used by Hindus all over the world. (Stoler-Miller 1986:2-4)

<sup>91</sup>Gita Govinda translates as 'song of the lord'. It was composed by Jayadeva in the 12th century C.E. Written as a beautiful love poem telling the story of the god Krishna and his human lover Radha, Jayadeva explores the relationship between the human and divine souls in separation. The affair between Krishna and Radha, despite being an example of an illicit and highly sanctioned union, is celebrated primarily in the North. Devotees in Orissa have done a great deal to popularize this story. (Ludwig 1996:93)

<sup>92</sup>The stories of Radha and Krishna and Rama and Sita, aside from their numerous other interpretations, are said to be symbolic of the separation between humanity and the divine. In this scenario, people assume the position of the abandoned or solitary woman, pining for her love, the

Padma and Gauri were well situated to see the performances. Standing at the front of the crowd in the temple, they found themselves completely mesmerized by the movements of the dancers. Gauri watched with an expert eye and a deep understanding of the ritual taking place. Padma observed with a child's enthusiasm and fascination, but her love was no less great than that of her grandmother.

In the performance, the dancers portrayed different roles. One woman played the part of Kama<sup>93</sup>, god of passion and conjugal love, trying to arouse Krishna's interest in his earthly wives so he would return to his home contented. Kamala held the main role, that of Radha, Krishna's main consort. She circled the deity with the fluidity and soft roundness of a bubbling stream, tempting and cajoling her husband back to the temple after his visit to the world outside. In many ways Kamala was luckier than Radha, the character she played, for Kamala was married to Vishnu, where as Radha only enjoyed an illicit love affair with the god Krishna. As Padma watched Kamala, arms reaching out in loving embrace, face lit with the joy of welcoming home the beloved who had been absent, Padma could almost see Vishnu alive in the cold stone statue of Krishna sitting motionless on the dais. In the flickering dim glow of the pot lamp, held by the devadasis as they moved through the main shrine, Padma watched light disappear into the body of Vishnu. It seemed to her as though the golden beams vanished through the cracks between worlds. They dissolved on the stone of the statue, and shadows danced where the light pierced through the veil into what lay beyond.

Gauri placed her strong hands on Padma's shoulders. "He's my husband also," she said softly under the sound of the drums and the chants. "But his love is big enough for all of us. It's an umbrella in the monsoon and a light in the darkness. He holds it for us, you know, eli; he holds in the light. And in times of need he gives it back to us to show us the way."

Padma didn't look up at Gauri. She couldn't move her eyes from the carved stone lids revealing the gaze of the beloved. Lord Vishnu smiled down on her with knowing eyes and patience.

The room around Padma was filled with devotees reveling in their love for Vishnu, just as Padma was. However, there were some who didn't share her sense of wonder and joy. Numbered first among these disbelievers was Padma's father.

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greater divine soul. These stories express the separation between humans and the divine in terms of a lover/ beloved relationship. The symbol of two lovers separated by fortune is a widely used metaphor in Hindu mysticism to address the pain of human/divine separation on earth and the struggle to rejoin the two in an ultimate and indivisible union. The poetry of many of India's great devotees, including Mirabai, Mahadeviyakka and Antal, speak of this desire to be consumed by the divine, and express their pain at separation in terms of lover/ beloved relations. (Dehejia 1990:vii,34,75-78. Ramanujan 1973:111-114. Hawley & Juergensmeyer 1988:119-120)

<sup>93</sup>Kinsley 1988:142

Observing the crowd from the back of the room, Padma's father stood without acknowledging his daughter's presence. He was a tall man, with greying hair and a serious expression in his stormy eyes. He seemed out of place among the other worshippers, dressed in a British style suit and tie. It was from him that Padma inherited her tall, slim figure and quiet nature. But she shared none of his adoration of all things English, having barely been exposed to anything colonial inside the temple walls where she was raised. Above all else, the difference between them was one of joy. Padma's faith led her to a quiet but constant appreciation of the living world around her, and of the presence of the god she wished to one day call husband. Her father, on the other hand, abhorred all things to do with archaic ritual and whimsical faith, preferring instead the empirical world view his upper class British education had taught him. It had brought him success in war time ventures, but it brought him no happiness aside from the accumulation of wealth. It was clear from the skin on his face that no laugh lines had ever creased the corners of his solemn grey eyes.

Padma had never known her father except by sight, as was the custom of the temple<sup>94</sup>. Her mother, as a dancer, had been sponsored by a patron, a man of wealth and influence in the community who showed his support of the temple and the arts by paying for the training of a devadasi<sup>95</sup>. Kamala's patron was chosen for her by Gauri and the temple priests when Kamala was only five, at the time of her initiation into a dance school. Padma's father had specially requested Kamala out of the group of girls trained that year, in 1897<sup>96</sup>. Even at a

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<sup>94</sup>A patron had no claim to the children of their partnership with a devadasi. It was a requirement that any person applying to the temple to be a patron already had a family of their own, and that the man applying, within his own family, had to be the eldest son. This was to both demonstrate a financial ability to care for a family and to insure that patrons did not form too much attachment to the devadasi household. Although patrons were welcome to visit on the basis of sexual interest in the dancers, they were not encouraged to do so to the extent that they neglected their own wives and families. Because of this arrangement, Padma would likely have only seen her father when he came to the temple to visit her mother. On those occasions, Padma would have been kept away from her parents to allow them the necessary privacy. Although Kamala, as a devadasi, was welcome in the home of her patron as an honoured guest on special occasions such as weddings and festival days, she would not likely have brought her daughter with her. All references for this section come from the articles by Amrit Srinivasan, whose works concentrate on the extended family relationships of the devadasi household in the 19th and early 20th centuries. (Srinivasan 1985:1869-1870)

<sup>95</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1870

<sup>96</sup>I have carefully constructed the timeline of events to correspond with specific periods in the course of the end of the devadasi tradition. Kamala, born in 1892, trained from 1897-1904 and dedicated in 1904, would have enjoyed a large public celebration on the event of her dedication. It was seen as a blessing for the community to welcome in a new dancer to the tradition. However, by the time of Padma's dedication in 1918, these ceremonies were no longer public. The last official public dedications were held in 1910. (Srinivasan 1985:1869) (It is important to note that in recent years dedications of devadasis have been occurring in the provinces of Andhra and Karnataka. These temple dedications are not of the same type as the ones performed in the time prior to 1910. The key difference between devadasis of pre-Independence times and those of post-Independence is that before the Madras Act of 1947, dedication was only achieved after several years of extensive dance training in what was viewed as a professional career. Devadasis of today are not trained in dance and are not surrounded by the same social structure that

young age, she had shown her love of precision and order. To a man who admired the British for their rationalism and logic, Kamala appealed to his world perspective. He didn't sponsor a dancer out of any interest in either the temple or the arts; he did it only to demonstrate to the people his ability to do so. Only men of high caste and considerable means could afford to pay the extensive and long term costs of maintaining a dancer<sup>97</sup>. The costs involved were so high that many dancers had more than one patron, especially after the completion of their training<sup>98</sup>. As a reward for his support, Padma's father took Kamala to his bed when she had finished her training and was of age. Not all men waited so long, but because of his desire to do right by British standards, he respected their injunctions against partnering with women when they were, under English law<sup>99</sup>, too young.

When Padma had first heard about the arrangements between her father and mother, she wasn't sure if she was happy about the prospect of facing a similar situation. Her father's icy nature and complete rejection of her as a child upset her, but Kamala had explained that it was the way these things were done. Padma was a child of the temple, not the child of a man, and he had no claim on her<sup>100</sup>. This was, as her mother pointed out, a benefit to both of them rather than a burden. It only meant that no man could claim the earnings of his temple daughter or her mother. And the system ensured that wives of the gods could still have children without taking a mortal husband. In fact, these men were almost always already married, in order to demonstrate their financial ability to care for a family and their ability to produce children. It was seen as entirely proper in the community. Even more than that, it was held by the priests to be a necessity. Because of the patronage system, the priests were able to avoid a far more serious concern.

When dancers in ancient times had approached puberty, the state of their unchanelled sexuality threatened the community. When this point was explained to the British, they took it to mean that the community was worried about the

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supported the art and careers of earlier devadasis. Because of this, the level of abuse reformers hoped to avoid by making the profession illegal has instead increased dramatically. )

<sup>97</sup>see footnote 94

<sup>98</sup>Dancers, upon completion of their training, were largely able to decide their sexual partners for themselves. Although obligation, and therefore priority, rested with the patron, devadasis were considered free women in matters of sexuality. This is one of the key reasons for their association with prostitution. Although forms of prostitution did occur, this was usually the result of men bringing gifts to the temple and in turn being offered the favours of one of the dancers. The devadasis were free to chose or reject such offers made to the temple. Some dancers took many lovers, while others maintained life long relationships with only their patrons. (Srinivasan 1985:1872/73)

<sup>99</sup>The British campaigned widely in India to have the age of marriage and age of consent raised to prevent the child marriages practiced by Hindu families. The debate came to a head over the Age of Consent Act (1891) which increased the age a girl must be to marry from ten to twelve. However, this legislation did little to accomplish the reforms the British had hoped for and instead became a battle between British and Indian men who fought for control over Indian women's sexuality. Women themselves did not participate publicly in the debate and it is almost impossible to speculate on what their private response were to the Act of 1891. (Forbes 1996: 31)

<sup>100</sup>see footnote 94



sexual liaisons of the dancers. This was only partially true. Priests knowledgeable in the ways of energies and cosmic forces were more concerned about the effect this built up sexuality would have on the delicate balance of ritual<sup>101</sup>. The desires of men and women were held to be entirely natural and the denial of these forces by anyone other than a trained ascetic was believed to be harmful not only to the one repressing these desires, but to the community as a whole<sup>102</sup>.

In order to satisfy both these concerns, the priests had arranged a system of patronage. In the eyes of the colonizers, young temple women being taken to bed by older married men was seen as a scandal, and the devadasis were called prostitutes for their participation<sup>103</sup>. But in the eyes of an older India, the system was not a problem, it was a solution.

After the festival was over and the dance concert had ended, Padma and Gauri made their way back down the quiet hallways to the women's quarters where the buzz and excitement of the day still lingered. Dancers chattered and laughed while other women of the house helped them disrobe. Each ceremonial piece was carefully put away, each garment shaken out for dust and folded with reverence for the next occasion. Hair was let down and so was the serious and professional demeanor the dancers had assumed for their public performance.

Padma found her mother gracefully lowering herself into a seat. Kamala gave her daughter a tired smile as she used a small towel to wipe the sweat off her face and arms.

"What exercise this dancing is!" Kamala laughed, and then let out a deep sigh for emphasis. "I doubt even men of the army go through such training!"

The girls surrounding Kamala laughed and proceeded to show off their muscles to the other women in the room. However, although she had only been joking, Kamala was right. The level of fitness a dancer in her prime achieved was superb. Devadasis were taught to control muscle groups that most people weren't even aware existed. The rigorous nature of the dance would have left most fit men gasping for breath before even the first ritual formalities were completed.

Padma smiled at the room full of raucous women releasing the last of their energy and nervousness at the close of the day. She sidestepped quickly as Vimala came by with a jug of water and a twinkle in her eye. Padma burst into giggles as she saw Vimala deposit the water all over Uma, one of the younger daughters in the temple. Uma shrieked and leapt up to chase Vimala around the room, intent on getting her revenge by at least shaking herself all over her attacker.

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<sup>101</sup>Marglin 1985:60-62, Kersenboom-Story 1987:8-9

<sup>102</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:8

<sup>103</sup>Abbe Dubois, quoted in Marglin 1985:4-5

Padma smiled quietly from the corner as she watched the girls playing. Uma was closer to Vimala in age, and although Vimala wasn't a dancer, the two had a lot in common. Vimala was, by birth, an outsider, having married into the household when her parents arranged her meeting with Padma's uncle Sundaram. Uma too was an outsider, but unlike Vimala she hadn't married into the family. Uma was adopted<sup>104</sup>.

The devadasi household was unlike any other in Indian society. The art was matrilineal<sup>105</sup>, and as such the temple complex revolved around the women who lived there as wives of the god. Because mothers passed on their art to daughters, women who never gave birth were permitted to adopt children from outside<sup>106</sup>. The sons of devadasis, such as Padma's uncle Sundaram, usually became musicians, a position of far less prestige than that of their sisters<sup>107</sup>. This often led to resentment, for devadasi households were some of the few in all India where the position of a girl child was far more important than that of a son<sup>108</sup>. Most men growing up in such a system had their own marriages arranged by their mothers or sisters to women outside the temple; daughters inside were usually promised to the god. Just as Sundaram had done, men were forced to accept lower caste partners<sup>109</sup>, for their own station in life was low and largely dependent on the generosity of the women in the temple family.

Padma stared at Vimala and Uma, now locked in struggle together. Both were laughing so hard that neither was able to gain the upper hand. Padma envied them their closeness and their ease in the family. Uma was well liked, as was Vimala, and nobody considered them anything but family. Although both

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<sup>104</sup>Adoption was the right and special privilege of a devadasi. Daughters were often adopted into the household by a dancer and were then seen to be children of the entire household, as were other dancers' daughters. (Srinivasan 1985:1872)

<sup>105</sup>The art, although taught by male gurus, was inherited by daughters from their mothers. Although the passing of knowledge was seen as the responsibility of a qualified man, only women of a devadasi family line were permitted to perform at religious occasions. Adoptions into the devadasi community helped to keep the numbers of dancers in any given temple high. (Srinivasan 1985:1870-73)

<sup>106</sup>"Devadasis were the only women allowed to adopt a child under customary Hindu law and often an adopted daughter was favoured over an only son in matters of inheritance." (Srinivasan 1985:1872)

<sup>107</sup>The jealousy resulting from this arrangement is recorded by Srinivasan in numerous articles. The system created frictions between men and women because the relationships of wealth and power within the immediate family flowed counter to the customs of the rest of India. Srinivasan speculates that this is one of the reasons that the British were so quick to win over the local populations in their quest to shut down the dance. Many men in the households believed that once the dancers were gone, the wealth and prestige that resulted from the dance concerts would then fall to them, and that musicians would take the place of dancers as the highlight of local entertainment. Unfortunately, the disappearance of the devadasis marked a collapse in the ancient traditions of dance, traditions which were then reformed to cater to a very different group of participants and experts. Devadasis also incurred resentment from the men in their community because of their close relationship to the divine, one which not even the Brahmin priests could duplicate. (Srinivasan 1985:1871)

<sup>108</sup>see footnotes 104, 105, 107

<sup>109</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1872

were outsiders for different reasons, neither seemed as out of place in the household as Padma.

"Lazy girl," shrieked a voice in Padma's direction. "Until you dance, you help like any other working woman in this family! Get over here and help me off with my surya<sup>110</sup>."

Padma leapt at the sound of the voice and scurried to do whatever was asked of her. The woman who had spoken so sharply was Uma's mother, Minakshi. Having had no children of her own, she had adopted Uma into the family when Uma was four years old. Now, at the age of thirteen, Uma had just recently completed her training, a fact that was not lost on Padma. Despite this, Minakshi never missed an opportunity to put down Padma as an untrained dancer. Padma's mother, Kamala, was widely recognized as the most skilled dancer in the household, despite her young age. Jealousy fueled Minakshi to turn an old grudge into a matter of daughters, one which had left Padma publicly embarrassed on more than one occasion. Still, Minakshi's sharp tongue had been turned on most of the women in the family at one time or another, and there was a lot of sympathy for Padma's position. Most of the women were extremely fond of the family's little mouse, and nobody took Minakshi's criticisms seriously. No one, that is, except for Padma.

"Hurry up, stupid girl," Minakshi cursed at Padma as she tried to help the woman take down her hair. "No wonder really! Who could ever expect an untrained child to ever know anything about how to let out a dhammilla?"

Nearby Vimala was helping Uma take down her damp dhammilla. The two exchanged a look. The comment had obviously angered Vimala who, although not a dancer by birth or training, knew everything there was to know about assisting the devadasis in their changing rituals. Uma smiled encouragingly at Padma, embarrassed once again by her mother's tongue.

"Give it here!" Minakshi shouted at Padma, grabbing the chandra, the moon decoration, from her hands. The sharp tone of her voice took the other women in the room by surprise and many stopped to see what was unfolding. Minakshi, suddenly aware of the silence, looked to see who was watching. Kamala and Gauri were not in the room, having slipped away quickly on another important matter. Feeling brave in their absence, Minakshi continued where she had left off.

"Imagine a dancer of Kamala's line growing to such a nobody! You are seven today, seven, and still not trained. Oh, the public embarrassment of being housed with such a failure! You stay away from my Uma. I don't want any of your bad luck to rub off on her! Still, what could be expected with the crazy patti of yours running around, pretending to run the household? Maybe she has told

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<sup>110</sup>Sanskrit for sun. The surya was worn opposite the moon (chandra) on either side of the head for dance performances.

you not to dance, hehn? Get out of here, stupid girl. If you aren't dancing and you haven't the wits to help then get out! Nobody in all India needs a useless, lazy girl like you!"

The women were shocked by Minakshi's outburst. Padma burst into tears and ran for the doorway. She stumbled on a piece of fabric on the floor and fell, dropping Minakshi's surya, the sun pair to the moon that had been snatched from her earlier, on the ground. Then, tripping over her skirts, Padma escaped through the archway into the dark corridor beyond.

Minakshi snorted, and went to collect her surya.

"See what I put up with?" she smirked, holding aloft a dented golden sun. The injury to her surya seemed, in her eyes, to justify her claims against Padma's character.

"No daughter of mine would be so stupid," Minakshi boasted, smiling triumphantly across the room at Uma. Embarrassed and upset, Uma turned and hid her head in Vimala's shoulder. As a comfort Vimala ran her fingers through Uma's thick hair, pulling out the last thick folds of her wet plait.

Through the corridors leading from the women's quarters Padma ran, navigating her clumsy path through a veil of tears, her hands covering her eyes. The worst had happened. She knew it would. How could people ignore her failure when it was so obvious to everyone? She was untrained and showed little promise of any skill. She offered nothing and had no claim on the house aside from her mother's reputation. Minakshi was right; who in all India would want such a burden for a child?

Padma's tears flowed freely, obscuring the passageway in front of her. In her haste, she ran straight into her uncle Sundaram, Kamala's brother and Vimala's husband. The musician was coming in to put away his vina, the classical Indian lute he had played at the festival. He caught Padma as she crashed into him, managing not to drop his instrument or let go of his new found prize.

"Well, what have I found? A little mouse scurrying in the darkness. What could be wrong, my little niece?"

Padma, upset as she was, knew that her situation had suddenly gone from bad to worse. Normally she avoided Sundaram at all costs, and because he knew this, he sought her out on every occasion he could. She wriggled to free herself from his embrace, but he held fast, digging his long dirty fingernails into Padma's arm.

"Now, now, little mouse, surely you don't really want to get away?" Sundaram crooned as Padma struggled. "After all, you were the one who rushed towards me in the first place. In need of a little comfort, maybe? I see

you're upset. Why don't you come with me and I'll make you feel better, play you a little music maybe?"

The name Sundaram meant 'beautiful' in Tamil, but in Padma's eyes he could not have been more misnamed. His jealousy over her mother's success had led him to resent his lot in life, lamenting often about how much more he would have been valued had he been born to any family other than that of the devadasis. He was constantly in a state of financial trouble, gambling his earnings and treating himself to a lavish lifestyle he couldn't afford<sup>111</sup>. When he looked at Kamala, shining in her beauty, Padma saw hatred and envy burning in his eyes. And she knew at a very deep level that anyone who could look at her amma that way was not someone she wanted to be near.

Sundaram laughed as Padma struggled harder, excited by her fight. He knew that as her uncle, she would most likely have been given to him in marriage, as was the practice in the South. By custom he should have had access to her body, but because she was born to a devadasi and was likely to become a devadasi herself, he was forbidden to even touch her. Sundaram dug his fingers more deeply into Padma's skin, enjoying the rare feel of it. He wondered if he would leave fingerprints on her body, a marking that he had touched her, placed his claim on her. But Sundaram knew that even if Padma grew to be one of the devadasis who took many lovers<sup>112</sup>, he would never be chosen. His desire to dominate her was born out of an inner will to hurt the women he felt had taken from him the wealth and prestige a musician of his talent deserved. Padma knew fear when she saw him, and he liked that. He read his own power in her instinct to run, a power that in his own life he had never really known<sup>113</sup>.

Padma struggled in desperation. She had never been touched by a man before and she could almost feel her flesh under Sundaram's grasp withering away from the unwanted contact. Then suddenly in the hallway, shining with wrath and fury, was Gauri. Under her gaze, Sundaram's strength melted and Padma flew from his fingers to Gauri's sari.

"On your way, eli," Gauri said in a quiet and controlled voice, looking Padma squarely in the eyes. "Your amma wants to see you in the women's quarters."

Padma stared gratefully at her patti and then raced off, forgetting for the time being the reason she had run from the changing room in the first place.

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<sup>111</sup>"Quite clearly, it was the women who were considered precious in any given (devadasi) household for its social and professional reputation and continuity. The men folk acquiesced in the priorities of the household for they too saw their future prosperity as inextricably linked with the emergence of a beautiful and talented sister or niece who would consolidate resources... The dominance of women, even at the level of formal authority within the home was in a large sense due to the very nature of its economic base." (Srinivasan 1985:1872)

<sup>112</sup>see footnote 98

<sup>113</sup>see footnotes 111

Sundaram covered his thoughts with a sly smile, and moved to walk past Gauri in the corridor. She stepped into his path.

Gauri held Sundaram with the force of her gaze, and her anger overpowered him. He shrank before her, like a palm tree bent double under the monsoon's wrath. Just as Padma avoided her uncle, so too did Sundaram avoid his mother. When she looked on him, he saw in her gaze all that he truly was. In his heart he knew his character, his weakness, his pettiness. Gauri pierced deeper into his eyes, down to his hidden secrets, his ambition and his rage. She saw his desire for one forbidden to him by the position of her birth. Sundaram could take no more, and bowed his head before his mother. He turned with no trace of smile left on his lips, and skulked back towards the crowds in the temple foyer.

Gauri stared after him and only when her fury receded did the supernatural light around her dim. Her gaze was known for its power and there were few who could stand before it. She was a mirror of the gods, where people looking in saw only themselves, and seldom could they look past into Gauri's own spirit. Those who stared into her eyes at times such as this were made afraid by a glimpse of their true natures revealed in her sight. It was for this reason that Sundaram feared and avoided his mother. Her gaze flowed ever outward and all who looked upon her found their own eyes bent to her will. Sundaram couldn't bear to see his own weakness, his own flaws. Only those who hid nothing from themselves were able to look freely into Gauri's eyes.

Satisfied that her son had been persuaded, at least temporarily, to direct his attentions elsewhere, Gauri turned and hurried down another corridor to the inner courtyard where Padma had sat earlier trying to hide from the arrival of Dipavali. She had more important matters than disciplining a son too old for such behaviour. There was no doubt in Gauri's mind what his intentions were towards Padma.

"Now is the time," she whispered to herself as she rushed to the gardens. "We dare not wait any longer."

### **Chapter 3**

#### **A Mother's Gift**

#### **Cinnaveedu, Early Autumn 1917**

Kamala stood alone in the women's common room, folding the last of the ornately woven costumes. She hummed softly to herself, enjoying the serenity of a few quiet moments. Kamala always found pleasure in tidying; it made her feel as though the world had been put in its proper order.

The embroidered green border of Kamala's red sari brushed across the floor behind her as she walked. Smiling and singing, beautiful in her fresh change of clothes, Kamala suddenly appeared much younger than the amma of the house. After all, she was only twenty-six. Padma was her first and only child, born at the end of Kamala's nineteenth year. Today was her daughter's seventh birthday.

'Seven,' Kamala thought to herself. 'I wonder, have we waited too long?'

Although the world outside had yet to reveal itself to a younger, more naive Padma, Gauri and Kamala were well aware of the changes happening outside the temple gates. The presence of the British was everywhere, leaking into every household through the education of men. In the public sphere the English demonstrated a mastery over others that men of influence in the Hindu community were quick to try to emulate. Although not all were sold so easily on colonial values, enough men of the town were turning. Already there were protests against the dancers, talk of reforming their lives, talk of the end of the devadasis. Kamala had hoped that with time the British would learn to appreciate the value of the temple dancers, their history and precision, the elegance of a lifetime spent in training and religious devotion. But instead the dancers had become a rallying point. Prostitutes, they were called, and courtesans. Kamala was enraged by this. Didn't the English know anything about the differences between rajadasis, dancers of the court, and alamkaradasis<sup>114</sup>, dancers of the common man? All dancers were not the same. But, as Kamala was slowly realizing, the British didn't misunderstand this point because of their ignorance. They misunderstood because it was their intention to deliberately do so<sup>115</sup>.

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<sup>114</sup>There were three different classes of female entertainers: Rajadasis - dancers of the king and court, courtesans; Alamkaradasis - dancers of the common man, prostitutes; and Devadasis, dancers of the temple, supported by patrons. The distinction between the three has become highly confused, not only in popular perception, but also in the works of scholars who write on the topic of devadasi. The distinctions between the groups, though greatly significant, have largely been overlooked, allowing the perception of temple dancers as common prostitutes to permeate research on the topic. (Bose 2001:12)

<sup>115</sup>"The reformers (British) presented the extant temple dancer as a 'prostitute' in order to do away with her." (Orr 2000:12) It was a widely recognized technique of the British colonizers to debase the moral standard of the aspect of Hinduism they wished to take over. What we now recognize as a fallacy of reasoning, a 'straw man' argument, was one of the most popular tactics used in collapsing the social structure surrounding temple dancers. Deliberately misunderstood and misrepresented aspects became permanently associated with these women, leading to the

It was into this world, not the world of the temple dancers, that Kamala and Gauri were reluctant to bring Padma. Every year they watched the streets and read the papers. Temple dancers and courtesans were some of the few groups of women in India who were taught to read and encouraged to gain a wide education<sup>116</sup>. Kamala and Gauri now used this rare privilege to acquire as much information as possible about those who campaigned against the devadasis. Kamala's academic pursuits and her growing anger towards colonial intervention in temple matters had put a rift between her and her patron. She could no longer see only the benefits, as he did, in the British occupation. Kamala had once commented to him about how perhaps it was time for the English to return to their own country. Padma's father had gotten up and left without a word. A note had arrived for Kamala later in the day. 'Remember where the money for your training has come from.' Kamala's patron and lover never came to her bed again, although he still sent lavish gifts of money and jewelry. Kamala wasn't sure if he did it to maintain the public appearance of wealth and support of the arts, or to bury her in the irony that washed through every corner of her life. When Gauri saw the note, she gathered up all the jewelry Padma's father had ever given Kamala and sold it in the market.

"No daughter of mine will wear a collar around her neck like an animal going to slaughter," Gauri had said. "I will have nothing wrapped around your body that was not given with joy and blessings."

"Amma," said a quiet voice behind Kamala, breaking her train of thought. She turned to see Padma standing timidly in the archway, waiting for encouragement to enter.

"Come here, Padma," Kamala said with a gentle smile. She could see the streaks on Padma's cheeks where fresh tears were still drying. Uma had told her about the incident earlier, and apologized to Kamala for her mother's sharp tongue. Because she knew nothing of the fright Padma had been given by Sundaram, Kamala assumed Padma's sadness was because of Minakshi's harsh words.

"Come on over here, my Padma," Kamala said with sympathy. Taking a seat on a broad bench, Kamala patted her knee. Her tall daughter came and curled up on her lap. Kamala wrapped her arm around the corner of her red and green sari around Padma's shoulders and rocked her gently.

"Now, what's this, my daughter? A festival day and you so unhappy! What will Vishnu think?" Kamala chided softly.

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eventual end of their way of life. However, as will be explored later in the text, this process began before the British, and was initially begun by men of the Hindu community prior to the British arriving in India.

<sup>116</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1873



"I don't know, amma," said Padma. She let out a long deep sigh that relieved some of the ache under her ribs. "I don't want to be like this. I'm just sad, deep down, lying in my tummy. It feels like its swelling up inside me. A big sadness, making me feel all fat like a temple cow. Do you think I could be pregnant, amma?"

At this Kamala burst out laughing. Padma tried to stay sad, stubbornly wanting not to laugh when she didn't understand what was funny. Still, despite her resistance, a smile broke out on Padma's lips. And then suddenly she was crying again. Emotions welled up in her and the ache in her ribs became a sharp pain. Sobs flung themselves out of her mouth and tears washed over the floodgates in her eyes and cascaded down her cheeks. Kamala held her, crooning softly and rocking. Padma felt as if she was being turned inside out. As she gasped and sobbed, it was as though she was vomiting out great gulps of sadness, and as she did her body slowly deflated, one retch after another.

"Still pregnant?" Kamala asked with a smile when Padma's sobs settled to gentle shakes and sniffles. Padma shook her head. Her mother didn't ask her to explain the outburst; some things were better left unsaid. Kamala knew, although Padma didn't, that the reasons for her sadness were about to change.

"Come over here, Padma," her mother said, getting up and moving across the room. "We should get you cleaned up."

Padma followed her mother over to a large brass basin of warm water. Padma thought it was left over from the women changing, but Kamala had prepared it specially for her daughter and scented it lightly with jasmine flowers. The water sent up tiny soft tendrils of warm steam, smelling of the garden after fresh rains. Pushing gently on Padma's shoulder, Kamala bent her daughter's head down over the basin and ladled warm flower water over the back of her neck. The water ran in rivulets down Padma's jawbone and across her cheeks, crisscrossing the fine salt lines left by her tears. Padma dipped her fingers into the basin, running them through the water and thinking about what her grandmother had said earlier in the day. *Be like the water, eli. No one can push the water over. If they try, they can only pass their hands through it.*

Padma scooped water out of the bowl and washed her face, scrubbing away any evidence of tears and sadness. She tried to let the scent of the jasmine carry her thoughts into happier times, garden picnics and days in the sun before it grew too hot. When she was finished washing, Kamala handed Padma a soft cloth to dry her face and began to take out her daughter's *veni*. The long braid was a tangle of fly away hairs and loose tresses. Kamala pulled each clump gently free and set about brushing her daughter's long hair. Padma sat happily, feeling clean, empty of her sadness and, on the whole, much better. There was something so caring in having someone else brush her hair. It felt wonderful, a simple but exquisite pleasure. It made her feel safe and well-loved.

Kamala finished brushing the tats out of Padma's hair and began to re-braid it. Instead of leaving Padma's plait in a plain veni, she turned it into a dhammilla, adding a long, multi-linked chain of gold and pearls. It looked as though Padma's braid had been covered in decadent royal armor. When Kamala was finished putting in the dhammilla, she took her gold surya out from where it had been tucked into a fold of her sari. Kamala reached over and pinned the beautiful sun just to the side of Padma's part. Then she placed the moon across from it on the other side of her daughter's head. Padma reached her small hands up to see what it was that her mother had put in her hair.

"Amma, your chandra and surya!" she exclaimed with surprise. "I can't wear these! They're for dasis only!"

"And what do you think you are, daughter of mine? Come and look in the basin. I want to show you something."

Padma peered over into the still water. It had cooled, and steam no longer rose from the mirrored surface. The brass shone under the clear water, giving the impression that Padma's reflection shone with a golden light. In her hair the sun and moon gave off their own elegant glimmer.

"See Padma, you're also the bright one, golden just like Gauri. You wear my surya and chandra, and one day they'll be yours, just as they were once your patti's. I know how hard the past few years have been on you, staying at home with all of us. But it's important that you can see yourself for what you truly are, a dasi of our family line... the next dasi of our family line."

Padma looked up at her mother, surprised that the issue of her future was finally being addressed, and even more surprised that despite all her failings, her mother seemed to believe she would go on to be a dancer. Her amma nodded towards the brass basin.

"Look, daughter of mine, and see deeply. The reflection shows us how we appear in this life, but it cannot show us all that we are beyond samsara<sup>117</sup>, this cycle of rebirth. Reflection is no more than maya<sup>118</sup>, illusion. The difference, my daughter, between simply looking and actually seeing is only a question of depth."

Padma stared at her mother with a questioning look and then leaned over the basin. At first all she could see was her own face looking back, eyes wide, lips pushed together in a gesture of determination. Padma had never really

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<sup>117</sup>Samsara - a Sanskrit word meaning "the rebirth cycle of existence". (Ludwig 1996:132) Only when a devotee achieves moksha, liberation through realization of the true nature of existence, are they able to escape this continuous cycle of karma and rebirth. (Ludwig 1996:108)

<sup>118</sup>Maya - a Sanskrit word meaning "appearance, illusion, term to indicate that which prevents one from seeing truly." (Ludwig 1996:132) It is held in the Hindu faith that the world apparent is only an illusion of the real world. Meditation and other ascetic practices are used to help the devotee see past the transient qualities of this life to the infinite, eternal reality of what lies beyond.

taken a long look at herself before. Whenever she tried, embarrassment prevented her from holding her own gaze for very long. Now she stared closely, intent on achieving this feat of seeing that her mother described.

Her face was thin and dark brown. Thick eyebrows dominated her features like eagles peering down the steep mountainsides of her nose. Her black hair was pulled sharply away from her high forehead and sitting just back of the crests of her temples the sun and moon shone forth in golden splendor. As Padma gazed into them, she could see them in her mother's hair, shining brightly before the Dipavali festival. For an instant it seemed to Padma as though her hair was her mother's hair, the two of them intertwined as the midnight background from which the stars and moon shone forth. The image startled Padma. She gasped and looked up.

Her amma smiled encouragingly and motioned for her to keep looking. Padma returned her eyes to the water and the sensation moved over her more quickly this time. She looked into the light reflecting up through the water from the brass bowl. A gold brightness washed over her own image, blurring its definition, robbing Padma of her ability to decipher the distance between her face and her reflection, the reflection and the basin below. And then she was falling free, down, down into the bowl, into the golden brightness of her grandmother, the shining moon and sun of her amma. Padma couldn't retract her gaze, couldn't move back from the image long enough to see it in its entirety. The eyes in the water held her and she felt as though there was nothing in the world beyond that moment. Padma couldn't have said whose eyes stared back at her, only that they were both her mother's and grandmother's, and something else that encompassed them all.

Padma gazed into the water as long as she could, and when she was finished, she had no idea how long it had been. A few seconds, a few minutes, she couldn't tell. Kamala was sitting back on the bench, rubbing soft sandalwood oil on her arms and feet. Padma felt as though the warm sweet scent had crept into the mirror through her nose and woken her from the trance. Its aroma was beckoning, thick with tones of spice and musk, reminding her of the incense and offerings made to Vishnu at the festival<sup>119</sup>. Kamala looked up at her and Padma went to sit at her mother's feet. Reaching down, Kamala placed a dab of sandalwood oil behind each of Padma's ears. The two smiled at each other, enjoying a moment of closeness and silence.

Finally Kamala reached over and removed the sun and moon decorations from her daughter's hair. Padma sighed slightly, sad to be rid of them. For a few minutes she had felt like a real dasi getting ready for the festival.

"Padma," Kamala started, then paused. She wanted to make sure she had her daughter's full attention.

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<sup>119</sup>Sandalwood paste and incense are often used as ritual offerings at festivals and ceremonies.

"Padma, there are certain things about being a devadasi that I want you to learn about. It's important for you to understand not only why we're here, but how we have come to be as we are. Our history is long, going back many thousands of generations, some say as many as twelve or thirteen hundred years<sup>120</sup>. We didn't always have this temple system around us; it grew as we did and made a place for us. It's said that when girls first danced in the temples they were celibate all their lives, they never took husbands or lovers<sup>121</sup>. But then so many beautiful girls were alone, and their art died out with them every generation, for they had no daughters. And so the kings of the South decided to take the dasis to their bed and they gave in exchange money and power to the priests of the temples where the girls had come from<sup>122</sup>. This could only have been done by kings, because they were seen as the living body of the gods and had the right to rule men<sup>123</sup>. So the dasis had babies and the temple prospered.

"In those times we had little protection. After the king, many courtiers and priests took advantage of the dasis<sup>124</sup>. There was widespread abuse of our position. People came to think of us as courtesans instead of celibates. But this, Padma, was where the gods were kind to us. The rajadasis, dancers of the court, had many rights and privileges and when we became associated with them, we also gained these protections. We were taught to read and write, we learned politics and power<sup>125</sup>. We formalized our art to protect its continuity in an uncertain world. We protected it and it protected us; together we have survived centuries of invasion and change. The artist and her art, the dancer and her dance, we are one being, brought into divine creation together by our love.

"After a time, it came to be recognized that the devadasis would have patrons. No man takes us to his bed now without our consent. Priests and gurus, even kings, have no rights to our bodies save those that we confer on them, although it is still a great blessing for a dasi to be asked to the bed of the king. After many years of close ties between the royal courts and the temples, people came to understand the importance of our place in the world. We are the ever auspicious, living bodies of unchanging luck. We are wives who are never widows, women who never go childless. We are more than just dancers, entertainers, courtesans - we are protectors of our communities and servants of Vishnu.

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<sup>120</sup>The origination of the tradition of temple dancing has been traced to literature of the 8th-12th centuries. Although the exact earliest recorded reference of devadasis is uncertain, many refer to the 8th and 9th centuries as the most likely period of the tradition's emergence. The earliest sources trace this tradition back to the 4th century, although this date is not clearly substantiated or recognized among scholars. (Orr 2000:6-7)

<sup>121</sup>Marglin 1985:8-9

<sup>122</sup>Marglin 1985:11

<sup>123</sup>Marglin 1985:90

<sup>124</sup>Marglin 1985:90-91

<sup>125</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1872

"Do you know what our name means, Padma? Our name is *tevaradiyal* and it means 'at the feet of the god'<sup>126</sup>. That is where we are Padma, and have always been. It is where we will always be. And you must understand Padma, that the feet of the god are not found only in the temple. Vishnu is everywhere in the world, and if the time ever comes when you have to seek him elsewhere, you must know that it isn't only in the temple where you are his servant and his bride. Just as Sita kept her loyalty and her duty to Rama even in his absence from her, so too must you never neglect your husband despite any distances between you."

"But amma," Padma interjected, "I'm not a dasi."

"Yes, but you will be soon. Your patti and I have made arrangements for you to begin your training."

Padma stared at her amma, examining her serious face for any trace of a joke. Padma's disbelief was so strong that Kamala burst out laughing and then reached out to hug her daughter.

"You mean it, amma? I'm really going to be trained?" Padma's happiness overwhelmed her. She jumped up from the floor and began leaping around the room, waving her arms and hooting with joy. Kamala laughed out loud. It suddenly didn't seem so long in the past that she was excited for the announcement of her own acceptance into the dance school two decades ago.

"Come now, Padma," Kamala said, interrupting her daughter's wild victory lap around the room. "There's a lot to be done before then. Tonight, for instance, you have to meet the man who's going to be your guru."

Padma stopped leaping and came to sit back beside her amma on the bench. It was then that a serious thought occurred her.

"But amma, what if he doesn't like me?"

"Well, he's just going to have to, isn't he?" Kamala said with a smile. "And besides, I think he already does. He was watching you in the temple today. His name is guru Madhavan<sup>127</sup>."

"Madhavan? Just like Krishna! He's your guru too amma!"

"Well," Kamala said thoughtfully, "he's the son of my guru. My own guru, beautiful soul that he was, passed on a few years ago. His son has taken over in

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<sup>126</sup>"The term devadasi is a shortened form of the word *tevaradiyal* which translates (not very well) as 'slave of the god'. Literally it means 'at the feet of the god' and refers to the class of women who through various ceremonies of 'marriage' dedicate themselves to the deities of the temple." (Srinivasan 1985:1869)

<sup>127</sup>Madhavan is another name for Krishna, an avatara of Vishnu. It comes from the encounter where Krishna defeats the demon Madhu.

his place, and he too is a wonderful man. You're very lucky to have him for your teacher, and not a guru like your patti had when she was young<sup>128</sup>."

There was something unreadable in Kamala's eyes as she said this and Padma wondered what it was that gave her amma such a look. However, because she had learned early from her patti that sometimes people want to keep things to themselves, Padma decided not to ask. She wasn't sure if it was something about guru Madhavan that made her mother see inside herself, or the comment about her patti's guru. Padma knew nothing in detail about her grandmother's early life, but it was a widely recognized fact that something terrible had happened to both her and her guru when she was in training. The secret was closely guarded by the older women in the household. Even Minakshi's wagging tongue couldn't be loosened on this subject.

Kamala helped Padma change into a fresh skirt and blouse. "You'll be in saris soon," she commented to her daughter with pride.

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Gauri left from her encounter with Sundaram in an agitated state. She had known about his interest in Padma for several months and was more determined than ever to see her grand-daughter safely living in another house, under the training of a competent guru. Gauri knew from her own experience how damaging any hint of scandal could be to a dasi's career<sup>129</sup>. She wouldn't put it past Sundaram to ruin with gossip what he couldn't physically get his hands on.

The difficulties Sundaram created with the women of the cinnaveedu caused Gauri no end of grief. Relationships in any devadasi household were normally full of tensions and complexities, but Sundaram's thinly veiled hatred was like a pool of gasoline seeping ever closer to a flame. So far Gauri had been able to control her son, but she knew that soon he was likely to seek his patronage elsewhere, and would then have no reason to obey her or respect the rules of the cinnaveedu. Reform movements were employing musicians and trainers to teach a new generation of dancers, the daughters of the upper

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<sup>128</sup>Mothers had a large say in the choosing of a specific guru for their daughters. It was common for the daughter to take the mother's guru if he was available and the child showed promise as a talented dancer. Trainees usually resided with the guru in a separate residence with numerous other girls during their period of training. Only when there were personal reasons, such as the guru's sexual interest in a female member of the household, did the daughter have her training at home. (Srinivasan 1985:1872/73)

<sup>129</sup>In illustration of this point, Kersenboom-Story records an instance where a girl was turned down on her application to become a devadasi at the completion of her training on the grounds that her mother, decades previously, had "gone astray" before her own initiation ceremony. The girl eventually found acceptance at a temple where they were willing to overlook her mother's indiscretion. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:187-8)

caste<sup>130</sup>. Wealth and privilege were turning the essence of her life into a hobby for school children<sup>131</sup>. Gauri resented these newcomers, their colonial inspirations and their future that depended on her place remaining in the past<sup>132</sup>. She feared Sundaram's hand in what was to come. Although he was born of her womb, twin to her darling daughter Kamala, Sundaram had always remained a dangerous enigma to his mother. She understood his ambitions all too clearly, but she couldn't decipher the root cause of them. Growing up in a household dominated by women in a country largely ruled by men was difficult on Sundaram's sense of pride. However, he was only one of thousands of men who were part of devadasi families. Although Gauri knew of other men who shared Sundaram's feelings of jealousy and ambition, his deep hatred of the women in her household was far beyond any natural family tension. Even Sundaram's beautiful wife Vimala was an object of his assault.

Although he prized her for her beauty and her willingness to serve him, Gauri knew that Sundaram had repaid Vimala's devotion with violence on more than one occasion. Her happiness seemed to both enrage and enthrall him. Gauri had no doubts he loved her; he spoke of her often with joy and pride. But somehow the things he loved the most about her also infuriated him. As Taikkizhavi, Gauri refused to allow any abuse to take place in the household, but her control was stronger over the dancers than it was over the musicians and their families. Vimala's good nature left her uncomplaining of her husband's

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<sup>130</sup> Generally, two distinct branches of reform developed around the topic of dance and devadasis in the century prior to Independence. One group argued that the tradition was one of loose women and that it should be done away with altogether. The other group maintained that the devadasis were victims of a harsh culture, and that they should be rescued by having the tradition ended and the art of dance transferred to respectable women where the art itself could be salvaged, even though the artist was sacrificed to history. These reformers theorized that the removal of the temple dedication system would ensure that no future women would be subjected to the life of a temple prostitute. The later opinion (in favour of preserving and transferring the art of dance) finally won out, although its success was almost entirely dependent on the wealth, influence and political power of the Brahmin families who took it up as a cause in the larger Reform Movement. (Orr 2000:11-14, Marglin 1985:6)

<sup>131</sup> Initially in the reform movement it was the daughters of upper caste families who took over training in dance, although now women of all castes from the upper and middle classes participate in the art. In the early twentieth century it was believed that the only way to disassociate the art from its more negative affiliations was to have it performed by a group of women whose moral standing was beyond reproach. As such, the young daughters of upper caste families took up the art. However, despite their high social standing, it wasn't an easy battle. For many years after the training of upper caste daughters began, the associations of dance also affected the reputations of the families involved. Because of its associations, many families flatly refused to accept the 'reformed' art form and continued to reject it entirely until much later this century. (Srinivasan 1998:100)

<sup>132</sup> Neither of the two major dance reform movements (see foot note 130) envisioned a way of preserving both the dancer and the dance. In fact, their platforms rested almost exclusively on the eradication of devadasis from the community. The debate itself was centered on the resurrection of the art form, one which reformers saw as something anyone could perform with the right training. The key shift in the reform movement was to make the focus of dance entertainment rather than an act of ritual. Despite this, it is important to note that aspects of devotion are still a key part of a dancer's training, but are now much more dependent on the individual dancer rather than being regulated by the temple.

treatment. She always maintained, even when questioned directly by Gauri, that Sundaram's treatment of her was nothing other than fair.

Gauri tried to put aside thoughts of her problems with Sundaram to another time. She had a more important conversation to prepare herself for. Waiting in the garden was Padma's future guru, and Gauri had no intention of letting herself be distracted by topics that could wait until later. She went quickly down the narrow twisting corridors, by-passing the women's quarters and moving swiftly into the gardens. The sun had just set, leaving the sky glowing with remembered warmth in the face of the oncoming darkness. Gauri pulled her sari around her shoulders as a chill moved through her body. The air that caressed her skin still held some of the heat of the day, and Gauri wondered what it was that had caused her sudden shiver.

Moving carefully in the dim light of evening, Gauri made her way to the far corner of the gardens. She wandered down the stone walkway, past the attached houses of each family of dasis. Many of the gardens surrounding the temple proper also belonged to the dancers<sup>133</sup>. Land was only one of the numerous gifts the devadasis received. Although title to the land remained with the temple itself, the dasis were given the land to use and enjoy as long as there was a daughter to inherit it, and to continue the family line of dancers. The women of Gauri's family had served at the temple for sixteen generations, and the most beautiful and extensive of the gardens had been given to her line.

In the days when Gauri's family first danced for the temple so many daughters had been born. Beautiful and talented, they became the backbone of art and culture in the community. The reputation of the family and the temple grew, and Gauri's line was gifted much of the land surrounding the temple complex. Now so few daughters were born. Gauri knew she was witnessing the end of an age. Of her own family, only one of her three older sisters was still alive, and she had married a musician instead of being ordained as a dasi. She lived in the town, close enough to be woken by the early morning rituals, but she hadn't served at the temple since her husband's success allowed them to move out from under the financial umbrella of Gauri's mother. In Gauri's own past, she had born two sons and a daughter, and Kamala had only given birth to Padma. Gauri knew that the wombs of the women in her family understood the outside world too clearly, and in a time of starvation and need, they had ceased to bear fruit.

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<sup>133</sup>"The temple tenurial system of pre-colonial India granted a service allotment or *maniam* which was meant for the enjoyment 'over the generations' (vamsa parampariyam - genealogies/ descendants) of a set of dasis attached to a given shrine. They had no right to alienate it since it was not in their name but the temple's, more specifically in the name of the deity or the head of the controlling *matha*. The organization of shares (*panku*) in this land, just as the organization of training and arrangement of daily duties, was a matter of internal management by the community. The property transmission within the household recognized the joint and inalienable nature of privileged land-use which could only remain with the family so long as there was a member actively employed in the temple." (Srinivasan 1985:1871-72)



Gauri's ankle bells jingled softly under the gold embroidered border of her ocean blue sari. Under her bare feet the smooth stones of the pathway, worn down by so many generations of passers-by, released the warmth of the day with a sigh and began to chill in the night air. The old woman made her way by starlight, ducking in and out of the blue shadows of the trees. The air smelled of jasmine and the incense that was always in the breeze around the temple. Above her, the vast expanse of sky darkened as the last of the sunlight melted over the western horizon. The light turned to a translucent blue green, like looking up at the underside of the sea. Stars crept in from the east in greater numbers, challenging the salty liquid of evening. In the last of the light only a few long clouds were left in the sky. Above Gauri they stretched out like the crests of ebb tide ripples, melting white foam sucking gently at the soft dark shoreline.

As she neared the back wall of their family garden, Gauri noticed that torches had been lit and placed in the iron holders mounted in the stone. On a bench, bathed in a golden glow and sitting with his eyes closed was Madhavan. He was ten years Gauri's junior. At the age of thirty-four, he was young to be in charge of his own school, but the recent death of his father had left him no choice but to take over. He was an only son, although the old guru had given many daughters to the temple. As was the custom, gurus didn't train their own families for the temple<sup>134</sup>, and with his sisters away from a young age, Madhavan had always considered the other students at the school to be his siblings. Following the death of his father, he had been the natural choice to fill the position of dance guru and trainer. In an effort to compensate for his youth, Madhavan's hair had begun to recede rapidly in the past year, and had conveniently obliged him by turning salt and pepper grey almost over night. As she watched Madhavan sitting in meditation under the torches, Gauri would almost have sworn she was watching the father instead of the son.

Hearing the soft tinkle of ankle bells, Madhavan looked up and smiled as he spotted Gauri in the negotiating her path through the darkness.

"Why are you hiding, little patti?" Madhavan jested. "You look like a blue ghost standing in the shadows like that. Come and rest your tired old legs next to me on the bench."

"I'm not as old as that, and you're not so young," Gauri answered, making her way over to him. "Look at that hair of yours! I thought it was your father sitting there!"

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<sup>134</sup>Although a guru could live with his mother and sisters, students in his trust came from a separate household. (Srinivasan 1985:1872) Because Madhavan's father was a dance guru, his daughters (Madhavan's sisters) were trained out of the house by a different guru from another family. This system resulted in a complex and highly interconnected set of family relationships, one which kept the flow of money, skill and influence spread more evenly across communities. Families often stood as teachers and students in relationship to different households, thereby preventing one household from assuming a dictatorship position over the art form.

Gauri walked to Madhavan and the two greeted each other formally. Madhavan put the palms of his hands together and raised them to his chin, bowing slightly. Gauri did the same in response, bowing her head a little lower to respectfully acknowledge the higher status of the guru. She smiled fondly at the son, remembering the father who had taken in her daughter to be trained. Kamala was so innocent then. Gauri had refused to take her to several local gurus because they were known for their harsh treatment of the dancers in their care. Gauri would have gone as far as Puri to find a guru who would treat Kamala gently and without abuse. Luckily for both mother and daughter, an acceptable trainer had been found only a few hours away in a neighboring town. Although Madhavan's father's school was not the largest or the most widely known, it was well-respected in the community. Looking into the eyes of the man who would train Padma, Gauri knew that if anyone could raise her and protect her from the storm that was sweeping across India, it would be Madhavan.

"I tell you, guru Madhavan, it has been too long between visits. I'm glad you were able to remember at which temple we served."

"Come now, old mother. You know I only needed to be asked by the Taikkizhavi. It was you who were slow in your invitation."

Madhavan's joking made light of a serious situation. Despite the humour of their greeting, both were aware of the underlying abnormality of the situation. It was the custom for a guru to recruit a *dasi*, and to approach the Taikkizhavi of his own accord to negotiate a dancer's future training<sup>135</sup>. In this case, Gauri had made a subtle but significant request in her invitation to Madhavan to visit the family. He was aware of her unvoiced appeal and had come in person to accept Padma as a student, thereby avoiding any public embarrassment to Gauri's household for having to ask the guru to train a daughter.

The two sat next to each other smiling. Gauri, for all her jests, was relieved to see Madhavan hadn't changed over the past years, despite his absence of hair. Dropping her humour like a heavy fruit falling from the tree in autumn, Gauri moved on to discuss the terms of Padma's training. Although Madhavan had already agreed, Gauri wanted to make sure he understood Padma's nature before he took her into his house. It was no place for a woman, even a woman of Gauri's standing, to tell a guru his business in training a *dasi*<sup>136</sup>, but the two were old friends. Madhavan listened to her concerns with patience. As with the best teachers, he never let a need to appear all-knowing inhibit his ability to do a better job. Because he understood that Gauri's concerns might help him to train Padma better, he let her talk without reminding her that it was

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<sup>135</sup>Srinivasan n.d.:212-213

<sup>136</sup>Although female dancers were the vehicles of the art, training a *dasi* was exclusively the right of a male guru and was not done in consultation with other *das* in the student's household. However, despite the guru's supreme role in the official training of a *dasi*, girls began learning about dance from the time they were born. The value of unofficial training received by simply growing up in a *dasi* home is not to be underestimated in its contribution to a trainee's understanding of the art. (Srinivasan n.d.:211)

his place, not hers, to determine the course of Padma's instruction. And Gauri, because she understood Madhavan's character, ventured into the topic in the first place. When she was finished, she knew for certain that any man who could hear an old dasi speaking where she shouldn't without reminding her of her place was exactly the man to handle Padma's insecurities and shyness.

The two talked of Padma and then of other things. Gauri and Madhavan avoided the topic of reform; both were aware of and feared the gathering storm of colonial judgment poised to wash through the temple like a monsoon flood. They stood in the midst of changing and uncertain times, and neither ventured to discuss it in case they somehow, in the ripple of cosmic forces, affected the outcome. They waited in the growing chill of evening as Padma bathed and changed. The garden was an unlikely place for an interview. Normally such things were held in the temple, in the presence of priests and other dasis. But the times were in motion, leaving Gauri just enough flexibility to arrange a quiet interview away from the temple proper. The priests would agree; they would be glad enough to get Padma off to training, one more dasi to bring in money and gifts.

Finally Gauri and Madhavan heard footsteps and whispers in the garden.

"Guru Madhavan," said a confident voice in the darkness. Kamala stepped into the light of the path. "It's so good to see you after such a long absence."

Madhavan stood and gave a small bow before Kamala, as he had done with Gauri. In gesture of respect, Kamala greeted him as a student greets a teacher. She bent forward into a crouching position to place her hands on his feet. As Kamala stood up, the two stared at each other, nervously holding their breaths. Finally they both gave way to smiles and the tension of the moment dissolved. 'She is still so beautiful,' Madhavan thought to himself. 'My youth slips farther away everyday. Already I'm like an old man, and still she is as fresh as a lotus bud offered at the temple.'

"I would like to present my daughter, Padma," Kamala said, grandly sweeping her arm back to indicate the spot where Padma had been standing a moment before. Madhavan smiled, amused by Padma's shyness. At the moment of her big introduction, she had stepped sideways, trying to hide herself behind the trunk of a tree. The yellow border of Padma's pink skirt trailed behind her on the path, giving away her hiding place. Kamala placed a firm hand on her daughter's shoulder and Padma magically reappeared.

Although Kamala maintained her winning smile, covering her frustration as any good performer would, Padma hung her head in embarrassment. She couldn't control her shyness and was ashamed of having given in to the urge to hide. Padma was certain guru Madhavan would decide right away not to take her as a pupil. She had seen the harsh mannerisms and quick tempers of other gurus when they attended the performances of their students at the temple.

Fearing the worst, Padma raised her eyes just a glance and was surprised to see guru Madhavan smiling gently at her, with amusement rather than annoyance in his eyes. He stood lightly next to the bench, one arm resting gently across the other. Years of dance training highlighted his thin frame and delicate movements, giving him the air of one who was both a woman and a man. Padma relaxed a little and took a step forward, raising her eyes more boldly for a closer look. Madhavan, like one trying to encourage a small animal to lose its fear, remained perfectly still. Gauri and Kamala watched the performance with great interest, exchanging a confident look as they saw Padma's shyness slip away and her curiosity increase.

"Padma," her mother offered, "you should greet guru Madhavan properly."

Padma looked at her mother and then at the man perched beside the bench. He straightened slowly, reminding her of a slender water bird stretching its head up towards the sky. Padma went forward, and just as her mother had taught her to do, she bent down onto her knees and carefully touched her head and hands to guru Madhavan's feet. She paused there for a moment, thinking that his feet smelled rather nice, like sandalwood paste and fresh cut grass. Behind her she heard Gauri cough. Realizing that she had obviously stayed there too long, Padma rushed to stand up and hurried back behind her mother's sari. The adults smiled as Padma poked her head around from behind Kamala's bare midriff.

"Now you can see why we call her our little mouse!" Gauri laughed. Padma stared at guru Madhavan. He didn't seem to be at all put out, acting as though Padma's stumble in the rules of courtesy had been nothing out of the ordinary. He didn't order her to come out from behind her mother's sari, and neither did he say anything else to make her feel small or out of place. He simply existed without passing judgment, like a blossom on a tree breathing in the night air or a friendly spirit she happened to chance upon in the garden. Padma decided she liked him, she liked him a lot, much better than she thought she would. Bravely she took a step away from her mother's side. Padma looked at guru Madhavan again, and then decided to take a second step. Her amma and patti exchanged another pleased look.

"And now, eli, don't you have something for our most welcome guest?" Gauri asked.

"Oh," Padma peeped as she remembered, and then, embarrassed, put her hand over her mouth. Kamala handed her a small parcel containing a gold coin, sandalwood paste, and other tokens of value. Padma gave the gift to guru Madhavan. This was only a token of the gift she would give him when she was formally accepted, on the occasion of her first dance lesson<sup>137</sup>. Her offer and his acceptance symbolized his agreement to train her over the next seven years. Gauri and Madhavan had already discussed the arrangement, for which a patron

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<sup>137</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:190-191

would now have to be found, or else the family would be faced with a heavy financial burden. Fees were never haggled over<sup>138</sup> like market goods, or even discussed in great detail. Gauri offered the guru payment by way of gifts given on festival occasions and the guru's birthday throughout the seven years of Padma's training, and rice would be sent on a regular basis to offset the costs to Madhavan's family of providing room and board for the dasi in training<sup>139</sup>.

Madhavan accepted the gift Padma offered with a smile. After the formalities were complete, the group agreed it was time to head back to the temple for hot coffee. Although Gauri had already informed the priests of the interview, the rest of the women in the cinnaveedu had yet to find out.

As the group walked back through the gardens, Kamala had another gift for Madhavan.

"Here," she said, holding out a bowl covered by a cloth. "Rasogollas<sup>140</sup>. I know your fondness for them. And I know how hard it is to come by them here in the South. We never make them."

"How kind of you to remember!" Madhavan said, taking the bowl with great care. "Where did you get them from?"

"They were made by... a woman of the house," Kamala finished quietly. She looked at Gauri. The old woman nodded almost imperceptibly to indicate that she wouldn't give away her daughter's secret. It was a serious offense for a dasi to be caught cooking for someone, especially for a guru or a Brahmin. But it did go on, more than many people of the community would admit.

The company entered the temple complex through a side entrance and walked past the corridor that led from the kitchens. Vimala was coming up the corridor, fresh from scrubbing the festival dishes. She rubbed her raw hands, trying to smooth over the sharp cuts in her fingers where hours of washing had made her skin crack. When Vimala noticed the group in the hallway, she took one look at Padma leaping around in excitement in front of guru Madhavan and her face lit up in a huge smile.

"Congratulations, our little mouse!" Vimala said with genuine affection. "It looks like you'll be leaving us after all!"

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<sup>138</sup>Srinivasan n.d.:216

<sup>139</sup>Srinivasan n.d.:216

<sup>140</sup>Rasogollas are a dessert made from cottage cheese and syrup. They are made in Bengal and aren't commonly a feature of the South Indian diet.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Sowing the Seeds of Dance**

#### **Gurukulam, Winter/ Early Spring 1918**

It was 5 a.m. when the temple servants went to wake the deity. The men walked to the doors of the main temple, four Brahmins and a man of the potter's caste. The potter broke the mud seals that he had placed on the temple doors the night before, as was the custom at the end of every day<sup>141</sup>. The Brahmin watchman watched, the priest in charge of doors oversaw the opening. The Brahmin in charge of light brought torches so that the man responsible for articles of morning worship could see. Together they opened the temple, as it was done everyday, chanting and beating drums to wake the deity.

In the inner sanctum the Brahmins put away Vishnu's bedding, laid out on the floor each night. They purified their hands with water and made light offerings, arati. They gathered the burnt camphor, tulasi<sup>142</sup> or basil leaf garlands and the sandalwood paste of yesterday's offerings and wrapped them to be sent to the king. Offerings, once offered, couldn't be thrown out after they were used. Nobody would dare to treat a possession of the god with such disrespect. Instead they went to the king, who was in a position to both supply the offerings and receive them back after use.

Vishnu was bathed and given fresh clothing. To do this the Brahmins set up a mirror, washing the reflection with camphor and flower water, brushing its teeth and tongue with special cleaning tools. It was far more appropriate to bathe the image of the deity in the mirror than to climb on the statue itself. The priests avoided contact with the stone representation of Vishnu out of reverence. In order to change his dress, they carefully hung clean saffron cloth on the stone deity, draping the fabric cautiously so as not to touch the statue itself. They then presented Vishnu with fresh offerings: a flower garland, perfume, incense, food and lamp light. When they were finished, the temple was opened to the public.

Lying asleep in the cinnaveedu, Padma's dreams followed the Brahmins through the night, watching the morning rituals. She saw the mud seal break on the door, the lamps lit, the light flood into the stone room, lapping around Vishnu's feet. In her dream the priests moved forward, walking on top of the light that had turned to water. They held up their hands to remove the flower garland

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<sup>141</sup>All references from this section are from Frederique Marglin's description of waking the deity in Wives of the God-King. Although this text deals mostly with rituals in Puri, a city in North Eastern India, the description is of Vaishnavite morning rituals. Despite the fact that Saskia Kersenboom-Story's work Nityasumangali is primarily directed at Vaishnavite devadasis in the South, her section on this topic relates Saivite rituals; rituals which are, of necessity, quite different. As a result, I have chosen to give preference to Marglin's account of these rituals because, although it originates farther north than the location of the story, the deity being discussed is the same. All details discussed above can therefore be found in Marglin 1985:185-87.

<sup>142</sup>This basil plant is considered to be special to Vishnu, and would have no place in a Saivite ritual. (Marglin 1985:186)

offered the day before, but the water surged and churned, splashing over the deity and taking the garland before it could be retrieved and sent to the king.

In that moment the stone god opened his eyes and a silvery light blazed out of them. Padma looked around and realized that she was now alone in the sanctum, a place she had been forbidden to enter<sup>143</sup>. She stood trembling, holding up the fresh flower garland to be offered to the god. Vishnu opened his mouth and out of the stone lips poured a giant serpent, scales glistening in the light. The snake dropped down into the dark water under Padma's feet, circling her, rising up behind her. Padma felt a growing sense of urgency and desperation. She hurried forward over the churning sea, and climbed into Vishnu's lap. From there she reached up and placed the garland around the god's neck, smelling the fresh basil leaves and jasmine. With her task achieved, Padma felt relieved. The offering was made, the ritual completed.

As she sat in the lap of god, Padma became increasingly aware that the room around her was growing. Frightened by the stone under her stretching and groaning, Padma climbed quickly down from Vishnu's lap. Trying to avoid the frothing black water, she stepped across onto the serpent's back and he lifted her up towards the roof of the sanctum, a ceiling that now seemed as high above her as the night sky. From her vantage point Padma looked down on Vishnu. She watched with an overwhelming feeling of grief as the flower garland she had placed around his neck broke apart. The offering slipped like a silk scarf across Vishnu's stone body and was swallowed into the black waves surrounding him. Vishnu rolled his head once and closed his eyes. Padma's fear reached a frenzy as she realized what was happening. She opened her mouth to shout a warning but no sound emerged from her lips. The waters began to rise, flooding over the sanctum, swallowing Vishnu and the temple. In the darkness Padma stood on the back of the serpent, weeping and staring down at a sheet of black water. Its vast expanse stretched across all of India and the liquid darkness was dotted with crushed basil leaves and torn flowers.

The power of the dream shocked Padma into waking. Her body jerked, pulling itself out of the circle of sleep and into the grey light of morning. Padma lay on the bed, safe and alone in the cinnaveedu, salt tears streaking her cheeks in glistening lines. She lay quietly, trying to regain control of her fear. Padma could feel the skin on her cheeks tightening as her tears dried.

Three months had passed since Dipavali and this was the last night Padma would sleep in the cinnaveedu with her family for a very long time. The household had waited for an auspicious day for her first dance lesson, a day chosen by Gauri and the astrologers. After eager anticipation the time had finally arrived, but Padma's dream cast an uneasy feeling over what she was sure would be a perfect day.

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<sup>143</sup>Marglin 1985:72

In some Agamic dance traditions, the first dance lesson was preceded by a tali tying, the ceremony of giving the marriage necklace to a girl<sup>144</sup>. But in Padma's community, that event happened at the end of her dance training, several years away<sup>145</sup>. The occasion of her first dance lesson was therefore the ritual event marking her entry into the tradition of her mother and grandmother.

Although there were twenty-two dancers in the cinnaveedu<sup>146</sup>, among the children of these women there were only a few girls younger than Padma. Of these children, none was of the age to be received into a dance school, and so Padma would have her ceremony alone instead of with other girls her age. The whole day was dedicated specially to her. To Padma, a child who had always lived in the shadows of other people's successes, the event was unparalleled. She found the memory of her disturbing dream slipping away from her as women bustled to help her change and get ready to leave. Her amma brushed her hair and Vimala, now pregnant with her first child, brought warm water for Padma to wash with. Dancers and temple servants chattered around her, giving her advice and complimenting her on her achievement. Padma's cheeks bloomed red under her dark skin like the rosy blush of dawn appearing against the night sky. She beamed a giant smile in the direction of the main temple where Vishnu lay resting in the cool shadows. Padma was like an opening flower bud around which a swarm of bees circled, lost from sight under the whirl and buzz of excited, bustling women.

When she was scrubbed and dressed in fresh clothes, Padma emerged from the cinnaveedu looking like a newly polished coin. Her cheeks shone, all trace of tears completely gone. Her eyes sparkled and her hair smelled of jasmine blossoms, a scent that drifted after her like the smell of spring rain. Her hair was neatly plaited and tied up in a bun. Behind her ears slight traces of damp rested, lingering evidence of her bath and hair wash.

The group of women, led by Padma's mother, escorted her through the mud brick corridors to the main room of the temple where Vishnu was housed. There the priests acknowledged her departure with smiles and nods. Although Padma knew that many of them were critical of the dasis, and believed themselves to be far above the value of a dancer, the living relationship was still close between the priests and the temple servants. Despite tensions and the occasional dispute, usually with Gauri, the priests generally wished the dasis well in their performance of temple duties. It also didn't go unnoticed that the more dedicated dancers there were working in the temple, the more money the priest saw brought in through their performances.

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<sup>144</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:186, 187

<sup>145</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:187-191

<sup>146</sup>"The dasi or matrifocal household was characterized by large size (an average of thirty residents) and excess female residents. The guru or patrifocal household on the other hand, had a smaller size made up on average of an equal number of males and females." (Srinivasan 1987:1872)



Several of the dancers disappeared once the group reached the temple, off on their own errands and duties. Kamala and Gauri took Padma through to the eating area so she could have some breakfast before she left. As she walked with her mother and grandmother through the stone corridors, filled with sunlight and warm air, Padma realized how strange it would be to wake up somewhere else the next morning. For a second the sudden awareness that she was leaving took her by surprise, causing panic to rise in her body. In that quick instant Padma was sure she would have given up her training and her future just to stay as she was a little longer. All the time she dreamed of being away, she never really understood that being away really meant being somewhere else, somewhere apart from here.

"Not getting scared, eli?" Gauri asked, seeing the sudden look of panic on Padma's skinny face. "I tell you, eli, you should have seen your mother when it was time for her to leave! Packed up all her things herself, she did, all ready to go the night before. Wouldn't let anyone help her, acting the part of the Taikkizhavi herself, she was! And that whole morning, heavens! She bossed everyone in the house to get out of bed and hurry up! And then, when it came time for her to go in the cart, all packed up and ready to leave, do you know what? I tell you, eli, she wouldn't go! And then your calm and logical amma was so full of tears and wailing, standing there in the street refusing to get in the cart. This daughter of mine said she'd changed her mind after all!"

"Now amma," Kamala interjected in a pragmatic tone, "I wasn't as bad as that. I just had nerves, like anyone else."

Kamala put her arm protectively around her daughter, as though she could shield Padma from any fears and misgivings she was feeling. Padma smiled weakly at both of them, aware that they were only trying to cheer and encourage her. But despite their presence, Padma felt she was being dragged along through events she had no control over. It was as though, through her wishing, she had created a stream in the course of events, a rushing river that once let loose had swept her away with it and was carrying her off to a strange and distant sea.

The women ate quietly. Padma picked at her food, too nervous to get anything down her tight, dry throat. After they finished, Gauri called for the porters to bring down Padma's things and the rice she would take to eat at the school. The packages were put in an oxen-drawn cart waiting outside the gates.

'This is all happening too fast,' Padma thought to herself. 'Stop, slow down, I'm not ready yet.'

But the day whirled on around her, showing no sign of slowing. Uma and Vimala rushed into the outer courtyard to give her quick hugs and good wishes. Minakshi, reluctantly acknowledging Padma's day of good fortune, waved goodbye from one of the cinnaveedu windows. And then they were in the cart, Padma sandwiched between her amma and patti, surrounded by packages of

food and clothing. The two women were formidable chaperones. Gauri called to the man who drove the oxen and the cart started to move. There she was, leaving the compound, the only home she'd ever lived in, the only area she'd ever known. Kamala tightened the head scarf around Padma's face to prevent men in the street from coveting Vishnu's bride to be. The pale green cloth fluttered around her face, obscuring her view of the temple as they left. Padma craned her neck, trying to see back to where she had been, but the road turned and her past was no longer visible behind her.

In the temple compound Uma and Vimala sighed and put their arms around each other. The two young women walked back into the house, aware of the small emptiness that was in them. The air was still and hot. For a moment everything in the temple seemed to pause, locked in place, held by the quiet but sudden loss of one of its own. And then the breeze moved, and everything relaxed, melting in together to fill the small gaps Padma had created by leaving. Life undulated on, weaving in and out like the ripples of a country stream.

Only Sundaram stayed behind, scowling into the street after the cart. His anger festered. Life had taken away the one person in the world he could truly intimidate, the one person he held power over. He was left in the temple, bottom of the heap, the lowest of servants. The stupid child would grow to fame and money while he, talented and ambitious, would stay in the temple and rot. Somewhere buried in Sundaram's body, the depth of his hatred for the women in his family grew a little deeper.

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The lumbering white oxen pulled the cart down the busy streets, pushing through crowds and past markets. From her vantage place high in the cart, Padma tried to look past the driver and the huge humps on the oxen's necks, intrigued by the new scenes that were unfolding in front of her. The town was a vibrant chaos of people, smells, colours. Everything was in motion, all jammed in together. Padma wasn't sure if she smelled or saw the colour orange, tasted or touched the fabrics, the sweat of people's skin. The onslaught of senses drenched her body, saturating her mind with their heavy sweetness. But through it all Padma realized she was having fun. Somehow she had made it through the terror of leaving, and now that she was out, the adventure promised not to disappoint her.

The cart made its way through the market streets, moving slowly by countless food vendors and tiny shops overflowing with cloth of all colors and descriptions. As they passed by one particular stall, Padma noticed a bubbling vat of oil, its yellow surface spitting and sizzling at the boiling point. The vendor cast a handful of what looked like chili powder and gram flour into the searing oil and Padma's nose immediately began to burn with the scent of scorched spice. Whatever was being fried in the vat made her eyes water, and her throat tightened as it tried to shut out the scalding intrusion that came in through Padma's mouth as she breathed. Her tongue, already swollen and dry from the

heat and dust of the journey, protested this latest invasion. Her taste buds were already saturated with the flavors that dipped into her mouth in each tiny pocket of air she inhaled, fresh scents that coated the inside of her cheeks, the back of her parched throat.

As the cart finally found its way to the outskirts of Padma's town, the young girl noticed how the scenery was changing. Tightly-packed alleys overhung with fabrics, jostling crowds and oppressively heavy layers of smells and sounds eventually gave way to wider, quieter streets. The atmosphere of the town shifted. Padma realized that she was more aware that they were passing by people's homes now that the commerce of the market streets was behind them. She watched with great interest as the cart passed by a young woman walking along the side of the road. The woman's skin was even darker than Padma's, but she wore a vibrant green sari. Its color was luminous, like the new shoots of a plant as it emerges into the sunshine for the first time. On her head, the young woman carried a woven basket that she helped to balance with her right hand. By the slow movement of the woman's feet and the stiffness with which she held her posture, Padma could tell that her burden was heavy. As the cart passed her, the young woman looked up and smiled at Padma, revealing a dark gap in her mouth where her front teeth should have been.

The last few houses at the outskirts of town soon disappeared entirely, and Padma observed the countryside for the first time. The driver stopped to water the oxen in a small river, the same river that ran through her guru's town. Padma tried to imagine herself as part of the water, gliding down river to observe the gurukulam from a distance. She was anxious and excited by thoughts of what her new home would look like.

The dance school or gurukulam<sup>147</sup>, located in the next town down the road, was also very close to the main city of Madras. In the end, the trip took just over two hours in the oxen-drawn cart. By the time they finally arrived, Padma had grown weary of trying to guess which, of the hundreds of homes they were passing, would be hers for the next seven years.

Madhavan's family lived on the far outskirts of the town, in an old wood and mud brick house surrounded by a large garden. Behind the gurukulam lay the fields that encircled the small town, and beyond them the river weaved a slow path across the grassy countryside. To get to the dance school, the oxen were forced to wind their way through narrow lanes and between the walls of houses, finally entering the gurukulam through a small arch in one of the alleys. The opening was just wide enough for the cart to fit through. The narrow entrance to the dance school opened into a small mud brick courtyard where the driver stopped and began to pull sacks of rice and Padma's things out of the cart.

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<sup>147</sup>Name for the residence of the guru and the location where dance instruction took place. The gurukulam resembled a boarding house for students. Compared to the cinnaveedu or devadasi household, the gurukulam was patrifocal. (Srinivasan 1985:1872)

The dance school shared some of its older walls with the surrounding buildings of the town. Because of this, the only road entrance was through a warren of cluttered streets and tight lanes. As a result, Padma's first impression of guru Madhavan's house was that it was in the heart of town, tiny and claustrophobic. Having been accustomed to the extensive temple grounds, her heart sank at the prospect of spending so many of her future years confined to such a small area. It wasn't until she approached the main house that she noticed trees peaking up over the roof, giving her hopes of a garden in the back.

The group was met by Madhavan's mother, a squat, round woman brandishing a wooden spoon.

"Hello my lovely! So you've come at last! And look at the beautiful new daughter you've brought me," she gurgled at Kamala, waving the spoon and her arms wide in greeting. Padma's dark skin paled at the exuberant welcome and shrank back behind her amma. Just as one concern was satisfied, Padma found herself panicking over a fresh worry.

The woman rumbled forward to greet the newly arrived guests. This was Madhavan's mother, the woman who had taken Kamala into her house two decades ago to be trained in the art of dance. Her limbs looked like blobs of brown dough stuck onto her body, jiggling with soft, round fullness. She was short despite her width, but her presence seemed to fill the whole courtyard. Padma nervously observed the wooden spoon making ever-widening loops in the air, as Madhavan's mother gestured broadly while explaining something to Gauri. Padma watched amazed as her crazy patti, always the most eccentric figure in her own home, smiled and nodded politely as though she was Kamala. Next to Madhavan's mother, Gauri looked completely normal, a calm and composed grandmother facing the onslaught of the wooden spoon without flinching.

Madhavan's flamboyant mother led them into the house and up a set of stairs into the back wing. The staircase, although sheltered by the overhanging roof above, was attached to the outside of the house. It created the impression that one long balcony extended along the entire upper floor. Wooden doors were loosely hinged into the wall at regular intervals, opening to reveal the dormitory rooms where the girls slept. Although there were doors into each of the chambers, glassless windows had also been cut into the outside walls to let in the light and to keep the house cool in the heat of the summer.

Madhavan's mother showed Padma into a room with four beds. One of the cots was empty, with fresh linens sitting folded at its foot. The other three beds were neatly made, and Padma could see people's things stored underneath them. A porter came in carrying Padma's packages. Madhavan's mother indicated that he should put them under the bed. The man hurried forward to do as she asked, but he obviously wasn't quick enough for Madhavan's mother's liking. Suddenly annoyed, she brandished the wooden spoon like a weapon and went to strike him. The man, startled and confused,

scampered out of the room. Madhavan's mother glared after him and then turned to face Gauri and Kamala. Her frown faded so quickly the women wondered if they had really seen it in the first place.

"Can't have these men hanging around the girls. Not proper, not right at all," she murmured to herself. Then, aware of her guests, she said loudly, "Now you must all be hungry. Come along to the kitchens and I'll see that you get some food."

Padma spent the rest of the afternoon getting to know the gurukulam but she never wandered far from Gauri and Kamala. Because she couldn't participate in any of the classes until the puja and ceremony marking her official introduction to the dance school, Padma was left alone to observe the other girls from a distance. The gurukulam had fewer people living in it than the cinnaveedu where Padma was raised<sup>148</sup>, and she noticed that unlike her own home there were almost the same number of men and women. In the temple the number of women far outweighed the number of men, even counting all the priests, sons, musicians and husbands. The daughters of Madhavan's extended family went elsewhere to receive their temple training, because it was against custom for them to be educated at home. But girls came in from other families to learn dance and so the gender balance of the gurukulam remained intact. Padma watched shyly as the girls performed and practiced on the lawn in the afternoon, but she avoided the boys who were learning music in another part of the house.

Kamala and Gauri, official chaperones until the ceremony, spent the night at the gurukulam. Padma was in bed just after dark, but lay awake until she heard the other girls coming back from their evening lessons. When the three of them came into the room carrying a small lantern, Padma closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. Tomorrow would be soon enough to greet new faces, a new family to replace the one she had always known. It was the first night in her entire life when Padma shared a sleeping space with someone other than the women of her own cinnaveedu. Understandably, she didn't sleep well.

The next day Gauri came in at three-thirty in the morning to wake Padma for the ceremony. Wrapped in a pale yellow sari and holding a torch, she was like a ghost out of a dream, a woman whose flesh was spun of light and shadows. Padma stared in awe at her patti, staggered by her power and surreal beauty. Gauri dressed her grand-daughter quickly and the two went out into the hallway. Despite the early hour, the house was already waking, and Padma could see people moving through the garden with torches. Behind them the darkness of the fields stretched out like the sea at night, and blue mist swam around the trunks of the trees like waves coming ashore. The scene was eerie and mystical. It filled Padma with a sense that something sacred was taking place. It would be years before she would be able to pass by the morning scene of the house waking without it taking her breath away.

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<sup>148</sup>see foot note 146, 147

"I'm very proud of you, eli," Gauri said, smiling at Padma.

When they got downstairs, Padma took part in a special puja, a ritual offering of sandalwood incense and flowers to Vishnu. The image of Ganesa, the elephant god of success, was drawn in saffron powder<sup>149</sup> and surrounded by tulasi, the ritual basil leaves that were sacred to Vishnu<sup>150</sup>. The men of the house, both teachers and students, played music to accompany the occasion. Padma bowed in reverence to Madhavan, who was specially honoured at the puja. It was the first time she'd seen him since her interview in the garden.

After the flower offerings were made, Padma was led to a special spot where seed rice had been spread on the ground. Kamala and Gauri held a bamboo staff wrapped in silk<sup>151</sup> between them and Padma was instructed to hold onto it as she walked across the chaff<sup>152</sup>.

"We're sowing the seeds of dance in you," Gauri whispered with an encouraging wink. "Now you have to nurture the art inside to make it grow."

As she walked on the seed rice, guru Madhavan came forward and, kneeling on the chaff, he took Padma by the ankles. This was perhaps the only occasion when a guru would actually touch a female student, especially on the feet. As a bride of the divine, Padma was not to be handled by any man, and as a guru, Madhavan would not hold onto anyone's feet, the lowest and least sacred part of the body. However, the event of a girl's first dance lesson was a rare exception to both these rules. Pulling gently but insistently on her ankles, guru Madhavan guided Padma in her first dance steps<sup>153</sup>. Madhavan's hands were cool and felt like the brush of dry paper against her skin, his strong bony fingers wrapping around her ankles like the knarled narrow roots of an orange tree.

"Teyya tey, teyya tey," he chanted, and Padma recited after him. To her own surprise, her voice sounded strong and confident.

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<sup>149</sup>Ranganayaki relates that during this ceremony the image of Sri Ganesa was drawn in saffron power. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:191)

<sup>150</sup>"The first day of dance instruction was a holy ceremony, with worship of god, flower offerings, music and special obeisance to the revered dance master." (Ragini Devi 1990:45)

<sup>151</sup>"A bamboo staff wrapped in silk was held horizontally by two devadasis, which the pupil grasped while stamping her first steps in paddy (seed rice)." (Ragini Devi 1990:45)

<sup>152</sup>According to Ragini Devi, paddy or seed rice was used. (see footnote 10) Similarly, Smt. P. Ranganayaki describes the spreading of chaff or *umi*, which was seen as a symbolic representation of the goddess Laksmi. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:190, 200)

<sup>153</sup>"The dance master asks the girl to stand on the chaff, he takes her feet by the ankles and directs them in executing the first steps which are recited as "teyya tey." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:190-191)

After her first dance steps, Gauri brought forward the first installment of Madhavan's fees: money, new clothes and betel leaves<sup>154</sup>. She handed them to Padma who, in turn, offered them to her new guru. Madhavan accepted them. The arrangement was official.

"Now you can call your guru 'Mama,' Gauri told Padma. "It means 'mother's brother'<sup>155</sup>. He's far more deserving of the title than my son Sundaram."

Over the next several years Padma would learn many things from guru Madhavan. He would teach her dance and abhinaya, the language of gesture and emotions. He would instruct her in literature, vocal music, languages, reading, writing and ritual<sup>156</sup>. Above all this, he would help her to learn who she was and to discover her place in a changing world, a reality that was rapidly slipping away from both of them.

After the ceremony, the objects of ritual were cleared away and the rest of the students came in to join the lesson. There were nine girls including Padma, ranging in age from five to fourteen. Padma was embarrassed to note that although she was the newest, she wasn't the youngest among them. The group was smaller than it would have been in many other gurukulams, but since the death of Madhavan's father two years before, fewer students had been accepted.

Padma found the rest of the day physically and mentally exhausting. The others in the class were far ahead of her, and despite guru Madhavan's special attention and assistance, she grew increasingly frustrated as the hours wore on. She was too slow, too unaware. No sooner had she understood something than the class had moved on to something else. In the dance practice she was always several movements behind, and her gestures were rough, wooden and incomplete. Many times Padma felt tears welling up. She stared at the strange faces around her through blurry eyes.

Finally the afternoon came to a close. The other girls, looking happy and content, hurried away to have a dinner break. Madhavan escorted Padma back through the main house to the courtyard in the front where Gauri and Kamala were putting their things into a cart, one which would return them to their own town. At the sight of them packing up Padma burst into tears and flung her arms around her amma's waist.

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<sup>154</sup> "Betel leaves, new clothes and the first part of the master's fees are offered to him." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:191)

<sup>155</sup>The two titles commonly given to the guru are *mama* (mother's brother) and *anna* (elder brother). (Srinivasan n.d. :212)

<sup>156</sup>"In the course of the education of an aspirant devadasi other arts are taught in addition to dance: vocal music, literature (Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana) and languages (Telugu, Tamil and Sanskrit)." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:190-191)

"Don't leave yet amma," she pleaded, her nose dripping on her mother's crimson red sari.

"Like mother, like daughter," Gauri said. "Your amma was the same way when it was time for me to leave."

Gauri walked a short distance away with Madhavan, leaving Kamala to say whatever it is a mother says when she sends a child out into the world.

"How is she?" Gauri asked bluntly, wanting an up-front answer from the guru. He thought for a moment before responding.

"She has a very quick eye for learning," he said, "although she doesn't think so. Her movements are clumsy and slow now, but she has a keen perception for deciphering what's expected of her, just like her mother did, if I remember correctly. She watches me and several of the other girls at the same time. She'll learn the technical movements of dance quickly enough, but how soon it might be before she really dances from within herself, who can say? It will depend on whether or not the bud opens to a flower. It has to blossom before it will be picked."

Gauri nodded, listening to Madhavan as she stared at Padma wrapped in her mother's arms. Kamala hugged Padma hard and then pointed to Gauri, indicating that Padma should say good-bye to her grand-mother. Then she stepped into the cart.

Padma came over and sobbed into Gauri's sari. Choking back her own tears, Gauri pushed Padma out from her body, placing her hands on her grand daughter's shoulders.

"Listen carefully, eli," she said, leaning in close to whisper in Padma's ear. "You go from your mother's sari into the arms of the god. Cling to Vishnu and he will keep you safe. Treat him as the husband he is, and he will protect you like the bride you will be."

With that Gauri held Padma close once more and then, letting her grand daughter go, she walked to the cart. The oxen watched her approach with dark, drooping, sorrowful eyes. The animals seemed to sense the pain of separation that was affecting their passengers. Padma stood beside her guru, sobbing and waving after her mother and grandmother as the oxen pulled the cart out of the courtyard. Kamala choked back sobs as she waved good-bye to her daughter. Gauri stared at the road ahead and didn't look back. She had done all she could; tears would do nothing more.

"Oh now, my little pumpkin," Madhavan's mother crooned, putting her arms around the teary-eyed girl. "Come on inside for a cool drink. Now that will help, won't it?"



Padma, grateful for the kind words and the warmth of a woman's touch, even though it wasn't her amma's, nodded to Madhavan's mother.

"Get back to what you were doing! Eyes forward and off my girls," Madhavan's mother suddenly bellowed at a man passing by the entrance to the dance school.

The man yelled and made rude gestures in response, affronted by the implication that he'd been doing anything more than passing by in the street. Madhavan laughed and went back into the house. In his family, his mother's paranoia about prying and imprudent eyes was almost as famous as the school itself. Most put out by the man's response, Madhavan's mother wrapped the end of her sari protectively around Padma, shielding her from all offending eyes. Then placing her bulk between Padma and the street, she wheeled her safely into the house, slamming the great teak door behind them.

A sorrowful and deflated Padma spent another three hours after dinner at various lessons. At the end of the day she crawled into bed without even bothering to brush her hair. Her clothes still held the lingering smells of the cinnaveedu, Vimala's cooking and her amma's sandalwood oil. She curled her body around them and wept herself to sleep.

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As Padma joined the other girls in the gurukulam, all of them leaving their families to place their futures in the hands of their devoted guru, she had no concerns aside from those that any child experiences when being parted from her family for the first time. The present and immediate course of her life filled up her vision, making her believe that the world was no larger than the gurukulam, the cinnaveedu and the long thin road in between. However, in the river of history, her entire reality was no more than a fallen leaf being swept precariously along on the waves of changing times. Her future had been cast into an ancient boat which, having ruled the world and conquered the temple, now struggled to stay afloat in the storms of modern waters.

Public perception of the devadasis had changed greatly in the years since Padma's grandmother had received her initial dance training and performed her first public concert in the temple. The first official step taken against the devadasis was in 1861<sup>157</sup> when an amendment to the Indian Penal Code was put in place that stated that the age of dedication for a girl being accepted into temple service must be at least 18 years. However, on a local scale this decision by the British and selected upper caste Hindus did little to change dedication practices<sup>158</sup>. Also included in the amendment to the Penal Code was a law stating that recruitment of a girl for service in the temple was prohibited<sup>159</sup>.

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<sup>157</sup>Prasad 1990:124

<sup>158</sup>Prasad 1990:124

<sup>159</sup>Prasad 1990:124

But rather than finding that these new additions to the Penal Code saw more prevention of dedications, in many cases the Indian courts were forced to publicly acknowledge the devadasis' desire to be incorporated into the temple system<sup>160</sup>. However, those in opposition to the practice of temple dancing continued to canvas the public for increased support for reform. By 1892 protests against the dancers<sup>161</sup> had escalated into heated public arguments and the occasional outburst of violence. The Anti-Nautch campaign<sup>162</sup>, as it called itself, had set to work viciously attacking the devadasis at their most vulnerable point, their public reputations. By the time of Padma's acceptance into the gurukulam, men of the Hindu community, influenced by a Christian moral code and the colonial powers of Britain, had organized themselves into public protests and gatherings, some resulting in the eruption of violence and minor riots.

As Padma studied dance, looking forward to the time when she too would be dedicated as a devadasi, the world outside the gurukulam was turning against the temple dancers. Articles were written and widely published in both English and Indian journals discrediting the dancers as prostitutes and women of little or no moral fiber. Those who were more sympathetic sought to portray them as victims of a heathen and morally fallen system of Hinduism, proposing to rescue them by a process of attrition. When there were no more devadasis, reformers argued, there would be no more victimized women, no more innocent girls sacrificed to the temple to satisfy the carnal appetites of men in their communities. Even the name of the campaign, anti-Nautch, was a corruption of the North Indian word, nach (dance), indicating a prostitute whose services were extended to non-Brahmin castes.

Public debates and published articles led to action in the form of petitions and marches. The British saw an opportunity, a place of tension in the community that they successfully began to exploit to the fullest. Priests, already jealous of the devadasis' place in the temple, their position of special closeness to the deity, began to side with the colonial powers, arguing that the dasis weren't needed in the temple anymore, that they had fallen from their original place of reverence<sup>163</sup>. Men of the community began to blame the dasis for their ill-luck, and musicians such as Sundaram widely vocalized the idea that correct gender relations, those of the patriarchy, should be restored by tearing down the matrifocal household and reinstating men in positions of power and authority. The elite, under the pressure of marches arriving at their doors, began to boycott dance concerts. Kamala's patron, in whose house she had long ceased to be a

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<sup>160</sup>Prasad 1990:125

<sup>161</sup>Except where specifically noted, all details of the following rise of protests, including tactics, dates and participants involved can be found in the article Reform and Revival (Srinivasan 1985:1873-1875)

<sup>162</sup>"The movement urging the abolition of all ceremonies by which young girls dedicated themselves as Devadasis to Hindu temples, was articulated in the first instance as an Anti Nautch campaign. the very use of the term 'Nautch' (a corruption of the Hindi term nach, meaning dance, which was performed by a more common class of northern dancing girl, prostitute) suggested the smear campaign that was to follow." (Srinivasan 1985:1873)

<sup>163</sup>Madhavi Mudgal, video Given to Dance (1986)

welcome guest, was one of the most adamant supporters of reform. The dancers began to fear for their survival, not just for their place in history, but also in their daily lives. A lack of patronage brought hard times for the dasis. A scarcity of money meant smaller concerts and fewer guests, a vicious cycle that resulted in fewer patrons becoming interested in the art, even fewer concerts and even less money.

The pressure mounted steadily as the years went by. During Kamala's training there had been marches and protests, but it wasn't until the time of Padma's birth that the campaign grew into full swing. In 1910 all public dedications to the temple were stopped. In 1911, the Viceroy of India and the Governor of Madras were convinced by reform supporters that the devadasis were no more than prostitutes and morally degraded women. British missionaries and Hindu reform lobbyists pressured the government to bring in legislative action and a ban on dance at the temples. Although it would be over thirty years before this full ban was successfully passed through parliament, the Viceroy issued a dispatch stating that nationwide action was to be taken against these performances.

Although Padma was still a naive child at the time, blissfully unaware of the storms gathering outside the temple walls, Kamala and Gauri had watched with fear as the dispatch from the Governor of Madras and the Viceroy of India began to have its effect. During the years of Padma's training, India would see a great decline in the public support of the institution of dance, and many dasis were forced, through hard times, to fulfill the prophecies handed down to them by patriarchal and colonial reformers. Many turned to prostitution, and facing a lack of suitable long-term patrons, dancers found themselves in the arms of anyone with money to spare for the temple and for the food they put in their mouths.

It was into this struggle for dominance and survival that Kamala and Gauri had cast Padma's life. However, as they saw it, they had no choice. Padma had been born to the temple; it was her future to serve and marry the god. So it was with much sadness that Kamala and Gauri sent their little mouse away to the gurukulam, where the next stage of her journey towards an uncertain future lay waiting anxiously for her arrival.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Worship of the Ankle Bells**

#### **Gurukulam, Late Winter/ Early Spring 1925**

"Usha, hurry! You'll miss breakfast!" Padma yelled, leaning over the balcony. In the gardens below a girl waved and began to run across the grass.

"She'd forget to breathe if we weren't there to remind her," Padma said to Parvati, another girl in the room behind her. Parvati was one of the younger students at the gurukulam.

"She isn't the only one. Didn't you run up here to get something?"

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Padma, grabbing a fresh black cotton ribbon out of a box and tossing her old snapped hair tie on the bed. "See you downstairs?"

"I'm right behind you," Parvati answered grinning. There was a large gap in her smile where her two of her baby teeth had fallen out and her adult ones were slowly growing in.

Padma turned and raced down the outside staircase to the verandah below. Her bare feet slapped a fast staccato rhythm on the wooden steps as she ran, her hands flying to tie back escaping tendrils of her hair with her new ribbon. There was a time in Padma's first few years at the gurukulam when she fell down the stairs on a regular basis, always in too much of a hurry.

"Aaaieee! She's done it again," Madhavan's mother would shout, rushing to assess Padma for injured limbs and freshly blushing bruises. Thankfully, although Padma had gone through quite a clumsy phase in her early years, she was tough and had managed to make it to puberty with little in the way of permanent damage.

Padma rounded the corner and screeched to a halt, right at the same time as Usha. The two girls stood next to each other at the end of a line of students, catching their breath and waiting to be told they could sit for breakfast. Parvati raced the corner just behind them, bashing into Usha at the end of the line. The three girls suppressed giggles and stood at attention under Madhavan's mother's gaze, trying to appear apologetic for their tardiness.

Padma, already tall for her age when she first entered the dance school, was now easily the tallest girl in the group. With Madhavan's gentle encouragement and the help of new friends her own age, Padma's shyness had slipped away to reveal a young woman with confidence and grace. Although she was still very quiet at lessons and solemn occasions, laughter had come to replace the self-doubt that had once clouded her eyes. The years had been kind to Padma, taking her boyish figure and leaving her with delicate womanly curves and lean, strong limbs. Now at the age of fourteen, Padma was the oldest

student and one of the most competent dancers at the gurukulam. The nickname of mouse that had followed her to the dance school was now a joke among the girls. As the tallest, the oldest and one of the most confident girls at the school, eli had become a title of ironic humour rather than one of imitation.

"Attention, everyone!" Madhavan's mother shouted, banging her ever-present wooden spoon on the table, "Serve, eat and get back to class. You won't learn anything sitting around here all day!"

"Do you think she was born with that spoon in her hand?" Usha whispered to Padma. The girls giggled as they hurried forward to get their share of breakfast.

Despite her strict demeanor, Madhavan's mother always supplied lavish meals for the dancers and the musicians at the school. The girls ate first because they had been up the longest. The dancer's day<sup>164</sup> began at 4 am, when the girls would gather on the verandah to learn abhinaya<sup>165</sup>, the language of gesture. They would sit silently watching and imitating guru Madhavan as he showed them the correct movements to indicate that they were playing a flute, making a flower offering, beckoning the Beloved. The torch light mingled with the soft glow of morning, casting pale shadows in all directions. As the girls followed Madhavan with their eyes and arms, it seemed to the casual observer as though there were hundreds of hands in motion. The shadows mimicked their owners, creating layer upon layer of movement and dancing darkness on the floor and walls around the class. Later in the dawn the sounds of the musicians beginning their lessons would drift through the gurukulam to the verandah, faint and ghostly music becoming an orchestra for a ballet of shadow gestures and the wisps of dancing incense.

Lessons in abhinaya lasted until breakfast. The girls took their break around seven o'clock, wide awake and hungry for the carefully prepared food Madhavan's mother always provided. The gurukulam was a patrifocal household<sup>166</sup> run by guru Madhavan, but his mother's influence over the family was strongly felt. Her temper was like a parched bush spontaneously combusting in the dry season; it's flash was sudden and unpredictable, but short-lived. The food she prepared was nurturing in more ways than one, for she always cooked her love and good wishes into it.

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<sup>164</sup>The dancer's day described here is based on information from Mandakranta Bose on a standard timetable for dancers. Although there are definite variations among different schools, the schedule proposed is highly likely and contains no irregularities in content.

<sup>165</sup>Abhinaya, or the language of gesture, is a silent performance of the hands and arms adding to the overall effect of the complete dance. The gestures are symbolic representations of different things, everything from emotion to objects to actions. Abhinaya illustrates images such as Krishna playing the flute, a flower offering given in the temple and characteristics of the gods such as 'lotus eyes'. (Ragini Devi 1990:38-44)

<sup>166</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1872

After they finished their breakfast, Padma and Usha made their way across the lawn to the spot where the next part of their lessons in dance would be conducted. At the back of the garden near to a pond and some tall trees was a place where the grass had been cut short and close to the earth. Above the clearing was a sort of awning stretched out between the trees. It gave the girls protection from the hot sun in the summer months, and a place to seek refuge during the sudden thundershowers of the rainy season.

"What were you doing out here earlier?" Padma asked Usha as the two walked arm in arm to their lesson.

"I wanted to see if the lotus was blooming yet. I couldn't wait till after breakfast. It's been on my mind all night."

Usha was one of the smaller girls in the class and standing next to Padma, she seemed like a young child. She was almost a year younger than Padma, but the two would graduate together in a few days. Usha came from a temple in the same town as the gurukulam, and had begun her training with guru Madhavan just a few weeks before Padma. The two had become fast friends, helping and encouraging each other as they struggled through the years.

Usha had a kind heart. She delighted in the garden, reporting on the progress of the lilies, the marigolds, the lotuses emerging from the mud as though she was a proud parent relating her children's latest achievements. 'Usha' meant 'dawn' and to Padma she definitely marked a new beginning in Padma's life. All things in her care blossomed, and so had Padma. In the early days of their friendship Usha had cared for Padma as a mother would, with a wisdom far beyond her years. She chattered almost constantly about this and that, always with a positive outlook and a smile. As Padma herself bloomed from a tight bud into a blossoming flower, she was more and more able to return the care and support Usha had given her in their early days together.

Although Usha was kind and generous, she lacked Padma's eye for detail. Her tall friend was a much faster learner, and on many occasions Padma had stayed awake late into the night to help Usha understand a certain history lesson, a Sanskrit verb, the essence of a story and the abhinaya to tell it. Considering what few hours of sleep the girls got, Usha appreciated this late night help more than she could say. As the years went by and Padma grew older, she found herself the center of many night time lessons. Word began to grow about Padma's storytelling ability, and the younger girls would come down the hall after lights out to watch Padma act out the tales by starlight. Madhavan knew of these after curfew visits, but indicated subtly to Padma that he wouldn't stop any of the girls from attending as long as they were awake enough in the morning to do their lessons properly. Secretly Madhavan was pleased to see Padma's progress, and had started to take special interest in her as a pupil. She was always keen to learn, always able to soak up more knowledge. Whatever he gave her, she came back for more, until Madhavan began to fear that he would run dry before her graduation. But his fears in this also pleased him. It

was rare to find such an intelligent student, a vessel into which so much could be poured and still there was room for more.

Usha hurried along, dragging Padma by the arm and chattering excitedly about how well the trees were coming along this year and how much fruit they were likely to bear. Although last to breakfast, the girls were first to the clearing where they found Madhavan already waiting for them. In greeting, the girls touched their guru's feet reverently with both hands and went to sit at the outside of a well-worn circle in the grass.

"What are we learning today, mama?" Usha asked in her exuberant manner, jiggling up and down as she sat with her legs crossed.

"Patience, my little Usha," guru Madhavan said, rolling his eyes. "Will I ever be able to teach you to sit still?"

Usha looked embarrassed and smiled sheepishly, trying her best to keep still. With only a few days left in her training, she was eager to be given her ankle bells at graduation<sup>167</sup>. Padma, on the other hand, still remembered how hard it was when she first arrived at the gurukulam and was wary of changes and the power they had over her life. Although she saw her amma and patti several times a year, at festivals and special ceremonies, her relationship with them both had changed a great deal since her arrival at the dance school. She was now preparing herself to leave her second home, a home that would become both a place and a time she could never return to. The tides rolled on, carrying her with them, ruled by greater powers in the heavens than she could overcome. She was proud to be graduating, proud to take her place alongside her mother and grandmother before her. But unlike Usha, Padma was very wary of the costs involved.

The other girls arrived and guru Madhavan began the lecture. The class had grown in size from the time Padma first joined and there were now thirteen girls receiving instruction at the gurukulam. Having started their daily lessons with hand and arm gestures, the students now moved on to concentrate on the feet and legs. Madhavan began the lesson by taking the girls through a series of stretches. They practiced *bhangas*<sup>168</sup>, flexing the body around the imaginary central line extending from the top of the head and dropping directly down to the inside surface where a person's feet come together. Madhavan also took them through the fundamental postures of dance called *sthana*<sup>169</sup>. The girls practiced moving their bodies slowly through the positions, warming and stretching their

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<sup>167</sup>Ragini Devi 1990:45

<sup>168</sup>There are five key types of bhanga, a term defined as "the deviations of the body from the central plumb line, bends or flexions." (Ragini Devi 1990:30)

<sup>169</sup>There are numerous fundamental postures of dance, or sthana, corresponding to emotions or states of expression. For example, a dancer with one leg extended so that the heel is touching the ground either to the side or to the front is said to have assumed a stately posture. There are postures corresponding to masculine and feminine attitudes, heroism, serenity, adoration and lyrical postures (also known as *Lasya*.) (Ragini Devi 1990:30-35)

limbs while concentrating on achieving a perfected stance or movement. Facial expression and rhythm would be added later in the day. For now the girls focused on their feet and hips, adjusting their balance and listening to their bodies. It was a time of introspection; their gazes were turned inward rather than outward in expressions of performance.

"Now," Madhavan said, concluding the warm up, "what are the angas?"

The group gathered on the grass around the tree stump where Madhavan perched while teaching a lesson. Several of the younger girls raised their hands to answer. The older students who knew the lesson by heart didn't offer a response, leaving the newer girls to be tested on their skills and knowledge.

Madhavan nodded to one of the children on the grass. She looked pleased at having been chosen and in a small voice she answered her guru's question.

"Mama, the six angas or major parts of the body are the head, chest, waist, sides, hands and feet."<sup>170</sup>

Madhavan nodded his approval.

"And the pratyangas?" he asked, nodding to another of the younger students.

The second girl was less certain, stumbling over her response.

"The pratyangas or minor parts of the body are the shoulders, back, neck, arms, belly, thighs..."<sup>171</sup>

She paused, thinking. "The calves and knees," she finished finally.

"Good," Madhavan answered, "but you forgot wrists and elbows."

The girl blushed. Madhavan moved on.

"There are one hundred and eight Karanas or basic dance sequences<sup>172</sup> taught by Bharata in the Natya Shastra. However, in actual practice, we use over two hundred. All of them must be learned, and beyond that all must be studied so that you can adapt them to the individual dance you're performing. We learn here that a sequence of six or more Karanas is called an Angahara<sup>173</sup>,

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<sup>170</sup>The major parts of the body are enumerated by Bharata in the Natya Shastra. (Bose 1995:27, Ragini Devi 1990:35)

<sup>171</sup>The minor parts of the body appear in dance texts that were compiled after the Natya Shastra. (Bose 1995:30, Ragini Devi 1990:35)

<sup>172</sup>Bose 1995:145-82, Ragini Devi 1990:30

<sup>173</sup>Bose 1995:145-82, Ragini Devi 1990:29



a term for the body of Siva, the Lord who gifted people with dance. There are thirty-two Angaharas in total, thirty-two combinations of six that must be learned, memorized and internalized. You cannot remember how to do them when you dance; you simply must perform them.

"We must take our lessons from the apsaras, the celestial nymphs who dance in the court of Indra, the thunder god. They are said to be 'broad-hipped, slender-waisted and graceful as panthers'<sup>174</sup>. But despite the fact that beauty adds to a dancer's abilities, it isn't all. You must be able to make me believe you have a slender waist even if you look as though you were wearing watermelons on your hips. To be the dancer is only part of the exercise. You must also be the dance. Padma, please demonstrate."

Padma stood and stepped forward. When she wasn't moving, she still had the air of ordinariness that had followed her like a storm cloud in her early childhood. Although it may have seemed cruel to some that Madhavan pointed Padma out as a woman of small beauty, he was actually paying her a huge compliment. For Padma possessed the rare and true art of transformation. She didn't imitate, she became.

Padma stood patiently, waiting for instructions from her guru. He paused for effect, making sure the whole class had their attention focused on his older student, their minds bent on understanding the essence of the lesson.

"Padma, I would like to see some animals," Madhavan directed.

Padma bent her knees and dropped the weight of her body down onto her thighs, lowering her shoulders and raising her hands to the side of her face. Then, swinging her hands by flexing at the wrists, she indicated large ears flapping against her head. To the class she seemed huge and heavy, an elephant of a woman swaying her bulk around the circle.

Madhavan clapped twice and Padma shifted postures. Drawing up her height, she abandoned the heaviness of an elephant, turning to the side to highlight her slim figure. Quickly lifting her right leg far behind her, she gave a small leap, raising her slim arms as she did so. To the students she now appeared graceful and sleek. Her movements made them think of a deer leaping through the forest.

Madhavan clapped again and Padma slowed her performance. She extended her right leg, placing her heel on the ground in what the students knew to be a stately posture. Then, once she recognized that they'd make connections between her movement and her body, Padma moved her right leg behind her, lifting her right hand up beside her head with her flat palm facing forward. She thrust up her chest and lifted her jaw, swaying slightly, full of pomp

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<sup>174</sup>Ragini Devi 1990:25

and importance. In Padma's gestures the students easily recognized the peacock<sup>175</sup>.

Madhavan smiled and nodded. Padma smiled in return and went back to her place on the grass, suddenly a normal ordinary girl again. The class murmured their respect, but it was unseemly for them to show their appreciation of her directly with applause or comments. She was her guru's student, and it was to him that credit was directed.

After the demonstration the girls broke into groups to practice their leg movements and postures. The older girls helped the younger girls, taking on some of the teaching. Madhavan circled the group, adjusting ankles and hips, rotating knees and feet. He instructed the younger girls on how to do the steps, and he taught the older girls how to teach. His gaze was ubiquitous, and little escaped his attention. His eyes were like those of eagles, able to spot tiny discrepancies, overseeing the world from a distance.

The class continued for several hours and then broke for lunch around noon. Here the girls had their longest break of the day, a whole hour to eat, relax and practice on their own.

After lunch, Madhavan reconvened class in the same location. The afternoon was devoted to putting together all the pieces. The girls performed stories from the Ramayana and Gita Govinda, acting out the parts of Sita and Radha. They played men also, heroically defeating demons on the lawn of the gurukulam. In this part of the afternoon the older students worked alone, practicing complex, fast-paced dances. The senior musicians came to join them, giving the performance the added dimension of sound.

The girls practiced their abhinaya along with their Karanas, adding dancing hands and deeper meaning to the positions and choreography of the rest of the body. The effect was mesmerizing. Shaking, fluttering hands indicated the flight of a bee, anger, radiance. Fluttering the fingers alone brought out moon beams, fireflies and the passion of love<sup>176</sup>. The girls made circular gestures with their hands, using their wrists as a pivot and creating the impression that they wielded weapons of power and vengeance. Releasing fingers that had been tightly locked together, they indicated speech, an unfolding. Opening their whole hands, they gave flower offerings to the gods, their bodies swaying in welcoming poses of devotion.

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<sup>175</sup>All postures for the animals are taken from the relief carvings appearing in Chidambaram, where dance poses were carved in great detail. The Siva temple in Chidambaram is famous for its carving of the 108 Karanas dictated by Bharata in the Natya Shastra. (Ragini Devi 1990:30,33)

<sup>176</sup>This form of abhinaya is called Hasta-prana or 'lives of the hands'. Gestures are deliberate and carefully choreographed to correlate with and add to the movements of the rest of the body. Interpretations of the gestures described in this passage can be found in Ragini Devi 1990:44.

"No, no, Parvati," guru Madhavan corrected, holding his own hands out to show her how to create a flower offering. Parvati tried again, and then a third and fourth time as Madhavan shook his head.

"Mama, I don't understand," Parvati said quietly. She fought back hot tears as her frustration grew. Padma looked over and felt sympathy for her. She understood Parvati's feelings very well and had struggled with them often during her years at the gurukulam.

Madhavan shook his head one more time at Parvati's attempts and then raised his right arm straight into the air. The girls all stopped what they were doing; it was his sign that he wanted their attention.

"Usha, come," he ordered, beckoning with his wrist from the top of his long straight arm. Usha hurried forward.

"Parvati, why was Usha late for breakfast this morning?" her guru asked. Usha blushed, thinking she would be in trouble.

"She was in the garden, Mama," Parvati answered softly.

"And why, when she should have been in the house with the other girls, was Usha in the garden?" Madhavan continued.

"Mama, it was because she wanted to visit the flowers," Parvati explained. The girls let out a few nervous giggles. Usha's unusual fondness for the garden was well known in the household.

"Usha, step forward. I want you to show Parvati how to make a flower offering with her hands."

Usha, relieved that she wasn't in trouble for being late, gave a huge grin. She bent her body forward delicately, cupping her hands together as though they cradled some precious fragile object of great significance. Her fingers created the cup of a flower basket, *puspaputa*<sup>177</sup>, that she lifted in offering with great care and love.

"You see, Parvati, how your offering is different," Madhavan instructed. "For you, the gesture is about the hand position, the correct posture. To Usha, who loves the flowers and the god, the offering is about the blossoms in her hand. In her offering, I can smell the flowers she's holding<sup>178</sup>. Why can I smell them, Parvati?"

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<sup>177</sup>Ragini Devi 1990:41 (figure 36)

<sup>178</sup>This passage is based on a real life story related to me by Mandakranta Bose. Ramgopal was a legendary performer of Bharata Natyam, held to be one of the greatest classical Indian dancers of this century. When he was a young man in training, a fellow student complained to their guru that although his movements were the same as Ramgopal's, the guru always criticized him while praising Ramgopal. The guru then explained that when Ramgopal made a flower with his hands,

Parvati thought for a moment and then shook her head. "I don't know, Mama."

"I can smell the flowers because Usha can smell the flowers. They are a creation of her imagination. Unless you yourself can touch and taste the object in your hand, nobody else will be able to either."

Padma nodded her head in agreement. Usha beamed, pleased that she'd been complimented and that she wasn't in trouble for playing in the garden before breakfast.

"Don't worry, little one," Padma said reassuringly to Parvati when guru Madhavan had moved away. "We all learn the movements first and smell the flowers after. One day you'll probably be asked to demonstrate the same lesson to younger students when you get a bit older."

Parvati looked up at Padma with appreciation and devotion. To Parvati, who was too young to have witnessed Padma's first few years at the school, her favourite storyteller was confident and wise, the very model of an accomplished dancer.

Padma smiled, seeing what was on Parvati's mind by looking into her eyes. 'It's so ironic that she sees me this way,' Padma thought. 'I wonder who in my life I have seen only with a child's appreciation. Did amma, my perfect and precise amma, make many mistakes when she was learning? Did she make them when I knew her and I didn't see?'

Parvati rejoined the other girls learning basic choreography from the guru. Padma walked over beside the pond to practice her turns. When she was younger, Padma had dreaded this part of the day. Although she had learned quickly to imitate the individual postures and gestures, when it came time to put the poses into motion, Padma had failed miserably. She forgot steps and overcorrected. She whirled without looking, always neglecting to use her eyes to help her balance and stay centered. One year, when the hot season had drained the water from the pond leaving a shallow bath of mud, Padma had found herself whirled right over the slippery bank. The girls had howled with laughter, and so had Madhavan, when they saw her emerging from the mud like the demon Ravana. The poor, crying, mud-soaked demoness tried to collect herself and get back up the bank, only to slip a second time and re-deposit herself back in the slime. The whoops of laughter had brought Madhavan's mother running. When she saw the mess Padma was in, she was less than amused.

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the guru could actually smell the flower because his movements were so beautiful and heart-felt. On the other hand, the complaining student failed to make his movements believable even though they were technically correct.

"My linens!" she had shrieked, pointing at Padma's mud drenched clothing. "Help her! Get her out!"

The other girls had struggled to give Padma whatever assistance they could offer. Although the assembled crowd of onlookers roared with laughter, Madhavan's mother failed to see the humour in the situation. She lashed out furiously at one of the student musicians who was busy mocking her precious surrogate daughter, shoving the boy into the mud pond that Padma had just escaped from. He sat oozing in the slime, a shocked look on his face as murky water gurgled into his instrument.

Padma smiled slightly at the memory of that day as she whirled confidently past the pond, feet slapping on the bare earth, eyes forward directing her course.

Dinner followed the dance practice and marked the conclusion of the physical rigors of the day. The girls returned to the house, toweling sweat off their slender tired arms as they walked. Darkness was beginning to creep across the lawn, and the sunset stretched long shadows over the grass towards the verandah.

Padma and Usha washed and then sat down to eat. Although the physical exercise was finished for the evening, dance lessons were far from over. In the hours around dinner, depending on how much daylight they had as the seasons changed, the girls spent the dark hours inside the buildings of the gurukulam studying Tamil and Sanskrit, learning to sing, read and write. After their individual lessons and study time, the girls gathered together once again for the final lesson of the day, that of facial expression.

When dinner was finished and the rest of the household had returned to their usual activities, Madhavan gathered the girls together on the verandah. From the back of the house the faint sound of drums and vinas could be heard, drifting out across the lawn and down the alleys of the town. The girls sat quietly, breathing in the cool night air and listening to the voices of the lutes. The verandah they sat on was made of mud bricks and it stretched out from the house like a hand spreading its fingers in a wide arc over the grass. The sun had set over an hour ago. In the gardens behind the porch the darkness was thick, swallowing the light from the house like a hungry demon. Padma and Usha used to truly fear the darkness at this time of night. Its strength was growing and the daylight was as far from returning as it could be. Blue-gray mists rose up from the river behind the fields and floated across the grounds of the gurukulam. When she was young, Padma was convinced the ghostly blue tendrils were smoke from the nostrils of the demon darkness, breathing heavily as it lay in wait around the verandah.

As he did every night, guru Madhavan lit a single standing lamp and placed it just behind him on the porch. The lamp gave off a reassuring golden glow, but where the path of its light was obstructed, thick shadows slinked along

the mud brick floor. Padma wondered about the line that divided them, the shadow and the light. It seemed to her as though they rubbed their bodies together, skin on skin, creating a balance between them with their pushing. 'Is there anything in between,' she thought to herself, watching the living line with fascination. 'Is there a place there, a space of borderland, somewhere I could touch or taste? Is there room between the darkness and the light, or do their bodies encompass all things, leaving no distance between them?'

The standing lamp was a tool of teaching. Madhavan used it to create a feeling of mystical experience. Darkness awoke emotions inside people and Madhavan used this to his advantage. Fear of the unknown, the darkness, made people retreat into themselves, and once their focus was directed inside their own bodies and minds, Madhavan found it easier to awake other emotions as well. He used this specially selected time of day to teach the Rasas<sup>179</sup>, states of emotion identified by the dance sage Bharata.

Guru Madhavan sat on a small stool in front of the group of girls, resting peacefully in a half lotus position. One sinewy brown calf muscle rested on top of the other, legs crossed comfortably in front of him. His back was very straight, and he sat tall, commanding the attention of his class.

"The nine Rasas," he began, "as you should all know, are feelings that can be expressed as heroism, love, humour, wonder, anger, disgust, sympathy, fear and peace. These nine moods are the sources of all states of emotion and they form the changing or transitory emotional states we depict in drama, Natya, and dance, Nritya and Nritya<sup>180</sup>. The way we move our head and particularly our eyes creates an experience of emotion in the observer. All these states are important for public performances but it's important to remember for whom we are ultimately performing. It is Vishnu who sees not only our faces but inside our bodies and into our hearts. So you must ensure that the drama we perform reaches deeper than just the surface. We aren't mimicking; we are becoming."

Guru Madhavan then took the girls through their evening practice, shifting his moods like the weather changing its face, rapidly and unexpectedly. He showed them rage, tightening his jaw muscles, circling his eyes and vigorously moving his head. The light of the lamp illuminated only half his face, and shadows created pockets of darkness across one side of his body. Sitting on his stool seething with anger, he appeared half man, half demon. His fury was frightening and many of the younger girls huddled in tightly against their older friends. Padma remembered with embarrassment that the first time she had

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<sup>179</sup>Bharata identifies eight different varieties of human emotion (Rasa) in the Natya Shastra. These Rasas are love (of eleven different types), heroism, sympathy, wonder, humour, rage, disgust and fear. In the thirteenth century, Sarngdeva identified a ninth emotion which is now considered to be the ninth Rasa, the meditative or peaceful mood. (Bose 1995:91, Ragini Devi 1990:35)

<sup>180</sup>Nritya and Nritya are terms used to denote abstract and representational dances, respectively. In earlier times, Natya (meaning drama) and Nritya (representational dance) were used interchangeably. (Bose 1995:111)

seen Madhavan perform this transformation she had been so terrified that she started to cry. Madhavan hadn't stopped. In fact, he increased the intensity of his acting. Padma had shrieked and run out of the circle, crying for her amma. Madhavan's mother had been nearby and had gathered Padma in her huge fleshy arms, rocking and comforting her.

"Honestly, my son," she had said to Madhavan, "Do you have to frighten all the new girls this way?"

Padma watched carefully as the guru took the girls through all the nine emotions, explaining the correct eye and facial positions to accompany them, the exact tone needed to bring a response in the audience. She marveled at his control, physical and emotional. He was like a canvas that pure emotions played on, coloring his face to their design, splashing him with a divine brilliance. 'What a shame he could never perform in public,' Padma thought to herself. 'But the world of dance is a woman's world. Only knowledge is held by the men. I can see how this is a blessing and a burden for both of us,' she mused, staring at Madhavan in the flickering lamplight.

In the final exercise of the lesson, the guru taught the girls about the emotion of love. In the Agamic tradition<sup>181</sup>, one which was no longer practiced in the part of India where Padma lived, the gurus had been the first to teach the dancers in aspects of love, both physical and emotional. They had taught the girls about sexuality, intercourse<sup>182</sup> and pleasure. In the Agamic tradition, a girl had to be dedicated to the temple at the age of nine, before she reached puberty<sup>183</sup>. After this ceremony, the gurus took full advantage of the young girls in their care, becoming, after the king who took the virgin devadasis to his bed<sup>184</sup>, their first lovers<sup>185</sup>. The Vaishnavite tradition that Padma belonged to prohibited this practice, insisting that the girls had their first sexual encounter after puberty and the completion of their dance training<sup>186</sup>. At this time the girls were usually around fifteen years old, and did not experience giving their bodies to their guru, but to an appropriate patron chosen with their consent by the Taikkizhavi of their cinnaveedu. However, despite the fact that becoming sexually involved with the girls was strictly forbidden, some gurus still took advantage of those in their care. This was exactly the type of dance trainer that Gauri had been so careful to avoid when she had cautiously chosen Kamala's guru two decades before.

Although in many ways Madhavan was the first to teach the girls in his school about sexuality and seduction, he had absolutely no physical contact with them. Aside from the first dance lesson where he guided their footsteps, the guru never placed a hand on the sacred brides of god. No man, no matter what

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<sup>181</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:186-87

<sup>182</sup>Kersenboom -Story 1987:189

<sup>183</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:187

<sup>184</sup>Marglin 1985:75-77

<sup>185</sup>Srinivasan n.d.:214-215

<sup>186</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:189

the situation, was allowed to touch the devadasis until after their marriage ceremony to Vishnu.

Padma watched with amazement as guru Madhavan taught the girls about the eleven different types of love, the differences between loving a father, a mother, a husband and a god. Then he showed them the expressions and postures that corresponded to the different types of love, paying particular attention to those used for beckoning and arousing a husband. He showed them how to glide their head back and forth across their shoulders in a beautiful motion called *sundari*<sup>187</sup>, one identified with the grace of a woman and with passion. Expanding on the theme of love, he demonstrated how the girls should swing their heads, alternately angling their faces to either side. This was known as a half-moon swing<sup>188</sup> and it symbolized the adoration of the dancer for the beloved.

As Padma watched she observed another amazing and now familiar transformation. There in the lamp light it appeared as though she was no longer watching a grey-haired man sitting on a stool but a beautiful woman, full of passionate love for the divine. This was one of Madhavan's favourite portrayals and he used it frequently in daily life to confuse and amuse his friends and family. Each time she saw it, no matter how many times she had seen it before, Padma was astonished to see all aspects of Madhavan the man slip away, only to be replaced by the face of a coy, devoted, beautiful woman. But Padma recognized that although Madhavan had been transformed, the face that now gazed back at her was still that of her guru.

Lessons for the evening ended around 10 pm, and the girls hurried to bed. It was late and there would be no story-telling in Padma and Usha's room that night. Lamps were turned out and the gurukulam fell into a silent sleep. In the sky above, the march of stars across the sky counted out the six short hours before the household would wake and begin its day all over again.

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The sun rose bright and strong on the dawn of Padma and Usha's graduation. Its light peeped in over the windowsill of the girls' room and found four empty beds, two without linens and without belongings stored under them. Seeing that the girls had already packed their things and moved them out, the sun felt sad. Clouds gathered in the blue sky and the bright solid light of the sun faded to a translucent glow. Shadows blurred in the yard as the light retreated behind the clouds. The auspicious day<sup>189</sup> chosen for the graduation grew dim and grey.

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<sup>187</sup>Bose 1995:60, Ragini Devi 1990:36

<sup>188</sup>Ragini Devi 1990:36

<sup>189</sup>Ragini Devi 1990:45



Padma and Usha had washed and prepared themselves carefully for the morning puja, their last at the gurukulam. They made flower offerings and asked Vishnu to wish them well on this special day. Then, while guru Madhavan led the younger girls in the abhinaya practice, Usha and Padma collected their few belongings and brought their linens down to Madhavan's mother.

"These are for you," Padma told her, handing over her used sheets. Madhavan's mother snorted her disapproval.

"And these are also for you," Usha said. The girls smiled as they gave Madhavan's mother a bundle of garden lilies wrapped with grass.

"Oh, my little ones," Madhavan's mother gushed, bursting into tears. The old lady reached out her huge arms and crushed Usha and Padma into her expansive breasts.

"My girls, my girls. Always leaving me," she sniffled into Padma's shoulder.

Padma and Usha pried themselves free of Madhavan's mother's emotional embrace and went to eat breakfast with the other students.

"We're going to miss your stories," Parvati said to Padma over the meal of idlis, steamed rice cakes.

"And the flowers are going to miss Usha," Padma joked.

"I know," Usha said sadly. "But I have to think of my own garden at the temple. It's been so neglected since I've been away, no one to talk to it and keep it company. I have to think of my home as well."

Usha's feelings made Padma think of her own home. Would it be a home to her now that she'd been away from it for so long? And Vimala, what would she think of her now, all grown up? Would she care for her as she had cared for Uma? The twins Vimala had been pregnant with when Padma left for the gurukulam had grown into strong young boys. They barely remembered her from her infrequent visits to the cinnaveedu. Vimala's second pregnancy had given her and Sundaram a third son that Padma had never even met.

Padma tried to push her doubts away. "Why should it have changed in the past seven years? It hardly changed in my first seven years there." Padma looked up at the grey sky, unusual for such a hot time of year. It filled her with an uneasy feeling. She wanted to walk over the lawn and join the dance class, to bury herself so deep in the familiar that the winds of change would never be able to find her as they moved across India hunting her.

Padma felt a tightening in her chest as she thought about leaving. Looking out across the grass, she could see the students practicing their sthana

under the awning. The nearby pond reflected the grey sky and the branches of trees bent low over the glassy water. The scene suddenly seemed very strange to Padma. For a moment she felt as though she was caught peering into a dream, an awake intruder who wandered by chance across the borders of sleep. Then the feeling shifted and it seemed as though only the gurukulam was real and the rest of the world and all her memories were a dream, another life, another reality.

In that moment she was foreign to herself, an outsider in her own mind. The lines between past and present, waking and dreaming, body and mind whirled away leaving her entire reality bleeding in on itself, drawing her into a space without borders, distinctions, separations. In that moment she forgot herself, her history, her ability to observe the world from a body called Padma. All she could think was that she had lost something, something... She couldn't remember what it was, but it was something of great importance. For a moment her awareness wandered free, walking through the world without the rest of her, without her memories, her identity. It was seeking its home, the body of god underlying all things, a space beyond the distinctions of home and away, beyond leaving and returning.

Then suddenly she remembered where she was. She was a fourteen year old girl, standing on the verandah of her dance school. The feeling of displacement eased as she looked around, re-familiarizing herself with her surroundings.

"Padma! Padma!" she heard Usha calling. "You can't stand there all day! You amma's arrived."

Padma looked up at the balcony above the staircase.

"How long were you calling?" she asked.

"Only three times, sleepy!" Usha said with sarcasm, coming down the stairs. When she reached the verandah, she stopped to look at Padma more closely.

"Are you all right?" Usha asked. "You seem like you're somewhere else. Your eyes look like they're seeing far away instead of here."

"I'm fine," Padma answered, shrugging her shoulders. Then she paused and said, "Usha, how do you feel about leaving here? Won't you miss it?"

"Yes, of course. And I'll miss you," she added, giving Padma a quick hug.

Padma smiled, but Usha's answer obviously hadn't gotten to the heart of whatever it was Padma was thinking about. Usha decided to try again.

"You know, the flowers this year are so beautiful. It makes me sad when they have to wither and die each year. But at least I have next year's buds to look forward to, and I get to watch them blossom and grow all over again. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it wouldn't matter if I was sad or happy about leaving, the leaving would happen anyway. So I may as well be happy about it and enjoy all the good things like seeing my family more often and finally getting to dance in public. If I'm too busy being sad about old things, I may miss my only chance to experience where I am right now, and that could be somewhere very special as well."

Padma smiled and gave Usha a hug. There was no need for thanks among friends. Usha could see it in Padma's eyes.

"Now then, if you're feeling better, would you do me a favour and hurry up? Your amma will be out of her cart and wondering where on earth you are. If you don't show up soon to greet her she may decide to turn around and go back home without you!"

Padma laughed, feeling much better. It was always good to have someone like Usha around. Her practicality was both logical and pleasant. It was no wonder her patti and amma had immediately taken a liking to Usha on their visits to the gurukulam.

Padma went to the front of the house to meet Kamala and Gauri. The older women were standing in the mud brick courtyard, having just gotten out of the cart when Padma arrived. The three of them hugged and chatted, catching up on the latest news about the gurukulam and life back at the cinnaveedu. Madhavan's mother was in the courtyard also. She hugged Kamala tightly, nearly squeezing the air out her lungs. There was a time not so long ago when she had hosted Kamala's graduation, sending her off into the world as a dancer and a woman. Taking Kamala by the arm, Madhavan's mother steered her into the house, eager to catch up with one of her old girls, a student she had seen grow from a child into an adult.

'Amma has hardly changed a bit over the past seven years,' Padma thought to herself. 'She's a little rounder in the middle than I remember her being when I was young, but I've watched that happen slowly over the years.'

Gauri had changed much more than her daughter. Padma's patti had shrunk a great deal and the tiny flecks of grey she had in her hair when Padma first arrived at the school now covered her head almost entirely. Her abrupt and forward manners hadn't altered a bit, but Padma noticed a change in her eyes, a heaviness, a worry. Something was burdening her patti, something that was aging her swiftly. Although Padma had noticed it on previous occasions, today Gauri seemed even more distracted and withdrawn, her eyes refusing to engage the world around her, keeping their thoughts buried deep within.

The last time Padma had seen her grandmother was six months before at a festival performance. Padma had returned to the temple in her own town to celebrate, as she did several times a year. But on those occasions she had been a visitor in the cinnaveedu. Now she was returning to reclaim her place in the community as a dancer and the grand-daughter of the Taikkizhavi. The thought both thrilled and scared her.

"That tiny flame inside you is beginning to turn into a fire," Gauri said proudly to Padma as they walked into the house. "It's getting to be so bright that it's lighting you all up. You're shining like a lantern in the dark today!"

Padma smiled at her patti. There was a time when she had lived for words of encouragement and praise from her grandmother. But the tone of the comment was different now, a compliment passed between women, rather than support from an elder to a child. Standing towering over her shrunken patti, a woman who was still a force to be reckoned with, Padma thought how much circumstances changed with the turning of the wheel of time. It wasn't so long ago, just a brief moment passed, when she had hung on Gauri's sari, looking up at her with eyes that saw the entire world held in her grandmother's hands.

"Now then, eli, I'm not so old as all that," Gauri said with a wink, reading Padma's thoughts. The moment was uncanny, and was enough to remind Padma that although she had grown in years and experience, Gauri had in no way diminished.

The Gajjai Puja<sup>190</sup>, worship of the ankle bells, was performed that afternoon. The puja officially concluded the dancer's period of training, one that normally lasted seven years. This was the first time that Padma and Usha would perform in full attire, complete with ankle bells. After the Gajjai Puja the girls would go back to their own temples to wait for their dedication and marriage ceremonies, making them brides of god in the eyes of Hindu law. For the period between the worship of the ankle bells and the marriage ceremony, the girls would remain in seclusion, hidden away from the eyes of men while they were in a vulnerable state between being a student and becoming a dancer.

The ceremony took place on the verandah. All furniture had been cleared away so that close relatives from the girls' cinnaveedus could watch. Cushions and fabrics had been laid on the mud brick floor, and Gauri and Kamala positioned themselves close to the front among the women of Usha's family. Kamala wore a bright pink sari, and surrounded by darkly embroidered cushions and the mud brick floor, she looked like a lotus bud peeking out of a brown pond. In contrast to her daughter, Gauri blended into the crowd, her forest green sari wrapped around her shoulders, her grey hair oiled back into a tight bun. Padma

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<sup>190</sup>"On completion of seven years of practice, the Gajjai Puja or worship of the ankle bells was performed on an auspicious day when the bells were worn by the first time by the dancer." (Ragini Devi 1990:45)

thought how unusual it was for her grandmother to be dressed in dark and subtle colors.

First Padma and then Usha received their ankle bells from guru Madhavan. He bent to tie them onto the dancers and then, conducting their choreography like a puppet master pulling strings, he directed first Padma and then Usha in their inaugural dance performances. Full musical accompaniment was provided by the men of Madhavan's home. The guru received his final fees from Gauri and the Taikkizhavi of Usha's cinnaveedu. Auspicious presents were given and received, as well as betel leaves for good luck<sup>191</sup>. After the performances, a lavish spread of food was offered to everyone, prepared by Madhavan's mother for the occasion.

During her performance, known as arengatram, Padma danced beautifully, full of grace and charm. However, she displayed neither the precision of her mother nor the awesome power of her patti. Despite the fact that all devadasis performed similar dances, each had their own distinct style in the way that although many artists may paint the same tree, none of the pictures are identical. Padma had her own movements, her own style. As with all artists, it was born out of some inner sense of self, a blending of her inner being with the outer world. Her expressions manifested with quiet grace and confidence, a trusting certainty. She seemed to flow from one motion into the next, unhurried, somehow outside the passing of time. Her dance, like her mother's, was comforting to watch, although for different reasons. Kamala's movements reflected a sense of logic, reassuring people of a greater world order, a cosmic plan. Padma's dance was almost the opposite; it took the observer out of time and place. She moved with the carefree feeling of a summer day, one without cares or obligations, a moment outside of the movements of changing seasons. The breath of warmth flowed after her, leaving those who watched her feeling uplifted long after the dance was over.

Usha also demonstrated her own distinct performance style.

"No sense being nervous. Best to just get it over with," Padma heard Usha muttering to herself as her ankle bells were tied on. Padma struggled to hide a smile in that most serious and important of moments.

When Usha danced she did so with a sort of gruff practicality. She moved with a sense of humour, highlighting the comic, the jovial. She didn't exactly stumble at the beginning, but the flow of her movements definitely improved as she continued. Usha was far shorter and rounder than Padma, and she made no pretense of trying to imitate her taller companion's grace. She had her own style to offer. When she was finished, the assembled crowd was laughing and

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<sup>191</sup>"For the first time she would dance with all musical accompaniments, wearing her ankle bells. The dance master would receive his final fees, and auspicious presents like betel leaves would be exchanged. Food would be served to everyone. Professionally speaking, the girl was now qualified to be accepted in the service of the temple." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188)

smiling. All agreed that she would be very popular in the temple. It was a rare and true gift to be able to bring laughter to others.

The families feasted and celebrated. The other students in the gurukulam looked at Usha and Padma with envy, day-dreaming of the time when they would wear ankle bells and be the center of celebration. Despite the grey skies, the afternoon was a great success.

After the food was finished and the gurukulam returned to its normal afternoon activities, Padma and Usha got ready to leave. Their things were put into buggies, leaving no tangible trace of their presence at the school, no solid reminders of their years of training and growing up.

"Come, come, my little ones," Madhavan's mother wept, squashing them into her body with her strong arms.

"My girls, my girls," she sobbed, before trying to regain her composure. "Make sure they feed you enough in those cinnaveedus. A dancer has to eat to keep strong."

With those final words of advice, Madhavan's mother hurried away into the house. She hated long good-byes. More girls would come to fill the hole in her life left by Padma and Usha, but they were all special to her, every student like a daughter she was giving back into the world. Gauri watched the chubby old woman with sympathy, remembering how difficult it had been for her to give first Kamala and then Padma into the old woman's care. She understood now how difficult it was for Madhavan's mother to return them.

Parvati and the girls waved from an upstairs balcony, cheering them away with wishes of good luck and happy fortune. Madhavan bowed slightly before Padma and Usha, and the girls went forward to touch the feet of their revered guru with both hands. The parting Padma had with her teacher was, to the eyes of the casual observer, merely a formality, a brief and uncelebrated farewell. But Padma knew the depth of her feelings for him and knew that no words would say what was in her heart. He had been everything to her, her inspiration and her strength, her teacher, father, mother, friend. She understood that with such ties of closeness between them, it wasn't necessary to say good-bye. She would see him soon, at her dedication and at many festivals in the future. There was no language to convey her gratitude for what he had given her and for the experiences they had shared. It would have been like thanking her mother for having given birth to her.

Padma and Usha hugged each other hard.

"See you soon?" Padma whispered to her friend.

"Of course! Sooner than soon," Usha answered, trying to sound reassuring. But events that could not have been foreseen would prevent Usha

from keeping her promise. It would be seven years again before the girls next met, and then under very different circumstances in a very different India.

With that last farewell taken care of, Padma got into the oxen-drawn cart with her mother and grandmother. Madhavan watched them from the courtyard, but it was Kamala, not Padma, on whom his gaze was fixed.

"Ready to come home?" Kamala asked her daughter.

'I'm not even sure what that means anymore,' Padma thought to herself, but in response to her mother's question she simply smiled and nodded. The driver tapped the oxen on the rump with a stick and the cart started moving out into the street.

**Chapter 6**  
**Tying the Tali**  
**Cinnaveedu, Late Winter/ Early Spring 1925**

"The world around us is changing, changing too much to appreciate our greatness," Gauri complained bitterly to her daughter as she spat betel juice out the window. "One day soon there'll be no place for us. And it's more than just us! There'll be no place in this new India for our memories, our dasi histories. What man, what historian, will talk about our lives the way they are, the way we know them to be? Traditions die when there's no one left to practice and teach them. We're disappearing and our way of life is vanishing with us!"

"Amma, stop spitting out the window," Kamala said with frustration. "Use the bucket over there. And please go help Padma get ready."

"Our memories are all going to amount to nothing," Gauri continued, spitting out the window again and ignoring her daughter, "because there's no one left who values them, and the same thing is happening to the art we've spent centuries building and preserving. Mark my words. Already we're witnessing the passing away of our heritage, customs we've held for hundreds of generations. Soon there'll be no one left who remembers our place in this society, our value to this community. Life is melting in around us, filling up the cracks, birthing new ways. Our past is too heavy, too large. It burdens us and we are drowning."

"Amma, please," Kamala said to Gauri with exasperation. "Don't let Padma hear you talking like that. It'll ruin her dedication."

"Hhhmmmmph! Some dedication! All these years of training and effort, for what? Public dedications stopped!<sup>192</sup> Twelve hundred years of celebration<sup>193</sup> and now we are told that public dedications are forbidden!"

"Amma, be grateful. At least they haven't stopped the dedications altogether<sup>194</sup>. In Vishnu's eyes, a marriage is still a marriage, public or private."

"Yes, but it won't be long now before that's stripped from us as well," Gauri raged in response. "Already there's talk of banning the dedications completely. And that talk isn't only coming from those meddlesome English. I've heard our own priests saying it's time to move to new ways, ways that put the

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<sup>192</sup>see footnote 194

<sup>193</sup>The origin of the tradition of temple dancing has been traced to literature of the 8th-12th centuries. Although the exact earliest recorded reference of devadasis is uncertain, many refer to the 8th and 9th centuries as the most likely period of the tradition's emergence. The earliest sources trace this tradition back to the 4th century, although this date is not clearly substantiated or recognized among scholars. (Orr 2000:6-7)

<sup>194</sup>Although public dedications were prevented by the force of petitions and marches by the year 1910, they still continued in private until the legislation of 1947, the Madras Prevention of Dedication Act, made all dedication ceremonies, public or private, illegal. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:xxi)



emphasis back on their power, their popularity<sup>195</sup>. These petty jealousies are going to cause the downfall of one of the greatest arts in India. What will become of us if there are no marriage dedications? Will we be hailed as divine harlots? Mistresses of the god?"

Kamala sighed deeply, frustration creeping into her expression. Her eyebrows knitted together in annoyance. It was Padma's dedication day. Why was her mother carrying on like this now?

"You of all people should know, amma, that none of the great devotees ever needed a priest to make them a bride of god. Look at the stories you're always telling Padma. Mirabai was married to a prince, not to a god. Does that make her Vishnu's illegitimate mistress? Does it really matter in the eyes of the divine?"

"We don't live in the world of the divine. Thousands of women across India will be turned out into the streets, discarded vessels, used goods. Where will they go if the temple system turns to shut us out? It's not my problem; I'll likely be dead before it happens. But what of Padma? Who will care for her when they turn her marriage, the marriage we celebrate today, into a thing of the past? We don't have divorce in India! And besides, who could divorce themselves from the god? What a ridiculous notion. Padma cannot even commit sati<sup>196</sup>; her husband will live forever and there'll be no funeral pyre to throw herself on. The only funeral fires lit will be our own, twelve hundred years of devadasi tradition smoking on the pyre. Tell me, daughter, where will India find enough wood to rid itself of us, to bury us in the past? There aren't enough trees in all the world to burn us out of history!

"Once we were great women, women who were so respected that Brahmin men would bow their heads before us! Every family wished that a daughter would be chosen by the priests to be given to the temple. Now parents teach their children that even to utter our name, even to let the word *devadasi* pass their lips, will cause their tongues to be set on fire!"<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>The jealousy of men as a significant contributing factor in the abolition of the devadasi tradition is widely explored in Srinivasan's work. Although the morality issues of the controlling colonial powers are recognized as key in causing the disappearance of the tradition, Srinivasan makes a point of analyzing the internal community factors that led to the degeneration of the tradition, namely the gendered nature of the art and dominance of men in deciding the place of the women in the wider Indian community. (Srinivasan 1985:1871, 1874)

<sup>196</sup>The practice of sati, named for the goddess Sati, involved a wife throwing herself on her husband's funeral fire. This practice was one of the most highly debated discussions in the last century. The British lobbied hard to have sati made illegal on the grounds that many of the women who were burned alive did not commit suicide of their own accord but were pressured, emotionally and sometimes physically, by their in-laws. The legislation preventing sati was passed in 1829, although rare cases of it are recorded even to this day in some parts of India. (Forbes 1996:248)

<sup>197</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:i

Kamala stared at her amma, full of grief. Despite the fact that she found Gauri's graphic presentation distasteful, Kamala knew she was right. The power that women of her line had once wielded, power over the temples, the people, even over the king, was gone. An earthquake was shaking India at the roots and like a foolish child, Kamala had run inside the house to seek shelter, only to find that the walls were collapsing in around her. The temple would give them no protection. The priests, who for so many centuries had relied on the devadasis' status as nityasumangali, the ever-auspicious, would cast them into the street, eager to scoop up any scraps of power the dasis happened to drop on their way out.

"You're right, amma, we will disappear. But there won't be any funeral services for us. People will simply forget us, and the few stories of us that remain will likely be told by the same people who have orchestrated our demise. There'll be nothing left of us, not even our history. Who listens to old ragged women muttering in the street? We cast our fortunes on the generosity of strangers, begging for our meals, sleeping on the temple steps. Is that what you want me to acknowledge? Does my admittance of defeat give Padma back her future?"

Gauri turned and walked away. She slumped her shoulders forward, hanging her head down so that her chin almost came to rest on her breast bone. Gauri knew that she had crossed the line, upsetting her own daughter on such an important day. She found more and more that she couldn't control her feelings of rage and pain. It wasn't because she was aging; it was because she sensed increasingly every day the amount by which the world was hardening against them. Violence was breaking out all across India. Its fury spread like a plague through the villages and towns, poisoning the waters, burning the crops with its hatred and ignorance. As a highly educated dasi who had studied the ways of history, Gauri saw all too clearly the path ahead. She wanted to turn and walk towards the past instead of towards the future. She wanted to pass on to Padma a tradition that was growing, blossoming, joyous. But the seasons had changed. Night was descending on them, and its darkness would swallow Padma and the others of her generation, before a new dawn would be able to rise. Gauri thought she could see where the new dawn would lie, and it made her detest the upper classes who were taking up dance as a hobby, an intellectual amusement. Gauri vowed to herself that she would never live to see the day when the dasis would be cast from the temple.

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Padma's dedication ceremony was held five days after the Gajjai puja, worship of the ankle bells. Weeks before Padma's completion of dance training, Kamala had petitioned the local representative of the king to admit Padma into temple service. Agreement from the king gave Padma certain rights, such as land and a home, an income and a place in the community<sup>198</sup>. It indicated that in

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<sup>198</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1871-72

times of trouble, the king would maintain Padma as a servant of the temple, ensuring her survival. Because of the potential financial costs involved, and because of the importance of the devadasis, Kamala had to prove her daughter's worthiness to be accepted. Ten priests and ten devadasis at her own temple had to sign a paper saying they believed that she was capable of performing her required duties and that she was an accomplished dancer<sup>199</sup>. Any hint of scandal could cause a dasi to be denied acceptance, forcing her to apply elsewhere, away from her home and family<sup>200</sup>. Approval for Kamala's petition had arrived a few days previous to the ceremony, right on time.

Because of the importance of the dedication ceremony, Padma had been observing a religious fast all day<sup>201</sup> and was now, at mid-day, very hungry. The morning had been very busy. In addition to all the usual rituals that were performed each day in the temple, wedding customs were carried out. Elderly ladies who had reached menopause brought gifts to the temple for the bridegroom, the god Vishnu. In exchange, these old ladies would receive flower garlands and cloth worn by Vishnu as a sign of his blessing<sup>202</sup>.

Padma was waiting patiently in her family's cinnaveedu. After they had completed all the necessary rituals in the temple, the priests brought the kattari, a sword symbolizing Vishnu, to Padma's house<sup>203</sup>. The musicians accompanied them through the lush gardens, playing joyous wedding songs. The sky above the procession was bright, pulsing with life and warmth. Padma wanted to look out the door to see them coming. She was ecstatic. The day of her wedding had finally arrived. Although most girls her age were excited about getting married, for Padma it was more than just a celebration. It was an affirmation of her entire being, the essence of who she was. For her, the ceremony marked her initiation, her true belonging, into a family of devadasis who had been wives of the god-king for centuries. Without her marriage, Padma felt that she would have been only a half-woman, a shadow member of the family, a promise made and never fulfilled. She had spent most of the morning imagining the wonderful new woman she would be when the ceremony was completed.

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<sup>199</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:187

<sup>200</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:187-88

<sup>201</sup>"On the day of the muttirai (marriage) function, the girl would have to observe a fast." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188)

<sup>202</sup>"Elderly ladies (after menopause) would take presents for the bridegroom to the temple. Among these presents would be a small cloth for the god (kaupinam). They would be accompanied by musical instruments. The ladies would offer presents to the utsava-murti Velayudha and receive the cloth and flower garland that was worn by the god from the hands of the priest." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188)

<sup>203</sup>The following account has provided the technical details of the text: "From the temple they (the bridal party) would bring the kattari (sword, spear, trident) to the home of the girl. All musical instruments would accompany them. The kattari would be taken inside the house and should be installed in a room that was kept specially 'clean'. Now the girl would enter, dressed like a bride; she would be given the kattari. Both would be invited to the bridal platform that had been arranged in the house. All traditional marriage rituals would be performed, and finally, an elderly devadasi would tie the tali (with golden bottu) around the girl's neck." The tali necklace with golden bottu was worn by all married women. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188)

The priests and the procession arrived at the cinnaveedu in all splendor. The sound of the drums reverberated in Padma's chest, waking both her passion and her nervous excitement. 'I don't care that this celebration is held in the temple instead of being open to the public,' Padma thought. 'It's wonderful just the way it is.'

The priests brought the kattari, the sword symbolizing Vishnu, into the house to a room which had been kept physically and ritually clean. Only a very special space could be used to house a symbol of the god when it was out of the temple. The priests laid the kattari on a carefully arranged bridal platform, and when they were finished, Padma entered the room dressed as a bride. She was so nervous that the sweat on her hands kept threatening to wash off her gold rings. She squashed her fingers tightly together to prevent her ornaments from slipping away. Dozens of gold bangles jingled around her thin wrists and jewelry was draped off every feature. Her ears, nose, hair, hands, ankles and toes had been decorated with delicate and ornate ornaments. She wore her hair tied up so that the tali<sup>204</sup>, the symbol of her marriage to Vishnu, could be tied easily around her neck<sup>205</sup>. In her hair shone her mother's surya and chandra, the sun and moon that Kamala had given her for the occasion, the same pair that Gauri had passed down to Kamala before Padma was born. Padma smiled as she felt their delicate weight in her hair. Although they gave the impression of being fragile ornaments, Padma could feel how firmly they had been attached to her head, weaving their tiny metal fingers through her hair. Kamala and Gauri smiled at Padma as she emerged in her bridal dress, and then for a brief instant they smiled at each other, remembering Kamala's dedication, before their anger returned and they turned away from each other.

The priests welcomed Padma and, with a great deal of ceremony, they passed her the kattari. Padma and her symbolic husband now sat together on the bridal platform while all the traditional rites that accompanied all marriages in the South were performed. Padma shook with anticipation as the moment she had been waiting for approached. Despite the elegant feminine manners she had been taught at the gurukulam, Padma struggled to contain her excitement. She was, after all, only fourteen.

Gauri, in her position as an accomplished and elderly devadasi, approached Padma. She bent low around Padma's head and placed the tali around her neck, tying it carefully and with reverence. From the tali hung the bottu, a golden symbol of the god. Padma tried to conceal the extent of her joy, but it was welling up in her, threatening to overflow. A priest came forward and

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<sup>204</sup>The tali was the necklace that was tied around a dasi's neck to indicate her dedicated status. In the Agamic tradition, the tali was tied at the age of nine years. In Padma's tradition, the Vaishnavite tradition, the tali was tied when a dancer completed their training, usually between twelve and sixteen years of age. The tali was hung with the bottu, a sort of gold pendant in the symbol of the god she had been married to. In the Saivite, the Agamic tradition, this symbol was the linga of Siva, a phallic symbol. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:186,188)

<sup>205</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:186

placed on each of her shoulders a flower imprint in sandalwood paste. Padma was now officially married to Vishnu. She felt the weight of the kattari in her arms, its reassuring heaviness. She loved the sword, the symbol of the god. She felt the presence of Vishnu emanating from it, beaming radiance and benevolence on the assembled group. The other dasis smiled with happiness. Kamala, pride lighting up her face, struggled to contain tears of happiness. Although she'd made a point never to convey them to Padma, Kamala had her fears and doubts about whether the marriage would ever come to pass. Now that the ceremony was complete, she was overwhelmed with feelings of relief and happiness.

Although the rituals marking Padma's initiation into the temple as a bride were complete for the moment, her function as a dancer was yet to be fulfilled. The assembled crowd waited as Vimala and Kamala rushed to assist Padma in changing out of her bridal attire and into her dance costume. 'I'll change my outfit so many times over the next few days<sup>206</sup>,' Padma thought to herself. 'There are so many different sides of me now that I'm a devadasi!'

Padma quickly reemerged dressed in a new sari tied so that it gave the appearance of pajama-like pants. This style of sari tying was used by the devadasis during dance performances. The loose pant-like sari hung around her legs, gathered so that it allowed her to move freely. Just below her sari, Padma's new ankle bells gleamed and tinkled. She also wore toe rings, the privilege of a married woman. On her forehead she bore a Kasi pottu, a mark of sandalwood paste to indicate her status as a bride. Guru Madhavan now came forward and directed Padma in her first dance as a devadasi, just as he had guided her first steps as a child in the gurukulam. She performed a series of dances by well-known choreographers, all chosen carefully by Madhavan to reflect a standard concert repertoire. Padma's concert included six dances, beginning with alaripa and ending with tilana<sup>207</sup>.

Because the dedication being held was a private rather than a public ceremony, Padma felt much more comfortable with the assembled crowd. She had known most of the people in attendance since she was a child, and didn't mind at all that public dedications hadn't been performed since the time of her birth. Although she knew it upset her patti, Padma was quite relieved to know that she still had a little while to get used to dancing for the general public.

Sundaram stared at Padma whirling away in the center of the room. Her stick-like young body had blossomed into delicious lean curves and bends. Her limbs moved like liquid and her chest heaved as she drew deeper and deeper breaths to keep up the pace of her movements. Sundaram licked his lower lip.

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<sup>206</sup>After changing out of her sleeping clothes, a dasi would prepare by putting on the wedding attire of a bride. After the initial part of the ceremony, she would change again into her dance costume. In the evening she would change back to sleeping clothes and the following morning she would wear the nine yards sari of a Brahmin caste woman, a mark of high status and a special privilege of the devadasis. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188-89)

<sup>207</sup>Kothari 1997:92-103

Across the room, his very pregnant wife Vimala was quietly preparing to serve the food that had been made for the guests to enjoy after the dance was finished. Vimala's roundness annoyed him. Having already given birth to three sons, the weight she had gained still hung around her hips, turning their slender delicacy into a soft pudginess. Sundaram was irritated by her figure, by her happiness, her willingness to serve. He was bored with his beautiful wife, wanting something new, something intriguing.

Padma's bare feet slapped the mud brick floor, making her ankle bells crack together sharply. Sundaram observed her carefully. The child that had left the cinnaveedu seven years ago was barely visible in this strong, confident young woman. Sundaram was curious to know if her strength ran deeper than just a surface appearance. The prospect of finding out excited him. He wondered if she would have much fight in her, this strong and nimble new devadasi, forbidden fruit, bride of the god. Sundaram glanced nervously at the kattari sitting on the wedding platform. Sometimes he completely dismissed the idea that there was any sort of divinity at all, believing it to be one giant trick of popular ignorance that had ruined his life. But at other times, times such as this, Sundaram cowered before the deity, certain that divine wrath would repay him for his wicked thoughts and his abusive hand.

When she had completed her performance, Padma was offered milk and fruit<sup>208</sup>. Because she was still observing a ritual fast, it was all she was permitted to eat to refresh her energy before the next series of dances that would be held in the temple in the evening. The other assembled guests were given festive food, a delicious buffet of savory and sweet creations that Vimala had spent much of the past two days preparing. Padma mingled amongst the assembled crowd, receiving congratulations and blessings. Kamala and Gauri stood at opposite ends of the room, something Padma decided was very odd considering the circumstances. Although both seemed very happy on the day of her wedding, Padma noticed a definite tension. She wondered what could have caused it.

At 7 pm Padma was accompanied by the wedding party to the temple to perform her first puspanjali, the flower offering given by a dasi to the god. Padma felt the slick leaves of the basil as she presented the green wreath to Vishnu, the deity who was now her husband. Following this she gave a full dance concert in the temple. Although the dedication ceremonies had been private since the year Padma was born, members of the general public were permitted into the temple in the evenings. Knowing that a new dasi was being dedicated that day, crowds of people from the surrounding areas packed into the temple to see her and to behold the festivities.

Padma danced several songs and was thankful for the difficult and strenuous training she had undergone at the gurukulam. The performance, her

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<sup>208</sup>"After her performance the guests would receive festive foods, but the girl would receive only milk and fruits" (because of her ritual fast). (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188)

second of the marriage, was extremely tiring, both physically and emotionally. It had been a long, exciting day and Padma was beginning to feel the strain in her head and lower back. She finished her final dance with the appearance of grace and ease, but inside she was exhausted, hungry and tired. Padma was now truly a devadasi; she had mastered the art of acting as well as the art of dance. She performed the part of a temple bride with absolute perfection, a fact that pleased the priests and the public immensely. Although many in the crowd had talked heatedly about reforming the temple system and stopping the practice of dedication, the festive mood was contagious and everyone left happy. In their collective memories lay twelve hundred years of dance tradition and appreciation, something that wasn't easily forgotten.

After Padma completed her concert, a priest came forward to make a fresh brand on her upper arm. He used sandalwood paste to paint the symbol of Vishnu onto her skin over top of the mark that had been put on her earlier in the day. Then he passed Padma the kumbhadipa, the pot lamp that was offered to the god.

Holding the pot lamp carefully and reverently, Padma approached the main idol housed in the temple. The massive stone statue of Vishnu smiled down on her, pleased with the beauty and sensitivity of his new bride. Padma held the kumbhadipa up towards Vishnu, waving it gently back and forth in offering. The lamp smoked softly, casting a dim light across the stone limbs of the god. In the creases of his body, where the stone folded together in a joint or a bend, Padma watched the light disappearing into the darkness, the shadows swallowing her offering hungrily.

Following her presentation of the pot lamp to Vishnu, Padma carefully carried the kumbhadipa into all corners of the temple. She was aware of the importance of this tradition that was her right by birth, to remove influences of the evil eye and to maintain a pure space for Vishnu in his house. The act was lovingly done, as a dutiful wife prepares with care her beloved's bed, his evening meal. Her nervousness, caused by the magnitude of her importance in the ritual, faded as a feeling of true and total devotion overcame her. She had dedicated her entire life to this; she had dedicated herself as a bride of the divine.

When the ritual of the kumbhadipa was concluded, the priests presented Padma with gifts<sup>209</sup>, tokens symbolizing her place of high honour in the temple community. Among them, she was given a coconut and a silken head-cloth called a parivattiam. The head-cloth was a special privilege of devadasis in some communities. It marked her fully ordained status as a servant and wife of the deity.

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<sup>209</sup>"This function of dedication to the temple would be concluded by the bestowal of all honors on the girl by the temple: she would receive a silken head cloth (parivattiam) which was tied around her head, a coconut and other prasadam (special and auspicious gifts)." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:189)

When the final rites of the ceremony had been completed, Padma was escorted back to the cinnaveedu by the wedding party and the musicians<sup>210</sup>. The first night of her marriage would be celebrated in the same way as other weddings in the South, with the consummation of the marriage by the bride and groom. The kattari, the sword symbolizing Vishnu, was still resting where it had been left on the wedding platform in Padma's house. The priests lifted the kattari and led Padma to the room where her bed had been made up for the occasion. In a ritual called the giving of an embryo<sup>211</sup>, the sword was placed next to Padma on the nuptial bed while the priests made offerings of sandalwood paste. Wedding songs were sung and played by the musicians as Padma ascended the bridal bed to sit next to her new husband.

When the wedding festivities were finally over, Padma was left alone with her new bride groom, a long heavy blade of steel resting on the bed next to her. She had been awake for nineteen hours. The desire to sleep hung over her like a heavy blanket, smothering her thoughts. As she fell into an exhausted slumber, it vaguely occurred to her that it was odd to share a bed with an object. She felt wooden and awkward, as though she was afraid to move in her sleep, afraid to disturb its silent, motionless presence. Padma felt a strong awareness of Vishnu's radiance as she fell asleep, not in the sword but in the room around her. His luminescent body slipped across the boundaries of worlds to visit his new bride as she slept, blessing her devotion with the return of his love. Although life could be cruel and difficult, especially in the changing times that surrounded and lay ahead of her, Padma would be watched over by a loving presence, the most dutiful and caring of husbands.

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The following morning Gauri rose early to bathe<sup>212</sup>. She was the only one awake in the cinnaveedu, finding ample privacy to wash. Although modesty dictated that a woman should keep her sari on at all times, Gauri discarded the cloth and blouse. The old woman stood naked and defiant in the bathhouse, placing crushed flowers into water she had warmed in the kitchens. As she aged, Gauri had found the trappings of clothing to be more and more confining.

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<sup>210</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:189

<sup>211</sup>After her evening dance performance in the temple and the giving of gifts, "the girl would be escorted home by the full melam (band) of the temple. At home, the kattari was still in its proper place. In a ritual called garbhadana (giving of an embryo) the kattari was placed next to the girl on the nuptial bed, while shanti homa (using hands to brush sacred smoke from ritual incense over the face and head) would be offered by Brahmin priests before the nuptial bed, as is usual in all regular marriages. Till the end of the ceremony the girl would remain fasting. Songs of lali and nalanku were sung and sandal paste was offered." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:189)

<sup>212</sup>"The next morning an elderly lady would first bathe, and then place the kattari back in its proper place (in the house). After her bath the girl would be allowed to break her fast. In the afternoon a swing function would be arranged. The girl should wear a nine yards sari (as is worn by the Brahmin women), a pyjama and a Kasi pottu; after the singing of lali, otam and unjal songs, the group would depart from the house and in a procession they would carry the kattari to the temple and return it to the priest. Hereafter they would go to the puspanjali mandapa where the girl would dance puspanjali." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:189)



She wanted to tear her sari off and wander naked in the streets like the women devotees who abandoned their homes in favour of an ascetic life of seeking and solitude. Dipping her hands into the delicately scented water, she trickled its honey warmth across her wrinkled skin. The water slipped and slid down her body, pooling in the cavities and creases created by the process of aging. Gauri pressed her hands into her skin, smoothing the wrinkles, stretching them out. The warm flower water steamed off her limbs, goose flesh prickling in the chill of its departed heat. Gauri ran her hands over her sagging breasts, down between her stick thin thighs where the power of a well-muscled dancer had once resided. She splashed the water, which was cooling rapidly, once more over her aged body. She was pleased to see that her nipples still responded to the touch of cold, waking memories that she had long since buried, memories of pleasure and power, memories of vengeance and pain.

Gauri pushed the thoughts away easily. She'd had many years of practice ignoring things about her past that displeased her. Dressing quickly, Gauri went into the cinnaveedu where Padma was still asleep, resting comfortably next to the kattari as though she had just lain down beside it. To Gauri it appeared as though Padma hadn't moved all night.

"Come my gentle husband," Gauri said to the sword, lifting it off the nuptial bed. "It's time to return you to your proper place in the house."

Gauri held the sword across her breast as though cradling a child. She brought the kattari back to the main room of the cinnaveedu where it would rest until a procession arrived to return it to the temple. As she moved the sword, Gauri talked to Vishnu, asking him about his night with her grand-daughter, his plans for her future. Whatever Gauri heard in response was not to be shared by others; Gauri's conversations with the divine were private and discreet. There were many things she hid from the rest of the household. Although she often behaved eccentrically in public to amuse herself, many of the things Gauri took more seriously would have been mocked by the priests. Even the dasis would have had a hard time sympathizing with Gauri's practices, passing them off as the craziness of an old woman who had lost touch with reality.

After returning the kattari to its proper place, Gauri returned to the bedroom to wake Padma and help her prepare for her first day as a wife. Her grand-daughter opened her sleepy eyes when Gauri shook her, smiling happily.

"Did you sleep well, my little eli?" Gauri asked. "Was Vishnu a good bedfellow?"

Padma nodded, not wanting to talk. Somehow she felt that by making a sound she might break the tangible feeling of sacredness that hung in the room. Still caught in the drowsiness of sleep, Padma sensed that silence would prolong the wondrous experience of waking up married. She didn't want to disturb the dream; she wanted to savor it. The feeling was one of delicious and total contentment.

" 'Take these mortal husbands who die, decay, and feed them to your kitchen fires<sup>213</sup>, ' " Gauri said, quoting from a famous woman Saivite poet. "That's what Mahadeviyakka always told people. Far better to have a god than a man for your bride groom!"

Gauri helped Padma to bathe and change, preparing her to meet the wedding party that would be waiting outside the house to take her to the temple. Padma put on a Kasi pottu, the bridal mark on her forehead, and a nine yards sari, tied into the pant-like style used for dancing. Nine yards was the specified length of a Brahmin woman's sari. It was Padma's privilege as a devadasi to wear one. When she was fully dressed, Padma was escorted outside the cinnaveedu to meet the other dasis and the priests. More wedding songs were sung as the procession returned the kattari to the temple where Padma would once again perform a flower offering, puspanjali, and dance before the deity.

As she wandered down the garden path, surrounded by the wedding party, Padma realized that she was taller than her mother. Her bare feet were decorated with intricate red lac dye designs, and on her toes glimmered her toe rings, a bride's privilege. When she was a child, Padma had often stared at her mother's ornately adorned toes, imagining the day when she too would be allowed to wear toe rings, a public indication of her married status. As she walked across the flat stones of the temple pathway, Padma glanced down to examine her mother's feet. She had sat so many times as a child on the floor before Kamala, listening to her amma tell stories about the history of the devadasis, their rise and now their fall, their survival through all invaders, all kings, all times of change. Padma remembered how her eyes had alternated between her amma's eyes and her beautiful feet; Padma had both adored and been intrigued by the marriage decorations Kamala wore. To a child who was fascinated by sparkly things, the collection of filigree gold toe rings, some inlaid with tiny pearls and colored stones, had formed a strong impression in Padma's mind. She now looked down at her own feet, walking the path beside her mother's, and was amazed to discover their similarity, their sameness. Although Padma's feet were slightly longer and more slender than her amma's, the two sets of brown toes, both ornamented with tiny golden circles, were almost identical.

Padma loved the delicacy and the roundness of the gold rings. She had taken them off to play with in her hands often when no one was looking over the past day and a half. She was amazed by the perfection of their elegant shape, one with no beginning and no end, a shape that spun and turned in her fingers as smoothly and easily as the stars revolving across the night sky. It was like holding a tiny universe in her hand; the gold itself reminded her of maya, the tangible world of illusion, and the empty space within made her think of Atman, the one true soul underlying all things. Hindu ascetics taught that when a person freed their mind of earthly things, they could see past the waking dream of the

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<sup>213</sup>Mahadeviyakka Caturvedi 283, from Ramanujan 1973:134

cycles of rebirth and would discover the truth of their existence. As Padma stared at the rings on her feet she imagined the way that the golden bands encircled her toes, catching her attention with their beauty. But when she removed them, they became a metaphor of her existence, a circle of maya floating in the nothingness, the airy freedom of what lies beneath all things, the greater divine soul to which all things and all creatures belong.

In the days following her marriage, Padma and her amma discussed the issue of a patron, a man who would be chosen to take financial responsibility for Padma's performances. Traditionally a dasi was given one month to contemplate her future, to decide whether she wanted to accept a number of different patrons, or to take just one lover<sup>214</sup>. Padma chose the latter. The idea of being with one man frightened her enough, and more than one man was unthinkable. But there was a slight problem for Padma and her amma. Often a patron would have spoken for a dasi long before her completion of training, but Padma, although now an accomplished dancer, had been trained in another town and hadn't attracted much attention from the men of the patron class in her own community. Kamala and Gauri had paid the fees for Padma's training on their own, most of the money coming from a huge supply of jewelry that Gauri had produced from some secret corner of the cinnaveedu.

"Hush, little daughter," Gauri had said to a shocked Kamala when she had seen the gold in her mother's hands. "I've set aside a bit for a special occasion, presents from admirers I no longer wish to have memories of. An old women shouldn't hold such tokens anymore. As I approach the throne of Vishnu in my great age, all my thoughts should be turned to him and away from such distractions and shiny things."

Kamala had nodded and taken the jewelry without further question. She thought to herself that her amma must indeed have been a very great dasi in her youth to have amassed such a fortune that so much was still surplus after the normal costs of the cinnaveedu were taken care of. She had taken the jewelry to be sold in the market, trading it for rice and money to send to guru Madhavan.

Although Padma had no exact idea where the money had come from for her dance education, she knew that no patron had stepped forward because there was no present claim on her to be considered by both herself and her amma. This fact both reassured and upset Padma. Although she didn't know if she was ready to have relations with a complete stranger, the idea that nobody wanted her raised old insecurities and fears. By completing her training, she had justified her right to be numbered among the devadasis, and now it was her responsibility to earn her keep. As one of the only public careers for women in India<sup>215</sup>, temple dancing came with both exciting privileges and significant burdens. Padma had proven that she was worthy of the title; now she only needed to bring in an income.

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<sup>214</sup>Kersenboom-story 1987:189

<sup>215</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1872

Most of the devadasis attracted the attention of potential patrons with their beauty and charm. There was something alluring, extra special, about women who had been promised to the divine. Touching the dancers, speaking to them or in some cases even looking at them was considered a ritual offense in the temple<sup>216</sup>. Behaving in such a way towards a bride of god was seen as a sacrilege similar to spitting in the temple or coveting the consecrated property of the divine<sup>217</sup>. Many men who could be patrons were drawn to accept financial responsibility for a *dasi* simply because it allowed them access to a group of women who were entirely denied to other men. There was a lot of prestige in having connections to the most beautiful and talented of devadasis. Among the patrons rivalries developed, as men struggled to continuously one up their peers<sup>218</sup>. Many saw themselves as art collectors, purveyors of exquisite and cultured objects. They were connoisseurs of all things beautiful.

The years at the gurukulam had been generous to Padma and she had grown into a pretty, tall, slender dancer. However, although the plainness that had plagued her as a child was now transformed into a pleasant and gentle attractiveness, she lacked the qualities of striking beauty that other *dasis* such as Uma possessed. Vivacious and gorgeous, Uma enjoyed the attentions of several patrons. She had only just completed training in the year Padma left for the gurukulam, and even then Padma recalled how many men had vied for her affections, each increasing the patronage offers of the others. When Minakshi had seen the possible wealth her adopted daughter's beauty might afford her, she recommended to Uma that she accept only short-term patronage appointments rather than a steady partner for life. Uma, eager to please her mother and thrilled by the amount of attention that was being thrown at her, entered into a long series of short-term arrangements with men. Despite the fact that many *dasis*, such as Padma, now had trouble finding patrons, there was always a line-up of men waiting to take Uma by the hand. The movements of reform that swept through the South and the increasing violence and climate of uncertainty made many men think twice about engaging a *dasi*. Better to keep the money at home, they thought, just in case the worst comes to pass. Talk of Independence raged across the country, and the possibility of an India without direction made everyone nervous about their future.

It was in this climate of uncertainty and increasing hostility that Padma sought her patron. The days following her marriage turned to weeks and then to months. Gauri ensured that Padma was the key figure dancing in the pujas during that time, something which infuriated Minakshi immensely. Although Uma still had more attention than she could handle, Minakshi resented the possibility that Padma, whom she had belittled since she was a child, should be given precedence over her own daughter, Uma. Disagreements became heated, and intense arguments fractured the fragile serenity of the *cinnaveedu*. Minakshi's

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<sup>216</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1870

<sup>217</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1870

<sup>218</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1870

complaint that the Taikkizhavi was showing favoritism fell on deaf ears; everyone in the household understood the need for Padma to be seen so that she could find a patron, including Uma. When this line of argument failed to win support, Minakshi attacked Gauri's character and age, spreading rumors about her senility and her unsuitability as a Taikkizhavi. A new 'old mother' needed to be chosen, she complained, one whose mind wasn't cluttered with craziness.

Through all these arguments Gauri remained unmoved. Padma continued to be given center stage and tensions in the cinnaveedu simmered ever closer to the boiling point. And then, quite suddenly, the problem resolved itself in a most unexpected way. Uma, who had already suspected for some time that she was pregnant, made the announcement public and elected to temporarily step down from the stage. Minakshi was furious with everyone, especially her daughter. In some strange way she felt that Uma had done this to her deliberately. Always friendly and eager to avoid conflict, Uma may well have asked Vishnu for a child. Like a wounded tiger, Minakshi crawled back into her own corner of the cinnaveedu, snarling and licking her wounded pride. None of the other dancers complained of Padma's preferential treatment. Although times were hard on all of them, they loved Padma, she was one of their own. Everyone wanted to see her succeed and everyone understood how necessary a patron was for a dancer in her early years.

Finally, as the brief and blossoming spring yielded up the last remembrances of winter to the onslaught of the humid summer heat, Padma's patron presented himself. It was no youthful and muscular Rama, nor an amorous Krishna who arrived to ask for Padma's favours. Instead Mr. N. Iyer was a short round man, showing signs of baldness though he was only in his late thirties. The other girls in the cinnaveedu gossiped about his appearance, his lack of sexual appeal, his boyish uncertainty and naiveté. Mr. N. Iyer belonged to a lower level of the upper Brahmin caste. Men who were low caste, Muslims or Christians were strictly forbidden to be patrons<sup>219</sup>. The priests discussed the suitability of Padma's admirer for the position, but Mr. N. Iyer's wealth, earned through highly successful trading ventures between Delhi and Madras, persuaded any last doubters. He was a gentle mannered man, with a young wife and a new baby son. A lover of the arts since childhood, Mr. N. Iyer had always dreamed of the day when he might be able to sponsor a devadasi, to claim a little part of the beauty brought into the world by their art for his own. He wasn't interested in the prestige of ownership as so many of the men who vied for Uma's affections were. His was a love of all things belonging to India. He cherished the great epics, spending hours in book and art stores collecting and admiring the beauty and history produced by his country.

When she was first introduced to her new patron, Padma could see these things in his eyes, his love of art and of India. His passions were things that she shared and understood. Suddenly the prospect of one day sharing a bed with her patron didn't seem so frightening. Although the other girls twittered and

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<sup>219</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1869

gossiped about his appearance and his suitability to be a patron, Padma was secretly very relieved and happy about the man who had stepped forward. Gauri, as the Taikkizhavi and a direct member of Padma's family line, made the negotiations final and the money began to pour into the cinnaveedu in the form of lavish gifts. Kamala was very relieved by the generosity of Padma's new patron. The costs of hosting so many of Padma's public dance performances to attract the attention of possible patrons had depleted Gauri's supply of emergency money drastically. Kamala, although she was never permitted to see how much Gauri had hidden in the cinnaveedu, could tell by looking at her mother that the financial strains of hosting so many concerts was beginning to show. If these stresses were actually visible in Gauri's face, Kamala understood that they must have been very severe indeed.

Padma's patron sponsored many dance concerts in the late spring of 1925, but when the heat of summer arrived in full force, few pujas were performed and the dance community took a brief but well-deserved rest. The extensive daily rituals and offerings continued, but they were more than enough to keep the dasis in the cinnaveedu busy. The time for public gatherings was over for a few months. The onslaught of the summer heat was staggering by midday. Few people could be out in it for very long without feeling faint, their bodies gushing sweat in an effort to cool their blistering skin. Padma pitied the heavy laborers at this time of year. Much of the work was done at night when the blazing sun hid its scalding rays and evening arrived, cooling the sizzling air to a pleasant baking heat. Nobody was ever cold after summer arrived, no matter where they stood or what time of day it was. Only those plagued by fever ever felt a chill pass through their flesh, and even then it was nothing more than the last desperate attempt their bodies made to wrest control away from the raging heat and restore calm to their steaming internal organs.

Padma had met her new patron on several occasions and had enjoyed many conversations about art and Indian history. Although Mr. N. Iyer was aware that all dasis received an education denied to most women, he was amazed by the depth of Padma's insight into subjects he hadn't expected her to understand. Her grasp of finance, for one, both surprised and delighted him. He found himself able to talk to her about his business decisions and she would listen attentively, often offering useful observations and comments. His own wife, though beautiful and eager to please him, had never been interested in his affairs, claiming that such things were the business of men in public places and that he should keep his concerns out of her house. His wife wanted to talk about their son and possible vacations. Politics and business didn't interest her. Padma, on the other hand, was fascinated by things to do with the public face of India. Her knowledge of the finances at work in the temple and her broad education put her in a position to understand what Mr. N. Iyer was talking about, something denied to his own wife. The friendship between the patron and his dasi flourished through the long hot summer, when conversation was far more appropriate to the season than desires of the body.

Summer finally faced to the torrential rains and savage storms of the monsoon. A wall of heat slammed up against a wall of water, each struggling for superiority. The battle of the march of seasons laid waste to the South, bringing floods, storms and sickness wherever it touched the land. Trees snapped like twigs in the massive storms that came with the monsoons and the lungs of children filled with fluid, drowning them just as the countryside was being drowned by the raging weather and rising seas. Through this time of darkness, Padma hid herself in the temple, counting down the days until the Dipavali festival which would mark the arrival of early autumn, the victory of Vishnu, in the form of Krishna, and a time of seasonal peace. By the time of Padma's fifteenth birthday, the gentle preserver god would shine his light on his children, marking the turning point in the battle between gods and demons<sup>220</sup>, the time of celebrations and the arrival of early autumn.

Dipavali eventually arrived and with it, the desires of the body were wakened as the heat and the storms that had ravaged the country subsided. During this season of celebration, Padma came to know her patron for the first time. Now fifteen and expecting to be shy and nervous, Padma surprised herself with her own confidence, taking Mr. N. Iyer by the hand as an experienced dasi would and showing him the way down the corridor to the place where they would come together for the first time. In the flickering lamp light, Padma noticed only his eyes, Krishna eyes, eyes of the divine lover. She wasn't aware of his fleshy rolls, his balding head, only the soft touch of his warmth against her. She felt love welling up inside her, merging with the darkness and mystery of the shadows surrounding the two entwined. There in the deeper and indescribable wonder of love, Vishnu was waiting for her, taking her into his arms and into his heart, swallowing them both into the divine unknowable.

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<sup>220</sup>The change in seasonal cycles was believed to have occurred because of the battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Unlike the West, where summer is seen as a time when the gods were winning, summer and the monsoon season in India marked a time when the gods were losing their battle against the demons. Only at the time of new year, Dipavali, does the struggle begin to turn in favour of the gods, and therefore humanity enjoys more hospitable seasons. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:103-104)

**Chapter 7**  
**The Bodies of Women**  
**Cinnaveedu, Spring 1930**

The years marched on, bringing with them many changes for the devadasis and the temple. Although Padma enjoyed the support of her new patron, many shrines in the Madras area were forced, through lack of financial support, to encourage their devadasis to turn to men of non-Brahmin castes for a handful of rupees to give to the priests and the temple kitchens<sup>221</sup>. Prostitution became increasingly apparent, fulfilling the discrediting reports propagated by reform groups that the dancers gave themselves to anyone on the steps of the temple. The devadasis had fallen far from the days when princes and kings would shower them with strands of pearls, and men of the cities would bow their heads as the devadasis passed, unwilling to look enviously on wives of the god. Now the temple dancers were associated with the alamkaradasis, the prostitutes who entertained anyone who paid them. Gone were the days when the devadasis could claim close ties to the rajadasis, dancers of the royal court.

The British, although less active in the campaign against the devadasis than they were in other reform movements, used the image of the helpless Hindu woman for their own political advantage<sup>222</sup>. If a temple dancer was being victimized at the hands of a corrupt Hindu society, then missionaries and reformers were justified in taking action to rescue these women in need of assistance<sup>223</sup>. This moral reasoning gave the British an excuse to take over everything from the court of the king to the small temples where communities met and enjoyed dance concerts and festivals. In their efforts to perform a rescue of all Hindu women, the British found it necessary to construct an image of the devadasis that was vastly inaccurate<sup>224</sup>.

It was not only the devadasis who found themselves portrayed as hapless, powerless victims in British moral campaigns. Temple dancers who were portrayed as prostitutes<sup>225</sup> found themselves placed in the same negative picture as child brides who had been widowed, women who were forced to commit sati (suicide on their husband's funeral pyre), brides who were murdered after heavy dowries had broken their families, and women of all castes who were denied education and a public life<sup>226</sup>. Although the British and Hindu campaigns against many of these things resulted in better living conditions for women, in the case of the devadasis, the results could hardly have been worse.

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<sup>221</sup>Except for specifically noted cases, all details of the following rise of protests, including tactics, dates and participants involved can be found in the article Reform and Revival (Srinivasan 1985:1873-1875)

<sup>222</sup>Orr 2000:14

<sup>223</sup>Orr 2000:11-14

<sup>224</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1873

<sup>225</sup>"Recent studies by Marglin, Kersenboom-Story, and others have for the most part rejected the idea that prostitution and ritualized sex were features of the lives of temple women." (Orr 2000:17)

<sup>226</sup>Forbes 1996:16-18



Ignorance and deliberate misrepresentation of the temple dancers<sup>227</sup> resulted in their classification as women who were in need of protection and salvation. However, unlike many of the other women who suffered greatly in India at the time, the majority of devadasis had, up until recently, fared quite well. They enjoyed many rights such as access to education, a guaranteed living space and land rights, food from the temple kitchens, public respect and the ability to choose their own sexual partners<sup>228</sup>. Although some devadasis still found their lives difficult and abuses did occur, these rights put the dancers in a position of high power in their own communities. Above all, their position as wives who could never be widowed ensured that they would always be welcome in their society as women of auspiciousness and favour.

The British campaign to make victims of these independent and powerful women did countless amounts of damage, not only to the tradition of temple dancing, but to the lives of generations of women to come. Although much of this may have been caused by a colonial blindness towards 'subjects' who practiced different moral codes, the effect was the same. The devadasis were labeled as prostitutes and widely attacked in the media and in their communities. As a result, they eventually were forced to become exactly what British reformers and missionaries had made them out to be, desperate women who prostituted themselves at the temples and fell victim to the whims and abuses of a patriarchy that placed them in a situation of limited choices and little local support.

However, despite the British smear campaign against the dancers, the dasis could not have come to harm if it had not been for the willingness of men in their own families and temples to support the ideas of the British. Many men of the Hindu community saw great advantages in tearing down the devadasi system, discrediting the dancers and their moral position. Priests and musicians, sons and brothers, had nursed their jealousies for many years. Because of the opposition against the dancers, more and more cinnaveedus were coming to resemble gurukulams in their size and gender dynamics. Cinnaveedus saw few or no daughters adopted, and as a result the men of the households found that they suddenly held positions of greater power.

In the late 1920s, a group calling itself the non-Brahmin Justice Party came to the foreground and forever changed the position of devadasis in the temple. The non-Brahmin Justice Party was made up of men from the lower and middle classes who sought to tear down many of the injustices of the caste system. However, in the case of the devadasis, what looked like charitable assistance on their behalf soon became an obvious and successful attempt to win power away from the temple dancers and place it in the hands of men such as Sundaram.

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<sup>227</sup>Many of the devadasis... refused to be labeled prostitutes and resisted the reformers' overtures." (Forbes 1996:182)

<sup>228</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1871-72

The party lobbied extensively to protect the service benefits of the dasis and their families. They argued that the dancers, as bonded slaves of the temple, were entitled to outright ownership of the lands in they lived on. The party achieved significant success and the Madras Act of 1929 was passed<sup>229</sup>. The Act, which gave the temple families ownership over the lands that had previously been in the name of the temple, sent men scrambling to assert normal rules of inheritance over the original devadasi tradition that daughters should be given preference in inheritance. Sundaram was only one example of this trend, arguing forcefully that half, if not all, of the gardens and the house should be his as he was one of two children that Gauri still had left. But Gauri would have none of it, refusing to see the temple grounds divided. In other towns, the temple grounds began to be torn apart, and the structure of the female dominated family units that had held the cinnaveedus together began to deteriorate rapidly. Although the dasis protested loudly and forcefully, they were no match for the rest of India. Little sympathy was given to them. In the eyes of the greater public they were prostitutes with land, independence and loose morals.

It was in this climate of uncertainty and decline that Padma was lucky enough to find a man with both money and kindness to spare. Padma and her patron enjoyed their time together, becoming close friends. Mr. N. Iyer was a man whose physical appearance was not what the world outside preferred to look at. Because of this, Padma found herself able to share with him her childhood memories and insecurities. His gentle but awkward sense of humour eased her mind, and she began, for the first time, to put the fears of her past behind her. She looked forward to a long and rewarding life partnered to a kind and loyal man, married to a benevolent god and back with her family in the cinnaveedu.

The years passed happily for Padma, despite everyone's growing concerns about the future of the temple system that provided for their welfare. Reform movements were sometimes extremely active, marching to the temple gates and demanding an end to the devadasis. At other times, topics of Independence and colonialism dominated public discussions and people looked to place blame on faces other than those of the temple dancers.

In the early spring of 1930, just after her nineteenth birthday, Padma became pregnant with her first child. Kamala was elated and Mr. N. Iyer, now the father of two sons and a daughter in his own home, was glad for Padma. It was good for her, he told her, to have some company in the times to come. It was always easier to take care of yourself when it mattered that you took care of someone else, he often told her.

Padma was overjoyed. She moved more carefully, frightened to disturb the child growing within her, terrified she might somehow damage it. It was as

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<sup>229</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1874

though Vishnu had placed a priceless statue in her belly, something so fragile and valuable that she hardly dared to breathe deeply for fear of disturbing it.

"It's not a crystal glass in there," Gauri would often bellow with laughter, slapping Padma so hard she almost knocked her over.

Padma would place both arms protectively across her stomach and then smile politely at her patti. She had no wish to offend Gauri by disagreeing, but her first and final concern was now for the new life growing inside her. It reminded her of the ritual seeds, *bija*, that were planted for festivals. The seedlings were buried in the earth, pushing green shoots out tenuously through the soil. The child in her womb was like the *ankura*<sup>230</sup>, a state in between, not yet a plant, and no longer just a seed.

Because of her condition, Padma had elected to give up dance for a time. Uma lent her support in this, remembering how her own pregnancy years earlier had avoided a split in the *cinnaveedu*. To everyone's surprise, Uma had born a son, not a daughter for the temple, a boy who was now two years old.

"It's the end of our days," Gauri would mutter to herself as she wandered through the *cinnaveedu*, her hair now completely white, her back bent with age.

"Even our wombs bring only sons," she commented in reference to Vimala and Sundaram's four sons and Uma's failure to bring forth a daughter. Only one of the dancers in the *cinnaveedu* had given birth to daughters in recent times, two girls one year after another. But two girls out of all the women in the household was a far cry from the bounty of children in older days.

"It's time you had some more babies, some more girls," Gauri would push Kamala, but Kamala refused. Since her patron's abandonment of her, she hadn't touched a man, refusing to revel in numerous lovers as Gauri had done in her youth.

Tensions between Kamala and Gauri were more frequent, escalating in even pace with the decline of the *devadasi* tradition. A year before Padma's pregnancy was announced, guru Madhavan had joined the growing number of dance trainers who had closed their schools to young aspiring *devadasis*. Gauri had been livid with rage and had cried betrayal when she heard of Madhavan's decision, swearing and cursing the son who had brought about the ruination of his father's dance school. Kamala, though also surprised by the news, sprang to defend Madhavan, arguing that times were changing and that he had no choice. He still showed his reverence of the *devadasi* tradition by closing the school rather than turning it over to train daughters of the upper class, Kamala argued. Gauri would have none of her daughter's persuasion, and from that time forward refused to speak with guru Madhavan. Word was sent by messenger that he was no longer welcome in the *cinnaveedu* and that as Padma had taken a

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<sup>230</sup>see footnotes 53, 54

temporary retirement during her pregnancy, his services would not be necessary for some time. Kamala was shocked when she heard the message Gauri had sent. She was convinced that such behaviour could only be a symptom of madness. No sane devadasi would ever consider addressing such a message to a guru, even if she was a powerful Taikkizhavi from a respected temple.

Padma was greatly saddened by her patti's response. She loved her guru. But Kamala explained that her patti's anger was only a reaction to a larger problem and that in time she would come to forgive and understand guru Madhavan's decision. Padma reluctantly agreed with her mother, and in her loneliness for the guru she missed greatly, Padma turned her attention to the other man in her life, her patron. Mr. N. Iyer and Padma spent a great deal of time together in the temple gardens, talking over the outside world and how the India that they both shared a great love for was changing beyond what anyone could have expected. Mr. N. Iyer noticed with pride how Padma's pregnancy brought her so much joy. The young woman seemed almost to glow with happiness.

Despite her temporary retirement from the stage, Padma was still welcome in her patron's home on special occasions<sup>231</sup> to perform all the expected tasks of a devadasi. Just shortly after she discovered her pregnancy, Padma was invited to bless the wedding of Mr. N Iyer's youngest sister who was marrying a doctor who had been trained in England. The man's education afforded him a great deal of prestige, however the costs involved in acquiring his degree had set his family deeply into debt. Mr. N. Iyer offered a generous dowry to the man's family and both parties eagerly agreed to the wedding.

Padma attended as an honoured guest. It was her role as nityasumangali, ever auspicious, to bless the wife-to-be so that she too would never have to suffer the hardships of widowhood<sup>232</sup>. Standing next to the bride, Padma recalled her own wedding day four years earlier. As she watched her patron's sister preparing, so young and innocent, Padma suddenly felt much older. In that instant it was as though she had said good-bye to her childhood, passed through the gates into an older, wiser Padma who looked on youth as though it was something else, something she wasn't anymore. Although she wasn't even twenty yet, Padma's pregnancy and a growing awareness of the politics alive in the outside world transformed her from a girl into a woman. Padma never noticed the change creeping over her, but as she stood staring at Mr. N. Iyer's sister, she knew that it had somehow come to pass.

After the ceremony, Padma feasted and celebrated with the other guests before returning home to the cinnaveedu. Although Mr. N. Iyer's family had a great love of the arts, the bridegroom's family considered themselves far more advanced because of the groom's English education and frowned on the presence of a devadasi at the house. But the bride refused to be denied her

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<sup>231</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1870

<sup>232</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1870

right to a proper blessing, arguing that it was, after all, in her husband's best interest that she not be widowed. His family had finally consented, but tension in the house was high and it tired Padma greatly. Although she looked strong and healthy, Padma's thin body was having difficulty with the pregnancy. It wore on her and the child growing in her womb devoured the food she put into her slender body until her flesh began to stretch thinly across her narrow bones. Padma hid her fatigue and weight loss under her sari, a garment that had come to resemble a loose tent far more than a dress.

There was a third reason why Padma was eager to leave her patron's home as soon as possible. Despite her fatigue and the tensions caused by the bridegroom's family, Padma also had difficulty confronting Mrs. N. Iyer, a woman not far from her own age. Having given birth to three children in recent years, Mrs. N. Iyer found that her figure was rounding out rapidly. She had ceased, between pregnancies, to lose the weight she gained with them, and her youthful feminine curves were soon lost under even larger feminine curves. Padma understood why the woman should resent her beauty and talent, but these were not the things that upset Mr. N. Iyer's wife. Many women were far more glad for their husbands to seek the favours of a devadasi than to bring a second wife into the house<sup>233</sup>. There was no state of competition between Padma and Mrs. N. Iyer; they inhabited completely separate worlds. It was not because of Mr. N. Iyer's physical attraction to Padma that his wife resented her, but because of her education.

In Mrs. N. Iyer's mind, a woman had no business going about learning things that belonged in a man's world. Education, for one, was top of her list and finances were not far behind. Padma's possession of knowledge in both of these areas upset her, not because she wanted to deny Padma's access to these things (after all, she was a devadasi, not a wife), but because she couldn't understand her husband's response to them. She had always been raised to believe that a husband would resent a wife who meddled in his affairs, voicing her unwanted opinions on matters of public debate. She was brought up to believe that acquiescence, not argument, was what a man wanted in his wife. She recognized, in fact she told herself often, that she, not Padma, was Mr. N. Iyer's wife, his other half. Still, she couldn't deny the closeness she saw between them, their fluid conversation on topics she couldn't follow, their laughter at a joke concerning politics or Sanskrit words of wisdom dropped casually at the end of sentences. She had come to hate Padma's presence in her house, not because she disliked Padma in any way, but because she couldn't bear the thought that the husband she adored beyond all measure of comprehension

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<sup>233</sup>"As the wives of men who had maintained dancing women often said, they preferred a devadasi to a second wife as a rival as the latter would make domestic life intolerable. Even amongst some non-Brahmin groups where the devadasi could assume the status of a common law wife of her patron, she never resided with him." Thus, the first wife of a patron was not threatened with the possibility of having to share her home with a second woman. In general, visits to the devadasi were few compared with the amount of time a patron spent in his own home. Because of this wives were often very friendly towards the dasis, as no state of competition existed between them. (Srinivasan 1985:1870)

could love someone else more than her. Mrs. N. Iyer was never unkind or rude to Padma in any way, but between women these things often don't need to be said and Padma felt her pain without really understanding the cause of it. Because she knew the feelings of her patron's wife, Padma left the wedding reception early, despite Mr. N. Iyer's pleadings that she should really stay to discuss the Madras Act with the other gentlemen in the next room.

As the cart pulled into the temple courtyard, Padma found herself nearly asleep. She felt exhausted, deep down tired as though her bones were beginning to fuse into place, never to move again. Cradling her belly protectively, Padma stepped down from the cart only to trip on the end of her sari and fall to the ground. The driver, knowing her shouldn't touch her to help her up, hovered close by, calling to the temple for help. It was Minakshi, of all women, who happened to hear his cry. Seeing Padma on the ground, she rushed into the courtyard and helped her up. Minakshi paid the driver and sent him on his way, supporting Padma's weight as she tried to walk.

Padma, dizzy and in pain, found herself bent over the mud bricks vomiting up the food from the wedding reception. Minakshi held her, smoothing her hair and keeping Padma's sari out of the way. When she was finished, Minakshi kicked some loose dirt and crumbled brick over the spot, determined not to attract attention to Padma's sickness in the temple grounds. Gently and silently she helped Padma into the house, leaving her in her room with a cup of water and a damp towel. Although Minakshi had never liked Padma and resented her for her family lineage, something deep down inside her made her take pity on the poor girl in the courtyard. Having never been able to bear children of her own, somewhere in her body she knew how fragile and how in need of protection Padma was. She felt Padma's fear for the child, her desperate need to sacrifice her own body to ensure its survival. Minakshi understood this pain, this all consuming urgency. For the first time in her life, she went to the temple to pray before Vishnu for Padma's safety and well-being.

The year turned and the gentleness of spring gave way to the intensifying heat of summer. Padma's pregnancy was coming along and a soft bulge was now visible under the folds of her sari. Mr. N. Iyer came to visit often, but because of her condition, he only enjoyed Padma's conversation, always leaving her with generous gifts and kinds words of encouragement. In the long heat, time slowed down, dragging its heavy body through the thick air, one slow step after another, and so the days passed. Among the women there was a growing concern for Padma's health. Her slender frame became skinny and bony, bringing to mind the picture of Padma as a child. No matter how much she ate, the bulge in her stomach grew and she shrank, the child inside devouring her from within.

Despite her condition, Padma's spirits remained high. She was thrilled by her pregnancy, by the thought of having a daughter to raise, inside or outside the temple, she didn't care. She spent long hours sitting in a hanging chair in the shade of the garden imagining herself telling her young daughter the stories her

mother and grandmother had told her. The daydreams drove the blistering heat away from her, and although angry tempers and protests in Madras province escalated with the mercury in the thermometer, the breeze continued to blow around Padma's body, filled with the breath of dreams waiting to be born.

The concern and special attention directed at Padma infuriated Sundaram, clouding his judgment. After the Madras Act of 1929<sup>234</sup>, granting the devadasis the lands they currently occupied, Sundaram had seen his chance to make a move into better prospects. Gambling debts weighted heavily on his mind and with all the extra costs involved in putting together dance performances now that patronage was down, Gauri had refused to pay her son's irresponsible debts. He had argued with his mother that he wanted nothing more than what was his, to have half the house and the gardens to do with as he pleased. Much to Sundaram's frustration, Gauri understood exactly what it was Sundaram wanted the land for and refused to give her son an inheritance that he would squander on women and gambling. The land, she argued, had been in the family's possession for hundreds of years. Because it would continue to be in the family's possession, he was entitled to use it any time he pleased, and if he was planning on removing himself from the family, then he wouldn't enjoy the rights of inheritance seeing as how he would no longer be part of the cinnaveedu. The logic of this infuriated Sundaram to the point of speechlessness. He waited, his insides souring in the vinegar of hatred and ambition, biding his time until he could almost taste the freedom of exacting power over others, freedom in dominance.

Summer roared forward like the furnace of a boiler room and it wasn't long before the climate of reform afforded Sundaram an opportunity to get his revenge on Gauri. Tempers flared in the town outside of the main city of Madras where the Act of 1929 had sparked heated public debates on property rights and renewed marches to the homes of patrons. Men clamored to claim their share of the wealth and power the dancers clung to precariously now that their protection from the temple was diminishing. Priests, angered by the movements of non-Brahmin political parties and the Act that had seen temple lands distributed

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<sup>234</sup>The Madras Act of 1929 was felt in force by 1930. It was not, in fact, the devadasis who had lobbied for land rights. They did not widely participate in public politics and were very content with the system as it had existed for hundreds of years. It was, in actuality, men of the middle and lower classes who were connected with the temple who most sought to bring in the Act. Because the Act dictated that the lands should follow all regulations for slave-bond land, the dasis immediately gained possession of the lands. This ownership, however, was short-lived. Land which no longer followed temple regulations of ownership was mandated by normative Hindu standards of inheritance, namely that men inherited the bulk share, if not all the land and property. This Act was hugely successful in not only creating friction between the dasis and the community, but also in serving to disenfranchise the dasis from their rights to land and property. The Act also enraged the Brahmins who, although they owned their own land, suddenly found themselves in a state of competition with the dasis over property dominance in the community. Brahmin priests were especially upset by the Act, arguing that the dasis could no longer claim the need to be protected under their service agreement to the temple because they now effectively owned much of the lands that had once belonged to the shrine. (Srinivasan 1985:1872-74)

amongst its servants, refused to aid the dasis in their struggle to hold onto their place in society.

In Padma's town, Sundaram found himself at the center of the debate. Conversations amongst his musician friends resulted in his group's alliance with reform parties trying to tear down the devadasis. Dance revivalist groups, a rival branch of reform, argued that the art should be salvaged and transferred to the daughters of the upper class so that it could be saved. But Sundaram wasn't interested in preserving the art of dance, only in promoting the art of music. Already he found himself welcome in the homes of many who had turned their backs on the devadasis. Kamala's old patron had hired him to play on numerous occasions at parties and festivals. The two men disliked each other strongly, but somehow each seemed to feel that they were managing to inflict some minor violence on Kamala by their mutual association, a boys' club which excluded her and her art.

Public debates and marches continued until one day, much to Sundaram's delight, violence began to break out in the market near the temple. A group of reformers had come up against some old Hindu men talking about the possibility of Independence. This discussion rapidly led to talk of Hindu values and the golden age of India. Although everyone agreed that India was the best country on earth, arguments ensued about how best to restore India to its state of former glory. The old men grew agitated and stood, the reformers put their faces in too close to the old men. Someone pushed someone else and soon a small riot was underway in the market. Fearing that his fruit would be smashed in the fight, a burly shop owner and his sons broke up the dispute, sending the old men off on their own and leaving the musicians and reformers burning with anger in the street. Their rage was fueled but the object of their attack, the old men, had been removed, and Sundaram saw a rare opportunity to control the situation in his favour. He called out to the men about how low Hindu morals had fallen, about the opulence and riches enjoyed by the temple prostitutes, about how their loose behaviour in the temple was bringing ill-luck on them all. The men, turning their anger towards a new target, a new victim, stormed towards the temple, intent on vengeance for wrongs, real or imagined.

The fight in the market had drawn quite a crowd and Sundaram's words excited the onlookers into joining the group of reformers. The long heat of summer had seen too much talk and too little action; the people of the town had fed their anger without knowing what it was that angered them. Sundaram's speech and the climate of the mob made people feel safe, as though they could become a nameless face, venting their rage and their heat without consequences, without needing to take responsibility for the things their hands might do.

Sundaram, having incited the crowd to violence, carefully removed himself from the front of the group. The people marched down the road to the temple, burning with a rage they didn't understand, intent on creating some form of destruction to vent their anger. Sundaram marched alongside, silent in a



cheering, chanting mob of men from different castes and professions. He smiled as the group approached the temple gates, pushing against them, crushing the bodies of those at the front into the images of Laksmi and Vishnu carved on the outside of the great doors. The temple wasn't normally closed at this time of day, and Sundaram sensed that word of the riot in the market had reached the nervous priests.

The mob crushed forward, rocking against the gates. Suddenly the huge doors swung open. In their rush to secure the perimeter of the temple, the priests had failed to latch the gates properly, and stampeding men now flooded into the mud brick courtyard. The crowd burst in on a surprised Vimala, who was carrying the washing across the yard from the drying area back to the cinnaveedu<sup>235</sup>.

"A dasi!" shouted the mob with one voice. "After her!"

With that dozens of men ran forward, grabbing Vimala's arms and legs and lifting her between them. Blows rained down on her helpless body as she screamed and cried for mercy. Sundaram, a terrified look on his face, realized who it was that was in the courtyard and struggled forward to help his wife. Despite all his mischief, Sundaram never expected the mob he had set upon the temple to get inside, much less to find anyone within. He pushed himself forward through the crushing jungle of arms and bodies. Men rained down punches in Vimala's direction, most striking other men close to them. Men turned to fight each other, losing their prize in the barrage of fists and teeth.

Sundaram struggled forward, ignoring the blows to his face and body. He moved to the place where the men were the densest, packed and heaped upon each other like fruit in a market stall. In that moment Gauri appeared, flinging open the door of the temple. She had seen the men take Vimala, had watched her son's look of satisfaction turn to one of horror and fear. It was as though a nightmare had been unleashed on the temple, one that belonged in the world of terrible dreams, not waking reality. Gauri stood with her arms wide, and bellowed at the raging mob in the courtyard.

"Stop! I command you! Stop!"

Gauri's raging fire was like a white heat blazing on the steps of the temple. But the men took no notice of her. They pushed her down with their brawling; her words had no effect. Gauri looked stunned. The light emanating from her body flickered and went out. She collapsed onto the stone steps, her face frozen in disbelief.

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<sup>235</sup>Although I have found no instance of singular violence to a devadasi, riots and violence were found in communities across India during this time because of the heated debates about Independence and partition. Although partition wasn't as much of an issue in the South as it was in the North, the idea of a divided India still caused a great deal of friction in public debates.

Sundaram spotted a square of bright red cloth on the ground. He bent forward, hoping to find that it belonged to his wife and was then horrified to discover that it did. The fabric of her once yellow sari was stained with her blood, blood that was still flowing freely from cuts all over her body. The men around her trampled her as they fought each other, and Sundaram struggled to create enough free space to lift her body. Half-lifting, half-dragging her, Sundaram finally was able to free his wife from the crowd and carry her up the steps of the temple, past a stunned and silent Gauri into the place of sanctuary beyond.

Padma, roused from her place of dreaming in the garden by the shouts and thumping at the gates, watched the terrifying scene from the window of the cinnaveedu. Uma stood beside her, weeping and tearing the pale skin on her hands with her nails as she saw Vimala disappear under the fists of the rioting men. Padma watched Gauri's valiant appearance and was stunned, as Gauri was, that her fire and fury had no effect. In that moment Padma felt a great pain in her stomach. She gasped and grabbed for the child in her womb.

"He's got her! Sundaram's got her!" Uma shrieked with the fear of someone who doesn't know if what they've just learned is something they want to know. She whirled and raced down the back steps of the cinnaveedu towards the temple. Padma followed slowly down the staircase.

Vimala lay on the floor of the temple, soaking the stones with the sacrilege of spilt human blood. Sundaram crouched over her, rocking himself back and forth, muttering and wringing his hands together. Uma ran straight to Vimala and tried to use the end of her sari to mop up the blood on her friend's face. One of her eyes was completely swollen shut, the eyebrow above it split down the middle and bleeding profusely down the side of Vimala's face. Her nose was broken and her lower lip was also split. When she opened her mouth to murmur something, Padma noticed that several of her front teeth were missing or broken.

Gauri had entered the temple and stood silently over the woman on the floor, assessing her injuries. Welts and thick bruises were already swelling on her arms and chest. Gauri wondered at the severity of her internal injuries. She doubted the girl would survive. As she stood there watching Vimala, she suddenly became aware of Sundaram, rocking and holding his wife's hand, trying in vain to wipe the blood and dirt off it, only managing to smear it across his own hands. Sundaram too had sustained quite a beating in his efforts to reach Vimala in the mob, but Gauri had no pity for his injuries.

"Viper!" she cursed at her son. "See what your hatred and greed have brought to our home!"

Sundaram, a stunned look of disbelief still frozen on his face, had no reply for his mother. He simply stared blankly, first at her and then at his wife again. Vimala, her lips swollen and caked with drying blood, was trying to speak.

Everyone leaned closer to hear what she wanted to say. Vimala raised a weak hand up towards Sundaram, looking at him out of her one good eye.

"Sundaram," she murmured weakly, stretching a bloody hand towards her husband, "you've saved me."

As soon as she heard Vimala's words, Gauri turned and stormed out of the temple, the end of her grey sari sweeping out behind her like the cape of a raging king marching into battle. Padma watched her go, fearing what her grandmother might do. Padma and Uma were too concerned about their friend to place blame on anyone, but Gauri's head was clear and her response to Sundaram's actions was swift and mighty. Vimala's words had broken her heart. She was like another daughter to Gauri, and the pain of watching her all-forgiving love of the man who had done this to her was too much for Gauri's sense of greater justice.

Women were coming in from the cinnaveedu through the doors as Gauri exited the temple. Word of the riot spread quickly through the house and soon the priests and dasis were gathered around Vimala. Having lost so much blood, she had fallen unconscious and the concerned priests stood over her, some performing healing rituals and some performing cleansing rituals to counter the negative energies unleashed by the violence and spilt blood on the temple grounds.

Within a few minutes Gauri returned to the temple, and she was not alone. In her arms she carried Vimala's youngest son, and in front of her she ushered forward the older three boys. When the children realized who it was on the floor, they cried out and ran to their mother. The youngest child cried and hid his head in Gauri's shoulder. But Gauri was not concerned about her grandchildren, the boys she had told stories too and held when they were babies. In her righteous anger, she only had eyes for the young woman bleeding to death on the floor of the temple. The children crowded around their mother, despite the priests' efforts to hold them back. Sundaram still sat, stunned and silent on the floor next to his wife. Gauri's rage was tremendous. Dasis and priests fell back at the sight of her. The golden one now resembled an incarnation of Kali, so deep was her fury and pain.

Gauri marched straight towards Sundaram where he sat and shoved him over hard. Her son, not expecting such a response, found himself off balance and fell backward. Gauri was relentless, pushing him again and again towards the doors of the temple leading out to the street. Sundaram reeled and spun, unable to regain his balance, confused by the nightmare that had somehow become his reality. When the mother and son reached the doors, Gauri shoved Sundaram down the last three stairs and out into the now deserted courtyard. Then she ran back to Vimala, grabbing her sons by the backs of their shirts and their hair. She forced the boys, weeping in pain and confusion, out the temple doors, tossing them down the stairs after their father. Only with the youngest child was she more gentle, putting him down to crawl the steps by himself. The

priests and dasis in the room were shocked and terrified by Gauri's response. Few understood Sundaram's role in the riots, and the violence of Gauri's emotions and actions stunned them all, men and women.

"You are no son of mine!" Gauri shouted down the stairs, her voice cracking with grief and rage. "You are a snake, a demon who crawled into this house on his belly, poisoning everyone inside with your venom!"

"Here! This is what you've wanted for so long, what you traded your wife's life for! May it bring you as much joy as it has brought her!"

With that Gauri tossed a cloth bag down the stairs. Then, turning on her heel, she swept out of the temple and was gone into the gardens, the distraught household staring after her in shocked silence. Sundaram caught the bundle Gauri had thrown but one corner of the cloth sprang free and a single gold coin rolled out across the courtyard. Sundaram stared down at the bundle in his arms. Gold. Gold enough to pay his debts, jewelry enough to afford a house, possibly even a servant of his own. Suddenly he was sickened by the truth of Gauri's words, that he had traded the life of the only person who had ever been unquestioningly devoted to him for what was now in his arms. He dropped the bag as though it burned his hands. Around him his sons were crying. He stared at them, trying to comprehend their pain, their confusion. Finally the severity of the situation, the full reality of what had transpired, penetrated his stunned and somersaulting mind. In what was probably the first fatherly thing he had ever done, Sundaram stood, picked his sons and the gold up off the ground and walked out of the temple gates. In his arms he carried his youngest child and the bundle of treasure Gauri had burdened him with. He gave words of comfort to the older boys, putting aside his own grief for later to meet the needs of their pain at the present moment.

It took only a few seconds of silence in the temple before the head priest was giving orders to the crowd. Vimala would have to be moved out of the temple immediately and into the cinnaveedu. Priests were sent running for ritual objects of cleansing and the dasis were ushered out of the room to make way for the ceremonies that now needed to be performed. The shock of what had happened consumed everyone; only Uma cried freely, weeping into Padma's thin, bony shoulder. Padma put her arm around Uma, trying to shield her from the pain surging inside her body. Vimala, still breathing faintly and moaning occasionally, was carried by other women of the kitchen to a large room on the main floor of Minakshi's house. There the women set up a constant vigil around her, cleaning her wounds and rubbing her limbs. Despite the heat, Vimala's body was cool to the touch, and everyone took turns trying to massage some warmth back into her swollen and bruised arms and legs.

Only Gauri was absent from the cinnaveedu that night. After her display in the temple, nobody had been able to find her. However, because of her wrath, nobody really looked very hard for her, afraid that they may in fact find the old woman still raging with otherworldly fury. Night eventually descended on the

temple and its grounds, but sleep did not come with it. The members of the household lay awake, trapped by the feeling that they had experienced a nightmare, one that still waited to confront them, not in sleep, but with the rising of the next dawn.

**Chapter 8**  
**Divine Beloved**  
**Cinnaveedu, Late Summer 1930**

Padma woke in the night, startled by the terror of an event that she couldn't quite remember. She lay in the darkness, listening to the faint sound of priests conducting rituals in the temple.

'That's odd,' she thought to herself. 'Why are they chanting at this time of night?' Then the events of the day came flooding back to her.

Padma felt a deep sadness in her body but found, to her surprise, that she couldn't cry. Instead she got up and, wrapping a thin shawl across her shoulders to cover her sleeping dress, she left her room and made her way down to the gardens. The night above her was black. Clouds had come in to cover the sky, blocking out the starlight and a thin wedge of the moon that was yet to be eaten by the darkness before growing again.

Something in Padma's mind made her want to stay indoors, out of the garden, but her own room was lonely and her house was empty. Gauri hadn't returned and nobody had seen her since the events of the afternoon. Kamala was in Minakshi's room, the two mothers trying together to save Vimala's life. Padma avoided the unlit gardens, fearing their shadows and the uncertainty of the world that their darkness represented. Instead she walked down the row of houses attached together that formed the compound of the cinnaveedu. Lamplight flooded out onto the stones of the temple path from the glassless windows in the mud brick buildings. There were far too many lamps burning in the middle of the night for people to be sleeping, but their golden glow made Padma feel more at ease. She walked softly past the open doorway of Minakshi's house. Inside she could see her amma wiping Vimala's arms with a damp cloth, the water leaving her brown skin glistening in the lamplight. Under the shine of the water, Padma noticed the round marks of blue and purple bruises made by angry fists. Kamala and Minakshi were very busy. In their concern for their patient they didn't notice Padma looking in through the doorway. She watched them for a moment, reassured by their confident movements, their gentle concern.

For some reason Padma didn't want to be noticed by Minakshi and her mother. Although her visit would have been welcome, she didn't want to interrupt what appeared to be a woman's ritual of love and caring. Everything about how they moved spoke to Padma of a deeper struggle, one that was not to be disrupted. Kamala and Minakshi were wrestling with forces greater than they were for the life of the woman in their care. Padma felt the need to not disturb their concentration in case, in that instant, Vimala's life was snatched from their grasp.

Leaving her amma to tend to Vimala, Padma wandered slowly down the path, caught in what felt like the timeless, spaceless season of a dream. The

horrors of the day were not as sharp in her mind anymore. Padma was reassured by the fact that although Vimala was struggling for survival, she was at least still alive right now. Somewhere inside her, Padma felt a great relief, a sense of safety knowing that Sundaram was no longer in the house. Although the man she had seen leaving was more like a confused and broken child than the person who had terrorized her youth, Padma was still glad he was gone. Her mind turned to thoughts of the couple's children. Instinctively her hands wrapped protectively around her own enlarged stomach where the mystery of life was growing inside her. She felt that Vimala would want their children near her in such a hard time, but she also understood Gauri's rage. She wondered if Gauri's response would have been the same if Vimala and Sundaram had daughters instead of sons. Padma doubted it. Her patti's wrath seemed to be directed at Sundaram because he was a man, in the same way that Sundaram had hated and harassed Padma as a child because she was a girl.

Wondering about the rift that had ripped through her home, Padma found herself at the entrance to the temple. The corridors stretched out before her, some to the kitchens, the cinnaveedu and one to the room where the main idol was housed. Padma chose this one, feeling the need to be close to her husband, to look on his lotus eyes and be comforted. She navigated her way through the dimly lit corridor, one hand tracing the rough mud wall to guide her path. As her fingers ran across its brittle, crumbling surface, Padma noticed how warm the wall was in the summer night air. It was as though she was wandering down the throat of the god, swallowed deeper and deeper into the living body of the temple.

Padma arrived at the end of the corridor, but paused before entering the room that had been the scene of so much pain and violence only a few hours before. As she stood in the doorway looking at the statue of Vishnu resting in the room, Padma noticed that the priests had scrubbed the floor where Vimala had lain, and cleansed the temple with rituals and incense. The smell of sandalwood was strong in the main room where Vishnu sat, overseeing his home and its occupants. In the inner sanctum, Padma could hear the priests performing more acts of cleansing. The chanting and rituals would likely continue all night, the following day and possibly into the next night. Padma was about to enter the room when she realized that there was already someone there. She stepped back into the shadows of the doorway, sensing that whoever it was wouldn't want to be disturbed. As she watched, Padma recognized that it was Gauri bent down on the floor before Vishnu.

Her patti was dressed in a clean white sari and in her hair she wore the decorations of a dasi giving a concert. Around her neck Padma could see the mango design necklace symbolizing immortality. Gauri's ankle bells jingled and tinkled softly as she stood and made the gesture of a flower offering with her hands. Then she began to dance before the statue of Vishnu.

Padma had never seen her grandmother dance before. Gauri had given her last public performance before Padma was born, retiring suddenly and

without explanation the year Kamala finished her dance training. As she watched her patti performing an offering of dance before the god, Padma began to understand why she was so revered among the other dancers, why the legends of concerts given in her youth were still talked about in the community.

Gauri seemed to miraculously shed her age as she moved through the temple, years slipping off her body with every step. She stood straighter, taller and her white hair seemed transformed in the lamplight to a glowing silvery golden glow, the exact color of which Padma could later neither describe nor accurately recall. The wrinkles on Gauri's body seemed to smooth over, giving her skin the appearance of a youthful golden brown tone. Padma stood, silent and transfixed by her grandmother's performance. Her skills reminded Padma of guru Madhavan's ability to shift the appearance of his gender, his trick of appearing as a woman. Gauri's feat of transformation amazed her, the old lady becoming before her eyes a youthful dasi offering herself to Vishnu. To Padma it almost seemed as though Gauri had shed her skin, discarding her old exterior to reveal a fresh new body underneath.

As Gauri danced, Padma became aware of the space in which she moved. Smoke tendrils of scorched sandalwood incense twined themselves into the air in the temple like ghostly fingers performing their own play of abhinaya against the ceiling. From the inner sanctum the sounds of chanting and drumming could be heard, muffled but insistent, as though echoing across time from another space, another world. Above Gauri, the eyes of Vishnu looked down into the stone room, staring into the blackness where Padma stood hidden. Around Gauri's body the light from the lamps seemed to bend and merge, creating the impression that the woman danced with her shadow as a partner, matching feet and hands together across the boundaries of light and darkness. Padma held her breath. The statue of Vishnu glowed in the lamplight, warming to Gauri's dance, bending in close to witness the yearning of the dancer's love for the divine. Gauri's earlier wrath and anger were gone. Padma saw nothing in her but the purity of an emotion of joy too great to be described and bound by language. It was as though Gauri had completely disappeared, leaving in her place a dancing flame, a fluid brightness closely resembling a woman's body.

Padma turned and left the doorway. The beauty of her grandmother's dance, her offering of love, filled Padma with an emotion so intense it overflowed her body, creating tears and laughter at the same time. The feeling consumed her, threatening to tear her apart from the inside, bursting to break through the confines of her skin. She felt as though she had dipped her fingers into the well of the divine and touched the waters of God.

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The sunlight of the following morning crept in through Padma's window, tickling the sleeping woman's nose and making her sneeze. Padma turned over and opened her eyes, feeling completely refreshed and full of joy. She felt sure that life was promising her a beautiful day.



As Padma carefully wrapped her green sari, the events of the previous afternoon began to surface in her mind, bringing doubts to her mind about whether or not she wanted to go down to meet the rest of the household. Vimala's uncertain condition clouded the sunny feeling she felt inside. However, soon her curiosity overcame her fear of hearing bad news. Padma wanted to know the truth, even if it hurt her.

As she made her way down the steps, Padma noticed Kamala sitting waiting for her. Her amma looked up at Padma, a young woman standing at the top of the stairs, one hand on the railing, the other arm cradled across her softly rounded belly. For a moment Kamala didn't really see her daughter; her unfocused gaze was turned inwards toward some hidden pain, some deep concern. Then Kamala's vision cleared and she stood to greet Padma, wrapping her arms tightly around her daughter as she came to the bottom of the steps. Padma burst into tears as her mother held her. The force of her amma's grief was so overwhelming that Padma's body responded to it instinctively. Her worries about Vimala were so strong that her mother's posture, the look in her eyes, confirmed Padma's worst fears about what the day might bring.

Kamala held her daughter as they cried together, searching for the words to give Padma the news. She knew her daughter was mistaken in her grief, that her sadness was for the passing of the wrong person. Much to everyone's surprise, Vimala had survived the night and was now lying awake in the cinnaveedu where Uma refused to be parted from her. Instead it was Gauri who had been found in the temple by the priests in the early hours of morning, her cold body stretched out before the statue of the god and around her neck the flower offering that had been given to Vishnu the day before. At first the priests had been scared to touch her, knowing the deity's strange fondness for one so wild and uncontrollable. They had send a servant to Minakshi's room, waking Kamala from where she sat resting, her head fallen forward onto her arms. Kamala had come alone and at once to face the death of her mother.

Gauri's shrunken, withered old body lay wrapped in her white sari, her eyes closed and her face expressionless. Kamala had overseen the necessary tasks as the body was moved. Despite the short time she had been dead and the heat of the summer night, Gauri's skin was cold to the touch and her limbs were stiff like wooden planks. Kamala, assuming the role of the next Taikkizhavi, directed that the body be placed somewhere cool to be prepared for funeral services. Then she went to wait for Padma to get up. There was no sense in waking her daughter. The news would reach her soon enough.

Kamala struggled greatly with her own grief in those few moments spent waiting anxiously for her daughter to wake. Her amma's passing was sudden and unexpected. Kamala was well aware of her mother's bizarre eccentricities, the events of the day before being the highlight of her increasingly strange behaviour. Gauri's thinking had always been a mystery to her; it was one of Kamala's greatest regrets in life that she didn't understand her mother better.

However, Kamala did share and understand the pain her mother felt as she watched the community turn against the dasis. Already there were temples where the dasis had been cast out. Kamala wondered if her amma had asked Vishnu to take her so she wouldn't have to watch the death of a tradition she loved and lived for. It would be just like her mother to make a dramatic and unexpected exit, one without explanations or farewells. Gauri had left her daughter nothing, not even an expression of joy or pain, to give Kamala a clue about what her final thoughts might have been.

Kamala was stricken by the grief of coping with her mother's passing, but part of her knew that Gauri's absence from her had begun long before this morning. In many ways her amma had always been absent from her. Kamala's relationship with Padma wasn't like that, full of deep rifts and unnatural silences, but Kamala realized that Padma's relationship with Gauri wasn't like that either. Gauri had always let her grand-daughter in, even when it meant shutting Kamala out. For a moment Kamala found herself painfully jealous of Padma, as though her daughter possessed a piece of her mother that should have come to her, something that was hers by right but had been denied to her, stolen from her. 'How can I be so ridiculous and selfish,' Kamala reprimanded herself. 'What a stupid notion, an absurd thought!'

As much as she tried to be sympathetic and rational about her mother's death, a large part of Kamala was very angry. She was furious at her mother for leaving her in such difficult times, abandoning her to be the next Taikkizhavi only long enough to see their own temple throw out its servants, sending the devadasis into the streets to fend for themselves. Another part of her was very angry at the greater world, the reasoning of the gods. Why had Vishnu taken her amma from her in such a time of need? Kamala was a mother herself, old enough to understand that grief is a part of life and that people pass on, but at what age is it that a daughter ever gets over needing her mother beside her?

Kamala waiting, struggling to both explore and contain her emotions. The time that passed as she sat at the bottom of the steps was gone in an instant and also lasted an eon. Kamala felt so cheated; she had only just let herself feel joy at Vimala's recovery when the news arrived about Gauri's death. She couldn't decide if Vishnu had been kind or cruel to his devoted servants, sparing the life of one so young in exchange for one so old.

'But it doesn't matter if she was nearing her time,' Kamala thought to herself. 'She was still my mother.'

Kamala was still lost in her own thoughts when Padma appeared. She had wanted to be able to give her daughter the good news about Vimala and then explain slowly about Gauri, but Padma recognized her amma's anguish instantly and had jumped to the obvious conclusion that Vimala hadn't survived. The language of a mother's body cannot be silent before a daughter's gaze. Padma had burst into tears as soon as she had seen Kamala and Kamala,

because of her own grief, had been unable to tell her daughter the news in the manner she had previously thought was best.

"Padma. Padma, listen," Kamala said to her daughter, holding her away from her own body so that their eyes met. "Vimala is still with us, she's going to live. It's your patti. Vishnu has called your patti back to him."

Padma was stunned by the news. The tears she had shed for Vimala stopped flowing. In her mind she could see Gauri dancing before the god in the temple, offering herself in her fresh white sari, like a lotus newly plucked from the waters of a pond and placed before Vishnu by the priests. This dream-like state, this nightmare that had taken over the past two days of her peaceful life, turned again in unexpected ways. In Padma's thoughts the idea began to take shape that Gauri had used her divine powers to trade herself for Vimala's life, that she had given back one woman in Padma's life only to disappear herself.

Padma found herself staring at a spot on the mud floor, and wondered how long her mind had been wandering, how long she had stood looking over her amma's shoulder without responding.

"But she never said good-bye," was all the confused young woman could whisper, still staring absent-mindedly at the spot on the floor.

"I know, daughter," Kamala said, pulling Padma close to her again. "She never said good-bye to me either."

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Gauri's funeral was held later the same day. When Gauri's body had been discovered in the morning all ritual activity in the temple ceased. No puja could be performed for three times three quarters of an hour out of respect for the dancer and for the god who was now in mourning over death of one of his brides<sup>236</sup>. Vishnu observed a state of pollution, called munnu mukkalu gatti, during this time, when Gauri was prepared for the funeral pyre and brought before the god. Normally a funeral procession wouldn't stop for anything, but the death of a devadasi was marked by certain special observances that indicated her status as a wife of the divine. Ironically, the manners and customs surrounding a devadasi's funeral paid the greatest compliment to her that she would receive in all her life, a compliment that not even the priests of the temple were honoured with at the time of their deaths<sup>237</sup>. After Gauri's body was

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<sup>236</sup>"When a devadasi dies, the god has to observe ritual pollution, called munnu mukkalu gatti ('hardness for three times three quarters of an hour'). No puja would be conducted during this period." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

<sup>237</sup>"The funeral honors that were bestowed on a devadasi are significant for the ambivalent attitude and appreciation that the devadasis received from society. The highest compliment that was paid to the devadasis was, paradoxically, their funeral. These funeral honors are still valid for those aged devadasis who were officially dedicated to the temple (those in the Madras area who had been dedicated before 1947)." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

wrapped and placed on a litter to be carried through the streets, the procession brought her back to the temple to be placed one final time in this life before the god. Only a devadasi's funeral litter could come to rest before the temple; all other were forbidden to stop there for blessing<sup>238</sup>.

The bier would be carried by men of the temple; women did not carry the funeral pyre of a loved one, nor did they mourn in the public procession that followed. News of the great dasi's death frightened the people of the town. Those who knew of and had participated in the riot were sure that Gauri was the woman who had been killed in the temple courtyard. Men of the town turned out in great numbers to mourn her passing, fearful that the wrath of Vishnu might descend on them for having murdered one of his wives. Rumors about the dasi's death and the riot flew through the crowd and stories were invented, told and passed so frequently amongst the mourners that almost anyone could have been hidden under the white linen cloth that covered Gauri's shrunken old body.

Kamala had sent word to Sundaram about their mother's death through one of the musicians in the temple. Unable to touch the gold that Gauri had thrust on him, Sundaram had taken his sons to the home of one of his friends and the boys had spent the night there. In the morning a man Sundaram knew from the temple arrived to bring him the news about his mother's passing. Sundaram was shocked. When he saw the man coming up the narrow lane between the houses he assumed, as Padma had done, that Vimala had died. The musician gave his news to Sundaram, who was both relieved and distraught by this latest turn of events. He was overjoyed that it now appeared that Vimala would live. He wanted to go to her, to see her, but his friend told him that she was being kept in the cinnaveedu and that Kamala was allowing no visitors until she made a more full recovery. As to his mother's death and the funeral, Sundaram didn't know what to do. In many ways he was relieved by Gauri's passing, as though the great and sudden weight of what had happened the day before was somehow lessened because she would no longer be around to remind him of his actions. Some part of him, a large part, had always hated his mother for her favoritism towards his sister and for the power she held over him. But despite all this, Sundaram found to his own surprise that he was saddened by her death. Like Kamala, he lamented that he had never known or understood her very well, that he was estranged from her all his life, even though he had lived in her house and shared many of her daily activities.

The events of the past two days worried Sundaram. He had been awake all of the previous night, sweating in the oppressive heat of summer, his fevered mind trying to get a grasp on what had happened. He struggled with his hatred, first blaming the women of the house, his mother for forcing him to bring the riot to the temple, his wife for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then he

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<sup>238</sup>"Usually a funeral procession should not stop anywhere, but in the case of the funeral procession of a devadasi, the bearers stop for a moment at the gopura of the temple and place the bier for a moment on the floor." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

would suddenly find himself weeping like a child who had woken from a nightmare, the force of his hatred strangling him as he tried to escape it's grasp.

Late into the night he came to a clear conclusion. He knew, beyond a doubt, that he loved his wife. Despite his anger and abuse towards her and his increasingly frequent trips to the beds of the alamkaradasis, the prostitutes who entertained common men, he was devastated by the thought of losing Vimala, of facing the world alone. She was his only support, the only thing in the world that truly belonged to him. Beyond any other identity she had, any loyalties to the temple or the dancers, Vimala was Sundaram's wife.

As the pale light of morning crept over the houses where the town slept and Sundaram lay awake, the musician came to a strange peace. For the first time in his life he was prepared to take responsibility for his actions. Vishnu had opened his eyes, Sundaram felt, to his greater divine presence. The dawn brought Sundaram a hope he had never known before, that there was something far greater than himself in the world, a being whose existence wasn't there only to punish him, but to help him. As the sun climbed into the sky, Sundaram meditated on the course of his life, searching for the strength to lead his sons to a better future than the one he had known, one without hatred. He also prayed that his wife would be brought back to him, begged on his knees before the face of Vishnu that shone in the rising sun for Vimala's life.

When the musician brought Sundaram the news from the temple, he was overjoyed by Vimala's recovery. However, his mother's death was something he had never expected. It made him wonder deeply about the ways of the divine. She had been his nemesis, his burden. Now Vishnu had called her back to him, leaving Sundaram to reconstruct his life without having to face the formidable force of his mother.

Sundaram knew that it was his position as her son to carry Gauri's body in the funeral procession, but he didn't know if he could do it. His ambiguous feelings towards her and his newfound struggle to take responsibility conflicted. In the end he sent his two oldest sons back with the musician to carry Gauri through the streets. Sundaram remained behind with his two youngest sons, one moment lifting a hesitant foot to follow the men as they walked back to the temple, the next moment putting his foot back down without taking a forward step.

As well as to Sundaram, Kamala had also sent word to guru Madhavan, asking him to attend the funeral and welcoming him back to the cinnaveedu. There had been no communication between the gurukulam and the temple since Gauri's last message of fury regarding Madhavan's decision to close his dance school. It would take the man Kamala had sent two hours to reach the gurukulam, so Kamala expected no response until either the afternoon, or until guru Madhavan himself returned in person.

After making the necessary notifications, Kamala spent the morning making funeral arrangements and tending to Vimala when she could. The young woman was making a steady but slow recovery. Her face was so badly beaten that nobody except her closest friends could recognize her. She muttered things between swollen, split lips, telling Uma how she felt and asking about her sons. Nobody had told her about Gauri's actions towards Sundaram and their boys. Vimala, who had been unconscious at the time, remembered nothing of events the day before. Uma was at Vimala's side continuously, Uma's only son sitting beside her listening to his mother tell stories about how Vishnu had created the world. Vimala also listened closely to Uma, the sound of her best friend's voice doing much to help her spirit and her body heal.

Padma spent the day helping Kamala prepare Gauri for the funeral. She didn't want to be far from her mother. Something in her was suddenly afraid to let Kamala out of her sight in case she too disappeared from Padma's life without warning. She didn't cry, and moved slowly and deliberately through the temple performing her assigned tasks with a far away, expressionless look on her face. Padma knew where her grief lay hidden. It curled in the pit of her stomach like a snake, circling her baby, crawling into her womb to feed off the spirit that her body gave to her child. Padma's face showed no sign that anything was wrong, but she felt the cramps in her stomach beginning to grow until she found that she had to hold one arm continuously across her middle. She tried, single-handedly, to finish the tasks she had been given, hobbled by the increasing pain she felt inside.

Kamala also felt the need to be close to Padma, as though she could somehow feel her own mother still in the room with her by staying close to her daughter. She noticed as the hours wore on how the strain began to show in Padma's posture. Her daughter bent farther and farther over, holding her stomach more frequently until she came to resemble an old woman herself. Kamala was very concerned, but said nothing, sensing the women's collective need for silence and reflection.

Sundaram's oldest sons arrived at the temple without their father. Kamala was enraged by his absence, but Uma and Padma had explained Gauri's anger the day before, telling her of Sundaram's involvement in the riot and his responsibility for his wife's beating. Kamala had been sickened with the poison of angry hatred when she heard this, but her logic and compassion eventually won out and she was prepared to forgive her brother under certain conditions. Above all, she believed that it was his duty as a son to see his mother laid to rest, to bear her body through the street and see it lit on fire. It was the position of a son to light the funeral pyre himself, to perform muhkagni, touching the flame to his mother's lips so that her soul could fly free of her decaying body. His absence renewed Kamala's anger, but there was little she could do so late in the day. The procession had started and Kamala sent Sundaram's sons to help the other musicians carry Gauri's body through the streets. Despite Gauri's inexcusable rudeness towards him, guru Madhavan had come quickly from his own town to attend the funeral. He offered to help carry the body, wanting to pay

his respect to the old woman who had been such a force in his life. Sundaram's sons took up their place ahead of Madhavan in the procession.

Kamala and Padma waited in the temple for Gauri's body to be brought back for one final stop before the main idol. Minakshi stood next to Kamala in a rare show of sympathy and support. Uma and her son left Vimala only for a short time to bear witness to the ceremony of a devadasi's last rites. Vimala couldn't have come even if she had been able to move, and everyone agreed that it was best to wait to tell her of Gauri's death for a few days until her fever broke and her mind was more clear.

Eventually the women spotted the return of the funeral procession. The people in the street parted to let the men pass by, carrying on their shoulders their sacred burden. Gauri's body was wrapped in white cloth and she looked a great deal smaller than Padma had remembered her being when she was alive. Bearing the front of the two poles that held the body were Sundaram's sons, looking grief stricken and confused, two young men holding on their shoulders the burden that belonged to their father.

Gauri's body was laid in the courtyard which only the day before had been the scene of great violence. The priests came from the temple, chanting and carrying a garland of flowers and basil that had been taken from Vishnu's neck<sup>239</sup>. An umbrella, similar to the royal parasol used during utsava parades, was held over her body, shielding it from the blazing heat of the late summer sun<sup>240</sup>. The Brahmin priests laid the garland on the white cloth covering Gauri's body, across the vague lumps that indicated the shape of her face and neck. Then the priests presented the dead devadasi with her final gifts of a lifetime of service to the temple: a new sari, prasadam, sandalwood and fresh flowers<sup>241</sup>. Padma felt grief wrenching her stomach as the men prepared to lift Gauri's body up and continue on their procession to the cremation grounds. Then she noticed a tall man striding across the courtyard, the crowd parting before his deliberate steps, his look of determination. Padma gasped as she recognized her uncle Sundaram returning to the temple.

Sundaram silently approached the bier, and when he reached the men, he laid his hand gently on the shoulder of one of his sons. The boy looked up and then stepped back, allowing Sundaram a place at the head of the

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<sup>239</sup>The flower wreath offered to and worn by the deity had extremely special significance. In my research I have only found three instances when a person could receive the wreath that had been offered to the deity: every morning the wreath was returned to the king who had a special ritual role in receiving the used offering; on the occasion of a devadasi wedding, old women were permitted to take the garland as part of the wedding procession to the house of the young bride; and thirdly, on the occasion of a devadasi's death, the garland was given as a gift of high prestige from the god to his deceased wife. (Kersenboom-Story 1987:188,192) (Marglin 1985:188)

<sup>240</sup>"When the funeral pyre arrives at the temple tower, a garland is taken from the god and given to the corpse of the devadasi, an umbrella is held over the stretcher." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

<sup>241</sup>"A garland is removed from the statue of the god and is given to the corpse, as well as a new sari, sandalwood, flowers and prasadam." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

procession and moving back behind his father. Sundaram looked at the white cloth, failing to believe that it was really his mother inside, that he would never look on her face again. The thought reminded him of something important and he looked up, searching the faces of the crowd for his sister. He found Kamala and the two stared at each other for a long moment. Finally Kamala gave a slight nod and Sundaram bowed his head. He bent down, indicating to the other men that they should lift the body. Sundaram placed the weight of his mother's thin, frail body on his shoulder and, staring straight ahead, he led the men to the cremation ground.

The funeral pyre of a devadasi was always lit with the fire from the temple kitchen<sup>242</sup>, a further special privilege conveyed on a dancer at the time of her death. Wives of the god always received the full funeral honors of a woman whose husband was still alive, for she could never be widowed<sup>243</sup>. After Gauri's body had been cremated, the priests would purify the temple so that death could be laid to rest and its inauspiciousness wouldn't return to haunt the temple<sup>244</sup>. To mark his grief over the death of one of his wives, Vishnu would be given a meal of bitter vegetables for his dinner<sup>245</sup>.

Padma stood with her mother in the courtyard watching Sundaram carry Gauri away from them. The heat of the summer evening was oppressive and stifling. Overhead dark clouds had gathered, blocking the last light of the sun and plunging the temple into an early darkness. As the crowd departed, Padma felt the grief in her stomach welling up, the reality of her patti's departure descending on her in full force. Padma started to cry, and soon Kamala, Minakshi and Uma were holding her, the four women sobbing out their grief in the mud brick courtyard of the temple. The sky above them opened up, and rain poured down in full force, marking the start of the monsoon season.

The women stood in the courtyard, drenched to the skin in a matter of moments. Padma hid in the arms of the women, anguish raking through her body, forcing her mouth open in great sobs. The pain in her stomach suddenly became so strong that Padma almost collapsed and Kamala helped her daughter to the ground which was now puddling rapidly into muddy rivulets and pools. Padma cried out as the pain in her body was too much for her. The women watched in horror as Padma's soaking wet sari was dyed between her legs with a new color, the color of her blood.

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<sup>242</sup>"When a devadasi has died, her funeral pyre must be lit with fire from the temple-kitchen." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

<sup>243</sup>"A devadasi always gets the funeral of a su-mangali, a woman who still wears her tali because her husband is still alive." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

<sup>244</sup>(Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)

<sup>245</sup>"On that day the god is served a curry of bitter vegetables." (Kersenboom-Story 1987:192)



**Chapter 9**  
**When Grandmother Gave Birth to God**  
**Cinnaveedu, Monsoon Season 1930**

After the funeral and the loss of her child Padma spent three days in bed without speaking or eating. Outside the walls of the cinnaveedu, the rain storms of the monsoon poured down, flooding the gardens of the temple. Even at midday the skies were dark and overcast, adding a feeling of gloom to the sadness in the household. Kamala was in constant attendance at her daughter's side, but Padma stared off at the walls or the ceiling, refusing the food she was offered and remaining silent.

After the tragedies of Gauri's death and Padma's miscarriage, guru Madhavan had stayed in the temple to give comfort and support to Padma and Kamala. His shy adoration of Gauri's daughter blossomed rapidly into an open and obvious love, one which Kamala leant towards in her sadness as though it was a flame in the darkness that she cradled for light and warmth.

The other women of the cinnaveedu spent their time with Vimala. As the days passed she grew increasingly stronger, the swelling in her face subsiding so that she could speak more easily. The cut above her eye was also healing, and as far as anyone could tell, she would still have her sight. Her teeth were another matter. Her front two upper teeth were shattered, as well as one of her lower ones. Vimala was in a lot of pain whenever she tried to eat or talk, struggling to make sounds and take in food through the wide gap at the front of her mouth. It upset Uma to see the permanent damage that had been done to her friend, but she was so happy that Vimala would live that all else seemed minor in comparison. After a few days Uma told her about Sundaram and the children, and about Gauri's death. Vimala was shocked that the old mother of the house had passed on, and was very upset by events concerning her husband. But Uma advised her that he had asked to visit her when Kamala permitted it, and Vimala agreed to abide by her advice. Kamala had officially retired from dancing in order to assume the position of Taikkizhavi. She was the youngest 'old mother' the cinnaveedu had ever had.

As the days passed and Vimala's condition improved, Padma grew increasingly weaker and more despondent. The ordeal that her body and spirit had undergone was made worse by her refusal of nourishment. Kamala was at a complete loss as to how to heal her daughter. Already dangerously thin from her difficult pregnancy, Padma deteriorated so rapidly that her face came to resembled a skull, dark skin stretched across her cheek bones, sunken eyes staring listlessly out from deep and hollowed sockets. Kamala began to fear that she would lose her daughter to the grief that possessed her, and faced the possibility of mourning the death of both a mother and a daughter in the same week.

One night, as Kamala sat holding her daughter's hand, Padma finally turned to her mother with a request.

"Amma," she said, "could I have some water."

"Of course!" Kamala almost shouted, so happy that Padma had finally come back from the land of her internal thoughts long enough to speak to her.

Kamala brought her daughter some water and helped her to sit so that she could drink it. Padma was so weak that she could barely lift herself up onto her elbow, but when Kamala went to support her, she was struck by how light her daughter's body had become. Padma managed a few small sips, much of the water dribbling out from the corners of the cup and pouring in thin lines down her chin and under her bony jaw. Then Padma collapsed back onto the bed, feeling so tired that she thought her limbs and chest were made of stone; they had become so heavy and hard to move. It was easier, far easier, to rest, just rest without moving. When she let her mind drift she could ignore the pain of losing the child that was everything to her, a bija, a seed that she had poured all her dreams into, nursed with her flesh and soul.

Kamala grew very concerned as she watched Padma fall back down onto the damp sheets of the bed. She could tell by the look in her daughter's eyes that she was losing her, that Padma was slipping away from her, back into the sleepless, expressionless stare that frightened Kamala so much. Kamala knew she had to do something before her daughter disappeared into the land of waking dreams where Kamala couldn't follow.

"Padma," she said gently. Her daughter didn't look back, her unfocused gaze staying fixed on the ceiling.

"Padma," Kamala said more firmly, reaching out a hand and shaking her daughter's shoulder.

Padma turned her head towards her mother and Kamala noticed that her eyes didn't move with her head but followed slowly afterwards, her gaze wandering lazily across the room to finally fix on Kamala's face.

"Daughter, I have a story I want to tell you."

"Mmmm," murmured Padma in response, expressing little interest. Kamala could see her gaze start to wander away again.

"Padma," Kamala said, shaking her daughter's shoulder a second time. The wandering gaze returned.

"The story is about your patti. It's about what happened to her when she was your age," Kamala told her daughter.

Padma's eyes focused quickly in response to her mother's words. This wasn't a topic she'd expected, but it was a mystery she'd speculated about since

she was a child. Her interest was piqued and her gaze remained lucid and fixed on her amma's face.

"When your patti was young," Kamala began, "she was the best dancer anyone had seen in centuries. Her talent was like that demonstrated by the dasis of ancient times; it made even the gods weep to see it.

"When she was a child, your patti was asked by many gurus to join their dance schools, but the Taikkizhavi of the time selected the gurukulam in our own town that had the best reputation. Your patti had her first dance lesson when she was barely five years old, and everyone marveled at her skill and the early signs of the great beauty she would one day have."

Padma's interest in the story was beginning to waver and Kamala, desperately trying to hold her daughter's attention, hurried on.

"Although the dance school had a well respected reputation, it wasn't long before your patti discovered that the guru in charge was a horrible man. It was unthinkable that girls in training would speak out negatively against their gurus; the men were too well thought of in the community and had too much power. Your patti's guru took great advantage of this and touched the girls in inappropriate ways. Many were silent about their treatment, but your grandmother was always a fighter and she knew that in our tradition gurus had no rights to the dancers in their care, especially not before the time of their marriage ceremonies when the girls were much older.

"Your patti was strong-willed and she fought with the guru, embarrassing him in front of the other girls. His pride was wounded and he called in your patti's Taikkizhavi to discipline her. The old mother was extremely angered by what the guru told her, that your patti misbehaved, showing no respect, and that if she didn't learn obedience, he would be forced to return her to the cinnaveedu. Such a scandal would have ruined the temple household and made it difficult for any girls in the future to receive training. The old Taikkizhavi told your patti that if she didn't do as the guru instructed then she would be cast from the temple and left to fend for herself in the streets. Your patti was only nine years old by this time and was terrified of losing her family. After the visit by the Taikkizhavi, your patti resigned herself to accepting the guru's advances.

"The old guru was an amazing dance instructor and the girls in his care went on to great careers, but he was a man without shame and he abused them terribly as well as teaching them. When he was angry he beat his students, which is not unheard of. But your patti's guru was far worse than most, and even the other men in the gurukulam began to suggest that he learn to control his anger.

"Many of the more beautiful girls the guru took to his bed before they reached puberty so that there would be no children and no proof of his actions. Your patti's beauty blossomed early, as did her talent, and she intrigued him

beyond any of the other girls in his care. There was something about her dancing that was beyond his reach, something beyond freedom, almost beyond reality. He wanted whatever it was, wanted to control her and to possess whatever it was that gave your patti such awesome talent. Although your patti accepted his unwanted touches because of the warning from her Taikkizhavi, she refused to go to his bed. The guru beat her often for her refusal, until one day she could no longer resist and he took her to his bed by force. At the time your patti was ten years old. The guru thought that she was too young to be affected by his advances, but your patti's body had matured very quickly, keeping pace with her talent and her beauty. Within a few months it became very obvious that your patti was pregnant with the guru's child.

"When he discovered what had happened, the guru was furious and beat your patti severely in hopes that she would lose the child. When she didn't, he had her locked in her room, and swore the rest of the household to secrecy. He was a very powerful man, powerful enough to ruin anyone who let his secret out into the street, but still vulnerable enough that if his actions were discovered then he would be forced to leave the gurukulam without money or a place to go."

Kamala paused briefly to examine the expression on her daughter's face. Although she was worried that telling her daughter such an upsetting story might make things worse, she was at her wit's end and had no other ideas about how to get Padma to come back to the world of the living. Kamala noticed with relief that Padma's eyes were intently focused on her, waiting for the rest of the story. Kamala hoped that her daughter could be healed by the story of her grandmother's struggle. With a deep sigh she continued the tale.

"The girls in the gurukulam were sympathetic towards your patti; many of them had also been forced to undergo the unwanted advances of their most trusted teacher. But they also regarded your patti as having bad luck. None of the others had gotten pregnant. Worried that some of her ill fortune might rub off on them, the girls avoided your patti. She spent many months alone, with nothing to do but pray to the god Vishnu to protect her. When she was in her seventh month of pregnancy Vishnu finally answered her pleas for help.

"One day, just after your patti turned eleven years old, she woke in the morning crying in great pain. Her screams raised the women of the house, who came rapidly to check on her. It was clear to everyone that your patti was going into an early labour. The gurukulam was in a panic. Hot water and cloth was brought to help the young girl give birth. Your patti was in labour for many hours and the women began to doubt that she would survive. Then finally, to everyone's relief, the child was born.

"Your patti's guru, who had been waiting anxiously outside, was suddenly shaken by shouts of alarm from inside the room. He burst through the doorway, ignoring the fact that the birthing space was a woman's domain, and approached the bed where your patti lay cradling her child. He looked down and was

shocked by what he saw. He was so afraid that he took two steps backward away from the bed, clutching his hands to throat.

"Here in the South, the people don't know and don't celebrate the lord of dance, Jagannatha. But devadasis are well-educated women and we know the figure of the god who is worshipped by temple dancers of the North. Lying in your patti's arms was the body of Jagannatha, his hands and feet sticking straight out the sides of his square, wooden-like body, his huge head displaying giant eyes and a wide mouth with dark red lips. Your grandmother lay on the bed cradling the body of the god in her arms.

"The baby was obviously premature and having trouble breathing. It turned its head once, looking straight up at the guru with huge piercing, angry eyes, and, letting out a terrible cry of pain, the child died."

Kamala stopped and looked at Padma. She was staring back at her mother and Kamala thought she could detect a slight glistening in her daughter's eyes, as though tears were beginning to pool inside them. The corners of Padma's mouth quivered very slightly, giving Kamala hope that her daughter was coming out of her trance-like state.

"After the baby died, your patti didn't cry. She simply handed the dead child over to the nearest woman and got up from the bed. She stood before her guru, looked him straight in the eye, and walked past him, out of the room of her confinement. She went alone to the bathroom and washed. Then she dressed herself and walked out to the center of the lawn to practice her dance postures. The household was stunned, certain that they had witnessed a direct act of the divine. All that afternoon and into the night your patti danced on the lawn by herself. Everyone was scared to come near her. The guru gave out a public notice the following day that he was retiring and that his younger brother would be taking over the gurukulam. Within a few weeks he was completely insane and he died not long after that. Nobody would touch the old guru's body and the family had to hire a group of men from the lowest caste to take his corpse to be burned. Everyone in the gurukulam was certain that Vishnu had taken out his divine wrath on the man who had abused the sacred relationship of trust that exists between a guru and a dasi, for everyone in the household recognized that the Lord Jagannatha is a manifestation of the great god Vishnu himself.

"Your patti completed her training under the old guru's brother. When she graduated, the brother took a huge percentage of her earnings for his own. The gurukulam of our town is still known for this. Uma attended the same school as your patti, and was trained under the son of your patti's guru. He takes so much of her earnings that it's no wonder Minakshi sees fit for her daughter to have so many patrons. This is why you and I were both trained in another town. Your patti has refused to see a woman of her line given to the hands of the men in that family, although she has consented to allow the other women in the cinnaveedu to choose gurus for themselves. Minakshi also attended your patti's gurukulam which is why her adopted daughter, Uma, went there.

"The scandal of your patti's time at the gurukulam has been kept secret from the public because everyone involved feared to talk of it. Ever since then, your patti danced with a divine fury and beauty that nobody had ever seen before or will likely ever see again. Minakshi and I were told this story by Vimala's grandmother, a woman who was a cook in the gurukulam at the time. She was the person who received the body of the god directly from your patti's hands."

With that last statement, Kamala finished her mother's story. For a moment Padma sat perfectly still, hanging on the possibility that her mother might have more to say. But her amma was silent, sitting with her hands folded neatly in her lap, gold rings on her elegant fingers, smooth brown skin resting on the orange silk of her sari. Padma stared into her amma's eyes and then burst into tears. Just as she had in the past, Kamala held her daughter as she cried and heaved great sobs of grief.

'My daughter has endured so much pain,' Kamala thought to herself. 'How many more times will I hold her like this in this lifetime? How much more tragedy will she have to survive?'

"We're living at the end, aren't we amma?" Padma asked when she gained control of her sobs.

"Yes," Kamala said plainly.

Her mother's affirmation of her deepest fears seemed to surprise Padma a little. She expected a gentle explanation, a reassurance that everything would be fine, that home would continue as it was. Her amma's response was so straight forward that it startled Padma. She stopped crying and dried her eyes on the edge of her short sleeve. Kamala's bluntness seemed to waken something in Padma, some deep resolve.

"Can I have some more water to drink?" she asked quietly.

"Here," her mother said with a gentle smile. Although Padma had cried a great deal, Kamala felt that at least tears were better than the horrible hollow stare. Tears belonged to this world, born of a sadness that was located in this place, this time. If Padma felt grief then she was returning home from the lost land of waking dreams, a place Kamala feared she would wander until she disappeared completely from this reality and followed her child on into the next world.

"Amma," Padma said, managing a weak smile, "I think I'd like to get up now."

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Padma's first trip out of bed was only a short walk out of the house to pass water. Both Padma and her mother were distressed by how frail she had become, barely able to hold her own weight on her legs and walk. Kamala supported her almost entirely, and for the first time Padma realized how close to the edge of the dream she had come. It was a dangerous game she had played with her mind, one that now frightened her intensely, sending a rush of adrenaline through her weak body. The short burst of energy made her empty stomach feel queasy and Kamala helped her to sit down. The rain around them thundered down, but its wet fingers washed the sweat from Padma's back and rinsed her greasy hair. The next morning she would have a proper bath, but for the moment the heavy rain was refreshing and made her feel clean. Kamala then helped her daughter back inside where Padma fell asleep for the first time since the night she had watched her patti dance her final performance.

Over the following weeks both Padma and Vimala made great recoveries. The women spent long hours together resting in the cinnaveedu and being entertained and fed by the other women of the house. During that time, Padma came to know a strong feeling of companionship with her peers, as Uma and Vimala welcomed her into their circle of gossip and affection.

In time Sundaram came to visit Vimala, making the journey alone and leaving his sons in the care of his friend's wife for the day. He made a point of announcing his arrival at the temple and seeking out Kamala as the first person he talked to. The meeting was brief and tense. Kamala, having assumed the role of Taikkizhavi in the cinnaveedu, was now in a position to flatly refuse Sundaram entry to the women's quarters where his wife was being cared for. This fact annoyed Sundaram and he felt an angry voice in his head asking what right a woman had to prevent him from coming to claim his own wife. The angry voice persisted, but Sundaram pushed it down, refusing to listen to the hatred that had made his life miserable in the past. Kamala, seeing that something in her brother's attitude was different, more respectful, granted him permission for a short interview to see Vimala.

Before he was escorted through to the cinnaveedu, Sundaram requested a visit to the main idol in the temple. The musician walked to the place where only weeks before his mother's body had been discovered by the priests. There he bent down before the gaze of the great preserver god Vishnu and asked for his wife's forgiveness and for help in controlling his anger. Kamala was impressed by her brother's act of humility, having never known him to show true and voluntary reverence to Vishnu in the past. She looked up at the carved stone eyes of the god as he stared down on Sundaram and wondered to herself about the ways of the divine. What had seemed to her to be an event of great tragedy was yielding happy results, and yet Padma's pregnancy, a celebrated thing of joy, had led to terrible sadness and the near loss of her daughter, a complete and devoted innocent. Kamala stared intently into the eyes of the god, but his gaze revealed nothing but a benevolence that looked down on them all.

Sundaram was given a private audience with Vimala. The woman's capacity for forgiveness amazed Kamala, as she observed on her way out of the room that Vimala's face lit up with joy as Sundaram approached. Unlike the devadasis of the temple, Vimala practiced another kind of true devotion. She saw in Sundaram the path of surrender to the divine and treated her husband as her god. She wasn't a temple dancer and would never undergo a ceremony marrying her to an intangible divine husband, but to her Sundaram was a manifestation of Vishnu, and she showed her love and devotion to the god by passing them through her husband. When Sundaram saw the look of happiness and adoration on his wife's face, he burst into tears and bowed his head before her, the palms of his hands crushed together, his dirty fingernails pressing edge to edge in repentance. For him, the forgiveness of the divine had been passed down to him through the loving look in his wife's eyes.

Although the following years would see Sundaram continue his visits to the brothels of the Madras area, he never again laid angry hands on his wife. When he was with her, he treated her with love and respect, and was always proud to boast of his devoted wife with his friends, despite her toothless smile and chubby hips. Sundaram's music also improved greatly. Much to Kamala's surprise, her brother finally discovered that the secret to a successful career was authenticity. As he played his lute, Sundaram saw in his mind the expression he wished to show to Vishnu, whether it was love or gratitude or remorse. In the years that followed Gauri's death, when musicians prospered and devadasis were cast from the temples, the people came to say that Sundaram possessed some of his mother's divine talent. Through his music and his new found devotion, Sundaram came to realize a connection with his mother that he had never had when she was alive, and came to understand why it was that she had always given preference to Kamala in the past.

After a few successful visits to see his wife, Kamala gave permission for Sundaram to move his sons back into the temple. Sundaram himself was asked to wait another few months. The musician's new found respect of the women in the household made Kamala suspicious. She was skeptical that a man could change so greatly from a single dramatic incident. But with Vimala's boys back with their mother, the cinnaveedu was soon full again with happiness.

Much to everyone's astonishment, Kamala, for the first time in years, found herself sharing her bed with a man. Madhavan came frequently to the temple and stayed for long visits. At first he told Kamala that the reason for his visits was his concern for Padma's health and dance career. However, after a time he admitted the nature of his true feelings to Kamala. In their efforts to help Padma with her recovery, they were brought closer together. Guru Madhavan walked in the gardens with Padma when the weather permitted and when the rains outside were too heavy, they practiced abhinaya and sthana, representational gestures and postures, indoors. Madhavan was very concerned about his fragile student, and insisted that she keep up her skills with frequent practice to build both fitness and confidence.



Padma's patron also came to visit during the rainy season, although his trips were becoming less and less frequent. Mr. N. Iyer was very concerned when he heard about the loss of Padma's child and saw how thin and sad she looked. Although she was up and actively participating in the daily temple rituals again, Padma was less talkative than usual. A deep sad quiet seemed to penetrate her body. Although she smiled often to reassure everyone that she was okay, her expression was always tinged with an intense look of irony and sadness. It was as though Padma had suddenly gained the height of a greater wisdom from which she looked down on the daily happenings of the household as part of a larger intertwined river of events, one which she scanned constantly for a higher meaning.

Padma spoke softly and reflectively about her loss of her child and the death of her grandmother, and about the flowers that would follow the rainy season. For the first time in many years Padma found herself wishing for Usha's company, for the friend who had taken her in as a child and taught her to stand on her own. She felt a terrible isolation inside herself, as though part of her soul still wandered in the dream she had created when she tried to follow her child across the boundaries of worlds. The feeling was far more intense but in some ways similar to the way she had felt on the day of her graduation from the gurukulam, the day that Usha had reassured her that the changing seasons meant a chance to experience fresh wonder rather than to grieve over things that were lost to the passing of time. Padma asked guru Madhavan to tell her stories about what had become of her best friend after their mutual graduation from the gurukulam. Usha's compassion and cheerfulness would have been much appreciated during Padma's recovery, and guru Madhavan did all he could to answer Padma's questions about the course her friend's life had taken over the past five years.

Although guru Madhavan's house was still a place where musicians were taught their art, it had been over a year since a devadasi in training had danced there. Gauri had considered Madhavan's abandonment of teaching as nothing short of high treason and her refusal to speak to him since she heard the news of the gurukulam's closure presented a serious rift in the friendship of households, one that required immediate care. Despite sharing some of her mother's feelings of betrayal, Kamala was now glad that Madhavan had no reason to be at his home day after day. He spent weeks at a time with Kamala in the cinnaveedu. Although it was rare for a dance guru to take up residence at the home of one of his students, it was permissible if the guru had sexual interest in one of the women in the household<sup>246</sup>, as long as that woman wasn't one of his students prior to her time of dedication. Kamala, having never fallen in love with a man before, was amazed by the depth of her feelings for Madhavan, feelings that he returned in full force. The two spent long hours discussing the history and technical aspects of dance, finding in the conversation a mutual love of the precision and dedication that formed the structural support of the art form.

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<sup>246</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1872

When they looked at each other, each could see the love of the divine shining back on them. Their love was a gift and a blessing from the gods.

Guru Madhavan's presence in the cinnaveedu was also helpful for Padma, who appreciated a return to the familiar routine of dance training she had known in the gurukulam. Thoughts of her younger years and happier times were brought to her attention constantly through Madhavan's insistence that she reestablish her basic skills. The regular routine and her return to public performances and concerts gave Padma the framework upon which she reconstructed the world that had collapsed around her. Her dance style was dramatically changed from the careless and happy feeling she had exhibited in the years before her failed pregnancy. Padma's movements and expressions now reflected a deeper sadness and the strange look of irony that haunted her eyes. But those who still came to the temple to watch the devadasis perform responded warmly to Padma's new style. In many ways the sadness and uncertainty that was present in her performance reflected the climate of India as a nation, a fragile but determined identity that struggled on under the weight of a great burden: the bizarre and unexpected loss of its anticipated future. The story told by Padma's movements became a metaphor for the evolution of the art form of dance itself; the life and ending of the devadasis was expressed in her eyes, the grace and finality of her hand movements, the pounding of her adorned feet.

During that time, Padma thought a great deal about the Saptamatrkas, the seven little mothers who brought destruction and infant death. In the end she decided that they had known best when they took her child from her. She had no desire to raise a beloved daughter in the volatile environment that was forming around her. 'Better to have no children at all than to bring a daughter into the temple in this harsh and unforgiving world,' Padma thought to herself.

The months passed steadily and Padma recovered her strength and a little of her old smile. The monsoon season, which was shorter and less violent than usual, gave way to the festival of Dipavali and a gentler time of year. Padma turned twenty in the early autumn. Uma continued to enjoy the attentions of many patrons, and Sundaram finally returned to the cinnaveedu, reuniting Vimala's separated family and returning the gold his mother had thrown down at him from the steps of the temple. Madhavan had taken up an almost permanent residence with Kamala, and the dancer and the guru were rarely found apart from each other. Happiness, which had been so elusive in the cinnaveedu in recent years, finally seemed to have found a permanent home with the household. Even Minakshi managed to curb her tongue and her criticisms of Kamala's family, feeling that after all the tragedy that had haunted the family in recent months, there was no reason to be jealous of Kamala's position. Autumn faded into the pleasant coolness of winter and the year moved on to 1931.

**Chapter 10**  
**At Vishnu's Feet**  
**Cinnaveedu, Summer 1931**

Padma lay in the shade of the garden staring lazily up at the dense blue sky. The intense summer heat was paralyzing and nothing in the garden moved except for the rise and fall of Padma's chest as she breathed in the hot, thick air.

'It's amazing how much closer the sky always seems to be in the summer,' she thought to herself, peering up at the fierce blue ceiling through the branches of the tree that stretched above her. 'It's almost as though I could stand and touch it.'

As she lay on her back on a stone bench, one hand resting across her thin midriff, Padma dreamed of the child that was almost hers. She envisioned how her daughter would have been nearly six months by now, and imagined all the ways that she would keep her cool, protecting her from the scorching sun and anything else that might threaten her absolute comfort and contentment. It was a game Padma allowed herself to play on occasion, although she knew it upset her mother that her dreams still followed the child that never was.

Padma had only been in the garden for about an hour when a visitor came to call. Mr. N. Iyer had searched for Padma in the temple, but the women in the cinnaveedu had directed him to look for her under the shade of the sheltering trees behind the shrine. He spotted the devadasi easily; the vibrant magenta of her sari made her look like a giant flower adorning the bench. She was so beautiful as she lay there in contentment that Mr. N. Iyer almost turned and walked away. He had no desire to disrupt Padma's happiness with the news he had to bring her.

Hearing shuffling footsteps on the path, Padma sat up with a smile and beckoned Mr. N. Iyer to come and sit beside her on the bench.

"It's been so long since I've seen you," she said with a mischievous grin. "I was wondering if you'd run away to England without telling me!"

"No! Never there," Mr. N. Iyer responded. "I'd find myself starving within a week! It's only good Indian cooking for me!"

Padma laughed and her patron sat down on the seat next to her. She noticed that Mr. N. Iyer seemed agitated, and she asked him if anything was bothering him.

"No, well yes. But no," he stuttered. Padma waited patiently, confused by his inarticulate response. Her patron had always talked so easily with her, even in the first moments of their acquaintance. She wondered what was on his mind.

Mr. N. Iyer pulled a handkerchief from his English-style suit pocket and wiped his sweaty, balding head. Then he returned the damp cloth to his breast pocket, shoving it inside with his chubby, clean fingers. As he withdrew his hand from his pocket, the sweat on his fingers brought the kerchief back out again. Padma reached over and tucked it gently back into his breast pocket. Mr. N. Iyer smiled nervously. Padma waited, expecting him to address whatever was on his mind, but instead Mr. N. Iyer began to ask her about how things were in the cinnaveedu. Was she feeling well? How old was Uma's son now? Was her guru still staying with the family?

The two sat on the bench under the trees and talked for a long time. The heat was intense, and although it didn't seem to bother Padma, Mr. N. Iyer was sweating profusely and constantly shifting his weight in search of a more comfortable position. Padma wondered why he was forcing himself to sit outside and speak with her when it would have been so much more comfortable for him inside. Eventually, when she thought he could stand it no longer, Padma finally suggested that they go to the kitchens for a drink.

Mr. N. Iyer stopped his wriggling and took a deep breath. In an uncommon gesture of public affection, he reached out and took Padma by the hand. Without looking at her, he began to talk.

"Little one, there is something I have to tell you. I," here he paused for a long moment while the heat of the sun melted even more drips from his shiny scalp, "I am going away. To Delhi. I won't be coming back."

Padma was stunned.

"But why," she asked in concern. "Aren't you happy here?"

"Of course!" he said, this time raising his eyes to meet Padma's, "but my business is suffering and I can't afford to stay here any longer. The buyers are nervous, all this talk of Independence, and if I don't attend to my business in Delhi I may soon not have a business at all."

Padma was silent. Her mind worked rapidly through the events of the past year, his shorter and more infrequent visits, her lack of invitations to his home. She wondered if Mrs. N. Iyer had anything to do with their sudden need to move away. As she thought these things over, she realized that Mr. N. Iyer was talking again.

"You see, it's not that I want to leave you, especially after all that you've been through. But I can't afford to support a devadasi anymore, even though there are so few concerts held these days. I want to protect the art of dance, but even more than that I want to protect you. I have told my wife that I would be asking you to come with us, to become my second wife."

Padma looked at Mr. N. Iyer for a long moment before answering.

"I am married to Vishnu," she said with a gentle smile, but her eyes held a fierce loyalty and a slight look of warning.

"But the laws have been changed<sup>247</sup>," Mr. N. Iyer said enthusiastically. "Everyone recognizes the new ways. Devadasis are able to have real marriages now, and my wife has said that she will accept my decision to marry you."

Padma stared straight into Mr. N. Iyer's eyes with a look that made him lean back away from its intense force.

"How can a man wed a woman who's already married?" she asked quietly, but her eyes held Mr. N. Iyer with their fury. He was taken aback. Padma had never shown him anything even close to anger. He didn't even know she had that emotion in her body.

The conversation fell silent and Mr. N. Iyer returned Padma's hand. The two sat next to each other for an awkward moment before Mr. N. Iyer decided to stand up. His wrinkled suit bunched up in creases around his waist and upper thighs. Padma noticed dark streaks across the brown fabric where his sweat had soaked through.

"I suppose this is farewell then," he said unhappily, uncertain how to proceed but convinced by the look in Padma's eyes that it was time to leave. "Our train departs early tomorrow morning. I have left money with the new Taikkizhavi, your mother, to care for any expenses you might have in the coming year."

He stared down at Padma. She nodded, looking up at him with an indecipherable gaze. She did not get up.

When it became apparent that Padma had nothing more to say, Mr. N. Iyer turned and walked stiffly through the gardens to the temple and then out into the street. His pants were damp between his thighs where he had sweated and the rough fabric chafed his legs painfully as he walked. Oh, how he hated the heat. Maybe in Delhi they could travel north to the mountains in the summer, maybe as far as Kashmir, to relax in the cool foothills of the Himalayas.

After Mr. N. Iyer's departure, Padma got up from the garden seat and began to pace back and forth along the path. Whenever she was away from the shade the sun scorched down on her, scalding her skin with the fire of its fluid light. The stones under her feet seared through the rough calluses on her soles,

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<sup>247</sup>An amendment to the laws concerning devadasis was enacted in 1930 permitting women who were married to a deity to also celebrate an official and recognized marriage to a mortal man. Although most dasis did not make use of this amendment, some did marry their patrons, often becoming second wives. (It was a requirement that a patron already be married before he was accepted. As a result, few devadasis were able to become first wives after the law changed to permit them to marry.) (Prasad 1990 :128)

blistering the delicate skin underneath. But Padma paid these things no heed. Her body was full of a torrent of emotions; rage, regret, forgiveness and an inexplicable feeling of freedom all fighting to control her response to this latest abandonment in her life.

Finally, after she had spent the energy of several long angry strides across the garden, a voice not unlike her grandmother's came into her head. She recognized the words of the Tamil saint Antal<sup>248</sup> flowing through her mind like the soothing gentle winds of winter. Her patti had often said that Antal, a devotee who wrote two volumes of marriage vows and love poems to Vishnu, was never born to a woman, but was plowed up right out of the earth by the man who became her father. It was said that when she was a child she stole the wreath that was to be dedicated to Vishnu and wore it around her own neck, much to her father's shame. But in his sleep, her father received a dream from the great god, who said that Antal was so dear to him that anything she had worn would be doubly blessed in his eyes. Just as Mirabai had done, Antal married herself to the divine and at the time of her death, she was absorbed right into the statue of Vishnu. It was the words of this woman of love which now found their way into Padma's mind.

Dear mothers  
grieve not for me,  
for none may understand my sickness.  
There is one, dark as the ocean -  
if his hand should stroke me,  
I shall be whole again.<sup>249</sup>

Who can offer me solace?  
Go to the lord,  
himself the nectar that never cloy,  
bring me the nectar from his hallowed mouth,  
sprinkle it upon me,  
wipe away my pain.<sup>250</sup>

The words of Antal echoed in Padma's head. 'Why should I grieve that my lover is leaving,' she thought, 'when my husband is lord of all the world. I don't find the truth of my life in Mr. N. Iyer's arms, but in the god who is my home and my beloved. I shouldn't feel such a loss. It isn't real.'

With that thought, Padma went into the house to search for something. The poetry that had come to her mind had given her an idea. She searched her room until she found what she was looking for, a copy of Antal's verses in beautiful hand-written Tamil script. She had bought them in the market last year thinking that she would read them to her child. Remembering why she'd gotten

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<sup>248</sup>All details of Antal's life can be found in Antal and Her Path of Love (Dehejia 1990:7-10)

<sup>249</sup>Antal, from the poem 'Take Me To The Land Of My Lord' (Dehejia 1990:120)

<sup>250</sup>Antal, from the poem 'The Agony of Desire' (Dehejia 1990:125)

the book, Padma put both arms around it and cradled it close to her as though the poems themselves were the child that was supposed to be hers.

That night Padma read into the evening by candle light, carefully tracing the words on the page with loving eyes, bidding good-bye to a dream she had kept close to her for many years, the dream of motherhood. In the morning she woke early and, dressing quickly, she walked through the town to the train station. There she waited on the platform for Mr. N. Iyer and his wife to appear.

As a devadasi, Padma enjoyed a freedom of movement that few women in India shared. She could go as she pleased, where she pleased, at any time of day aside from the hours when she was making offerings in the temple. She wandered on the platform, looking around at the vendors selling food for the early morning travelers. Soon, with the great clattering sound of metal grating against metal, the train arrived.

Padma scanned the platform anxiously, suddenly upset by the possibility that she would miss Mr. N. Iyer and never get the chance to say good-bye. What she really wanted was not to say farewell but to repair the damage that she had done with her coldness the day before. It wasn't in her nature to be cruel intentionally, but she recognized that her anger at Mr. N. Iyer's suggestion of marriage led her to be very harsh with a man who had always shown her every kindness.

Finally she spotted him, puffing as he tried to catch his breath and waddling slightly under the strain of a few small bags his wife wanted for their personal compartment. Mrs. N. Iyer stood next to her husband, surrounded by their excited children, and she was the first to spot Padma standing at the station. The woman stiffened immediately, afraid that Padma had reconsidered her husband's ridiculous offer of marriage. However, before she could turn her husband's attention to something else, he too spotted Padma and nearly dropped his wife's bags in an effort to open his arms wide in greeting. From the look on his face it was clear that he had high hopes that Padma had come to accept his proposal of marriage.

"I have come," Padma said quickly before anyone else could speak, "to say good-bye, and to bring you this token of remembrance."

As she spoke Padma held out to her patron the book of Tamil verses, the poetry of Antal. Mr. N. Iyer looked surprised by the gift and openly disappointed that Padma hadn't come to the station to join his family on the train. Mrs. N. Iyer was obviously very relieved. Padma's patron took the book with tears in his eyes, understanding the significance of the verses Padma had chosen to represent herself in his memory.

"I will always treasure this and the time we had together," he told her, holding the book close to his heart.

Padma then turned to Mrs. N. Iyer. The woman was standing stiffly next to her husband, looking unhappily from his face to Padma's.

"Good travels and good luck," Padma said to her patron's wife, taking both her hands in Padma's own and holding them tightly. Mrs. N. Iyer stared into Padma's eyes and a strange look passed between them.

"May Vishnu protect you," she said to Padma with genuine affection, leaning forward towards the devadasi for a moment. The two women looked at each other tearfully, neither able to give the other what she most desired. Then Mrs. N. Iyer gathered her children and her sad husband onto the train. Padma stood on the platform watching the train disappear long after she could no longer see her patron and his family.

'A family with a new future waiting for them,' Padma thought. 'How fortunate.'

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A few days after Mr. N. Iyer's departure, the priests in the temple finally came to a decision: the time had come for the devadasis to leave the temple.

At first Padma could hardly believe her ears, but her mother had a different response. She remained calm and went away with the priests to discuss this all important announcement. Padma suspected that her mother had been preparing for some time for this interview of monumental proportions, where she was forced to beg for the futures of so many women.

Padma waited impatiently with the other twenty dancers in the changing area of the cinnaveedu. Uma was pacing back and forth with angry, stomping feet, occasionally bursting out with a comment about the priests before returning to her pacing.

"How dare they! After all these years of us giving *them* money!" Uma ranted. "What right do they have to send wives of the god into the street!"

"Hush," Vimala said to Uma, passing her some coffee.

"It's too hot for coffee!" Uma retorted, pushing her friend's hand away.

Vimala, obviously hurt by her friend's reaction, turned and walked away. As she moved through the room offering drinks to the other devadasis, she quickly realized that nobody was interested in anything but Kamala's return.

Finally, as evening came on, Kamala returned to the women's quarters. She looked exhausted and disheartened.

"Amma, would you like to sit down?" Padma asked with concern.



"No, Padma. There's something I have to do first," Kamala responded. She walked to the center of the room and held up both her arms to get the attention and the silence of the other devadasis.

"As you all know, Padma's generous patron, Mr. N. Iyer, has returned to Delhi and has ended his arrangement with our household."

Padma looked both embarrassed and confused. She hadn't expected a discussion of her private arrangements. What did this have to do with the priests sending the devadasis from the temple?

"The priests have come to the conclusion that the devadasis of our cinnaveedu have had so much bad luck in the past year that we can no longer act as nityasumangalis, the ever auspicious. They worry that our misfortunes will infect the ceremonies. Their main concerns are the unexpected death of the old Taikkizhavi, the riot and the loss of my Padma's child."

"But how can they say that?" one of the other dancers spoke up with anger. "Those things were last summer, almost a year ago!"

"That was what I explained to the priests," Kamala said tiredly. "But it's my idea that because so few of you now have constant patrons, the priests no longer see the financial benefits of keeping the devadasis in the temple. As we all know, the climate outside its protective walls has been turning against us for some time, and the priests are worried about their own positions of power if they attempt to defend our place in the temple."

"I have voiced my concerns to the priests about the true nature of their conclusions and they have, more or less, acknowledged that I'm right."

"But where will we go?" one of the devadasis cried out.

"Our birth families can't take us back! And the monsoons are on their way!" one of the adopted dasis said in desperation.

"Some of us have all our family here! Where will we go?"

"At least you have more land!"

The women in the room fell into immediate bickering, turning against each other as they sought a way out of this sudden catastrophe. Kamala once again raised her arms, calling out for silence. The women quieted, anxious to see if their Taikkizhavi had a solution to their immediate crisis.

"I have negotiated with the priests for some more time. I argued that it was badly conceived to start new practices so late in the year and that Dipavali, a time when the gods are winning their greater battle, would be the best time to

enact such a sudden change from practices that have been ongoing for centuries. Unfortunately, it was not my argument but a large sum of the money that Mr. N. Iyer left for Padma that has convinced them to give us these extra months. For her generosity, we own Padma our gratitude."

Padma looked surprised at her mother's donation, but didn't speak out against the Taikkizhavi. She had no desire for the money, but was surprised that her amma had promised it without asking her. Kamala continued with her speech.

"The plan will therefore be this: all devadasis will now be responsible for keeping their own earnings. I'll hold them for you if you like, but no more money will be given to the priests to pay for offerings and their personal expenses. Each woman will seek out her own arrangements, and at the end of five months time, each will go her own way. I have explained to the priests that if they cast us from the temple, we will be immediately forced to enact our legal rights to the lands surrounding the temple complex. When I mentioned this they were furious. I think they never expected that we would decide we had rights to anything they assumed would be theirs. I know how difficult this law has been on us, seeing the men in our families stepping forward to take lands that they never worked for, never earned. But we now need this law to protect our interests. If we had been left alone, the temple would stand, but because we are being forced to leave, we will tear the stones down around us with our bare hands if we have to! This refuge is not the only home in India that Vishnu maintains!"

The women cheered and stomped their feet. In the main temple the priests, still fuming about their meeting with Kamala, heard a great shout rise up from the women's quarters. Their minds were seething with anger over the loss of the lands around the temple. Although the priests were devoted to the deity, many had dreamt of the large homes and new lands that would be theirs when the devadasis left. They underestimated Kamala's calculations. It was obvious that the new Taikkizhavi had understood their intended plan for some time now and had come up with an alternate response than the empty-handed walking out that the priests had planned for the devadasis. Suddenly their actions didn't seem so profitable, and many were having second thoughts about the wisdom of casting the devadasis from the temple. They all knew that their explanation that the dancers were not auspicious any more was a ludicrous accusation, and many began to fear Vishnu's anger at the loss of his wives. If a god was deprived of the women he loved in his own home, might he not leave the house and seek them elsewhere? Many of the priests began to fear that they had cast themselves into a course of events that could only end badly for them.

Over the next few months Kamala carefully paced out the length of each woman's allotted land and property, making arrangements for its sale. A few of the women elected to remain in the houses they had been given, so Kamala suggested that the houses that were farthest away from the temple be grouped together and that all women who wished to stay could live there. There was

great value in friendly neighbors during difficult times, and the women agreed to shuffle houses so that those who remained behind could stay together. Kamala gathered great amounts of wealth over those few months, wealth that she carefully hid from the priests. Meticulously she saw that a special payment was made to all those who entered into property negotiations with her, a payment for keeping the details of the sale private. Her actions enraged the priests, who were now bickering amongst themselves about how to get their hands on some of the money they knew Kamala was raising. But Kamala was an educated woman; she knew her rights. All sale of property was recorded in the public books and made fully legal. The priests had no power to claim any portion of that money for themselves.

"It seems like so much money," Padma said to her mother one day as they tallied the latest earnings under each woman's name. Never before had the accounts of the cinnaveedu been kept separately for each woman.

"Doesn't it?" Kamala said sadly. "But it won't go far at all in the outside world. I worry that so many of these girls are used to such a lavish lifestyle that they'll eventually end up in prostitution no matter how much security I am able to give them by Dipavali."

Padma nodded, agreeing with her mother's unhappy revelations about the devadasis' futures. Then she decided to ask a question that had been on her mind for some time.

"Your going with mama, with guru Madhavan, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course," Kamala responded with surprise. "I thought that much was obvious. Aren't you coming with us?"

"What will you do?" Padma asked, avoiding her mother's question.

"We plan to start a dance school for the upper classes," her amma answered, scanning Padma's face for any signs of disapproval. "I know your patti would scream at me if she were still alive for making such a decision, but maybe that's why she's passed on. She never wanted to live through times that would see so much change, so many things passing into history. But these Brahmin girls work hard, despite the fact that they devote fewer hours to the training than we did, and they're willing to learn. I'd do almost anything to help preserve the art that we've spent so many centuries building. It's all we have left of our legacy, our history. But we can't protect it any longer; it's out of our hands. The best I can do is see that the art of dance finds a new guardian, someone who is more able than I to see that it continues to be performed."

Padma nodded her silent consent. She knew it wasn't easy for her mother to admit that in the fragile battle between the devadasis and the rest of the world, she would be changing sides. Kamala was doing all she could for the devadasis, but it was the preservation of the art form that was so important to

her, the continuation of hundreds of years of history and tradition. Kamala could accept change as long as it guaranteed survival.

Padma reached over and gave her mother a strong hug. Kamala was pleased to observe that her daughter's health seemed to have returned to normal. Padma was now a good six inches taller than her mother, who had begun, ever so slightly, to shrink. Her hair was now greying at the sides of her head, and her face was rounder and softer than Padma remembered it being when she was a child. Everything in the cinnaveedu had seemed so perfect to her then, except for her own clumsy place in it. Had it ever really been so idyllic? Had there ever been a time when the daily sadnesses and challenges of life hadn't visited her household, or was it only in her mind that such a childhood of happiness existed?

"Will you marry mama?" Padma asked her mother.

"How can a woman who is already married take a new husband? My first is still alive!" Kamala laughed, hugging her daughter close to her. "Madhavan and I love each other greatly, but I have only one true husband, as do you. No amount of legal reform in this world can change the laws that have been witnessed and bound by the divine. Such things belong in Vishnu's hands, not in the permission of the English lords or the eyes of Hindu men."

Padma nodded her approval of Kamala's decision. The world would truly have been turned inside out if her amma was talking of taking another husband.

Despite Padma and Kamala's decision to refuse mortal husbands, a few of the devadasis in the cinnaveedu decided to marry. As the Taikkizhavi, Kamala recognized each woman's individual right to decide her own future, so she kept the details of her own plans quiet from the rest of the household. Much to Padma's surprise, Uma decided to wed one of her wealthier and more attractive patrons. The man was overjoyed when she consented, but his first wife was furious at the proposal. Eventually it was decided that he would pay for a separate household for Uma to stay in. She chose a small house in the center of town, close to the street where many of the musicians lived. Sundaram and Vimala had made it clear that it was their intention to take up residence there once Kamala had given Sundaram his share of the inheritance money. Minakshi moved in with her daughter to help Uma care for her son. It was the obvious conclusion that Uma's future would be shared with her adopted mother rather than with the family who had given her to the temple when she was only four years old.

The monsoons came early that summer and left sooner than Kamala would have liked. With their disappearance, Dipavali arrived and for the first time in centuries, the devadasis at the temple didn't dance before the god. The parades around the town continued as normal, except for the highly noticed absence of the dancers in the procession. Many of the dancers wept as they performed their final puspanjalis, held the kumbhadipa, the ritual pot lamp, for

the last time. Belongings were packed and good-byes were said. Many of the dancers left a few days or even a few weeks before Dipavali, unable to wait until the last moment to say good-bye to their beloved cinnaveedu.

Kamala and Padma were the last to leave the temple. As one of their last official acts, they wandered through the hallway where the records of the previous Taikkizhavis were kept. Here photos of the 'old mothers' hung on the walls, looking down on the dancers as they walked between the temple and the cinnaveedu.<sup>251</sup> The women started lifting the photographs off the walls, beginning with the oldest Taikkizhavi and ending with Padma's grandmother. When they reached Gauri's photo, they paused for a moment before lifting it off the wall. The picture, now slightly yellowed with age, was taken of Gauri in her full dance costume when she was young and beautiful. Her eyes stared out of the photo with stunning intensity. Kamala sniffled and began to cry.

"It's okay, amma," Padma said, reaching up to lift the photo down from the wall and handing it to her mother. "We'll put it up again when we reach the gurukulam. Patti will understand."

Kamala nodded and placed the picture in some cloth on top of the other photos. Her unusual emotional response made Padma look closely at her mother. Her amma's age was definitely beginning to show. Wrinkles had appeared on her forehead and around her eyes. The strain that breaking apart the cinnaveedu had caused was obvious in her mother's posture. She bent forward as though a great weight had been placed on her back, the burden of preserving an art form that was faced with extinction. Padma noticed with a slight smile that her amma's teeth were beginning to turn red. Since Gauri's death, Kamala had taken up the unlikely habit of chewing betel, something that Padma was sure made her amma feel closer to her deceased mother.

Kamala had ordered that their belongings be loaded into an oxen-drawn cart, and after they had collected the photos, Padma and her mother went out to the street to get into the cart themselves. As they passed though the main shrine in the temple, Padma looked up one final time at the statue of the great god, her husband Vishnu. His stone eyes looked down on the room, as they always did, and Padma was surprised to notice that rather than a look of sadness, the god seemed to be regarding them with humor. Suddenly the absurdity of the situation, the feeling she had that losing the temple meant losing her place in the world, vanished and was replaced by a feeling of deep peace.

"Come amma," Padma said, taking her mother by the arm. "The footsteps of Vishnu lead away from this dying tradition. Let's seek the feet of our husband elsewhere. Wherever he has walked to, there we will find our true home."

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<sup>251</sup>"Most homes had photographs on the walls of previous such (Taikkizhavis) before whom daily worship was offered." (Srinivasan 1985:1872)

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Guru Madhavan was waiting by the cart, and the three of them sat down in it. The driver tapped his stick against the rumps of the oxen and the buggy began to move out of the courtyard. As Kamala and Padma turned to take one last look at the home that had once been theirs, they were surprised to see a man coming out into the courtyard after them. Sundaram stood on the lowest step of the temple. Looking after the cart, he placed the palms of his hands together and bowed his head in a gesture of respect for his departing sister. Kamala, touched by her brother's final gesture, did the same.

The cart's departure had been late from the temple, and the sun dipped below the horizon not long after they passed out of the boundaries of their town. The rest of the distance to the gurukulam was covered in darkness, their path lit only by stars. Dipavali was celebrated at the time of a new moon, so there was little light shining down on the dirt road from the night sky above them. As the group neared the town where the gurukulam was, Padma noticed that the sky above it glowed red as though some great heat was rising up from the houses. As they approached the town, it became obvious that something was on fire.

"The temple!" shouted Madhavan over the crackling noise of the flames and the chaos in the street.

Kamala and Padma looked to where the guru was pointing as the cart driver struggled to get the oxen to walk through the panicking crowds in the street. Although the main building of the temple was so far untouched by fire, the attached houses, presumably the temple's cinnaveedu, and the gardens in between were alive with fire. The flames licked hungrily up outside of the mud brick houses, devouring and baking the walls. All around them Padma could smell the thick scent of ashes and dung, the particles from the house bricks flying through the air and down her throat. The crowd pushed and shouted, and people struggled in all directions. Many hurried to assist the men who were carrying water up from the river to quench the flames, while others pushed to get away from the heat of the blaze. The worst were the crowds of people who had come to stare, for they stood like statues in the middle of the road, blocking everyone else who was trying to get by. The oxen pulling Padma's cart began to roll their eyes and step backwards, refusing to go any farther into the crowd and the heat. The cart driver, recognizing that his beasts had reached the limit of their willingness to obey, swung his stick around and directed the oxen away from the fire. Padma saw that he had chosen to take a longer route around town, one which led quickly to dark abandoned lanes and silence.

The sound of the wheels and the oxen's feet were the only noises to be heard in the quiet alleyways. Padma figured that everyone in town had probably gone to see the fire. She wondered how it had gotten started. Fires were rare, especially right after the rainy season when so much of the earth was still damp and cool. It was an inauspicious sign that such an event had occurred at this time of year.

As the cart neared the outskirts of town not far from the gurukulam, a figure rushed out into the road in from of them and threw itself under the feet of the heavy oxen. The driver was startled, shouting at the oxen and pulling on the reins to back the beasts up. Madhavan leapt from the cart and raced forward to pull the person out from under the wheels of the buggy. When he got there, he realized that the figure was a woman and that, as far as he could tell, she had been extremely lucky and hadn't been run over.

The woman, who appeared dressed in rags, had very dark skin and lay in the road weeping. The cart driver was furious that someone had tried to take her own life using his cart, and waved his arms in fury indicating that he would be more than happy to finish the job. The day had been long and tiring for him and the fire meant a further late night. He wanted to return to his home and his wife to enjoy his dinner and rest his aching bones in their bed. All these delays infuriated him.

As Madhavan tried to assist the dark skinned woman, Padma realized that something was nagging at her mind. The sound of the woman crying was vaguely familiar and it wriggled through her thoughts searching for recognition. When Padma realized who it was lying beside the wheels, she leapt from the cart and ran to the woman on the ground.

"Usha!" she yelled, as she hurried forward, "Usha, it's Padma!"

"Padma?" the woman on the ground said with hope and great pain in her voice.

Padma reached down and put her arms around her friend, pulling her upright into a sitting position. She used the end of her sari to wipe Usha's face. A thick coating of black soot and tears was wiped away to reveal Usha's beautiful golden brown skin underneath. Padma wrapped her arm and the end of her sari around her friend, trying to soothe and comfort her.

Usha was trying to say something, but her words were lost under chokes and sobs. Padma leaned closer to try and understand what Usha wanted to tell her.

"I burned it," Usha whispered to her friend, so softly that only Padma and Madhavan were able to hear.

"Burned what?" Padma asked quietly, afraid of what the answer might be.

"I burned the garden. They tried to take it from me, you see, to send me away from my beloved plants. I had no choice," Usha muttered with grief, before collapsing into tears again.

Madhavan and Padma looked at each other. It was clear that Usha didn't know that the cinnaveedu had also gone up in flames. It was even possible that someone had been injured or killed in the huge fire that was now threatening to destroy the temple itself. If anyone discovered the truth, Usha would have been put in jail, maybe even killed for her actions. Padma stared at her guru with pleading eyes. Usha was obviously not in her right mind and Kamala and the driver were coming down from the cart to see what was going on. Madhavan stared back at Padma for a moment and then nodded his head. Foregoing the rules that a devadasis should never be touched, the guru lifted his old student up into his arms and carried her to the cart. Padma walked beside him, supporting Usha's head and trying to whisper that she would be taken care of, that Padma had come to protect her.

Kamala was very surprised that Madhavan brought the girl into the buggy. She had heard Padma shout Usha's name but hardly believed that it was possible. When Kamala realized the state she was in, she immediately helped Usha into the cart and started giving her words of encouragement and reassurance. The cart driver was puzzled by this latest turn of events, but he was quick and shrewd. He lost no time in turning to bargain with Madhavan that one more passenger meant one more fare. Madhavan was anticipating this reaction and already had a generous amount of money prepared to hand to the driver. The driver was so surprised that he even forgot to ask for more, and started the oxen moving on towards the gurukulam without bothering to barter.

The gurukulam was all but abandoned when the cart arrived. All the musicians had gone to help put out the fire, carrying water up from the river in whatever containers anyone could find. Only Madhavan's mother, slowed greatly by her age and her great bulk, came out from the house to greet the cart. Madhavan quickly took his mother aside and had a few words with her. Padma was never sure what her guru had said, but his amma went straight to the kitchens to heat some water. By this time Usha was able to walk on her own, and Padma helped her friend through to the bathhouse, leaving Madhavan and Kamala to unload the possessions they had brought from the cinnaveedu.

Unpacking the cart and bringing the possessions inside the house took a great deal of time, but even though it was a job that neither Kamala or Madhavan would normally have done, they worked hard to speed the process along. Although Kamala didn't ask Madhavan about the need to hurry, she sensed that the unexpected meeting with Usha made it important for their arrival to appear earlier in the day.

Padma took Usha through to the back of the house and waited for Madhavan's mother to bring out the warm water. Padma noticed the way the flesh under the old lady's arms hung down like open fans, swaying slightly as she moved. Madhavan's mother put on a serious face, having been given directions from her son to take care of Usha, but Padma could tell she was very happy to have two of her old girls back with her, three if Kamala was included in the count. Padma helped Usha out of her torn sari and the women bathed her, cleansing



the dark soot off her skin and lathering her hair so that the scent of smoke was washed out. Usha had stopped crying and stayed silent as the women cared for her. By the time they were finished, she had settled down enough to offer them a sad smile in thanks.

"Hardly the reunion we had imagined," Usha commented to her friend as Padma dried her back and hair.

"No," Padma said, smiling. "Wait here a moment and I'll be right back."

With that Padma hurried out of the room, leaving Usha to enjoy the chatter of Madhavan's mother, gossip from the gurukulam and memories of a time Usha thought was behind her forever. Padma walked through the gurukulam, searching for something.

"Amma," she asked as her mother came in through the great wooden doors leading to the courtyard, "where are my saris?"

"In the box in your old room," Kamala said, putting down the arm-full of packages she'd been carrying. "How is she?"

"Much better," Padma responded with a long look, letting her eyes give a true answer to her mother's question. Kamala gazed into them and recognized what she had feared, that Usha was in some kind of serious trouble.

Padma ran up the stairs to her old room and found the box of her clothes. She looked through her neatly folded saris and chose the bright magenta colored one, the one she had been wearing the day that Mr. N. Iyer had come to the garden to ask her to marry him. Padma loved the color; it was so bright and cheerful. She brought the sari back down to Usha and helped her to wrap it. When Usha was dressed and ready to emerge from the bathhouse, the three women went to the kitchens where Madhavan's mother put on some coffee. Kamala and Madhavan soon joined them and the group ate a small snack in silence. Soon they heard the sounds of the musicians returning from the fire.

"Time for bed," Madhavan's mother commanded, her look conveying the knowledge that it was more than just the late hour that ushered them out of the kitchen. Padma and Usha hurried upstairs to their old room. Inside they found the same old four beds, all empty except for a few small boxes of Padma's belongings that her mother had carried up for her.

"Almost like being children again," Padma observed.

"Almost," Usha said sadly.

Rather than sleeping in two beds that night, Usha lay down and Padma curled around her. The warmth between their bodies helped soothe both women

to sleep, and the familiar scents of each other's skin led them to dream of happier, carefree times.

Morning came and nobody spoke of finding Usha in the street. The musicians, some of whom already knew her from the temple, found nothing odd in her visit to the gurukulam to see her old teacher and his newly arrived family. Most of the men were too busy telling heroic stories about how they had saved the temple from the fire and how they had bravely fought back flames that were ten, no, twenty, no, thirty feet high. They hardly noticed Usha's presence.

Nobody had been killed during the fire, although some of the men who had tried to put it out had burns on their arms and hands. None of the injuries were very severe and neither was the damage to the houses. Only the trees in the garden had been completely destroyed. The police were actively looking for the person who had set the fire, and there were rumors that someone inside the temple community had started the blaze. Usha and Padma listened intently to the stories as they sat having their breakfast. During the night they had discussed what few options were open to them now that neither had a temple to dance in or patrons to support them. Finally Padma had come up with a solution. After breakfast she approached her mother, and the two went alone for a walk in the gardens behind the gurukulam. The sky above them was clear and cloudless, its perfect blue reflection lying on the surface of the full pond. The water was so high in it this year that it lapped at the roots of the trees that surrounded it, kissing their feet with its watery lips. Padma stretched over and dipped her toes into the pond, watching the line of reflection creep up her foot and over her toe rings. Beside her, her mother did the same.

"Amma," Padma said, breaking the pleasant silence of their stroll, "I think it's time that Usha and I went on a pilgrimage. There's nowhere else for us to go."

Kamala nodded. It was the conclusion that she had also reached and although it made her unhappy to think of her life without her beloved daughter, Padma was still young and needed to walk her own path to its end.

"I thought you might decide that," she said sadly, looking up into the eyes of her taller daughter. "I'll set aside some money for you to take with you. I have no need of my inheritance now that Madhavan will care for me as he would treat a wife. Your patti would be glad to see the last of her money put to good use."

Padma smiled and put her hand into the crook of her mother's elbow. The two continued their walk through the garden, enjoying each other's company for the last time. Because they both recognized the times they were living in, there was no need to waste such precious moments with excess conversation. All that needed to be said was conveyed in a few moments, before the only sounds in the garden were once again their bare feet moving through the grass and the gentle winter breeze making abhinaya with the branches of the trees above.

Padma and Usha's departure from the gurukulam happened quickly, and their parting with their loved ones was brief. Guru Madhavan bowed deeply before each of them, putting on his expression of spiritual peace. His presence helped to calm Padma's grief, and to ease her painful thoughts of being separated from her mother. Her amma cried, softly and silently, like a drizzling rain that falls persistently and delicately from the sky above. In comparison, Madhavan's mother gushed like a waterfall, weeping demonstratively over the girls' departure.

"Don't you have any family to say good-bye to?" Padma asked Usha with concern. Usha shook her head sadly.

"When there were no more patrons the priests sent us to the steps of the temple to earn money. My amma got sick. She died a few months ago. There's no one else I care about there anymore."

Padma nodded, and stretched out a hand to help Usha into the cart.

Padma's things were already packed, and Usha hadn't brought anything with her from her cinnaveedu when she rushed from the flaming gardens and flung herself under Madhavan's cart. They arrived at the train station, where Usha claimed half of Padma's belongings for her own and the two bought their tickets for the outside world.

"I've never been out of Madras before," Usha said uncertainly, as Padma stepped up the ticket window. Padma noticed her friend's anxiety and tried to distract her.

"I should like very much to meet Mirabai's mountain lifter," Padma answered with a grin. "Shall we ask if they have a train to take us to Brindavan?"

Usha returned her friend's smile.

"Maybe we'll find a quiet shrine somewhere where we can settle down," Usha said with hope. "And we could buy a house and have our own little garden. You could even learn to cook."

Padma smiled and looked out towards the horizon where an unknown future lay waiting under the rising sun. She understood that despite the advantages they had, education and money to spare, the world was harsh and the uncertain path of their future stretched out ominously along the black metal railway tracks. The chances of their survival, their ultimate happiness, were few... few, but possible. Words came to Padma mind as she contemplated what lay ahead of them, and she quoted from the poet Antal.

"Is it not better in this very birth

to serve Govinda<sup>252</sup> in little intimate ways  
than wait for a life beyond?  
If one day  
he would fold me into his radiant chest,  
that would fulfill me.  
Else, looking straight at me,  
uttering the truth,  
he should give me leave to go -  
that also would I accept."<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup>name for Vishnu

<sup>253</sup>Antal, from the poem 'The Agony of Desire' (Dehejia 1990:126)

## Epilogue

The Prevention of Dedication Act, ensuring the complete and final end to the devadasi tradition, was eventually passed in Madras in the year 1947<sup>254</sup>. Ironically, it was one of the first Acts passed by the newly empowered Indian government after Independence. What the British had fought to suppress was eventually eradicated entirely by the Hindu governments that came to power in the areas where temple dancing occurred.

Although the Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947 marks a clear end to the devadasi tradition from the perspective of historical pin-pointing, in actuality temple dancing ceased to be performed long before that time. By the year 1936<sup>255</sup> most, if not all, temples in the Madras area no longer housed dancing girls. This time period marks the end of the era when becoming a devadasi meant a long and intense training process involving dance, language and history education, and literacy. It was during this period that the collapse of the temple structure resulted in great changes to what it meant to be a devadasi.

In the years following the period when the meaning of 'devadasi' underwent such changes, dancing girls who were initiated illegally no longer had access to the protections and privileges their earlier sisters had enjoyed. Because of their lack of formal training in a profession and a lack of temple structure surrounding them, those girls who found themselves called devadasis after the period of decline have become what reformers always believed them to be: prostitutes who suffer great abuses from their society and who are basically outcast women whom anyone can go to for a service<sup>256</sup>. In some parts of India the unofficial dedication of devadasis still continues<sup>257</sup>, and while some of these women may proudly trace their roots back to the time when they were among the most well-regarded members of the royal court, these women are basically forced to become street prostitutes who have little hope of a better place in life. Devadasis who were dedicated in the years prior to 1947 are, by our time, very old and sparsely scattered across India. The film Given to Dance<sup>258</sup> conducts interviews with some of the few original devadasis who are left, many of whom have died in recent years since the film was produced.

The evidence that my research has provided has shown me beyond doubt that the temple dancers of earlier times were so far different from the devadasis of today that the same title can hardly be used; it is so misleading in its associations. The devadasis dedicated today suffer greatly and are, by the research of modern accounts, in a very difficult and harsh situation in Southern India<sup>259</sup>. As for the art form of temple dancing itself, it can no longer be found in

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<sup>254</sup>Kersenboom-Story 1987:xxi

<sup>255</sup> Srinivasan n.d.:103-195

<sup>256</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1874

<sup>257</sup>Srinivasan 1985:1875

<sup>258</sup>Madhavi Mudgal, video Given to Dance, 1986

<sup>259</sup>Forbes 1996:181-183

the skills of these women, but has transitioned into the next closest form: Bharata Natyam<sup>260</sup>. This form of dance is taught and performed across India and was formulated around the time of the decline of the devadasis prior to Independence. It is now seen in public concerts that have no connection with the temple, although reverence and offering of the dance to the deity is still shown by the opening dance. The dancers themselves are from the middle and upper classes. Bharata Natyam has also opened up doors for men to become involved in the practice, rather than just the teaching, of dance<sup>261</sup>.

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<sup>260</sup>Bose 2002:11-16, Srinivasan 1998:103-105

<sup>261</sup>Bose 2002:11-16, Srinivasan 1998:103-105

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## Appendix I

Interview with Madhavi Mudgal

Conducted November 4th, 2001  
Delhi, India

L: For the purposes of the interview, I have to ask you if you know that this is being recorded.

M: Yes, that's okay.

L: So, I think I'd like to begin by asking you about how you got involved in dance, and how old you were when you first started to dance.

M: I was, ... I think before I knew anything else I was already dancing. At the age of four I was already dancing, and that is recorded because there was an international dance competition and I got the gold medal for the children's section. So therefore, I can definitely say that I was dancing, but it was not Orissi. But that's because as a child I learned Bharata Natyam, the other styles of dancing.

L: Yes.

M: Since I was born into a musical family my parents were musicians. My father is no more, but my parents were musicians, and my father started this institute in 1939, this present institute that we are in. It's one of the oldest institutes in Delhi for classical Indian dance. I was born in this atmosphere and I guess I just naturally picked it up.

L: And why did your father decide to start the dance institute in 1939?

M: Basically because of music. He had learned music in Puri and his teacher, his guru, advised him to, because he was from the North. He was from Uttar Pradesh. At that time music didn't enjoy the popularity, the classical music, you know, because the royalty was the (kind of) patron of these arts. So to bring it about, an awareness in the common man, to make it available, the teaching of this great heritage was started at this institute.

L: And how did dance come to be involved in the institute?

M: When, in the Indian context, when we refer to the term music, we refer to the term sangeet, which combines the art of vocal music, dance, and you know... music instrumental, vocal, and dance combines together in this. A music institute means an institute for vocal music, instrumental music and classical dance.

L: Okay! And what styles of dance were originally incorporated into the school?

M: Originally we had Bharata Natyam and Kathak.

L: Okay... and you said you learned these two styles... I'm sorry...

M: Bharata Natyam and Kathak, originally.

L: And in the years that you have been dancing, have your main interests changed, or your main focus changed? Did you learn Orissi dance?

M: I started, you see, I started very young with the other styles, but Orissi I started only when I was fifteen... much, much later. Because when I started, the style was hardly known, not known in Delhi at all. So... that style I started learning much later.

L: Is it widely known in Delhi now?

M: Oh, yes! Now its really, really agreed. Every colony has some teacher or another.

L: So, I guess your family was very supportive of you learning dance, all things considered.

M: Yes, obviously.

L: Why I'm asking that is because for a while when devadasis were being made illegal the practice was, for a woman, ... well, not really considered respectable.

M: Yes, yes.

L: So I was wondering how, when your father started the school, what the feelings were about women being involved in that.

M: Not even dance, but also music learning was not considered a great thing by so-called 'respectable' households. So when he started he had great difficulty in getting people to come to the institute to learn music. Initially it was very difficult, but then he had that kind of reputation that... earlier the parents would accompany their children, their child, to the classes, but later one, you know, they didn't. He was given a lot of credibility to do that, to spread that kind of respectability to music. Because the art form, you know, is really, absolutely great. But as you said, the associations are not... of the right kind.

(laughter)

L: Just for the purpose of, uh, my records, what is your father's full name?

M: Vinay Chandra ( last name indecipherable for me - possibly Mowdgalliyay)

L: Just because I may need to write that down at some point!

M: Yes, alright, yes.

L: Um, yes... my next questions were basically about what types of women came to the dance school when it was put in place by your father? Upper caste? What types of women did he appeal to and what types of women came?

M: Well, I guess it was all castes, not specifically upper caste. But you know, this question.. I think it's pertinent that I mention this, because the caste system as you perceive it...

L: Yes...

M: ... we didn't. It didn't matter at all to us who belonged to what caste. And I'll just quote to you an incident, that I didn't know what caste I belonged to until I was eighteen years of age. Yes, and that too was when I went to the U.S. and I was asked this question "What caste you belong to" (with American accent), that I had to ask my father "which caste do I belong to? Well, we happen to be Brahmins, but that's a separate matter. I'm just trying to build a sense that, well, you know it doesn't matter. Maybe in the villages, you know, where it really matter to life. But in the city and the way we were brought up, we never even knew. So, people from all kinds of backgrounds, really rich families, respectable families, and people with lower income came to learn.

L: The reason I asked is...

M: Yes, I know. For Women's studies.

L: Well, Amrit Srinivasan, she's one of the scholars who writes a lot on devadasi, it's her theory that that particular art form was channeled largely into Brahmin families and adopted by Brahmin caste young women. I was wondering if that was your experience, or if it was, as you said, much more general than that.

M: Yes, yes. We didn't, at least in Delhi, we were not brought up at all in it. Maybe because of my father's kind of secular approach.

L: He sounds like a very amazing man.

M: Yes. That's him (pointing to picture on the wall). He passed away in 1995.

(pause)

L: yes, so, in the types of performances that you do now, what types of performances, you mentioned secular... you mention a secular sort of environment, surroundings. Are they devotional pieces that you perform?

M: The kind of repertoire that we have is not necessarily that different from what was performed in the temples, but it was not performed in the temples but was a ritualistic types pattern. And it was, you know, the whole process of performance was a ritual. It was not for the intellectual relish of an audience. Like an art form. I'm not born a devadasi, right; I choose to dance this form. So it is as an art form. And of course the mythology. In the dance we show mythology, and our mythology is so closely related to our spiritualism that we cannot separate it. So what we have inherited, in terms of tradition, in India and in other things, that I would like to mention that we don't break a tradition to make a new one, unlike in the West. We just continue. We imbibe what we inherit. We give the inputs of the present generation, and then we continue.

L: Yes, that was my next question, is to what extent do you feel that it's possible to use terms such as secular and religious as separate in India, and it seems that you're saying that it's very much mixed all in together, that you can't really...

M: Yes, it is all mixed in together. And I think that only an outsider really looks at in those terms. We don't even think about it.

L: Yes. It's a shame, because I think that a lot of the article that have been written as scholarship on devadasi, and on dance in general, have been written by Indian scholars, but for a Western audience, and so they artificially adopt these terms...

M: Mmmm, yes...

L: ... that then might not be descriptive of what their experience was.

M: Reality, yes. Quite right. And most have them have either been scholars educated in the West, and so they're thinking "all funded by a Western organization." It's all very... you know... (pause)

L: Yes.

(There is a pause, as someone telephones and Madhavi speaks to them. This section is not recorded.)

The second part of the recording deals primarily with women's space in present day India, and has not been included in the thesis content.