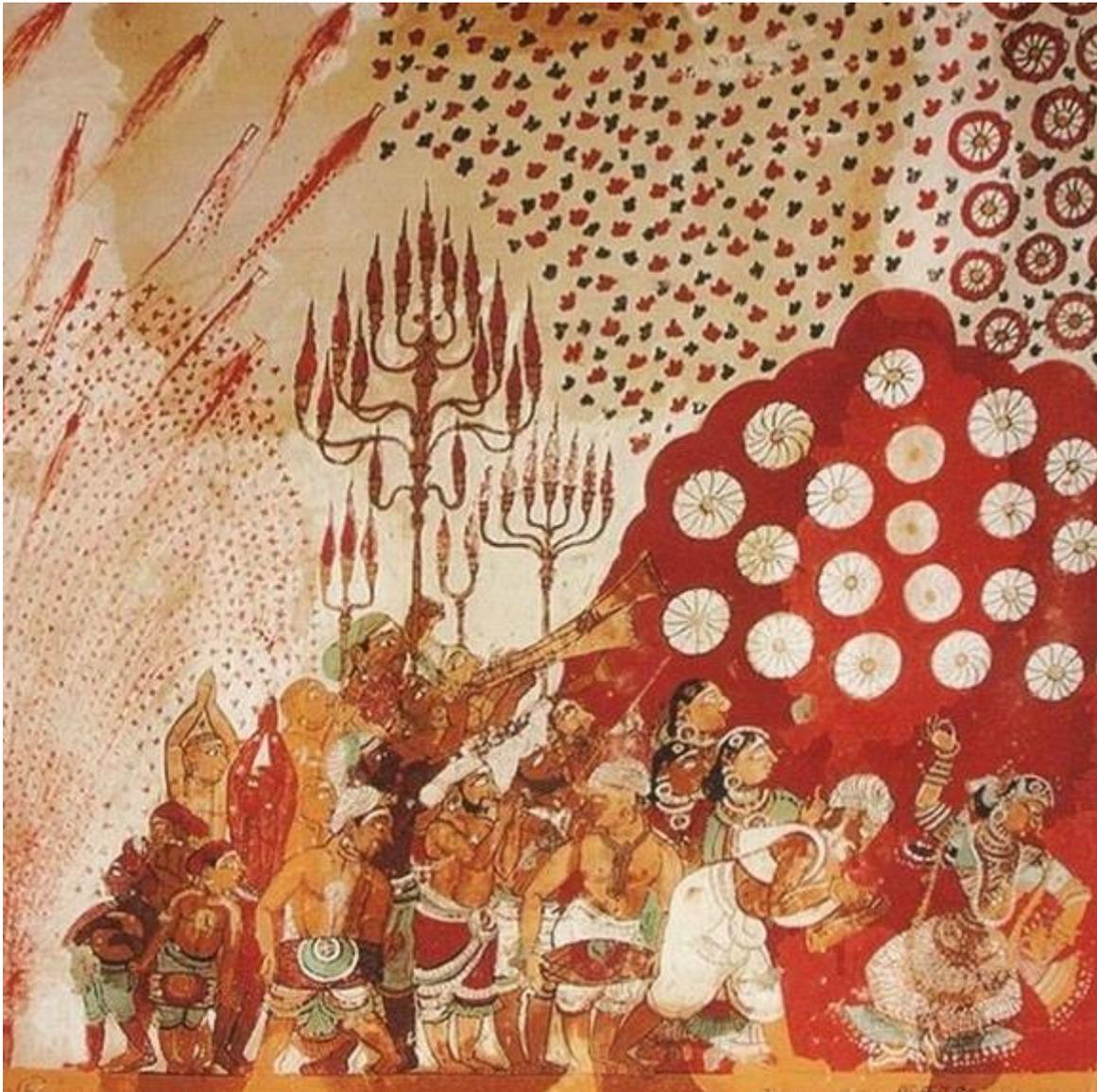


## *YATRA – journey into the world of DEVADASI performing arts*

*curated by Dr. Saskia Kersenboom; see [www.paramparai.eu/html/pdf/CID-DASI-ATTAM.pdf](http://www.paramparai.eu/html/pdf/CID-DASI-ATTAM.pdf)*

*The YATRA residency in Tamilnadu addresses those who are passionate about South Indian performing arts and their living history. This program situates the cultural heritage of **devadasis** in the continuing traditions of Hindu temple ritual, its music and dance repertoire.*



*Until the middle of the last century **devadasi** music and dance played a crucial role in Hindu temples and royal courts. (Post-)Colonial developments transferred their artistic heritage to a new social group of leisured performers, a new name „Bharata Natyam”, a new secular stage and a new format that is now performed worldwide. After the 'Devadasi Act' of 1947 - the Indian law that forbade dedication of women to temples and religious icons- the relevance of these hereditary arts became alienated from their millennia old embeddedness in Hindu ritual.*

***YATRA** connects remaining threads of this intangible cultural heritage to its original, functional environment of the Hindu temple and royal court. It does so by a residency in Tamilnadu, set in the village of Tirupugalur along the Kaveri delta. In its ancient Shiva Agnishvara temple, we will observe on a daily basis "arcana" rituals that form the pragmatic context for the songs and dances performed by devadasis then, and, that are taught now as part of the Yatra curriculum.*

***Three devadasi family repertoires** inform this curriculum: first and foremost, the ritual heritage of Smt.P. Ranganayaki (1914-2005) one of the last devadasis of the Murugan temple in Tiruttani. She was trained by her maternal grandmother Smt. Subburatnamma (1871-1950) who noted down her repertoire in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu. Saskia Kersenboom received these original manuscripts and their praxis from Smt.P. Ranganayaki as her rightful heir.*



*Contemporary practice of temple music proves that the devadasi intangible cultural heritage is not a thing of the past. Some twenty kilometers southwards, in the ancient town of Tiruvarur, we encounter the second devadasi family repertoire. Here, musicians of the Shri Tyagarajasvami temple still perform songs that used to accompany devadasis in daily and festival ritual. However, the actual dancers are but vivid memories of Shri T.K.Selvaganapati and family whose musical lineage goes back fourteen generations. Together with them and other local artists Saskia works on reconstructing this living devadasi archive into current dance repertoire. **YATRA** shares this effort in line with UNESCO sustainable development of Intangible Cultural Heritage ([www.unesco.org/culture/ich](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich)).*



***EXCURSIONS** to historical sites trace the origin from where the devadasi arts of music and dance migrated to urban centres. The delta of the Kaveri river resounds with echoes of famous composers, choreographers and poets. Their lineages „bani” are known by the names of towns like Pandanallur, Valuvur, Kumbhakonam and other places in the vicinity of Tirupugalur. **YATRA** travels further south to the city of Tanjavur to discover the „royal*

dimension” of devadasi arts. This is the home of the courtly style of devadasi dance now known as „Bharata Natyam”. Choreographies of the legendary ‘Tanjavur Quartet’ and the family heritage of Smt. Tanjavur Balasaraswati (1918-1984), date back to this royal court of the 18th century. Their sophisticated repertoire of music and dance makes up the third devadasi family legacy that informs the Yatra curriculum. ([www.vimeo.com/107884166](http://www.vimeo.com/107884166) )

In and around Tanjavur, the major cultural centre of the Chola kings (9th to 13th century CE), it is clear that Hindu ritual encompasses all dimensions of the **Triloka**, that is: the ‘three worlds’ of Gods, Mortals and Demons. Devadasis performed in Brihadisvara Koyil, the grand temple of Shiva, in the royal court and in village shrines. From this composite, ritual landscape they emerge as „living embodiments” of **Shakti** (the ‘Great Goddess’); this embeds their cultural heritage in the ancient traditions of **Tantra** that spread all over Asia.

This Tantric inroad leads **YATRA** to the ultimate shrine of Hindu performing arts: for ages mystics, poets, singers, composers and dancers have paid their obeisance to Shiva as Nataraja, the ‘Cosmic Dancer’ at Chidambaram. Here, **Shiva** performs his **Ananda Tandava** ‘Dance of Bliss’ with Shivakami, his beloved „other half”, at his side. The union of Shiva and Shakti holds the „secret of Chidambaram” as well as the secret of devadasis and their performing arts.



**REFERENCE:** *Devadasi Tradition in South India*, by Dr. Saskia Kersenboom, 1984, 4th edition 2011, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass

