

# Devadasi System: Transforming the Tradition

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## Abstract:

In historical, sociological and anthropological literature the documentation of Devadasis can be found. Theoretical explanations of this system focus on criminalization of lifestyles of women. Contemporary interpretation finds out the latent force of exploitation incorporated in the system. Sociological analysis reveals the socio –cultural determinants behind the perpetuation of the phenomenon are religious beliefs, caste system, patriarchy and economic stress. Methodology: The study is principally based on secondary sources like book, articles and even newspaper reports. The objectives of the paper are – 1] to explain the nature of the Devadasi system and 2] to discuss the process of transformation of the devadasis . From the time of Purana, i.e approximately 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D, the custom of dedicating girls to temples was initiated. As entertainers in temples, they performed singing and dancing in various functions in temples and religious festivals. Feudal power gradually became down. Hence devadasis became helpless after decaying of feudalism. Devadasis were the core cultural agent of Indian classical art from the time immemorial. Hence the world of art and artists should be always respectful to their traditional cultural skill and agency forever.

**Keywords:** Devadasi, Exploitation, Culture

In historical, sociological and anthropological literature the documentation of Devadasis can be found. Indian society has a typicality of tradition in considering religious practices, cultural transformation as well as historical specificity. Theoretical explanations of this system focus on criminalization of lifestyles of women. Contemporary interpretation finds out the latent force of exploitation incorporated in the system. Sociological analysis reveals the socio –cultural determinants behind the perpetuation of the phenomenon are religious beliefs, caste system, patriarchy and economic stress. The origin of term devadasi is Sanskrit . The word “devadasi” is the total of two words, “deva” means God and “dasi” means slave or servant-woman. So, devadasis were slaves of God. In some other senses, they are known as wife of god. In practical situation, they are sacred dancers or dance artists. They were known as sacred prostitutes or temple dancers. They are structured in guilds. Several names were related with them, the names vary sometimes from one place to another.

## NAME OF DEVADASIS IN DIFFERENT PLACES

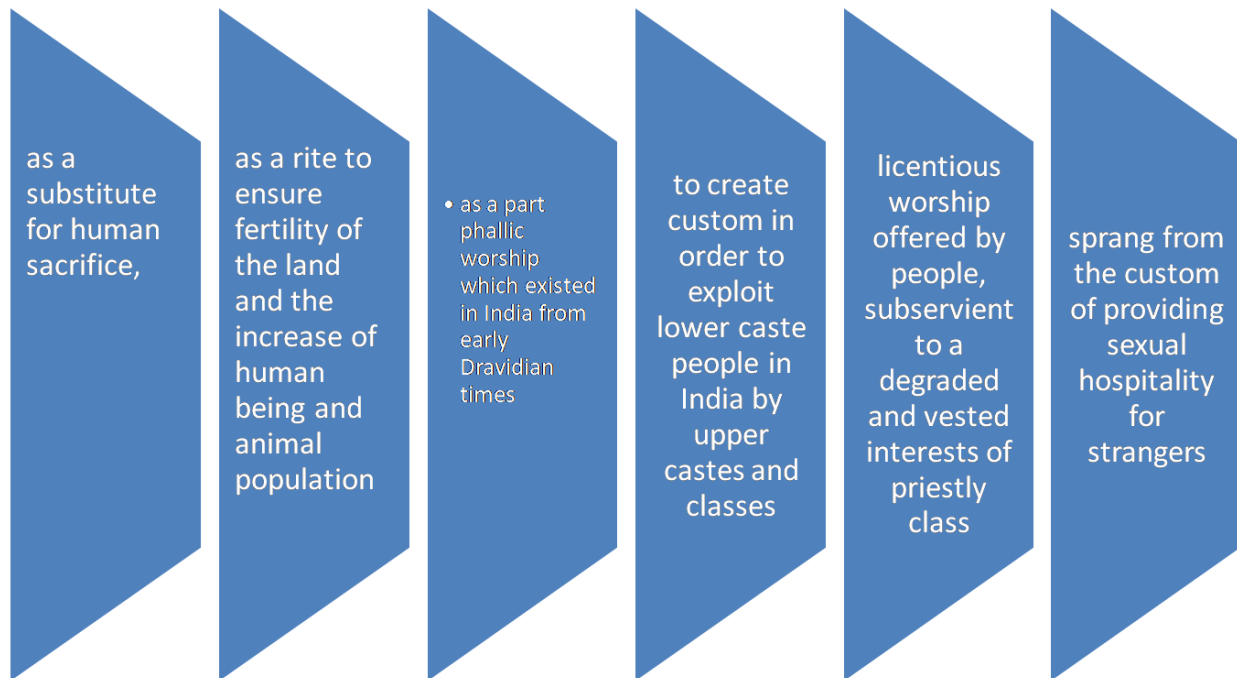
PLACE	NAME
Tamil Nadu	devaradiar or dasis
Travancore region	kudikkars,( those belonging to the house)
Andhra Pradesh	dogams and sanis
Kannada speaking areas	basavis and jogatis

Goa and Western India	bhavins or bhavinis, meaning beautiful wanton women
Maharashtra (other than coastal area)	muralis jogatis or jogtinis or aradhinis
Marwar	bhagtanis or bhagtan, wife of a bhagat or holy man

Devadasis are also known locally by the names of Nayakasani, Rangasani, Gangasani, Muttukattikondavlu, Davara Sule, Kasabi, Patradavalu, Jogti and so on.

Methodology: The study is principally based on secondary sources like book, articles and even newspaper reports. The objectives of the paper are – 1] to explain the nature of the Devadasi system and 2] to discuss the process of transformation of the devadasis .

NATURE: According to a report of Times of India [10.11.1987], devadasi system was established as a result of conspiracy between the feudal class and the priests. The priests sanctioned this system with their religious and ideological hold over the common mass. In reality poor and low caste girls were initially sold at private auctions and later they were dedicated to the temples. Famous scholar Jogan Shankar pointed out the reasons for continuation of this system ----



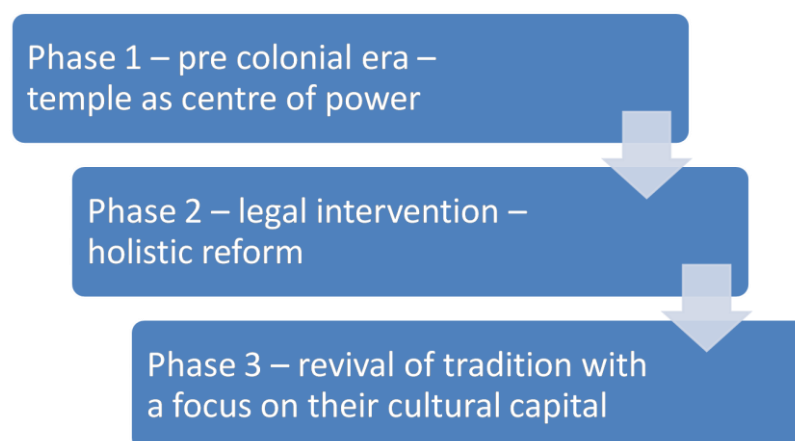
**HISTORY:**

From the time of Purana, i.e approximately 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D, the custom of dedicating girls to temples was initiated. As entertainers in temples, they performed singing and dancing in various functions in temples and religious festivals. According to Puranas, the Devadasi system was described as those persons who dedicated dancing girls to temples attained swarga loka after their death. During the rule of the Pallava and Chola dynasties (between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D) in the southern parts of India, devadasis were placed with great respect and dignity by the society holistically. At that period they were the treated as custodians of culture and the arts such as music and dance. To Chawla [2002], the analysis

of the life and customs of devadasis is crucial to recognize the liberal traditions of Indian society, art and culture. There has been a tendency in recent times to project an ultra-conservative neo-Victorian version of Hinduism, which seems to follow the Vatican in matters of sexual morality. One cannot comprehend the importance of institution of Devadasis with such a mindset. In Kalidasa's "Meghadhoot", the reference to dancing girls in temple can be found. The presence of dancing girls was marked at the time of worship in Mahakal Temple of Ujjain. Some scholars are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6th century A.D. as most of the Puranas contained reference to it. Using the sources of Puranas it can be said that arrangements should be made to solicit the services of singing girls at the time of worship at temples. It was accepted fact that by the end of tenth century, the total number of devadasis in many temples was in direct proportion to the wealth and prestige of the temple. During the medieval period, they were considered as an inseparable constituent of the establishment of temples. Interestingly, the rank they occupied was just next only to priests and their number often reached high proportions. There were 400 devadasis attached to the temple at Tanjore. [ Chawla: 2002]

The association of ritual dance with religious services in a temple was historically established. During the early medieval period, the practice originated and developed in India but in other countries like Mesopotamia (Iraq), Egypt and Greece the system was established several thousand years earlier. In Egypt, the existences of dancing girls were common factors in Temples of Osiris and Isis. At Corinth, in Greece thousands of women were associated with the temple of Aphrodite. The custom was widespread in Babylonia (Iraq), Cyprus and other countries. In Sumer (Iraq), stunning women were emotionally involved to every temple. They were known as component of the god's household. In Egypt, four professions were found among them like women-priesthood, midwifery, mourning and dancing. The royal priestess entered the profession when she was quite young and was given training in the sacred dances and singing the sacred songs. The tradition was extensively established in ancient Greece. It was the temple of Aphrodite in Greece, where the practice of dedicating girls was said to have been first recognized as a ritual of worship. In India, a link of religion and caste can be found in this context. The temple women came mostly from the low caste non-Brahmin families. However, the evidence of some higher caste women (including the royal families) was also noted. There were some prerequisites for a girl to be dedicated in this connotation. She had to be whole of body, not be lame, deaf, or blind, or have any bleeding or suppurating wounds.

#### EVOLUTION OF DEVADASI SYSTEM:



**THEORETICAL LINKAGE:**

Many theoretical links can be pointed out by the scholars for expressing the nature of Devadasi system. Mother Goddess theory explains the power of Mother Goddess in connection to glorifying her existence. According to the popular belief system, Goddess requires many girls for her service. By preference, these girls were young and beautiful. They were considered as possessions of temple institution. They had to live in the premises of the temple and learnt their responsible work under the supervision of senior priestess. This custom sustained without any disruption. This typical process kept the tradition of virgin Devadasis alive. Another theoretical orientation highlights on the issue of power because Mother Goddess became subjugated by a powerful male deity. There created a mythical saga that the new male deity is the husband or master of the Goddess. Subsequently the practice of sexual linkage with the temple began to start with the girls who were Devadasis. It was said that a custom of offering something to the deity was a well known practice on the basis of Religious Tradition Theory. Priests began to demand girls as an object of devotion from the devotees. These girls were allied to the service of temple after their initiation as Devadasi. The theory of objectification of women is also a related area of offering of girls in the temple. On the basis of Racial theory it can be said that several times alien people came to India. They established relation with local women. ‘The local women were taken only after neutralizing their position by dedicating them to local or their own deities as devadasis.’ [Tarachand: 1991] According to Selfless Citizen Theory women had to serve the soldiers in the time of their stay in the villages. They were dedicated previously to the God. Thus ‘the custom of keeping a section of men and women unmarried by the rulers of the past has resulted in the propagation of the devadasi custom.’ [Tarachand: 1991] The study of Devadasis is linked with ethnomusicology, performance study, dance history, gender, women study and religious study. Study indicates this system can be perceived as historization of custom. Coexistence of tradition and modernity was apparent in this system. The marginalization of devadasis over a considerable period of time became culminated into a weapon of oppression based on caste, class and religion. In many instances, devadasis are drawn from lower caste and lower class backgrounds. Thus the caste hierarchy joins hands with class division. As aided phenomena illiteracy and superstition came in the surface to attack vulnerable communities of women. all these existing practices holistically merge to create a web of discrimination and oppression. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) terms this phenomenon as intersectionality.

Types of devadasis :

DEVADASIS	DESCRIPTION
Dutta Devadasi	Offering daughter to temple,
Hruta Devadasi	a lady is kidnapped and made as a devadasi
Birkrita Devadasi	a woman is sold to temple for the purpose of being a devadasi
Bhrutya Devadasi	a woman voluntarily becomes a devadasi,
Bhakta Devadasi	a woman is devotionally offered as devadasi
Alankara Devadasi	a women after attaining a degree of competence, is offered as devadasi
Gopika” “Rudraganika	or a devadasi gets payment for her dance and music

**SYSTEM:**

Devadasis were associated with completely different opinions of common people during ages. There was a time when devadasis were considered to auspicious and holy. Their presence was compulsory at every wedding for the making of the ‘mangal sutra’ [the auspicious chain for wedding]. The belief behind this was that a devadasi is an eternally ‘suhagan’ (married woman) because she is married to God. Social belief is that if she made the mangal sutra with her own hands, the bride will die as ‘sumangali’ [eternal bride]. Time has changed. Several aspects of degradation became linked with this sacred process, though devadasi system sustained through these two very institutions – religion and society.

On the contrary, these women were generally treated as “impure women” (Anandhi 739) [As mentioned by I. Gupta in Perceptions of Prostitution: The Devadasi System in India]. Regardless of the social perceptions of women involved in this tradition, the economic benefits and privileges that came with the profession put these women at a stronger social position than men who were generally seen as living off the woman’s earnings. However, this practice gradually evolved into prostitution and sex work due to corrupt temple administration and more androcentric forms of worship that established male dominance and power over these women (Srinivasan 1873)[ As mentioned by I. Gupta in Perceptions of Prostitution: The Devadasi System in India] . Economic dependency of women was mainly on the power of patron male powerful individuals within the devadasi communities. Perceptions of devadasis are extremely dynamic and dialectical in perception. Although they are ostracized and socially condemned for their work based on popular moralism, their social status is not independent of their religious status.

The devdasi’s life was unique, not only because of her sexual function or because she was supposed to be sacred to and often possessed by the goddess. She was treated as different as well as sacred lady, she had no connection with ordinary lifestyle. Her whole way of life was far removed from the life of ordinary women, was in fact almost a reversal of their life. She was free to wander anywhere, in or out of the village, free to work at any profession or occupation, and earn an income. According to traditional law, she was treated as male, having inheritance rights similar to those of a son, and also having the right to perform religious rituals. Her children took her surname, and not that of any man, regardless of how longstanding a relationship she had with their father. She was thus absolutely free from the bondage of pativrata and the stricture of Manu that a woman must always be dependent on father, husband or son. Though devadasis had the social and religious rights that males had, the advantage of these rights was most often taken by men. Parents and brothers lived off the devadasi’s earnings from prostitution or other professions. Often, a little girl was deliberately dedicated to the goddess, so that her parents could benefit from her earnings. She had no knowledge about the system, in most of the cases she had to do her duties unknowingly. Girls are also sometimes dedicated when people have no male heir. Interestingly, defenses for the devadasi lifestyles came from Brahmin patriarchal authority. They were by and large the mistresses of upper caste elites including Brahmins. So, they were the defenders of institutionalized form of concubinage by adopting an anti abolition stance. Their logic behind this pro Devadasi stance can be viewed as attempts towards cultural preservation.

**TRANSFORMATION:**

Due to several transformations in society, traditional religions started to ban the involvement of women in ritualistic activities. As a corollary of changes devadasis had lost their status and social position. Different kinds of social and legal changes had resulted in economic degradation of landlords. Historically it is observed that the feudal power was the patron of the system. Feudal power gradually became down. Hence devadasis became helpless after decaying of feudalism. ‘The abolition of feudal estates adversely affected the devadasi custom and made it to lose its glory, pomp and splendor.’ [Taradas: 1991]

Several competitive social pressures and obligations of traditional community worked towards the setting up of particular arrangements between dancing girls and rich, landed or business households. The patron class was expected to accept a young devadasi as a concubine despite the enormous expense it eventually entailed. For the side of devadasis, it was obvious that their temple attachment granted sectarian purity and the promotional avenues to pursue a prosperous career. The economic and professional benefits were considerable and most importantly with no lacking in social honour. [Chawla: 2002] Invaders from West Asia got their first victory in India at the beginning of the second millennium A.D. The practice that probably started around 6th century A.D. seems to have reached its pinnacle around 10th and 11th century A.D. The demolition of temples by invaders started from the North Western borders of the country and spread to the whole of the country. Thereafter the position of the temples destroyed very quickly in North India and slowly in South India. Simultaneously the status of the Devadasis had changed dramatically. As the temples became poorer and lost their patron kings (and in some cases temples were completely destroyed), the Devadasis were forced into a life of poverty, misery and, in many cases, prostitution. The connection of Devadasis with the system of prostitution seems to have been established during the period of decline of their status. On the contrary it can be said that prostitution was forced upon the Devadasis. During the period of structural changes and upheavals caused by external aggression, the transformation of occupation took place from temple dancing to participation in flesh trade. In other words, respectable men are forced to withdraw the support from devadasis for their stigma imposed by the society. As a consequence devadasis easily slipped into the world of brothel. On the basis of observation of Soneji, [2012] actually this becomes the story of disenfranchisement. Sociologically speaking, this is a resultant process of cumulative effects of social marginalization, legal intervention, misapplication of the law and aesthetic loss. Here also the intersectionality became clearly visible.

**REFORM:** Reformists conceived Devadasi practice as a social evil and considered every devadasi to be a prostitute. The first anti-nautch and anti-dedication movement was launched during 1880-90. Their main aim was to do away with this system. Reform Lobbyists were comprised of mainly missionaries, doctors, journalists and social workers.

They urged the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls dedicated them as Devadasis of Hindu shrines. ...These anti-nautch campaigners began their attack on the devadasi system in 1882. They organized seminars and conferences to create a public opinion against the devadasi system. In the later part of 1892 an appeal was made to the Viceroy and Governor General of India and to the Governor of Madras. This appeal also defines the position of the anti-nautch movement.” (Jogan

Shankar, 1990) [As mentioned by Chawla in Devadasi- Sinners or Sinned against] The reform lobbyists were strongly influenced by Christian morality and religion. The movement urged for the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls dedicated them as devadasis to Hindu temples. Entire issue was articulated as Anti-Nautch campaign. Gandhiji supported the institutionalization of devadasi reform. He was in favour of domesticating the women by teaching them handicrafts. He felt the need for purification. Reformed image of devadasis portrays the picture of good, pure and respectable women. New version of thought is an amalgamation of neo nationalist spirit and feminism. After the reform movement, some were recognized as ideal wife. Second section was linked as second wife of elite people. Others engaged as performing artists in singing, dance, drama, films and so on. It can be said that the aim of reform movement was to include marginal devadasis within the mainstream of society. Another fact revealed in 1960s. Christian missionary group from North America took up the case of 'fallen devadasis' of coastal Andhra Pradesh. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century many women in the Kalavantulu community had converted to Christianity. They would get a stable monthly income as members of new rehabilitation programmes of the Mission. So religion in the form of conversion took special step in reform movement of Devadasis.

The Devadasi welfare could be visualized as acting on three planes,

1. Devadasi Rehabilitation: The arrangement for the Devdasi / Jogatas for leaving the tradition and facilitating their resettlement in social mainstream through economically gainful activities.
2. Devadasi Prevention: The focus of preventing new boys and girls from entering the tradition; and
3. Devdasi Traditions: Total elimination of the Devadasi tradition from the socio-religious culture.

In response to the social awakening brought by these individuals and service organizations, certain welfare schemes for the rehabilitation of the Devadasis were constructed with the joint activities of State and Central Government. These are : Devadasi marriage scheme, Devadasi Pension Scheme, Devadasi Rehabilitation Centre, hostel for Devadasi children. Several voluntary organizations are working for Devdasi rehabilitation from various trajectories. Sensitization efforts were taken with local government officials, police, relevant NGOs and media for changing attitudes of the common people towards the devadasis. Societal support system should work for delivering their rights and entitlements. Sensitization efforts include educational, health and other local service staff to ensure that Devadasis and their children are not subject to discrimination. Similarly, efforts should be made to reduce prejudice, discrimination and harassment against children without formally recognized fathers. Vigilance committees should be formed in villages in relevant areas, with membership from local leaders and Devadasi themselves. Initiatives should be made to ensure that no devadasis are called by anything other than their own names; those who have lost their names need to be encouraged to choose new names and these should be respected; Special awareness campaigns should be undertaken in advance of key festivals, with their organizers and among leading devotees, to avoid all practices which debase women or encourage their sexual exploitation. Now the rehabilitation programmes are actively connected to the participation of the devadasis as the most necessary component for the development of their social position.

In broader analysis of structure of power in Devadasi system, it is exposed that multifaceted amalgamation of indigenous patriarchy, colonialism and nationalism play noteworthy role in this context. Intense battle between tradition and modernity is strongly prevalent here. Several literary

creations were related with their lives. Especially the world of Indian classical music and dance will always remember their contribution in maintaining and continuing the cultural trends.. Their dance form actually initiated major classical dance forms like Odissi and Mohiniattam. Hence the involvement and active participation of devadasis is remarkable in the cultural sphere of Indian society till today. Devadasis were the core cultural agent of Indian classical art from the time immemorial. Hence the world of art and artists should be always respectful to their traditional cultural skill and agency forever.

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