

The Customs and Confrontations of Devadasis in Our Society

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Abstract:

Devadasi system has been a topic of several studies in the early Middle Ages. These were the women who were recognized with a lot of wealth and fame and were dedicated to temples. Devadasi functions have been part of worship throughout the long history of the temple system. In India, the practice began and developed in the early Middle Ages. Recently the system is associated with humiliation and prostitution. This article examines the inclusivity of Devadasi in society and the challenges faced by the community.

Key Words, Anti- Nautch, Natyam, Sadir, Devadasi, Agamas



Pic courtesy: Promotion at DelhiEvents.com

Introduction

The Puranas claim that Devadasi is descended from God. Devadasis are referred to in Agamas as Nartakis, Ganikas, Rudra-ganikas, and Dasis. By the third century CE, the Devadasi tradition was fashionable. Sharma asserts that this practise dates back at least as far as Kautilya, while Saleatore asserts that the devadasis were expressly mentioned in literature as early as the fourth century CE. Both of them make mention of Kautilya's claim that temple-associated ladies received strict training in music and dance before

being employed in the Shutrasala (weaving department) as they grew older (Behera, 1987, 163). Inscriptions about Devadasi system can be found in Somadeva's Kathasaritsagara of the Gupta Age, Kumarapanha of Buddhaghosha of the fifth century CE in Kumara panha. Devadasi is also mentioned in the Keshari Dynasty of South India, which dates to the sixth century AD. This custom started when one of the dynasty's great queens decreed that some ladies with a background in classical dancing should wed gods in order to glorify the gods. The subjects of this Tamil Nadu cultural phenomena, the Devadasi, refer to their tradition as Tévataci Murai or Devadasi Vritti. 400 dancers from the Chola nation are said to have been hired by Raja Raja Chola I for the Brihadishwara shrine. During the rule of Vijaya Sen, numerous devadasis were appointed at the Siva temple at Deopara in Bengal.

They are known as 'Maharis' in Kerala, 'Natis' in Assam, 'Basadis In Karnataka, 'Bhavani's In Goa 'Kudikar' on the West-Coast `Bhogam- Vandhi' or `Jogin' in Andhra Pradesh; Thevardiyar' in Tamil Nadu; `Murali', 'Jogateen' and 'Aradhini' in Maharashtra. In Karnataka, old devadasis are called `Jogati' and young devadasis are `Basavi'. Literally, the term Devadasi translates as "servant of God".

The Angkor Borei inscription from Cambodia or ancient Cambuja shows that in AD 611 there were 7 dancing girls, 11 singers and 4 violinists in the temple. Prior to 966 AD, the word Emperumandiyar was used by the Vaishnavites to refer to his Devadasis. This word was found in an inscription in a Vishnu temple around 1230-1240 AD. King Hari Brahman of West Bengal appointed a dancer at Ananta Basudev temple. "Descriptions of the dance rituals in various Indian inscriptions were available. Yogimala Cave (3rd century BC), Bhujaveswar Temple (975 AD), Kalipadaswami Temple (1018 AD), Brahmeswar Temple (1053 AD), Megeswar Temple (1070 AD), Sovaneswar Temple (1080 AD), Mukhalingam Temple (11th century AD), Jaladiswar Temple (1144 AD), Agastiswar Temple (1158 AD), Laxmi Nrusingha Temple at Simanchalam (15th century AD), Sri Jagannath Temple (16th century AD) had evidence of dance rituals and devadasi traditions. The reign of Chola kings from the 9th century to the 12th century was the heyday of Devadas. The Devadasi tradition continued from the 18th century to the 19th century but lost momentum.

The Past System:

Devadasi's stance was regarded as being honourable and respectable. It is stated that Vaishnava mysticism expert Kulasekara Alwar gave his daughter to a temple so she may become a devadasi. Neela, his daughter, was given to the Srirangam temple as Devadasi. The aristocrats did not view getting married to a Devadasi as dishonourable. The Susindram temple's inscription reveals that the Devadasi temple included a theatre and several mandapams. Devadasis played a big role in temple work. Devadasis had the authority to do the puja, which was a temple used by monks when they travelled far. They also went to the offerings and fire consecration. There were 400 devadasis, according to inscriptions found at Tanjore temple dating back to 1499 A.D. There were 450 devadasis in the Brahideswara temple and 500 in the Dorti Somnath temple. Around 4,000 temples in Gujarat are said to have had roughly 20,000 devadasis in mediaeval times; they resided in free housing near the temple and received tax-free land from the endowment. While the Devadasi system persisted unabated in southern India until the 19th century, it declined in northern India as a result of Muslim invaders' destruction of temples. The Thiruchirapalli district's "Korangunathan," "Pipilikeswar," and "Sundereswar" temple inscriptions provide information about devadasi. In the 12th century, Chalukya King Vikramaditya I built a temple called Chandaleswar and invited stunning women from all over the world to perform as temple dancers. 400 girls were chosen by Raja I to perform dances

at the shrine. During the rule of Vijaya Sen, numerous devadasis were appointed in the Siva temple of Deopara in Bengal. There is evidence that the Devadasi system was used in other regions of India as well, but it was most common in the southern Indian states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Devadasis have been a part of the Lord Jagannath Temple in Orissa for a number of centuries, and the Sailadbhawa dynasty, which ruled Orissa in the sixth and seventh centuries, is when the system first emerged there.

The period prior to the arrival of the British was considered the golden age in Devadasi history. They received the highest level of respect. The devadasis played a significant role in influencing dance and music culture because of their high social and economic standing. Devadasis used to perform rites and ceremonies while staying near to the temple. They gave performances during religious ceremonies and gatherings. Kings forced devadasis to perform in the palace and patronised them. Local landowners and other influential people entertained themselves with the devadasis related to the temple. Girls who had dedicated their lives to serving God in a temple in the past were thought well of. Both Dalit and poor girls as well as girls from affluent, aristocratic households were devoted. There was no specific caste from which women may be selected for devotion, and in the stories, princesses and young women from the priestly castes were known to become God's handmaidens. Thus, rather than forming a caste, the Devadasis formed an occupational group. Under Islamic and British administration, the devadasis' once-high prestige started to decline. After successfully capturing North India, Islamic emperors started demolishing Hindu temples all across the area. The devadasis, who were practically bound to the temples, were left to fend for themselves once the Hindu temples in the northern half of the subcontinent were demolished. Devadasis started to be exploited as a result of the temples being destroyed because they lost both their patrons and their social standing. The devadasis were compelled to dance at "wedding feasts or other private entertainments" as a result of the loss of patronage; they had previously performed at religious temple festivities. In India [at this time], dancing and prostitution "grew interwoven." British rule, which, in contrast to the Islamic Empire, covered the entire subcontinent, further restricted the system. The British reformists, according to many academics, wanted to set the practise apart from religious and traditional practises, despite disagreements over what the British believed particularly about the practise. No matter how they felt about the practise, the British authorities removed patrons and kings who supported the devadasi system. South India was mostly outside the grasp of the Islamic Empire. As a result, the practise persisted in flourishing in that region of the nation. Most devadasi communities still exist in south India today.

Every social issue has a few contributing aspects that make it worse, and these factors come from society as a whole. These aspects mostly fall under the categories of social, cultural, religious, and economic situations. Numerous causes contribute to the existence of the "Devadasi system," one of the worst societal ills. Each subsection discusses the body of literature that already exists on the influencing factors. Based on the severity of each contributing element, the factors are arranged.

One of the main causes of many societal problems is poverty. The only reason girls were committed in the past was because of religious beliefs. Later, the dedication's main driver was poverty. Many poor families dedicate their young daughters to the devadasis religion out of necessity, and these girls subsequently work as prostitutes in their community (mostly for upper caste individuals) or are sent to brothels to make money. The poor The Devadasi system has a deep relationship with Hinduism. Although there are other factors, females' devotion is largely influenced by their religious

and superstitious beliefs. There is a strong and irrational belief in god or goddess, which frequently leads to various outcomes like dedicating girls for the welfare of the family/village, to have a boy child, etc. Second, there is a commitment to finding a cure for any illness or handicap that affects the girls or other family members.

The devadasi system mostly has an impact on those from lower castes. Additionally, the literature indicates the significant connection between lower caste and poverty, which forces parents to send their daughters to the devadasi order. The dedication is primarily observed among non-Brahmin communities, and the Devadasi system is genuinely seen as a social concern that primarily affects Scheduled Castes. On the other hand, some people from higher castes also give their daughters to the devadasi order. Higher-class ladies occasionally dedicated themselves to avoiding widowhood. The devadasi and her dance have the same cultural and aesthetic tradition. The Reformist Movement and the entrance of the colonial British, however, signalled the end of the Devadasi and a profound alteration of the art form. In relation to the Devadasi system, there is a significant distinction between private and public, the home and the outside world, and women and males. The social reformist rhetoric on the Devadasi system makes this difference very clear. “The artistic achievements of devadasi women – their prowess as musicians and dancers – were overshadowed, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by the stigma of prostitution.” (Weidman, 2005).

Their Challenges:

The modern version of the devadasi practice differs significantly from the historical institution in terms of both its outward manifestation and underlying goals. Even though the ceremony today still involves worshipping a deity, most usually Yellamma, the similarities between the historical and modern organizations largely end there. In its current form, the practice is less about temple devotion or temple dancing and more closely associated with the sex trade, prostitution, and the exploitation of lower castes. Despite its honourable past, the devadasi system has evolved into an institutionalized system that sexually exploits the most defenseless segments of Indian society.

India's current devadasi system still promotes the sexual exploitation of women from lower castes, despite the fact that it is not nearly as prevalent or prominent as it previously was. The system, especially in its current form, is very closely linked to tradition and poverty.

It's crucial to understand that the practise differs slightly from a typical sex worker's method. The most important distinction is that many devadasis are coerced into the way of life at an early age as a result of the integration of social and religious ideals. The close connection between religious convictions and sexual exploitation makes the devadasi tradition stand out. In fact, thousands of little girls between the ages of five and ten continue to commit themselves to the Goddess Yellamma every year. For the first pattern, which involves tying the beads before the thread, the girl is often between the ages of six and thirteen, according to Chandra, a devadasi who spoke with the Wall Street Journal. Despite its practical applications, the devadasi practice differs from other institutions of a similar nature in terms of both community acceptance and law enforcement's lack of concern. This is because of its religious and sociological connotations.

The family's well-being, the absence of male problems, the mother's devadasi status, the presence of the only female kid in the family, the fact that the parents were childless and that the first child happened to be a girl, among other factors, were cited as reasons for dedication.

Devadasis and present Society:

Despite the fact that this is not well known, a large number of current dancers, singers, and musicians in India are of Devadasi descent. Kishori Amonkar, an Indian classical vocalist, is one such musician who isn't ashamed of her heritage. The Devadasi Community is the common ancestor of Lata Mangeshkar, M. S. Subbalakshmi, and Asha Bhonsle. The widespread misconception that devadasis are prostitutes was encouraged by the Reformist and Revivalist terminology. The initial anti-nautch and anti-dedication campaign was launched in 1882. Their main goal was to get rid of this system. The majority of the reform lobbyists were social workers, missionaries, and medical professionals. They fought for the abolition of all practices and ceremonies used to consecrate females as devadasis to Hindu shrines. They sponsored conferences and seminars to "create a public attitude against the Devadasi system." In the latter half of 1892, a request was made to the Governor of Madras, the Viceroy, and the Governor General of India. This appeal also summarises the viewpoint of the anti-nautch movement.

The Movement initially focused on moulding public opinion, enlisting supporters, and motivating people to refuse to host devadasi guests at their festivities and to forsake Nautch parties. By 1899, the anti-nautch and Puritan organisations had focused their efforts on making dedications illegal. The anti-dedication movement gained traction thanks to the anti-nautch movement. Ram Mohan Roy, Periyar, Muthulakshmi Reddy, S. Muthiah Mudaliar, Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer, M. Krishnan Nair, C. N. Annadurai, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Govind Ranade, and Dhondo Keshav Karve among others led social reform movements that criticised and questioned the Devadasi system. The Hindu Revival Movement deliberately disregarded the laws of state political systems and Western scientific traditions. The Theosophical Society of India, whose anti-official stance and fervent interest in Indian Home Rule bound them with the revival of dance and music, significantly supported the movement. Pioneers of the Theosophical Movement like Madam H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott traveled widely in South India to support the revival of devadasi institutions and the associated art of Sadir. By outspokenly denouncing Western Christian morality and materialism, they gained the support of some of the native elite. In order to try to restore India's former greatness in philosophy, science, and art, the Theosophical Society of India established its main office in Adyar, Chennai, in 1882.

The efforts of E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale played a vital role in the Theosophical Society supporting the revival of sadir as Bharatnatyam. Arundale received the assistance he need from the Theosophical Society, along with the framework he required to act as the voice of India's cultural renaissance.

Strangely, it was Devadasis who fought to keep the Devadasi system in place and opposed its elimination. In the post-independence era, the Devadasi system rapidly collapsed, leaving only a direct path to prostitution. According to the 1956 United Nations Additional Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, dedicating a girl as a devadasi constitutes a kind of slavery. Any institution or practice whereby a child or young person under the age of 18 is handed by either or both of his natural parents or by his guardian to another person, whether for compensation or not, with a view to the exploitation of the child or young person, is forbidden under Article 1(d). A lot of laws have been passed by the federal and state governments to forbid dedication. In the part that follows, these have been covered.

During colonial times, groups of women with and without affiliations to temples were called "dancing girls" in various parts of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies. The dance they performed was known in Tamil Nadu by many names, including Sadir, Nautch, and Karnataka, before the dance form's "revival"

as Bharata Natyam in the 1940s. The heritage they had worked so hard to preserve over the years was damaged by this perception of the devadasi position.

The early gramophone companies, which were initially managed by Americans and Europeans rather than Brahmins, were eager to record Devadasi females. Contrary to All India Radio, which was established in the 1930s as a platform for the nationalist goal of making music acceptable, the phonograph companies were completely capitalist enterprises (therefore denying devadasi women access to broadcasting opportunities). Between 1910 and 1930, the devadasi women Dhanakoti Ammal, Bangalore Nagaratnammal, Bangalore Thayi, Coimbatore Thayi, M. Shanmughavadivu, Veena Dhanammal, and Madras Lalithangi had the best-selling recordings in South India.

Tamil Isai Sangam is another well-known organisation that supported the artistic abilities of the Isai Vellala Community, from whence many Devadasis descended. The Tamil Isai Sangam (Tamil Music Sangam) was established by Raja Annamalai Chettiar in 1942 at the Annamalai University in the South Arcot neighbourhood. This organisation served as a rival to the 1926-formed Madras Music Academy, which was founded by Brahmins. The Tamil Isai Sangam generally extended its patronage to non-Brahmins, prioritised Tamil music, and encouraged indigenous musical instruments like the nadaswaram in contrast to the Sankritic musical traditions of Muthuswami Dikshitar and others (wind instrument). This was also the time when female musicians from the Devadasi group started to gain recognition in the realm of Carnatic music. This was also the time when female musicians from the Devadasi group started to gain recognition in the realm of Carnatic music. The Isai Vellalar community, which had previously been affiliated to the Devadasi system, was made up of Veenai Dhanammal, M.L. Vasanthakumari, M.S. Subbulakshmi, and her nieces Mukta and Brindha. Balasaraswati, one of the top Bharatanatyam performers, was a neighbour and the niece of Veenai Dhanammal. Sociologically speaking, it is notable that while the male devadasi children selected to play the nadaswaram, the female devadasi children were selected to become mothers.

The abolitionist movement was founded in the nineteenth century in the princely Kingdom of Mysore. In Tamil Nadu, political parties started to campaign against the Devadasi system, and in the end, in 1930, Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy introduced a bill in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly that prohibited the dedication ceremony there and developed a way to legalize the marriage of the devoted women. Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy called a notice to a loophole that rendered the devotion unlawful in Sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Criminal Code. Under British rule, the Bombay Devadasi Prevention Act was passed in 1934. Apart from the woman who is being dedicated, anyone else involved in the dedication could be punished with a year in jail, a fine, or both under this Act. This Act also provided support for the devadasis in cases involving land. This Act compelled the neighborhood collector to intervene in cases of land disputes.

Subsequently, in 1947, the devadasi practice was outlawed by a Madras Presidency Act. The Devadasi system as well as its methods of survival, like as dance and singing, were forbidden by these Acts. The Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Devotion) and the Bombay Devadasi Prevention Act were both in force in Mysore State, which is now Karnataka. These Acts were replaced by the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982, which the government subsequently published in the Gazette in 1984. The Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Devotion) Act increased the fine amount and imprisonment duration. This statute provided provisions for devadasis rehabilitation, in contrast to earlier ones. A similar Act was later passed in Andhra Pradesh (which includes both Andhra and Telangana).

The Reform Movements were quite active, and the Reformists were heavily involved in a number of issues, such as the abolition of Devadasis and Sati, Child Marriage, Female Infanticide, etc., in contrast to

the other three States. The "Self Respect Movement" (Suya Mariyathai Iyyakkam) of E.V. Ramasamy was essential to the abolishment. Several reformers wed devadasis and the daughters of devadasis to show their support for the overthrow of the Devadasi system. Ramamurtham Ammal and E.V. Ramasamy had different viewpoints on the Self-Respect Movement, though. As a result, Ramamurtham Ammal launched a separate effort to get it repealed. The Devadasi system was put an end by the two women Muthu Lakshmi Reddy and Ramamurtham Ammal.

Tamil Nadu currently has a lower prevalence of devadasis than the other three States. Due in large part to the Reform Movements' vigorous activity and the Reformists' presence there, the practise is not very widespread in Tamil Nadu.

Hence, during the 20th century, the fight to end the devadasi practise was taken very seriously. The practise was outlawed by a number of State laws, such as the Bombay Devadasis Protection Act of 1934, the Tamil Nadu Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, the Karnataka Prohibition of Dedication Act of 1982, and the Andhra Pradesh Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1988.

The State governments have made the practise illegal and have started a number of efforts to put an end to it. Although the government has outlawed the practise, it hasn't addressed the root causes, such as poverty, untouchability, a lack of education, and illiteracy. He continues by stating that this is a crucial element in the practice's widespread adoption,

Conclusion

Despite these restrictions, the practise has numerous versions. Two probable underlying factors are the rules' inability to effectively stop inappropriate behaviour and a lack of enforcement. The Devadasi system's laws lack the authority necessary to hold perpetrators accountable. Initially intended to celebrate particular women, the devadasi ceremony evolved into a system of organised sexual exploitation and prostitution of young, lower-caste women. Thousands of girls are still coerced into prostitution every year for social, religious, and economical reasons, despite the fact that it is illegal under both local and international law and that it occurs less frequently now than it did in the past. They are extremely impoverished and devoted, thus the devadasi system can still be perceived as offering a way out of poverty and giving them access to the education they desire. Even more concerning would be the fact that a lot of the committed females do not view participation in the practises negatively. Despite the fact that they are extremely poor and faithful, it can still be said that the devadasi system offers a way out of poverty and access to the gods' blessings—the two things that the poorest people long for.

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