



History of Devadasis in India and the Social Stigma Attached to Them

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ABSTRACT:

The Devadasi system held a significant role within Hinduism in Ancient India, where young girls were married off or dedicated to temples, temple priests, or local deities before reaching puberty. While it was a prevalent practice across temples in ancient times, remnants of it still persist in certain regions of India today. Initially, it was regarded as a sacred tradition. The term 'Devadasi' originates from Sanskrit, combining 'Deva,' meaning God, and 'Dasi,' signifying a female servant. However, over time, it evolved into a system of female prostitution with religious endorsement.

Many of the girls were married off to temple priests and subjected to sexual exploitation by them, as well as by wealthy landowners, traders, and other men. Manipulated in the name of religion and divine service, they were led to believe that this exploitation was a form of devotion to the divine. In contemporary times, these women have lost their revered and sacred status, instead facing marginalized lives.

Index Terms— Devadasis, History, Historical Background, Origin, Social Stigma, Types of Devadasis

I. INTRODUCTION

Devadasi is known to be a woman who is dedicated to serving a specific deity and temple. They are unmarried females who were consecrated to deities and temples from a young age and this is done through various ceremonies of Hindu marriage rituals.

The term 'Devadasi' originated from Sanskrit roots and is said to be a Sanskrit interpretation of 'Tevaratiyal', a Tamil term which signified a woman or a girl devoted towards the service of deities of a temple or any other sacred entity. Its Devadasa's- men who devoted themselves to the service of divine deities, feminine counterpart. As the term originates from Sanskrit roots, the mention of them and their practices can be found in Sanskrit literature.

Devadasis were prevalent in major Hindu Brahmanical Temples, where they carried out their roles and duties as temple dancers and care takers. Their social identities were entangled with the temple life.

According to Farquhar every marvellous temple in India aspired to be a deity's divine abode on Earth and therefore apasaras denoted as courtesans who sang and danced for deities as a part of their service. They were devoted towards the deity and later were identified as devadasis on earthly realm. Devadasis were tasked to carry out the rituals of the temple, sing and dance at ceremonies where the deity's images were paraded across the town.

Edgar Thurston's say on devadasis is that devadasis were the dancing girls who were affiliated with the Tamil temples. He described the devadasi institution as 'the oldest profession in the world.'

Mornier Williams portrayed devadasis in his book- 'Religious Thought and Life in India' as the females who were wedded to the gods and deities and so were regarded as the deva-dasis, meaning deity's devotees.

Nonetheless, most historians believed devadasis as the female individuals who were married to deities and then further devoted their lives in service of the deity and the temple from a young age.

II. ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are many arguments and theories which are related to the origin of the devadasi system and these include myth, occupation theory, the mother goddess theory, theory of Sanskritization, matriarchal and patriarchal theory, theory of religious traditions, self-citizen theory, traditional theory and theory of lineage continuation. This practice of devoting women for ritual sacrifices and services was widespread in ancient India. Similar practice of dedicating women for religious purposes was widespread and it was recorded from different parts of the world such as Egypt, Cyprus, Greece etc.

This tradition, where women are given in the name of religion and which is believed to date back to the 7th century A.D. India, is known as Theogamy and James Frazer, in his book mentioned Theogamy as something which arose from Mother Goddess's worship. It is believed that young girls who were

married to the gods/deities served the temple with a divine status. Their personification of their roles was often associated with the forms of Mother Goddess (mother goddess because she symbolised the caring and nurturing nature as the women in the Theogamy practices often provided their services of taking care of the deity along with the temple). They were bestowed with various kinds of gifts and offerings for their religious service and these offerings were also seen as a symbol of respect from the people and elites.

With the creation of new myths which spread in short period of time and through subjugation by the powerful male gods, the tradition of mother goddess underwent two-tier process. This influence was a result of the Sanskritization which indeed resulted in the elevation of male deities in terms powers and influence. This introduced the concept of ritual purity and pollution. All this led to the change from matriarchal trends to the patriarchal trends and hence this resulted in the deteriorating of the status these women.

The beginning of Devadasi system in India can be traced back to the Christian era but the practice of involving women in religious affairs and temple services had its roots in the Puranic religion (approx. 3rd century B.C.E.). However, the system continued to exist over many centuries but it came to the limelight only from the medieval period. With the growth of Bhakti movement all across the sub-continent, India saw construction of various great temples that were dedicated to the Hindu gods. As bhakti movement incorporated the signing of bhajans and songs that were dedicated to the Hindi deities, the music and dance elements were also introduced in the devadasi system. Girls and women dedicated to temple service, sang music during the performing of the service and rituals.

After the analysis of various inscriptions found on the wall of the temple belonging to the medieval age it was revealed that the tradition of devadasi system started in 7th and 8th century C.E. The growth and maturation of the devadasi institution in 9th to 12th century C.E. when feudal system spanned across India, was witnessed more in the Southern part of the sub-continent. The religious developments got entangled with the operations of the social formations of the 5th and 6th century C.E. and this made way for the rise of new religious ideology. Thus, the elements of feudal form of governance were linked to the sanctification of the political authority by the religion. Hence, temples became important centres of socio-economic activities for locals. Patronage to Temples associated with devadasi system were given by different aspects of society like various rulers, elites, local communities and individuals as well.

Initially, the devadasis or the women dedicated to the temple had freedom to live and have a social life outside temple premises and not just restricted to the temple boundaries. Therefore, the devadasi system gradually evolved into a complex institution. They grew the system into a distinct social sub-caste, which consisted of their own social etiquettes, traditions, and codes of behaviour.

As the developments paced further within the devadasi system, it received the support and cooperation from religious, economic, political and social state of affairs in different specific regions. Now the devadasis who were skilled in the art of dance and music / singing became a part of the royal courts and darbars in India.

However, the way and the pace at which devadasi system flourished in different regions of India, it did not thrive with the same scope in northern India because it failed to become a significant aspect of temples and religious rituals here. Another reason was the political instability in the northern region of the country. Different rulers from different backgrounds and religions like non hindu rulers of Delhi sultanate, Mughal dynasty, Persia etc did not provided the patronage to the temples and acceptance to the devadasi system in north. According to the Kafi Khan's writings, Aurangzeb banned the dancing and singing by women in the courts or in the name of religion and also proclaimed that all devadasis should either marry or be expelled from the kingdom.

Therefore, with the examining of various sources it still remains unclear to the date if these women and girls were devadasis or were they courtesans in the northern and central part of India. While in southern part, the system evolved without consistency in different regions. The intricacies of the religious services and rituals continued to exist unaffected by the external influence or invasions. Hence, the south Indian temples rose to prominence as centres of social and economic activities of the communities.

III. TYPES OF DEVADASIS

Devadasis were divided into different categories in the ancient era.

Distinct categories were consisted of different characteristics and pertained to different circumstances in terms of their dedication:

1. Dutta Devadasi- a daughter who was offered by her parents to the temple.
2. Hrutta Devadasi- a girl or a woman who was kidnapped and then forcefully turned into a dasi.
3. Bikrita Devadasi- a girl or a woman who was purchased by the temple.
4. Bhrutya Devadasi- a girl or a woman who chose to become a devadasi voluntarily.
5. Alankara Devadasi- a proficient girl or a woman who was offered to the temple after certain achievements.
6. Dasis- also known as Gopika or Rudraganika, a girl or a woman who was given money in return for their performances.

Apart from the mentioned categories, there were many differences and distinctions which existed based upon the castes. Devadasis which had elite backgrounds or belonged to the upper castes carried out tasks related to religious rituals and sacrifices within a temple. On the other hand, tasks like

washing, fanning the deity and cleaning the temple were often assigned to the women devadasis of the lower castes. One thing which remained common for all devadasis was to serve and worship their deity husband.

IV. DEVADASIS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF INDIA

In the eastern part of India, the Devadasi system was practiced in Orissa. Devadasis here were commonly called Manharis. Manharis were linked with the Jagannath temple and were considered prominent for their devadasi dances.

In Gujarat, the devadasis were associated with the Somnath temple. It is believed that approximately five hundred devadasis were associated with this renowned temple.

In Banaras, devadasis were found at the Vishwanatha temple. They made water reservoirs and dharamshalas also for them.

Murlis were the group of devadasis which was found in the Bombay region of India. Marrying Khandoba in Jejuri was the identifying characteristic of this form of devadasis. Hindus of Jejuri vowed to give their daughters to Khandoba upon birth as offerings. Devadasis who were devoted to Khandoba carried bags of turmeric powder. They applied it on their's as well as by passers foreheads. Another form of devadasis that existed in Bombay was known as Kalavatis or Nayakins. In Goa, Kalavatis were known as Bhavins. Bernier stated about belief that introduction of devadasis will bring extraordinary prosperity to farmers of that areas.

In Agra, devadasi system was accepted by fishermen community. They devoted one of their daughters to the service of the temples of deity Bhairon. The devadasi tradition of Agra incorporated the traditional act of giving dough dolls.

In assam, temples consisted of their group of devadasi dancers who received great patronage under the rule of Ahom Kings. Various dancer families were brought to the courts for performing the the Ahom Dynasty. The primary distinctive characteristic of the devadasis of the assam was that they were followers of celibacy.

The devadasi system also extended to the Kashmir in early 8th century A.D.

V. DEVADASIS IN SOUTH INDIA

Along with the increase of temple culture and tantric religion, among them, the devadasi traditions continued to thrive in the southern part of the country. Dancers and various dance forms played an important role in Puja Worship, which developed as a part of religious life around temples. It is against this historical background that the Chola king Rajaraja Chola donated 400 goddesses to the Tanjore temple in the 10th century AD and the Chalukya emperor built a goddess temple in 1112 AD. In south Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, the devadasi system was prevalent and were considered integral aspect of the temples there.

Various names like- Sule, Atiyal, Varangana, Patram were used for devadasis in Karnataka. The system was popular among Bellary, Mysore and Dharwad regions of Boyar caste. The kannada inscription of 8th century A.D. addresses and revere the devadasis as Devakanyakas and significant dancers in the Channaraja town of mysore were given the credit of constructing two large water reservoirs. Devadasis were dedicated formally for the religious purposes to the temples during the golden age of Pallava and Cholla dynasties.

As interpreted from the carvings of Dharma Mahadevi- wife of Nandivarman, it is known that the devadasi system that persisted in 8th century south India, participated in temple's religious rituals only got acceptance in the 10th century A.D. and thrived when Rajaraja Chola established the Brihadeswara Temple in Tanjore. A rock inscription from 1004 A.D. states that about 400 devadasis were dedicated to the service of the Brihadeswara temple by the king Rajaraja Chola. He even gave them free land, including four roads surrounding the temple. Also, around a hundred people dance at the Kailasnath Temple in Kanchipuram.

Kunjan Pillai, historian from Kerala, describes the evolution of the dance school in Kerala by examining the patterns of South Indian temple civilization and girls' dance tradition in Kerala history. The temple culture of South India began with the arrival of the Aryans. William Logan believes that with the process of Aryanization in the eighth century AD, temples became the mainstay of religious life in Kerala. In temple-based societies, importance is given to rituals as acts of gaining the consent of the gods. Tantra was prevalent in Kerala temples, and the social economy of medieval Kerala was closely associated with temple activities. Temples support social work, business, and religion, as well as various arts such as dance, music and drama. Koothambalams or traditional theaters are set up in temples in Kerala to promote and showcase art.

VI. DETERIORATION OF DEVADASI SYSTEM AND ATTACHMENT OF SOCIAL STIGMA

The tradition of Devadas began in the sixth century when young women from wealthy families offered sacrifices to local temples. They "married" the gods and became guardians of the temple; They honoured the gods through drama, dance, and music. Devadasis highly respected their marriage with gods and lead a celibate life. Their duties include maintaining temples and performing Indian classical dances such as Bharatnatyam during temple rituals.

The decline of the devadasi tradition was evident over the period of time specifically during the timeline of delhi sultanate, Mughal, and colonial eras. The patronage got lost with the mass destruction of the temples in India. With the decline in temples and patronage by the rulers, the social status of the

devadasis also downgraded which eventually led to their exploitation. Many devadasis became the mistresses of the local rulers and noble class. Offsprings which were born as a result of such relationships were dedicated to the temples. Daughters continued the legacy and traditions of the devadasi system while the sons were trained as musicians. These occurrences led to the contribution towards the rise of the religious prostitution mainly in the temples. The sad reality is that this practice persists in the contemporary times as well.

Often girls were given to temples before they reach adulthood. Upon reaching adulthood, the ceremonies that were performed included consummation rites, after which the devadasi was free to choose her sexual partner. This practice favoured men, especially wealthy Brahmins, and upper-caste landowners. These people had no responsibility to devadasis, and their descendants have no right to inherit. These incidents gave rise to a popular saying in Marathi culture: "Devadasi devachi bayako, saryagavachi" (Servant of God, but wife of the whole city).

Initially, being a devadasi was a matter of pride and it had nothing to do with prostitution. Devadasis were given liberty and respect from all sections of the society. With the waned influence of the temples, the social status of the devadasis also waned. They formed a subcaste which had its own traditions and codes of conduct. The transitioning of the roles of women in temple services went from revered ones to being paid prostitutes and mistresses of royalties, priests, upper caste elites and landlords. This phenomenon evolved and later turned out as the commercial phenomenon. Their social standings were further deteriorated during the colonial rule as they were left without any financial support. Women who were once associated with the bhakti movement and religious devotion now found themselves caught up in a demeaning profession. Even the Britishers saw them as entertainers solely and used their skills of dancing and singing for their amusement. They openly discouraged the practices of the devadasi system across India.

According to Romila Thapar, devadasis consisted one of the most honoured groups of women in ancient era and from a young age they were dedicated to the religious rituals and temple service of deities. The prolific ones were chosen and trained to be Bharatnatyam Dancers. Even today, the most trained and respected Bharatnatyam dancers in India have their lineage attached to the devadasi traditions. Gradually the system and the traditions were subjected to abuse leading to their degradation and being exploited as prostitutes and their earnings were often collected by temple authorities leaving them financially unstable.

Social and economic shifts also had a major role to play in the decline of the status of devadasis. Dominance of Brahmins over temple property corroded the institution. Devadasis faced the subjugation of the medieval patriarchal society reducing them as merely for sexual pleasure. Temples and religion became the two strong structural components to exert patriarchy and its influence. Patriarchal pressure turned the female bodies into the properties of male deities and the temples. Hence, in later stages, the once revered devadasi system was crushed by the patriarchy and became an example of how patriarchy moulded the devadasi traditions as per their wants. This not only resulted in degradation of the whole system but it also contributed in attaching a social stigma with the devadasis.

VII. CONCLUSION

Devadasis are unmarried women dedicated to serving specific deities and temples from a young age, often through Hindu marriage rituals. The term originated from Sanskrit roots and was associated with serving deities or sacred entities. Found in major Hindu Brahmanical Temples, they performed roles as temple dancers and caretakers, their identities intertwined with temple life. They conducted rituals, sang, and danced at ceremonies, often parading deity images. Scholars like Farquhar, Thurston, and Mornier Williams depicted devadasis as women devoted to deities, with some considering them as married to gods. Overall, historians view devadasis as females dedicated to deity service from youth.

The Devadasi system's origin is debated, with theories including myth, occupation, mother goddess, Sanskritization, and more. It involved dedicating women for religious services, similar to practices in Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece. Theogamy, arising from Mother Goddess worship, saw young girls married to deities and serving temples with divine status. Over time, the system shifted from matriarchal to patriarchal trends due to Sanskritization and the influence of powerful male deities. The system's roots trace to the Puranic religion around the 3rd century B.C.E., but it gained prominence during the medieval period, especially with the Bhakti movement's growth. Devadasis performed music and dance in temple rituals, evolving into a distinct social sub-caste. While flourishing in southern India, it faced challenges in the north due to political instability and lack of patronage from rulers like Aurangzeb. The system's existence in northern and central India remains unclear, but in the south, it thrived, contributing to the prominence of temples as socio-economic centers.

In ancient times, Devadasis were categorized based on their circumstances. Additionally, caste distinctions influenced their tasks; elite or upper caste devadasis handled religious rituals, while lower caste devadasis did menial tasks. Despite differences, all served and worshipped their deity husband.

The Devadasi system thrived in Orissa, Gujarat, Banaras, Bombay, Goa, Agra, Assam, and extended to Kashmir in the early 8th century A.D. In southern India, alongside the rise of temple culture, devadasi traditions flourished, with dancers playing crucial roles in Puja Worship. The system gained acceptance and thrived, particularly during the establishment of the Brihadeswara Temple in Tanjore. In Kerala, temple culture evolved alongside South Indian temple civilization, with traditional theaters like Koothambalams promoting and showcasing art.

The tradition declined over time, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate, Mughal, and colonial eras, due to the loss of patronage and mass destruction of temples. Devadasis' social status degraded, leading to exploitation and their involvement with local rulers and noble classes. Offspring born from such relationships were dedicated to temples, contributing to the rise of religious prostitution. Initially a matter of pride, being a devadasi later became associated with prostitution, with their social status deteriorating during colonial rule. Despite once being honored, devadasis were reduced to entertainers and prostitutes, with their earnings often collected by temple authorities. Social and economic shifts, along with patriarchal pressures, played a role in the decline of the devadasi system, contributing to its degradation and the attachment of social stigma.

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