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Female Functionaries of Temples: '*Dēvadāsī*' System from Divine to Degrading in Colonial South India

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Abstract: *Understanding the activities of the temples as well as their contributions to south Indian society requires a notion of the 'dēvadāsī' (female servants of god) system. It aids in developing a perception of how women contribute to the maintaining of a specific ideology and the complexities of women's subjugation under patriarchal structures. Regions with strong political and economic development, such as the fertile area of Tamil Nadu in the Kāvēri delta, were where the 'dēvadāsī' institution originated. The focus of this study has been on how the 'dēvadāsī' system gradually changed from having a spiritual nature to a profane one. Both literary and inscriptional sources have been used for this paper. Eventually, this article focused on the socio-economic conditions that 'dēvadāsī' faced throughout the colonial era.*

Key Words: *Dēvadāsī, Woman, South India, Temple, Dancing Girls, Inscriptions, Prostitution.*

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Introduction

Traditionally referred to as '*dēvadāsī*', female functionaries of temple have long been a source of debate and contention. Before there was declared unlawful in the beginning of the twentieth century, the '*dēvadāsī*' system[1] was widely used in India. In several regions of India, temples have been connected to female servants. Traveler's stories, literatures, inscriptions, and ethnographical references all depict about the '*dēvadāsī*', and these sources account for a large portion of our information about the '*dēvadāsī*' legacy. The dancing females known as *dāsīs* or '*dēvadāsī*', or 'servants of the gods', were employed by Tamil temples and live off of dance, music, and 'the oldest profession in the world'.[2] Women were traditionally dedicated for the ceremonial service, which was an ancient and widespread custom. Depending on the time and the culture, each country had different customs. The inception of social system in India is unclear. According to Aloka Parasher Sen[3], the puranic religion invented the practice of women performing servitude in Indian temples. According to A.K. Singh[4], the '*dēvadāsī*' institution in India did not originate in the third century B.C.E. because public temple worship was developing in the early centuries of the Christian era.[5] According to few academicians, this system was originated only in Tamil Nadu.[6] We have unambiguous proof concerning the '*dēvadāsī*' and their contributions to the society in south India. Rather the devotional songs of the Āḻvārs and Nāyanmārs, written in Tamil between the sixth and ninth centuries, speak of singing and dancing, as well as celestial and human females doing adoration in temples. However, they do not speak about temple women specifically.[7] We can learn about the '*dēvadāsī*' tradition from the inscriptions found in south India.[8]

Recently few anthropologists have worked on ritual activities of female functionaries of south Indian temples; they are namely, Frederique Marglin[9], Amrit Srinivasan[10], Saskia Kersenboom[11] and K. Sadasivan[12], etc. The new ethnographies that these researchers have produced have shed light on and modified earlier conceptions of the nature of temple women. They are particularly useful in showing how temple women are part of Indian society, culture and faith and do not exist as unusual individuals.

The Cōḻa dynasty had its zenith in south India during the ninth to thirteenth century C.E., encompassing political, social, economic, religious, and cultural domains. Great temples of Tamil Nadu's were built by the Cōḻa kings and other members of the royal family. Apart from serving as influential places of worship, these temples also served as hubs for various social and commercial activities. The combination of numerous similar socio-religious and cultural organizations led to the evolution of the '*dēvadāsī*' system.

Meaning of the word '*Dēvadāsī*'

The historian Leslie C. Orr defined the '*dēvadāsī*' or temple women as women who are connected to a temple either by having a regular service role there or because their fundamental social identity is established with reference to a temple. These women may or may not be prostitutes or dancers.[13] Tamil classical writings claim that they were proficient in singing, dancing, and instrument playing in addition to being amusing.[14] In different sections of India,

'*dēvadāsīs*', or female slaves of the gods, went by different titles. These '*dēvadāsīs*' were known as '*jōginīs*' in Andhra Pradesh and '*muralis*' in Maharashtra.[15] Jogan Sarkar listed the various titles by which they are referred to in different regions of India, including '*basavis*' in Karnataka, '*nātis*' in Assam, and '*mahiras*' in Kerala.[16] The names for temple women in the inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh differ significantly from those in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The phrase '*sāni*', which is the Telugu translation of the Sanskrit word 'lady', or '*svāminī*', appears in more than half of the Andhra inscriptions. This term is also frequently used as a title for women who are not temple ladies. It's noteworthy to contrast this phrase with '*tēvaraṭiyāḷ*', which is most frequently used to refer to temple women in Cōḻa period inscriptions. The word for temple ladies most commonly used in the inscriptions from the Cōḻa period is '*tēvaraṭiyāḷ*', or in its plural, '*tēvaraṭiyār*'. This is a compound term made up of the words '*tēvar*' (god, lord) and '*aṭiyāḷ*' (female slave, servant, and devotee).[17] *'Aṭi',* which means 'foot' in Tamil, is the source of the second component of the name '*tēvaraṭiyār*'. Being at someone else's feet as a slave, servant, or devotee is known as being an '*aṭiyāṉ*' (male) or '*aṭiyāḷ*' (female).[18]

Recruitment of '*Dēvadāsī*'

This institution was supposed to have originated and continued to exist due to a number of circumstances. One explanation for this is that the gods required full-time, sacred, and secular service. According to A.S. Altekar's[19] work, when Hindu temples started to be built and adorned on a grand scale, a few individuals started to feel that singing girls should be affixed to shrines to provide music during the various rituals and worships of the day. Rājarāja I constructed the Tāñjōre temple in the tenth century C.E., and he made sure that the temple had at least four hundred dancing girls (*tēvaraṭiyār*)[20] for temple services. It was thought to be a divine event when a '*dēvadāsī*' got married in the temple. Another explanation is that some devotees performed their services at the temple, while others gave donations or received gifts from elderly family members. '*Dēvadāsīs*' were recruited in plenty of ways, including by purchase and presentation.[21] A mediator by the name of Candraśekara of Nandīvarma Maṅgalam donated his three slaves to the Vayalūr temple in 948 C.E.[22] A document from 1119 C.E. states that the hunters gifted a few of their family's ladies to the Tiruvallam temple as slaves.[23] The sale of women for temple service was noted in another document.[24] Five women and their ancestors were sold, with the dates of sale recorded in the inscription 1218-1219 C.E.[25] According to a broken inscription at the Uttarapatiśvara temple, four ladies were sold as '*tēvaraṭiyār*' for seven hundred *kāsu* to the Tiruvalaṅgaṭuṭaiyār Nāyanar shrine during the thirteenth regnal year of Rājadhirājan II.[26]

Responsibilities of '*Dēvadāsī*'

The girls who were consecrated to the deities as '*dēvadāsīs*' are required to carry out specific tasks in the temples. The services these females provide are referred to by St. Appar as '*thoṇṭu ceiṭal*' (performing service), '*paṇikal paviḻutal*' (doing duties), etc.[27] Dancing, singing, reciting the *Tiruppāṭyam* (ten Śaiva hymns) or *Tiruppācuram* (Vaiṣṇava hymns), and cleaning the temple premises were the main duties of the '*dēvadāsī*' of the past. The Mukteśwara temple

claims that singing and dancing were performed by the '*aṭigaḷmār*' (servants of God) of the temple.[28] Among the menial tasks were sweeping, mopping the floor, using the water and cow dung to clean, and beautifying the temple grounds. All these services, including the making of garlands, were carried out by Tilakavati, according to *Periyapurāṇam*.[29] The division of labor was clearly defined and '*dēvadāsīs*' were well-trained, according to the custom. Historian Rekha Pande divided the roles played by temple girls in the sacred domain into ritualistic and non-ritualistic categories.[30] Dance, the performance of '*tiruālātti*', or '*karpura ālāttai*' (a concoction of turmeric, lime, and camphor), and '*tiruculam*' (the sacred trident) were regarded as ritualistic services.[31] The non-ritualistic tasks included carrying a lamp[32], keeping it lighted all the time[33], bringing water for prayer[34], fanning the idol, husking the paddy[35], cleaning the rice[36] and kitchen utensils[37], cleaning clothes[38], decorating the area[39], and blowing flywhisk for the gods[40]. They also prepared scented powder, burned incense[41], sacred flowers, and plates[42] for the deity. According to *Tiruvācakam*, the Śaiva canon, '*dēvadāsīs*' were responsible for dancing, sweeping, smearing, and manufacturing garlands.[43]

Rewards and Privileges for '*Dēvadāsī*'

The '*dēvadāsīs*' were compensated with various rewards in exchange for carrying out specific tasks in the temples. Their responsibilities and compensation differed from temple to temple and occasionally as well. Their prestige in the temples and in society at large was determined, in part, by the nature of their duties. The Vaiṣṇava saint Rāmānuja made some changes to the terms of employment for servants, such as the '*dēvadāsīs*' of Śriraṅgam temple. They were mentioned in the 'Udaiyavār Code' – third group.[44] For their services, '*dēvadāsīs*' received remuneration in the form of a home, land, food, remission or exemption from taxes, and other privileges. '*Dēvadāsīs*' were awarded grants in two or more of the above mentioned combinations the majority of the time. These rights included paying taxes, fetching water from wells, and having priority on performances. In exchange for their services, a few of them received tax-free land and residential sites.[45] The village had been given to '*dēvadāsīs*' by the emperors and temple officials. An inscription from the reign of Kaṇṇaradēvā[46], dated to 958 C.E., documents the gift of land in kōṭiyūr to a '*dēvadāsī*' named Nṛtya Viṭanki. According to a record from 1208 C.E.[47], the temple administrators were delighted to bestow upon a '*dēvadāsī*' small hamlet of Erumēlippaṭi as '*jīvithā*'. These settlements were free from all types of taxes (i.e., '*ilavai*'/'*uvagai*').[48] The territory that surrounded the temple complex was known as *cērī*[49], *maṭaiviḷākam*[50], which was the common term for the residential region of '*dēvadāsīs*'. Female functionaries who were recruited to work at the Rājarājeśwara temple were given one *vēli* of land, equivalent to one hundred *kālam* of paddy, and a house in each of the three quarters of the temple's grounds: North Street (191 houses), South Street (184 houses), and West Street (25 houses).[51]

S. Chandni Bi[52] believes that these elements show the true position that they had in the society because a person's name and title can also allude to their social standing. When a '*dēvadāsī*' fulfilled her ritual responsibilities in the temple, she was considered a *Nityasumaṅgalī*

who was forever emancipated from widowhood. These individuals were considered auspicious. Even married ladies whose husbands are still alive, or '*sumuṅgalī*', were not as auspicious as the '*dēvadāsī*'. Primarily, because the goddesses were ceremoniously united with the particular feminine energies of the '*dēvadāsīs*', who were described as the 'emerging of the Śakti'. Further, she pledged her life to a partner who is heavenly, or one who will never pass away. As a result, she was able to maintain her double auspiciousness and became known as '*nityasumaṅgalī*', or the perpetually auspicious female. Because they brought luck, shielded the monarch and the nation from harm, offered protection from the elements, and promoted prosperity, health, fertility, and happiness, it was believed that the temple should employ and protect the ladies.[53] During the reign of Rājēndra I, Nankai Paravai was a renowned '*dēvadāsī*', according to an inscription, with the image of the Cōḻa king Rājēndra I, her image was also kept on the premises of the temple.[54] The images later received ritual approval, and the images are still subject to worships performed by temple priests today.[55] Based on the available data, it appears that the '*dēvadāsīs*' sought a respectable and dignified status in society throughout the Cōḻa era.

Both socially and economically, the '*dēvadāsīs*' were highly esteemed in their era. Both the temple administration and the members of the royal family who appointed the '*dēvadāsīs*' paid them for the numerous services they rendered. A temple woman named Cāṇi Orriāḻvi from Tiruorriyūr Uṭaiyār temple was mentioned in an inscription from Rājādhirājadevar's ninth year of his reign that she donated thirty two cows to keep one continuous lamp burning and supplied one hundred fourteen *nāḻi* of '*ney*' (*ghee*).[56] According to an epigraphic document, Iravi Varma gave the Śucīndram temple land for the purpose of introducing a '*pūjā*' and other rituals. The property was dedicated to the Perumal Rāyār, a well-known '*dēvadāsī*' of that time.[57] A late twelfth century inscription from the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu spoke of a woman who worked in the Pāṇḍya kings' palace. She installed an image of the goddess in her daughter's honor and gave her jewelry and other gifts to encourage worship.[58] She conveyed her daughter's name to the next generation with this inscription. She used the temple as a communication channel and became renowned or immortal in the eyes of her daughter and granddaughter. In some instances, female functionaries of temple were also mentioned in the inscriptions as the holders of '*kāni*', which is a right over the portion of a land's yield that was not required to be paid in taxes. Females of temple were referred to as '*kāni*' holders in seven different inscriptions.[59]

'*Dēvadāsī*' System in Colonial Tamil Nadu

Throughout the colonized countries, the colonization process had a profound effect. Traditionalism and modernity went out of favor between the eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century C.E. The brahmanical social order and colonial state's prevailing beliefs marginalized and discriminated against the indigenous population. The current social norms and practices of the local population were called into question by the new social and economic changes. The *nautch* was typically carried out by '*dēvadāsī*' and courtesans. '*Dēvadāsī*' played a significant role in the *nautch* performances in south India. The sacred identity of the '*dēvadāsī*'

was lost in the nineteenth century C.E., and their *nautch* became the '*dēvadāsī*' phenomenon. The position of '*dēvadāsī*' was deteriorating during the colonial period, and they were being treated like prostitutes.[60]

The Mārāthā kings of Thāñjāvūr encouraged the performing arts, such as dance, music, and drama. The Mārāthā had extensive training in the arts and had a significant role in the development of several art forms. Mārāthās were known to allude to the practice of '*nātyam*' (dancing) in various documents as '*abhinayam*', '*ādal*', 'nāṭakam', '*nātyam*', '*pāratham*', '*sadhir*', and '*kēḷikkai*'.[61] The term '*sadhir-āṭṭam*', rather than '*dāsī-āṭṭam*', was once used to refer to the '*dēvadāsī*' dance during the Mārāthā reign. '*Sadhar*' in Mārāthi signified '*durbar*', or court. The dance that was done in the '*sadhar*' was first known as '*sadhar-āṭṭam*', then as '*sadhir-āṭṭam*'.[62]

Code of Conduct

A strict code of conduct for '*dēvadāsī*' was enforced by the Mārāthā court, and anyone who disobeyed it faced harsh penalties.[63] Girls were bought for temple service by the Mārāthā royal court and temple organizations. Dāsī Rāmamaṇi with five people was purchased by the royal household for the Cidambaram temple. Two kālam and five *paṇam* of paddy might be obtained by them each month.[64] The Mārāthās of Thāñjāvūr imposed a great deal of regulations and limitations to regulate the sexuality of '*dēvadāsī*'. According to Abbe Dubois, '*dēvadāsī*' performed the '*ārati*' over idols faithfully both in the morning and at night to protect them from the deadly gaze of evil-minded people.[65]

The *Nautch* Performance

In south India, royal cosmologies generally devolved to lower strata of political hierarchy in the eighteenth century C.E. In 1856 C.E., the Mārāthās' independent reign over Thāñjāvūr was terminated by the British due to the 'theory of lapses'. The recently formed political force established itself throughout the area. The colonists realized that the temple patronage would not help them maintain their imperial rule over the indigenous people. Thus, they stopped providing support to the temple. The changing patronage structure pattern in the eighteenth century C.E. was noted by K.N. Panikkar.[66] A new patronage system was necessary to reflect the changes in society. As this was going on, the Rāyōtwāri and Zamindāri systems gave rise to a new political lobby, which was sometimes referred to as the new elites in south Indian society. Minor rulers, *zamindārs*, *thupaci* – affluent Brahmins, and merchants were among the local elites who held influence over the temples and other religious organizations. The 'dēvadāsīhood' was controlled and impacted by these patrons. It respected the character of '*dēvadāsīs*'. The ceremonial festivities of the non-royal elites now included significant use of the auspicious insignia of '*dēvadāsī*'.[67] This patriarchal society aspired to share the 'sacred body' and become patrons of '*dēvadāsīs*'.[68]

'*Dēvadāsī*' lost temple patronage as a result of the collapse of the temple economy. They began to experience financial hardship and challenging situations. Consequently, it forced them to turn to prostitution and concubinage to get acquainted their basic necessities. '*Dēvadāsī*' activities gradually transitioned from the sacred to the profane realm. Rather than emphasizing

their previous religious services, sexual actions of '*dēvadāsīs*' were stressed. A *zamindār* in the north Arcot region oversaw a sizable troupe of dancers from Kalahasti Temple who were '*dēvadāsīs*', or '*pagōda*' (temple) dancers, and who lived only in concubinage. Their sons were slaves of *zamindār* and go by the name of Nagari Kunrāradas, or sons of the country, as they have no father.[69] Rather than being performed for the temple's gods, the dance was performed for *thupaci*, *zamindārs*, and minor rulers. Typically, '*dēvadāsīs*' were hired for several days to perform in profane settings, and upon their satisfaction of lords, they were given treasures including cash, shawls, and other gold accessories.[70] Art historian Kimiko Ohtani[71] exposed how conventional dance performances were degraded and how audiences were expected to focus on the beauty of dancers rather than their performance. P.N. Appusvami[72] stated that the vulgar gestures used by the '*dēvadāsī*' dancers made him hesitant to observe their performance.

Social Life of '*Dēvadāsī*' in the Colonial Period

A significant influence came from the '*dēvadāsī*' system's imperial intervention in the Indian subcontinent. The '*dēvadāsī*'s' way of existence was impacted by social and economic paradigm. They were compelled to investigate their identification as their 'sacredness' was called into doubt. Edgar Thurston[73] stated that prostitution, the oldest profession in the world, was practiced by the '*dāsīs*' or '*dēvadāsīs*'. When a girl reached adulthood, she was sold into prostitution by outsiders based on her virginity, if it was not debauched by the temple Brahmins. The amount paid depended on the wealth of the person seeking for the honor. John Shortt[74] brought out the terrible institutions associated with Hinduism and how these systems victimize poor, unfortunate women. Conflicts over temple rites and honors focused on the colonial judiciary. Certain rules and special rights that applied only to '*dēvadāsīs*' were not extended to the common women of the Indian subcontinent. The Hindu law acknowledged the dancing women in India. According to the Indian Penal Code, temple workers, dancing girls, and other individuals were found guilty starting from the 1860s. Sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Penal Code prohibit the devoting of underage girls and the adoption of infant girls by dancing women with the intention of treating them as '*dēvadāsīs*', which imposes a criminal penalty.

According to Kunal Parker[75], the development of urban civilization gave rise to a new kind of urban prostitution, mostly including Hindu women as its practitioners. The authorities found it difficult to distinguish between prostitutes and '*dēvadāsīs*'. Additionally, because '*dēvadāsīs*' were regarded as a distinct class under Hindu law, the government somehow acknowledged the civil rights of dancing women.[76] Yet, throughout the British control, '*dēvadāsīs*' were thought to be similar to prostitutes. As a result, prostitution and dancing started to be associated in the society.[77] Certain authors[78] contend that the '*dēvadāsī*' community faced internal threats in addition to external ones due to reform efforts. The issue was that the '*dēvadāsīs*' at the time was growing more and more divided between those who were brought into the society as prostitutes and those attempting to preserve its links to respectable activities.[79] Despite disapproving of the '*dēvadāsī*' girl's performance at the temple, the princely states refrained from outright banning the '*dēvadāsī*' service.

Discussion

Worship, dancing, and singing at the temple gradually declined, and '*dēvadāsīs*' started to engage in prostitution on a direct basis. It has been demonstrated that the ritual of committing young girls to the service of the deity originated in ancient India, but in contemporary India, it has degraded into a justification for the exploitation of these girls sexually. The '*dēvadāsī*' heritage has suffered so much socially, culturally, and economically during each change that it is now exclusively connected to societal problems in modern times. The practice of performing females to the temple persists despite legislation outlawing the '*dēvadāsī*' practice. However, using the same instruments that were formerly thought to be prestigious, today's they are pleading for their existence rather than entertaining divinity.

Therefore, if we go back in time, we can observe a steady decline in the reputation and status of the '*dēvadāsīs*'. They enjoyed immense popularity and a stellar reputation throughout the early period. However, during the Thāñjāvūr Mārāthās, the status of the '*dēvadāsīs*' declined. The autonomous function of '*dēvadāsī*' was dismantled, and they were recognized more for their dance performances than for their participation in temple rituals. The existence of '*dēvadāsī*' was called into question by the failure of temple economy. The subsequently formed elites were drawn from several castes and became the temple and '*dēvadāsīs*' patrons. The majority of the princely states began the process of outlawing the custom in their respective provinces at the early stages of the twentieth century C.E. Thus, the initial observation of this writing has been discussed that most of them joined the '*dēvadāsī*' institution with the intention of serving the god and anticipating something in return; however, in later times, one group in society attempted to take advantage of another group by using religion as a pretext, and as a result, the '*dēvadāsī*' ended up becoming a sex object for the dominant groups. This degradation formed the background of Periyar's self-respect movement later on in south India, which played one of the significant roles in changing the perception on '*dēvadāsīs*' as well as women in the people's mind of that time.

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