

Article

Nandanar: Visibilizing Caste in Bharatanatyam Performance

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Abstract: What are the implications of a bejeweled dancer in fine silk on the proscenium stage performing a piece that undeniably centers caste? As the Bharatanatyam field reflects on the art form's appropriation from the hereditary dance community, analyzing choreography reveals different bodily representations of caste. Many Bharatanatyam dancers globally perform excerpts of the *Nandanar Charitram*, by Tamil composer Gopalakrishna Bharathi. The plot traces Nandanar, a Dalit saint who is not allowed in many temples and ends with his immolation, allowing his "purified" self to unite with the Hindu god Shiva. I study performances of the Nandanar Charitram comparing two Bharatanatyam showings and the 1942 film "Nandanar". To recognize how caste is both articulated and understood, I analyze choreography, interviews conducted with dancers, and forums where audience members share their responses to the works. I use Judith Butler and Dwight Conquergood's theorization of performativity, acknowledging that while Bharatanatyam choreography is often "iterative", it has the potential to "disrupt" dominant norms on caste and politics. Nandanar remains the most prominent Dalit figure seen in the Bharatanatyam repertoire. By studying representations of his story, I highlight the relevance of bodily caste politics in the South Asian diaspora today.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam; Nandanar; Tamil; caste; myth; representation; film; performativity; gaze



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The stage is empty, but for the mellifluous orchestra on the side next to the *villaku*, golden standing lamps which illuminate and decorate the space. The *tambura*, or musical drone, is humming softly before a burst of energy from the vocalist when the dancer, Tara, comes on stage. Dressed in a muted yellow, she gingerly moves lithely from one position to another. Her outfit creates a glow around her body as if she is a goddess. Tara poses in the middle of the stage, addressing the main deity of the poem with the *anjali* mudra holding her hands together, bending slightly to the front as a sign of prostration and humility.¹ It is hard to imagine *her* bowing in her immaculate costume and gold jewelry glimmering from head to toe—one feels that *they* must bow to this goddess instead. But a trained spectator who understands the language of the song would realize in that moment that this dancer is portraying an outcast in society, a Dalit character in Hindu mythologies named Nandanar who is not allowed to enter many Hindu temples.² What are the implications of a Bharatanatyam dancer, dressed from head to toe in golden jewels and silk finery, on the formal proscenium stage, performing a piece that undeniably has to do with caste?

The history of Bharatanatyam is inextricably rooted in gender and caste violence.³ Key figures in India's cultural and political landscape "reconstructed" and appropriated Bharatanatyam from hereditary practitioners.⁴ While men from the hereditary communities gained economic and social capital as "teachers" of the art (Krishnan 2019, p. 141), women in the hereditary dance and music community were systematically invisibilized in favor of dominant caste and class women on main stages (Allen 1997, p. 63). Hereditary dancers also struggled with the continued backlash from being wrongly labeled as "prostitutes" in post-colonial India and were not given platforms to share their many nuanced narratives. Their silencing is an example of both gender and caste suppression that has continued for generations as Bharatanatyam takes on many global avatars (Pillai 2021) Instead of spotlighting the female hereditary dancer who was once the progenitor and keeper of Bharatanatyam traditions, the face of the art became the dominant caste Indian woman

(Putcha 2022, p. 60).⁵ Transnational Bharatanatyam dancers who are trained with monolithic portrayals of myths embody the art form's history in their performances, like that of Nandanar, which reiterate gender and caste norms.

The origin of Nandanar's story comes from a 12th century Tamil text, the *Periya Puranam*. However, dance, music, and film portrayals of Nandanar largely utilize a singular version of the story rewritten by a Brahmin (dominant caste) man, Gopalakrishna Bharathi.⁶ Bharathi sang and wrote a series of poems, the *Nandanar Charitram*, which chronicles Nandanar's life: born into a Dalit family, Nandanar worked the fields for a cruel landlord, but longed to sing and dance inside a Shiva temple. One night he asked the landlord to be allowed to leave early; the landlord acquiesced but gave him a particularly large workload to complete first. Nandanar miraculously completed his chores and went to the Shiva temple. Prevented from going inside due to his caste, he sat outside the temple and sang songs about Shiva (Iyer 2020). Nandi, or the bull statue facing Shiva in all temples, was blocking Nandanar's view.⁷ The music of Bharathi that depicts this scene says:

Valimaraittirukkutē malaipōlē oru māṭu paṭuttirukkutē

My path is blocked like a mountain A cow [bull] is laying down across it (Ragde 2020a)⁸

After hearing Nandanar's pleas, the Nandi statue moves to the side for Nandanar to view Shiva. Today, the temple where Nandanar allegedly sought this moment with Shiva in Tirupunkur, Tamil Nadu, still sees the Nandi statue slightly off-center from the right of the main statue, representing the moment in the story when it moved aside. Later in a different significant part of his story, Nandanar visits the Chidambaram temple, another famous religious site where Shiva is said to have descended to earth and danced for an audience. Here, Nandanar walks through fire to "purify" his status to be allowed inside the temple. Oral history accounts from dancers and teachers whom I interviewed suggest that the fire "allowed him to join Shiva" (Iyer 2020). Nandanar's official cause of death is immolation. The *Periya Puranam* mentions Nandanar's immolation, but Gopalakrishna Bharathi's version of the text does not mention the burning of his body, and instead writes that Nandanar's death allowed him to become one with Shiva "despite" his caste location (Ramachandran 2023). It is worth mentioning that this narrative about Nandanar does not disavow the framework of casteism, but rather tells the story of Nandanar as an exceptional saint who gained divine privileges despite his caste position.

While the Dalit figure Nandanar is male and part of an oppressed caste community, he is portrayed with a specific stance and character during performances by female and male dancers alike. "Dalit" is the self-identifying term for people in the most oppressed caste group by the Hindu caste or *varna* system (Zwick-Maitreyi et al. 2018, p. 9).⁹ While the *varna* system names four major sectors, with Brahmins at the top of a hierarchy and linked to education, the Dalit population included those who do not fall into any categories, placing them in the most oppressed stratum of society (Zwick-Maitreyi et al. 2018, p. 10). Today, activists also use the term "Bahujan" to include multiple castes of people who have been oppressed by the violent caste system which divided people based on ancestry. Dalit and Bahujan people in South Asia and the diaspora face statistically higher rates of violence and suffer from fewer economic opportunities. They have also been consistently misrepresented in mainstream expressive culture, such as film and dance. Many Bharatanatyam dancers perform excerpts of Nandanar's story as part of their *margams*, or traditional performance repertoires.¹⁰ Nandanar is a historical figure who has been mythicized in performance and remains the most prominent Dalit representation among the mythologies seen in the Bharatanatyam idiom. The repeated enactment of his character in the repertoire produces an example of the performativity of caste in Bharatanatyam.

In this essay, I explore the politics of representation through a choreographic analysis of three portrayals of Nandanar, one film, and two Bharatanatyam performances. I situate myself as a dominant caste transnational Bharatanatyam dancer theorizing performativity

and gaze through choreography. I argue that some portrayals of Nandanar often reiterate casteist norms rather than question them.

1. Finding Performativity in Dance: Theory

For Bharatanatyam dancers who choose to work on choreographic themes related to social justice, performativity can be a useful tool to discuss the effectiveness of their performances, specifically with regard to performances of Nandanar and the issue of caste. Drawing on Judith Butler and Dwight Conquergood's definitions of performativity as iterative and disruptive, respectively, I define performativity as the ability of a performance to enact change or action, using an art form which depends on repetitive interpretations.

Although performativity began as an assertion that words, movements, and even objects could "act" or have a meaning that could alter the present, its usage has shifted (Thomas 2021, p. 13). Impacted by social justice initiatives, it is ironic that performativity has gained a reputation for doing the opposite of its initial purpose: performativity now is also taken to imply an insincerity of words and actions. However, according to JL Austin (1962), performativity involves a kind of action (p. 5). One example of a "performative utterance" is the pronouncement of "I do" in a wedding ceremony, which signifies a marriage. A wedding ceremony has several specificities which in turn assign the words "I do" with the power to mean that two people are married. Austin writes, "When I say, before the registrar or altar, "I do", I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it... I propose to call it a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short, "a performative". The name is derived, of course, from "perform", the usual verb with the noun "action": it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (p. 6). Austin differentiates between reporting and indulging in the words as they relate to the actions that come after. While "reporting" on something does not necessarily connote a cause-and-effect relationship, "indulging" in a word requires being impacted by the word in subsequent actions. Austin therefore establishes that the performativity of a word differs from performance depending on the action that succeeds it. If a performance of a marriage ceremony does not lead to the people being legally married, then the words "I do" fail to be performative. Thus, for Austin, performativity pertains to action and change. However, Austin notes that conditions must be appropriate for words to enact change. For example, a person must be present in a ceremony with the intent of marrying.

Judith Butler (1988) adds to Austin's discourse on performativity from the perspective of gender. She answers the question, is gender a performance?

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again (p. 526).

Butler theorizes that gender is the result of multiple iterations. It must be continually performed. She adds, "social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimization" (p. 526). According to Butler, it is not simply a singular pronouncement or an action that makes something performative, but rather the repetition and the reception of these acts that instantiates their meaning. Performativity differs from performance because it is the culmination of multiple "acts" defined by "rehearsed" iterations (p. 526). Butler's intervention uses performativity to discuss minoritization in gender studies. The iterative aspect of performativity is important in understanding the method of transmitting choreography in Bharatanatyam through oral tradition, seeing all traditional Bharatanatyam compositions as performative in this vein.¹¹ In the context of Bharatanatyam, without understanding the politics of caste, the movement practice and its practitioners can continue to marginalize people based on caste as an axis of identity. The ongoing presence of casteism since the evolution of Bharatanatyam impacts the way that dancers interrogate caste oppression in their work.

However, dancers are also seeking ways that performativity can serve Bharatanatyam performances which aim to address social issues like caste. Theatre Studies scholar and practitioner Aaron Thomas' essay ([Thomas 2021](#)), "Infelicities", explains that Dwight Conquergood draws on the meaning of performativity across Austin, Butler, and even others in the field of performance studies to call on readers to see performativity as a means to "originate, activate, and innovate" (p. 19). He explains, "Thus, performative for Conquergood comes to mean "oppositional, disruptive performance" (p. 18). Thomas' summary of Conquergood's definition of performativity allows me to look at the different ways three Nandanar performances (Bharatanatyam showings in 2011 and 2021 and a film from 1942) address caste. While they are all representative of an iterative tradition, they address and "disrupt" casteism differently. Thomas' essay on performativity confronts the multiplicity of definitions associated with the term, in addition to shedding light on how best to apply it in relation to dancers who are looking to intervene in a political issue. The "iterative" and "disruptive" definitions of performativity allow me to analyze both the tendency for dance to reproduce casteism through repeated representations handed down through Bharatanatyam tradition, while also recognizing its potential to disrupt casteism through counter-representations.

In a recent online forum about social justice, an artist asked if Bharatanatyam dancers engage with the issue of caste. Vimal, a person responding on the forum, replied that because Nandanar's story is performed often, it is a clear example of dancers engaging with caste.¹² While performing the story of Nandanar touches on the issue of caste, it is not, I argue, the same as the Bharatanatyam field engaging in critical discussion on casteism. Per Conquergood's notion of performativity, I read different performances and their methods of engaging with caste, instead of solely analyzing the performer's ability to depict Nandanar. In short, I ask if Bharatanatyam performances of Nandanar can "disrupt" existing notions of caste and thereby enact real change.

2. Finding Performativity in Dance: Methods

To explore performativity in the context of Bharatanatyam, I analyze the bodily representation of caste along with its response through live audiences, online comments, and online forums. In doing so, I seek to examine how dancers and people who attend Bharatanatyam shows understand Nandanar's story. Bharatanatyam's relationship with spectatorship can be studied through the term "*rasa*". Defined by the *Natya Shastra*, a South Asian treatise for dance and theatre arts, *rasa* translates to "essence" and is a means of connecting with the audience through theatrical and emotional expression ([Raghupathy 2020](#)). In the Bharatanatyam representation of Nandanar, *rasa* becomes useful to showcase the effectiveness of the portrayal of an excluded character. Many dancers ascribe value to *rasa* and audience engagement, which makes it relevant in understanding why choreographers make certain bodily choices to represent characters like Nandanar.¹³ *Rasa* theory suggests that the "dancer must incite the same emotions that they are feeling in the audience while they perform" ([Raghupathy 2020](#)). This understanding does not simply come from the artist, but also from iteration (like Butler proposes for gender), such as consistently showing disenfranchised subjects with a similar humbling posture. Through *rasa* and spectatorship, bending shoulders forward makes the artist smaller on stage, leading the audience to pity them.¹⁴ The iterative structure in Bharatanatyam is both part of the pedagogy and the performance; it lets the audience know that the character is Nandanar, while making it unnecessary for the audience to question why Nandanar is portrayed in the same way repeatedly. The cyclical feedback of *rasa* requires spectatorship from a knowledgeable audience who understands the Bharatanatyam illustration of Nandanar.

I will therefore evaluate performativity through spectatorship to understand how caste is perceived by audiences' consumption of Nandanar in the South Asian diaspora. Driven by Jyoti Nisha's explanation of spectatorship from the perspective of oppressed people ([Nisha 2020](#)), I discuss how the depiction of Nandanar by people who cannot identify with his positionality impacts their performance. I found in my fieldwork that people were often

reluctant to discuss caste in relation to traditional choreography. Therefore, along with performance analysis, I depend on analyzing audience reception.

3. The Bharatanatyam Body Portraying Nandanar

Tara, the bejeweled Bharatanatyam dancer, continues her characterization of Nandanar trying to see Shiva from outside of the temple. Tara's performance is largely similar to other Bharatanatyam performances I have seen of the character. Although she is dressed in glimmering gold, it is clear that she is portraying the indigent Nandanar. Throughout the piece, her shoulders are hunched forward and her elbows are dropped, a sharp contrast to her stiff chin and straight back in the rhythmic sequence introducing the dance. She stands leaning forward pleading to the main deity with the lyrics:

Varukalāmō ayyā

Is there any way I may come inside? Oh lord? ([Ragde 2020b](#))¹⁵

Nandanar, in this song written by Gopalakrishna Bharathi, is referring to his inability to be allowed inside the temple because of his status as a Dalit man in society. He asks to be let inside the temple. The sharp contrast between the attire and choreography of the dancer as she portrays Nandanar is emphasized by these words above. The dancer uses the *chatura mudra* in both her hands, a Bharatanatyam gesture with bent thumbs, in front of her chest, often used to convey asking or pleading. Her hands slowly move their way up to her mouth, as she looks up gradually, appearing to the viewer like she is begging the god figure, the *Ayya*, if she can enter the premises. Rather than acting out the lyrics, she is gesticulating their meaning. Second, Nandanar is portrayed by a dancer in Bharatanatyam attire of rich silk and gold jewelry, designed to look like a celestial being, on a proscenium stage. The traditional costume defies the status of the character being portrayed. Therefore, the viewers must imagine his position of exclusion outside the temple.

Tara's interpretation of Nandanar is similar to how other Bharatanatyam dancers are trained to signify him and similar characters who are marginalized. A bent stance with relaxed joints offered as a contrast to the disciplined, taut Bharatanatyam body serves as an indicator of a difference in caste and class. Invoking Judith Butler's connection between iteration and performativity, people's recognition of Nandanar's character is through the iterative behavior that is used to signify his position: the trope of a humbling bent back and hunched shoulders. The bent back, contrasted with the straight upper body in Bharatanatyam, becomes a trope of how dominant caste and class artists read and portray people from oppressed and marginalized positions. Because there are few other characters with Nandanar's position and situation, this body language is enough to suggest who he is, and for audiences to recognize him. Bharatanatyam dancers and audience members who are trained to watch Tara's dance can immediately recognize Nandanar solely because of how his body is held.

However, this Nandanar does not disrupt any notions of casteism, which creates the basis of his story. In fact, Tara's Nandanar, which represents the Bharatanatyam norm of presenting the figure, removes caste-oppressed people's agency to define themselves. The method for recognizing and understanding Nandanar is encoded through humbling his stance: choreographed, written, and performed often by people who have caste privilege. Thus, the positionality of the dancer and the repetition of how Nandanar is shown precludes the portrayal from enacting change with regard to caste hierarchies. Instead, the dancer is evaluated based on how realistically she performs being oppressed. Nandanar's caste and "lower" position in Indian society are part of the performed iterative behavior in Bharatanatyam choreography, thereby allowing dancers to play his character without reflecting on their problematic representations of caste.

Rather than conducting research into the idea of casteism through ethnography or research on the Dalit experience, dancers rely on a monolithic text on Nandanar written by a Brahmin, which is performed in the Bharatanatyam idiom year after year. His character is recognized through a gaze of caste privilege, the same one that once established the "rewritten" Bharatanatyam. For example, the YouTube comments on this performance are

in line with the following: “I feel the pangs of Nandanar” and “Excellent portrayal”.¹⁶ They are not about caste, but rather the dancer’s portrayal of a man who is disenfranchised, and her *ability* to represent his abject subjectivity in an effective manner. This effectiveness is measured again, not by representing Nandanar’s agency, but by the ability for people to feel for or understand his portrayal as indigent.

While these comments were a small sample of audience responses, they identified strongly with live audience responses to other portrayals of Nandanar I have seen in the idiom both as a performer and ethnographer. For example, in person, a fellow audience member once brushed away tears from the “devotion” or surrender signified by Nandanar. Viewing the work in a religious framework, the context of Nandanar’s unwavering faith in Shiva connects with the spectators. Often, the dancer has been judged by how much the audience can pity the figure, rather than question the caste system and his position in it. Therefore, the performance of Nandanar in Bharatanatyam is measured not through discussing casteism, the main aspect of the story, but by shifting the focus from the character to the dancer’s skill in portraying that character. In doing so, the dancer might claim that she is discussing caste oppression by performing this story, but the dancer is not actually critically engaging with the issue of caste. While the dancer is enacting the iterative structure delineated by Butler about performativity, she is not initiating any change with regard to the issue of caste, by relying on stereotypical representations of caste-oppressed people as objects of pity.

In Bharatanatyam, the relationship between performativity and gaze can become a vehicle through which dancers can engage with political issues like caste. In seeing the distance between a Dalit person’s actual lived experience and the performance of Nandanar’s character, the issues of gaze and spectatorship help examine how Bharatanatyam can or cannot represent this character. Anti-caste and Dalit activists are vocal about portrayals of Dalit people as “submissive” in the face of privileged-caste people ([Kandukuri 2023](#)). From content creators on social media pointing out casteism online to academics, Dalit people are moving to represent themselves in greater numbers. Jyoti Nisha, filmmaker and writer, explains the relationship between performativity and gaze in expressive culture:

[The] gaze of “othering”, silencing, and appropriating the existence of history, knowledge, and symbols of the marginalised communities have been tools employed by the dominant-caste filmmakers deliberately. Evidently in that process, they have not only capitalised on such discourses, but have also stripped the marginalised characters of their dignity and agency replicating the same hierarchical structures of caste on screen. ([Nisha 2020](#))

Crediting and drawing from bell hook’s term “oppositional gaze”, Nisha suggests that one way to oppose the lack of Bahujan agency is to center the “Bahujan gaze”, which demonstrates the lived experiences of minoritized castes through their own eyes.¹⁷ While Nisha is talking about filmic representation in particular, her words can apply to Bharatanatyam performances as well, where dominant caste women are portraying the plight of a Dalit man, through a Brahmin gaze. Nisha’s reclamation of the Bahujan perspective even begins with naming the gaze, by refusing the term Dalit. The term Bahujan is employed to name multiple oppressed-caste identities. In this paper, I utilize her perspective of the Bahujan gaze to include the Dalit perspective as a Dalit–Bahujan gaze, centering why it is important to consider the positionality of the actor portraying an oppressed-caste character. In Bharatanatyam, the “successful” portrayal of Dalit figures like Nandanar in Bharatanatyam is determined by other dominant caste spectators, essentially replicating casteist structures in Bharatanatyam and barring the voices of oppressed caste people. In this instance, the gaze is not determined from an oppressed caste perspective, but rather it is placed upon a Dalit-Bahujan subject by the Brahmin performer.

Performativity is also impacted by the extent of agency a character has in determining how they are perceived by the spectator. Because Nandanar performances are assessed to cater to a Brahminical gaze and expectation rather than one which centers Dalit people, I assert that performativity functions in conjunction with the gaze. The dancer depends

on the audience to recognize their actions through common caste signifiers, defined by the iterative structure and shared gestural vocabulary of Bharatanatyam. In turn, the character is defined by dominant caste people who do not have the perspective to redefine caste-based norms.

4. Nandanar in Film

Due to its popularity, Nandanar's story has been created on film multiple times. To compare portrayals of the character, I analyze the most famous 1942 film "Nandanar" starring Dhandapani Desikar, who sang and played the role of the protagonist. In this time frame, Bharatanatyam was undergoing a significant transition after its appropriation from hereditary dancers. It was less than a decade after Rukmini Devi Arundale began her institution training dancers in a "reconstructed" version of Bharatanatyam at Kalakshetra in Chennai, India. Importantly, Bharatanatyam dance and Carnatic music were intrinsically linked to Tamil cinema at the time and often shared thematic commonalities between performance and films ([Krishnan 2019](#), p. 6). It must be noted that the film actor Desikar playing the role of Nandanar was a Brahmin and a renowned musician. The direction (musical and otherwise) was also by Brahmin figures in the industry, revealing a lack of diverse representation ([Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 2002](#), p. 295). Analyzing a filmic depiction of Nandanar highlights the tropes in the Bharatanatyam development of the same character, during a time when the two fields were in conversation.

In the scene where Desikar sings the same song that the dancer described above performs, he does not represent each word gesturally as is often conducted in Bharatanatyam. He simply stands with his hands together in *anjali* as if praying, without utilizing choreographed Bharatanatyam gestures. In Desikar's portrayal of Nandanar, his eyes look longingly at the temple. His palms move to face upward with extended arms, giving the impression that he is reaching and pleading during this soliloquy. The song serves as a musical monologue for him to ask for entrance into the temple. Additionally, the film's portrayal of the *dhwajastambha* or religious flagpole and the water tank, which devotees use to cleanse their feet before entering the premises, provide the impression that Nandanar is positioned outside the temple. Filmed in black and white, the visual effects of blurred images give the viewer a feeling of being excluded from a religious experience as with the character of Nandanar himself. The act of watching the film on a screen inherently distances the viewer, alluding to their feeling of exclusion, which by comparison, may not be apparently felt by a spectator watching a live Bharatanatyam performance on the proscenium stage ([Balakumar 2014](#)).

A glimpse into the history of this film reveals its potential for enacting social change, and the accompanying pitfalls. Desikar's portrayal of the character earned many accolades due to his prowess at singing and acting. Even though the film happened to be the most popular adaptation of Nandanar's story, its release was initially disrupted by Dalit protests in the South Indian town of Kolar Gold Fields. The demonstrations objected to an over-romanticization of Nandanar's immolation as a symbolic act of purging the oppressed-caste body in a desire for his unification with the divine. Bahujan audiences rebuked the portrayal of Nandanar as it glorified both the rigid hierarchy of caste and Nandanar's resulting immolation. It was not until Desikar publicly attended the rally and apologized to the people of Kolar Gold Fields for being a part of such a scene, that the movie was re-released in theaters ([Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 2002](#), p. 295).

The 1942 film "Nandanar" spurred discussions and ruptured the norms of casteism; the film producers were criticized for their depiction of a Nandanar by dominant caste persons who could not identify with a Dalit person's lived experience. Drawing on Jyoti Nisha's commentary on spectatorship and representation, the Brahmin representation of Nandanar does not portray the character with agency nor does it provide a critical lens to the onscreen portrayal of a Dalit figure. Nisha references the potential of a "Bahujan gaze", which centers the agency of the Bahujan body. This film caters to and upholds a Brahmin gaze, centering a privileged-caste fantasy of how Nandanar might be. In this

example, it took the Dalit-Bahujan perspective to reclaim ownership of Nandanar's agency by protesting his portrayal on film.

While Nandanar was represented with more details in the setting signifying his position, the depiction of the figure still used the same song to say "Varugalaamo" based on the Carnatic music idiom. The tune still saw Nandanar as a pleading figure, with his back hunched over. But as a contrast, the reaction towards the film was able to incite protest which speaks to the fact that spectatorship plays a significant role in the reception and political efficacy of a piece. Bharatanatyam performances of Nandanar do not question the agency of the Dalit figure to the same extent as the film does, the advantage being that "Nandanar" the film reached out to a more diverse audience. The accessibility of film can and has historically made room for a political conversation around the representation of Nandanar as a character. It is difficult to tell the caste identities of Bharatanatyam audience members, except for some name markers. However, Bharatanatyam's history of appropriation from oppressed caste people indicates its longstanding link to caste hierarchy. Additionally, many of the prominent figures in the Bharatanatyam field also hold caste privilege, which impacts who watches the Bharatanatyam depiction of Nandanar, and who appreciates or protests it. Bharatanatyam's history of appropriation from hereditary Bahujan practitioners lends itself to cater to a largely dominant caste gaze today, while films have a wider reach and accessibility.

Enactment of Nandanar in the film medium highlights how the onus of representation falls on the performing body; it was Desikar's bodily representation and presence that greatly impacted the audience's reactions. The bodily articulation of caste is apparent both in how the Brahmin Desikar was received in the film as well as how the dancing Bharatanatyam body is seen as a representative of Nandanar. It is therefore critical to analyze the bodily choreography of his character to highlight the multiple ways that caste viscerally permeates the cultural consciousness.

5. A Dynamic Nandanar

Is it possible to find an anti-caste Nandanar in the Bharatanatyam idiom, unmarred by the coloniality and Brahminization of the dance form's violent past? My search continues. Nandanar's repeated postural choreography could also indicate that his story is impossible to retell radically in Bharatanatyam, empowering a Dalit perspective. In the meantime, one depiction of Nandanar caught my attention. In 2021, I watched a video clip of Raja, who is a Bharatanatyam performer based in India but performs globally. In his "Varugalaamo" performance, Raja chose to avoid vocalizing the original lyrics of the song. Instead, he replaced the lyrics with the instrumentalization of the tune of the song, allowing the informed audience to recognize the myth.¹⁸ Raja therefore does not adhere to the words of the Brahmin poet in defining the Dalit person's life, in quiet subversion.

Raja's Nandanar holds himself with a different bodily frame, with his chin up. His back is straight and upright, first with his arms extending outward in wonder as he arrives at the temple. But then his wonder turns to a question and rapidly to frustration as his view is blocked by the huge obstruction in front of him (the Nandi statue), leaving him out of the temple and out of society. He is angry to be missing out on seeing Shiva and his expression changes gradually into outrage. He marks this emotion not with his shoulders hunched but rather standing straight with a taut core, thinking as he stands there about how he can get out of his position. He paces from side to side. Covering multiple levels, he first tries to catch a glimpse of Shiva by bending very low, then attempting to jump higher and higher to see the figure from above, around the Nandi statue. Right away, this interpretation of Nandanar is radically different because rather than remaining stationary using only hand gestures, Raja is physically and actively trying to change positions. As a viewer, I also extrapolate that he is figuratively trying to change his position in reference to being included in the temple.

Many months after I saw his clip, I was able to interview the dancer over the phone. There was a gentle laugh when I told Raja that his dynamic Nandanar caught my attention,

and as I described his movement covering multiple levels and space, Raja started to chuckle. When I asked what inspired his dramaturgy, Raja responded that after discussing with the director, he felt the need to build Nandanar's frustration into the storyline, rather than leave it stagnant. "The music was also giving us trouble", he added. When I inquired further, he said, "There was a dissociation between asking for permission in the word "Varugalaamo" and the experience of being left out. We decided to keep lyrics out of the work and experimented with the theatrics of working around the Nandi".¹⁹

I could not ascertain the caste location of Raja. This reflects many moments in my research and the Bharatanatyam field, whereby issues like caste and class privilege operate insidiously yet are not fully known or discussed.²⁰ The show description refers to the word "liberation," alluding to Nandanar within the Hindu context of "reaching" Shiva. This description does not disavow caste, and instead places Nandanar within the framework of the religion which oppresses him. While Tara's Nandanar saw golden lamps and a performance which drew attention to Nandanar's devotion, this Nandanar did not make me think of the religious liberation of Nandanar, but rather his exclusion.

Raja's interpretation of Nandanar helped transform my perspective of the character. His active movement expressing Nandanar's aggravation and frustration instilled a corresponding emotion within me as the viewer. Raja's interpretation did not make me feel sorry for Nandanar, rather I was vehemently in agreement with him, reminiscent of my emotional irritation when something I long for is not accessible to me. The bodily frame of Nandanar did not demand pity from me, but rather indignation and empathy. The invisible but very present Nandi who blocked Nandanar's field of vision felt even more present in this scene. Much like the dynamism of the dancer on stage, Nandanar's character also seemed dynamic and with the agency to demand space in the scene. In reference to Jyoti Nisha's theorization of the Bahujan gaze, Nandanar in this instance is claiming space and agency rather than forfeiting it. Nandanar is also defying a normative stance and is instead changing his position willfully. Raja shared that while many audience members enjoyed his take on Nandanar, he did receive criticism that it was not "humble" enough. He replied that his vision of Nandanar was one who could stand tall and demand space from Nandi, explaining the reason for his upright posture.

The comparison of these Nandanar representations offers insight into the question: what are performers trying to accomplish when engaging with the notion of *rasa* and how does it relate to caste? Sandra Chatterjee and Lee (2012) suggest creating a "shared experience" with the spectator of Indian classical dance and giving the audience access to the artistic practice is integral to *rasa*. They propose involving the viewers' attention to the process rather than assuming them to be knowledgeable of the iterative tropes in Indian classical dance (Chatterjee and Lee 2012, p. 4). By expressing this joint understanding between the spectator and the viewer, Lee and Chatterjee imply that the object of *rasa* depends on an understanding between the performer and spectator. But the communication of *rasa* can include the dimension of dissent as well, whereby the spectator can question and even disagree with the representations that they witness on stage. For example, when the dancer portrays Nandanar with an upright posture, perturbed, and pacing, he goes against the normalized representation of Nandanar as a man who is downtrodden. I recognize the character only because of the dramaturgy of the Nandi, the intrusive bull figure, on the stage and the tune of the familiar song "Varugalaamo" without the lyrics being sung. The dancer moves around the invisible structure, building its presence as an obstruction. Sharing in the moment of annoyance makes me as an audience member invested in the notion of caste as an obstacle to belonging. Why would Nandanar have to immolate himself in a glorified manner rather than owning his caste location? Both literally (Nandi) and symbolically (the structure of caste), the focus of this scene shines a light on the structures that prohibit Nandanar's inclusion.

Drawing on Nisha's perspective of Bahujan spectatorship, the very portrayal of Nandanar, scripted and performed by privileged-caste people, not only ignores a critical discussion of caste but also excludes people who are able to comment on the experience of

casteism. In the 1942 film, the actor Desikar not only ignored a critical understanding of the character Nandanar but also overlooked empathizing with him. Desikar's portrayal of Nandanar encounters the notion of *rasa* where particular socially positioned audience members empathize with his character portrayal and at the same time, allows others to question the plot in relation to Nandanar's actions. Raja's portrayal however allows the audience to challenge the politics of casteism as presented during the retelling of this story. The critical engagement of Raja is a significant departure from the spectatorship of Tara's performance, which catered to Brahminical expectations in the portrayal of Nandanar. Finally, in Raja's embodiment of Nandanar, even an unfamiliar or uninformed viewer could empathize with the character's experience of exclusion from entering the temple. Thus, a close analysis of choreography and audience reception of Nandanar performances reveals that not all retellings of a story engage with its underlying politics or disrupt the status quo in the same way.

6. Political Mobilization of Nandanar

After Vimal from the social justice and dance forum mentioned the performance of Nandanar as a way that Bharatanatyam dancers interact with caste, I watched a choreography sharing held by the organizers of the forum on Zoom.²¹ They invited artists of many backgrounds, including Dalit performers. Anjan, one of the Dalit dancers, brought up Vimal's comment from the forum. He said, "Many people talk about Nandanar, and I could not comment on it online, because it is like the life I live... Sometimes when I hear it, I feel it is about my grandfather... In our traditions, we sing songs of the story, without acting it out, and the story is passed on. For many people, Nandanar is just a story. For me, it is an experience." Anjan describes how his positionality as a Dalit person precluded him from participating in the conversation about Nandanar on social media because of its closeness to his personal life. His testimony interrogates the methods, investment, and reasons of Bharatanatyam dancers brazenly telling stories without considering caste.

The value of *Nandanar Charitram* has always had a wide political impact. During the post-independence Harijan movement, M.K. Gandhi spoke at the site of Nandanar's burning and called for the eradication of the caste system as well, citing Nandanar as not only a victim of discrimination but also as an example of someone utilizing non-violent protest.²² This viewpoint met with some opposition among the anti-caste activists including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who felt that Nandanar's character comes across as submissive in the face of the adversity that he was put through (Basu 2011, p. 291).²³ Interrogating its context in Bharatanatyam and affiliated fields could impact long-term conversations on caste. For example, during South Indian music and Bharatanatyam performances, the word "*parayan*" is no longer performed in the latter verses of the song "*Varugalaamo*", because it is now recognized as a derogatory epithet for "untouchable" referring to Dalits. It is also the origin of the word "pariah". Eminent Carnatic vocalist TM Krishna asks if this omission is truly progressive, or if it furthers the erasure faced by people affected by blatant casteism in India (Krishna 2018). The ongoing discussion of "*parayan*" in the poem, and people's discomfort with the issue of caste demonstrates that not just the story but also the musical representations of Gopalakrishnan Bharathi's *Nandanar Charitram* have immense potential to be performative and enact change. Casteism continues to impact India and the global social climate. Moments in art and culture which disrupt casteist stereotypes, like Raja's performance, are crucial in interrogating broader intersections of caste and politics.

Caste impacts the Bharatanatyam field through the dance form's continued appropriation from the hereditary dancing community, but also in unspoken ways. Caste often nefariously shapes dancers' financial and performance opportunities through personal relationships. Hereditary practitioner Nrithya Pillai and scholars who have built on her work such as Sammitha Sreevaths (2019) and Anusha Kedhar (2021) have written about the enduring impact of caste discrimination in the Bharatanatyam field, and the hypocrisy that Bharatanatyam would not exist without Bahujan communities to begin with (Pillai 2022). During my fieldwork, I interviewed a dancer who was moved by the historical disenfran-

chisement of hereditary practitioners. With her company, she endeavored to tell their story by portraying courtesan dancers through a lens of feminist empowerment. Dressed in colorful costumes in the backdrop of an ornate set to mimic a temple, her ensemble performed a fictional story of a strong, defiant dancer saving a temple from a crisis. However, the ensemble overlooked consulting or including any hereditary practitioners in the process or production of the show. After learning more about representational politics, she issued an apology for not considering the perspective of hereditary dancers. In this instance, I witnessed one of the few moments of ownership by a dancer who recognized how caste and representation have impacted Bharatanatyam so deeply that even our portrayal of history can come across as a mythical story to be performed. Naming the misrepresentation of hereditary dancers' disenfranchisement is a significant moment in understanding how gaze and performance of caste must be critically examined in the Bharatanatyam field, while other issues like feminism or citizenship are recognized. Caste is embedded in Bharatanatyam because of its history of appropriation from hereditary practitioners, which has impacted the art's current pedagogy, economic flows, and aesthetic expectations of dancers (Pillai 2022). Knowing this history, the recurrent mythical Nandanar as the symbolic Dalit representative within the dance form is an extension of Bharatanatyam's casteist past. The fact that Nandanar is performed so often reveals how the generational repetition of myths in the Bharatanatyam repertoire can lead to an omission of discussions on caste and representation.

It is crucial to view the performance of Nandanar with an understanding of the responsibilities implicit in its representation. When dialogues invoking caste are brought to the forefront, Nandanar's story can be mobilized to understand greater social implications that still plague the South Asian performing arts sector and beyond.

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Notes

- 1 This performance is part of a video released online and via DVD in 2011. The artist has been anonymized with a pseudonym, Tara. All artists and interlocutors in this paper have been given pseudonyms.
- 2 Dalit translates to "broken" or "oppressed", referring to people in the Indian classification of scheduled caste. People in the Dalit community have reclaimed this term, replacing ones such as "Harijan" and "untouchable". More details further in the paper, and for more information, see the Equality Labs website.
- 3 Bharatanatyam is a form of South Indian dance. See ([Krishnan 2019](#); [Allen 1997](#); [Thakore 2022](#)) for history of appropriation of Bharatanatyam from hereditary practitioners.
- 4 See ([Allen 1997](#)) for more information on pertinent actors including Rukmini Devi Arundale, E. Krishna Iyer, Annie Besant.
- 5 In this text, I use the word Bharatanatyam, referencing the form as it is seen today, including hereditary dancers as Bharatanatyam practitioners, as well. For more on the politics of naming the Bharatanatyam dancer and style of dance, see writing by Nrithya Pillai.
- 6 This text differs from the *Periya Puranam*, and its primary authorship by a Brahmin man impacts dance interpretations.
- 7 Nandi is a bull deity who faces Shiva idols in temples. The figure of Nandi is known to be the "vehicle" of the Hindu god Shiva, as well as his close confidant. Shiva is one of the foremost gods of the Hindu pantheon.
- 8 In this paper, I have provided transliterated lyrics provided by Karnatik.com, a popular site for lyrics in the South Asian diaspora, after having verified them with my interlocutors in Chennai, India.
- 9 Some claim the term *jati*, referencing community, as more culpable in creating the violent caste system. For more information on caste in the South Asian diaspora and its history, see Equality Labs.
- 10 The Bharatanatyam *margam* is the name for the traditional solo repertoire, which includes up to ten compositions performed by the dancer. It has evolved over the years, and an excerpt of Gopalakrishna Bharathi's work is one composition which continues to be included in some performances.

- 11 For more on South Asian dance forms, gender, and performativity, see (Kamath 2019).
- 12 I have chosen to provide pseudonyms for the names of performers and individuals mentioned in this essay in order to protect their identity.
- 13 For more on *rasa* and the *Natya Shastra*, see (Kamath 2019; Chatterjee and Lee 2012).
- 14 As a dancer and researcher, Nandanar is not the only character I have understood through these bodily nuances. One example is the mythical monkey figure Hanuman, whom I have often played bending forward in reverence to the Hindu god Rama. In this paper, I interrogate this stance as it relates to caste specifically, whereby Nandanar’s basic stance in choreography, not just when standing in reverence, is hunched over.
- 15 While my initial reference for the text was (Ragde 2020a, 2020b) and Karnatik.com, I used the Madras Tamil Lexicon scheme for the transliteration of lyrics.
- 16 I am not providing the link for this performance or comments, to preserve the anonymity of the dancer.
- 17 While I am citing Jyoti Nisha’s use of gaze, see (Hooks 1992) for bell hooks’ definition of oppositional gaze which aids Nisha’s concept.
- 18 This online video is from approximately 2021 and has since been removed. The name of the performer is a pseudonym.
- 19 This interview occurred via phone in 2023.
- 20 I also acknowledge that my transnational identity and caste privilege precludes me from noting all markers related to caste. For this reason, my research has benefitted from thinkers and artists who engage with caste including but not limited to: Yashica Dutt, Mimi Mondal, Brahma Prakash, Nrithya Pillai, Yashoda Thakore, Suraj Yengde, and others.
- 21 To preserve the anonymity of the speakers of the online forum, I am not including citation details.
- 22 See (Guha 2017). for more details on the Harijan movement. Harijan is now considered an offensive term for Dalit people.
- 23 B.R. Ambedkar dedicates his text, *The Untouchables* to Nandanar. For more on the anti-caste movement and Dravidian Self-Respect Movement, see writing by B.R. Ambedkar (1968) and E.V. Ramasamy, spelled Rāmacāmi while using the Madras Tamil Lexicon Scheme (Rāmacāmi IVe 1982).

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