

# Grace in Resistance: Karnataka's Female Classical Dancers and the Freedom Movement

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the overlooked yet influential role of Karnataka's female classical dancers in India's freedom struggle, focusing on two key figures K. Venkatalakshamma and Shanta Rao. It situates their artistic practice within the socio-political and cultural contexts of colonial Mysore, demonstrating how dance served as both a spiritual discipline and a subtle form of political expression. Drawing upon archival sources, biographies, oral histories, and performance theory, the study reveals how these women transformed ritual and court traditions condemned by colonial morality into acts of aesthetic resistance. Their performances carried nationalist themes through mythic allegory, devotional emotion, and artistic precision, allowing political ideas to resonate in veiled yet powerful forms. Through pedagogy and institutional engagement, they secured continuity for classical dance within modern education and post-independence cultural policy. The paper also interrogates gendered aspects of cultural nationalism, showing how women dancers negotiated respectability and agency through art. Ultimately, Karnataka's female artists contributed to India's cultural sovereignty, embodying a "grace in resistance" that merged artistic devotion with the moral imagination of freedom.

### KEYWORDS:

Karnataka, Freedom Movement, Bharatanatyam, Venkatalakshamma, Shanta Rao, Cultural Nationalism, Women Artists, Devadasi Tradition.

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### Introduction

The story of India's independence is often told through the lenses of politics, protest, and reform. Yet, beneath these overt struggles lay quieter forms of resistance artistic, devotional, and deeply cultural. In Karnataka, classical dance became one such vehicle for reclaiming identity and dignity under colonial domination. The gestures, narratives, and stage presence of women dancers evolved into symbolic assertions of national selfhood.

This paper examines two exemplary artists K. Venkatalakshamma, custodian of the Mysore Bani of Bharatanatyam, and Shanta Rao, the modernist visionary who infused classical idioms with spiritual intensity. Both negotiated complex intersections of colonial moralism, reformist scrutiny, and patriarchal limits. Through them, dance became an embodied assertion of cultural continuity and moral autonomy. Their careers, viewed as artistic journeys and acts of resistance, reveal how aesthetic practice could nurture the spirit of freedom as powerfully as political activism.

## **Historical and Cultural Context**

### **Legacy of Temple and Court Traditions**

Karnataka's dance heritage has roots in the Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1565), which celebrated divine kingship through temple and court performances. Inscriptions from Hampi, Lepakshi, and Srirangapatna mention Nartakis and Devadasis as ritual custodians of sacred art. Even after Vijayanagara's decline, the Wodeyar rulers of Mysore preserved this tradition, refining Bharatanatyam into a graceful regional idiom known as the Mysore Bani marked by fluid movements, delicate *lasya*, and devotional restraint. By the 19th century, Mysore's Rangamandira had become a vibrant cultural center where music, dance, and spirituality converged, producing palace dancers who combined scholarship with sacred duty.

### **Colonial Moralism and Reformist Interventions**

British colonial rule disrupted these interwoven traditions. Missionary accounts portrayed temple dancers as immoral, influencing reform movements that conflated ritual dedication with social degradation. Legal actions culminating in the Madras Devadasi (Abolition of Dedication) Act, 1947, dismantled centuries old systems of patronage and practice. However, these attacks inadvertently sparked a cultural revival, as Indian nationalists began to view the restoration of classical dance as an act of patriotic renewal. In this environment, Mysore's royal court became a sanctuary for artistic preservation and reinterpretation.

### **The Mysore Court as a Cultural Crucible**

During the reign of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV (1902–1940), Mysore emerged as a model of enlightened governance, blending modern progress with cultural reverence. Institutions such as the Palace Natya Shala, the Karnataka Sangita Parishat, and later the University of Mysore's Department of Dance formalized training and research. The Dasara festival, once

confined to royal audiences, evolved into a public celebration of Indian heritage. Mythological themes Durga Mahishasura Mardini, Bhakta Kanakadasa, or Krishna Leela resonated with nationalist symbolism, transforming devotional art into a coded language of liberation.

### **Women and the Cultural Nation**

Nationalist discourse in the early 20th century reimagined womanhood as the moral backbone of the nation. Dancers once marginalized by reformist rhetoric were recast as embodiments of India's spiritual essence. In Karnataka, this transformation endowed female performers with a unique agency: they articulated patriotism not through protest, but through bhakti and aesthetic rigor. Classical dance became a non-verbal manifesto, where mythic allegory mirrored the people's political aspirations. As scholar Ananya Krishnan observes, "Every raised hand in Bharatanatyam was both an invocation of deity and of the nation."

Through performance, women dancers reclaimed sanctity and respect, transforming the stage into a sacred and political space simultaneously.

### **K. Venkatalakshamma: Guardian of the Mysore Bani**

#### **Early Life and Artistic Formation**

Born in 1906 in Mysore, Kittur Venkatalakshamma entered temple service at an early age, studying under Guru Jatti Thayamma. Rooted in the Devadasi lineage, she mastered the traditional margam repertoire Alarippu, Jatiswaram, Padam distinguished by subtle expressiveness and spiritual grace. The Mysore Bani's signature attributes soft curvature, controlled abhinaya, and lyrical fluidity defined her style and enduring influence.

#### **Performing under Royal Patronage**

During Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV's reign, Venkatalakshamma's performances at Navaratri and Dasara Durbar became emblems of cultural nationalism. Her presentation of devotional pieces like Purandaradasa's Bhagyada Lakshmi Baramma (1936) symbolized hope for national prosperity amidst colonial hardship. While British officials attended as on-lookers, her art conveyed India's civilizational dignity.

After Independence, her appointment as Guru at the University of Mysore affirmed the sanctity of a tradition once condemned by colonial

morality. By linking temple, court, and classroom, she preserved continuity across eras a quiet revolution achieved through devotion and discipline.

### **Pedagogical Philosophy and Legacy**

Venkatalakshamma viewed dance as sadhana, a lifelong spiritual practice rather than profession. Her pedagogy stressed humility, ritual discipline, and moral purity. Students such as Maya Rao and Padmini Rao carried her teachings into post-Independence India, integrating Bharatanatyam into cultural programs celebrating freedom fighters. Through them, the Mysore Bani's elegance evolved into a living expression of cultural resilience.

### **Shanta Rao: Modernist, Mystic, and Cultural Envoy**

#### **Early Life and Multidisciplinary Training**

Born in Mangalore in 1925, Shanta Rao belonged to an educated Kannada family that embraced both Western and Indian learning. Trained initially at Kalakshetra under Rukmini Devi Arundale, she absorbed revivalist ideologies that sought to redeem Bharatanatyam from colonial stigma. Later, under Kelucharan Mohapatra and Meenakshisundaram Pillai, she achieved mastery in Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi, pioneering cross-style synthesis.

#### **Dance as Metaphysical Liberation**

For Shanta Rao, dance transcended performance; it was a meditative discipline and a means to spiritual emancipation. Her 1940s-50s recitals, noted for geometric precision and yogic stillness, embodied what critics called "fire frozen into geometry." She reimagined the Ananda Tandava as a metaphor for India's awakening the destruction of ignorance mirroring liberation from colonial rule.

In 1946, during a Quit India Movement fundraiser, she choreographed Bharata Mata Namaskara Nritya, invoking the goddess as the nation itself an act of reverence that doubled as resistance. Without overt slogans, her performance stirred patriotic emotion within the spiritual idiom.

#### **Global Presence and Intellectual Inquiry**

After Independence, Shanta Rao became one of India's foremost cultural ambassadors, representing the nation at the Edinburgh Festival

(1956) and United Nations Day (1960). Performing in Kannada and Sanskrit, she upheld regional identity within national representation. Her writings and interviews often linked Bharatanatyam's geometry with cosmic harmony: "When I form the triangle of Shiva with my arms, I trace the same pattern the ancients saw in the stars." This fusion of art, science, and spirituality reflected India's modernist ethos and strengthened its cultural diplomacy.

### **Dialogue with Modernity**

Unlike Venkatalakshamma, Shanta Rao was not from a hereditary lineage; her modern education shaped a critical consciousness. Rejecting ornate costume and sensual excess, she embraced minimalism and meditative composure, challenging both colonial exoticism and patriarchal aesthetics. Through her austere elegance, she redefined beauty as inner luminosity, not spectacle asserting women's intellectual and spiritual authority in public art.

### **Challenges and Transformations**

#### **Negotiating Prejudice and Respectability**

The early 20th century was fraught with contradictions for women artists. Colonial and reformist narratives labeled temple dancers immoral, while nationalist movements sought to "purify" art without fully understanding its ritual roots. Venkatalakshamma, despite royal reverence, bore the burden of Devadasi stigma. She responded not through confrontation but through devotional reformation, turning every padam into a meditation on virtue.

Shanta Rao, in contrast, faced skepticism of a different kind: as an intellectual urban woman reclaiming a stigmatized art, she was considered "too severe" or "too cerebral." Yet her very restraint subverted stereotypes of feminine passivity and sensuality, allowing her to assert dance as an act of mental strength and spiritual clarity.

#### **Aesthetic Nationalism and Symbolic Resistance**

Dance during the freedom movement became a coded form of political expression. Mythological episodes like Sita's Agni Pariksha, Draupadi's Vow, or Durga's Victory echoed the collective struggle for justice and autonomy. In Venkatalakshamma's Mahishasura Mardini, the goddess's triumph paralleled India's fight against oppression; in Shanta

Rao's Ardhanarishvara Stotra, the fusion of masculine and feminine embodied unity beyond colonial division.

These performances also carved new spaces for women in public life. The stage became a domain of nonviolent leadership, where moral strength replaced militant activism. Costumes of saffron and white symbolized renunciation and truth; the rhythmic ghungroo became the sound of freedom itself.

### **Pedagogical and Institutional Legacy**

After 1947, both dancers contributed to shaping India's modern cultural landscape. Venkatalakshamma's appointment as honorary professor at the University of Mysore signified official recognition of traditional wisdom within academia. She integrated textual study, notation, and performance, turning dance into a legitimate field of research and scholarship.

Meanwhile, Shanta Rao's international outreach embodied Nehruvian ideals of cultural diplomacy. Her participation in UNESCO and global festivals presented Indian aesthetics as timeless philosophy. Karnataka's institutions from the Sangita Nritya Academy to Abhinaya Schools absorbed their ideals, fostering new generations who used Bharatanatyam to engage with modern social themes while maintaining spiritual integrity.

### **Spiritual Semiotics and the Feminine Nation**

In Indian aesthetics, rasa is not merely emotion but moral realization. Under colonial oppression, it became a political sentiment. Through Veera Rasa (heroism) and Karuna Rasa (compassion), dancers evoked national endurance and collective empathy.

The feminine principle, long revered as Shakti, became the symbolic body of the nation Bharata Mata. Venkatalakshamma's serenity reflected the nurturing, maternal face of India, while Shanta Rao's intensity evoked Durga's fierce energy. Together, they expressed complementary visions of freedom compassion and courage defining India's cultural soul.

### **Conclusion**

The contribution of Karnataka's women dancers to India's freedom movement transcends conventional political history. Through artistic preservation, reinterpretation, and pedagogy, they crafted a subtle but profound

resistance. Venkatalakshamma embodied continuity transforming temple ritual into modern pedagogy while Shanta Rao represented transformation, aligning ancient spirituality with global modernity.

Their legacies remind us that freedom is not only political independence but also cultural sovereignty the right to preserve and reinterpret one's artistic identity. Their lives demonstrate that beauty itself can be political, that grace can defy power, and that spiritual discipline can nurture national consciousness.

In the end, their revolution was not in manifestos but in mudras, not in protest but in abhinaya a luminous choreography of liberation that continues to inspire India's cultural imagination.

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