

GENEALOGIES AND LEGACIES:
A POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MOHINIYATTAM

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Rajesh Kavilveedu
for asking me to pursue this research,
For your love, warmth, and companionship.

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ABSTRACT

ANISHA RAJESH

GENEALOGIES AND LEGACIES: A POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MOHINIYATTAM

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This dissertation develops an alternate history of the classical dance form Mohiniyattam native to the state of Kerala in India to acknowledge the amalgamation of the kinesthetic contributions of different practitioners in Mohiniyattam. I explore how the identities of the indigenous Mohiniyattam dancers shifted as they became implicated in the changing discourses of colonialism and nationalism and how they became the subjects in larger debates about sexuality, womanhood, and the nation. In this project, I situate Mohiniyattam in the larger context of nationalist movements in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, which paved the way to the independence of India in 1947 and connect it with the notion of Victorian morality, which seeped into the social ethos of the nation during the colonial period. I also focus on the shift of a major community in Kerala society from matriarchy to patriarchy as well as on the division of India into various states on the basis of regional languages after independence; I explore how these socio-political issues are all intertwined with the history of bodies in Mohiniyattam as well as the reconstruction of the form. In this dissertation, I pay attention to the choreographies, dance pieces, and movement vocabularies of various dancers whose contributions are considered as invaluable to the development of Mohiniyattam. My research mainly relied on oral histories and archival research to develop a qualitative study of four practitioners who were identified as pioneer contributors to the field of Mohiniyattam in the postcolonial era: Kalyanikuttyamma, Kalamandalam Satyabhama, Kanak Rele, and Bharathi Shivaji. Though the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in the 1950s parallels the renaissance and reincarnation of many classical dance

forms in India, I argue that the historical, cultural, and geographic elements of Mohiniyattam are specific to the form.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY: MAPPING POSTCOLONIAL

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MOHINIYATTAM

Embodied Memories

As a student of Mohiniyattam, I grew up hearing stories from my teachers about the dancers of the past, particularly the debased stature of the dance at the turn of the twentieth century. Although there are brief written references to Mohiniyattam dancers before the 1950s, there are no detailed accounts in the cultural history of Kerala detailing the corporeal interactions and the kinesthetic legacies of these women. The works by Rajan Gurukkal and M.R Raghava Varier, *The Cultural History of Kerala* (1999), *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present* (2020) contains no reference to the dance form called Mohiniyattam. The archival evidence that forms the basis of the available written history of Mohiniyattam marks these dancers as performing the precursor of the present day classical Mohiniyattam; however, there is no acknowledgment of the dancers' kinesthetic, cultural, and historic significance. My study thus aims to cover tradition and transition in Mohiniyattam, reviewing its history and the contributions of performers who furthered the postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam. During this process, I explore how the identities of the indigenous Mohiniyattam dancers shifted as they became implicated in the changing discourses of colonialism and nationalism and how they became the subjects in larger debates about sexuality, womanhood, and the nation. Thus, the purpose of my research is to explore the postcolonial identity of Mohiniyattam, acknowledging the missing links and missing bodies in the colonial history of Mohiniyattam as I also situate myself as shifting between historiographer and practitioner of this dance form.

Leading up to and after the independence of India in 1947 several classical dance forms were revived and reconstructed. The reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in the 1950s at Kerala Kalamandalam (a major arts training center in Kerala where Mohiniyattam was institutionalized in the 1930s and reconstructed in the 1950s), and the erasure of its earlier history in the cultural history of Kerala points to missing links and missing bodies in this history. The reconstruction of the dance form was initiated from an older repertoire of Mohiniyattam and has only passing references to some of the dance items and dancers. In this process the body of the Mohiniyattam dancer of the nineteenth century was written, rewritten and overwritten with the on-going negotiations incorporating new images built during the process of nation building of postcolonial India and the State of Kerala where it belongs.

My readings in historiography, postcolonial theory, and subaltern theory prompted me to embark on a critical exploration of the bodily history of Mohiniyattam, past and present, situating it in the larger context of society and acknowledging its role in representing nationhood, statehood, and gender. To enable this, I engage in reimagining the Mohiniyattam repertoire in the mid and late 1800s (discussed in detail in chapter two), together with an exploration of the repertoire after its institutionalization in Kerala Kalamandalam in 1932, followed by its reconstruction initiated in 1950 (discussed in chapter three and subsequent chapters).

This dissertation develops an alternate history of Mohiniyattam that challenges historical accounts that do not acknowledge the amalgamation of the kinesthetic contributions of different bodies from the past, especially the choreographies, dance pieces, and movement vocabularies of various dancers detailed in the chapters that follow. I situate Mohiniyattam in the larger context of nationalist movements in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, which paved the way to the independence of India in 1947 and connect it with the notion of Victorian morality, which seeped

into the social ethos of the nation during the colonial period. I also focus on the shift of a major community in Kerala society from matriarchy to patriarchy as well as on the division of India into various states on the basis of regional languages after independence; I explore how these socio-political issues are all intertwined with the history of bodies in Mohiniyattam as well as the reconstruction of the form. Though the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in the 1950s parallels the renaissance and reincarnation of many classical dance forms in India, I argue that the historical, cultural, and geographic elements of Mohiniyattam are specific to the form. The dance was not associated with worship or temples in Kerala unlike many of the classical dances in India, and it owes much of its movement vocabulary to the coastal landscape of Kerala and the regional language, Malayalam. Choreographing its history involves exploring how this dance formed an accrued symbolic significance for gender and state identities in Kerala.

Researcher Positionality and Ethical Issues

I am a “native” transnational, born and brought up in rural Kerala. I was initiated into Indian classical dance training at a very young age concentrating on the Bharathanatyam style of Indian classical dance. After initial years of training in Bharathanatyam, I was introduced to the movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam, an indigenous dance form from Kerala performed exclusively by women. I have had rigorous training in both these dance forms, and I teach, practice, and perform both these dance forms. My training was accompanied by a learning of Indian classical music, mythological stories connected to Hindu religion, and the philosophy of Hinduism. As a researcher, I am an “insider” who has cultural and familial ties with Kerala. I have experienced the many rhythms (often slow) of Kerala country life and the cycle of festivals and harvests through my childhood, adolescence, youth, and adulthood. As a dance PhD student at Texas Woman’s University, my subject position in the field is built on this training.

Many of the participants in my interviews were familiar faces and are even my own teachers or mentors. As a practitioner of Mohiniyattam, to avoid my subjective approach and affinity towards a particular style of Mohiniyattam I garnered a neutral approach to the many styles of Mohiniyattam and considered those many styles as a contribution to the field while also empathetically paying attention to the labor of many practitioners of Mohiniyattam, well known, unknown, and unacknowledged. During this period, I started exploring the vocabulary of various performers connecting their choreographic innovations and patterns to the historic journey of this form. As a result, I was able to expand my knowledge on various schools of Mohiniyattam and was able to understand the relevance of the contributions of various practitioners of the form.

Methodological Approach: Creating a Postcolonial History of Mohiniyattam

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research is to create a postmodern, postcolonial history of Mohiniyattam through oral history interviews and archival research. This study will contribute to the literature on classical Indian dance more broadly, and Mohiniyattam specifically by tracing the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam from independence through the present day through the voices and practices of the key figures involved in its reconstruction.

Research Questions

- Who were the main figures in reviving and codifying Mohiniyattam in the independence and postcolonial periods?
- How did the postcolonial movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam develop? How was the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam affected by nationalism and the postcolonial nation-state?

- How have decisions about costuming and hairstyle contributed to defining Mohiniyattam?
- What is the relationship of place to the dance form?
- How have postcolonial ideas of femininity as evidenced in contemporary Kerala society influenced the nature and repertoire of Mohiniyattam?
- What is the relationship of gender to the dance form? How is gender represented in the dance choreographies, narratives, and performances? How has this changed over time and space?

Rationale for Research Design: Postcolonial and Postmodern Historiography through Oral History and Archival Research

Postcolonial studies is an umbrella term involved in the cultural analysis of countries with a history of colonialism that still preserves the remnants and values of colonialism after the decolonization process. The scope of postcolonial studies spans to the areas re-reading literature, visual and performing arts, analyzing the legacy and ideology of colonialism as still lurking beneath, both directly and indirectly in the experiences portrayed in these works. Postcolonial studies in this sense demands a critical scrutiny of cultural endeavors as “the act of reading in postcolonial contexts is by no means a neutral activity. How we read is just as important as what we read” (Mcleod 2010, 74).

Thus, my study of the postcolonial history of Mohiniyattam involving the reading and re-reading of this dance form is informed by the foundational works of postcolonial scholars that provide a theoretical understanding of the concept of postcolonialism and how it applies to the field of critical dance studies. I am informed by Edward Said’s phenomenal work *Orientalism* (1978) and *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins, which considers

the time frame from the moment of colonization to the present as a continuous process preoccupied by the remnants of imperialism. I am also informed by Homi Bhabha's theoretical discourse in his work, *The Location of Culture* (2004), "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," and "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," where he discusses the rationality and positionality of colonial discourses, the notions of identity, social agency and national affiliation, and the theory of cultural hybridity. Bhabha's findings about concepts of "ambivalence" and "mimicry" in colonial discourses and the resultant hybridized identity emanating from the cultural identity of the colonized and the cultural identity of the colonizer were worthy of applying to Mohiniyattam considering the colonial and postcolonial course of its history. In the discipline of postmodern historiography Homi Bhabha's consideration on the relationship between postcolonial and postmodern practices seems to be more fruitful as he brings together both discourses to open a space that addresses and critiques the conventional narratives of the West. Bhabha's space, what he calls as the "third space," opens the possibility to converge the practices of postmodernism and postcolonialism from where the voices of the marginalized and silenced can emerge too. As postcolonialism is described as a theory relevant to anyone "joined by the common political and ethical commitment to challenging and questioning the consequences of domination and subordination" (McLeod 2010, 6), I also found Subaltern Studies project¹ as a fertile area to

¹ The Subaltern project initiated as a framework for historical analysis of the Third World has spread its terrain into historical and anthropological scholarship. Subaltern, a term borrowed from Antonio Gramsci refers to the populations in colonized countries that are socially, politically, and geographically on the margins of the epicenter of colonial power. The Subaltern occupied a silent position on the margins of the society where the possibility of hearing their voices was impossible. Postcolonial studies initiated the scope of inquiry of Subaltern Studies as an intervention in South Asian historiography to enable a revisionist history told from the perspective of the colonized.

consider when engaging with postcolonial and postmodern historiography. Gayathri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" and Walter Mignolo's *Local Histories/ Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (2012) explores and problematizes the notion of "colonial difference," traces the emergence of border thinking, and argues that in any civilization affected by the remnants of cultural imperialism; there is a continual emergence of subaltern voices at the border of modernity and coloniality. In continuation with the idea of the Subaltern I am hugely informed Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty's work *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997) who considers the terms "genealogies" and "legacies" in a dynamic way suggesting the urgency of "conscious thinking and rethinking of history and historicity" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, 20) acknowledging the uniqueness of Third World women's experiences in different geographical and cultural spaces. Alexander and Mohanty revisit the ideas of nationalism, the postcolonial nation-state, and the problematic relationship Third World women encounter with it in an era of globalization. Alexander and Mohanty suggest that Western feminists write about Third World women as a singular entity and the concept of "international feminism," which calls for "global sisterhood," born in the West is "premised on a center/periphery model where women of color or Third World women constitute the periphery" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, 22). As I re-think the history of Mohiniyattam, my dissertation is inspired by the observations of Alexander and Mohanty regarding genealogy and legacies.

While postcolonial studies provided me with the theoretical framework for my research my approach to postmodern historiography is strongly influenced by Keith Jenkins' *Re-Thinking History* (2004), Susan Leigh Foster's *Choreographing History* (1995), and Alexandra Carter's *Rethinking Dance History* (2004). Jenkins considers histories as "situated literatures," that is, as

narratives that are “composed, created, constituted, constructed” (Jenkins 2004, 109) and that relate to the stories of people, events, and even nonliving entities. Jenkins’ argument of considering history as “situated literatures” points to the relevance of history in relation to time, geography, and culture as he considers history vested with the historiographer’s “philosophy or 'take' on the world present, past and future” (Jenkins 2004, 30). Jenkins provides an understanding of traditional, conceptual, and postmodern histories and enables the rethinking and deconstruction of the existing models of history.

Foster’s *Choreographing History* elaborates the need, scope, and possibilities of a new scholarship about dance writing in which the body is at the center. *Choreographing History* addresses the perceived neglect of the body in mainstream scholarship and aims for a discourse that "addresses a writing body as well as a body written upon" (Foster 1995, 12). Foster explains that choreographing history engages with the relationship between “body” and “history.” To materialize this relationship between the “body” and “history” the historian should “grant that history is made by bodies, and then to acknowledge that all those bodies, in moving and in documenting their movements, in learning about past movement, continually conspire together and are conspired against” (Foster 1995, 10).

Jenkins' call for rethinking and deconstruction of the existing models of history offers a wider scope in creating a postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam. Susan Foster’s concept of choreographing history considering bodily writing as a tool for inquiry also offers wide-reaching analysis of the complications, confrontations, and conquests of bodies writing history. Thus, to create a postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam following the tenets outlined by postmodern historiography and choreographing history I have used oral history and archival research as the methodologies to enable this process. These methodologies were largely

employed to gather data about Mohiniyattam dance and dancers, the social and cultural milieu in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial times; identify important incidents and persons; and connect these findings and observations into the storytelling process culminating in this postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam.

Oral History

As a researcher and dancer, I am influenced by oral history's power for storytelling. The social goal of oral history plays a prominent role in my research as the storytelling not only focuses on prominent practitioners of Mohiniyattam, it also focuses on the stories of people associated with Mohiniyattam who were unacknowledged in previous historical narratives. This focus on the undocumented practitioners of Mohiniyattam brings a social justice aspect into my project as it aims to acknowledge the kinesthetic legacies of Mohiniyattam practitioners who were left on the periphery in conventional historiography.

I have used oral history interviewing to gather and interpret the stories and memories of people associated with Mohiniyattam and their professional and personal journeys in time and space. Oral history inquiry explores the stories of people from the mainstream, margins and periphery, this methodology also coincides with the philosophical underpinnings of postmodern historiography, which calls for the historiographer to function as an interpreter who stands between the story, its participants, and the reader.

In my approach of employing oral history as one of my methodologies I am guided by Valerie Janesick's work *Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher* (2010), Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis's book *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (1997), Patricia Leavy's work *Method Meets Art: Art Based Research Practice* (2009), and Rustom Bharucha's work *Rajasthan: An Oral History* (2003). Valerie Janesick's work *Oral History for the*

Qualitative Researcher considers oral history as a tool to retell history through interview transcripts, archival data, and documents. Janesick introduces new elements to document the lives of ordinary people through oral history including “elements of testimony as oral history, oral history as a social justice project, photo voice, constructing poetry from data as found data poems, and digital oral history” (Janesick 2010, 2). In oral history as Janesick suggests, this is achieved through spoken text, written text, videotext, or all of these communication agencies. Janesick defines oral history as “the collection of stories and reminiscences of a person or persons who have firsthand knowledge of any number of experiences” (Janesick 2010, 8). In her introductory chapter “Reinventing Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher” she emphasizes oral history as a social justice project generating data with the power of storytelling and poetic diction. Janesick states that “the power of oral history lies in the power of storytelling. The power resides in the meaning made of the storytelling and what we learn from the stories” (Janesick 2010, 4).

In line with Janesick’s findings about oral history, I have adopted oral history methodology to create a collection of oral histories gathering multiple individual stories of people associated with Mohiniyattam. In doing so, I was also inspired by the idea of portraiture outlined by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis in *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (1997) to weave a quilt in the form of a story, taking elements from the participants’ narration of their stories. Portraitists according to Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis, seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions, their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the participants.

Patricia Leavy's work *Method Meets Art: Art Based Research Practice* (2009) states that art-based practices can also promote dialogue as art evokes emotional responses. Leavy suggests that connecting people on emotional and visceral levels through artistic forms of representation that cultivates empathy can enable a dialogue challenging stereotype. In my personal interviews with Mohiniyattam practitioners I used my embodied knowledge of Mohiniyattam coupled with Leavy's idea of art-based research to connect with practitioners with an empathetic approach in the process of framing questions, which benefited the process in gathering data in a more relaxed way both for the interviewer and the interviewee.

While I have borrowed Leavy's empathetic approach to participants, I have employed the nature of strategies employed by Rustom Bharucha in his work *Rajasthan: An Oral History*. (2003) to elicit the methods used in informal conversations and with regard to the local traditions of India. Rustom Bharucha in his work attempts to unveil his participants' vast experience of the Rajasthan desert, drawing on extended and freewheeling conversations with the folk musician, Komal Kothari. Informal in its discourse and packed with snippets of folk wisdom, this book brings out the diversities and play of local traditions. I have used this book as guidance in framing some of the questions and strategies in the interview process with older practitioners of Mohiniyattam from Kerala who spoke in the native language, Malayalam. Bharucha's text as an oral history framed in India alerted me to the use of informal, leisurely conversations, which made older participants more comfortable to answer questions in the presence of video recorders.

Oral history interviews with Mohiniyattam practitioners in my research are thus used to document perspectives on kinesthetic, social, and cultural issues to document the postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam. The oral history interview process with Mohiniyattam practitioners proved as a successful strategy to elicit their philosophies, guiding principles,

technique, repertoire, decisions on costuming, and their observations on the place of women in postcolonial times, which ultimately resulted in their movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam.

Archival Research

While oral history allows me to understand the lived experience of people associated with Mohiniyattam, archival research provides me with the background knowledge to trace the precolonial and colonial history of Indian dance traditions. Susan Bennett (2010) talks about the concept of archive in her essay “The Making of Theatre History.” The archive according to Bennett is a repository of conserved events from which a historiography can be created. Bennett finds that the trajectory of events and people in the archive is also incomplete as the repository in the archive holds the proposition of conservation and omission. The conservation and the omission happen not only outside of the archive but also inside of the archive especially through the custodial system of conservation in the selection process of materials used by archivists and researchers. The findings of Susan Bennett about conservation and omission in the archive is helpful especially when tracing the precolonial and colonial female dance traditions and also what was reconstructed during the postcolonial times. In this respect Diana Taylor’s, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) was a guiding text for my archival research in search of embodied memories of the fragmented past of Mohiniyattam and also the much clearer memory of the postcolonial repertoire of Mohiniyattam. Taylor’s work has substantially guided me to compare and contrast the written accounts, orature, and the embodied memory of Mohiniyattam practitioners to develop an alternative understanding of the transition of Mohiniyattam from the precolonial to the colonial and the postcolonial stages. Archival research helped me to engage in a critical rethinking about the depository of information about Mohiniyattam contained in the archive to further the rethinking of its history.

Specifically, I explored archival written accounts in the form of newspaper articles, cartoons, and accompanying texts; audiovisual material in the form of films, documentaries, video, and voice recordings about Mohiniyattam available in the archives of Kerala Kalamandalam, Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy, Kerala State Archives, and the internet archives of Indian Council for Cultural Relations. I followed the tenets of archival research outlined in Gesa E Kirsch and Liz Rohan's work, *Beyond the Archives: Research as Lived Process* (2008), which suggests that the materials or data should not only be unearthed but closely examined and that conducting archival research is not a compartmentalized endeavor, but it involves interactive eliciting of data from everyone involved. The collection of essays in *Beyond Archives* enabled me to consider my research as a lived process sustained through collecting data from the archives; taking notes from written, visual, and voice recordings; and taking photographs and photocopies of written accounts relevant to my research. These materials collected were labeled and organized diachronically first as hard copies and then converted into easily retrievable electronic copies which were also labeled diachronically.

Texas Woman's University (TWU) dance PhD alum Thom Hecht's coinage of the "archive-outside-archive" (Hecht 2012, 198) also opened a new stream of thought when approaching the archive. According to Hecht, archival research is not limited to the primary archive but extends also to the surroundings, which according to Hecht produce new understanding and new data for research. Hecht finds that "on-site experience" allowed him "not only to investigate the primary sources found in the archive, but to also gain a "lived experience of the archival surroundings" as he "developed connections between the archival findings and the actual location where the historical figure lived" (Hecht 2012, 198). This idea opened up for me the possibilities of exploring and analyzing the spaces where Mohiniyattam flourished, and

also other venues involved in the teaching and performance of the dance form. These archival spaces include the precolonial and colonial spaces where female traditions of dance flourished as well as the postcolonial *kalari* (dance instruction space) at Kerala Kalamandalam, in which both the pioneer practitioners of Mohiniyattam and contemporary practitioners of Mohiniyattam have learned and taught.

I was guided by the above frameworks to construct a plan to gather data, identify the protagonist story tellers, identify supporting storytellers, gather source materials (e.g., photographs and other audiovisual aids, archived oral histories, and oral and kinesthetic memories of old choreographies), and identify my own position as a postmodern historiographer. Oral history and archival research in this way tremendously contributed to my research working with movement artists to present their ideas.

Data Collection

Data Sources

At the heart of my research data are oral history interviews and archival evidence supporting the practice and contribution of four Mohiniyattam practitioners. I conducted oral history interviews with three of my main participants over a period of four years during my visits to India each summer from 2013 to 2017. During the course of my interview process, I also interviewed other participants who were associated with these pioneer practitioners of Mohiniyattam. The four main practitioners featured in this dissertation include Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma (Kerala), Kalamandalam Satyabhama (Kerala), Kanak Rele (Gujarat/Mumbai/London), and Bharathi Shivaji (Chennai/Delhi). I have personally conducted oral history interviews with Kalamandalam Satyabhama in 2013 and 2014, and Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji in 2017. The late Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma's (1915-1999) interviews

and choreographies are available in the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) archives and are accessible online. To gather and cross connect her practice and contributions to postcolonial Mohiniyattam, I conducted interviews with four other practitioners associated with her including her daughters and disciples Kala Vijayan and Sreedevi Rajan, and her student, dance scholar and musician Deepthi Omchery Bhalla. I also conducted interviews with Kalamandalam Sugandhi who learned with both Kalyanikuttyamma and Satyabhama. These dancers also witnessed the arrival of Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji into the practice of Mohiniyattam and their memories about various interactions with Rele and Shivaji and also the memories of various events they had witnessed together was helpful to triangulate oral stories and archival evidence. While Kalamandalam Satyabhama represents Mohiniyattam within the institutional framework of Kerala Kalamandalam, all the other dancers represent individualistic styles of Mohiniyattam. I chose these four dancers because their embodied interventions within Mohiniyattam, starting from its reconstruction in Kerala Kalamandalam from the 1930s to the 1980s, are considered groundbreaking. In particular, these four dancers created four main schools of Mohiniyattam, namely the Kalamandalam style, the Kalyanikuttyamma style, the Kanak Rele style and the Bharathi Shivaji style. In these four dance styles, the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam is reflected, and they are now practiced, performed, and taught by various dancers who demonstrate affinity with these particular styles. Out of all the pioneer practitioners Bharathi Shivaji is the only living exponent. Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma passed away in 1999 much before I started my research. Kalamandalam Satyabhama passed away in September 2015, and Kanak Rele passed away in March 2023.

I conducted the first interview with Kalamandalam Satyabhama in 2014. This participant was chosen because of her affiliation with the archival site of Kalamandalam as the

reconstruction of Mohiniyattam happened at this site. Kalamandalam Satyabhama also has the longest affiliation with Mohiniyattam (as discussed in detail in chapter five), starting with her childhood years at Kalamandalam as a student, transitioning her role to an instructor, and then head administrator of the institution. She has also witnessed all the other three participants' engagements with the form. Kalamandalam Satyabhama was my starting point, and my goal was to learn from her interview to frame questions for the later interviews. This interview process was guided by interview techniques outlined in Shannon B Merriam's *Qualitative Research* (2009), which include semi-structured and unstructured/informal interview questions. While my research goal was to explore and narrate the postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam, the semi-structured part of the interview with Kalamandalam Satyabhama was "guided by the list of questions or issues to be explored" (Merriam 2009, 89) pertaining to the past history of Mohiniyattam, reconstruction in Kalamandalam, and her role as a student and practitioner of the dance form. The unstructured/informal questions with Kalamandalam Satyabhama consisted of open-ended questions which were flexibly framed during the conversation with her. These questions predominantly were framed to ask about various other practitioners she came into contact with during her time at Kalamandalam, which included her students, other pioneer practitioners of Mohiniyattam, etc. These questions were "flexible and exploratory" (Merriam 2009, 89) and further led me to "formulate questions for later interviews" (Merriam 2009, 89) with all the other participants in my oral history interview process.

Kalamandalam Satyabhama was initially contacted by telephone and an interview was requested for July 2014. This interview was mainly focused on Mohiniyattam dance training, her life in the field of Mohiniyattam, and her philosophies of its pedagogy. Kalamandalam Satyabhama spent almost the entire day with me during the interview process. I interviewed her

at her home in Shoranur and visited Kerala Kalamandalam along with her and watched some of the classes there, which included her choreographies. The interview at her home and a few of her choreographies were recorded on audio and digital video format. The initial part of my interview with Kalamandalam Satyabhama followed a timeline from the birth of Kalamandalam in the 1930s, touched upon the topics of the institutionalization of Kathakali and Mohiniyattam, the contributions of various instructors, and the important seminars about Mohiniyattam that happened at Kalamandalam during the reconstruction process. The interview questions also focused on her contributions to Mohiniyattam repertoire in terms of the newly culled dance pieces and the pieces she worked on during the reconstruction process. The same day I interviewed Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad who was closely associated with Kerala Kalamandalam and Kalamandalam Satyabhama during the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam.

The scheduling of the interviews with the other two principal participants, Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji, presented many challenges. I was unable to contact them directly via email or phone. In order to reach Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji, I requested the assistance of Viswanath Kaladharan, who worked as the Public Relations Officer at Kerala Kalamandalam for over three decades and who had a close relationship with Rele and Shivaji. In the past, Kaladharan has written articles about the performances of Rele and Shivaji. I have also worked with Kaladharan during his visits to the US for lecture demonstrations about Kathakali at various universities. I have performed Kathakali two times with the artists who accompanied him for his lecture demonstrations. My interviews with Rele and Shivaji were thus facilitated through this association. Initially Kaladharan sought permission from Rele and Shivaji to share their emails and phone numbers with me. After they granted permission, I emailed them and scheduled interview dates for July 2017. Both Rele and Shivaji insisted that Kaladharan should also be

present during the interview with them. For this reason, I had to book a flight ticket for Kaladharan from Kerala to Mumbai and Delhi. Since he lived in Cochin (a city in Kerala), I booked his ticket from there while I flew from Thiruvananthapuram (the capital of Kerala) to Mumbai. I also booked him accommodation in a hotel in Mumbai. The interview with Rele was scheduled on July 8, 2017, and the morning of that day Kaladharan fell sick. He was vomiting on the way to Nalanda Nritta Kala Mahavidyalaya where the interview with Rele was supposed to take place. On the way to Nalanda, we stopped at a clinic and pharmacy to get medical help and got medicines for him. Upon reaching Nalanda, one of the faculty members took Kaladharan into a room to rest since he was unwell. Rele arrived at Nalanda after an hour of our arrival there. As soon as she learned of Kaladharan's illness, she permitted me to interview her alone. The evening of July 8, 2017, I had to cancel Kaladharan's travel to Delhi because he was not well. I canceled his ticket and booked another ticket back to Cochin next morning for him while I flew to Delhi the same morning to interview Bharathi Shivaji and Mohiniyattam practitioner, musician and scholar Deepthi Omchery Bhalla who was also a participant in my oral history interviews. I interviewed Shivaji and Bhalla at their residences in Delhi. My interviews with Rele and Shivaji would not have happened without Kaladharan's help as both of them were particular about who should interview them. My unique position as a researcher from a US university, which she mentioned during our conversation, led Rele to express particular interest in participating in the interview.

All the remaining oral history interviews were also conducted in July and August 2017. Kalamandalam Satyabhama's and Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad's oral history interviews led me to a group of people who had the knowledge about Mohiniyattam and its history. This group consisted of Kala Vijayan and Sreedevi Rajan, daughters and disciples of

Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma whose interviews helped me frame the story of Kalyanikuttyamma. Another interviewee was with Deepthi Omchery Bhalla, a disciple of Kalyanikuttyamma who embarked on an independent journey in Mohiniyattam as an independent practitioner and scholar. Another participant from Kerala was Kalamandalam Sugandhi who was trained in Mohiniyattam under the tutelage of both Kalamandalam Satyabhama and Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma. Additionally, all of these participants interacted with Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji when they visited Kerala.

The questions framed during the interview process were guided predominantly by my research questions demonstrated earlier in this chapter. The first phase of the interview pertained to my participants' journey in Mohiniyattam. This phase mainly focused on their initial and early training in the dance form and other forms of dance, their instructors, etc. The second phase of the interviews consisted of questions about their views of Mohiniyattam dance, its technique, and pedagogy. This phase focused on the essential features and characteristics of the dance, the scope, limitations, and boundaries of its technique. The third phase covered their main choreographies and their contributions and achievement in Mohiniyattam. This phase included the main choreographies, the choice of characters in their choreography, and the challenges they faced when creating those choreographies. The phase also focused on their collaborators and other forms of guidance they received in the process of creating their choreographies. The concluding questions in this final phase elicited their responses about their future vision of Mohiniyattam.

Data Analysis

I am guided by Merriam's (2009) consideration of data analysis as a "process of making sense out of data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and

interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (Merriam 2009, 176). My data analysis in this dissertation thus was aimed at making meaning by paying attention to the genealogies and legacies of practitioners in order to create a postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam.

Thus, the data analysis in this dissertation also aimed at “consolidating, reducing and interpreting” (Merriam 2009, 176). I followed a five-step process to analyze the data collected. The first step involved defining my research questions and finding out what data is relevant to answer these questions. The second step involved cleaning out the data collected to make it usable for research. In this second step I transcribed oral history interviews conducted in English and Malayalam, translated those conducted in Malayalam, and acquired the approval of my interviewees of their transcripts. While transcribing the oral history interviews, I paid keen attention to the chronology of various events mentioned by the practitioners and also their entry into the field of Mohiniyattam. The third step thus involved chronologically arranging the oral stories and archival materials associated with each practitioner. This step was certainly helpful in arranging the timeline of stories in the dissertation and pointed out the need for chapter two and chapter three in this dissertation before attending to the oral stories of Mohiniyattam practitioners. The fourth step involved an “iterative and generative process” (Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis 1997, 185) paying attention to the emergent themes from the chronologically arranged data to create a narrative of Mohiniyattam. I used the comparative method in grounded theory to look for emergent themes from the interviews and archival materials pertaining to Mohiniyattam repertoire and history. The fifth step thus involved bringing together all the individual stories to create the postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam, detailed in chapters three to five. In this step I used narrative analysis, or “the study of experience is through stories,”

in which “the text is analyzed using the techniques of a particular discipline or perspective” (Merriam 2009, 202). In the final chapter, Mohiniyattam's future trajectory is explored through a variety of contemporary practitioners in the 21st century in accordance with the themes that emerged from these stories.

A qualitative research approach employing the tenets outlined by oral history and archival research within the theoretical framework of postmodern historiography has enabled me to pay attention to the individual stories and varied practices of Mohiniyattam dancers in the postcolonial period. As a practitioner of postcolonial Mohiniyattam and as a researcher, these stories have enabled my understanding about the precolonial and colonial precursors of Mohiniyattam, the erasures and missing links and also the different agencies that facilitated the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. In the chapters that follow I organize these critical episodes around lived experiences and embodied memory rooting them in the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial socio-cultural and functional perspective to weave the presentation and development of Mohiniyattam as it exist and evolve through the postcolonial period.

Chapter Overview

The history I explore in the chapters that follow is different from the official history of Mohiniyattam as it involves rewriting and reimagining the postcolonial history of Mohiniyattam, addressing the “missing links” in the journey of Mohiniyattam from post-independence to the present day. Through fragmented narratives and individual stories, I have connected the different trajectories, not necessarily to create an uninterrupted narrative, but to work towards a more elaborate critical history of Mohiniyattam, acknowledging the presence of various women in its formative years during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Chapter two, “Female Dance Traditions of Kerala in Precolonial and Colonial Times,” draws from geography as well as sculptural, inscriptional, and textual evidence to trace the existence of female dance traditions in Kerala in precolonial and colonial times. The repertoire of Mohiniyattam before the 1930s, the kinesthetic legacies of those dancers and their repertoire is discussed in this chapter. I engage with historical narratives by Leela Nampoothiripad in the *History of Kalamandalam* (1990) and Betty True Jones’ work “Mohiniyattam: A Dance Tradition of Kerala, South India” (1972). The narratives presented by Leela Nampoothiripad and Betty True Jones present the social memory of Mohiniyattam from the seventeenth century through the narratives presented by women who lived in the twentieth century. The musical compositions of Maharaja Swathithirunal (1812-1847), which form a major part of the choreographies, are also discussed in detail in this chapter. The chapter serves as a “building site” as the narrative of postcolonial Mohiniyattam gains momentum from these historical underpinnings.

The postcolonial history, geography, culture, and the language of Kerala is an amalgam of various borrowings and transitions that are closely related to India's collective memories from the past and the projects of nationalism. chapter three, “Mohiniyattam (Re) Construction and the Archival Site of Kerala Kalamandalam” is written by cross connecting the narratives from chapter two by including the inscriptional and literary evidence of the female traditions of dance forms from precolonial and colonial India to the narratives that form the foundation of postcolonial Mohiniyattam. Postcolonial Mohiniyattam is considered as a subject of an “imagined community” gearing towards the construction of a nation state. Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimesis (2004), the chapter discusses the mode of representation central to the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam that constitutes the mimicry of certain constructed ideals of both imperialism and nationalism. To enable a fruitful dialogue of this aspect, the revival,

reconstruction, and reformation of Indian classical dances, this chapter historically focuses on the second decade of the twentieth century when nationalist movements gained force under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The chapter considers the various social campaigns of social reformers, writers, and satirists from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century that targeted dancers and dancing, including the abolition of Devadasi practices in temples all over South India in the 1930s, which contributed to the relegation of the female dance traditions of Kerala to a “subaltern” existence. The archival site of Kerala Kalamandalam and its prime importance as a historical and cultural landmark, is discussed in detail in this chapter as this institution essentially forges the link between the dance form’s kinesthetic narratives, both past and present thus enabling a continuous view of the dance form’s colonial and postcolonial history. Kerala Kalamandalam is considered as an aesthetic, cultural, and archival site to critically historicize the postcolonial narratives in Mohiniyattam as the story of the revival of the form began in this institution in the 1930s.

While the practice and performance of Mohiniyattam was reconstructed and rewritten as a new vocabulary in Kerala Kalamandalam introducing the dance form into an institutional framework within the state's geographic and linguistic boundaries, giving movement monopoly to Kerala women, the form found its way to the social and cultural memory of Kerala through the agency of Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, who was a student at the institution during the first phase of reconstruction which happened in the 1930s. Thus, chapter four, “Standing in the Middle ground between Past and Present: The Story of Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma and her Historic Relevance as a Pioneer of Postcolonial Mohiniyattam” relates the kinesthetic legacy of Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, her eyewitness accounts, and her notions of the purification and classicization of Mohiniyattam. The chapter brings to light the restored form as

a kinesthetic endeavor enacted within the institutional framework of Kerala Kalamandalam materialized through marking the predecessor of the form, which is discussed in chapter three as "vulgar" and "crude." This chapter narrates how the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam embedded with the accepted norms of post-independence found fulfillment through Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma's agency. Her new movement vocabulary and grammar of Mohiniyattam participated in the construction of a female Mohiniyattam "body," closely linked to the new postcolonial state of Kerala, which was born on November 1, 1956. Kalyanikuttyamma's approach to creating a new vocabulary involved a confluence of the colonial and the postcolonial where the dancer worked between two milieus, the present and the past. The chapter shows how she was negotiating with the received knowledge of its vocabulary from the past and present to create a new space or new vocabulary at the boundary to move beyond the dance's colonial predicament to a refined postcolonial movement vocabulary. The chapter draws data from textual evidence, oral history interviews with her daughters Sreedevi Rajan and Kala Vijayan, and her student Kalamandalam Sugandhi.

Chapter five, "The Architect of Postcolonial Mohiniyattam: The Story of Kalamandalam Satyabhama" discusses the pivotal story of Kalamandalam Satyabhama from her childhood, her acquaintance with dance, and her association with the archival reconstruction site of Kerala Kalamandalam in various capacities. The chapter traverses through her personal life and professional life that is closely intertwined with the institutional history of Kerala Kalamandalam. Since the style of Mohiniyattam that came out of Kalamandalam is the predominant form practiced by the majority of Mohiniyattam dancers in Kerala and elsewhere, the repertoire created by Kalamandalam Satyabhama, discussed in detail here, is crucial to the form, and constitutes the dominant history of the form.

Chapter six, “Roots and Routes: The Journey of Mohiniyattam from Kerala to Mumbai and Delhi: Stories of Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji,” traces the overlapping and amalgamated stories of two Mohiniyattam dancers outside the geographical boundary of Kerala, Kanak Rele from Mumbai and Bharathi Shivaji from Delhi. The chapter explores their personal history, introduction to dance, and influence as performers of Mohiniyattam. The chapter explores the alternate traditions of Mohiniyattam created by Rele and Shivaji and examines the historical and kinesthetic significance as the vocabulary was created and flourished outside of the geographical boundaries of Kerala. In this story, I also discuss the contributions of Kavalam Narayana Panicker, who I argue is central to both these lineages and whose phenomenal musical contributions connects both these dancers together. I explore the routes of Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji through the data collected from oral history interviews, kinesthetic traces, textual and archival material gathered during my research.

The final chapter of this dissertation titled “Future Trajectory of Postcolonial Mohiniyattam” initially compares and contrasts the different practices of the pioneer practitioners including Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, Kalamandalam Satyabhama, Kanak Rele, and Bharathi Shivaji while identifying the costuming as the unique factor that ties the different practices together. In the light of these different practices or styles established by these practitioners, the concluding chapter then briefly explores the journey of four contemporary practitioners from Kerala who have substantially contributed to the field of Mohiniyattam. The first practitioner considered in this aspect is Nirmala Panicker (born 1950) who has experimented with recreating the pieces from the older repertoire of Mohiniyattam that were erased during the reconstruction period. The second practitioner is Kalamandalam Sugandhi (born 1950) who combined the movement vocabulary of Kalamandalam Satyabhama and Kalamandalam

Kalyanikuttyamma to enrich and expand the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. The third practitioner is Deepthi Omchery Bhalla (born 1957) who has unearthed songs from inscriptional evidence and incorporated them into her vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. The fourth practitioner and youngest of all is Neena Prasad (born 1970) who has created both traditional and experimental choreographies in Mohiniyattam. The concluding chapter traces the development of a future trajectory of Mohiniyattam through the practices of these practitioners, which may help future researchers to explore the tradition and transition of Mohiniyattam both historically and kinesthetically.

CHAPTER II

FEMALE DANCE TRADITIONS OF KERALA IN PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL TIMES

The book, *Choreographing History* (Foster 1995), prompts me to ask the following questions: What evidence can a historian gather to find a dance form's history? In what geographical landscape did the dance happen? What was Mohiniyattam in the precolonial and colonial era? What was the occasion of this dancing? These questions and their answers, I argue, serve as the backdrop to the main subject of this dissertation, the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam, enabling a "historical synthesis between past and present bodies" (Foster 1995, 6). Exploring the traces of female traditions of dance in the geographical area from which the dance comes is essential to decipher its postcolonial endeavors. Approaching Mohiniyattam's precolonial and colonial past as a "building site" marked by the kinesthetic traces of different bodies in time and place, the instructions these bodies took and portrayed, the music to which they moved, the clothing that covered those bodies, I argue, serve as referencing markers to the constellation of aesthetic choices taken in the varied movement vocabularies of postcolonial Mohiniyattam. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the precolonial and colonial vocabularies of what we now call Mohiniyattam were created through the kinesthetic endeavors of real women and men whose labor has since fallen into disregard since the creation of postcolonial vocabularies of Mohiniyattam.

Geography as Context

Postcolonial Mohiniyattam is described as a localized, native dance form of Kerala belonging to an "ethnoscape." Ethnoscape according to Appadurai is the flow of people and their cultures across boundaries. Nagam Aiya in *The Travancore State Manual* says that the

precolonial ethnoscape of erstwhile Kerala consisted of an ethnically diverse population as a result of migration across the geographic boundaries of different provinces and kingdoms from the fifth century to the fifteenth century. The diverse population of people who settled down in Kerala in the past includes the “Brahmin colonists²...Aryan invaders from the north-west of India” who migrated and “mingled with the first Dravidian inhabitants of the east coast” (Aiya 1906, 335). Nagam Aiya cites the Jain and Buddhist migration into Kerala, which converted many Brahmins into Buddhism. Later came the “huge Saivite movement propagated by Tamil Saints” (ibid, 235), and later by Adi Sankara who propounded the Advaita philosophy, which had a huge impact in Kerala from the eighth to the fourteenth century. The Christian missionaries and the followers of prophet Mohamad were the last ones to come to Kerala. Locality thus becomes “a dimension or value” (Appadurai 2003, 178) in postcolonial Mohiniyattam where the dancing body is socially situated to embody locality, materialized through “deliberate practice of performance, representation and action” and “cultural reproduction of a group identity” (ibid, 180). This deliberate practice of performance and its value is achieved by placing the dance within the geographic and linguistic boundaries of the state, giving movement monopoly to Kerala women, bound by the ethnic dress codes and movement vocabulary imitating the state’s landscape: flora, fauna, rivers, backwaters, etc. The resemblance to the ethnic dress code is achieved through the costuming in Mohiniyattam, which consists of a tailored off-white golden border costume and the use of golden jewelry, which is typical of the saree and jewelry of Kerala women. The movement vocabulary of the dance involving the upper part of the body swaying

² It is believed that the land of Kerala was reclaimed from the sea most probably due to volcanic action. There appears a legend that a Brahmin warrior Parasurama created the land by throwing his axe into the sea. Historians suggest that Parasurama was undoubtedly the leader of the Aryan invaders who settled in Southwest India.

sideways, the swinging motions of the upper body forward and backward, up and down, the semicircular movements and the circular movements is compared to the “ceaseless waves of the ocean,” “the endless coconut trees swaying in the breeze” (Shivaji 1986, 51). Bharathi Shivaji compares the “quivering of the eyebrows, so conspicuous in expressing Sringara in Mohiniyattam” to be in “style with the fluttering of the palm leaves, gently wafted by the soft, cool breeze” (ibid, 51).

While locality plays a prominent role in contextualizing Mohiniyattam dance in the present era, it will be beneficial to explore the geography of the land of Mohiniyattam in a historical context; a journey back in time exploring the geographical context and the tradition of female dance and dancers to probe whether the dance was once localized in time and space or has moved across boundaries. While the present geography of Kerala is a postcolonial endeavor, with borders established during the nation formation project of independence, the strip of land from Gokarnam³ to Kanyakumari,⁴ which constituted the country of Keralam, has been known by different names at different points of time. Nagam Aiya in *The Travancore State Manual* refers to these different names as “Malayalam, Parasurama-Kshetram, Karma-Bhumi, Cheram, Keralam, Malanad, Malavaram and Malabar” (Aiya 1906, 2). While many of these names signify various attributes of the land, it is interesting to note that these names are either in Tamil language or Sanskrit. Of these, the most important one I find is “Malayalam,” the native language of Kerala, which was once also the name of the land itself. Nagam Aiya describes Malayalam as a Tamil word which signifies “‘Mala’ (hill) and ‘Azham’ (depth)” (Aiya 1906, 1). Thus, interestingly the name of the land itself had gone through various transitions to reach the

³ Temple town in the western coast of Karnataka.

⁴ The southernmost town in mainland India part of Tamilnadu.

present-day State of Kerala and it is highly likely that the society itself had gone through various cultural transformations in time and place. While various religious colonizations happened between fifth century to fifteenth century AD, Aiya suggests that the language spoken at this period was Tamil, and Malayalam is a recent language derived from Tamil when Sanskrit words were incorporated into the native Tamil vocabulary to form a new language, Malayalam.

During the early twentieth century when the Indian independence movement gained momentum, the present-day Kerala was divided into three major provinces, two princely states called the Travancore State and the Kingdom of Cochin, while the Malabar region, which formed the northern part of Kerala, was part of Madras province of British India. This region became part of the Madras State post-independence. In 1949, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin Kingdom joined together to form a single state called Thiru-Kochi. After the States Reorganization Act in 1956, the modern-day Kerala State was formed by merging the Thiru-Kochi, Malabar district, and Kasaragod district of South Karnataka, which was part of the Madras State. The taluks⁵ of Kanyakumari district, Shenkottai and Tenkasi taluks, predominantly Tamil speaking regions belonging to Thiru-Kochi became part of Tamilnadu and from Malabar district of Madras State few places including the Nilgiris, Anamalai, and the Attappadi forest east of Anakkatti were retained by Tamilnadu. I posit that this sociopolitical milieu is of prime importance when we take into consideration a dance form that was constructed or reconstructed during the same period. The precursor of postcolonial Mohiniyattam, from which it is claimed to be reconstructed, belonged to a multilingual state which spoke four languages: Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and Tulu. The narratives of the origin of the dance form mentions

⁵ Taluk is a subdivision of a district in India that consists of several villages organized for revenue purposes.

inevitably the far north and far south of the present-day Kerala, namely Trivandrum and Palakkad that borders Tamilnadu, which are even now predominantly Tamil speaking regions. Thus, it can be surmised that the multilingual and likely multicultural context of dance in Kerala during the precolonial and colonial times has been simplified to a monocultural and monolingual “Kerala” in the postcolonial era.

While this trajectory of development of Mohiniyattam dance rooting it in a precolonial sociopolitical milieu and routing its development through colonial and into postcolonial times can be of historical importance, there is no continuity from past to present with long silence between epochs of time and place. Thus, the weaving together of historical facts available to churn the precolonial and colonial preoccupation of Mohiniyattam is specifically informed by the sources of information available from the ninth century AD. To materialize this I find architecture, art, inscriptions, and traditions as entry points for this inquiry, as these sources provide archival evidence as well as a line of continuity as these sources continue their presence during the postcolonial times.

Sculptures as Evidence of a Dance Tradition

Sculptures and stone carvings of temples involving female figurines have been mounded into the narratives of Mohiniyattam by various writers who point to it as an evidence of female dance tradition in Kerala dating from the tenth to fourteenth centuries. Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma in her work *Mohiniyattam: Charithravum Attaprakaravum* (Mohiniyattam: History and Acting Manual) (1992), Bharathi Shivaji in her work *The Art of Mohiniyattam* (1996), and Deepthi Omchery Bhalla in her work *Vanishing Temple Arts* (2006) reference many dancing figurines in temples in South and Central Kerala built during the reign of the Chera dynasty, which ruled western Tamilnadu and central Kerala during the ninth to twelfth century.

The dancing figurine with pots in her hand accompanied by musicians playing the drum and cymbals and three female dancers in a dancing posture at Kidangur Subramanya temple, the sculpture of a dancer and two musicians playing drums at Tiruvikramangalam temple near Trivandrum, and two sculptures depicting two types of dances (Kudaikuthu or Umbrella dance and Kudakuttu or Pot dance) accompanied by musicians playing drum and cymbal found at the Vishnu temple at Trikodithanam are all chronicled as evidence of the existence of female dancers in Kerala from the ninth to twelfth century. Further south, the Suchindram temple in Kanyakumari district, which is now part of Tamilnadu and was part of the Princely State of Travancore during colonial times prior to India's independence, houses many dancing female figurines. The spectacular dancing hall called the Navarathri Mandapa at the Padmanabhapuram palace, the capital of Travancore Kingdom, now in Kanyakumari district, is also cited as proof to the existence of dancers during the ninth to twelfth century. Sculpture of a female dancer enacting the *Kandukanritta* (playing the ball) in Mahadeva temple in Vaikom in Central Kerala is also furnished by Bharathi Shivaji as evidence of an existence of a female dance form. Shivaji further elucidates that "Judging from the mosaic of graceful poses, there is ample proof that the dances performed then were essentially laasya – the substratum of Mohiniyattam" (Shivaji 1986, 23). Although these dancing sculptures can be traced as evidence of a female dance tradition, I contend that the frozen figurines' movement vocabulary can be discerned mostly through their postures. They might have inspired dancers during the later stages of developing the movement vocabulary of a female dance tradition. It is possible that the sculptures were evidence of dance. However, we cannot discern their movement; in addition, continuities seen by others may be due to contemporary dancers adopting the postures seen in the sculpture.

Inscriptional Evidence of Dance Traditions

The dancing sculptures take us further to the inscriptional evidence from epigraphs, palm leaf documents from Sucindram,⁶ which finds a place in K.K. Pillai's outstanding research work, *The Sucindram Temple* (2002). Pillai mentions the presence of women associated with the temple duties in Sucindram temple and is further supplemented by the presence of women in various temples in South India. Pillai mentions these women called Devadasis as "a unique class of employees in the temples of South India," "those dedicated to the service of the Deva or deity of the temple" who "were esteemed as the chosen servants of God" (Pillai 2002, 277). These women as Pillai notes were associated with temple duties and were called *Devaradiyar*, which was later used in a colloquial way as *Tevadiyal*. Pillai suggests that "as a consequence of the degeneration that set in among them in later days, the name, Tevadiyal, has acquired a disreputable association" (Pillai 2002, 277). The female servants of South Indian temples as mentioned in the epigraphic records associated with those temples according to Pillai were addressed by various names including, *Kudikkari*, *Talicerippendugal*, *Manikkattar*, *Kanikaiyar*, *Adigalmar*, *Rudraganikas*, etc.

Tracing the Devadasi and her role as a forebearer of female dance traditions in Kerala is worth exploring. Pillai traces the earliest epigraphic mention of a Devadasi in Sucindram to an inscription from 1257 AD and to an inscription⁷ from the neighboring temple of Cholapuram from 1253 AD. The earliest mention about a Devadasi near Sucindram dates to 1040 AD, which is traced to an inscription from the Guhanathasvamin temple in Kanyakumari. In South India the

⁶ Sucindram is a temple town in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu. The Sucindram temple is famous for its stone sculptures, epigraphs, and inscriptions.

⁷ An epigraph is an inscription on a building while an inscription is a text carved into a particular wall or plaque.

most important epigraphic inscription about Devadasis comes from the Brihadeesvara temple of Tanjavur built during the reign of Rajaraja Cholan which reveals that in “1004 AD., the Brihadeesvara temple had attracted to it no less than 400 talicceripendugal (Devadasis)” (Pillai 2002, 278). An inscription from the same period from Mukteswara Shrine at Kanchi also mentions forty-four Kuttigal (young girls) among the Talipparivaram (group in the temple establishment). As more clearly evident from inscriptions, historians ascribe a time during eighth century or a time before the eighth century as a period where women were associated with duties in South Indian temples. Inscriptional evidence also points out the transfer of Devadasis between various temples of the Chola country and Sucindram, which lies on the southern coast of Tamilnadu; they were also actively connected with the rest of Tamilnadu during the Pandya and Chola reigns. The Sucindram temple also shares similar characteristics in the temple organization with the temples in the east coast of Tamilnadu. Pillai suggests that the Devadasi system must have found its way to Sucindram “perhaps no later than Raja Raja’s reign” (ibid, 279). It is doubtful whether the Devadasis of Sucindram belonged to the Isai Vellalar community of the Pandya and Chola kingdoms of Tamilnadu. The inscriptions and the Travancore census report of 1901 states that the Devadasis of Sucindram and the Devadasis of Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple at Trivandrum belonged to the Nair community of Tamil Padam or Padamangalam. Evidence from the census report also suggests that the Devadasis at Sucindram shared the mixed characteristics of the Tamil speaking region and the Malayalam speaking regions in their customs, attire, etc.

As demonstrated above, it is worth exploring the similarities in between the Devadasis from Sucindram and the women in the Malayalam speaking region, predominantly those who belonged to the Nair community exploring their attire, jewelry, customs, and vocations. The

attire and jewelry worn by Devadasis of Sucindram—white cloth and Toda (Pillai 2002; Shivaji 2002)—bear similarities to the attire of Nair women from the Malayalam speaking region. This amalgamation of Tamil and Malayali customs, as Pillai suggests, created a “composite group,” which can be traced to 1811 when the Malayali Brahmin community entered the management of the temple as priests and administrators. Pillai also describes the elaborate ceremony called the Thalikkettukalyanam, which formed the dedication ceremony of girls admitted to the official rank of Devadasis at Sucindram. Some female servants, as Pillai describes, were dancers and others were employed in various other capacities including making the sandalwood paste, grinding rice, curing, and cleaning metal vessels and lamps for temple ceremonies and accompanying carrying the lamps for religious ceremonies (ibid, 280). Dancing and music seem to be an essential skill for the Devadasi at Sucindram as “from early times, the Devadasi at Sucindram was expected to play an important role in connection with the Mahotsavas,⁸ for which the skill of dancing as well as in singing hymns from the Tiruvacagam⁹ was needed. On the eighth day of the Utsava, a dance of a high order had to be enacted, to the accompaniment of vocal music” (ibid, 280). V. Nagam Aiya in *The Travancore State Manual*, on the other hand, states that “the Malayali Dasi has neither...sang nor dance” (Aiya 1906, 383) in the temples of Travancore. From these observations, it is also understood that work of Devadasis of Sucindram were primarily confined to the premises of the temple as both the Malayali dasis and the Sucindram sect “did not accept engagements for singing and dancing in private houses” (Pillai 2002, 280). The presence of female dancers in Kerala is further evidenced by Pillai as he notes that the Devadasis of Sucindram were sent to the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Trivandrum to “sing and dance on

⁸ Temple festival.

⁹ A sacred collection of Tamil hymns composed by Shaivite poet Manikkavasagar.

specified days” (ibid, 285). The high standing and honor conferred to talented Devadasis of Sucindram with the telugu title “Rayar” (ibid, 285) found in the inscriptional evidence of 1490 AD and 1874 AD, I argue suggest the amalgamation of various cultural practices spread over all over South India, irrespective of geography and regional cultures. This supports the findings of Nagam Aiya who chronicles the ethnically diverse population of Kerala in precolonial times due to the migration across the geographical boundaries from the fifth century to the fifteenth century.

Deepthi Omchery Bhalla also provides convincing evidence in her work *Vanishing Temple Arts* (2006) connecting the practice of the Devadasi dancers to the precursor of Mohiniyattam. She argues that the dance form of Mohiniyattam had undergone “many stages of developments and transformation spreading over hundreds of years” (Bhalla 2006, 102) to reach its present form. She recounts that the female dances developed in the lineage of four schools, all of them incorporating the elements of “Geetam, Vaadyam and Nrityam, under one common head called ‘Thauryatrikam’” (Bhalla 2006, 103). Bhalla attempts to present these traditions based on information she gathered during her research from palm leaf manuals and also from manuscripts she procured from traditional artists and people traditionally associated with the temples of Thiruvattar, Suchindram, Parassala, Tripparappu, and Trivandrum. Bhalla also claims the backing of *Othiya-Geetha Vazhi* (vocal tradition transmitted orally) and *Aadiya Koothu Vazhi* (the path of dance tradition) kept alive by people of different generations which is now extinct as allied traditions of female dancers in Kerala.

Bhalla lists the development of female dances in Kerala to four different categories, which are the *Kovil Vazhakkam* or temple tradition, *Arangu Vazhakkam* or theater tradition, *Kottara Vazhakkam* or court tradition, and *Naattu Vazhakkam*, which included the

Veetuvazhakkam, which pertains to popular tradition and family traditions. The tradition of female dancers in the temple tradition is extinct or absent in present times and the temple art services is predominantly limited to singing accompanied by the Edakka in front of the sanctum sanctorum and to Melams, an instrumental ensemble presented incorporating various temple percussion instruments. Bhalla argues that “from remote times up to at least the fourteenth century AD” (Bhalla 2006, 111), along with the musical offerings in temples as part of temple services there existed a community of dancers called *Thalinankas* who were grouped into three levels of services with each having two subdivisions, which were namely,

1. a) *Uttamothama*, the godly, and the
b) *Utthamas*, the exalted
2. a) *Utthama Madhyama*, also called *Sreshta*
b) *Madhyama*
3. a) *Adhama*, also called *Saamaanya* and
b) *Acchi* or *Chedi*

Of these categories only the first two *Uttamothama*, *Utthama*, *Utthama Madhyama*, and *Madhyama* were temple dancers who danced inside the inner walls of the temple. The third category called the *Adhama*, *Saamanya* had two levels called *Laasyaangis* who performed dances and songs in the outskirts of the temple, while the *Achis* did the cleaning of the premises of the temple including washing, sweeping, etc. Bhalla presents a vast repertoire of the *Thalinankas*, which includes more than forty-seven dance pieces that are completely extinct from any female dance tradition in Kerala. While the temple female dancers became an extinct category during the turn of the fourteenth century due to internal conflicts and external invasions, many women associated with the temple left to settle in various places in Kerala. There was also

an exodus of Devadasis from various regions outside of Kerala. Bhalla states that the Adhamas from the Thalinkanas mingled with the Devadasis and this resulted in a new school of female dancing, which lacked “the charm of the refined dance...and as a result, they became the target of contempt, both by the temple and by the public, leading to their neglect and ruin” (Bhalla 2006, 112). Bhalla suggests that the dance of the Thalinkanas fell into oblivion until the beginning of the seventeenth century when the female dance form of Kerala was resurrected as a new form under “the kind attention and patronage of the Travancore Royalty” (Bhalla 2006, 112).

Bhalla’s research findings can be connected to the inscriptional records of the Sucindram temple, which mention the presence of Kerala Brahmanas in the temple activities and a complete control of the temple activities procured by them in the thirteenth century. It is most likely that the Thalinkanas mentioned by Bhalla were attached to the Sucindram temple during the same time as their names are mentioned in the temple inscriptions (ibid, 280). *The Travancore State Manual* (1906) also records the arrival of Devadasis belonging to the “Padamangalam Nair” community to Sucindram Temple when the Government of Travancore gained control over the temple in 1811 (Aiya 1906, 382-385). I also find it convincing to connect the terms, *Tevadicci* as mentioned by Pillai and *Acci* as mentioned by Bhalla, as in colloquial Malayalam even in present day *Acci* is referred to as the wife of man from the Nair community. It is highly likely that the Kerala Devadasis from the Padamangalam Nair community and the subcategory of the Thalinkanas who were called Accis were the same women. This is an important area of inquiry that needs further historical research to establish Devadasis from Kerala as temple dancers whose practice had association with the evolution of Mohiniyattam, as no evidence about a dance form

called Mohiniyattam is found either in inscriptional references or literary works until the sixteenth century.

Literary References

The earliest textual reference to the term Mohiniyattam is found in *Vyavaharamala*, a Sanskrit text on jurisprudence written by Mazhamangalam Narayanan Nampoothiri in the sixteenth century. A legal document written in the form of verses, the *Vyavaharamala* contains reference to the remuneration paid to dancers, musicians and artisans. Verse 571 reads:

Nartakanamesa eva dharmassadbhirudahrtah

*Talajnano labhyate dhayardham gaayakaastu samaamsinah*¹⁰

The verse outlines the procedure to be followed when paying dancers and musicians. According to the verse, the dancers (Nartaka) and musicians (Gaayaka) get an equal amount of pay, while the person in the orchestra who is well versed in rhythm and time measure (Taalajnano labhyate) will receive more than one half of the payment than the dancers and the musicians. The person well versed in “Taala” (time measure) can be either identified as the percussionist or the Nattuvan who conducts the orchestra. Accompanying this Sanskrit verse there is a prose commentary written in Malayalam, which mentions Mohiniyattam. This commentary written in 1709 points to the existence of Mohiniyattam and that the performing troupe of Mohiniyattam consisted of accompanying members of the orchestra who supported the dancer to make the performance happen. It reads as follows:

Mohiniyattam muthalaya attakarkku labhikkunna dravyam

Pakuthetukkunna vidhi silpikalude vidhipoleyatre akunnatu

¹⁰ The dancers and musicians get an equal amount of pay, while the person in the orchestra who is well versed in rhythm and time measure (Taalajnano labhyate) will receive more than one half of the payment than the dancers and the musicians.

Ithil talajnanamullavan patikkumelum pattukaranum sesham

*Ullavarellavarum samamayittum etuthukollanam*¹¹

Another literary reference to Mohiniyattam is found in the eighteenth century Ottanthullal text *Ghoshayatra* (“The Procession”) written by Kalakkathu Kunchan Nambiar in Kerala’s regional language, Malayalam. Ottanthullal, a popular art form of the period, employed novel literary and acting techniques, which could be easily understood by the people. The form, which is popular as “the poor man’s Kathakali,” even today is enacted as a single singer-actor-dancer performance accompanied by a vocalist and percussionist. Kunchan Nambiar’s Thullal stories paid attention to the social milieu of eighteenth-century Kerala and the poet employed mythological themes adding a critical commentary to these stories, which was rooted in the social milieu of Kerala during those times. In *Ghosayatra* Nambiar describes a scene in the king’s court of Ambalapuzha, which includes various performing art forms as follows:

Natakanatanam Narmavinodam

Pathakapathanam Pavakoothum

Matanimulamar Mohiniyattam

*Patavamerina Palapala Melam*¹²

¹¹ “The remuneration received by Mohiniyattam dancers are paid in the same mode of payment given to sculptors. The person who is well versed in rhythm and time measure will receive one half from the whole remuneration while the rest of the amount will be divided in equal amounts among other members of the orchestra including the vocalist and the Mohiniyattam dancers” (Translation by the author).

¹² “Dramas and Satires,
Narrators of Mythological stories and Puppetry,
Buxom young women’s Mohiniyattam,
Ensemble of a variety of skilled instrumentalists” (Translation by the author).

Further to this, M.G.S. Narayanan's work *Aspects of Aryanisation of Kerala* (1973) and P. Soman's articles, "Charitramillatha Mohiniyattam" (1994)¹³ and "Devadasikalillatha Kerala Samskaram" (2001)¹⁴ juxtapose the presence and absence of Devadasis in Kerala. While Narayanan cites the presence of Devadasis through stone inscriptions, copper plate records from various temples in both South, Central and North Kerala from the eighth century onwards, Soman finds that the institution of Devadasis did not have a striking presence in the temples of South Kerala, which is evidenced through traveler accounts and temple records. Soman further attributes the duties of the temple to the female members of *Ambalavasi*¹⁵ community who he finds essentially as non-dancers. These narratives offer a trajectory for further research as they provide the social, cultural, aesthetic, and kinesthetic memories of Kerala culture to trace the dance form's past and the initial stages of Mohiniyattam.

While this literary evidence of Mohiniyattam demonstrates the existence of a female tradition of dance in the eighteenth century, there is no evidence that the Mohiniyattam mentioned was a continuation of the dance tradition of Devadasis from Sucindram or Travancore. Further, both pieces of literary evidence mentioning Mohiniyattam belonged to the Kingdom of Kochi, while the dance traditions followed by the Devadasis belonged to the Princely State of Travancore during the sixteenth century. These regions were only joined to form the Thiru-Kochi state in 1949. Considering these two kingdoms as separate entities and assigning them with two geopolitical identities, I attempt here to decipher a critical historical reading of the narratives on Mohiniyattam's past as it exists today. The historical narratives

¹³ "Mohiniyattam without History" (1994).

¹⁴ "Absence of Devadasis in Kerala Culture" (2001).

¹⁵ Women from Nambiar community, another subject in Kerala who still performs the duties in the outer temple.

provided by Leela Nampoothiripad in the *History of Kalamandalam* (1990) and Betty True Jones' work "Mohiniyattam: A Dance Tradition of Kerala, South India" (1972) serve as point of entry into this story of Mohiniyattam rooting its existence to the Palghat region belonging to the Kingdom of Kochi. *The Travancore Manual* (1906) by V. Nagam Aiya, *The Sucidram Temple* (1952) by K.K. Pillai, and Deepthi Omchery Bhalla's work *Vanishing Temple Arts -Temples of Kerala and Kanyakumari district* (2006) are nuanced readings into cultural as well as performative traditions of the Princely State of Travancore in precolonial and colonial times.

Betty True Jones describes the seventeenth century Mohiniyattam dancers as a troupe consisting of three to four dancers as they travelled together to various places to perform the dance. The dancers had a hierarchical order based on their seniority and were termed *Onnamkita*, *Rantamkita*, and *Moonamkita*.¹⁶ The *Onnamkita* used to perform the solo complex dance pieces, while the other two dancers performed group pieces and less complex solo dance pieces. The troupe was headed by the *Nattuvan*,¹⁷ who conducted the orchestra. The accompanying musicians included the drummer who played the *toppi maddalam*,¹⁸ the sruti player who played the *titti*,¹⁹ and additional instrumentalists who played the *mukhaveena*²⁰ or the *kurunkuzhal*.²¹ The other two members of the group were the *pettikaran* and the *bhandarakaran*.²² This troupe travelled walking from village to village for performances, which were not invited but based on

¹⁶ Principal dancer, second dancer, and the third dancer according to their training and expertise

¹⁷ The conductor of the orchestra.

¹⁸ Percussion instrument – a double barrel drum.

¹⁹ A tuner-like instrument that resembles a harmonium.

²⁰ A wind instrument like the mouth organ.

²¹ Flute made of bamboo.

²² Costumier and the cook.

“speculation.”²³ As soon as they arrived in a village, they paid a visit to the village temple to arrange for their first performance. Jones contents that this performance was termed *Sevakali*, which functioned as their paying homage to the deity of the temple, as an advertisement, and as a curtain raiser announcing the arrival of the troupe in the village. The temple supplied a free meal to the troupe members and oil for the wick lamp called the *nilavilakku* or the *kalivilakku*,²⁴ which provided lighting for the Mohiniyattam performance. The performance took place inside the outer wall of the temple inside the *mandapa*²⁵ or in a temporary tent. The performance also took place in the premises of a wealthy landlord’s house. Jones observes that “the arrangement of the *pantal*,²⁶ matting, *vilakku* and audience was the same except that the ladies of the family saw the performance from the veranda or even the inside of the house” (Jones 1972, 21). Jones states that “three hundred was considered a good audience” (Jones 1972, 22). This observation openly acknowledges the fact that Mohiniyattam was a popular form in the villages with majority of the audience being men.

Jones finds that the earlier repertoire of Mohiniyattam was more of a “popular theatre” of the villages than an “urban art” (Jones, 1972, 22). With its affinity towards *Kaikottikali*, a folk-dance tradition of women in the Nair community, which is marked by handclapping and ladies moving in a circle creating various graceful movement patterns, many Mohiniyattam dancers were drawn from the *Kaikottikali* groups. Jones and Nampoothiripad both mention that *Kaikottikali* teachers also taught Mohiniyattam, which attests to its close relationship with Mohiniyattam. Jones’ findings about this older repertoire were retrieved from the embodied

²³ The dance troupe approaches prospective venues which they think can accommodate their performances and pay remuneration.

²⁴ Large oil wick lamp made of brass.

²⁵ A building which resembles an auditorium where people can sit and watch the performance.

²⁶ Tent.

memories of former Mohiniyattam dancers who belonged to the colonial era, Kalippuratta Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma when she conducted interviews with them in 1961. Jones' narrative about the extant practice, former repertoire, and presentation of Mohiniyattam is thus part of an embodied memory of both these dancers. Her narrative also indicates that Kaikottikali and Mohiniyattam training began around thirteen years of age either as a group lesson or a private study, which either happened at the teacher's house or the at the dancer's home. There were male teachers who were called the *Nattuvans* and the Mohiniyattam students paid a fee for the lessons and a *gurudakshina*²⁷ during the commencement of their study and the *Arangettam*.²⁸

Betty True Jones gives an elaborate description of the make-up, costume, and jewelry worn by old time Mohiniyattam dancers in the nineteenth century and finds it similar to the *Minukku*²⁹ make up for female characters in Kathakali with the exception of a subdued stylization of the eyebrows and eye makeup. While the base foundation of the face was a mixture of *chayilyam* and *manayaola*³⁰ mixed with rice flour and water to give a yellow and red tone for the face, *Kajal* or *Kanmashi*³¹ was used to line the eyes and the eyebrows. The decorative dot called the *pottu* at the center of the forehead was created using red *kumkum* or *chantu*. White dots were used as a decorative border around the *pottu* and above the lined eyebrows. During her interview with retired practitioners of Mohiniyattam, Jones found that some dancers wore *chela* the eight-yard-long sari worn by women of the Tamil Brahmana community in Kerala. This

²⁷ An offering given by the student to the guru as a token of respect towards the teacher. This can include various things like clothes, money, flowers, fruits etc.

²⁸ Debut performance after training in dance for a few years.

²⁹ Soft and sober make up elaborating the facial features as opposed to the mask make up worn by male characters in Kathakali.

³⁰ Yellow and red color earthen stones used as facial foundation for Kathakali.

³¹ Eye liner.

observation also connects to the multicultural and multilingual ethnoscape of precolonial and colonial times that point to the continuities in postcolonial times. While the sari worn by Tamil Brahmana women is a colored one, Mohiniyattam dancers used the white sari with a three banded *kasavu*³² border with a removable golden border stitched to the sari. The sari was worn above the ankle giving space for free movement of the legs and for the ease of tying the ankle bells called *kaccamani*. The upper garment of the saree was a midriff blouse called the *raukka*, which was stitched with a colored fabric with golden border at the sleeves. It is interesting to note that some of the informants also mentioned a skirt (*pavada*) and a long jacket (*kuppayam*) with puffed sleeves, a scarf over the jacket, and a black cap as a costume that Jones finds unique to a dance piece called *Mugalai Vesham*, which has affinity to the present day Kathak as she mentions that the skirt “fanned out” as the dancer turned. This dance piece is absent in the present-day repertoire of Mohiniyattam. Jones also lists various jewelry worn by Mohiniyattam dancers, which closely resemble the jewelry worn by present day Mohiniyattam dancers, including the head ornaments called *Nettichutti*, *Suryan*, *Chandran*, *Ettaminni*, *Odiyanam* (waist belt), various kinds of traditional necklaces native to Kerala including *Ezhamala*, *Mohinimala*, *Manikuttam*, *Kuzhiminni*, *Kasumala*, *Nagapadam*, earrings called the *Thoda* and *Kotakadukkan*, and flat brass bangles called the *Kappu*. All ornaments were made of gold or gold plated. Jones states that “A famous dancer at the peak of her career might have ornaments of Kerala’s 24-carat gold, presents from admirers or investments representing her earnings in past seasons” (Jones 1972, 25). The most distinguishing costuming element in this description is the hairdo, which was in existence until the 1940s. Jones states that

³² Golden border that is a unique design of traditional fabrics from Kerala worn by both men and women.

the hair was worn in a bun at the back, but the most common hair dress for dancers was a plait down the back, with false hair added when necessary to attain the desired length and thickness. Besides a circlet of white Jasmine flowers at the nape of the neck, the plait was further adorned with *ettamini*, small disc of gold-plated brass in graduating sizes, attached to a cord and then tied into the braid.

(Jones 1972, 23)

Jones' description of the hairstyle worn by Mohiniyattam dancers until the 1940s also connects to the broader ethnoscape of precolonial and colonial Kerala and the influence of Tamil-speaking Devadasis from Sucindram, which Nagam Aiya describes. The hairstyle is also reminiscent of the one worn by Devadasi dancers and the Bharathanatyam dancers of present day.

The description about the performance troupe of Mohiniyattam until the 1940s is also similar to the Dasiattam and Sadir of Tamilnadu. Jones states that the *Nattuvan* and the orchestra who accompanied the dancers were dressed in white *mundu* and a *vesth*.³³ While the accompanying artists' *mundu* and *veshti* were simple, the *Nattuvan*'s *vesthti* was "ornamented with a gold border and was draped with casual elegance over one shoulder" (Jones 1972, 26). The *Nattuvan* also decorated his forehead with a *gopi pottu* made of black *chantu*. During the stage performance the dancers started with an invocatory song called *Vandanam* dedicated to a deity. While the dancers stood in the center upstage during this act, the *Nattuvan* stood in front of them while the instrumentalist stood on the left and the *titti* player on the right; downstage right was the drummer and downstage left were the singers. This is also a marked feature of colonial Mohiniyattam where the whole troupe occupied various parts of the stage making it a group

³³ White sarong and a stole.

theatrical performance, which distinguish itself from the present day where the musicians sat at stage right during the performance while the dancer/dancers occupied the center stage.

Influence of Swathi Thirunal's Music Compositions in Nineteenth Century

As demonstrated in the previous section, there is clearly historical evidence of female dance traditions in the precolonial region now known as Kerala. These dance forms were influenced by various factors during its evolutionary phase to reach its present form and content. The repertoire of Mohiniyattam past and present owes a great deal to the musical compositions of Swathi Thirunal (1813-1847), the early nineteenth century Maharaja of Travancore. He grew up in the royal court of Travancore, and as a child he was exposed to the nuances of music, literature, and dance through his regular acquaintance with great musicians who frequented the palace at the disposal of his maternal aunt Regent Rani Laxmi Bai who was a great musician. Swathi Thirunal was well versed in the two streams of classical music prevalent in India: Carnatic music from South India and Hindustani music, the North Indian tradition of music. Although he passed away at the age of 34, he left behind a formidable repertoire of both Carnatic and Hindustani music compositions, which still serves as the archive and repertoire of both music and dance traditions of South India. Swathi Thirunal was a patron of musicians from various part of India, including the Tanjore quartet³⁴ who were composers of Bharatanatyam and who set the *Margam*³⁵ for Bharatanatyam. According to *The Travancore Manual* (1906) the quartet came to Travancore in 1830; the archival record from the palace records of 1836 mentions the presence of Vadivelu Pillai and Chinniah Pillai in the court of Travancore. While

³⁴ The four brothers from Tanjavor who were great musicians. These brothers, Chinniah Pillai, Vadivelu Pillai, Ponniah Pillai, and Sivanandam constructed the repertoire of Sadir which is now renamed as Bharathanatyam

³⁵ Literally meaning path or way, Margam is the concert order of dance pieces in the repertoire of Bharatanatyam.

the quartet and the Maharaja had many dance compositions to their credit, there were collaborative pieces where Swathi Thirunal penned the lyrics and Vadivelu composed the music. Together with the Tanjore quartet came dancers from the court of King Serfoji of Tanjore (Tanjavoor), and they were employed as dancers in Swathi's court. While many historical accounts mention the dancers were dancing Sadir or Dasiyattam, which is the predecessor of Bharatanatyam, Nagam Aiya's mention in the *Travancore Manual* is noteworthy as he describes Swathi Thirunal "as an accomplished musical composer and some of his musical compositions show great knowledge of the art of native dance, known as Bharata Nattyam" (Aiya 1906, 483). Researchers also point out to the fact that the third wife of Swathi Thirunal, Sundara Lakshmi was a Sadir dancer who belonged to the Saiva Mudaliar community of Tamilnadu. The house called *Tanjavoor Ammaveedu*, which the Maharaja built for his consort Sundara Lakshmi, is still existent today in Thiruvananthapuram, which is now the capital city of Kerala. In many of the musical compositions of Swathi Thirunal in the existent repertoire of Mohiniyattam, especially the ones that extol the *Sringara rasa*,³⁶ one can witness Swathi Thirunal celebrating his love, longing, and the pangs of separation. Betty True Jones finds that two musicians present in Swathi's court during this time, Swathi's maternal uncle Irayimman Thampi and the court musician Parameswara Bhagavathar as important links to the tradition of Mohiniyattam. Irayimman Thampi (1783-1856) is credited with the text of three Kathakali plays, many compositions including padams, varnams, and keerthanams, which are still used in the repertoire of Mohiniyattam. Parameswara Bhagavathar was appointed as the chief musician at the court, and he continued in this position during the reign of four Travancore Rajas, until 1885 when he returned to Palghat, the place where Mohiniyattam prospered. He had a wealth of students who

³⁶ Sensuousness.

trained with him and some of them were accomplished musicians. The Mohiniyattam tradition prevalent at that time through the lineage of *Kaikottikali* dancers extended “across central Kerala westward from Palghat” (Jones 1972, 28).

It is highly likely that the musical compositions of Travancore court entered the repertoire of Mohiniyattam through the lineage of Parameswara Bhagavathar and his disciples. So, this takes us to the question about the repertoire of Mohiniyattam prior to 1885, before the arrival of Parameswara Bhagavathar in Palghat. This repertoire I argue is unknown or undocumented. Historically, there remains a vacuum before 1885 as we can see a documented repertoire of Mohiniyattam only from the late nineteenth century or the post-Swathi period. This repertoire bears close relationship or rather can be considered as an amalgamated form having elements from the vocabulary of *Kaikottikali*,³⁷ a Kerala dance form of women, and also the vocabulary of Bharatanatyam and Kathakali, which later developed into a vocabulary of its own.

The Repertoire of Mohiniyattam in Early and Late Nineteenth Century and the Early Twentieth Century

As demonstrated in the previous sections, many dancers’ written accounts, including those by Betty True Jones (1972), Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma (1992), Kanak Rele (1992, 2013), Geetha Radhakrishna (1997), Kalamandalam Radhika (2004), and Kalamandalam Satyabhama (2013) talk about the earlier repertoire of Mohiniyattam. While my research on the postcolonial history of Mohiniyattam largely relies on my oral history interviews with pioneer practitioners, I have also drawn from these writings, cross connecting the oral data with written text so I could get a clearer picture of the repertoire of Mohiniyattam in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

³⁷ Folk dance form of Kerala performed by a group of women moving in circles.

Betty True Jones gives a convincing account from her oral history research in 1960 with Mohiniyattam practitioners who were in their late sixties when she interviewed them. Her main informants were Kalapurathe Kunjukuttyamma and Thottacherry Chinnammuamma, both practitioners of Mohiniyattam. Jones started training in Mohiniyattam in 1959 with Thottacherry Chinnammuamma, a traditional practitioner of Mohiniyattam, a teacher at Kerala Kalamandalam, and the forerunner of the form from whose vocabulary the reconstruction was initiated. As Jones mentions, it was through Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma that she came to have first-hand knowledge of the older repertoire of Mohiniyattam. Chinnammuamma was a disciple, along with Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, of one of the first instructors of Mohiniyattam in Kerala Kalamandalam, Appuredath Krishna Panicker. The first Mohiniyattam instructor at Kerala Kalamandalam, Orikilledath Kalyaniamma, was also a student of Appuredath Krishna Panicker. Kalapurathe Kunjukuttyamma was a disciple of a male instructor Karuvattil Kunjan Panikkar and a female instructor Kalapurathe Kochukunjiamma. Kanak Rele considered Kunjukuttyamma as the oldest living exponent of Mohiniyattam when she interviewed her in 1970-71. Kanak Rele interviewed the same participants fourteen years later when Chinnammuamma was seventy-eight and Kalapurathe Kunjukuttyamma was over eighty years old “almost deaf and bent double with severe arthritis, which had resulted in a hunch back” (Rele 1992, 81). Rele notes that she had a good memory and remembered a few items.

Both Jones and Rele mention many dance items in common belonging to the earlier repertoire of Mohiniyattam. Jones provides a very elaborate description of dance pieces, some of which are now extinct from the repertoire of Mohiniyattam. The dance pieces in a typical Mohiniyattam performance as Jones notes, commenced with a Cholkettu performed by a group of three dancers followed by solo items including Pada Varnams mainly compositions of Swathi

Thirunal, followed by Jathiswaram and Padams. There were also lighter dance pieces with folk elements involving interaction with the audience called Mukkutti, Chandanam, and Mughlai Vesham. There was also a duet piece called Esal, and during this, a Poli Pattu or Poli Kali was performed to collect money from the audience. The concluding piece as Jones notes was always a Kaikottikali piece performed by three dancers moving in circles around a *vilakku*³⁸. I detail each of these pieces in detail to suggest the relevance of these pieces as indicating the colonial history of Mohiniyattam and how these pieces and the dancers who performed these pieces became irrelevant in the post reconstruction period of Mohiniyattam. In my research with the key postcolonial Mohiniyattam practitioners, they are calling back to these earlier repertoires; even when they say that they were recreating the form from the earlier repertoire, some of these dance pieces were not recreated. These dances that were discarded creates a vacuum in the history of Mohiniyattam pointing out to the unacknowledged contribution of many dancers who practiced the colonial repertoire of Mohiniyattam.

Cholkettu

Cholkettu, the oldest of the pieces in the Mohiniyattam repertoire that is still present in the repertoire, is a dance piece involving the syllables sung in rhythmic patterns and choreography involving abstract dance movements of Mohiniyattam. While Jones purports the piece has an unknown origin, Rele traces its origin as the first dance piece in the repertoire of *Dasiyattam* as mentioned by G. Venkatachalam in his book *Dance in India* (1947), thus establishing an affinity towards the predecessor of Bharatanatyam, the Tanjore quartet, and the dancers present in the court of Swathi Thirunal. Jones describes the old Cholkettu as a piece interspersed with Sanskrit hymns and rhythmic syllables set to different time measures and

³⁸ Oil lamp.

different scales. The opening Sanskrit hymn in praise of Shiva is sung in *Anandabhairavi* raga³⁹ without rhythmic accompaniment with the dancers standing quietly with joined palms overhead, followed by a brief Aatami⁴⁰ in *Misra Chapu* Taalam.⁴¹ The main body of the piece is set to *Chakravakam* raga and *Chaturasra eka* Taalam. At the beginning there are many Sanskrit verses, which are in praise of the goddess Bhagavathi. The main body consists of abstract dance movements involving adavus in various combinations danced to the rhythmic syllable. The last portion consists of hymns in Sanskrit praising different Hindu deities including Vishnu and Rama, which are literally interpreted by the dancers in gestural language, alternating with sequences of abstract dance. This Cholkettu is still taught in Kerala Kalamandalam with minor omissions of the hymns in praise of Vishnu and Rama. Jones sees in the Cholkettu an affinity to the Kuchipudi⁴² dance piece *Rama Sabdam*, as they have similarity in the way of singing; she finds that more research is needed to claim the source of these traditions.

Pada Varnams

The most important and central piece in the repertoire of both Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam in the colonial era, which has a continuity in the postcolonial period, is the Pada Varnam, a long and complex composition that offers scope for *Nritta*, *Nritya*, and *Natya*.⁴³ The dominant emotion of the Pada Varnam is Sringara bhakti⁴⁴; accordingly, the dancer assumes the role of the female protagonist whereas the male protagonist is imagined as one of the male

³⁹ Raga is equivalent to scale in western music and there are seventy-two Melakartha (parent) ragas in Carnatic music from which the several sub genres called Janya Ragas are derived.

⁴⁰ Coordinating movement of the neck and the eyes to the right side and left side.

⁴¹ Taalam is the equivalent to western musical meter or the time measure, which is measured by rhythmic beats or strikes.

⁴² Dance form from Andhra Pradesh.

⁴³ Abstract dance, expressive dance, and theater.

⁴⁴ Love towards God, which is both sensuous and devotional in character.

deities. The pangs of separation, longing, and the resultant suffering of the heroine from these emotions are interpreted and improvised in the Varnams. Betty True Jones gathered information about five Pada Varnams in Mohiniyattam as reported by her informants Kalapurathe Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma. The varnams reported are:

- 1) *Sami Ninne Nammithira* in *Yadukulakamodari* ragam set to *Champada* talam and written in Telugu language.
- 2) *Daisamajendra Gamini* in *Todi* ragam set to *Champada* talam and written in Sanskrit.
- 3) *Savamarushayatu* in *Kamas* ragam set to *Champada* talam and written in Sanskrit.
- 4) *Calamela* in *Sankarabharanam* ragam set to *Champada* or *Ata* talam and written in Telugu.
- 5) *Sarasijanabha* in *Kamodari* ragam set to *Champada* talam or *Ata* talam and written in Sanskrit.

All these compositions are attributed to Maharaja Swathi Thirunal; moreover, the music for *Sami Ninne Nammithira* and *Chalamela* is said to be composed by Vadivelu from the Tanjore quartet. *Sami Ninne Nammithira*, as Jones remembers, was the only Varnam taught in Kalamandalam in the 1960s. During the initial years (1933-1938) when Orikkiledath Kalyani Amma was teaching at Kalamandalam, the meaning of the *Telugu*⁴⁵ phrase “*Panthamusaiya Nyayamu*” was misinterpreted as playing ball and consequently a ball dance called *panthadi* was performed. Later it was corrected and choreographed according to the meaning, “Is it fair of you to be stubborn and treat me like this, is it fair to reject me?” (Translation from Telugu by the author). Some informants told Jones about a choreographic innovation in the Varnam where the “dancer drew a picture in the sand with her feet” (Jones 1972, 31), making the figure of either

⁴⁵ Regional language of Andhra Pradesh.

elephant or that of a tiger. Jones' observation about this choreographic practice points out the affinity of these pieces to the repertoire pieces in Kuchipudi where this choreographic innovation is still employed.

Sari

Jones also identifies a preliminary piece performed to rhythmic syllables called *Sari* dance as a preceding dance piece before the Pada Varnam. Although she says that the name has similarity to the Sari dance in Kathakali it doesn't show affinity in the choreographic content.

Jathiswaram

Jathiswaram is an abstract dance piece still present in the repertoire of both Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam. The composition comprises sol-fa syllables of the Carnatic music system. In the past, this piece was presented as a group piece by two dancers, the *randamkita* and *moonamkita*.⁴⁶ Many of the Jathiswarams were composed by the Tanjore quartet in different ragas including *Bhairavi*, *Anandabhairavi*, *Kalyani*, and others. All these compositions are attributed to Maharaja Swathi Thirunal and two of the Jathiswarams from the old repertoire, *Chenchurutti* ragam and *Todi* ragam, are still taught in the repertoire of Mohiniyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam. Jones notes that her informants identified the Jathiswarams songs as also being used in Kaikottikali. The choreography of the Jathiswaram is identified as "fairly simple and somewhat repetitious" (Jones 1972, 34).

Padams

Padams are interpretative dance pieces thematically similar to Pada Varnams. The structure of the song is less complex than that of a Pada Varnam. Jones notes that some Padams in Mohiniyattam offered the scope of pure dance, too, which is an unusual feature when

⁴⁶ Second and third dancers in order of their importance.

compared to the Padams in Bharatanatyam. The padams as mentioned by Jones' informants include the following:

- 1) *Enta ho Vallabha*, which has its lyrics in *Manipravalam*⁴⁷ set to *Asaveri* Ragam and *Champada* Taalam
- 2) *Indal Iha Valarunnu* with lyrics in *Manipravalam* set to *Surutti* ragam and *Atanta* Taalam
- 3) *Telivilakum Mukhaminnu* with lyrics in *Manipravalam* set to *Punnagavarali* ragam and *Atanta* Talam
- 4) *Manasidussahamayyo* with lyrics in *Manipravalam* set to *Aahari* ragam and *Ata* Taalam.
- 5) *Taruni Njan Entu Chevva Hantha* with lyrics in *Manipravalam* set to *Dvijavanthi* ragam and *Atanta* Taalam.
- 6) *Asai Porukku* with lyrics in Tamil set to *Sankarabharanam* ragam
- 7) *Prananayakan* with lyrics in *Manipravalam* set to ragam *Nadhanamakriya*

While the first padam and the seventh padam are attributed to Irayimman Thampi, the second, third, fourth, and fifth ones are attributed to Swathi Thirunal. Jones assumes that the padam *Asai Porukku* written in Tamil might be probably written by “one of the musicians at the Travancore court since *Maharajakulasekhara* appears in the text; *Kulasekhara Perumal* is also one of the titles of Travancore rulers” (Jones 1972, 32). Jones states that her informants remembered the texts of *Asai Porokku* and *Prananayakan* only in “fragmented form” (ibid).

⁴⁷ Manipravalam is a poetic language that is a mix of Malayalam and Sanskrit.

Mukkutti and Chandanam

Both Jones (1972) and Rele (1992) list the *Mukkuthi*⁴⁸ and *Chandanam*⁴⁹ as dance pieces in the repertoire of Mohiniyattam before the reformation period, but these dance pieces are absent from the contemporary repertoire of Mohiniyattam. While Jones finds that these pieces were immensely popular with male audiences, many other authors and dancers including Rele (1992), Radhika (2004), Kalyanikuttyamma (1992), Satyabhama (2013) and many others do not address these pieces, which were determined to be “vulgar” and subsequently being banished from the repertoire. Some go so far as to see them as contributing factors to the “near disappearance” (Rele 1992, 28) of Mohiniyattam in the early twentieth century before it was introduced in Kerala Kalamandalam in the early 1930s.

Rather than simply accepting the determination of the dances as unacceptable in the Mohiniyattam repertoire, it is important to understand how they existed in form and content. Jones provides a detailed description of the *Mukkuthi* as performed by the *Onnamkita*⁵⁰. Her account describes it as a dance piece with a duration of forty-five minutes with the dancer enacting and repeating each line of the song several times. The text of this song as found in Deepthi Omchery Bhalla’s book in Malayalam *Keralathila Lasyarachanakal* (2001) is as follows:

Has anyone seen my *Mukkuthi*?

I have searched for it here and there,

But couldn’t find it anywhere.

Has anyone found it?

⁴⁸ Nose ring.

⁴⁹ Sandalwood paste.

⁵⁰ Primary dancer.

My *Mukkuthi* was made of scintillating diamond,

Mukkuthi which was unique and rare,

It was made of gold,

Made of gold and diamonds.

I searched it under the mundu, beneath the clothes,

Searched it here and there,

Did not find it anywhere.

[Addressing a particular male spectator] Hey, Potti Nambi⁵¹ from Chingavanam⁵²

Flirting members from the *Illam*⁵³

Nair soldiers with swords,

Did you see my *Mukkuthi*? (Bhalla 2001, translation by the author)

Jones recounts the searching of the *Mukkuthi* as a “little scene” where the dancer approaches a particular patron in the audience pretending that he had hidden her nose ring in his turban. This patron would have been prearranged by the Nattuvan by taking an extra fee for his special appearance for the role in the act. She playfully takes his turban to the stage and “finds” her nose ring and shows it to the audience playfully scolding and complaining about this particular person who took her nose ring. She puts on her nose ring and returns the turban to the patron with “playfully admonitory words and gestures” (Jones 1972, 35).

The *Chandanam* item is described by Jones as a piece where the dancer maneuvers through the audience and smears sandalwood paste on the foreheads of the audience who in turn returned the favor with a small gift of money. While Jones finds these pieces “harmless” with

⁵¹ Surname for a male malayala Brahmin.

⁵² A place near Kottayam in Kerala.

⁵³ Kerala Brahmana household.

“occasional excesses,” she adds that “some dancers used these pieces as invitations to dalliance and at times even went so far as to playfully sit on the gentlemen’s laps! Critics were only too ready to denounce the entire performance and the art itself as leading to moral degradation” (Jones 1972, 35). These dance pieces, which were blamed for the decline of Mohiniyattam in the colonial era, were consciously wiped out in the process of reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in the postcolonial period.

Mughalai Vesham and Thillana

Two dance pieces are identified as *Mughalai Vesham*, one with Moghul influence visible through the difference in costuming similar to that of the modern day Kathak with chosen Hindustani compositions, followed by a *Thillana*. Jones mentions only one complete text verified as Hindustani, a composition set to *Kanada* Raga and Chapu Tala, which is attributed to Swathi Thirunal. The Hindustani piece has disappeared from the repertoire and the informants remembered the choreography only partially. The *Thillana*, which exists in the contemporary repertoire, is similar to the one in Bharatanatyam repertoire, which again has its origin from the North Indian *Tarana*. *Thillana* consists of abstract dance to same syllabic phrases repeated multiple times. Jones mentions the *Thillanas* in the Mohiniyattam repertoire set to *Anandabhairavi*, *Bilahari*, and *Kalyani* ragas; only the *Thillana* in *Kalyani* ragam was taught in Kalamandalam in the 1960s.

Esal

The description of the *Esal* resembles the ritual folk-art forms prevalent in Kerala. *Esal*, as Jones describes it, was enacted by two dancers playing the roles of *Kurattis*.⁵⁴ The piece seems to be a conversational piece describing the relative virtues of their husbands, Siva, and

⁵⁴ Women belonging to the Kurava community.

Vishnu (Jones 1972, 33). This item is also absent from the postcolonial repertoire of Mohiniyattam.

Poli Kali

Poli Kali is recounted as a former practice in Kerala theatre arts forms including Kathakali, Samghamkali, *Ottanthullal*, and many other art forms of Kerala. An item solely performed to invite monetary contributions from the spectators, this was more of a song performed by the dancer or one of the musicians who stood behind a *mundu* spread on the floor. Contributions were made by members of the audience coming up on the stage; the dancer would accept the contributions and place them on the *mundu*, announcing the contributor's name and thanking him.

Apart from the dance pieces discussed and explained by Jones, she also recounts the places in Central Kerala westward from Palakkad to the coast that are of importance in the history of Mohiniyattam in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to information she collected about the dancers, two villages, Korattikara and Pazhayannur, are worth serious attention as many former Mohiniyattam dancers belonged to these places. Kanak Rele in her revised edition of her book *Mohiniyattam: The Lyrical Dance* (2013) shares a list of Mohiniyattam dancers and Nattuvans who lived between 1817 and 1957 that was provided to her by the late Balakrishna Kurup, the older son of poet Vallathol Narayana Menon. This also attests to the fact that Parameswara Bhagavathar's repertoire of Swathi Thirunal's compositions entered the repertoire of Mohiniyattam during the period after 1885 as the informants of both Jones and Rele were born after this period and so in their repertoire outlined by both of them. The list also makes one aware that there were other women dancers and male teachers whose repertoires are still unknown in the history of Mohiniyattam.

Table 1: Women Mohiniyattam Dancers from the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

| Sr. No | House Name | Name of Women Dancers | Native Village | Approximate Lifetime |
|---------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Mullath | Madhu Amma | Korattikara | 1865-1945 |
| 2 | Oottulli | Narayani Amma | Korattikara | 1870-1935 |
| 3 | Mullappilli | Meenakshi Amma | Korattikara | 1875-1931 |
| 4 | Mullappilli | Kali Amma | Korattikara | 1865-1935 |
| 5 | Ramankandath Valappil | Madhavi Amma | Korattikara | 1882-1942 |
| 6 | Puthanpurayil | Ammalu Amma | Korattikara | 1830-1957 |
| 7 | Puthanpurayil | Lekshmikutty Amma | Korattikara | 1882-1947 |
| 8 | Appuredath | Kunhikutty Amma | Korattikara | 1867- 1947 |
| 9 | Appuredath | Kunhu Amma | Korattikara | 1876- 1926 |
| 10 | Kalipurayath | Kalyani Amma | Pazhayanoor | 1871- 1938 |
| 11 | Kalipurayath | Kunhukutty Amma | Pazhayanoor | 1875-1930 |
| 12 | Mankili | Kochukutty Amma | Lakkidi | 1851-1925 |
| 13 | Thattukkesseri | Parukutty Amma | Kongad | 1841-1915 |

| | | | | |
|----|--------------|---------------|-------------------|------------|
| 14 | Natavarambu | Narayani Amma | Irinjalakuda | 1861- 1930 |
| 15 | Orikkeledath | Kalyani Amma | Peringottukurissi | 1891-1938 |

Note: Data from Rele (2013, 21).

Table 2: Nattuvans or Teachers and Conductors

| Sr. No | House Name | Name of Nattuvan | Native Village | Approximate Lifetime |
|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Mullappili | Sankaran Nair | Korattikara | 1845-1935 |
| 2 | Appuredath | Krishna Panikker | Korattikara | 1871- 1946 |
| 3 | Thekkot Valappil | Kannan Nair | Korattikara | 1860-1920 |
| 4 | Thekkot Valappil | Sekharan Nair | Korattikara | 1864- 1921 |
| 5 | (Unknown) | Kalamozhi Krishna Menon | Achippura | 1861-1920 |
| 6 | Puthumana | Gopala Paniker | Chemmanahatta | 1864-1916 |
| 7 | Anikket | Ganapathi Iyer | Palakkad | 1851-1920 |

Note: Data from Rele (2013, 21).

The lists given above are a clear indicator that Mohiniyattam existed in the nineteenth century as a precursor from which the postcolonial repertoire of Mohiniyattam evolved. Some of the dancers including Orikkiledath Kalyani Amma, Madhavi Amma, and Appuredath Krishna Panikker were instructors of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam in the early and late 1930s.

This section has shown that the repertoire of Mohiniyattam taught by these instructors bears a close resemblance to that of Bharathanatyam. There are also compositions that were used by Mohiniyattam during the colonial era in several languages of South India, including Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam. The repertoire even had a Hindustani piece called the *Mugalai Vesham*, which obviously has influences from North India. The dance pieces including the *Mukutti*, *Chandanam*, *Poli*, *Esal*, and *Mugalai Vesham* that involved audience participation were wiped out of the repertoire during the reconstruction period as they were termed as socially unacceptable.

Mohiniyattam Dance of Nineteenth Century in Popular Literature

The social disapproval of Mohiniyattam during the colonial period is reflected in the popular literature of nineteenth century Kerala. Many of the erased forms during the reconstruction period are mentioned in works such as the novels *Indulekha* written in Malayalam by Chandu Menon, and first published in 1889 and *Meenakshi* written in Malayalam by Cheruvalathu Chathu Nair and first published in 1890. These novels are situated in the late nineteenth century colonial socialscape of Kerala. In the novel *Indulekha* (2008), the old Brahmin Suri Nampoothiri is mentioned as a *Kali Bhranthan*⁵⁵ and is portrayed as holding an urge to have an erotic relationship with Indulekha, the female protagonist as opposed to the platonic love between Madhavan (the male protagonist) and Indulekha. Likewise, young Indulekha, the female protagonist of this novel, has a passion for literature, music, and painting, rather than for dance. The second edition of the novel *Meenakshi* (2013), includes a critical study in which Hema Joseph (2013) analyzes how the novels of the late nineteenth century

⁵⁵ Kali is a colloquial word for Kathakali. Bhranthan means lunatic. So Kalibhranthan means someone who is crazy about watching Kathakali all the time, which according to author is an unacceptable social behavior.

demonstrate the native cultural scape, which was strongly influenced by Victorian morality and colonial modernity. This, according to Joseph, served as a framework, that “reformed and reconstructed the cultural and social life of the people of Kerala” (Joseph 2013, 23).

The advent of Victorian morality, colonial modernity, and the beginning of a new reformed and reconstructed cultural life in Kerala is clearly portrayed in this novel as it provides a detailed description of the place of Mohiniyattam and the dancer in these colonial discourses. Chapter seven of the novel, “Govindante Madangi Varavum, Vazhiyil Vachu Kanda Mohiniyattavum”⁵⁶ depicts a Mohiniyattam performance by three beautiful young girls in the house of a police inspector, Eressa Menon, in which men are seduced by the beauty and gestures of Mohiniyattam dancers. The setting and the performance of Mohiniyattam serves as a backdrop to bring forward the reformist ideologies put forward by the author Chathu Nair, and certain characters become the mouthpiece of the author advocating this ideology. For example, the character Govindan Nair is walking to his village when he has a chance encounter with a group of people walking to witness a Mohiniyattam performance. Govindan Nair is reluctant to ask them where the performance is, but secretly asks in a low voice. In response, he is told: “the performance is at inspector Eressa Menon’s house. We are going for the kali. If you want to join you can also come with us. There is both *kali* and *poli*. We heard that the girls who are dancing are extremely beautiful” (Nair 2013, 96). Govindan Nair’s commentary describing the setting of the Mohiniyattam venue, audience, and the various interactions gives a fair idea that it was an entertainment medium of wealthy Nair men and Brahmins who were either landlords or officials in British government jobs. The venue is described by Govindan Nair as “a single building” on the eastern part of Eressa Menon’s bungalow. He saw around 300 people in the audience of

⁵⁶ “The return journey of Govindan and the Mohiniyattam he saw during his return journey.”

which there were “forty Brahmins and sixty landlords” (Nair 2013, 97). The only women Govindan Nair saw was Eressa Menon’s wife, Kalyani Amma, who was seated with two daughters far from the crowd, and their maid servant standing beside her. For Nair, her face showed disapproval for the entire act as her face reflected “a mixed feeling of worry and thoughtfulness” (Nair 2013, 97). He saw a “lascivious man” seated on a mat on the left side of the oil wick lamp and on the east side were seated “Eressa Menon, taluk tahsildar Shamukutti Menon and advocate Sankara Panikkar on a white mat decorated by a special carpet” (Nair 2013, 98). Govindan Nair also saw a silver tray with betel leaves, areca nut, other accompanying ingredients, beautiful rose water sprayers, lemonade bottles, and glass tumblers placed in front of the landlords and brahmins. There was no raised platform for the dancers, and these wealthy men were seated near the performance arena. The Mohiniyattam dancers are described as in the prime of their youth and seemed well-versed in the “art of attracting men” with the movement of their collyrium-lined eyes, erotic gestures which seemed to Govindan Nair like the “arrows of Cupid” which created a “sexual desire in the male audience” (Nair 2013, 98). He saw many men showing lascivious gestures seeing these dancers and when the time came for the *poli* men were seen competing to give money to the performers. After the performance was over and all men left “giving their piece of heart” (Nair 2013, 99) to the Mohinis, lascivious men like Shamukutti Menon got the freedom to freely fulfill their desire with the dancers.

While Govindan Nair retreats to a resting corner nearby, he overhears the conversation between two police constables who are subordinates of Eressa Menon. The constables express their reformist ideals and dislike for the women who performed the Mohiniyattam act. They find the acts of the men dishonorable and unreasonable. The first constable thinks that the money is spent unwantedly on these worthless women and is dishonorable on the part of men to do so. He

says, “what is the need to honor these wretched women? These women are like a *Chenda* hung on the side of a public road which any bygoer can play with” (ibid, 101). The second constable feels quite uncomfortable seeing the men behaving in this manner in the presence of their wedded wife. His doubt takes another turn when he compares the Mohiniyattam dancers to a *Kolambi*, a vessel that is kept in front of a shop for everyone to spit after chewing betel leaves. He asks if “anyone will take the Kolambi and kiss it” (ibid, 102). The first constable even thinks of these men as mad with sexual desire as they were all ready to do anything for “these women who will sit on the lap of men” (ibid, 103) and were ready to do anything for the sake of money. This conversation makes direct reference to *Mukkuthi*, the infamous dance that involves the search for the nose ring described above. Kavya Krishna K.R. in her dissertation “Dance and Gender Performativity: Mohiniyattam and the Making of Malayalee Femininity” sees this conversation as an indicator of the problematics of “uncontrolled accessibility of the performer’s body to the audience” (Krishna 2014, 113). Further, as Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munshi observe, it clearly brings to surface “the Victorian sense of modesty, public behavior and conceptualization of the leashed body and its freedom of expression regarding desire and movements established a different set of values, which became evident in the writings of British women writers” (Dutt and Munshi 2010, 199).

These reformist ideals are furthered in the conversation between Eressa Menon and his wife Kalyani Amma when he reveals to his wife his wish to sleep with one of the Mohiniyattam dancers the night after their performance, having made arrangements for this with the Nattuvan or the owner of the troupe who accompanied them. Kalyani Amma in her frustration replies that while he is free to fulfill his wish, he should pay attention to her concerns too. Kalyani Amma calls her husband’s behavior in public during the performance repulsive and irresponsible for a

police officer to behave in an unruly manner in public. Eressa Menon's very act of intimacy with the dancers, "giving them lemonade, breaking into uncontrollable laughter, fanning them, sprinkling rose water on their bodies" (Nair 2013, 104) is questioned by his reformist wife. She further elaborates her view on Mohiniyattam dancers as follows:

If Mohiniyattam was a dignified art form meant for entertainment, it would have been learned and practiced by all Malayali women belonging to different castes. No one would have hesitated to take up this profession if it earned money for a livelihood. But this is not the case of Mohiniyattam. Only the Sudra women in particular places have taken up this "unique" thing to earn money. Even if people starve for a thousand days or wander around here and there for a job or even do bonded labor, they will not opt for becoming a Mohiniyattam dancer. Only the Sudras give away their daughters to become a Mohiniyattam dancer. Only people belonging to the Nair community take advantage of earning money by making their daughters as Mohiniyattam dancers. Our own caste is tainted and is ridiculed because of this practice. Nairs themselves should work together to bring an end to this practice. (Nair 2013, 106)

Eressa Menon in turn feels remorseful after listening to his wife and decides to dismiss the Mohiniyattam troupe from his place.

Kalyani Amma's outlook reflects the late nineteenth century consciousness developed among Indian thinkers as a result of the spread of English education, which led to "a gradual shift to the attitude towards the public display of the female body, actually putting dance in temples or courts in the same category as prostitution as these people, often identified as 'polluted' and 'pollutant' as social reformists tried to confirm to the

colonial standards of ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’” (Dutt and Munshi 2010, 199). The novel *Meenakshi* delineates these same reformist ideals regarding women issues, changing social hierarchy and the social reforms happening in Kerala. The female protagonist in the novel, Meenakshi is presented as an antithesis to the Mohiniyattam dancers and women including Ammalu, another character, who is portrayed as a woman of loose morals who represented the Nair women of the late nineteenth century. Meenakshi is presented as the ideal of refined womanhood. She is nurtured under the watchful eyes of her parents and her maternal uncle. She is taught Sanskrit and is trained in music, not in dance. Her instructors are aged and mature men. The novel devotes a great deal to sanctify the tainted body and self of Ammalu by purifying her body and mind in various means and ultimately through Bhakthi. Her transformation into a permanent wedded life with a single wedded husband is an antithesis to the social “evil” of *Sambhandham*,⁵⁷ which existed in the Nair community and the older customs paving way to newly reformed customs.

Betty True Jones foregrounds this opposition of the society against Mohiniyattam to the multiple hierarchical order of the Kerala society even from the seventeenth century based on caste and the then existing customary traditions within and between these communities. This is incredibly important, both to the precolonial and colonial history of Mohiniyattam, and to the reasons for the British colonial and nationalist opposition to the form. Jones notes that this was due to the “strong reaction” of the society “at that time against the art” (Jones 1972, 32). The most important of them, which is of concern to Mohiniyattam, is the customary interaction of men from the Nambuthiri Brahmana community and women from the Nair community. The

⁵⁷ Polyandrous relationship that involves fluid relationship with multiple men.

Namboothiri community followed the patrilineal order with the oldest son inheriting the ancestral property. In this community only the oldest son married women from the same community and inherited all family holdings. The younger sons married women from either the Ambalavasi community or entered into *Sambandham*⁵⁸ with women of the Nair community. While polygamy was accepted and traditionally practiced by Nambuthiri, Ambalavasi, and Nair communities, Nair community also practiced polyandry. The Nair women who formed the *Sambandham* relationship with Nambuthiri men stayed in their own family home with the children they bore from this relationship. The Nambuthiri men who entered into *Sambandham* visited the Nair family hold and stayed with them occasionally. While the inheritance of family property in Nair families were through the female line, the administration of the property and other familial matters were left to the oldest male member of the family who was called the *Karanavan*. Jones observes that this kind of social system “produced a leisured intellectual class, particularly among the Namboothiri’s, who were able to devote a great deal of time to literature and the arts” (Jones 1972, 13). Mohiniyattam dancers belonged to the Nair community and many of these women formed close relationships with Nambuthiris through *Sambandham*, sometimes a relationship which became permanent and sometimes temporary. Jones suggests that the practice of polyandry among the members of the Nair community had sometimes led Nair ladies from “good but impoverished” (Jones 1972, 13) families to undertake the profession of Mohiniyattam dancer “to seek a wealthy husband” and these Mohiniyattam dancers were even “invited to become second wives of wealthy patrons” (Jones 1972, 13). Betty True Jones’ concluding remarks in her article point out the urgent need of training and research in Mohiniyattam during

⁵⁸ A fluid relationship between men in the Nambuthiri community and women from the Nair community.

the future years as she finds the “rapid change in social conditions and value systems” and “the changing aesthetic values discard the old in favor of the new and the indigenous in favor of the exotic” (Jones 1972, 31). Jones’ observation can be clearly witnessed as a marker of the trajectory undertaken by Mohiniyattam and its practitioners towards creating its postcolonial vocabulary.

Conclusion: Trajectory Towards the Postcolonial Repertoire of Mohiniyattam

Mohiniyattam dance, as demonstrated in this chapter, went through a gradual evolution from the precolonial period to the colonial period to consummate its reconstruction phase, which is the main subject of this dissertation. Its movement vocabulary can be traced from female dance traditions in the precolonial and colonial era, via historical evidence in the form of sculptures, stone carvings, epigraphs, and inscriptions seen in temples from both Tamilnadu and Kerala. This evidence also points to an undivided geography of precolonial and colonial times and a society characterized by multilingual and a multicultural ethos. This precolonial and colonial contexts are important to my research as the findings provide the backdrop of the reconstruction phase, which will be discussed in the following Chapter three of this dissertation.

CHAPTER III

MOHINIYATTAM (RE) CONSTRUCTION AND THE ARCHIVAL SITE OF KERALA KALAMANDALAM

In the previous chapter, I discussed Mohiniyattam's precolonial and colonial antecedents as important contexts of Mohiniyattam's revival, reconstruction, and reformation as part of India's independence movement, and the subsequent postcolonial period in which Kerala also became a state. Kerala's postcolonial history, geography, culture, and language are after all an amalgam of various borrowings and transitions closely related to India's collective memories from the past and the projects of nationalism. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) astutely remarks in his work *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, that in the "multifarious struggles that took place in colonial India, antihistorical constructions of the past often provided very powerful forms of collective memory" (Chakrabarty 2002, 383). In other words, the postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam articulates its own unique collective memory through an antihistorical construction of its past existence, both through the kinds of histories and artifacts discussed in chapter one, as well as through the explicit reconstruction of the form in the state agency, Kerala Kalamandalam, which is the focus of this chapter. Moreover, this process lays the groundwork for the subsequent chapters, which trace the specific lineages and repertoires, beginning in the nationalist period and extending through postcolonial India and Kerala, through which Mohiniyattam became classical dance form of Kerala.

My argument here is drawn from cross connecting the narratives from the inscriptional and literary pieces of evidence of the female traditions of dance forms from precolonial and colonial India (see chapter one), to the descriptions of postcolonial Mohiniyattam propagated by Kerala Kalamandalam. Postcolonial Mohiniyattam, in this way, can be considered a subject of an

“imagined community” (Anderson 2006, 10), which then was imbricated in the construction of an actual state. The mode of representation that postcolonial Mohiniyattam practitioners and the society envisioned is akin to what Homi Bhabha called “mimetic” (Bhabha 2004, 12), which constitutes the mimicry of certain constructed ideals of nationalism, which in some cases were imported from British colonial values. Dance revivalists portrayed precolonial and colonial female dance traditions as incomplete, lacking “refinement,” and even vulgar (see chapter one) when measured against these constructed ideals, which then provided a foundation for the complete reconstruction of various dance forms across India. In this chapter, I examine this process more broadly before turning my attention specifically to the role of Kerala Kalamandalam in the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam.

Female Dancers, Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Indian Nation-State

The cultural significance of Indian classical dance and its role in society has shifted over time from a form of worship in precolonial India, as an entity of scorn in colonial India, and finally as a marker of nation and state identities, including race, language, geography, and gender post-independence (Gaston 2005). Urmimala Sarkar Munshi cites Rabindranath Tagore's letter to the dancer Uday Shankar, in which he encourages Shankar to lead an effort to reform dance from its “diseased” ways.

There was a time when in the heart of this country, the flow of dance followed a buoyant life through the passage of time that is nearly choked up, leaving us bereft of the spontaneous language of joy, and exposing stagnant pools of muddy impurities. In an unfortunate country where life's vigor has waned, dancing vitiates into catering for a diseased mind that has lost its normal appetites, even as we find in the dance of our professional dancing girls. It is for you to give it

health and strength and richness. The spring breeze coaxes the spirit of the woodlands into multifarious forms of exuberant expression. Let your dancing, too, wake up that spirit of spring in this cheerless land of ours; let her latent power of true enjoyment manifest itself in exultant language of hope and beauty.

(Quoted in Munshi 2008, 81)

Tagore's letter claims that the traditional performers of Indian classical dance had failed to guard the image of dance and allowed it to degenerate to serve the tastes of the unworthy, a sentiment common among social reformers, writers, and satirists from the nineteenth century through the twentieth century. They critiqued the erotic content in dance performed by women who were hereditary performers and who enjoyed a level of economic autonomy as singers and dancers.

During the second decade of the twentieth century when nationalist movements gained force under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the ideology of Home Rule, or *Purna Swaraj*, gained momentum throughout the country. Davesh Soneji, in his work *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (2012), observes that the nation's goal was swaraj, self-governance, over physical, moral, and spiritual aspects of life. Soneji notes that the “moral health” of the nation was a growing concern in India's nationalist movement, and the “politics of respectability” were a “cornerstone of Congress Nationalism in South India, and these privileged patriarchal norms were deeply embedded in the discourse of women activists” (Soneji 2012, 132). Moreover, Gandhi's views on female sexuality influenced social reformers throughout India, including Kerala. Soneji recalls Gandhi's reflection on a visit to Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh, where he met several members of the Devadasi community to drive this point home. He quotes Gandhi as saying,

It was about ten o'clock last night in Cocanada that dancing girls paid me a visit when I understood the full significance of what they were. I felt like sinking in the earth below...I ask you, brothers, and sisters, to send me assurance, as early as possible, that there is not a single dancing girl in this part of the land. I charge these sisters who are sitting behind me to go about from place to place, find out every dancing girl, and shame men into shunning the wrong they are doing.

(Soneji 2012, 133)

Soneji observes that Gandhi's plea had widespread repercussions throughout India. Gandhi continued his support to institutionalize the devadasi reform, suggesting that domesticating devadasis by teaching them weaving and handicrafts would solve the problem of prostitution. Gandhi also said that devadasis require "purification" and offered weaving of *khadi*⁵⁹ "as a sacrificial practice," and as a "moral penance" (Soneji 2012, 134). The gaining momentum of the national campaign under the ideology of Gandhi also influenced the nationalists to domesticate women in the performing communities in South India. This domestication tied women's roles to their inherent virtue of modesty, a nineteenth-century Victorian ideal. According to Victorian standards, Devadasis were oppressed and were denied the bliss of domesticity most suited to the "feminine" nature.

Janet O'Shea, in her work *At Home in the World: Bharathanatyam on the Global Stage* (2007), critiques the ideals of Victorian morality and observes that the "colonial and nationalist reformers sought primarily to bring Indian cultural practices into line with those of Europe, rather than to emancipate women" (O'Shea 2007, 107). O'Shea's observation on the ideology of nationalist reformers finds evidence from the imperial venture of British colonialists whose

⁵⁹ Cotton fabric spun by hand.

mission was to "civilize" and "uplift" the "debased natives" and save them from their restrictive traditions (ibid). The colonialists (and many independence campaigners) considered women as "vulnerable" members of Indian society whose abject status emanated from the sanctions of tradition. Colonialists further considered imperial intervention as inevitable as Indians could not rule themselves. It is evident from these observations that this colonial ideology formed the subconscious imperative of nationalist reformists who sought to reform Indian society modeled on modern European ideals of refinement and equality to prove Indians as capable and on par with European standards. Nationalist revivalists, on the other hand, sought the values of India's ancient cultural practices to validate the status of women in the would-be nation-state. The resultant status of women in Indian society was the outcome of various oppositional forces during the colonial period including the agendas put forward by the nationalists and colonialists, reformists, and revivalists.

Putting Tagore and Gandhi's sentiments together, we can see the call for the abolition of current dance practices alongside one for the rescuing of the practices from the practitioners. Social reformers, historians, and nationalists thus did not consider traditional practitioners as worthy repositories or spokespersons for their own art. As Urmimala Munshi points out, "any dance to be accepted and be included in historical documentation as 'Indian,' had to have an added characterization such as 'pure' or 'traditional'" (Munshi 2008, 80) to be worthy of a new nation. This, Munshi observes, required a cleansing and the deliberate removal of specific dance forms from the context of their recent past. The abolition of Devadasi practices in temples all over South India in the 1930s is an example of the process that contributed to viewing the female dancers and the traditions that belonged to them, in Kerala and all over India, as having a "subaltern" (Spivak 1996, 34) existence. Moreover, through the sanitation process, reformers

attempted to link the dance forms to ancient historical sources to establish them as pure and of sacred origin. This was essentially the agenda behind the reconstruction of many dance forms during the independence movement and continuing into postcolonial India. As a result, the right to practice was denied to hereditary women dancers (Devadasis and the Nair Mohiniyattam community), the right to teach the “pure form” was given to male members of the community, and institutions emerged as learning places for dance and as custodians of tradition. For example, in the neighboring state of Tamilnadu, Sadir was resurrected as Bharathanatyam giving it the status of a national classical dance form of India with women practitioners including Rukmini Devi Arundale from the Brahmin Upper caste spearheading its performance and practice and validating it as an expression of spirituality through the institutional framework of Kalakshetra College of Dance and Music, which was established in 1936. During Kerala's transition from colonial to postcolonial state, reincarnating Mohiniyattam into an institutional practice was a step in this process. Consequently, the postcolonial narrative of Mohiniyattam as Kerala's female dance tradition can only be completed by situating it in Kerala Kalamandalam, the foremost cultural institution in Kerala.

The Archival Site: Kerala Kalamandalam

The historiography of Kerala's classical dance traditions would not be complete without considering the history of Kerala Kalamandalam, which holds a prominent place in the cultural history of Kerala. Kerala Kalamandalam upon its inception initially played an instrumental role in reviving two art traditions native to Kerala, Kathakali⁶⁰ and Mohiniyattam, and later adding

⁶⁰ Dance drama tradition of Kerala enacting mythological stories predominantly from the Ramayana and Mahabharatha. Actors in this performance are predominantly male. Female characters are also performed by men disguised in female costuming. There are a few female performers who have taken up the art form in the late twentieth century.

many other art forms into its institutional framework. Leela Nampoothiripad in her work *The History of Kerala Kalamandalam* (1990), written in Malayalam, narrates various stages of Kerala Kalamandalam and its activities from the 1920s to the 1980s. Kerala Kalamandalam is the brainchild of the nationalist poet from Kerala, Vallathol Narayana Menon, and it came to official existence as a registered organization on December 9, 1927.

There were various factors that paved the formation of this organization, the most important being the decline of the economic status of landlords and aristocracy during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who were patrons of Kathakali. The 1920s also witnessed a rise in the nationalist movement among the masses in India and the notions of nationalism was reflected in various ways in different regions of India. Although the Indian National Congress had to retreat from the non-cooperation movement against British colonial rule, it paved the way to a renaissance in various walks of life in India. Khadi and cottage industries were brought back to life and there was a hue and cry to revive the classical arts forms of India.

Cultural activists during that time considered the renaissance and reformation of classical art forms as the cultural facet of the nationalist movement and found it imperative to revive and reconstruct many of the dying art forms. According to them these art forms truly reflected the unique cultural richness of the nation. Leela Nampoothiripad finds the notion of nationalism as the master narrative that "awakened the cultural activists from slumber" (Nampoothiripad 1990, 9), as they found the future of classical art forms plunging into oblivion in colonial India. These insights paved the way to a cultural renaissance in various parts of India, the most important of them being the need of cultural institutions to nurture and revive the dying artistic traditions of India. In 1901, the great poet Rabindranath Tagore founded Santi Niketan near Calcutta, West

Bengal, which later grew into Vishwa Bharati University in 1921. The institution was built on the principles of humanism, internationalism, and sustainable environment. Tagore envisioned a curriculum rooted in art, human values, and cultural exchange. These principles had a strong influence on many of the cultural revivals across the country. In 1927, Rukmini Devi Arundale founded Kalakshetra in Madras (now Chennai) upholding the revival and reconstruction of Bharatanatyam. In Kerala, Kerala Kalamandalam was registered as an organization in 1927 in Kozhikode. Originally aimed at the propagation and performance of Kathakali, the organization was initially housed in a home named “Leelavilasam.” The newly formed Kalamandalam thrived on the funds raised through individual memberships from people who came from different walks of life.

On November 9, 1930, during the fifty-second birthday of Vallathol Narayana Menon, Kerala Kalamandalam as training institution came into being at Madapattil, the royal residence of Kakkattu Karanavapad (Kunjunnithampuram), who was a connoisseur of Kathakali. Karanavapad had his own troupe of Kathakali actors, instructors, drummers, and students housed in his residence at that time. He generously transferred his performance troupe together with all the costumes and accessories of Kathakali to Kerala Kalamandalam. The pioneer troupe of instructors and students who first joined Kerala Kalamandalam included Kariyattil Koppan Nair, Thakazhi Kunju Kurup, and Pulapatta Kuttan Bhagavathar who joined as instructors, Sankunni Nair who joined as costumier, Vettipara Sankaran and Ezhikara Sivaraman who joined as Kathakali students, Kothachira Koovappally Pushpakattu Neelakandan Nambeesan and Chirutha Madhavan who joined as music students, and Thayankavil Narayanan Nambidi who joined as a student of percussion (Nampoothiripad 1990, 23). This initial phase of Kalamandalam at a residential dwelling lasted only for five months and had to shift to another place and facility due

to various hardships including housing students and instructors and teaching an art form at a joint family residence caused inconvenience to the people in the family. In April 1931, Kalamandalam was shifted to a small house named Sreenivasam Bunglow in a place called Ambalapuram near Mulankunnathukavu, which is almost twelve kilometers north of Trissur. As the bungalow was owned by Mukunda Raja, the close ally of Vallathol, the training of Kathakali flourished as the coming months saw more students enroll. Vallathol found the need to add more faculty members for the training and started exploring the various schools of Kathakali. He was enamored by the well-disciplined stylistic approach of the Kalluvazhi Chitta⁶¹ with its focus on histrionics, distinct eye and feet movements, and the economic use of space to create subtle nuances. He appointed one of the titans of Kalluvazhi Chitta, Pattikanthodi Ravunni Menon, as the faculty of Kathakali in July 1931. Ravunni Menon discontinued the job after two months. He came back again in 1932 but stayed there only for another four months. He was dismissed from the job due to his difference of opinion with the office bearers of Kerala Kalamandalam. He was again called back as Vallathol experienced a vacuum in the teaching learning process of Kathakali at Kerala Kalamandalam as he found that Ravunni Menon was irreplaceable when it comes to the pedagogy of Kathakali. Vallathol believed that Kathakali would flourish in Kalamandalam only under the strict guidance and instruction of Pattikanthodi Ravunni Menon. Ravunni Menon continued in Kalamandalam till 1936 and again discontinued. He was called back again in 1938 and he rejoined as faculty. During this time, Kalamandalam was shifted to another place called Cheruthuruthy. Ravunni Menon stayed with Kalamandalam during its economic hardships although he permanently left Kalamandalam in 1943. He passed away in 1948. Ravunni

⁶¹ A style of Kathakali from which the Northern style of Kathakali developed.

Menon's personal repertoire became the institutional repertoire called the Kalluvazhi Chitta in Kalamandalam, and it evolved through the performers who are trained in this style.

In addition to Kathakali, Kerala Kalamandalam can be considered as an aesthetic, cultural and archival site to critically historicize the postcolonial narratives in Mohiniyattam as the story of the revival of the form also began in this institution in the 1930s. Mahahavi Vallathol was a nationalist poet and freedom fighter who was hugely influenced by the cultural revivalist movement in the late 1930s and was a great advocate of reviving India's "grand culture" by resurrecting the dance forms that had been lost or forgotten. This institution essentially forges the link between the dance form's kinesthetic narratives, both past and present thus enabling an insight into the dance form's colonial and postcolonial history. The historical narratives provided by Leela Nampoothiripad in the *History of Kalamandalam* and also from "Mohiniyattam: A Dance Tradition of Kerala, South India" (1972) by Betty True Jones, who started her training and research of Mohiniyattam in 1959, serve as point of entry in situating Kalamandalam as a site of historical relevance to the story of Mohiniyattam. In addition to providing social, cultural, aesthetic, and kinesthetic information about the dance form's past, these narratives offer a pathway for further research.

Both Nampoothiripad and Jones establish 1932 as the year of introduction of Mohiniyattam in Kerala Kalamandalam. Prior to 1932, girls were not part of any training in Kalamandalam. The addition of a girls' school was the preliminary step undertaken by Vallathol to enroll girls into the training program. At the same time, a retired Mohiniyattam dancer from the village of Peringottusseri was brought to Kalamandalam as the first teacher. Vallathol appointed Orikkaledath Kalyani Amma and her Guru Appuredath Krishna Panicker as the instructors for Mohiniyattam. This introduction provided the groundwork and first-hand

knowledge of a dance form he was not familiar with. But this move was not without difficulty during this colonial era when this dance was considered as an art of a fallen woman. Leela Nampoothiripad mentions this difficulty faced by Vallathol.

Vallathol recognized that getting an instructor to teach Mohiniyattam was only one part of the difficulty. To enroll devoted students to learn Mohiniyattam was the most difficult task faced. No one and most importantly men who were head of the families were not ready to send girls from their family to learn Mohiniyattam. Even after searching and requesting various families to send their daughters, even after many months they got an instructor, Vallathol failed in his attempt to get even a single student. (Nampoothiripad 1990, 41)

Such was the difficulty in getting a student, and as a final attempt, Mukunda Raja, the cofounder of Kalamandalam, ordered one of his worker's daughters to enroll as a dance student to learn Mohiniyattam. As a result, a student named Thankamani, who later married the famous dancer Gopinath, became the first Mohiniyattam student to study with Orikkaledath Kalyani Amma at Kerala Kalamandalam. Nampoothiripad adds that Thankamani was not particularly interested to learn Mohiniyattam and that her enrollment materialized only "due to their respect to the authority of Manakulam King's family" (Nampoothiripad 1990, 42) whom her family relied on for their livelihood. The conductor, or the nattuvanar, of the Mohiniyattam troupe at this time was Korattikkara Appuredath Krishna Panicker, who played the cymbals for the performance. They were accompanied by Madhava Warriar on the Maddalam while the vocals were rendered by the dancer herself.

During 1933, Ragini Devi (aka Esther Luella) an American dancer, the first foreigner and the first female, joined Kalamandalam to learn Kathakali. She also learned Mohiniyattam under

Kalyani Amma. Her training at Kalamandalam was brief. Later Ragini Devi took the whole Mohiniyattam troupe along with her to Mumbai and Kalyani Amma performed Mohiniyattam for the Mumbai audience, which was widely lauded for "its beauty and graceful movements" (Nampoothiripad 1990, 42). Ragini Devi's observation about the abstract movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam and the photographs she provided in her work *Dancing Dialects of India* (1972) is worth mentioning at this point. Ragini Devi describes Mohiniyattam as "an ideal example of the erotic form" (Ragini Devi 1972, 116). She states that the Mohiniyattam she learned from Kalyaniamma in the 1930s consisted of "swaying movement of the torso from side to side ... with wide swinging steps. Rhythmic variations (chollus) are based on patterns of rhythm syllables that are an integral part of the vocal accompaniment which is gracefully rendered by the dancer with plastic fluency, beautiful dance gestures, and footwork. The expression of the wide-open eyes in erotic" (Ragini Devi 1972, 116). She also notes a form of dance, *Kanduka Nritta*⁶² as part of the dances like *Varnam* and *Padams*. Ragini Devi also observes "the lyrical eroticism and flowing cadences.... the melodic style" of Mohiniyattam as "a pleasing contrast to the more precise Bharathanatya" and the exposition of abhinaya she learned from Kalyaniamma as "a rich vocabulary of gestures quite different from Kathakali" (ibid, 117). Ragini Devi's narrative quite evidently identifies that the gestural language used for Mohiniyattam in the 1930s was quite different from the one outlined by the text *Hashtalakshanadeepika* followed in Kathakali and Mohiniyattam at present. Ragini Devi's observations can be considered firsthand information on the colonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam and are very crucial to the understanding of Mohiniyattam after the reconstruction period regarding the kinesthetic omissions and acceptances, which will be demonstrated in chapter four.

⁶² Dancing enacting playing with a ball.

In 1935, Thankamani left Kerala Kalamandalam after her marriage to Guru Gopinath, a Kathakali actor and a member of Ragini Devi's performance ensemble. That same year, Orikkaledath Kalyani Amma joined the famed Shanthi Niketan in Calcutta in 1935, she passed away three years later. Mohiniyattam teaching and learning came to a standstill at this time. Even as these logistical struggles took place, Mohiniyattam dance, its revivers, and its practitioners also had to prove the classical "authenticity" of the dance form. Ananya Chatterjee (2004) finds this negotiation for "authenticity" as one of the greatest challenges faced by dance forms all over India in the wake of Bharathanatyam gaining prominence. She suggests that the dichotomy between the "margi" and the "desi" was at the center of the challenge: "margi" dances were considered structured and organized, with a developmental pathway and a specific aesthetic and were translated as "classical," while "desi" referred to vernacular social dances or fragments of dances locally performed with no fixed organization and was translated as "folk." This translation, which Chatterjee clarifies is the "inevitable implication of high art and low art" (Chatterjee 2004, 147), proved to be problematic for regional dance forms.

The introduction of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam and the resultant resistance of the public against this form and Vallathol's decision to reform the dance call back to the social critiques of the dance leveled by the novels *Meenakshi* (1890) and *Indulekha* (1889) discussed in chapter one. While the novels were published decades prior, the very introduction of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam invited pungent criticism from literary and political circles. Of these the most important critique to discuss is the writing of satirist Sanjayan that appeared in the *Viswaroopam Magazine* (1940), which called Vallathol's introduction of Mohiniyattam to Kerala Kalamandalam a choice of aesthetics over morality. But it was not only writers that challenged the inclusion of Mohiniyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam; the Kochi government initially ordered

them to stop teaching Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam in 1938 (Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 64), an order that was overruled upon the request of Vallathol who argued that the introduction of Mohiniyattam was aimed at preserving the indigenous art tradition of Kerala. He argued that he had removed the "vulgarity" from Mohiniyattam, and the repertoire taught at Kalamandalam was aesthetically invaluable. Sanjayan's political commentary responded to Vallathol's justification to teach Mohiniyattam against the order of the government.

The older question of art for art's sake or art for life's sake has taken a new dimension with the Cochin government's approval and Vallathol's justification. The question now is whether art is for prostitution. The great poet has become an admirer of Devadasi dance which was considered immoral by many great people of India. The dance is banned in Cochin temples too. But the poet sees art in Devadasi dance! May be there is art in it! Who is disagreeing with it? Even the songs sung by booze men in toddy shops have art in it! So is there in a butcher's knife Yes there is an art in the Devadasi's eye movement, her gait which resembles the walk of an elephant, her facial expressions. There is no wonder in it as she is trained in the erotic arts. But will the poet take the Devadasi along with her art? I feel this question is unwanted that the poet has already given his choice of art over morality. But if I am asked the same question, I will say that I want both or else my choice will be morality alone...because at the origin of art is worldly and morality comes with spirituality. One shouldn't cut off the rice sapling to provide manure to the rose plant of art... if that is the case the hand which materializes this act should be cut off. (Sanjayan 1986, 506-507)⁶³

⁶³ Translated from Malayalam by the author.

In the same vein, a cartoon ridiculing Vallathol was published in *Viswaroopam Magazine* on November 5, 1940, illustrated by M. Bhaskaran with an accompanying text by Sanjayan. The poet is pictured as seated with a group of people watching Mohiniyattam. The dancer is pictured as dancing to the drummer while another person on the left side of the dancer has his hand leaning towards to touch her costume. The text that accompanies the cartoon reads "It is sad to see Mahakavi who depicted the plight of the devadasi in the poem *Kochusita* praising Kochi Government for its efforts to reinstate Dasiyattam, ignoring the knowledge of the lurking *kamakinkara* ["lascivious person"] behind each Devadasi" (Sanjayan and Bhaskaran 1940).⁶⁴ Sanjayan here refers to Vallathol's poems celebrating womanhood. The poem *Kochusita* (2018)⁶⁵ address the issue of the Devadasi system and prostitution. The little girl Champakavalli who is the protagonist of the poem is born in a Devadasi family who fights against odds in her community and commits suicide to escape becoming a prostitute. An ardent admirer of Sita in Ramayana she wishes to be a chaste wife like Sita and returns to mother earth like the mythological Sita who was taken into mother earth's womb when Rama questioned her about her chastity. Sanjayan is agitated by the fact that the poet who wrote poems like *Kochusita* had taken an instrumental role in reinstating a dance that is believed to have an inglorious past. This also demonstrates the stakes of Vallathol's personal commitment to establishing Mohiniyattam as a classical dance form of Kerala; he risked personal attacks to maintain a commitment to the dance form.

But Mohiniyattam was not the only art form publicly critiqued. Another cartoon titled *Kali Bhranth Moothal Thani Bhranth* (Sanjayan and Bhaskaran, 1937)⁶⁶ mocks Vallathol and the

⁶⁴ Translated from Malayalam by the author.

⁶⁵ Translation: Little Sita.

⁶⁶ Translation: Gone insane due to the craziness for Kathakali.

establishment of Kerala Kalamandalam in 1932 to teach the art forms of Kerala, the first of them being Kathakali. “*Kali*” is loosely used to describe performance in Malayalam but is more frequently and casually used to denote Kathakali performances happening elsewhere. The description of the picture shows a man in his thought bubble having a *Sringara Abhinayam* (“erotic act”) with a woman after witnessing a Kathakali performance. The cartoon illustrates that he has become insane due to his extreme passion for Kathakali and is being taken to the Kuthiravattom mental asylum for treatment. The cartoon suggests that the overindulgence in Kathakali performance results in a socially unacceptable behavior and satirizes *Sringaram* as an insane emotion that needs medical attention.

During the same period several other cartoons appeared in *Viswaroopam* depicting the dangers of Kerala women entering public spaces. *Madamayude Madangi Pokku* (Sanjayan and Bhaskaran 1937)⁶⁷ focuses on “*Madama*,” a colloquial form of the address “Madam” that got permuted (even at present) into a satirical description of a woman who is “modern” and outgoing and is seen in public, as opposed to the “domestic women” who stays inside the territory of the home and family. The cartoon portrays the transition of western women (white/English woman) through different attires from the time of Adam and Eve to 1937 and a prediction of how the attire of women in the future will be. The pictures begin with little or no clothes in the first sketch of a woman titled “primary stage of human evolution,” transforming to a woman carrying a child clothed in skin of an animal or bark of a tree titled “beginning of history.” In the third picture titled “AD 1000” a woman is seen covered head to toe holding a piece of meat over fire; the fourth one titled “AD 1600” and in the fifth one titled “AD 1890 Victorian Period,” both show a woman wearing an ankle length gown. The woman in the sixth one titled “AD 1925, Post

⁶⁷ Translation: The exodus of Madam.

World War," is wearing a short dress above the knee and in the seventh one titled "AD 1937" as the present time, a woman is seen wearing a bikini holding a beach ball. In final picture titled "Future?" the cartoonist is pessimistic and doubtful and shows the sketch of a naked woman holding a mirror applying makeup. The cartoon appears to present a full "circle of life" with both the primitive woman and the modern woman lacking the values of propriety, modesty, and respectability.

The images of the female body constructed in literature and cartoons of English women and native Kerala women demonstrated in the paragraphs above contributed to a meticulous reconstruction of the role of women in Kerala in both public and private spheres as a continuous negotiation of colonial and native gender roles and codes. This social milieu around the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam clearly articulates what Homi Bhabha describes as the trap for colonized peoples between ambivalence and mimicry. For him, ambivalence is the course of assumptions created by colonial discourses to justify the colonial settlement of other lands and its people, and mimicry is how colonized people copy the civilized values and behavior of the "First World." These examples of critiques of Mohiniyattam by writers like Chathu Nair, Chandu Menon, and Sanjayan show the influence of British colonialism, its sense of Victorian modesty, conceptualization of the woman's body, its freedom of expression, and its different set of values. Given this social context, it is no wonder that Vallathol felt compelled to prove the righteousness of his decision to introduce Mohiniyattam into Kerala Kalamandalam by instilling the dance with the acceptable norms of society.

As noted earlier, Mohiniyattam instruction came to a standstill in Kalamandalam 1935 when both Orikkaledath Kalyani Amma and Thankamani left the institution. It was only in 1937 that Vallathol was able to find another instructor, Chomayil Ramankandathu Valappil

Madhaviamma, to teach Mohiniyattam. It is worthwhile to note that another student Kalyanikuttyamma (who later became Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma) joined as a Mohiniyattam student upon the request of Vallathol as he wanted girls from respectable families to take up Mohiniyattam. "Girls from respectable families" was "a descriptor" that would "immediately signal higher prestige" (Chatterjee 2004, 148), thereby erasing and eliminating the ambiguous social status that Mohiniyattam and Mohiniyattam dancers had during the colonial period, a most important marker of the cultural revivalist project in colonial India.

All of Vallatol's efforts were part of a deliberate attempt to authenticate the "classical" status of the form. As Ananya Chatterjee observes,

because Bharathanatyam was the first to claim its "classical" status, it effectively set a clear model for how "classicism" might be interpreted, with the corollary that the claim of classicism and the demonstration of organization according to a uniform code as outlined by Bharata in the *Natyashastra* were proven validation of classical "authenticity." The organization of Bharathanatyam repertoire in a specific format to suit the new needs of a stage recital, in fact like a journey through "a great temple," was also an important model. This left dancers and advocates of several other dance forms, in particular Odissi, Kuchupudi, and Mohini Attam, in a quandary, for while they felt strongly that these forms had their aesthetic and regional specificities, they also recognized the necessary uniformity of any notion of "classicism," and that, in order to support their claims of classicism, they would have to work with the already established model.

(Chatterjee 2004, 147)

As suggested by Chatterjee, Mohiniyattam also went through this complicated phase of authenticating the form. The omission of dance pieces like *Mukkutti* and *Chandanam* served a two-fold purpose. Firstly, both these pieces were vernacular or "desi" songs that were performed like a folk dance involving social interaction with the spectators. Eliminating them from the repertoire allowed Mohiniyattam to be considered a classical dance form. Secondly, eliminating the "risqué" dances, which did not fit into the evolving social, moral, and ethical norms associated with the independence movement, paved the way for the creation of a new ideal of Kerala womanhood and the image of the female dancer as a respectable citizen. This is likely in reaction to the Nair practices of *sambhadam* and matrilineal inheritance, which Justine Lemos describes in her dissertation *Bracketing Lasya* (2009) as inverse to British Victorian marriage ideals, that is, a single protecting husband attached through contract to a single dutiful wife. Lemos observes that the sentiment of social reformers (like Vallathol), who desired to configure matrilineal inheritance and marriage practices strongly resembled the agendas of Victorian missionaries in Kerala and Victorian sentiments regarding marriage in England.

As demonstrated in chapter one, the precursors of Mohiniyattam were practiced by women from the Nair community in Cochin and Travancore Princely States. Janaki Nair's work *Women and Law in Colonial India* (1996) presents how the colonial and indigenous mechanisms that recast the devadasis as prostitutes became synonymous with the "polyandrous" Nair women and Mohiniyattam dancers who were also recast as prostitutes. Janaki Nair describes how the Nair Marriage Act in 1930 and the influence of anti-devadasi legal measures fundamentally changed inheritance, marriage, sexuality, and roles of women throughout South India. Nair finds the reform of matriliney in Kerala, its relationship with *sambandham* reform, and the anti-devadasi measures as intertwined processes. Nair quotes a landlord named Changalath

Kunjiraman Menon as saying, "the sambhadam put the *Sudra* (Nair) women on par with the dancing girls of the East Coast" (Nair 1996, 164). While this observation of a male member of the Nair community and his comparison of women from his own community to the devadasis demonstrates the perceived immorality of the system called *sambandham*, it also added the perception that the dance form Mohiniyattam practiced by women of their community was "morally corrupt and antithetical to the Indian National movement" (Lemos 2009, 158).

Conclusion: Mohiniyattam Reconstruction as a Socially Centered Kinesthetic Process

The reconstruction of Mohiniyattam at Kalamandalam I argue, thus was a social kinesthetic process that aimed at creating a form acceptable to a society transitioning from colonialism to postcolonialism. This socially centered kinesthetic form was then achieved through placing the dance form into a framework where the grammar of the dance form was structured, and the link to the treatise *Hasthalakshanadeepika* was deliberately established. This enabled reinstating exclusive dance pieces from the colonial repertoire, which fitted into the "margi" or the "classical" format. Purity in language and expressions were given prime importance when considering them into the repertoire. Thus, the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam initiated in Kerala Kalamandalam was aimed at bringing the dance into the social, moral, and ethical norms of a new Kerala identity. As Avanti Meduri (2010) has demonstrated the master narratives of internationalism, Indian nationalism, Orientalism, and colonialism has helped to shape contemporary classical dances. Meduri argues that Rukmini Devi staged the reconstruction of Bharathanatyam historically with the help of three symbols "Natyasastra, guru and temple" (Meduri 2010, 258). Meduri's argument is directed towards the theatrical presentation of Bharathanatyam, which brought the effects of both respectability and visual spectacle. In Kerala, Mohiniyattam, I argue, was reconstructed and historically placed with the help of three symbols:

Hasthalakshanadeepika, womanhood, and statehood. J. Devika in her essay "Bodies Gone Awry: The Abjection of Sexuality in Development Discourse in Contemporary Kerala" states:

The mid-twentieth century missionary discourse on the family in Kerala and later in the discourse of social reform pioneered by the modern educated elite, the alleged threat to procreation that free-flowing sexual desire posed was continually highlighted along with the instrumentality of the disciplined family to modern regimes of wealth creation. Further, the ideal domestic female projected in such writings was inevitably a desexualized figure, in contrast women in traditional marital arrangements, such as in matrilineal families, were thoroughly sexualized and therefore found incapable of healthy procreation. (Devika 2013, 98)

As evident in Devika's observation is the place of women in the postcolonial nation-state (Kerala), which was premised on the desexualized and procreative ideal of womanliness and natural feminine inclinations towards domesticity. Devika finds that the postcolonial ideal femininity in twentieth century Kerala also added an aesthetic element to the domestic ideal. This element, Devika states, was to enable the woman to also function as the provider of pleasure in order to cement conjugality. The ideal woman in the postcolonial nation-state thus was expected to provide aesthetic pleasure to her husband, with such pleasure being recognized as instrumental to marital stability. Reformist authors insisted that the aesthetic woman should indeed be fully "subsumed within the housewifely role, and held in check" (ibid, 102). As Lemos observes, this resulted in Nair marriage reform act and paved the way towards monogamous matrimony and patrilineal property inheritance. These colonial and independence ideals of domesticity are also reflected in the realm of Mohiniyattam and its reconstruction in Kerala Kalamandalam in the late 1930s.

The transition of Mohiniyattam from colonial to the postcolonial stage also indicates the birth of a reformed Kerala womanhood. As evident from the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam is the Subaltern status of women performers in Mohiniyattam, during the colonial period and the postcolonial period. Although the Mohiniyattam dancers of colonial times belonged to the matrilineal Nair community who had sexual freedom and authority over property and inheritance, the Subaltern status comes from the fact that they were not an organized community unlike the devadasi community who launched massive protest during the implication of the anti-devadasi bill. The Subaltern status of Nair women is evident as none of my readings record any historical evidence of protest from the Nair women community against the transformation of the community from matriarchy to patriarchy. Also, during the postcolonial period, the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam was initiated by men assigning women's movement vocabulary into acceptable norms of patriarchy, as bearers of a tradition and nation-state identities.

The observations and arguments put forward by various critics also reinforce the fact that the reformation of Mohiniyattam was tied to the aestheticizing of the female body, bringing dance into the sphere of nuclear family, imbuing it with the standards of Victorian morality, and recuperating it into projects of state consolidation and nationalism. The postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam is the resultant outcome of all these factors and these factors have had a huge influence on decisions regarding its movement vocabulary, repertoire, its presentation, the ideologies it carries, its costuming, and the theme and the narratives it presented. The movement vocabulary of practitioners of Mohiniyattam who took forward the form after its reconstruction at Kerala Kalamandalam thus bear the stamp of these ideologies translated into kinesthetic imagery of Mohiniyattam in the postcolonial era. Among all practitioners of Mohiniyattam in the postcolonial period Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma stands out as the first and foremost

pioneering practitioner as her contributions to Mohiniyattam became the model for other dancers to emulate. Kalyanikuttyamma carried with her the ethical codes, principles, and aesthetics outlined by Vallathol during the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam. Her daughter Kala Vijayan observes that "Kalyanikuttyamma's goal was to fulfill the responsibilities vested upon her by Mahakavi Vallathol" (Vijayan 2015, 73). Thus, Kalyanikuttyamma forges the link from colonial Mohiniyattam to postcolonial Mohiniyattam, which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

STANDING IN THE MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT: THE STORY OF KALAMANDALAM KALYANIKUTTYAMMA AND HER HISTORIC RELEVANCE AS A PIONEER OF POSTCOLONIAL MOHINIYATTAM

Kalyanikuttyamma's role as a pioneering practitioner of postcolonial Mohiniyattam is of prime importance as she is the first Mohiniyattam student from Kerala Kalamandalam who consistently pursued dancing, teaching, and developing Mohiniyattam technique. While the repertoire and the style created by Kalamandalam Satyabhama is termed as the institutional style of Kalamandalam, Kalyanikuttyamma belongs to the introductory phase of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam. While her continuation in this institution after her initial training period from 1937-1940 might have furthered her vocabulary as the vocabulary of Kalamandalam, her departure from this institution led her to undertake a separate personal journey in Mohiniyattam. As a witness to the initial phase of reconstruction of Mohiniyattam that happened in Kalamandalam in the 1930s, she bridges the past and present vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. Guided by Vallathol's goals of purification and classicalization of Mohiniyattam, her work to codify the form laid the kinesthetic and narrative foundation for Mohiniyattam practiced today.

Kalyanikuttyamma and Her Training Period in Kerala Kalamandalam (1937-1940)

Kalyanikuttyamma (1915-1999) was born as the daughter of Panangad Govinda Menon and Karigamana Sreedevi Amma. She commenced her training in Kalamandalam in 1937 as a mature adult, aged 22. While all the other students who studied with her were young children. It was not until Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma joined Kerala Kalamandalam as a student that Vallathol actualized his desire for a "respectable" Mohiniyattam dancer. As Kalyanikuttyamma's daughter Kala Vijayan notes, her mother was from "an aristocratic lineage and respectable

family" (Vijayan 2015, 88). Vallathol a family friend of Kalyanikuttyamma's parents requested Kalyanikuttyamma to join Kalamandalam seeing her interest in poetry and Sanskrit. At that time, according to Leela Nampoothiripad (1990), when Mohiniyattam students were initially admitted they were taught Kathakali dances and the female roles in Kathakali, too. Krishna Panikkar who was eighty-two and Madhavi Amma who was fifty-six years of age respectively, taught few Mohiniyattam pieces to students including Kalyanikuttyamma under the watchful eyes of Mahakavi Vallathol who instilled the need of a refined aesthetics in Mohiniyattam.

Kalyanikuttyamma says that she learned from Krishna Panikkar "the cholkettu, Jathiswaram in Bhairavi ragam, Varnam in Yadukulakamboji, a Padam in Punnagavarali ragam and a Thillana in Arabhi ragam" (Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 59). She says that he also explained to her through narration "two other dance pieces, the Slokam and Sappham, which were performed by dancers in the past and now extinct from the repertoire" (ibid, 59).

During the same period, the dance students had eight months of training in Manipuri dance under the tutelage of Priyagopal Singh, who was a Manipuri dancer. Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma in her book *Mohiniyattam* (1978) mentions about seven other students with her, including a boy named Balamohan. Kalamandalam Satyabhama in her book *Mohiniyattam: History, Technique, Practice* (2014) names these students as Lakshmi, Bhargavi, Ammini, and two girls whose names were Sumathi and Karingamma Kalyanikutty, the latter of whom would become known as Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma. When Mohiniyattam instructors left Kalamandalam due to old age and later passed away, Mohiniyattam learning again came to a standstill, while Bharathanatyam and Kathakali dances filled the lacuna left by Mohiniyattam. From 1940-1950 Mohiniyattam was not taught in Kerala Kalamandalam.

Kalyanikuttyamma in the preface to her book states that “since there were no available manuscripts on the structure and technique of Mohiniyattam, people are destined to watch whatever is performed by the name of Mohiniyattam” (Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 2). She adds that the limited knowledge of the dance form she got from her guru, Krishna Panicker, during her training period in Kerala Kalamandalam from 1937-1940 was further developed by her with the help of her husband, Kathakali Maestro Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, who was also her mentor and Guru in abhinaya (acting). She added that there were no students interested in Mohiniyattam at that time and she taught the dance form only to her daughters, Sreedevi and Kaladevi, to satiate her love for Mohiniyattam. One could presume from these observations that from 1940 to 1950, Kalyanikuttyamma had an individual tryst with Mohiniyattam. With the limited knowledge she earned from her experience learning the dance form for three years in Kerala Kalamandalam, she developed it further through her own efforts and personal research. Kalyanikuttyamma’s choreographic strategies and interventions in Mohiniyattam were a pioneering effort to bridge Mohiniyattam from past to present, and to build a postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam.

The training period of Kalyanikuttyamma in Kalamandalam was only for three years (1937-1940), and it should be noted that in this short time span she learned, as mentioned in her work, Kathakali, Kathakali dances, Manipuri, and Mohiniyattam. She mentions in her work *Mohiniyattam: History and Acting Manual* (1992) that she had to leave Kalamandalam due to her secretive marriage with the legendary Kathakali maestro Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, who was a faculty there at that time. She added that in Kalamandalam there existed a rule that curtailed students from marrying during their training period. Thus, she had to leave the institution at the end of 1940 without finishing her studies.

Post-Kerala Kalamandalam (1940-1958)

Kalyanikuttyamma (1978) narrates her personal journey through dance and marital life from the period between 1940 and 1958 as marked by transitions, displacement, and achievements. This journey marks the evolution of Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma's journey with Mohiniyattam after her training period in Kalamandalam. She gave birth to her first child in 1941 and when her child was four months old, she and her husband Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair were invited to join the faculty of Sreechitrodaya Nrithakalalaya in Trivandrum in southern Kerala. This performing arts school was founded by alumni of Kerala Kalamandalam, Guru Gopinath and his wife Thankamani, who was the first student of Mohiniyattam in Kerala Kalamandalam. Kalyanikuttyamma briefly taught the famous South Indian film actresses Lalitha and Padmini at this institution. Grief stricken by the loss of their first born during their stay there, Kalyanikuttyamma and Krishnan Nair left Sreechitrodaya Nrithakalalaya after only a short time. After leaving Trivandrum, they returned to North Kerala and stayed temporarily in a place called Desamangalam. In 1944 they bought a house in Vellarapilli near Alwaye and started teaching classes at various places including Alwaye, Cochin, Vellarappilli, Chalakudy, Kodungallor,⁶⁸ etc. During the same time their two daughters Sreedevi and Kaladevi were born, who would later become the torchbearers of Kalyanikuttyamma's style of Mohiniyattam.

In 1952 and 1953 the couple started their training center called Kerala Kalalayam, where they taught Mohiniyattam and Kathakali.⁶⁹ By this time they were parents of seven children. According to Kalyanikuttyamma, "six boys and two girls joined the classes and stayed with her in her house to learn dance" (Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 12). Kalyanikuttyamma adds that her

⁶⁸ Names of various towns.

⁶⁹ Kerala Kalalayam is still run by their daughter, Kaladevi (Kala Vijayan).

daughters Sreedevi and Kaladevi were ten and twelve years of age at that time, and they started helping her teach the dance lessons. Eventually the school added Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music, and Mridangam classes, for which they hired additional instructors. Of these instructors, Tanjavur A.R.R. Bhaskar's name is worth mentioning, as he taught Bharatanatyam at Kerala Kalalayam and later in Kerala Kalamandalam. During the same time period Kalyanikuttyamma and her younger daughter, Kaladevi, were involved in theater plays. Kalyanikuttyamma also had a stint in few movies and was part of the broadcast of plays from Kozhikode radio station. In 1956, she went to Ahmedabad and briefly taught at the noted Darpana school established by the famous Bharatanatyam dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai.

In 1958 the family moved to Tripunithura near Cochin when Krishnan Nair was invited to join the faculty of Kathakali in the Fine Arts Academy (Now the RLV College of Fine Arts). Tripunithura became their permanent home for the rest of their lives. Her daughter Kaladevi (Kala Vijayan) continues to live in this ancestral home. Kerala Kalalayam had a wealth of students while in this place. Kalyanikuttyamma mentions that she wrote scripts for many dance-dramas for both Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam that were performed by her daughters and her students at Kerala Kalalayam.

Overall, the period from 1940 to 1958 can be considered as an experimental period in Kalyanikuttyamma's life as a dancer. She was teaching the repertoire of Mohiniyattam that she learned from Kalamandalam. She gained a wealth of experience teaching at many institutions, was introduced to the vocabulary of various dancers including Mrinalini Sarabhai, and on the personal front was the life partner of a legend in Kathakali, Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair. The year 1958 became a turning point in her life as a dancer when she dedicated her life to Mohiniyattam after visiting the ailing and bedridden Vallathol Narayana Menon shortly before

his death. According to Kalyanikuttyamma, during that meeting Vallathol conferred upon her a responsibility to nurture Mohiniyattam, saying,

I wanted to see you for a very special reason. I was able to bring Kathakali to a decent status which I envisioned for. But I couldn't do much for Mohiniyattam. So many parts of it are still missing. You need to excavate them and add to its repertoire. You should strive to uplift the status of Mohiniyattam and should make it famous. I am vesting that responsibility upon you... You are the only one capable of doing it and you need to work with courage. Nothing is unachievable with human effort. I am giving Mohiniyattam into your hands.⁷⁰

(Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 49)

Although Kalyanikuttyamma's narrative stages her as the inheritor of Vallathol's vision, she was not the only person responsible for the furthering of Mohiniyattam. The above conversation Vallathol had with Kalyanikuttyamma must be cross connected with the entry of various other pioneers into the field of Mohiniyattam too including the appointment of Kalamandalam Satyabhama joining Kalamandalam as Mohiniyattam faculty in 1957 at the behest of Vallathol. Vallathol might surely be convinced about the capabilities of Kalyanikuttyamma as a student in Kalamandalam and also witnessing her work on Mohiniyattam from 1940 to 1958. His request probably might have arisen from having witnessed the Mohiniyattam instruction in Kalamandalam after Kalyanikuttyamma left in 1940 with occasional pauses. Since he passed away in March 1958, he also did not have the opportunity to witness the work of Kalamandalam Satyabhama.

⁷⁰ Translated from Malayalam by the author.

As demonstrated above there were indeed gaps in the teaching of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam between 1940 and 1950. Another instructor, Chinnammamma was brought in to teach Mohiniyattam in 1950, and she taught there until 1959. Despite classes being offered, the quandary regarding the movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam identified by Vallathol in the above conversation with Kalyanikuttyamma is affirmed by Betty True Jones in her article “Mohiniyattam: A Dance Tradition of Kerala.” Jones, the first researcher to do an in-depth study of Mohiniyattam in the late 1950s and early 60s, states that when she joined the Mohiniyattam classes with Chinnammamma in 1959 she “was surprised by the meagerness of the repertoire as it was taught” (Jones 1972, 11). She adds that when she studied there was a great emphasis to learn “the brilliant and ‘exotic’ Bharatanatyam,” which was “popular in the curriculum of Kalamandalam’s Girls School” (ibid). Jones moreover observes that a “number of items from the Mohiniyattam repertoire had been forgotten or were only partially remembered” and “owing to the emphasis on Bharatanatyam, only a limited effort had been made to reconstruct them” (ibid). In this context, it is quite possible that Vallathol became convinced that Kalyanikuttyamma was a capable dancer and that she should be responsible for the future of Mohiniyattam. Although Kalyanikuttyamma and Chinnammamma had both been students of Krishna Panicker, in contrast to Kalyanikuttyamma who had been consistently teaching and dancing Mohiniyattam for years, Chinnammamma was in the position of teaching a dance in her 60s that she had learned only during her teenage years and that she had not performed for decades. Despite the limitations of Chinnammamma’s teaching, her student Kalamandalam Satyabhama, who later joined the Mohiniyattam faculty in 1957, became the chief architect of the Kalamandalam style of Mohiniyattam (see chapter five).

Kalyanikuttyamma was twenty-two years of age when she joined Kalamandalam as a student. Kalyanikuttyamma witnessed the initial phase of Mohiniyattam reconstruction initiated by Vallathol at Kalamandalam and carried forward his visions of Mohiniyattam as an independent practitioner and contributor to the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam later in her dance career as a performer and instructor. Thus, the initial step taken by Vallathol was introducing Mohiniyattam through the institutional framework of Kerala Kalamandalam and recruiting students from well-to-do families to learn Mohiniyattam. The reconstruction of the form happened after recruiting Kalyanikuttyamma and few other younger students in 1937.

Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma in her work *Mohiniyattam Charithravum Attaprakaravum* (Mohiniyattam: History and Acting Manual) (1992), lists various stages of reconstruction of the neoclassical Mohiniyattam in Kerala Kalamandalam under Vallathol's guidance. Kalyanikuttyamma who was present at the forms' recreation observes:

Vallathol paid considerable attention to provide new and fresh approach to Mohiniyattam providing it with decent status and artistic value. As a result, Mohiniyattam emerged as a visually beautiful dance form escaped from the shackles of obscenities and immoralities. The Mohiniyattam thus reconstructed emerged like untainted gold. (Kalyanikuttyama 1992, Translation from Malayalam by the author)

The first step in reconstructing Mohiniyattam was stopping the practice of the male *Nattuvanar*⁷¹ following the dancer around the stage while playing the cymbals and reciting the dance syllables. Instead, the conductor/guru/nattuvanar was assigned the right side of the stage. The musical instruments of Carnatic music were adapted by Vallathol. He replaced the "desi"

⁷¹ Conductor of the dance orchestra.

percussion instrument called Thoppimaddalam and the wind instrument Kurunkuzhal with the musical instruments of Carnatic music including flute, violin, and mridangam. The most important change Kalayanikuttyamma notes is the erasure of "obscenities" in Mohiniyattam. She says that Vallathol insisted on "pure" language in the songs, and any dance items that were considered to have obscene content were removed from the repertoire. The *Mukutti* (see elaborate discussion in chapter two) is a perfect example of this. In the dance, the dancer physically searches the audience for their lost nose ring. The dances *Chandanam*, *Poli*, and *Esal* dances were also removed from the repertory, and were replaced with new compositions by Swathi Thirunal and *padams* (expressive dance pieces) like *Entaho Vallabha*, a dance depicting the heroine waiting for her lover that was seen to stage the ideal husband and wife relationship. Kalyanikuttyamma remembers that dancers were instructed to avoid flirtatious glances and erotic gestures, and instead encouraged to use the Sanskrit concept of *lasya*, or graceful movement. Moreover, Vallathol introduced discipline in the movement vocabulary by the introduction of various hand gestures and their usage⁷² from the Sanskrit text *Hasthalakshanadeepika*, also known as the acting manual for Mohiniyattam and Kathakali. Vallathol was very particular about *lokadharmi*-dictated *abhinaya*, or realistic acting. Vallathol was then the initiator of this codification while the dancers and instructors worked toward the fruition of his vision of future Mohiniyattam.

Creating the Postcolonial Vocabulary and Grammar of Mohiniyattam

Kalyanikuttyamma was strongly guided by Vallathol's goal of the purification and classicalization of Mohiniyattam, which could emerge from the process as "untainted gold"

⁷² Hand gestures are used in Indian dances to denote meaning and accessorize the footwork in abstract dance.

(Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 26). In fact, I argue that Mohiniyattam was not (re)constructed from an historic form (e.g., the one described by Ragini Devi in the 1930s), but rather mainly relied on a set of values, attitudes and beliefs conceptualized through different body movements, which largely conformed to the cultural milieu at the margins of the colonial and postcolonial period. The vocabulary and grammar of Mohiniyattam created by Kalyanikuttyamma, I suggest, is thus a social and cultural construction, especially the construction of the female Mohiniyattam “body,” which was closely associated with the new postcolonial state of Kerala born on November 1, 1956. Kalyanikuttyamma was guided by what postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha calls the notions of identity, social agency, and national affiliation (Bhabha 2004, 8) to provide a culturally hybrid vocabulary employing the key concepts of its postcolonial endeavor, which I argue is both a refutation and inclusion of Mohiniyattam’s past repertoire. The refutation comes from Kalyanikuttyamma’s confirmation of Vallathol’s choices to omit certain items from the colonial repertoire while her inclusion comes from the dance pieces she included from the colonial repertoire. In the case of Mohiniyattam, Kalyanikuttyamma’s approach to creating a new vocabulary involved a confluence of the colonial and the postcolonial where the dancer worked between two milieus, the present and the past, negotiating with the received knowledge of its vocabulary from the past and present to create a new space or new vocabulary at the boundary to move beyond the colonial predicament of the dance to a refined postcolonial movement vocabulary.

Kalyanikuttyamma seems to have envisioned a very clear path forward as she followed a structured way to create the kinesthetic language of the female body to create a pedagogy for Mohiniyattam dancers to follow in years to come. It is evident from Kalyanikuttyamma’s narrative that there was a repertoire that she could emulate. She took the “cleansed” repertoire

Vallathol Narayana Menon created during the time when Kalyanikuttyamma was a student of Mohiniyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam by eliminating the “desi” pieces; and the repertoire learned from her guru Krishna Panikkar through movement and narration, which she used as a basis to create her own repertoire. By codifying the technique in the vernacular language of Kerala, Malayalam, she moreover gave an indigenous identity to the form.

Kalyanikuttyamma’s most important contribution is the molding of Mohiniyattam into a codified dance form with an articulated technique based on the idea of *lasya*, which helped promote the form as one suitable for women. She identified the characteristics of Mohiniyattam as “soft with flowing body movements and simplistic acting” (Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 191). She believed that “exaggerated acting techniques were not suitable for Mohiniyattam” (ibid, 191). Assisted by her husband Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, she toned down the acting techniques of Kathakali to a more subdued format to suit Mohiniyattam. Kalyanikuttyamma moreover outlined a set of “do’s” and “don’ts” to be followed by dancers, emphasizing Mohiniyattam as a dance form performed by “aristocratic women” while stating that dancers should not engage in displaying “erotic gestures not suitable for aristocratic women” (ibid, 193) such as “biting the lips and winking one eye, sharp twisting of shoulders, protruding of breasts, moving the buttocks and moving the head uncontrollably in rotatory movements” (ibid, 192). Kalyanikuttyamma emphasized the importance of bodily energy being released in a slow and restrained manner, rather than with a free flow of energy. This is evident in her rule regarding the weight of the footwork in Mohiniyattam, which she says should be “soft and devoid of any sound and to achieve this the dancer should further press the feet in a manner akin to keeping the feet on a thick and soft carpet, or a lush lawn” (ibid, 191).

She codified the stances of the feet while dancing into five positions as *Samam* (standing straight and keeping feet together), *Kalmandalam* (feet turned outward knee bent and body dipped down into one fourth sitting position), *Aramandalam* (feet turned outward knee bent and body dipped down into half sitting position), *Mukkalandalam* (feet turned outward knee bent and body dipped down into a three-fourth sitting position), and *Muzhumandalam* (feet turned outward, knees bent, and body dipped down into a full sitting position). Kalyanikuttyamma was keen on establishing the “two finger distance” between the heels as *Aramandalam* position where many abstract movements are materialized in Mohiniyattam. She found the two feet wide *Aramandalam* of Kathakali, which had until then been followed by the *Kalamandalam* style of Mohiniyattam, as problematic to a female dancer. Citing propriety of the female body, and according to her own aesthetic sense, she felt that the more closed position promoted more restrained movement. Kalyanikuttyamma also codified the swaying rotatory movements of the body as *Kalvruham* (one-fourth circle), *Aravrutham* (half circle), *Mukkalvrutham* (three-fourth circle), and *Muzhuvrutham* (full circle). Similarly, she codified the bending of hand movements into one fourth, half, and three fourth bending positions respectively.

The most important and inclusive terminology she constructed was regarding the whole-body movement which became the cliché definition for Mohiniyattam was in the form of a quatrain which reads as:

The dancers body movements

Should come softly,

Akin to the tender rice plants,

Swaying in the gentle breeze. (Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 4)⁷³

⁷³ Translation by the author.

She made another quatrain to establish the coordination of hand, eye and body as:

One can witness,

The performance as complete,

Only if the eye and the body,

Follow the hand movements. (Kalyanikuttyamma 1992, 7)⁷⁴

As a testament to the transformation, she effected in the discourse around the dance, in 1970 she successfully convinced the then Education Director of Kerala to include Mohiniyattam for the first time as part of the competition category in the State School Youth festival along with Bharathanatyam and Kathakali. This inclusion increased the popularity of Mohiniyattam and led young girls to learn it for the competitions.

In addition to remaking Mohiniyattam as a dance appropriate for Kerala women, she needed to problematize the preexisting Mohiniyattam vocabulary as lacking a structure. In 1972 she was awarded a fellowship by the Sangeetha Nataka Academy⁷⁵ including a grant of Rs 500 and the opportunity to teach at Kalakshetra in Chennai for five months. This fellowship at Kalakshetra was crucial in her career as she got the opportunity to watch the reconstructed form of Bharathanatyam there and their instructional structure. This gave her the time and the inspiration to develop a clear framework for Mohiniyattam in the fundamentals of abstract dance (*adavus* or basic steps) and the syllables (*chollus* or *vaytharis*). During my interview with her daughter Kala Vijayan, she said that when her mother was learning Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam there were only eight or nine *adavus* total and it was “Amma who added to it and made it thirty-two while categorizing them at the same time into five groups depending on their

⁷⁴ Translation by the author.

⁷⁵ Apex body of performing arts in India under the Cultural Ministry.

mnemonic syllables which she later expanded again” (Vijayan 2017). These adavus are listed in Kalyanikuttyamma’s work *Mohiniyattam Charithravum Attaprakaravum* (Mohiniyattam: History and Acting Manual) (1992) as follows:

- 1) Taganam – Classified as adavus starting with the “Tha” Syllable (14 adavus)
- 2) Jaganam - Classified as adavus starting with the “Ja” Syllable (6 adavus)
- 3) Dhaganam - Classified as adavus starting with the “Dha” Syllable (4 adavus)
- 4) Vakram or Sammishram – Combination of two or more adavus done as a single adavu (6 adavus)
- 5) Theerumanam – Adavus done at the completion or at the very end of an abstract dance sequence (6 adavus)
- 6) Chari – Side to side movements and forward and backward movements (14 adavus)
- 7) Karanas – Coordinating movements of the hands and feet borrowed from Natyasastra (15 Karanas)

Kalyanikuttyamma also created a two- and half-hour long recital format for Mohiniyattam in line with the Bharatanatyam repertoire, including two newly crafted dance pieces, *Saptham* and *Slokam*, based on similar dances from Bharatanatyam.

- 1) Cholketu - Chakravagam
- 2) Jathiswaram – Various new compositions
- 3) Varnam – Various new compositions
- 4) Padam
 - a. Varika Varika Sakhi – Composed and Written by Kalyanikuttyamma, Ragam – Aanandabhairavi, Taalam – Aadi
 - b. Aliveni – Composed by Swathithirunal, Ragam – Nattakurinji, Taalam – Aadi

- 5) Thillana – Various Thillanas
- 6) Slokam – In praise of Various Deities
- 7) Sapham - Ramasapham

All these nuanced techniques were kinesthetically incorporated by her into the repertoire of Mohiniyattam and taught to her students including her daughters Sreedevi and Kaladevi. This social and cultural construction of the female Mohiniyattam body was clearly defined and was eventually brought into a written pedagogical framework by Kalyanikuttyamma in her work *Mohiniyattam Charithravum Attaprakaravum* (Mohiniyattam: History and Acting Manual) (1992), and by her daughter Kala Vijayan in her book, *Mohiniyattam Ariyendathellam* (Mohiniyattam: All you Need to Know) (2015). The ninth chapter in Kala Vijayan's (2015) book entitled "Nibandhanakal" ("Conditions") highlights the key elements of movement ranging from the fundamental movement patterns like positions of the feet, stances, and gait to more nuanced movements including lateral movements, weight transfer of the moving upper body while moving in different planes – lateral, forward, up, and down - and coordination of upper and lower body movements. Her movement vocabulary became the foundation for Mohiniyattam dancers who came after her.

Kalyanikuttyamma insisted on the off white and golden border saree costume and the hairdo called the *Nagalambam*⁷⁶ and *Kakapaksham*,⁷⁷ which became the hallmark and distinguishing feature of Kalyanikuttyamma's style of Mohiniyattam. Kalyanikuttyamma's costuming shows affinity to the hairstyle in Bharathanatyam which was followed till the early

⁷⁶ Long braided hair in the back of the head with a decorated bun on the top. Dancers wear the head ornament called the Nettichutti, sun and the moon decorative jewelry on the front portion of the head. This is similar to the hair style in Bharathanatyam.

⁷⁷ Hairdo with the bun on top with five heads resembling a five headed snake with the rest of hair freely kept below. Head ornaments remain the same as in Kakapaksham.

1960s. During the late 1960s the hairstyle was modified with the hair bun tied on the front left side of the head as a differentiating and distinguishing factor from Bharathanatyam.

Kalyanikuttyamma totally rejected this modification and insisted on the hairstyles of *Nagalambam* and *Kakapaksham*, which was followed in Kalamandalam from the late 1930s to the early 1960s. Interestingly, the costuming has evolved from an unstitched off-white saree to a stitched costume, which is worn by all Mohiniyattam dancers from different styles with slight variations.

Conclusion: Reinvented Vocabulary as the Embodied Memory of Mohiniyattam

Many of the phrases used to describe Mohiniyattam and its features such as “dance of the enchantress,” “enchantress need not be a temptress or seductress,” “sublimation of one’s emotion to higher aesthetic level,” “sringara or love...is dignified and refined to the level of devotion” (Radhakrishna 1997, 6), movement of “endless coconut trees swaying in the cool, soft breeze by the seashore,” and the “fluttering of palm leaves” (Shivaji 1986, 51) were strongly influenced by the discourse of Mohiniyattam established by Kalyanikuttyamma. Her movement vocabulary and its affinities with the topography of Kerala, the sense of Victorian morality and propriety of the female body moving in the performance space all became an enabler for future practitioners of Mohiniyattam in their choice of technique, costuming, themes, and the recital repertoire. These choices, as Judith Hamera puts it, translated “individual bodies into a common ‘mother tongue’ to be shared and redeployed by its participants: a discursive matrix, a vocabulary, and a grammar, to hold sociality together across difference and perpetuate over time” (Hamera 2006, 19). Indeed, Kalyanikuttyamma is often called “The Mother of Mohiniyattam,” though I might clarify that as “The Mother of Postcolonial Mohiniyattam.” The title nonetheless creates a disconnect from the labor of earlier Mohiniyattam dancers and their kinesthetic traces,

contributing to the disappearance of those earlier repertoires. Moreover, even as Kalyanikuttyamma was doing all this work, an institutionalized reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam was happening under the leadership of Kalamandalam Satyabhama, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

THE ARCHITECT OF POSTCOLONIAL MOHINIYATTAM: THE STORY OF KALAMANDALAM SATYABHAMA

Among the most relevant stories in postcolonial Mohiniyattam history, Kalamandalam Satyabhama's story is a significant one. The relevance of her contribution comes from the fact that she played a key role in the ongoing reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in Kerala Kalamandalam. Throughout her life, her personal and professional histories are inextricably linked to the institutional history of Kerala Kalamandalam, encompassing childhood, adolescence, youth, middle age, and retirement. Kerala Kalamandalam's reconstructed Mohiniyattam dance evolved and grew with her. Satyabhama is considered as the most prominent practitioner of Mohiniyattam due to the large number of students who have learned this form from her as well as the legacy she has left behind, which is called the institutional style of Kalamandalam. Most students who studied Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam have become instructors and have disseminated the reconstructed movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam across geographical boundaries. Due to its status as a state-sponsored institution offering undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral courses, no other style in Mohiniyattam enjoys the same level of studentship as the Kalamandalam style. Approximately, 40,000 Mohiniyattam dancers may have graduated from this institution between 1950 and 2023 after training in the style of Mohiniyattam created by Kalamandalam Satyabhama. Consequently, most of the dancers in Kerala and beyond, practice Mohiniyattam that originated in Kalamandalam. Additionally, Kalamandalam's status as the cultural institution that pioneered the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam contributes to its significance. All these factors create an undeniable place for the

story of Kalamandalam Satyabhama and her relevance in the postcolonial practice and performance of Mohiniyattam.

Satyabhama Early Life (1937-1949)

Satyabhama was born on November 4, 1937, in Shoranur in Palakkad, Kerala as the fourth child of Venat Ammini amma and Kadampat Krishnan Nair. Her book *Mohiniyattam: History, Theory and Practice* (2014), which is written in Malayalam and coauthored by her daughter Lathika Mohandas, recounts that her father was a small-time businessman, the only earning member of her family, who passed away when Satyabhama was five years old, adding more burden to the already poverty-stricken family. According to Satyabhama, the family earned a living by selling milk from the cows they raised, small-scale plantain farming, and selling timber and bamboo from the half-acre they owned. According to Satyabhama, her childhood and teenage years were marked by “famine and poverty” (Satyabhama 2014, 32).

During her elementary school years in Shoranur, Satyabhama participated in action songs and group dances⁷⁸ taught in her classes. As Satyabhama recounts in her book, she has always been enthusiastic about dance and approached it with excitement. She recalls watching Tamil movies with her mother in the talkies near her home in Shoranur that inspired her love for dance. Little Satyabhama was captivated by the dances in these movies performed by Kamala Lakshman, T.R Rajakumari, and the Sai Subbalakshmi sisters, and she tried to imitate these dances at home. Seeing her interest in dance her mother enrolled her with a dance instructor named Balan at age nine years. Young Satyabhama’s first dance instructor taught her folk dances, Shiva Tandavam, and Radha Krishna dances, which all had influences of “some

⁷⁸ Songs that resemble small poems for young children sung accompanying showing some gestures and body movements. Group dances are free style dances.

Kathakali and folk dances” (Sathyabhama, 2013). The dances were performed in many venues in and around Shoranur, where she grew up. Sathyabhama recalls her mother and her friends performing Kaikottikali⁷⁹ at various temples and neighboring houses during the occasion of Onam and Thiruvathira.⁸⁰ Sathyabhama recalls that these performances were a source of support and encouragement for her, too. Later, in 1948 at the advice of her dance instructor Balan Master, she learned Bharathanatyam from Krishnan Kutty Warriar and Achutha Warriar who taught private classes in a nearby place. They were both teachers at Kerala Kalamandalam at the time. Krishnan Kutty Warriar trained in Kathakali under Pattikkamthodi Ravunni Menon and then in Bharathanatyam with Nattuvanar Chokkalingam Pillai at the behest of Vallathol. His brother Achutha Warriar, as Sathyabhama states, was a phenomenal artist and a multifaceted genius excellent in Bharathanatyam, Carnatic music, Mridangam, Maddalam, Kathakali music, Harmonium playing, etc. He was an excellent choreographer, too, according to Sathyabhama who “created new dances for new songs” (Sathyabhama, 2013), and had directed dance choreographies for Tamil movies working at Vahini studios in Madras. Sathyabhama's training with them lasted only for two months as she could not afford the monthly fee of Rs 15. Through these two months of instruction, she learned the Alarippu and Kalyani Jathiswaram. Sathyabhama met her instructor Krishnankutty Warriar at the marketplace in Shoranur a few days after discontinuing her dance training. After learning about her reasons for stopping dance training, Warriar advised her to come to Kalamandalam with her older brother. Since her brother had to go for work that day, Sathyabhama, and her mother visited Kalamandalam the following day. Krishnan Kutty Warriar and Achutha Warriar were not available that day, but a beautiful middle-

⁷⁹ A folk-dance tradition of Kerala where women dance in circles accompanied by occasional clapping of hands.

⁸⁰ Cultural festivals of Kerala.

aged woman greeted them and took their message. Satyabhama said she was captivated by the love and kindness of the middle-aged woman who was none other than Thottasseri Chinnammuamma, who became her Mohiniyattam guru, the oldest living practitioner of the precursor to Mohiniyattam that was introduced into Kerala Kalamandalam's institutional framework.

Early Introduction to Dance at Kerala Kalamandalam (1949-1953)

Satyabhama was almost thirteen years old when she visited Kalamandalam for the first time with her mother. In 1949, when she was in fourth grade, she went to Kalamandalam again with her brother and he enrolled her in Kalamandalam to learn dance paying a fee of Rs 3 per month. She continued her schooling at Shoranur Upper Primary school while studying at Kalamandalam simultaneously. In both her book and the oral history interview I conducted with her, Satyabhama describes her daily routine shuttling between Kerala Kalamandalam and her school.

The dance classes in Kalamandalam started at 7:00 am, I used to wake up at 6:00 am and had to run to the classes. Had to walk through the railway line over Bharathapuzha to reach Kalamandalam. My brother who was a policeman in the Indian Railway protection force accompanied me till the bridge over Bharathapuzha⁸¹ as the roads were deserted and the places nearby were uninhabited at that time. I would reach Kalamandalam around 6:45 am. Krishnan Kutty Warriar and Achutha Warriar used to teach me Bharathanatyam. By 8:00 am classes were over. I was exhausted after classes and *Mash* (Teacher) used to

⁸¹ Bharathapuzha is the longest river in Kerala. Kerala Kalamandalam is situated on the banks of this river.

buy me idli and coffee for breakfast. I would eat that and run back home, my brother waiting for me near the train tracks. I went to my regular school after that. I was in fourth grade when I started to go to Kalamandalam. I continued the class for three years, going to Kalamandalam in early morning and then back to regular school after the classes. I learnt the *Alarippu*, *Jathiswaram* in *Kalyani Ragam* and *Raagamalika*, *Sabdam*, *Varnam i* in *Anandabhairavi*, *Padams* and *Thillana*.⁸² I also learnt a Mohiniyattam Cholkettu from Chinnammuamma teacher. While I was a part time student there at that time there were four girls who were fulltime dance students at Kalamandalam. They were Clara from Thrissur, Hymavathy from Thiruvilvamala, and Vidyavinodini and Bhanumathi from Madras. Going back and forth between Kalamandalam and regular school became a tedious task to fulfill, and I discontinued the dance class after three years. (Satyabhama 2013)

Satyabhama was almost sixteen years at the time she finished seventh grade and her three-year-long part-time training in Kalamandalam. As mentioned in her oral history narrative, Satyabhama primarily studied Bharathanatyam with a single dance piece known as the *Cholkettu* in Mohiniyattam taught by Chinnammuamma as a secondary focus. It is evident from her narrative that the other students who were older than her also studied Bharathanatyam since she mentioned that their performances of Thillana and Padam were “beautiful.”

Training in Kalamandalam (1953-1957)

When Satyabhama was an eighth-grade student at K.V.R. High School in Shoranur, in 1953, Mahakavi Vallathol awarded her a stipend and scholarship that allowed her to join Kerala

⁸² Name of dance pieces in Bharathanatyam and the corresponding scales and tunes they are set to.

Kalamandalam full time. She stayed on as an in-residence student for four years from 1953 to 1957. At the time, she was sixteen years old.

It was at this same time that Satyabhama's previous Bharathanatyam instructors Krishnan Kutty Warriar and Achutha Warriar discontinued their jobs at Kalamandalam.⁸³ Satyabhama discovered that the new Bharathanatyam instructor, Rajaratnam Pillai had little mastery over Bharathanatyam, and that his forte was folk dances such as "Snake Dance, Peacock Dance and Manipuri Dance" (Satyabhama 2014, 37). Rajaratnam Pillai's students included Satyabhama and Thankamani, who as a twelve-year-old, was younger than Satyabhama. Satyabhama further describes Thankamani's performance of the peacock dance as very competent and conveying the peacock's movements. Satyabhama danced the Manipuri folk dance and played the lovelorn Radha yearning for Krishna in the dance. According to her, this was a very creative folk choreography by Rajaratnam Pillai, which is quite different, according to Satyabhama from the actual Manipuri dance as we know it today in terms of technique and costume. The snake dance was taught to them as a group choreography similar to a dance drama, and it was performed together by a few other students including Mullurkara Leela, Thankamani, and Kalamandalam Chandrika, who were Kalamandalam Satyabhama's classmates in the dance class. According to Satyabhama, these dances were performed as lighter pieces in between Bharathanatyam and Mohiniyattam recitals at Kerala Kalamandalam to engage the audience.

As Satyabhama recalls, Hymavathy, a new student, started training in Kathakali under the tutelage of the legendary Kathakali maestro Ramankutty Nair in 1954, which sparked her interest. She disclosed her desire to train in Kathakali to the poet Vallathol, who then arranged

⁸³ Achutha Warriar continued teaching in Kerala for a few years after Krishnan Kutty Warriar left for Mumbai and established a dance school there. In her book, Satyabhama writes about Achutha Warriar's untimely passing four years later.

for the legendary maestro of the form, Padmanabhan Nair to instruct her in Kathakali, and to train the Mohiniyattam and Bharathanatyam students in eye exercises. Having the opportunity to study with Padmanabhan Nair, the pioneer educator and actor who was instrumental in bringing Kathakali's theory and practice to future generations of Kathakali students, was a highlight of her training. In the following months of 1954, Satyabhama, and her friends Hymavathy and Chelanattu Subhadra, got the opportunity to train in various female characters in Kathakali, which Satyabhama recounted included “Lalitha in the story Keermeeravadham, the story of Poothanamoksham, Sairandhri in Keechakavadham, Rambha in Rambhapravesham, [and] Panchali in Kalyanasougandhikam” (Satyabhama 2014, 38). During my interview with her she added that she also learned from Chinnammuamma the Mohiniyattam pieces “Chenchurutti Jathiswaram, Thodi Jathiswaram, Yadukulakambhoji Varnam, the Padam Entaho Vallabha and the Padam Indaliha valarunnu, which was more or less incomplete” (Satyabhama 2013).

In my conversation with Satyabhama, it became evident that the year 1954 marked a renewal of dance training in Kerala Kalamandalam as a training institution, as she mentioned the names of various students who arrived to learn Mohiniyattam, Kathakali, Kathakali music and percussion, whose names became synonymous with those dance styles. This list included not only Satyabhama herself, but also Chandrika, Thankamani, and Hymavathy who were the pioneer students of Mohiniyattam and other dance forms taught at Kalamandalam. Gopi, Kuttan, Vasudevan, Muraleedharan, and Purushothaman were Kathakali dance drama students, Gangadharan was a Kathakali music student, Kesavan was a Kathakali percussion instrument Chenda student, and Narayanan Nambeesan was a Kathakali percussion instrument Maddalam student. Even though, all of the students who participated in Kathakali training and orchestration became well known in their own fields, Satyabhama stands out among the dance students as a

Mohiniyattam dancer, educator, and choreographer as a result of her involvement with Kalamandalam during various periods in various capacities, which will be discussed later. As a result of their long-term association with Kerala Kalamandalam, the same applies to the Kathakali ensemble members as well. It is interesting to note that Kalamandalam Satyabhama and Kalamandalam Gopi's careers ran parallel to each other in Kerala Kalamandalam, since both were appointed as faculty in their respective dance forms by poet Vallathol himself. The two were born in 1937, and while Satyabhama passed away in 2015, Kalamandalam Gopi remains the only person alive who was appointed by Vallathol directly as faculty in Kalamandalam.

In 1954, the Kerala Kalamandalam troupe under the leadership of the poet Vallathol visited Malaysia and Singapore at the invitation of the Kerala Association in Malaysia. Leela Nampoothiripad describes their journey as follows. “In August 1954 the troupe started their voyage from the Port of Bombay. They travelled across Malaya and Singapore to present programs and came back to India in October. This foreign trip brought so much popularity to Kathakali in these countries together with financial gains too for Kalamandalam”

(Nampoothiripad 1990, 72). Satyabhama remembers this trip as the first foreign trip of Kalamandalam and says that their sea voyage took seven days to reach Singapore. According to Satyabhama, the Kathakali team consisted of “the instructors from the Kathakali section including Neelakantan Nambeesan, Ramankutty Nair, Padmanabhan Nair, Appukutty Pothuval, and Sivaraman Nair...while from the dance section Hymavathy and I were also members. Hymavathy’s father accompanied us as he was familiar with Singapore as he had lived there for quite a long time” (Satyabhama 2014, 39). As Satyabhama further recalls, the dances Sitaswayamvaram and Duryodanavadham (Satyabhama 2014, 40), were presented in Kathakali.

At the time, Satyabhama was seventeen years of age, and she provided a comprehensive list of the dance pieces she presented at various venues in Singapore and Malaysia.

During this visit I performed the Varnam in Yadukulakamboji Samininne Nammithira and the padam Enthaho Vallabha in Mohiniyattam. In the Bharathanatyam style I presented the Varnam Sakhiye Intha Velayil set to ragam Anandabhairavi and the padams Kalaithookki and Thaye Yashoda. I also presented the Lalitha in Keermeeravadham in Kathakali. Hymavathy presented the Kathakali story Poothanamoksham and sometimes danced a Mohiniyattam piece. After this trip Hymavathy stayed in Kalamandalam for another 2 months and she left. I stayed back and continued studying. (Satyabhama 2013)

These events demonstrate that Satyabhama was accepted into a cultural ecosystem that was very conducive to her development as a dancer proficient in multiple dance forms of Kerala, as well as Bharatanatyam. Additionally, this first foreign tour of Kalamandalam troupe sheds light on the development of dance training at Kalamandalam and indicates the relative status of Mohiniyattam when compared to Bharathanatyam and Kathakali at that time. For example, the Kathakali troupe appears to be nearing a well-developed stage in terms of choreography and orchestration based on the performances they gave in Singapore and Malaysia with the aid of live vocal and percussion accompaniments, whereas Bharathanatyam and Mohiniyattam appear to serve as fillers between Kathakali performances in order to enhance the overall presentation. Satyabhama explained that during the period of 1952-1954, orchestral arrangements for dance performances were commissioned on a work-to-hire basis, and during their trip to Malaysia and Singapore, there was no exclusive orchestra for either Bharathanatyam or Mohiniyattam. Instead,

Satyabhama and Hymavathy would take turns singing for each other's dancing and they were only occasionally accompanied by members of the Kathakali orchestra.

The year 1955, according to Satyabhama was a flourishing year for dance at Kalamandalam as “the dance department grew in leaps and bounds with the Mohiniyattam taught by Chinnammamma teacher, Bharathanatyam taught by Achutha Warriar Master, the folk dances taught by Rajaratnam Master and the Kathakali dances taught by Kumaran Master” (Satyabhama 2014, 40). Moreover, a full-time accompanying orchestra for dance was formed that year. The trio included P.N. Rajalakshmi (vocalist), Vasudeva Panicker (violinist), and Ramakrishna Iyer (mridangist). Furthermore, all three of them taught vocal, violin, and mridangam concurrently at Kerala Kalamandalam.

Kalamandalam celebrated its silver jubilee December 26 to 28, 1955. On this occasion, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Indian prime minister, was the chief guest. He was joined by other prominent people, including Kamaraj, the then Chief Minister of Madras. Faculty and students of Kalamandalam and eminent artists presented a range of programs to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the institution. Satyabhama shares this as one of the most elated moments in her life as a dancer as she found herself dancing on the same stage with Kamala Lakshman, the eminent Bharatanatyam dancer whose dancing in Tamil films inspired her to learn to dance. Satyabhama states that “after his speech the Prime Minister spent some time watching the cultural programs. Bharatanatyam was presented by Kamala Lakshman who I worshiped as a dancer. I presented Mohiniyattam. This was a profound and cherished moment in my life” (Satyabhama 2013). In her work *The History of Kerala Kalamandalam* (1990) Leela Nampoothiripad describes the silver jubilee celebrations of Kalamandalam as a “grand fair of classical and folk-art forms” (Nampoothiripad 1990, 73). She details that the events included,

the Carnatic vocal concerts of M.S. Subbalakshmi and P. Leela, Veena concert by Devendra Pai, Bharatanatyam concerts by Balasaraswati and Kamala Lakshman, Dance Dramas by Tara Chowdhary and Chandralekha, Ottanthullal by Malabar Raman Nair, lyrical narrative performance by M P Manmadhan, Chakyarkoothu by Painkulam Ramachakyar, Dramas, Mohiniyattam, Thayambaka, Nagaswaram concerts, Jalatharangam concerts, Kaikottikali, Kurathiyattam, Mappilakali, Kudamkali, Kalaripayattu, Ashtapadi, Pulluvan Pattu, Ayyappan Pattu, Seethankan Thullal, Parayan Thullal, and the different Kathakali styles from Northern, Southern and Central Kerala. The day and night of these three days Kalamandalam created a heavenly feeling for art lovers. (Nampoothiripad 1990, 78).

Leela Nampoothiripad's description indicates that Satyabhama's Mohiniyattam performance took place alongside legendary Bharathanatyam artists such as Balasaraswati and Kamala Lakshman as well as highly sought after young Bharathanatyam dancers Tara Chaudhary and Chandralekha. This was a major introduction for Mohiniyattam alongside more established dance forms including Bharathanatyam, Kathakali and well-known music genres performed by dominant artists in those fields.

However, the silver jubilee celebrations did not result in Kalamandalam's dance section securing any notable paid performances, whereas the Kathakali troupe was commissioned for several paid performances in the wake of the silver jubilee celebrations. Leela Nampoothiripad opines that “the general public finds it difficult to enjoy classical dance performances” (Nampoothiripad 1990, 68). She reasons that dance was introduced to the public as a new art form that they had not previously been exposed to. Furthermore, she points out that it differs

significantly from Kathakali, since it does not narrate a story familiar to the audience. Another reason she offers is that dance was essentially performed solo and the absence of different performers portraying different characters made it difficult to follow the story or situation.

Kerala State Formation and the Initial Stages of Postcolonial Mohiniyattam (1956-1962)

During this period of development in the performing arts scene, the erstwhile Malayalam-speaking states of Travancore, Malabar, Cochin, and Malabar were merged to form Kerala State by the State Reorganization Act of 1956. In Kerala, fifty-seven local administrative units called N.E.S. blocks were formed prior to state formation for the purpose of community development and rural administration. These developments coincide with the final phase of Kalamandalam Satyabhama's performance journey as a student at Kalamandalam. In 1957 towards the end of her diploma course in dance she performed with the Kalamandalam troupe in all fifty-seven N.E.S. blocks starting from Kasaragod on the northern border to Parassala on the southern border. Satyabhama notes this program as a milestone for dance in Kerala as "this program enabled the people in the villages of Kerala to watch and enjoy classical dance forms of Mohiniyattam and Bharathanatyam. This program also etched the name of Kalamandalam in the minds of people" (Satyabhama 2014, 41). Nampoothiripad (1990) finds that the terms classical and stylization were incorporated into the movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam during the preparatory stages of this program for the first time. I argue that the addition of these terms is inextricably linked to the statehood of Kerala in 1956 and the resultant need of a classical dance form that would reflect the identity of the newly formed state.

During the transition period of Kerala, Satyabhama joined Kalamandalam as an assistant dance instructor on June 1, 1957, at Vallathol's request.⁸⁴ Her job was to assist Chinnammuamma. She soon took over as the head of the dance department at Kalamandalam after her guru Thottassery Chinnammuamma retired. With only a few pieces in the repertoire of Mohiniyattam at Kalamandalam during this time, Satyabhama was left with a limited repertoire to perform and teach. As she states:

When it came to Mohiniyattam performance there were not that many dance pieces to perform. There was a cholkettu, Jathiswaram, a Varnam and one or two Padams. When it came to performances, we were performing more Bharathanatyam. People started complaining that there was no Mohiniyattam. We just thought what to do. We had only a limited number of adavus, and therefore were limited in the pieces we could dance too. If we were going to create new pieces, we would need more adavus. At that time (in 1957) Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad⁸⁵ joined Kalamandalam. There was also Vasudeva Panicker who played the violin, Ramakrishna Iyer who was a mridangam player. Killimangalam brought a book which contained the compositions of Swathi Thirunal. We wanted new dance pieces for Mohiniyattam, and we desperately searched the book to see if we can use any compositions. We just saw the Thodi Varnam Danisamajaendra and I remembered this piece from another incident which happened earlier. Kalamandalam authorities sent Chinnammu teacher and

⁸⁴ I have cross connected this request with Vallathol's request to Kalyanikuttyamma in chapter three where he asks her to work on elevating the status of Mohiniyattam.

⁸⁵ Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad was the superintendent of Kalamandalam. He was also a Sanskrit scholar, and he helped Satyabhama to gather new dance pieces and helping with the literal meaning of those compositions.

me to an old-time dancer Kunjukutty Amma in 1957 as someone said that she knew more Mohiniyattam pieces. We went to her house with Chinnammamma teacher, Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad and all. She was very old and faintly remembered the name of the Thodi Varnam. She sat and just showed a gesture denoting an elephant and that is it. We started searching for that Thodi Varnam. Luckily the singer Sukumari Narendra Menon had learned the compositions of Swathi Thirunal as a music student in Madras. The song was in Killimangalam's book also. Sukumari Narandra Menon sang the Thodi Varnam for the first time. Vasudeva Panicker set that dance piece with correct meter and rhythm to choreograph for a dance. Killimangalam explained the lyrics and it was Padmanabhan Nair who gave advice on the gestural language to be used which was borrowed from Kathakali. It was from the text *Hasthalakshana Deepika*.

(Satyabhama 2013, translation by the author)

Satyabhama's recollection reveals important events in the history of Mohiniyattam and the responsibility she had to shoulder at the onset of her career as a dance instructor at Kalamandalam. The above conversation from the interview I had with her falls in a chronological order. It appears from the conversation that she had learned four dance pieces in the Mohiniyattam movement vocabulary by the time she graduated from Kalamandalam in 1956. This was a relatively short repertoire when compared to the more developed forms of Bharatanatyam and Kathakali, which were both revived during the postcolonial period as well. The limited repertoire was the reason for their visit to Kunjukuttyamma to gather information about dance pieces from the past. Satyabhama did acquire the knowledge about the dance piece *Danisamajendragamini* a composition of Swathithirunal from Kunjukuttyamma. The kinesthetic

memory of Kunjukuttyamma was limited to the hand gestures and a posture. But this posture and the name of the dance piece from Kunjukuttyamma had prompted a search for the lyrics and meanings of the composition, which had furthered the choreography of this piece by Satyabhama. While the conversation about meeting Kunjukuttyamma and the resultant choreography of the piece happens in my oral history as a continuous process, this process came to fruition in the span of different time frames, which will be discussed later in this chapter. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, Satyabhama herself had learned several dance pieces from the repertoire of Bharatanatyam at Kalamandalam and had learned and witnessed a fully developed repertoire of Kathakali at Kalamandalam. Having a solid foundation in Bharatanatyam and Kathakali as well as learning a short repertoire of Mohiniyattam, Satyabhama was tasked with expanding the repertoire of Mohiniyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam.

In the years that followed from 1957 to 1993, Mohiniyattam grew through her and so did Kalamandalam Satyabhama in her various roles. As this evolution unfolded, it was primarily composed of five stages. During the first stage of this evolution from 1957 to 1962, Kalamandalam Satyabhama served as an assistant instructor of dance. During this time, she mainly taught Bharatanatyam and assisted Chinnammamma in teaching a brief repertoire of Mohiniyattam to dance students which mainly consisted of six dance pieces including the Thodi Varnam which was mentioned by Kunjukuttyamma.

The first batch and second batch of students she taught between 1957 to 1962 became part of this first stage of evolution of Mohiniyattam as they were the first ones to learn dance in Kalamandalam, which was situated in the newly formed Kerala. Satyabhama lists these dancers as T.K. Chandrika, Kshemavathy, Sumathy, Anjanam, Annam, and Radhamani who formed the first batch and Saraswathy, Vimala Menon, Mythili, Omana, Jayalakshmi, and Latha

(Satyabhama 2014, 45) who were part of the second batch. In 1962 and 1963, these students graduated from Kerala Kalamandalam and became performers and instructors of Mohiniyattam in the newly formed state of Kerala. The first revived and reconstructed pieces, which Satyabhama mentioned in her conversation, the Thodi Varnam was taught to T.K. Chandrika for the first time and to all other dancers in the first batch. These dancers became instrumental in disseminating the technique of both Bharathanatyam and Mohiniyattam styles taught at Kalamandalam to the public of Kerala through performance and through instructing young children. The six dance pieces in Mohiniyattam that included the Cholkettu, Jathiswaram, Varnam, Padam, and the two Thillanas found its way into the public arenas of performance and instruction through these dancers. T.K. Chandrika joined as an instructor in Kalamandalam in 1964, and the other dancers disseminated the repertoire taught at Kerala Kalamandalam to prospective dance students in their own hometowns across Kerala. Many of these dancers including Kshemavathy, Saraswathy, Vimala Menon, Sumathy, and Mythili are still active in the field, as are their students.

It is worth exploring the stages of Satyabhama's contributions through the insights and experiences of some of her students who learned with her at various stages of the reconstruction process at Kerala Kalamandalam. V. Kaladharan in his article "In Step with Tradition" (2011) calls Kshemavathy a true follower of the Kalamandalam tradition. He writes, "With a diploma in dance in hand, Kshemavathy stepped out of her alma mater (Kalamandalam) in 1962. In 1964, she founded Kerala Kalamandir in her hometown with the purpose of training youngsters in different dance disciplines." Kshemavthy's take on Mohiniyattam is quoted by Kaladharan as follows, "To be honest, I was not charmed by Mohiniyattam then. Bharathanatyam and Kuchipudi with their relatively fast tempo were my interests," admits Kshema (Kaladharan

2011) Although from these quotes it appears that Kshemavathy did not place a high priority on Mohiniyattam in the beginning, Kaladharan reports that Kshemavathy reexamined her approach and involvement in Mohiniyattam after her first solo Mohiniyattam recital in 1979 at the Vallathol Centenary Celebrations in New Delhi. Her portrayal of Swati Tirunal Varnam, *Daani saamajendragamini* in Raga Thodi and Adi Tala, which made a strong impression on the *rasikas*,⁸⁶ showed her how her passion for music had permeated her movement techniques and emotional expression. The slow, undulating movements and graceful expressions of Mohiniyattam became her forte from that point on. According to Kaladharan, as she developed her choreography, Kshema drew inspiration from diverse lyrical sources to choreograph her Varnams and Padams together with performing the dance pieces she learned from Kalamandalam, including Kalamandalam Satyabhama's first choreographed Varnam, Thodi Varnam (Kaladharan 2011).

Yet another student from the second batch is Kalamandalam Saraswathy, who was among the second batch of Satyabhama's students who joined Kalamandalam in 1958. Saraswathy credits Satyabhama in making Mohiniyattam a "distinct classical form" (Ajithkumar 2013) although she finds that Mohiniyattam evolved into a classical form almost after 1964, after she graduated from Kalamandalam. In an interview telecast for *Dooradarshan Kozhikode* (Television Station Kozhikode), Saraswathy discussed the training she received from Kalamandalam: "When I finished fifth grade my father took me to Kalakshetra. They did not take me as I was only 10 years of age at that time. He then enrolled me at Kalamandalam. I learned Bharathanatyam from Thanjavur A.R.R. Bhaskara Rao and Mohiniyattam from Kalamandalam Satyabhama" (Saraswathy 2022). However, Saraswathy says that she "learned

⁸⁶ Connoisseurs of art forms.

more Bharathanatyam than Mohiniyattam” (ibid) as a student at Kalamandalam. In 1964 after her graduation, she was impressed by the performance of Kalamandalam Sugandhi performing Satyabhama's new choreographies, as well as the Mohiniyattam performance of T.K. Chandrika, who by that time was teaching Mohiniyattam. As Saraswathy recalls, “Satyabhama teacher asked some of us who were good dancers to come back and learn her new choreographies” (ibid). As a result, Saraswathy went on to learn two new Padams choreographed by Satyabhama, and subsequently choreographed Mohiniyattam pieces to teach her students in her own institution, Nrithyodaya.

An innovation noteworthy is the changed hairdo of Mohiniyattam credited to Satyabhama, which is invariably the identity of Mohiniyattam in the postcolonial era and forms as a distinguishing feature of dance form denoting it as a native dance of Kerala as it resembled the hairstyle of upper-class women of Kerala in colonial times. In another interview with T.K. Ajith Kumar, Saraswathy credits Satyabhama with her innovation she brought to Mohiniyattam in the hairstyle, which is essentially a hallmark of Mohiniyattam. Saraswathy says that “the Mohiniyattam dancer did not look as fetching as she does now. We didn’t have the ‘konda’ [bun] hairstyle – hair was worn in a braid instead” (Kumar 2013). Among the memories of Kalamandalam Saraswathy is a Mohiniyattam performance she did for the film *Nirmalyam* (1973), directed by M.T. Vasudevan Nair, who would later become her husband. “Kalamandalam Leelamma and I were the dancers. We performed ‘Panimathi mukhl bale...’, sung by Sukumari Narendra Menon, who taught Carnatic vocal at Kalamandalam in those days,” reminisces Saraswathy” (Kumar 2013).

During the first phase of this evolution of postcolonial Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam, which spread through Satyabhama’s students throughout Kerala, her personal life also took a

very favorable turn in her dancing career when she married Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair in 1958. Padmanabhan Nair was the maestro of the Kathakali tradition, which was nurtured in Kalamandalam. Satyabhama endearingly thinks that her relationship with Padmanabhan Nair as a “phenomenal turning point” in her life as it was the “support and inspiration” he gave which enabled her to reach her “present stature” (Satyabhama 2014, 46). Satyabhama says that her husband Padmanabhan Nair “approached Mohiniyattam with a research interest” (Satyabhama 2014, 45). It was with his guidance that she started choreographing new dance pieces in Mohiniyattam. She says that they had “prolonged and consistent” (Satyabhama 2014, 46) discussions for many days when it came to new choreographies in Mohiniyattam. She acknowledges that she gained phenomenal insight into the gestural language of Mohiniyattam through Padmanabhan Nair teaching her the gestural language in the text *Hasthalakshnadeepika*, which was followed by Kathakali actors. Padmanabhan Nair helped her to “simplify” the more elaborate gestural language of Kathakali to make it suitable for Mohiniyattam. She says that this simplification was materialized by reducing the time of using a gesture and by using one hand to denote or convey meaning as opposed to using both hands in Kathakali.

While Padmanabhan Nair helped Satyabhama develop the gestural language of Mohiniyattam, she also had another avenue through which she understood the more developed and elaborate repertoire of Bharatanatyam. Essentially, this was through Tanjavur A.R.R. Bhaskar, who was appointed in 1960 as Bharatanatyam faculty. It was till 1960 that Satyabhama and others continued to practice the Bharatanatyam repertoire taught by Rajarathnam Pillai, Achutha Warriar, and Krishnankutty Warriar. Upon the arrival of A.R.R. Bhaskar, the repertoire of Bharatanatyam took a new direction as he taught the pieces in the Tanjavur style that included many Varnams and Padams. Satyabhama remembers that he choreographed many compositions

in Malayalam as dance dramas which included “Kavalam Narayana Panicker’s Thiranottam, Nagila penned by Vallathol, poet Kumaranasan’s poem Chandalabhishuki” (Satyabhama 2014, 47). Satyabhama assisted Bhaskar in these choreographies, and she says that it was through this experience that she gained insight into the improvisations possible in dance and also gave her the “confidence that she can do something by herself” (Satyabhama 2014, 47).

Nevertheless, while her association with Padmanabhan Nair and A.R.R Bhaskar gave her the momentum to work on expanding the repertoire of Mohiniyattam she was “trapped between Kathakali and Bharathanatyam” (Sathyabhama 2013) and the demand of creating a dance that should have in essence the features of a Kerala dance form which according to Satyabhama “should not have any resemblance to Kathakali or Bharathanatyam and should have the features of Kerala. The movements of this dance should be rooted in Lasya” (Sathyabhama 2013). Satyabhama finds this as the impetus which led her to the creation of new foundational movements (adavus) in Mohiniyattam.

She started to construct new abstract movements in Mohiniyattam, which she started teaching the new batch of students who joined after 1964. Those students included Kalamandalam Sugandhi, Seethalakshmi, and Omana who joined in 1965 and Kalamandalam Hymavathy who joined in 1966. After graduating from Kalamandalam, Sugandhi became a renowned Mohiniyattam dancer and instructor. Hymavathy joined Kalamandalam as a faculty member following her graduation.

During the process of constructing new movements and dance pieces, from 1957, Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad and Unnikrishnan Elayathu helped Satyabhama decipher Sanskrit terms and their meanings. Students who joined Kalamandalam during the years that followed were taught these new movements (newly developed adavus) and dance

choreographies. In Satyabhama's words, these movements with groups of newly codified adavus which Satyabhama said as having placed into certain “spatial boundaries in which the body can sway, hand movements can extend” (Satyabhama 2013) “a certain height to which the feet can be lifted and softly tapped to the floor to execute foot work” (Satyabhama 2013), and the newly constructed dance pieces which enacted this movement vocabulary set together into the particular framework of the text *Hasthalakshanadeepika* regarding its vocabulary of expressive dances formed the hallmark of Kalamandalam and slowly the “Kalamandalam style” (Satyabhama 2013) started evolving. As Satyabhama says, Mohiniyattam from Kalamandalam became well known as a sought-after style of Mohiniyattam after the 1960 due to various innovations brought to its vocabulary and this vocabulary through the instruction and performance was disseminated by alumni of the dance department from 1960 to the present day. Satyabhama finds Sugandhi, Saraswathy, Kshemavathy, Leelamma, Chandrika, and Vimala Menon as some of her prominent disciples who were instrumental in the propagation of the Kalamandalam style of Mohiniyattam.

Furthermore, there was a major makeover in the costuming and hairstyle of Mohiniyattam, which completely reestablished Mohiniyattam as a regional dance form of Kerala. With the introduction of the stitched off white saree costume with the golden border and the hair bun tied on the left side of the head, Mohiniyattam became readily identifiable without seeing the dance.

Likewise, the construction of the basic abstract movement vocabulary comprising the adavus, newly choreographed dance pieces, costuming and a renewed hairstyle marks the performance of postcolonial Mohiniyattam. This contribution is essentially an institutional one that came to fruition under the pioneering work of Kalamandalam Satyabhama. This new

makeover was fulfilled through the students who were studying dance at Kalamandalam after 1965. Kalamandalam Sugandhi who joined as a student in 1965 says that when she joined Kalamandalam at age fifteen,

there were not that many items in Mohiniyattam and Bharathanatyam was the main dance. The *Namaskaram* (salutation) for Mohiniyattam was not even done at the beginning. The Namaskaram for Bharathanatyam was done instead. Our performance included more Bharathanatyam dances. A Mohiniyattam Padam was probably performed in between Bharathanatyam dances. A white saree was quickly worn over the Bharathanatyam saree at that time, and we performed the Mohiniyattam Padam. As for the hairdo, it was the long braid of Bharathanatyam. When it was time to perform the Thillana in Bharathanatyam, we once again changed into the color sarees. (Sugandhi 2017)

In the conversation, Kalamandalam Sugandhi says that the new movements were added to Mohiniyattam in 1968 as a result of a seminar held by a variety of cultural figures in the field. Leela Nampoothiripad in her work *The History of Kerala Kalamandalam* (1990) gives a detailed description of this seminar that was attended by various well-known figures in various art fields, and was curated by the Chairman of Kerala Kalamandalam, M.K.K. Nair and the secretary M.K. Rajavu. She lists the names of more than twenty-five people who participated in the discussion. This list is important as it contains the evidence of Kanak Rele's visit to Kerala and Kerala Kalamandalam for the first time to learn about Mohiniyattam as an invited participant among other prominent participants including "K.P.S. Menon, Dr. Kunjunni Raja, Dr. K.N. Pisharody, Kaalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, Dr. K Raghavan, Dr. S. K. Nair, A.R.R. Bhaskar, M.G.S. Narayanan, Sangeetha Nataka Academy Chairman Mohan Khokar, Kanak Rele, Guru Gopinath,

Mrinalini Sarabhai, Clifford Jones, Betty True Jones...” (Nampoothiripad 1990, 88). As unequivocally stated by Kalamandalam Satyabhama, Kalamandalam Sugandhi, and Leela Nampoothiripad, the main focus of the seminar was on the practice and performance of Mohiniyattam. This included its music, technique, and grammar, as well as ways to enrich the form through novel ideas and movements. This seminar certainly contributed to the rejuvenation of Mohiniyattam through the expansion of its fundamentals, repertoire, and overall presentation. After the seminar a list of tasks discussed during the seminar was given to Kalamandalam Satyabhama to experiment with her students.

Kalamandalam Sugandhi recalls that after the seminar Kalamandalam Satyabhama again created new adavus in Mohiniyattam and Sugandhi was “the first to learn these movements” (Sugandhi 2017). As Sugandhi recalls, the changed hairdo to the side bun in the left side of the head was first attempted on her by K.P. Chandrika to perform the Thodi Varnam. She also recalls performing the newly created adavus in front of the seminar attendees. Additionally, Sugandhi said, the costuming was altered slightly when a pleated fan was added to the existing white saree costume. It was an unstitched costume with a new look” (Sugandhi 2017). Through this conversation, it becomes apparent that institutionalization of Mohiniyattam movement vocabulary initiated and evolved through Satyabhama was a gradual process that became a standard practice for students who studied there. Mohiniyattam was thus defined by its costume and hair style, encompassing practitioners of other styles also, such as Kanak Rele and Bharathi Shivaji. While Kalyanikuttyamma adopted only the costume, she and her entourage followed the braided hairstyle, which became synonymous with her Mohiniyattam style.

As demonstrated earlier, the year 1968 was a turning point in bringing out a new aesthetics to Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam under the efforts of Kalamandalam Satyabhama.

At Kalamandalam, the new aesthetic, including an evolved costume, distinctive hairstyle, foundational movements, and a complete performance repertoire, brought a disciplined approach to the teaching and learning Mohiniyattam. As a result of this process, Mohiniyattam at Kalamandalam was codifying its postcolonial vocabulary into an institutional framework that has continued to this day. By the end of the sixties and early seventies, the full Mohiniyattam repertoire had been completed as envisioned by Kalamandalam Satyabhama. The repertoire she created for Kalamandalam included the dance pieces she learned from Chinnammuamma, the ones she learned from Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma in 1966 and the dance pieces she choreographed by herself. Over the span of thirty-three years from 1957 to 1990 Satyabhama researched, compiled, choreographed, and expanded the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam at Kalamandalam. Her work in this aspect falls into two time periods. The repertoire as recounted from 1957 to 1970 and the expansion of the repertoire from 1970 to 1990.

Evolution of Kalamandalam Repertoire 1957-1970 and 1970-1990

The repertoire developed from 1957 to 1970 includes a combination of dance pieces that Kalamandalam Satyabhama encountered at different points of time during her tenure at Kalamandalam. It includes a piece she heard when she met Kalapurathe Kunjukuttyamma, which according to Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad, was "Dani Samajendra Gamini, which Kunjukuttyamma mentioned, and which only displayed the hand gesture of an elephant without dancing" (Nampoothiripad 2013). Also included were those she learned from Chinnammuamma and Kalyanikuttyamma, which Satyabhama "corrected and choreographed" (Sathyabhama 2013). Aside from these compositions, there were new Swathithirunal compositions with lyrics "discovered and translated" by Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad and choreographed

by Satyabhama (Nampoothiripad 2013). Several of the new dance pieces were composed by Vasudeva Panicker and sung by Sukumari Narendra Menon. Satyabhama recalls that her choreographies were supported by “Vasudeva Panicker, Ramakrishna Iyer, and Padmanabhan Nair” (Satyabhama 2014, 52). Her involvement in the reconstructive process thus shows the collaborative effort of various people which she had credited at various times during my interview with her. Over the period 1957 - 1970, Kalamandalam Satyabhama created the following repertoire:

- 1) *Cholkettu* in *Ragam Chakravagam* (taught by Chinnammuamma)
- 2) *Cholkettu* in *Ragam Sourashtram* (taught by Kalyanikuttyamma and re-choreographed with minor variations by Satyabhama). Satyabhama explains the minor variation as setting the composition into the correct rhythmic meter (with the help of Ramakrishna Iyer) which she found was missing in the song when she learned from Kalyanikuttyamma
- 3) *Jathiswaram – Chenchurutti* (taught by Chinnammuamma)
- 4) *Padam – Enthaho Vallabha* (Satyabhama learned this padam from both Chinnammuamma and Kalyanikuttyamma, incorporated the nuances of both their choreographies that involved acting from Kalyanikuttyamma and use of hand gestures from Chinnammuamma into the composition)
- 5) *Varnam – Sami Ninne Nammithira* (This Varnam was taught to Satyabhama by Chinnammuamma. The later part of the composition was “interpreted incorrectly” (Nampoothiripad, 2013) and the “choreography included the *Panthadi* (a dance sequence enacting playing with a ball), which was later corrected when Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma found the correct lyrics of the composition and

conveyed it through a letter written to Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad while her stay in Darpana⁸⁷(Nampoothiripad, 2013), (Satyabhama 2014, 52). The dance piece was thus rechoreographed by Satyabhama according to the meaning of the lyrics.

- 6) *Padam – Panimathimukhi Bale* (The first Mohiniyattam piece entirely choreographed by Satyabhama)
- 7) *Varnam – Danisamajendra Gamini* (Recounted from the broken memory of Kunjukuttyamma, lyrics and meaning provided by Killimangalam Vasudevan Nampoothiripad and choreographed by Sathybhama following the gestural language in the text *Hashtalakshanadeepika*)
- 8) *Padam – Tharuni Njan Enthu Cheyvu* (Choreographed by Satyabhama)
- 9) *Thillana – Ragam Paras* (Choreographed by Satyabhama)

These choreographies mark the making of a complete repertoire for the instruction at Kalamandalam. This repertoire marks a complete institutional repertoire of Kerala Kalamandalam, which fulfilled the notions of classicization and stylization along with setting a benchmark for instruction of Mohiniyattam to future students of Mohiniyattam. This repertoire also placed Mohiniyattam into the framework of an orderly academic discipline as it was part of a course study of four years which awarded a diploma upon successful completion of this course. The students of Satyabhama including Chandrika, Sugandhi etc secured permanent dance instructor jobs in government aided regular schools upon completion of this diploma in Mohiniyattam at Kalamandalam.

⁸⁷ Darpana is the dance institution founded by Mrinalini Sarabhai in Ahmedabad. Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma taught Mohiniyattam in Darpana in 1967.

In the next phase of replenishing the repertoire Satyabhama created from 1957-1970, from 1970-1990 she started choreographing dance dramas based on the epic Chilapathikaram and choreographies based on various Malayalam poems. The following compositions of Swathi Thirunal, which are included in the present repertoire of Kalamandalam, were also choreographed by during the 1970-1990 period.

- 1) *Varanam – Pannagendra sayana*
- 2) *Varnam – Manassime Parithapam*
- 3) *Varnam – Sumasayaka*
- 4) *Varnam – Ha Hantha Vanchithaham*
- 5) *Padam – Elam thalir Sayane*
- 6) *Padam – Sundarasrunu kantha*
- 7) *Padam – Viditham the*
- 8) *Padam – Kanakamaya mayidum*
- 9) *Padam – Tharuni Njan enthu Cheyvu*
- 10) *Padam – Kanthanodu Chennu*
- 11) *Padam – Kantha Thava Pizha Njan*
- 12) *Padam – Karuna Chevyan*
- 13) *Padam – Panchabanan thannudaya*
- 14) *Padam – Aryaputhra Kshamichalum*

While Satyabhama added a total of nine dance pieces during the initial phase of her reconstructive work on Mohiniyattam from 1957 to 1970, the second phase from 1970 to 1990 shows a wealth of fourteen dance pieces added to the repertoire of Kalamandalam. These pieces are taught to students enrolled in the institution as Mohiniyattam students and the legacy of

Satyabhama is transferred to future generations through instruction by its faculty members who were former students at this institution and who had learned the same repertoire. It is to be noted that Kalamandalam selects only dancers who are trained in the same institution as faculty members for its diploma courses and high school courses due to the focus on the performance aspect in these courses in all art forms including Mohiniyattam, Kathakali, Ottanthullal, music, percussion, etc. The instruction method is thus akin to the tradition involving the direct transfer of repertoire from the teacher to the student, which has enabled a continuous flow of the legacy of the repertoire created in this institution. In the case of Mohiniyattam it is Kalamandalam Satyabhama's legacy, which is transferred through instruction of Mohiniyattam and that legacy continues. Furthermore, Satyabhama choreographed a Swathi Thirunal Padam Aliveni Enthuvu for the movies *Ganam* (1982) and *Bandukkal Satrukkaal* (1993), both movies directed by Sreekumaran Thampi.

Conclusion: The Lineage and Legacy

The dance pieces choreographed by Satyabhama became the Mohiniyattam repertoire of Kalamandalam and were taught to dance students in Kalamandalam, who then passed the knowledge on to other students throughout Kerala. These dance pieces found their way to the public through performances by the dancers at various venues including cultural festivals, temple festivals, the Kerala school youth festival, and the university youth festivals across Kerala. During Kalamandalam Satyabhama's tenure as faculty from 1957 -1990 in Kalamandalam some of her students also joined the dance department from time to time, including Kalamandalam Leelamma who joined in 1974, and V.K. Hymavathy who disseminated the repertoire of Satyabhama to the dance students at Kalamandalam. Leelamma and Hymavathy were followed by others who joined as faculty later in the 1980s and 1990s including P.S. Lathika who joined in

1982, Pushpalatha and Rajalakshmi in 1984, and Satyabhama's daughter Lathika in 1997. Other prominent practitioners of the Satyabhama's lineage include Kalamandalam Kshemavathy, Mythili, Kalamandalam Sumathy, T.K. Chandrika, Kalamandalam Saraswathy, Kalamandalam Sugandhi, and many others who established their own dance schools and taught Mohiniyattam. Those alumni of Kalamandalam who joined as faculty at Kalamandalam and others who spread out at various places in Kerala as independent instructors and performers till now have continued to practice and develop the repertoire of Kalamandalam Satyabhama.

In 1991, Satyabhama was appointed as the vice principal of Kalamandalam and in 1992 she was appointed principal until she retired in March 1993. Her journey with Mohiniyattam and Kalamandalam, starting in 1953 as a student, and continuing in 1957 as an architect of Mohiniyattam in postcolonial Kerala, was marked with notable awards, including the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy Award in 1976 and the Kerala Kalamandalam Award in 1988. It took almost four decades for her contribution to Mohiniyattam to be recognised by the Central Sangeetha Nataka Academy after she retired from her academic and dance career in 1994. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2014, one year before she passed away in 2015. Although Satyabhama's contributions were overshadowed by influential performers who entered the Mohiniyattam scene almost two or three decades later, her legacy and lineage remain unquestionably ingrained in its practice, performance, and identity. Satyabhama's contribution to the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam by way of training and performance is undeniable in terms of its well-knit repertoire in theory and practice, which is enhanced by movement, costume, hairstyle, and its acting techniques.

CHAPTER VI

ROOTS AND ROUTES: THE JOURNEY OF MOHINIYATTAM FROM KERALA TO MUMBAI AND DELHI THROUGH KANAK RELE AND BHARATI SHIVAJI

While the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam and the pioneering efforts of Kalamandalam Satyabhama and Kalyanikuttyamma were influenced by the Indian Independence movement, nationalism, and the newly formed state of Kerala, alternate traditions created by two women practitioners, Kanak Rele from Mumbai, and Bharati Shivaji from Delhi, created new historical and kinesthetic narratives of Mohiniyattam outside of the geographical boundaries of Kerala. Chronologically speaking, while Kanak Rele started her initiation into Mohiniyattam in the late 1960s in Mumbai learning the vocabulary from Kalamandalam Rajalakshmi, Bharati Shivaji came into contact with Mohiniyattam in the early 1970s after witnessing a Mohiniyattam performance by Indrani Rahman at the India International Centre in Delhi. Later Bharati Shivaji learned Mohiniyattam from Radha Marar, a student of Kalamandalam Satyabhama and an alumna of Kerala Kalamandalam. Both these dancers continued with the movement vocabulary and repertoires they learned from their respective instructors and then embarked on two different journeys into the dance form and its native place. Their journeys later overlap and channel into a new narrative of Mohiniyattam.

How did Rele and Shivaji come to occupy such a prominent position in Mohiniyattam? In what follows, I trace their personal histories including their introduction to dance and their rise as performers of Mohiniyattam. This chapter narrates their stories alongside one another for two reasons. First, their choreography formed a very different representation of Mohiniyattam outside the geographical boundaries of Kerala. Second, their preoccupation with the form calls

into question the historical narrative created by the nexus of cultural institutions, state-sponsored agencies, and the politics of representation of the official history of postcolonial Mohiniyattam.

Although this chapter is largely based on my interviews with Rele and Shivaji, choreographing their stories into writing calls for many voices to be brought into play. In addition to connecting them with the archival materials available, in this chapter I will explore the route of Kanak Rele and Bharati Shivaji through the data collected from oral history interviews, kinesthetic traces, and textual and archival material gathered during my research.

Kanak Rele

Kanak Rele's name is at the forefront of the state-sponsored narrative as a major Mohiniyattam exponent, an institution builder, an educationist, and a scholar. Rele is the first Mohiniyattam dancer in India to be honored with one of the highest civilian honors, Padmasri, and the only Mohiniyattam dancer to be conferred the Padmabhushan for her contribution to the field. During my oral history with her she insisted that she should be addressed as the "fellow of Sangeet Natak Academy," which according to her is the highest state-sponsored honor she received for her work in Mohiniyattam. And yet Rele herself admits in her book *Mohini Attam: The Lyrical Dance* (1992) that her acquaintance with Mohiniyattam was quite accidental. Rele had very little formal training with any of the pioneering practitioners or instructors of Mohiniyattam from Kerala discussed in previous chapters. On the contrary, she was a Kathakali performer who trained with Panchali Karunakara Panicker who performed the roles of female characters in Kathakali. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the "Rele Style of Mohiniyattam" evolved as a separate strand of Mohiniyattam and shows marked differences in technique from the Mohiniyattam reconstructed in Kerala Kalamandalam.

To someone who is accustomed to the contained movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam of both the Kalamandalam style and the Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma style from Kerala, the very first feature that catches one's attention is its fast tempo of music and movement patterns. The movement also looks unrestricted or uncontrolled with wider circles, twists, turns, jerks, and wider full stretching movements of the hands and feet. The abstract movement vocabulary thus stands in sharp contrast with the measured and contained Mohiniyattam vocabulary of the Kalamandalam style with its body movements put into frameworks in which the body and the limbs can move. The flowing vocabulary of Mohiniyattam recreated or reconstructed by rural native women of Kerala including Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, and Kalamandalam Satyabhama remains in sharp contrast with the urban-infused vocabulary created by the Mumbai-raised and London-educated Kanak Rele. I use the phrase urban-infused vocabulary specifically to refer to the faster tempo of Rele's Mohiniyattam style in contrast to the slower tempo of Mohiniyattam in Kerala. I connect her vocabulary to the faster pace of life in Mumbai where she lives and where her institution is stationed as opposed to the laid-back atmosphere of Cheruthuruthy⁸⁸ where Kalamandalam is stationed.

Before Rele ventured into a career in dance she was a lawyer. In the foreword to Rele's book *Mohini Attam: The Lyrical Dance* (1992) T. K. Tope writes, "I came to know her as my student at Government Law College. Later, when I was the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mumbai, she persuaded me to establish the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Mumbai" (Rele 1992, vii). Rele founded Nalanda Nritya Kala Mahavidyalaya in 1967 as a non-profit public trust. In 1973 during T.K. Tope's tenure as Chancellor, when Mumbai University

⁸⁸ Cheruthuruthy is a small village in the Thrissur district of Kerala and home of Kerala Kalamandalam.

established the Faculty of Fine Arts, Nalanda was promoted as an affiliated college of the University of Mumbai offering certificate, diploma, degree, and postgraduate courses in Bharathanatyam, Mohiniyattam, and Kathak. Nalanda Dance Research Centre is recognized as a research institute by the Indian Ministry of Science and Technology. The institution's website also has a description of its relationship with Mohiniyattam:

This dance style was almost forgotten at the turn of the twentieth century. **Dr. Kanak Rele** and **Nalanda** have played the pioneering role in not only rehabilitating this dance style but, more importantly, in creating technically sound courses of study for beginners as well at the University level. Today at Nalanda Mohini Attam is taught in the same scientific method as the other better-established dance styles. The activities are conducted under the guidance of the Board of Advisors comprised of leading scholars and experts. (Nalanda, n.d.)

Kanak Rele thus foregrounds her role and her institution's role as a phenomenal presence in the field of Mohiniyattam, which includes rescuing the dance form and placing it into the framework of an academic discipline at par with the other established styles of dances in India.

Becoming a Dancer: Rele's Early History

Born on June 1, 1937, into a Gujarati Brahmin family in Mumbai, Rele's acquaintance with dance started in her childhood. She says that it was quite "accidental" (Rele 2017). The first dance form she started learning was Kathakali during her teenage years. She finds herself very fortunate to have learned Kathakali from Panchali Karunakara Panicker (also known as Karunakaran Nair) who she said was sent by Vallathol to the court of Gaikwad to teach the princess of the Maharaja of Baroda. "He was feted and well-kept in luxury", she said. When the

princess got married and left the palace, Panicker's service ended, and he relocated to Mumbai since he did not want to go back to Kerala "to go back to his village living a life of penury and hardship." Rele was first introduced to him by his son-in-law, Raghavan Nair, Nair's older daughter's husband, who was Rele's first guru in Kathakali. Karunakaran Nair took over his son-in-law's classes with Rele and he started teaching her. She shares,

I started learning a few Kalasams with Raghavan. And Asan⁸⁹ [Karunakara Panicker] came here in Mumbai. We used to call him guruji. Guruji came here and when he saw what I was doing, he told Raghavan, "This girl is not your business, and she is my student, and I will make something out of her." This is the way I learned Kathakali Sthreevesham.⁹⁰ I became very famous; I went abroad also to present Kathakali. I was very, very, very young.... I was hardly five and a half or six years. (Rele 2017)

She added that she underwent rigorous training in Kathakali and frequently performed at various cultural organizations in and around Mumbai. As a teenager she was also introduced to Bharathanatyam by Naina Balsar and Chokalingam Pillai, which she did not pursue due to her lack of interest. She continued to perform Kathakali during her early adulthood too.

At the age of 20, when she was still in college doing her undergraduate degree, she fell in love with Yatindra Kashinath Rele, a cricketer, and married him on November 9, 1957, after her graduation. After marriage, they went to college together to study. Rele became a lawyer and completed her bachelor's degree in law at Government Law College, Mumbai, while her husband became a banker. Both later went to England, with Rele pursuing a postgraduate

⁸⁹ Guru, instructor.

⁹⁰ Female character.

diploma in international law with a specialization in civil aviation at the University of Manchester. Rele remembers she was the only woman in the huge crowd of men. She said she had the opportunity to study in the company of distinguished people from Egypt, Spain, Costa Rica, and many other countries. Soon after graduation they returned to India. Rele's family was neighbors with J.R.D. Tata, who owned Air India. Tata offered Rele a job because of her specialization in civil aviation. Rele views this offer as a turning point in her career. She shared, "that is the day I rebelled and said I just want to dance, I can't do this. With my family's support—they said go ahead—I became well known among the Malayali organizations here [in Mumbai]: Nair Samajam, Kerala Samajam, Nampoothiri Samajam, and you name it they are there" (Rele 2017). In the early to mid-1960s, Rele started performing Kathakali again in these organizations. I find various contributing factors to Rele's prominence as a Kathakali performer including her unique position as a non-native (Gujarati in Mumbai) performing Kathakali, her unique position as the founder of Nalanda, her outstanding academic career and foreign education and as a member of a family belonging to the upper strata of the society (educated Gujarati Brahmin family). The videos available from the Prasar Bharathi Archives (Television owned by the Government of India known as Doordarshan) contains her performances of both Kathakali and later Mohiniyattam shows her influential position too with the bureaucracy as one should go through different stages of audition to be included in these programs. According to Rele, she was "invited to perform" (Rele 2017) in these programs after the authorities came to know of her work in these fields.

First Introduction to Mohiniyattam and Early Training

In the second edition of her book, *Mohini Attam: The Lyrical Dance* (2013), Rele describes her acquaintance with Mohiniyattam as a "chance encounter" (Rele 2013, vii), which

started in 1967 with Rele getting introduced to a “sketchy repertoire” (ibid). In 1966, as Rele remembers, two gentlemen, Dalmia and Nedungadi, came to meet her one day and told her,

“Kanakji there is a lady who has come from Kalamandalam, and she knows Mohiniyattam. She is in need of money naturally, but she said she would like to ‘earn my living.’” I asked, “what is her name?” Her name was Rajalakshmi. She was quite willing to teach Mohiniyattam. I had vaguely heard the name, and Guruji would say about Mohiniyattam, that is also a dance. I was not interested. Why bother? Guruji is here and I am practicing. (Rele 2017)

Rele further explained that she did not bother to learn because her son was a very young baby at that time, and she needed to take care of him. Nonetheless, Rele remembers that Dalmia and Nedungadi persuaded her to learn and requested her to support a fellow artist.

They said, ‘She will not take donations.’ Usually, I don’t quarrel with people. But when it comes to education and all that I can break everybody’s head. I have got a notorious reputation.⁹¹ Ok then I said, ‘Let her come, I don’t mind.’ (Rele 2017)

Thus, Rele was introduced to P.N. Rajalakshmi, who she credits in her book as her first and only guru in Mohiniyattam. Rele reports that she found it difficult to converse with Rajalakshmi as she “could speak no Hindi or anything,” only Malayalam. Rele herself could only speak “in broken Malayalam.” Rele notes that Rajalakshmi “was a very good singer, she became my vocalist later on.” Rajalakshmi was living in a suburb of Mumbai, and Rele would give her the fare for her railway pass, which was not a huge amount. Rele remembers that in 1966-67 Bombay was not a congested city. “She used to come to my house, I used to take care that when

⁹¹ Rele says that she is good at argument and can prove her point in any conversation regarding education.

she came, I gave her tiffin and that. She was well looked after. Then she started teaching me” (Rele 2017). During my oral history interview with Rele, I asked her whether Rajalakshmi was from Kalamandalam, and Rele affirmed that she was from “Kalamandalam, from the dance section” (Rele 2017). She added that Rajalakshmi knew Kalamandalam Satyabhama, Chinnammuamma, and Balakrishna Kurup, the son of Vallathol Narayana Menon.⁹²

Rele recounts her initiation into Mohiniyattam as follows:

So, she [Rajalakshmi] came, and she started teaching me *cholkettu*. I just started counting the *Taala*, she was good in *Taala*. Suddenly I don’t know what happened to me, even today I cannot say. I had just come from Bangalore, there was a very big seminar organized by one of the leading exponents of Kuchipudi. Something happened to me; I thought that this is what I want to dance, this is what my body is craving for. I was a very fine *Streevesham*⁹³ presenter. That is the time I said I want to do this. (Rele 2017)

In addition to the *Cholkettu*, Rele remembers that Rajalakshmi taught “one mad *Jathiswaram*” (Rele 2017). She said she calls it mad because there was no *Taala* pattern and recalls it as the *Jathiswaram* in *Chenchuritti*, which was one of pieces from the repertoire of Kerala Kalamandalam during the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam. Rele found the dance piece haphazard; she describes it as “trunk headed” and “going this way, that way. So, it was going this way and nothing else. Then there were two *Padams*, *Enthaho Vallabha* by Irayimman Thampi and *Endaliha Valarunnu He Manini* by Swathi Thirunal. She also remembers a *Varnam*

⁹² Rele’s book contains a photograph of her standing with Rajalakshmi, Chinnammuamma, and Balakrishna Kurup when Rele visited Kerala for the first time in the 1970s (Rele 1992, iv).

⁹³ Female character.

mentioned by Rajalakshmi as Swathis *Varnam* in Thodi Ragam *Danisamajaendrugaamini* (Rele 2017).

I learned *phat-phat-phat*,⁹⁴ then I said some more. She said *bas ithna* [“only this much”]. I asked what? What do you mean, *bas ithna*, 3.5 item? No, no, no. I sat down. Look, look, look, I am not going to stop you coming here. I thought this poor lady was thinking that she will be kicked out. I said, I won’t do that. You will be here only. She said *Ithna bus nahi, Kalamandalam me nahi*.⁹⁵ My God. (Rele 2017)

From Rele’s interview, it is evident that P.N. Rajalakshmi taught her all the dance pieces taught at Kalamandalam. But Rele was not satisfied with that and wanted to learn more. Nonetheless, she started performing the dance pieces taught by Rajalakshmi.

From Rele's perspective, the Mohiniyattam repertoire seemed very limited, and indeed at this time as I showed in chapters three and four, the repertoire was being expanded by both Kalyanikuttyamma and Kalamandalam Satyabhama. But given Rajalakshmi's position as a musician, she might not have been aware of these new developments in the repertoire, and therefore Rele was not learning the most up-to-date repertoire. During my interview with Kalamandalam Satyabhama in 2012, she repeatedly mentioned the name P.N. Rajalakshmi. She described Rajalakshmi as their vocalist who sang for them while teaching students in the Kalaris⁹⁶ at Kerala Kalamandalam. I asked Satyabhama whether Rajalakshmi was trained in dance, and she responded that Rajalakshmi was only a vocalist. When I asked her to comment on Rajalakshmi as the Mohiniyattam guru of Kanak Rele she said “maybe she [Rajalakshmi] might

⁹⁴ Colloquial Hindi meaning “quickly.”

⁹⁵ Hindi words mixed with English, meaning there is only this much in Kalamandalam.

⁹⁶ Dance studio which most probably is an open space.

have learnt seeing us dance.... She [Rele] did something different, in her own way. Their style is different from what we did; maybe she might have learnt from someone, I do not know”

(Satyabhama 2013).

Leela Nampoothiripad mentions Rele’s guru P.N. Rajalakshmi in her book *The History of Kerala Kalamandalam* (1990) According to her, by the mid-1950s “Chinnammamma, Kumaran Nair, and Rajaratnam trained students in dance. Rajalakshmi and Vasudeva Panicker taught music, sang for programs, and played the violin while Ramakrishnan played the mridangam” (Nampoothiripad 1990, 68). Vallathol at this time felt an urgent need to teach the dance students, the nuances of dance music and “appointed P.N. Rajalakshmi as a vocalist to sing for students during their dance classes and also for performances on stage” (ibid). Nampoothiripad describes Rajalakshmi as a good singer, excellent in teaching music, having a good understanding and knowledge of time measure, and having excellent voice modulation. In 1957 when V. Satyabhama (Kalamandalam Satyabhama) joined the dance section, Rajalakshmi was still on the music faculty. Nampoothiripad states that in 1957 Rajalakshmi toured with a Kalamandalam troupe consisting of Kathakali, Bharathanatyam, and Mohiniyattam dancers across many places in Kerala. The program aimed to "create an awareness to the public about the rich artistic traditions of the Kerala Kalamandalam including Kathakali, Bharathanatyam, and Mohiniyattam” (ibid, 70). According to Nampoothiripad, Rajalakshmi was the music teacher and lead vocalist in Kalamandalam until August 1964.

It is thus quite evident from this historical account that Rele’s guru P.N. Rajalakshmi was a music teacher and a vocalist at Kerala Kalamandalam. It is quite natural for a musician who frequently accompanies dancers and choreographers to understand the dance form's movement

patterns. This may be the reason why Rele says the dance items that Rajalakshmi taught were “mad” or “trunk headed,” and it left her wanting to learn “something more” (Rele 2017).

The question of Rajalakshmi’s training to be a Mohiniyattam guru aside, Rele’s association with Rajalakshmi served as the gateway for Rele’s entry into Kerala as a Mohiniyattam practitioner since it was Rajalakshmi who made her aware of the existence of Mohiniyattam and had also instilled in her the desire to learn “something more.” In fact, Rajalakshmi accompanied Rele on her first trip to Kerala in 1968. Rele says that “the Sangeetha Nataka Academy and the then Secretary of Academy Suresh Awasthi, knowing my work on Mohiniyattam, gave a small grant” (Rele 2017). She narrates this incident as quite accidental when she says,

I don’t know how they came to know about my work...Mr. Suresh Awasthi...said, “Kanak you are doing this work, and I am willing to give you a small grant, go and do field work, find out what is Mohiniyattam.” I jumped up and died. I said, ‘Yes, Dr. Avasthi I want to go.’ (Rele 2017)

In addition to the Sangeetha Nataka Academy grant, Rele adds that at the advice of Bharath Iyer, a scholar and patron of her family, she applied for a grant from the Ford Foundation stating her intention to film the surviving exponents of Mohiniyattam. The Ford Foundation Grant, Rele remembers,

Was intended as a scheme, wherein, little known art forms, art forms which were in danger of getting totally wiped out, these dance forms, if somebody wants to work towards the revival or something they could apply. And I said I want to film. That time I got to know that there were three old ladies, the oldest was Kunjukutty Amma, the second one was Chinnammuamma who was associated

with Kalamandalam, and the third was Kalyanikuttyamma, Krishnan Nair's wife.

I knew that these three ladies were there. I just applied and I said I want to film them. (Rele 2017)

Rele was touring Japan on vacation with her husband in 1968 and the Ford Foundation agreed to send the grant money from New York to Japan. Rele collected the money in Japan to purchase her video camera. Rele added that Sangeeta Nataka Academy gave her a certificate with which she could avoid paying the customs duty in India for her new video camera. It is evident from these narratives that Rele had ties with the higher officials of cultural bureaucracy in India during the very early stages of her work, most notably the officials in the Sangeetha Nataka Academy.

Rele remembers that her first trip to Kerala was in 1968, and Rajalakshmi accompanied her as her informer. This was 38 years after Kerala Kalamandalam came into existence and during the second period of Mohiniyattam reconstruction in Kerala Kalamandalam (see chapters three, four and five for a discussion of the first and second phases). When Rele arrived in Kerala, the dance faculty at Kalamandalam included Kalamandalam Satyabhama and K.P. Chandrika as junior instructors in dance. Both were alumni of Kerala Kalamandalam and students of Chinnammuamma. While Satyabhama was appointed as faculty in 1957, Chandrika joined the department in 1964 when Satyabhama was on a short-term leave.⁹⁷ During this period, the Mohiniyattam repertoire underwent a gradual expansion, as discussed in previous chapters.

⁹⁷ In 1968 Chandrika was sent by Kalamandalam to Andhra Pradesh for a two-year training in Kuchipudi. When she returned after her training in 1970, she discontinued her employment in Kalamandalam to accept a more financially lucrative career as dance instructor at the FACT High school in Aluva. Chandrika was replaced by V.R. Padmini who was also an alumnus of Kerala Kalamandalam.

Rele's name is mentioned in *The History of Kalamandalam* (1990) as attending a Mohiniyattam seminar organized by Kerala Kalamandalam in November 1968. Among the participants were Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, Clifford Jones, and Betty True Jones who came to Kalamandalam in 1960 for the first time and had visited during subsequent years to learn Kathakali and Mohiniyattam. The seminar according to Nampoothiripad (1990) covered the foundational concepts of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam, manuscripts from Tamilnadu, the history of Devadasi practices in Kerala, problems faced by Mohiniyattam, the music of Mohiniyattam, Mohiniyattam technique, and its further development, the problematics surrounding the enrichment of Mohiniyattam, and the relationship between Mohiniyattam and Kathakali. In addition to attending the seminar, Rele interviewed old-time practitioners of Mohiniyattam including Kunjukuttuyamma, Chinnammuamma, and Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma and filmed them dancing.⁹⁸ Rele notes that "Kalyanikuttyamma being the youngest of the three was the only active performer of Mohini Aattam from the traditional group" (Rele 1992, 17). It was also during this trip that she was introduced to one of her chief informers, C. Balakrishna Kurup, son of the late Vallathol, who was the founder of Kerala Kalamandalam.

Kalamandalam Sugandhi one the most prominent and well-known exponents of Mohiniyattam in Kerala reminisce Kanak Rele's visit to Kerala Kalamandalam. Sugandhi recollects that it was 1968 right after she completed the diploma course in Mohiniyattam under the tutelage of Kalamandalam Satyabhama. Sugandhi remembers Rele attending a seminar on

⁹⁸ During my oral history interview with Rele, she said that these interviews are in the archives collection at Nalanda Nritta Mahavidyalaya library. While these interviews are not available to the public or for reference for researchers, Rele had shown brief clips of these practitioners in her lecture demonstrations.

Mohiniyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam. Among so many discussions that happened during the seminar Sugandhi remembers the changed hairstyle of Mohiniyattam tying the hair into a side bun on the left side of the head as the innovation, which was experimented on her hair, an innovation by her guru Kalamandalam Satyabhama. She recounts Kanak Rele as an “intelligent woman” who knew that “entering into the discourse of Mohiniyattam was easy for her at that time as she understood that there was no one as intelligent as her” (Sugandhi 2017)

Rele during my oral history interview described the hardships she faced to record the “grand old ladies” as follows:

I recorded them and do you know how much I paid them (old Mohiniyattam dancers). They were living in penury. Kunjukutty Amma, we brought her from her village. She was bent double like this [Rele showed that she had a hunch back] because she had arthritis. Her teeth were decayed, and she couldn't hear properly. My husband was helping me out, and she said that he refused to strain these old ladies unless we gave them medical aid. I was not given the cooperation which I was hopeful of ... with humility, we approached Kalamandalam to give us their stage for shooting and we will pay whatever rent you (Kalamandalam authorities) want to have. When we were collecting everything, and last moment somebody came and said that we cannot enter Kalamandalam. Chalo [let's go], then we were at the tourist bungalow where we stayed and then there was the cook there, John, he was there. He said, madam, forget those people don't worry about them, and we gathered lights from Shoranur [a place nearby]. We used the dining room of that tourist bungalow to shoot my films. Then Ramankutty Nair [Kathakali actor from Kalamandalam] came, and Neelakandan Nambisan came. They all helped us. Not the

Kalamandalam authorities. Now if they want these copies, why should I give them? So, I don't want to give them. They can go to hell. (Rele 2017)

From this conversation, it can be inferred that the films made by Rele on old-time dancers were not given or shown to anyone. I can confirm that these recordings do exist as I had the opportunity to view certain video clips during a lecture demonstration on Mohiniyattam at Rele's institution, Nalanda Nritta Kala Mahavidyalaya. The virtual broadcast of this event was shared on their Facebook page in 2019. As part of the lecture demonstration, Rele primarily demonstrated episodes from the "grand old ladies" repertoire of Mohiniyattam, as well as her own contribution to the repertoire of Mohiniyattam. Rele showed the videos of Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma demonstrating excerpts of two abhinaya (acting) pieces while Kalyanikuttyamma demonstrated adavus (abstract movements) in Mohiniyattam. Both Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma, in the videos, are seen sitting on the chair demonstrating the abhinaya pieces. Kunjukuttyamma according to Rele was demonstrating the piece *Prananayakan Ennodu Vanchana Cheyvu* (My beloved cheated me) while Chinnammuamma was demonstrating the piece *Enthaho Vallabha Inneram Mounabhavam* (My beloved, why are you silent at this time). While the songs or lyrics are absent in the video clips, it is evident from the gestural language of these dancers that they are demonstrating the respective compositions mentioned by Rele. There are no movements from these dancers other than the facial expressions and the hand gestures as they are sitting on a chair. In the lecture demonstration accompanying these videos, Rele states that these videos are the original source of her recreation of Mohiniyattam. While both of these dances demonstrated by Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma are found in the repertoire of Kanak Rele, as demonstrated in chapter two and chapter three the dance piece demonstrated by Chinnammuamma (*Enthaho Vallabha*)

represents a significant addition made by Kalamandalam during the institutional reconstruction of Mohiniyattam. Rele videographed Chinnammuamma in 1968, ten years after her retirement from Kalamandalam as an instructor of Mohiniyattam and the dance piece demonstrated by Chinnammuamma essentially belongs to repertoire and movement vocabulary of Kalamandalam. Quite evident from the videos of Kalyanikuttyamma dancing her adavus, I argue that Kalyanikuttyamma was the only person with a conceptual vocabulary from which Rele could have borrowed Mohiniyattam's abstract vocabulary. During my oral history interviews with Kalyanikuttyamma's daughters and disciples, Sreedevi Rajan and Kala Vijayan, they recalled Kanak Rele's visit to Tripunithura, Kerala. Both Rajan and Vijayan recollected Rele videographing Kalyanikuttyamma's vocabulary including adavus and dance pieces choreographed and danced by Kalyanikuttyamma herself. Kala Vijayan recounts Rele's visit to their home in late 1968 and the recording experience as "Kanak Rele did not learn from my mother. She filmed everything that Amma knew. She videographed Mani Chechi [Sreedevi Rajan] and me. I clearly remember her filming the *Sankarabharanam Thillana*" (Vijayan 2017). Kala Vijayan finds no similarity in the prevalent repertoire of Rele with her own practice of Mohiniyattam, which was directly transferred to her by her mother Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma. She finds very minute traces of similarity in some of the adavus taught by her mother but finds Rele's Mohiniyattam to be of a very different style.

Rele considers the videos she made as her authentic historic source and she says that she attempted to "observe, learn and recreate some of it" (Rele 1992, 1) and initiated her creation of Mohiniyattam in the "absence of a well-defined repertoire" (ibid). Rele recounts in her book that there were "only a handful of items available in the sketchy repertoire that was being followed," and she could not "term it a tradition since there was no discernible tradition available which I

could study. All that I had were the films that I had made and the interviews I had taken” (Rele 1992, 7). She then started working on a repertoire of her own based on those films. In her book she writes,

In the general absence of documentary evidence in the form of manuscripts, records or *granthas* (texts) pertaining to Mohini Aattam I have derived the technique of Mohiniyattam by observation, recording, enumeration and finally analysis and deduction. The surmises presented as a direct result of the process are fully supported by the documentary films which I have made, and innumerable interviews taken of the old timers in the villagers and cities of Kerala, scholars, research workers and lastly the grant old ladies who were the sole survivors of the old and traditional school of Mohiniyattam. (Rele 1992, 86)

Rele claims in the preface of this book that she “analyzed the style on the basis of aesthetics and kinetics” (Rele 1992, X) while the technique she “culled” is “fully supported by the films” she had made. She justifies her “ultimate analysis” of the technique of Mohiniyattam as an “artiste does have some creative freedom to express her chosen idiom in a manner her own conscience dictates” (Rele 1992, X).

But the question remains why Rele felt she had to construct another form of Mohiniyattam when substantial reconstruction efforts were already being carried out in Kerala at Kalamandalam and by Kalyanikuttyamma through the 1950s and 1960s and concurrent to Rele’s own work in the late 1960s and 1970s by Kalamandalam Satyabhama. Rele’s narrative on her invention of her style of Mohiniyattam points one to the kinesthetic memories of various bodies in Mohiniyattam to whom she was exposed, for example, the movement vocabulary she learned from P.N. Rajalakshmi, the conversations she had with the “old time” dancers and their

movements in the video recordings she made, the ideas she gleaned from the seminar at Kalamandalam in 1968 including the newly introduced hairdo, and the performances of Mohiniyattam students from Kalamandalam during the seminar. I argue that these were the initial Mohiniyattam ideas and choreographies she absorbed at an earlier stage, dancing between 1968 and 1980. Most likely, the choreographies she created in the 1980s were the pieces she developed further and taught to her disciples. Through an examination of the many performers and other individuals she interacted with, including scholars, one will be able to gain a clearer understanding of how Rele developed her style and came to be known as a pioneering Mohiniyattam practitioner outside of Kerala, whereas native Mohiniyattam dancers from Kerala who began their practice many years earlier remained on the periphery.

The interviews and video recordings conducted by Rele took place during the final stages of the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam. Rele claims to identify the traditional repertoire of Mohiniyattam from the “grand old ladies” (Rele 1992, 78), Kunjukutty Amma and Chinnammuamma during the periods between 1968 -71. Both dancers, Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma belonged to the precursive phase of the “classical” or I say the “neo-classical” form of Mohiniyattam, which is practiced today. They were as Rele says, “both the older ladies were almost in their eighties and gave up practicing Mohini Aattam more than sixty years ago” (Rele 1992, 79). Although the old Mohiniyattam dancers, Kunjukuttyamma and Chinnammuamma, may have been able to recall the names of dance pieces they may have learned when they were young, Rele's narrative about the meeting makes one skeptical about her claim that she had the “rarest of good fortune and opportunity to learn the technique from them.” I argue that this narrative provided about them by Rele as the “last surviving exponents of the old and traditional school” of Mohiniyattam who practiced the traditional repertoire have “shed

invaluable light on the technique of the style” (Rele 1992, 12) is only to enable legitimacy to her style by attaching her own vocabulary of Mohiniyattam to a historic genealogical source.

Betty True Jones during her interview with some of the practitioners who were also approached by Rele herself notes the dance pieces mentioned in the older repertoire like *Mukutti*, *Chandanam*, *Esal*, etc. These dance pieces are absent in the repertoire created by Rele. It is to be noted that Mohiniyattam when it was first introduced in Kalamandalam had these dance items, but they were later banished at Kalamandalam and replaced with pieces like the Cholkettu, Jathiswaram, *Varnam*, Thillana etc. These dance pieces are also absent in Rele's repertoire.

While Kanak Rele developed a repertoire beginning in the 1980s that she claimed to have recreated from the broken memory of old-time dancers and of course the recreated form of postcolonial Mohiniyattam she recorded from Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma and her daughters. Rele seems to be completely unaware (willfully ignoring) of the fact that a well-knit repertoire was shaping up in Kerala Kalamandalam under the efforts of Kalamandalam Satyabhama. This might be because Kanak Rele during her visit to Kerala and Kalamandalam in 1968 did not get a chance to videograph the repertoire of Kalamandalam nor use the facilities available at Kalamandalam.

I argue that Kanak Rele's grand entry into the scene of Mohiniyattam in 1968 was a conscious individual effort, strategic, planned, and well-executed. This strategic planning and execution are evident in the ways she crafted her association with Mohiniyattam. Rele already had a cultural habitus surrounding her life in Mumbai and beyond including her own institution Nalanda Nritta Kala Mahavidyalaya, close association with the bureaucracy of Central Sangeetha Nataka Academy, New Delhi which included Suresh Awasthi who was the secretary of the SNA from 1965 to over a decade.

Rele's repertoire from the 1970s is quite unknown. At that time a new generation came out of Kerala Kalamandalam including Kalamandalam Kshemavathy, Kalamandalam Sugandhi, Kalamandalam Chandrika, Kalamandalam Saraswathi, and Vimala Menon. They emerged as not only Mohiniyattam dancers but also as instructors who trained the next generation of dancers all over Kerala. These dancers essentially were trained in the reconstructed postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam. What is today known as Rele's technique and is taught at Nalanda, however, was created only in the 1980s through a collaborative effort with Kavalam Narayana Panicker, a poet and dramatist from Kerala. Rele's choreographies and lecture demonstrations available in the archives of ICCR stand as testimony of the collaborative work between Panicker and Rele. The themes of the songs reflect Panicker's philosophies and ideologies inspired by his affinity to Sanskrit and folk theater traditions of India, indigenous musical traditions, Greek theater, and Shakespearian plays. In his theatrical works, he liberally mixed these traditions together. The compositions he gave Rele inherited these philosophies that included a copious mixing of the indigenous and the modern, which was cleverly called the "Sopanam tradition," which connected them to the indigenous Sopanam music sung as part of the daily rituals in the temples of Kerala. But in fact, Rele's repertoire was not the first to be created with Panicker.

Bharati Shivaji

The repertoire envisioned by Kavalam Narayana Panicker found its kinesthetic fulfillment through another dancer before Kanak Rele gave her own choreographic interpretations to his compositions. This dancer was Bharati Shivaji from Delhi. While Kanak Rele met Kavalam Narayana Panicker in 1982, which she mentions as a "providential encounter" (Shivaji 2017), Bharati Shivaji met Narayana Panicker in 1974 in Delhi, the capital of India.

Mohiniyattam dancer Deepthi Omchery Bhalla observes that Bharati Shivaji's entry into Mohiniyattam was at a time when women dancers in Kerala looked "less attractive" and "here was this young dancer who came from Delhi, tall, lean, beautiful" who resembled "Mohini" in all aspects (Bhalla 2017). According to Bhalla, Shivaji's beauty, which distinctively differed from the curvy and rounded physique of Mohiniyattam dancers from Kerala, gave her the advantage of more popularity with the media and audience. The swiftness of body movements in her vocabulary and the entirely new repertoire gave her an edge as one of the most sought out Mohiniyattam performers in the 1980s.

Bharati Shivaji was born in 1948 in Kumbakonam in the Thanjavur district of Tamilnadu, the cradle of Bharathanatyam. Shivaji began her training in Bharathanatyam when she was eight years old, initially under Janaki Raman and later under Lalitha Sastry from Kalakshetra. In addition, she was introduced to Odissi dance under the tutelage of the maestros Kelucharan Mohapatra and Trinath Maharna while in Delhi after her marriage in 1968. In the early 1970s, she first became acquainted with Mohiniyattam by watching a performance by Indrani Rehman at an event in Delhi titled "An Evening of Indian Classical Dances." As Shivaji recalls, Indrani Rehman was one of the most well-known dancers of that period and a contemporary of Yamini Krishnamurthy, the illustrious Bharathanatyam dancer. Although Indrani Rehman performed Bharathanatyam and Odissi as the main dance pieces during the recital, a Mohiniyattam dance piece at the end caught Bharati Shivaji's attention. She states that, as a Bharathanatyam dancer, she found the Mohiniyattam dance piece simple and interesting at the same time, interesting because of the "languorous and graceful movements involved" (Shivaji 2017). In the late 1970s, Bharati Shivaji found a Mohiniyattam teacher in Delhi, Radha Marar who was an alumnus of Kerala Kalamandalam and a disciple of Kalamandalam Satyabhama. Shivaji recalls that Radha

Marar taught her the usual repertoire of Mohiniyattam from Kalamandalam, which includes the *Cholkettu*, *Jathiswaram*, *Varnam*, *Padam*, and *Thillana*. Furthermore, she pointed out that the introductory learning involving the adavus was very limited compared to the well-structured and elaborate adavu system in Bharathanatyam (Shivaji observed similar limitations in the adavus as Kalyanikuttyamma and Kalamandalam Satyabhama, as noted in chapters three and four).

According to Shivaji, who has been trained in Bharathanatyam since childhood, in contrast to the way in which adavus are grouped in Bharathanatyam with their respective names and variations, Mohiniyattam's adavus were loosely arranged. Moreover, she points out that the number of adavus in Mohiniyattam is limited to barely twelve to fifteen, as opposed to the more than a hundred adavus in Bharathanatyam which are divided into different groups with corresponding names and variations. According to Shivaji, the process of learning from Radha Marar enabled her to discover that "Mohiniyattam has a lot of potential and needs to be explored.... That I can go deeper into the subject observing, researching, and exploring" (Shivaji 2017). Shivaji might have made this observation comparing and contrasting the repertoires of Bharathanatyam and Mohiniyattam given that Bharathanatyam had an elaborate repertoire compared to a repertoire of Mohiniyattam from Kalamandalam in the 1970s comprising of seven pieces she learnt from Radha Marar. Shivaji began performing Mohiniyattam in the late 1970s, presenting repertoire that Radha Marar had taught her, including the *Cholkettu* in *Ragam Sourastram* choreographed by Kalamandalam Satyabhama, as well as a *Jathiswaram* in *Ragam Chenchurutti*, which was revived in Kerala Kalamandalam, three *Padams*, a *Varnam*, and a *Thillana*, which were also choreographed by Kalamandalam Satyabhama. She performed these pieces in 1972 at the India International Centre in New Delhi in the presence of many well-known connoisseurs of dance and drama including Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, the Chairperson of Kendra Sangeetha Nataka

Academy.⁹⁹ Bharati Shivaji remembers this performance as a brief forty-minute presentation consisting of the *cholkettu*, *jathiswaram*, *padam*, *Varnam*, and *thillana* that she learned from Radha Marar. Following the performance described by Shivaji during our oral history interview, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay “identified” Shivaji as “an ideal candidate” and offered her a scholarship to go to Kerala and learn more about Mohiniyattam. Bharati Shivaji was “very happy and thrilled about it because such an opportunity one would not get” (Shivaji 2017). Immediately following the performance, Kamal Devi Chattopadhyay introduced Shivaji to the poet and dramaturg from Kerala, Kavalam Narayana Panicker, who served as the Vice Chairman of the Kendra Sangeetha Nataka Academy. My contention is that this “providential encounter” between Bharati Shivaji and Kavalam Narayana Panicker marked one of the most significant turning points in her career as a Mohiniyattam dancer.

Bharati Shivaji and Kavalam Narayana Panicker: The Dancer and the Musician

Bharati Shivaji's association with Kavalam Narayana Panicker, I argue, is inextricably connected to her emergence in the late 1970s as one of the most highly sought-after Mohiniyattam performers on national and international stages. The performances of Mohiniyattam dancers in Kerala were confined to the boundaries of the state; however, Bharati Shivaji gained a wider canvas in the early stages of her career because she resided in Delhi, where she had access to influential networks and associations, including the bureaucracy of the Kendra Sangeetha Nataka Academy, the supreme body for the arts and culture in India. As Shivaji was a non-Keralite, Kavalam Narayana Panicker acted as her mentor and a source of first-hand knowledge for her. His interest and knowledge in the arts and culture of Kerala led

⁹⁹ Kendra Sangeetha Nataka Academy is the apex body of art and culture under the government of India.

him to provide her with information about these areas, as well as to guide her through those areas of literature and art forms, which ultimately led her to develop new vistas in the performance and practice of Mohiniyattam. According to Shivaji,

Panicker was a genius. He was a brilliant authority on Kerala folk arts and any subject he could speak. Of course, he was a well-known theater director, traditional theater director. He gave me all details about the cultural scene in Kerala like the various dance forms in Kerala, the Taala system and all the musical traditions, semiclassical traditions, dance drama traditions etc. All these he introduced to me first. Because it is very important for me to understand because I don't belong to Kerala, I belong to Tamilnadu. From there you are coming from a different culture totally. I was very keen to do something for Mohiniyattam. I was not willing to accept what was given to me... a casual presentation of Mohiniyattam. I wanted something more intense because it had a lot of rich possibilities. So, I wanted to explore that and go deeper into the subject. That way I was able to seek the help and guidance of Panicker Sir. He composed and we came about with a new repertoire of Mohiniyattam, completely right from the very beginning till the end. The whole format was different. We did a lot of work. He made me go to the original sources. For example, if there is a semiclassical dance form he would ask me to go there and interact with the guru, understand what it is, how different it is and what can be drawn from the other art forms of Kerala which can help and complement Mohiniyattam. The rich Nritha content many of these traditions have like *Krishnanattam*,¹⁰⁰ the Nritha content is very very rich. There was a lot of possibility to draw from them. (Shivaji 2017)

¹⁰⁰ Dance drama involving stories about Krishna.

In accordance with Panicker's advice, Bharati Shivaji visited Kalamandalam in 1973 to observe the instruction of Mohiniyaattam at the institute. Her visit to Kalamandalam was limited to observation because Kalamandalam did not provide any short-term private instruction and admitted only full-time students for its four-year diploma course. Shivaji rather started learning movement vocabulary of Kalyanikuttyamma style under the tutelage of Kalyanikuttyamma's niece and disciple, Chandrika Kurup who ran her dance school in Thiruvananthapuram. Additionally, she engaged with Mitran Nampoothiripad, who provided insights into the religious aspects of Kerala culture; Paramashiva Menon, who helped her initially understand Mohiniyattam; Govindan Kutty, who introduced her to the basic body disciplines of Kalari, a martial art form of Kerala; and Kuruchy Kumaran, who introduced her to the Taalas of Kerala. Madhavan Pillai and Kadammanitta Vasudevan Pillai introduced her to Padayani, a ritual art form of Kerala. Bhaskaran Pillai introduced her to the Ottanthullal dance of Kerala. Nellyode Vasudevan Nair and Chengarapalli Aniyam introduced her to Kathakali. Krishnan Kutty Marar gave insights into the Sopana music system of Kerala. Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar, the maestro of Kutiyattam, demonstrated the nuanced and finer aspects of acting. She observed Janardhanan Nedungadi singing Astapadi in the Sopanam tradition of music at Guruvayur temple in Kerala. One can see the amalgamation of elements from all these encounters in the work Shivaji did under the mentorship of Kavalam Narayana Panicker to birth a new stream of Mohiniyattam that draws upon the variegated vocabularies of folk, semiclassical, and ritualistic art traditions native to Kerala.

A New Repertoire Incorporating Regional Kerala Identity into the Aesthetics of Mohiniyattam

While Mohiniyattam already had a character and identity of its own, which was created by Kerala Kalamandalam and Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma in what was more a postcolonial endeavor than a historical progression, Shivaji and Panicker sought to explicitly link Mohiniyattam to other Kerala art forms. Though Shivaji's movements are predominantly rooted in the Mohiniyattam vocabulary of Kalamandalam and Kalamandalam Kalyankuttyamma, she has also extensively borrowed movement patterns from other Kerala art forms like Ottanthullal, Kathakali, and Kutiyattam to create a new Mohiniyattam repertoire of her own. The format of this new repertoire was a radical departure from the Mohiniyattam repertoire format found in Kerala Kalamandalam, which Shivaji had learned from Radha Marar during her initial phase of training in Mohiniyattam. Instead, this new repertoire embodied Panicker's ideology of Mohiniyattam as a regional art form of Kerala unique in its treatment of music and language. According to Shivaji the Mohiniyattam she and Panicker collaboratively created was aimed at bringing an “identity of Mohiniyattam on its own and at the same time it speaks about the regional factor which was totally missing earlier... basically, I worked on the aesthetics of Mohiniyattam” (Shivaji 2017).

A key part of the focus on developing Mohiniyattam as a regional art form is that the dance pieces were set to Sopanam music. The word Sopanam refers to the steps leading to the *Sreekovil* [sanctum sanctorum] in Kerala temples, which houses the presiding deity. Sopanam music is a unique system of music indigenous to Kerala with lyrics predominantly in Malayalam and accompanied by Edakka, Maddalam, Chenda, and Chengila percussion instruments unique to Kerala. The use of Sopanam music to compose songs for Mohiniyattam was a marked

departure from the Carnatic music tradition used in Mohiniyattam in Kerala by both Kalamandalam and Kalyanikuttyamma. Carnatic and Sopanam traditions of music are both based on ragas, but the method of singing differs. Sopanam music hugely relies on *bhava* [emotive expression]. On the other hand, Carnatic music singing focuses on the Gamaka system, which is a movement done on a musical note or between musical notes while singing resulting in the variation of pitch in a musical note. In Kerala temples, Sopanam music is sung by men from the Marar community with singing accompanied by the Edakka, an hourglass shaped medium drum. Another strand of Sopana Sangeetham is called Abhinaya Sangeetham with its focus on emotive singing is used in folk, ritualistic and dance drama traditions of Kerala including Mudi yettu, Arjuna Nritham, Kutiyattam, Krishnanattam and Kathakali.

As he did with Rele, Panicker wrote and composed music for his new vision of Mohiniyattam while the movement vocabulary was left for Shivaji to explore. According to Shivaji the vocabulary she created was very “meaningful, rich, desi, and regional in its content, solid and substantial in materials which we collected, composed and choreographed” (Shivaji 2017). Initially, Panicker carefully guided and mentored Shivaji towards the sources and art forms of his interest allowing her to explore and draw upon elements from those movement vocabularies to amalgamate into the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam she initially learned from Radha Marar. She asserted that “from which source what I took I cannot say...whatever went along with could be incorporated into the Mohiniyattam mold, that was what was taken. Otherwise, Mohiniyattam will lose its identity, and Mohiniyattam will lose its character. Only that which will complement, only that which will enrich the dance form that is what we tried to include” (Shivaji 2017).

Analyzing the movement patterns of dance pieces performed by Shivaji in the online archive of ICCR, it is evident that she uses the adavu patterns of Mohiniyattam from both the Kalamandalam style and the Kalyanikuttyamma style without much variation. Despite these common foundational aspects, the style of employing the adavus differs, largely because of the accompanying music. The Mohiniyattam movement vocabulary developed by Kalamandalam and Kalyanikuttyamma moves two dimensionally, laterally, and horizontally: bending into the Aramandalam (half sitting position), compressing the body, extending, or compressing the hand movements, gliding the feet and hands and the body, and turning, depending upon the nature of the adavus. For Kalamandalam and Kalyanikuttyamma, the musical composition used is in slow and medium tempos, which leads to languid spiral or revolving movements and swaying movements.

Shivaji agrees that the “languorous sway” of the torso in Mohiniyattam is very specific to the dance form; unlike Kalamandalam, she finds Sopanam music suitable to express that movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. In her book *Mohiniyattam its Art and Aesthetics* (2020) she observes that “Mohiniyattam comes within the soft and graceful tradition of Lasya. Lasya is grace, a charming trait or accomplishment far more pleasing than beauty alone. It may be easier to be beautiful than to be graceful. Grace is undefinable, hidden, and latent, while beauty is patent and obvious. So divine is Lasya, that is feminine, gentle, and graceful, that Mohiniyattam could be attributed to the Devastris” (Shivaji 2020, 6). Shivaji says that she looked for the elements of Lasya in the sources she stumbled upon and borrowed elements she found as graceful and feminine into her new vocabulary.

However, the musical compositions by Panicker also incorporate higher tempos from the folk and ritual traditions that he was influenced by. In these tempos, the spiral or revolving

movements and the swaying movements of Mohiniyattam would be difficult to sustain due to the lack of continuity of movement of the limbs supported by the spine in different planes. At those tempos the possible movements instead include tapping the feet, executing a variety of footwork, and jumping, which Shivaji added into the repertoire.

In addition to the movement vocabulary of Kalamandalam and Kalyanikuttyamm styles, Shivaji included elements from regional folk dances and ritual dance traditions of Kerala. The use of postures from frozen sculptural stone carvings of female dancers from various temples in Kerala and Tamilnadu in particular was a unique addition. The postures were derived from frozen sculptural figurines found within temples built during the Chera reign (second and third century BC), which are temples in the state of Tamilnadu. Possibly, her use of sculptural poses is a result of her training in Odissi dance, which makes liberal use of sculptural motifs in its choreography.

Finally, Shivaji reminisces that both Panicker and her explored parallel traditions, predominantly the repertoire of Bharathanatyam and Odissi, to create a new terminology and a new repertoire for Mohiniyattam.

When we wanted to create a new format of Mohiniyattam, we looked at a repertoire which is already established like in the sense Bharathanatyam has a very clear-cut format of *Alarippu, Jathiswaram, Varnam, Thillana, Padam, Javeli* and all that. Similarly, Odissi also as a parallel if you see it also has a certain repertoire like Ganapathy sloka they have and they have invocation. they have Astapathi from Geetha Govindam.....so keeping all these things in mind and looking at the parallel you know the formation of all these the repertoire of Mohiniyattam could be developed we kept all that in mind to develop it. (Shivaji 2017)

The new repertoire created thus included the following dance pieces which replaced the existent repertoire of Mohiniyattam then prevalent in Kerala. Shivaji lists the dance pieces as below:

- 1) *Ganapathy Sthuthi* – *Ganapathy* is a dance piece dedicated to Lord Ganesha. The music is composed of intermingling Malayalam lyrics and mnemonic rhythmic syllables drawn from Chenda and Maddalam, percussion instruments unique to Kerala.
- 2) *Mukhachalam* – A slow-paced abstract dance piece that uses mnemonic rhythmic syllables drawn from Chenda and Maddalam, percussion instruments unique to Kerala. It replaced the Cholkettu from the Kerala repertoire. According to Shivaji, it introduced the scale and rhythmic patterns of Sopana music with a new abstract movement vocabulary.
- 3) *Mohinipurappadu* – A unique piece with movements borrowed from the sculptural evidence Shivaji collected from temples. According to Shivaji the dance announced the entry of the mythological Mohini, with each section set in different Sopana rhythmic patterns. Shivaji holds a small pot in her right-hand resembling Vishnu disguised as Mohini who comes with the eternal nectar to lure the Asuras. The movements are “languorous” and sensual when portraying Mohini. An Abhinaya piece, it was the main piece of a recital.
- 4) *Astapadi* – This new dance piece caught the attention of Shivaji from the repertoire of Odissi. While the first one was set to music by Kavalam Narayana Panicker, Shivaji said that later she worked with the Sopanam singer Janardhanan Nedungadi who sung the Astapadis in Sopanam style in the Guruvayur temple in Kerala. She also recorded

various Astapadi singing styles from various temples in Kerala and choreographed those Astapadis. While Mohiniyattam dances were choreographed as solo pieces in Kalamandalam and by Kalyanikuttyamma, Shivaji choreographed Astapadi as a dance drama in a group format and added it to her repertoire.

- 5) *Padams* – Shivaji with the help of Panicker choreographed certain rare compositions in the genre of *Padams*, mainly from the compositions of Swathi Thirunal, which were set to music in the Sopanam style by Panicker. There were also certain *Padams* penned and composed by Panicker.
- 6) *Jeeva* - According to Shivaji, during my interview with her, this dance piece replaces the Thillana and combines the structure of Moksha from Odissi with the native rhythmic patterns of Sopana music, giving it a regional flavor. (Shivaji, 2017). *Jeeva* is a fast-paced abstract dance piece performed as the last piece of the recital in which Shivaji is seen using swift footwork towards the crescendo of the songs, which I argue is borrowed from the folk tradition of Ottamthullal. Moreover, Panicker’s mnemonic syllables “Dhem takataka tatata, Dheem Dheem takataka tatata, Tatatata Dhithithi Dhithadhimirtha” echo the typical tempo and footwork of the mangalam performed at the end of an Ottanthullal performance.

An additional piece seen in Shivaji’s online video archives is the *Muruga* where the whole dance encompasses the movements of the peacock. The dance is more about the peacock than Muruga, a Hindu deity. The movements show elements of *Arjuna Nritham* to a smaller extent in the footwork while the elaborate movement patterns of the peacock moving in circles fluttering its wings, the extensive vibration of its tail feathers (train), oblique and vertical eye movements, the turning of the head horizontally and the complimentary eye and head

movements resulting in different types of gazes, and the closing of the wings that serves as an interval between different swift movements are all extensively borrowed from *Kathakali* and *Kutiyattam*.

Kavalam Narayana Panicker - From Bharathi Shivaji to Kanak Rele

Panicker worked with Bharathi Shivaji through the 1970s to guide her in creating a new repertoire in Mohiniyattam. In 1980, his collaboration with Shivaji suddenly ended (Shivaji did not confide the reason). Panicker was later introduced to Kanak Rele in Mumbai in 1982 by her husband Yatin Rele's friend Sambamoorthy, an official in the Shipping Corporation of India. Rele was 45 years old, and Panicker was 54 years old when they met in 1982. She describes the introduction of Panicker to her husband by Sambamoorthy and then her own meeting with Panicker as follows:

Sambamoorthy said, "Yatin, there is a gentleman from a village in Kerala. He does some peculiar dramas. He wants to meet Kanak." Yatin said I am at home, and he can call me. Sambamoorthy called me and said Panicker was a family man and he wanted to meet you. He is from my village... After sometime, this man (Panicker), his wife, his son, his daughter in law, his nephew, his niece, his team members...About twelve people landed in my house. He came and held my hand and said "I have heard so much about you, I asked about you everywhere, nobody could give me your contact, but Sambamoorthy gave it. He knows your husband very well...I [Rele] must have talked to him for 15-20 minutes...I don't know what happened, but something clicked. He asked me what I was doing. I said for the last six months I am not doing anything in Mohiniyattam. I am facing a dead end. I don't want to do those songs in Mohiniyattam like the Javali...Panicker

asked me, “you know Kathakali, right?” I replied, “I love it.” He asked me “Do you understand Sopana Sangeetham? To which I replied “yes.” I added that I have learned, and I understand the Taala system of Sopanam music. Panicker asked me if I want to listen to what sort of music he has done. I said, “I would love to.” He asked his younger son Sreekumar who was with him to sing the song...One song he sang, and I said I want to dance to this song. We just shook hands and from that day we were collaborators. (Rele 2017)

Rele’s association with Panicker continued until his death in 2016. The association they had was quite different from what Panicker had with Bharati Shivaji. Panicker’s association with Shivaji involved in creating Mohiniyattam pieces researched and musically composed by Panicker and choreographed into the Mohiniyattam vocabulary by Shivaji. However, with Kanak Rele, some of the dance pieces were researched and scripted by Rele, while Panicker wrote the lyrics in Malayalam to reflect Rele's scripts and tuned them to fit the Sopanam style of music, which were then choreographed by Kanak Rele and performed by her. To work on new compositions, Panicker would either travel to Mumbai to work with Rele, or she would go and stay with Panicker's family in Thiruvananthapuram. During Rele’s visits to Kerala, Panicker introduced Rele to the folk traditions and other different art forms of Kerala including *Theyyam*, *Arjuna Nrittam*, *Ottanthullal*, and *Nangiarkoothu*.¹⁰¹

As a result of her association with Panicker, Rele created a new choreographic interpretation to the movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam by introducing strong women characters who are bold and questioning. Rele stated that, as a mature woman and someone who had completed a law degree in the UK, she was neither convinced nor interested in dancing the

¹⁰¹ Folk and ritual art forms from Kerala.

Padams traditionally performed by Mohiniyattam dancers in Kerala, which depicted a pining heroine begging for mercy from her lord. Hence, she scripted dance pieces that expressed ideas such as freedom, feminism, and courage. During my interview with her, she stated that “as a person who worked on international law, the law of peace and law of war, and as a person who studied about the second world war, my approach is bound to be very different” (Rele 2017). Rele stated that she believed in the Vaishnavite philosophy, which holds that every individual, regardless of gender, can become a Nayika for the Supreme Being, Parama Purusha. This is how the love for God arises. Rele describes this love as mysticism, which has a tremendous influence on the state she hails from, Maharashtra. Her scripts on various women in Mahabharatha titled *Tejaswini* were born out of her own outlook and analysis of these texts.

She based her Mohiniyattam technique on what she calls “body kinetics.” The extensive video footage of Kanak Rele documented in the archives of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations elaborates on this idea of body kinetics. The complete footage includes the elaborate lecture demonstration divided into three parts presented live at Azad Bhavan auditorium in Delhi on Nov 11, 1988, and a repertoire of Kanak Rele performed by her disciples and her at the FICC Birla Auditorium in Delhi on July 7, 1988. The lecture demonstration included her commentary on the style of Mohiniyattam she developed and the philosophy that she adopted in her style. She says that “after a very detailed study of the Natyasastric traditions I have found out that the Indian dancer’s body is divided into 5 levels... We are horizontal dancers. We don’t move and jump against gravity. That is why Level A is the head and shoulders, Level B up to the waist, Level C is the hip, Level D is the thighs and the knee, and Level E is the shanks, ankle, and foot. I have added one more level which is very flexible and that is Level F that is the wrist for

Mohiniyattam. All these five levels are for volution”¹⁰² (Rele n.d.d). Kanak Rele made sketches of these planes of the dancing body in Mohiniyattam and this “resulted in the kinetics of Mohiniyattam,” which she calls “revolution or spiral which is the essence of Mohiniyattam”¹⁰³ (ibid).

Kanak Rele (From 1982) – New Interpretations

The lecture demonstration by Rele indicates her commitment to establishing Mohiniyattam as a classical dance form derived from the *Natyasastra* as she explains that after analyzing all body movements in Mohiniyattam, the adavus fall within the category of Karanas according to the *Natyasastra*. Continuing the analogy between Mohiniyattam and the *Natyasastra*, Rele cites the eighteenth century Sanskrit text *Balaramabharatham*, a commentary on a few chapters of *Natyasastra* written by Karthika Thirunal Balaramavarma, the Maharajah of Travancore. The text mentions histrionics associated with “Mohiniyattam and other minor arts” of Kerala (Rele 1992, 156). Based on this, Rele argues that Mohiniyattam could have existed even before the sixteenth century. As she points out:

One may say Mohiniyattam as a style is more than 500 years old, though what its original form was is difficult to ascertain. But it is quite certain that by the end of the seventeenth century it was definitely a well-established dance style with a set of well-established rules and, in all probability, was recognized by the name Mohiniyattam. Karthika Thirunal appears to be the patron who gave it the required impetus and made it very popular in Kerala. (Rele 1992, 157)

¹⁰² The term volution is the English translation of *Andolika* in Malayalam, which was suggested by Kavalam Narayana Panicker. This is essentially the swaying movement of the body from side to side. Panicker gave the movement the regional name while Rele gave the English translation for the term.

¹⁰³ The total circular movement in Mohiniyattam, which is called in Malayalam as the Chuzippu.

According to Rele, “Mohiniyattam has no similarity in Nritta with the rest of Kerala arts. The only art in this country is Mohiniyattam, which is modeled after the ancient Natyasastric tradition recast and reinterpreted in terms of the Kerala ethos to become a desi version” (Rele 1992, 160).

While Rele is keen to tie Mohiniyattam with other classical dance forms of the country through this argument, she completely contradicts this statement by analyzing the films she produced with the old-time Mohiniyattam dancers Kunjukutty Amma, Chinnammuamma, and Kalyanikuttyamma, where she ties the movement with other forms of Kerala art. Rele finds Chinnammuamma’s abstract Mohiniyattam vocabulary “influenced by Kathakali artistes of Kerala Kalamandalam” and “the greatest impress of Tiruvadiralakali” (Rele 1992, 171). In her opinion, Kalyanikuttyamma's style combines some elements of both while having totally different characteristics (ibid). Rele depicts Kunjukutty Amma as an elderly woman who stopped performing Mohiniyattam nearly fifty years ago. In Rele’s account, Kunjukutty Amma began her training at the age of twelve, with Asan Karuvattil Kunjan Panikkar and Kalapurathe Kochukunjamma. The training she received lasted for five years. In Rele's opinion, out of all three dancers, Kunjukuttyamma provided the most information and showed the greatest variety of dance movements. Her Mohiniyattam (Rele spells it out as Mohini Attam) was the least influenced by other collateral arts (Rele 1992, 169). Rele also attributes Kunjukuttyamma's vocabulary as being closely related to Nangyar Kuttu, having an “unmistakable similarity to Patayani in terms of foot movements” and “a great deal of similarity exists between Kunjukuttyamma's footwork and that of Tullal” (Rele 1992, 169). Rele explains that all three dancers used the same basic stance when executing adavus: “two feet apart, knees bent and pointing sideways, and firm waist akin to Kathakali and other traditional performances of

Kerala” (Rele 2013, 210). In addition, she adds that “all three used the *Hasthalakshanadeepika* as a dictionary of hastas, something that they shared with other theatrical performances in Kerala” (Rele 2013, 210). Thus, Rele treats her films and the analysis of dance movements in those videos as authentic historical sources that allowed her to create her own vocabulary which she says was materialized through observation, learning and recreation. She then bridges her two sources, the films from the late 1960s and her work from the early 1980s by assigning the technique of Mohiniyattam to two texts: *Hasthalakshanadeepika* and *Balaramabharatham*.

Rele states that she invented her style of Mohiniyattam as a “parallel system which answers to Bharathanatyam”¹⁰⁴ (Rele n.d.d). According to her, Mohiniyattam represents an interpretation of mythology and if the interpretation is not accurate “there is the great danger of reducing the whole concept of Mohini to that of titillation and that of seduction” (Rele n.d.f). As Rele explains:

Mohini has to enchant, Mohini never lures, and this is the premise on which I have created or tried to recreate Mohiniyattam. My strong base is in those films, and I have as far as possible say 95 percent have not digressed from the basic postures and steps, they [old time Mohiniyattam dancers Rele recorded] have shown. They showed it in a very weakened way because their bodies were simply not able to portray anything at the age of 80; how can you ...now I have created the alphabet...in the steps...I have the grammar, and now I am going to the linguistic expression of connecting the words into sentences using the grammar.” (Rele n.d.f)

¹⁰⁴ Rele says that Mohiniyattam lacked structure to teach her students who were already accomplished dancers in Bharathanatyam. According to her the vocabulary of Bharathanatyam can be understood and interpreted by its learners as it has a complete vocabulary starting with bodily exercises, footwork grouped into different categories, and the whole movement of various limbs of the body. The dance form also follows the texts *Abhinaya Darpana* and *Natyastra*.

In the lecture series, which is divided into three parts, Rele's disciple Mandakini Trivedi demonstrates Rele's recreated movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam, including a new “set of exercises that loosen up the body” consisting of spirals and figure eights. The student is also shown demonstrating the adavus using the mnemonic syllables sung by the musician on stage. She acknowledges that the mnemonic syllables used for the Adavus are entirely the creation of Kavalam Narayana Panicker. Rele states that during the construction of this unique vocabulary she had,

entirely relied on the work done by Panicker who is well known for his work, experiments in the pure Sanskrit Nritta, Natya concepts...he is equally a fine musicologist, he goes deep into the villages, all these Adivasi huts, sits down with them, takes out all these various *chollus* [mnemonic syllables], *vaytharis* [spoken text] in Malayalam and finds out all these Taala patterns and he used to tell me that they always dance Ganapathy and Lakshmi.” (Rele n.d.f)

Kanak Rele's Repertoire

There is no doubt that Rele's abstract vocabulary, the lyrics for her interpretative dances, and the music for her dances were strongly influenced by Kavalam Narayana Panicker. As one can see in what follows, her repertoire continues the legacy of Bharathi Shivaji's repertoire. Several of the dance pieces she discovered during her interactions with the old timers that she filmed, including *Jathiswaram*, *Hindustani*, *Yesal*, *Sari*, and *Varnam* are not included in her repertoire. Rele's repertoire includes the *Padams* of Swathithirunal and Irayimman Thampi, three of which are from Chinnammuamma's repertoire and one from Kunjukuttyamma's. The Sopanam musical inventions of Kavalam Narayana Panicker, which Bharathi Shivaji choreographed

earlier from 1973 to 1980 including the Ganapathy, Mukhachalam, Astapadi, Padam, and Jeeva, are also present in the repertoire of Kanak Rele.

As I mentioned in the previous section, Kanak Rele's repertoire is an overlap with Bharathi Shivaji's repertoire due to both working with Kavalam Narayana Panicker. Some distinctive dance pieces were added through her collaboration with Kavalam Narayana Panicker. In the Padam genre, she included three compositions from Chinnammamma's repertoire, one of which is also found in Kunjukutty Amma's repertoire. While Shivaji categorized her repertoire in terms of the name of the dance pieces, Rele categorized them "according to their structural and musical content" and "the categorization is not intended to be rigid; it should be flexible to accommodate innovations" (Rele 2013, 368). The framework of her repertoire is as follows:

- 1) *Invocation* – This group, intended as the opening piece in her repertoire, contains four Ganapathy songs, Krishna Kavyam and Sri Krishna Karnamritham, all musical compositions of Kavalam Narayana Panicker. Of these Ganapathy was introduced by Bharathi Shivaji.
- 2) *Nritta* – The Nritta group includes Mukhachalam, Pancari Kattala, Kottichedam, Jiva, Marma Jiva, Tattvam, Thillana, and Ritu Dhruva. All compositions are in Sopanam Music set by Kavalam Narayana Panicker except the Thillana which is listed as a Carnatic composition. Of these Mukhachalam and Jiva were introduced by Bharathi Shivaji and Thillana is part of Kalyanikuttyamma's repertoire.
- 3) *Padam* – The Padam group contains Aliveni, Poonthen Nermozhi, Teliviyelum, and Indaliha (compositions of Swathi Thirunal); Pranayanakan, Omana Thingal, Yendaho, and Vallabha (compositions of Irayimman Thampi); Sudur Todi, Oru Magal, and Orur Vazhinum (sourced from Aham Poems) Aiyana Aiyana, JigiJigi

Takkam and, Tindakam Tom (compositions of Panicker); and Vatil Tura Patam (composition of Kutty Kunju Thankachi). Many of the compositions in this group including those of Swathithirunal, Irayimman Thampi, and Panicker are also present in the repertoire of Bharathi Shivaji and Chinnammuamma.

- 4) *Astapadis* from Gita Govinda – This group contains compositions from Jaya Deva’s Gita Govindam, which was introduced into the Mohiniyattam by Bharati Shivaji.
- 5) *Citrakavya* -This group contains Madhurashtakam (composition of Vallabhacharya), Bhavayami (Composition of Swathi Thirunal), and Syamala Dandakam and Sabari Moksham (composers not listed).
- 6) *Nirampadal* – This group contains dance pieces scripted, composed, and set to music by Panicker. Durgavandana (sourced from Amarusatakam), Taravadataruci (sourced from Unniyaticharitam), Mahumasa, Paripuchhiya, Kallam Kila (sourced from Gata Sapthasati), and Taravilapam (sourced from Ramayanam).
- 7) *Sloka* or *Viruttam* – This group contains Astanayika, Asta Rasa (sourced from Natyasastra), Aditya Hridaya (source not listed), Nayikas (sourced from Amarusatakam), Nayikas (scripted by Panicker), and Subhasita (sourced from Subasitaratnakosa). Sloka is also found in the repertoire of Kalyanikuttyamma.
- 8) *Yuganta* – This group contains female characters divided into two groups: *Tejaswini*, which includes six “leading woman characters from Mahabharath. All of them suffered immeasurably but survived and came through their ordeal with enhanced personalities” (Rele 2013, 372), and *Tapasvi*, which contains woman characters who “were the epitome of sacrifice and magnanimity” who “had the moral courage and

fortitude to forgive the society in general and the men in her life in particular” (Rele 2013, 372).

Although Rele discursively links her repertoire to Kunjukuttyamma, it is difficult to find traces of Kunjukuttyamma’s influence in Rele’s vocabulary. Kunjukuttyamma's repertoire is multilingual as opposed to Rele's monolingual repertoire. Moreover, her repertoire includes the Cholkettu, Varnam – Samininne (Telugu language), Padam – Asayi Porukuttillai (Tamil language), Hindustani (probably in Hindi language), Yesal (Tamil), Jathiswaram in Chencurutti (Carnatic music system), Thillana (Carnatic music system), Padam - Pranayanakan (Malayalam), Sari (abstract dance piece probably borrowed from Kathakali), Varnam - Samajendra (Malayalam), and Varnam – Asai Minute (Tamil) (Rele 1992, 81; 2013, 15), whereas Rele’s repertoire contains none of these. I argue that, instead of serving as a foundation for Rele’s repertoire, Kunjukuttyamma’s kinesthetic traces and her repertoire served as an historic marker for Rele. That is, Kunjukuttyamma is not a source from where she borrowed, rather, Kunjukuttyama served as a referencing marker from whom she heard about the Mohiniyattam, which belonged to multilingual Kerala (see chapter one) before 1956, and before the independence of India in 1947. The kinesthetic memory of Kunjukuttyamma served as Rele’s historic “building site” into which Rele could situate herself, to legitimize her entry as a non-native dancer, without a lineage. Rele attributed her aesthetic choices to the films she made of Kunjukuttyamma, who was neither attached to Kalamandalam nor to any subsequent performers. This gave Rele an independent lineage on which she could build her own repertoire, which was furthered by her association with Kavalam Narayana Panicker, who introduced her to other art forms of Kerala.

Conclusion: Reimagining Mohiniyattam - New Routes

Rele and Shivaji were exponents of two individual styles of Mohiniyattam, nurtured by the same music stream and the same musicologist, Kavalam Narayana Panicker. Both the dancers, together with their mentor and collaborator Panicker, sought to situate Mohiniyattam to embody locality and statehood by employing the native language Malayalam, and the native Sopanam music tradition. While the reconstruction of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam was also aimed at making Mohiniyattam a regional dance, Kalamandalam envisioned Mohiniyattam as a dance form separate from other forms of Kerala. The focus of Kalamandalam was on making the form women-oriented, by attaching the movement of the Kerala woman dancer's body to the landscape of Kerala. Due to this focus as a women-centered performance, and making it a stand-alone classical form, Kalamandalam did not borrow its vocabulary from any male-oriented folk art forms including Arjuna Nrittam, Ottanthullal, or Padayani whose vocabularies were later borrowed by Shivaji and Rele.

The vocabulary in Kalamandalam does have affinity to the female folk tradition of Thiruvathirakali, and follows the same text *Hashtalakshanadeepika*, followed by other classical art forms including Kathakali and Kutiyattam. The music also pertained to this classical framework, as it used Carnatic music, which was used by Bharathanatyam. The Carnatic music system also stood apart from the music used by other art forms of Kerala. The “cultural reproduction of a group identity” (Appadurai 2005, 180) was achieved by Kalamandalam through the newly ordained costuming, particularly, the hairdo with the bun tied with jasmine flowers on the left side of the head.

Bharati Shivaji's vocabulary shows affinity to the vocabulary of Kalamandalam and Kalyanikuttyamma, and the folk and ritualistic traditions of Kerala. Shivaji's sole interest was

purely corporeal, rather than theorizing her performance. On the other hand, Rele theorized the movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam as “body kinetics.” With the help of Panicker, through her body kinetics she provided English translation to the movement terminology used by native dancers in Malayalam. To interpret Mohiniyattam, Rele also introduced the new text *Balaramabharatham*.

While Rele and Shivaji followed the costuming and hairdo developed by Kalamandalam, unquestionably the major contribution of Rele and Shivaji was their new repertoires created by them under the mentorship of Kavalam Narayana Panicker. Although their repertoires were created using the same musical compositions, the approaches they took in their choreographies were different, as were their philosophies. Bharati Shivaji’s most important contribution to the repertoire of postcolonial Mohiniyattam is the inclusion of the Astapadi, which is included in the repertoire of various Mohiniyattam dancers irrespective of the school of Mohiniyattam they belong to. Shivaji also said that she introduced group choreographies in Mohiniyattam by choreographing Astapadis in the format of dance drama. Shivaji’s movement vocabulary was soft, sensual, and “languorous” and the emotive character of her dance was rooted in *Shringara* (sensuality). Later in her career in the 1990s, Bharati Shivaji choreographed Mohiniyattam pieces using the musical genre of Rabindra Sangeet and Hindi poems, which she found was helpful to “interact with other traditions.” Rele on the other hand choreographed her Mohiniyattam with swift and forceful movements, and the emotive character of her dance largely remains as *bhakti* (devotion) and *Veeram* (valor). The different approaches adopted by Rele and Shivaji brought a new insight for Mohiniyattam dancers in Kerala to experiment with different choreographic interpretations of the same musical piece. Rele’s research and conceptualization of bold women characters in Mohiniyattam also challenged the notion of subdued women

characters portrayed in Mohiniyattam at Kalamandalam. Although this is the case, the demand for Mohiniyattam in Rele and Shivaji styles is low compared to Mohiniyattam developed in Kerala Kalamandalam. Due to the higher number of dancers who were trained by the institution, those dancers and instructors have been able to train a substantial number of practitioners both in Kerala and abroad.

The musical repertoire of Rele and Shivaji envisioned by Panicker has found its way into the repertoire of dancers who came out of Kalamandalam including Kalamandalam Sugandhi who choreographed the compositions incorporating the vocabulary she learned from Kalamandalam and Kalyanikuttyamma and later by various other dancers from the younger generation. It was through Rele and Shivaji that the musical compositions of Panicker garnered more prominence and significance as it was adopted by various dancers, and it has also initiated more research into the Sopanam musical tradition. Through the archiving of Rele and Shivaji's repertoire, the cultural wing of the Government of India (ICCR) has given historical attestation to their vocabulary, thus placing them at the forefront of Mohiniyattam's postcolonial history. Rele and Shivaji also represented Mohiniyattam and India in the ICCR-funded programs in foreign countries. The fourth highest civilian award Padmashri was awarded to both Rele and Shivaji in 1993 and 2000, respectively, while the third highest civilian award was awarded to Kanak Rele in 2004. While Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma, a pioneer practitioner and initiator of the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam was not commemorated with these honors, Kalamandalam Satyabhama was honored with the Padmashri in 2014, one year before her death in 2015. Despite the marginalization of the Mohiniyattam dancers from Kerala and the official attestation of the historical narratives about Rele and Shivaji's journeys in Mohiniyattam

in the archives, due to their position outside the linguistic boundaries of Kerala, the vocabulary they created had a limited number of successors.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A FUTURE TRAJECTORY FOR MOHINIYATTAM'S

GENEALOGIES AND LEGACIES

When exploring the history of Mohiniyattam, the fragments of the archival evidence from the precolonial and colonial times served as pathfinders to reach the postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam. In this exploration my own bodily experience and conceptions of Mohiniyattam has intervened at various stages in this exploratory process. The kinesthetic affinity to Mohiniyattam resulted from my training in the form around age ten or eleven. I learned few groups of adavus and a cholketu for the first time without knowing or thinking about the choreographer of this piece. I also learned the Padam *Karuna Cheyvan* and the Varnams *Suma Sayaka* and *Danisamajendra Gamini* in the years that followed. My training in dance (both Bharathanatyam and Mohiniyattam) was quite literally an extracurricular activity meant to be performed in school youth festivals and temple cultural programs. Later when I was in college, I came to know that the Cholketu I learned was the second Cholketu reconstructed in Kalamandalam from the memory of Thottassery Chinnammuamma¹⁰⁵ and choreographed by Kalamandalam Satyabhama. The Varnam *Suma Sayaka*, *Danisamajendragamini* and the Padam *Karuna Cheyvan* was also choreographed by Kalamandalam Satyabhama. These pieces were taught by a male instructor K Sreevalsan who learned these pieces from Kalamandalam Leelamma a direct disciple of Kalamandalam Satyabhama. During the same period, I have watched the performances of Kalamandalam Kshemavathy, Kala Vijayan, Kanak Rele, and Bharathi Shivaji during cultural festivals conducted by Keli, a cultural organization in my

¹⁰⁵ During my oral history interview with Kalamandalam Satyabhama she stated that she reconstructed five pieces from the older repertoire, which was passed on to her by Chinnammuamma as fragments of movements and memories.

hometown Mavelikara. Later, I learned from Neena Prasad, a more contemporary Mohiniyattam dancer during my adulthood which commenced in 2006. Basically, I was resuming my training in Mohiniyattam almost after an interval of six years as I danced the pieces from the repertoire of Kalamandalam Satyabhama from the late 1980s to year 2000. This training gave me an insight into the journey of Mohiniyattam, and its gradual evolution in the postcolonial stages, which happened initially during the reconstruction phase, which I argue, is still evolving with contemporary practitioners of Mohiniyattam. My bodily experience of my affinity towards Mohiniyattam has thus evolved from childhood to adulthood as various stages, which includes learning, understanding, differentiating, comparing, and analyzing the performance and practice of various practitioners. During my dissertation research this knowledge and experience has initially influenced the selection of various participants in the oral history interviews on Mohiniyattam. During this process of engaging with practitioners and observing their movement vocabulary of Mohiniyattam, my embodied knowledge of the technique of Mohiniyattam has enabled me to understand, distinguish and compare the varied bodies I met during the process of reading, viewing, talking, transcribing, translating and analyzing process which has finally consummated in the rethinking and rewriting of this “body-centered endeavor” (Foster 1995, 4), about the genealogies and legacies in postcolonial Mohiniyattam. My interpretation and presentation of the research has essentially emerged out of the data collected from the archival material and oral histories of my participants, together with my own bodily memory of Mohiniyattam, which evolved through various stages. I believe that this historiography, should be a continuing process that explores the evolution of Mohiniyattam in time and place by involving practitioners in different geographical and cultural areas as the "genealogies" and "legacies" continue to develop.

While the genealogies and legacies of Mohiniyattam can be traced back by cross connecting people, events and other historical evidence present from time to time, the existing literature on the histories of Mohiniyattam have not given prominence to voices from the past or have allowed these voices to direct the narrative of its history. In this postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam, I have demonstrated that oral histories coupled with archival evidence can include the voices of historically invisible persons, as well as the visible ones thereby disrupting and raising questions about existing narratives and representations.

The consideration of the timeline of entry of practitioners into the field of Mohiniyattam will also determine a future trajectory of postcolonial historiography of Mohiniyattam as there are so many dancers who rose to prominence in the digital era who have put out their works on digital platforms and have entered a dominant discourse, while many others who have less knowledge of technology remain on the periphery. In my opinion, to create genealogies and legacies in a more ethical way, the practitioners' timeline of entry into the field is very important. As Foster states "whatever the kinds and amounts of bodily references in any given constellation of practices, they will yield versions of historical bodies whose relation to one another is determined as much by the historians body history as by the times they represent" (Foster 1995, 4). The key foundation of postcolonial and third world feminist theory, and the process of excavation which according to Gayatri Spivak comprises of the stories that are "dug up" in order to disrupt a Subaltern status (Spivak 1996, 27), as "in the context of colonial production, the Subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the Subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 1996, 28). Postcolonial historiographies excavating the genealogy and legacy of Mohiniyattam dancers, even in the present times can disrupt this Subaltern position for many dancers, and it opens a new trajectory for future research which could pay attention to

fragmented subjects and stories while attending to the dominant narratives. However, most importantly, the inclusion of fragmented voices of historically invisible persons in oral histories also opens new spaces for, as oral historian Valerie Janesick rightly observes, “social debates” (Janesick 2010, 12).

Comparing and Contrasting Postcolonial Mohiniyattam Styles

As detailed in chapters three through five, the pioneer practitioners in postcolonial Mohiniyattam created four different styles of Mohiniyattam, each of them drastically different from each other even starting from the basic salutation dancers perform at the opening of a practice or performance. In this section, I bring these aspects into conversation with one another, discussing not only their differences, but also their convergences, especially through the legacy of Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma.

Out of these four styles or schools of Mohiniyattam in the postcolonial period, three of them emerged as individual contributions. Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma’s style even though emerged as an individual style, the foundation for her was the earlier repertoire taught by Krishna Panicker and Orikkaledath Kalyaniamma, at Kalamandalam. This training was from the genealogy of two dancers, and Kalyanikuttyamma followed the principles of Vallathol Narayana Menon, when she culled her individual journey in Mohiniyattam. Kalamandalam Satyabhama’s repertoire and innovations evolved in Kalamandalam’s instructional framework, and thus evolved as the institutional vocabulary of Mohiniyattam in Kalamandalam. The individual styles of Shivaji and Rele evolved with their collaborator Kavalam Narayana Panicker. All four practitioners— Kalyanikuttyamma, Satyabhama, Bharathi Shivaji and Kanak Rele—arranged their repertoire in line with the repertoire of Bharathanatyam involving Nritta (abstract dance) pieces, Nrithya pieces (abstract and expressive dance), and Natya pieces (expressive pieces involving

acting). While they are compartmentalized as four different styles, their approaches to their repertoires also show a gradual progression. Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma and Kalamandalam Satyabhama, both followed the repertoire order of Bharathanatyam. Kalyanikuttyamma prescribed a rule bound approach to the abstract vocabulary of Mohiniyattam, which was also followed by Kalamandalam Satyabhama under the institutional umbrella of Kerala Kalamandalam. Both these styles aimed at instruction of future students of Mohiniyattam, as they developed and categorized the abstract vocabulary in a structured way. Their character portrayals in Natya and Nritya pieces remained traditional following the character representations in Indian mythology without any critical exploration. Bharathi Shivaji's focus was predominantly on abstract dancing, making the vocabulary more graceful, and orienting to lasya. This is evident from her borrowal of abstract vocabulary from ritualistic traditions of Kerala. Kanak Rele's focus I argue, was predominantly on her Natya pieces. Many of her Natya pieces portrayed questioning female characters who defied male dominance, even though they were taken from Indian mythology. She added a new dimension to her characters adding a social justice perspective, presumably emanating from her education as a law student.

Moreover, the layering, organization, and technique of the basic adavus (steps) are different in all four styles, which ultimately results in a marked difference in all the abstract pieces involving the combination of these adavus. Even the postures of executing the abstract movements are also dissimilar. For example, in Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma's vocabulary the half sitting stance called the Aramandalam, where the majority of adavus are executed, is performed with a narrow stance with two inches distance between heels and the feet kept in a V shape with knees bent to reach half the height of the dancer. All the other three styles maintain a wider stance between heels with knees pointed to both sides, which is similar to the stance in

Kathakali. The span of swaying and circular movements, which all styles claim as inducing “*lasya*,” also differs ranging from the soft, gentle, slow and controlled sway of the upper torso in the Kalyanikuttyamma and Kalamandalam Satyabhama styles with coordinating footwork and hand movements kept closer to the body, to the wider stance and faster sway of the upper torso in Rele and Shivaji’s styles, which are also characterized by vigorous footwork and hands moving in wider circles.

The repertoire of Kalamandalam Satyabhama and the Kalyanikuttyamma style use music from the Carnatic system, while Rele and Shivaji both used the Sopanam musical system of Kerala that Kavalam Narayana Panicker introduced to them and to which he encouraged them to choreograph their dance pieces in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The names used for the dance pieces in the repertoire also are different. While Kalamandalam Satyabhama and Kalyanikuttyamma styles have retained many of the names of the dance pieces in the older repertoire (while using the postcolonial movement vocabulary) including the Cholkettu, Jathiswaram, Varnam, Padam, and Thillana; Rele and Shivaji’s repertoires using music compiled by Kavalam Narayana Panicker give the dances native Malayalam names. These include Mukhachalam, Ganapathy, Mohinipurappadu, Niram, and Jeeva.

In postcolonial Mohiniyattam, the constant features are the off-white and golden saree, the jewelry, and the hairdo with the bun on the left side. Even those, when examined closely, appears to be different. The stitching patterns of the costumes vary for dancers coming from these four styles of Mohiniyattam. For example, the dancers coming from the Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma’s style and Kalamandalam style wear a wraparound resembling a skirt similar to the female character costume in Kathakali. Rele and Shivaji’s followers wear a fully

stitched skirt. Rele's dancers again have a strip of vertical golden border on the front side of the skirt while it is absent in Shivaji's style. The hairdo is another remarkable feature, that distinguishes the identity of Mohiniyattam. Kalamandalam style, Rele style and Bharthi Shivaji's style, all tie a bun on the left upper side of the head, while the Kalyanikuttyamma's style dancers tie the bun in the upper back side of the head with a long braid and Jasmine flowers. Both Rele's and Shivaji's hairdo consist of only a single head piece called the Nettichutti in the middle without the head ornaments sun and moon placed on the front right side and left side of the head respectively. While Rele style dancers wear a moon like ornament attached to the side bun, Kalamandalam style dancers and Kalyanikuttyamma style dancers wear the full headset with the sun, moon and the *rakodi*.¹⁰⁶ All styles except the Rele style ties jasmine flowers around the side bun. Of late, I have seen Rele style dancers also using jasmine flowers. Rele told me during her oral history interview that she did not wear the jasmine flowers because she was allergic to flowers, and she jokingly added that everyone from her style followed suit later. For an uninitiated onlooker these minute details of costuming do not markedly distinguish the different styles of Mohiniyattam, while dancers who are trained in these different styles distinguish their vocabulary with these features, too. For the uninitiated onlooker, the off-white golden border costume, and the jewelry does serve as markers to distinguish Mohiniyattam from other classical dance forms of India.

The Continuation of Postcolonial Mohiniyattam Styles in Contemporary Practitioners

The postcolonial vocabularies of Kalyanikuttyamma, Satyabhama, Shivaji, and Rele further take us to a trajectory of practitioners who came after them. This trajectory opens the

¹⁰⁶ Ornament that is circular in shape, made of stones and a metal frame. The Rakodi is placed on top of the hair bun to cover the hair.

scope of my study to offer further exploration into the evolution of Mohiniyattam, which I argue is a fluid and organic process. According to my observations, this evolution has taken three different directions. The first path I find was aimed at disseminating the unique styles through an instructional path. The second path I found was that of historical mindfulness in which practitioners pay attention to the precolonial and colonial history of Mohiniyattam. The third path I suggest is that of choreographic exploration. Among these three paths, the one involved in instruction that aimed to teach the dance vocabulary of these styles, which was the direct transfer of repertoire from Kalyanikuttyamma, Satyabhama, Rele and Shivaji to their disciples, a tradition that continues. Kalyanikuttyamma's daughters Kala Vijayan and Sreedevi Rajan, granddaughters Smitha Rajan and Sandhya Rajmohan and other students trained under them take Kalyanikuttyamma's vocabulary forward while adding new insights into the vocabulary and expanding the repertoire. This genealogy by itself should be a topic of research in postcolonial Mohiniyattam. Satyabhama's legacy and repertoire is preserved and disseminated in Kalamandalam to many students who study in this institution. To name a few, Kalamandalam Kshemavathy, Kalamandalam Sugandhi and Kalamandalam Leelamma are few of her prominent students who came after the reconstruction period. Kanak Rele's style evolved as the institutional repertoire of Nalanda while Shivaji's style remained as an individual style. To demonstrate these three paths, I briefly discuss the journey of few contemporary practitioners. While there are many other practitioners who have furthered the development of Mohiniyattam after the pioneering efforts of Kalyanikuttyamma, Satyabhama, Shivaji and Rele, I have selected these four practitioners due to their affinity to certain common approaches in their sources and themes resulting in their innovative approaches. So, the main goal of introducing these Mohiniyattam dancers is owing to their "genealogical relatedness" and "genealogical

connectivity” (Zerubavel 2012, 11), which will be helpful in exploring the commonality of their approach to Mohiniyattam. In relation to the second path of historical mindfulness, I briefly describe the journeys of Deepthi Omchery Bhalla and Nirmala Panicker. I explore Kalamandalam Sugandhi and Neena Prasad's journeys to highlight my argument concerning the third path of choreographic exploration.

Historical Mindfulness: Deepthi Omchery Bhalla and Nirmala Panicker

Deepthi Omchery Bhalla (born 1957) and Nirmala Panicker (born 1950) are both disciples of Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma. Both are Mohiniyattam dancers and choreographers. While their dances and choreographies are topics for future research, I attempt to highlight a unique aspect of their contribution to Mohiniyattam. Bhalla, whose career includes a post as Professor of Music in Delhi University, was trained in Kathakali from the age of five at the International Centre for Kathakali in Delhi. Bhalla grew up under the artistic guidance of her mother Leela Omchery who was an eminent musician and a Maestra of Sopana Sangeetham. Her father Omchery N. N. Pillai was an eminent playwright in Malayalam. Bhalla shifted her training to Mohiniyattam at the age of eighteen as a solo dancer under the tutelage of Kalyanikuttyamma who according to her was an “ardent admirer of her mother’s music and writing” (Bhalla, 2017). During her doctoral research on the Sopanam music tradition of Kerala, Bhalla “unearthed many compositions of Kuttykunju Thankachi”¹⁰⁷ (Bhalla 2017), and has excavated the lyrics of the banished items in the colonial repertoire of Mohiniyattam including *Poli*, *Esal*, *Chandanam*, *Mukuthi*, *Kurathi*, which were discussed in chapter one of this dissertation. Bhalla has co-authored the following works with her mother Leela Omchery which includes *Kerlatille Lasya*

¹⁰⁷ Kutty Kunju Thankachi (1820-1904) is known as the first female composer of Kerala. She is the daughter of famous composer Irayimman Tbampi whose compositions are extensively used in Mohiniyattam along with Swathi Thirunals compositions.

Rachnakal (2001), *Sangeethathinte Padavum Paadavum* (1996), *Cinkkara Kootu Paatukkal* (2002), and *Karuna Chaiivan* (2004). These works include the collection of rare songs they both researched, musically scripted and were choreographed by Bhalla in Mohiniyattam. Other works coauthored by her mother include *Studies in Indian Music and Allied Arts* (1990), *Gleanings of Indian Music and Art* (1991), and *The Immortals of Indian Music* (2012). Bhalla's own published works on dance and music include *Manasollasa* (2021), *Ahobala Sangitaparijatha* (2019), *Sarangadevas Sangitaratnakara* (2019), and *Vanishing Temple Arts* (2006).

Nirmala Panicker, who is trained in Mohiniyattam under Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma and later under Kalamandalam Satyabhama has choreographed the compositions researched by Bhalla and has added them to her repertoire along with other pieces. Nirmala Panicker states that her research into these dance pieces has “brought her new insight to the primitive female dance traditions of Kerala” (Panicker 2004, 177) and the dance pieces including Esal, Chandanam, Mukuthi, Polikali and Kurathi which were part of colonial Mohiniyattam were recreated by her and presented by her students at various “cultural venues including the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy” (ibid, 177). Panicker has also incorporated innovations of her own in the abstract vocabulary of Mohiniyattam by adding movements from *Thiruvathirakali*, *Nangiarkoothu*, etc. She has researched into allied art forms in Kerala, which incorporated Mohiniyattam vocabulary including puppetry. Her research in Mohiniyattam and allied traditions are detailed in her works *Mohiniyattam Attaprakaravum Mudrakalum* (2004), *Nangiarkoothu*, *The Classical Dance Theatre of the Nangiars* (2005), *Hand Gestures of Hasthalakshanadeepika in Mohiniyattam* (2007), and *Keralathinte Lasyaperuma* (2015).

Both Bhalla's and Panicker's postcolonial repertoire contain musical compositions from the colonial lineage, while following the postcolonial repertoire. While the authenticity of these

postcolonial bodies choreographing the compositions inhabited by colonial bodies can be contested, these choreographies and the associated musical compositions brings historical mindfulness to the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. Both dancers have adopted the “flaneuse strategy” (Hammergren 1996, 53), in their attempt to “enter” a historical space both intellectually and kinesthetically to yield to recollections springing from the historian’s bodily memory. Both dancers with their contemporary practice of Mohiniyattam and a body disciplined to the training structure of Mohiniyattam after the 1950s is thus seen shifting with their own explorations of its vocabulary in the postcolonial period. I imagine them asking questions like those asked by Susan Leigh Foster: “What must it have felt like to move among those bodies in an unprivileged manner, desiring those proficiencies, being held from those vantage points? Moving or being moved by those other bodies?” I sense these dancers want to know “where it stands, how it came to stand there, what its options for moving might be” (Foster 1995, 42). With these memories and sensations, they have ventured to undertake a stroll through the corridors of the cultural history of Kerala and the kinesthetic memories of dancers in the mid and late 1800s and the early 1900s. In this stroll with the embodied knowledge acquired from existing readings of recorded archival history of Mohiniyattam they might have encountered the earlier Mohiniyattam body marked as “crude,” “vulgar,” and “bad.” One other major difference I find between the postcolonial dancer/ historian body and that of the earlier body of Mohiniyattam is that these postcolonial dancers’ bodies are privileged when compared to that of the Mohiniyattam body of the 1800s as both dancers belong to dominant families and communities. Sojourning through the annals of Mohiniyattam history both Deepthi Omchery Bhalla and Nirmala Panicker have attempted to choreograph the text and movement of those vanished bodies of the colonial era to be included in its postcolonial movement vocabulary.

Choreographic Exploration: Kalamandalam Sugandhi and Neena Prasad

Kalamandalam Sugandhi (born 1957), and Neena Prasad (born 1971) are dancers from two generations whose lineage evokes an “interpersonal sense of the past” (Zerubavel 2012, 21), owing to Kalamandalam Sugandhi’s positionality as a direct disciple of both Kalamandalam Satyabhama, and Kalyanikuttyamma. Both of their unique positions with Sugandhi as the guru and Neena Prasad as her disciple, evoke a sense of continuation from the past to the present. Kalamandalam Sugandhi started her training in Mohiniyattam under the mentorship of Kalamandalam Satyabhama in the early 1960s during the reconstruction period at Kalamandalam during the making of a complete repertoire of Mohiniyattam, while Neena Prasad took her Mohiniyattam training with Sugandhi in the late 1980s, which marks the post reconstruction period of Mohiniyattam. After her training in Kalamandalam, Sugandhi learned with Kalyanikuttyamma and amalgamated the vocabulary of both Satyabhama and Kalyanikuttyamma to construct a style of her own. In my interview with her she said that her “strongest influence in developing her unique abstract vocabulary of Mohiniyattam is Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma” (Sugandhi 2017). Sugandhi further learned the concept of *Karanas*¹⁰⁸ with Bharathanatyam dancer Padma Subramanyam and incorporated those into her vocabulary. Sugandhi has choreographed more than hundred compositions of abstract pieces and expressive dance pieces in Mohiniyattam. Being a lyricist, she has written and composed her own compositions, too. In the early 1990s, like Rele and Shivaji, she collaborated with Kavalam

¹⁰⁸ Karana is a posture which is the result of a harmonic movement of the leg, hip, body, and arm accompanied by hand gestures as detailed in the Natyasastra and incorporated in Bharathanatyam.

Narayana Panicker and incorporated Sopanam music and Panicker's compositions into her repertoire. Thus, in Sugandhi's repertoire one can see the amalgamation of the three different legacies of Mohiniyattam: The Kalamandalam style, the Kalyanikuttyamma style, and the Sopanam style adopted by both Rele and Shivaji collaborating with Kavalam Narayana Panicker. Kalamandalam Sugandhi's journey with Mohiniyattam suggests another possible critical exploration of Mohiniyattam.

Neena Prasad whose training period coalesces with Sugandhi's exploratory phase thus provides another critical point of entry into the postcolonial vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. Prasad grew up as a dancer participating in the youth festivals at school and college level and later ventured into professional dancing in the late 1990s. In Neena Prasad's repertoire one can witness that the codified vocabulary of Sugandhi is accessorized with lasya elements including more fluid movements of the hand gestures, movements defining the lines and curves of the female body, and sensuality evoked through the generous use of the eyes, eyebrows, cheeks, the lips. Neena Prasad states she discovered the possibility of elaborate abhinaya in Mohiniyattam "by watching the performances of Kanak Rele and reading that possibility detailed in Rele's written accounts" (Prasad 2017).

Prasad's repertoire also pays attention to the occasion and venue of performances. She choreographs and performs dance pieces that are traditional¹⁰⁹ and ones that employ criticality.¹¹⁰ Her exploratory pieces like *Sitayanam* (2004), *Draupadi* (2006), *Thathri* (2023), etc., present

¹⁰⁹ Traditional pieces are the compositions that already exist in Mohiniyattam and has a set story line. The dancer follows that story line with the literal meaning of the text than analyzing that meaning critically.

¹¹⁰ Pieces including criticality includes rethinking of traditional narratives adding new meaning and dimension to characters than those prescribed in mythology. These pieces disrupt existing narratives by creating new meaning and dimension to the narratives and character.

women who question male hegemony. Another group choreography *Sakhyam* (2016) is a male centric piece which revolves around the story of Krishna and Arjuna's friendship. She told me in an interview that she presents these pieces only "at secular spaces" (Prasad 2017). The repertoire she presents in religious and cultural spaces including temples and the annual dance festivals in Chennai are traditional pieces devoid of any critical exploration. The repertoire she presents at the Chennai Margazhi¹¹¹ season is of prime importance to her, as she finds the audience there as "true connoisseurs of classical dance and music" (Prasad 2017). Neena Prasad admits that her exploratory pieces show the intellectual influence of Rele in "analyzing and exploring the narratives about particular characters, the layering of meaning and more importantly the scope of abhinaya which Rele had shown in her exploratory pieces" (Prasad 2017). Prasad's choice of the music genre remains Carnatic music. This choice might be because of her association with her composer and musician Changanassery Madhavan Nampoothiri, who accompanies her for all her programs, and due to her extensive training in Bharathanatyam and Kuchupudi in Chennai. In Prasad's work, one can observe a well-established postcolonial Mohiniyattam dancer who can inhabit a variety of performance spaces in their unique form and content.

Postcolonial Mohiniyattam: Future Research

Looking closely at the postcolonial genealogies and legacies of Mohiniyattam, from the past to the present, I find that even though there is a marked difference in the themes, choreographies, and movement patterns, Mohiniyattam dance, past and present, represents the image of a culture-specific and culturally constructed body in motion—the body of the Indian-Keralite-Nair-Woman.¹¹² The socio-political identity of Mohiniyattam is intertwined with strong

¹¹¹ December Dance and Music festivals in Chennai. Margazhi is the month of December.

¹¹² Nair is a major caste in Kerala. They were below the Brahmins in societal order. Women from this class used to perform Mohiniyattam.

local ties and regional sentiment in South India, specifically the mutual relationship with the regional language *Malayalam* and the nation-state Kerala. The movement patterns in Mohiniyattam—a leisurely uses of visual images borrowed from the landscape of Kerala including swaying palm groves, paddy fields rippling in the gentle breeze, gentle waves of the sea, and boats bobbing up and down in the backwaters—serve as markers of Kerala as a geo-political entity in India. Paying attention to this visual imagery and the movement pattern of Mohiniyattam might be another area of research where one can disrupt this colonial imagery too. My insight on this future trajectory comes out from my own bodily experience of giving a master class at the TWU dance department in 2014 when I executed the movements in Mohiniyattam and used the above imagery to describe the movements to undergraduate students in the dance department. One of the participants in the class was quick to disrupt my narrative about the vocabulary pointing out the wider stance in Mohiniyattam, which she found was similar to the “warrior” stance in martial arts, which she pointed out was male centric. Thus, problematizing the *Aramandalam*,¹¹³ where most movements are executed can entirely disrupt the female oriented narrative of Mohiniyattam.

A feminist critique of Mohiniyattam can also be explored by examining how women characters are portrayed, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in a female dance form by demonstrating the attitudes and traditions reinforcing systematic masculine dominance inscribed in the reconstruction of the dance form. As Mohiniyattam dramatizes female subjectivity applying feminist literary theory to the narrative provided by dancers could provide meaningful insights into the practice and performance of Mohiniyattam. This gender sensitized research can

¹¹³ The basic stance in Mohiniyattam with feet kept wider apart, knees bent, and feet pointed to both sides where the dancer sinks into a half sitting posture to execute the swaying movement of the upper body coordinated with footwork.

explore how the reconstructions of Mohiniyattam resist and/or reinforce dominant conceptions of gender. Beginning from the lived experience of Mohiniyattam dancers and considering their bodily identity as socially inscribed, feminist criticism can simultaneously affirm those identities, questioning the origin and ideological functions thus working towards the notions of gender sensitized research.

Future research to unravel the history of Mohiniyattam in the twenty-first century should pay attention to the exploration of individual stories of practitioners who have furthered and are furthering the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. In addition to the four contemporary practitioners. I discussed above, many other dancers in Kerala have also explored and experimented with similar concepts, including Vinitha Nedungadi, Methil Devika, Pallavi Krishnan, Smitha Rajan, and Vijayalakshmi. Mohiniyattam's postcolonial history can be enriched by their stories since the journey of postcolonial Mohiniyattam also consists of an amalgamation of the contributions of different bodies, past and present. The journey through the life of contemporary Mohiniyattam dancers will also give a broader picture of the ongoing postcolonial history of Mohiniyattam and its contemporary practice. The contemporary dancers can be considered as living archives who inhabit both “the archive and the repertoire” (Taylor 2003), whereas bodies currently inhabit repertoires, while textual evidence of those repertoires and presences will reside in textual form in future archives of the performance history of Mohiniyattam.

Research into the practice and performance of Mohiniyattam in the diaspora outside of India is also another future trajectory of research as Mohiniyattam has traversed geographical boundaries to a new predicament. The alternative narratives created by researchers weaving through the historical, social, and cultural contexts of Kerala and India even through the problematic era of the COVID 19 pandemic could deconstruct the performative language of

Mohiniyattam, its aesthetic historical codes and its vocabulary relying on the paradigms of qualitative research coupled with a pluralistic approach combining history, cultural studies, ethnography, and feminist criticism. The data collected during different stages of these forms of qualitative research and the analysis of those data sources may allow for new opportunities for intervention and rupture, thereby enabling the postmodern paradigm of Mohiniyattam.

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