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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ERADICATION OF DEVADASI SYSTEM IN SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract

The devadasi system became popular custom in South India. It means a woman who performed the service to the Gods in the temple. In sangam literature, the dancing woman and prostitutes are frequently mentioned. Sethu Lekshmi Bai, the Queen Regent of Travancore abolished the system in 1930.

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Introduction:-

In Kerala, like the rest of South India, the Devadasi System gathered momentum following the establishment of the Brahmanical hegemony. The earliest literary sources to mention the association of devadasi with temple are in the hymns of Tamil Nayanar Campantar in 7th century C.E. The devadasi custom had to become an institution towards the end of the 5th and 6th centuries C.E. under the patronage of the Pallavas and the Pandyas.¹ The sources for the origin of the custom largely based on the literary records of ancient Tamils, particularly Tolkappiyam and Chilappatikaram. The practice of ritual dancing practiced by ancient Tamil tribe such as the Maravar hunters, and the gradual transformation of it under the influence of the Brahmanical religion, seems to point towards the probable inspiration for the system temple dancing. In Sangam literature, the dancing women and prostitutes are frequently mentioned. But there was no evidence of temple women. During early medieval period onwards the devotional literature of Alvars and Nayanars from 6th to 9th centuries C.E. referred to women as celestial and human, offering worship to temples and to singing and dancing. The earliest literary source which mentioned the association of devadasi was the hymns of Tamil Nayanar Campantar one who lived in 7th century C.E. The Tamil Bhakti ideologies of self- surrender and devotion to service had a huge impact on the society. It had a huge bureaucracy at its command amongst which the temple girls, who were employed in the service of God, deserve special mention, since they formed significant officiating dignitaries. They were the most important ritual performers and no festive occasion was complete in the temple without the performance of the temple girls. Hence, the employment of these dancing girls became customary on the part of the devasthanam (temple), which gradually institutionalized into a professional organization. The institution of devadasi was became an integral part of medieval temple organization.²

The rise of the caste, and its euphemistic name, seem both of them to date from about the 9th and 10th centuries C.E., during which much activity prevailed in Southern India in the matter of building temples, and elaborating the services held in them. The dancing- girls' duties, were to fan the idol with charmaras, to carry the sacred light called kumbarti, and to sing and dance before the god when he was carried in procession. In a book Religious Thought and Life in India, Monier Williams described devadasis in a way that they were held to be married to the god, and had no other duty but to dance before his shrine. Hence they belonged to the god's and had no other duty but to dance before his shrine. Hence they were called the god's slaves (deva- dasi), and were generally patterns of piety and

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propriety.³ He further points out that, in the present day they are still called by the same name, but are rather slaves to the licentious passions of the profligate Brahmans of the temples to which they belong. What surprised him the most was the number of these girls and the weight of the ornaments that they wore; especially in the case of those attached to the temples in southern India for they had a profitable trade under the sanction of religion.

Due to the cultural and geographical variations in different regions, devadasis were denoted by several names such as tevataci, tevaratiyar, patiyilar, talicceri pendukal, tevanar makal, cottikal, atikalmar, manikkattar, kanikaiyar, emperumanatiyar and koyil pinakkal in Tamilnadu, tevidicchi, nangaimar, kudikkari, muraikkari, kootachi, koothichi, and attackari in Kerala, suleyar or sule, poti, basavi and jogtis in Karnataka, sanis and bhogam in Andhra Pradesh, darikas, patras and maharis in Orissa, kurmapus and kudipus in Assam, bhavin and kalavant in Konkani and Marathi.⁴

An inscription of the time of Kulottunga III (1215 C.E.) recorded that the king resumed about fifty six sacred festivals (tirunals) in the temple and also he also revived some of the old practices found mentioned in some earlier records. It is evident from two inscriptions dated 1204 C.E. and 1235 C.E.⁵ They state that the system received royal support in the Tiruvorriyur temple. Another inscription recorded that Kulottunga III seated in the Rajaraja mandapa (hall) in the temple, enjoyed the dance performance of a devadasi in the Ani festival.⁶

A record dated 1235 C.E. of the time of Rajaraja III registered the presence of the king at the time of dance performance by a devadasi named Uravakkina- talaikkoli of the temple in the same mandapa.⁷ Much pleased with her performance, the king ordered that a village of sixty veli of land be granted to her. The later Pandyas also paid their keen attention for the institutionalization of the devadasi custom. An inscription dated 1203 C.E.⁸ recorded that queen probably of Jatavarman Kulasekhara I promoted the devadasi system in temple of Tirupattur and the system was further extended in the Sucindram temple around same period.⁹ Altekar pointed that some of the people began to visit shrines not so much to pay their respects to deities, as to carry on their love intrigues with the singing girls employed there.¹⁰ The non- ritualistic performers were attended different duties in temples as washing, sweeping, collecting flowers, sounding bells, fanning the deity.¹¹ South Indian inscription mentioned that the women who served in temple kitchen (madaippalil) were called as adukkalaip- pendugal.¹² Though the caste system influenced all the sections of the society, the devadasi's were not organized as a separate caste. The customs of devadasi had an accumulation of girls from various castes, customs and regions. They could dedicate to different deities. But within the system, caste played a vital role and forms a hierarchy. Based on their caste their genres of works were differed. The dedicated girls from upper caste were allowed to perform ritual roles and the others had only the secular. In same time the upper castes girls were taken by the upper caste men as concubines, and the others went as commercial prostitutes.¹³

Beyond all these special conditions of society the Devadasi system is believed to have been introduced in the temple at Sucindram by Raja Raja-I 985 to 1014 A.D. and dedicated girls used to sing devotional hymns and regulate religious ceremonies and festivals.¹⁴ It is said that at Seramangalam Vishnu temple a few years ago, a hall was found near the temple called Devadasi Mandapam. It was further informed by the villagers that a few Devadasi families were residing in a house called Kunju Veedu which was situated near the temple. It was a custom that the Devadasis were not allowed to retire from service until they dedicated their daughter for temple service.¹⁵ If they had no female to dedicate, they were permitted to adopt girls from another family. Generally good looking Nair girls were chosen for adoption.¹⁶

There is sample evidence to show that the Devadasis enjoyed many religious privileges which pushed them to a respectable rank in society. They wanted to do the meritorious work of temple renovation. The Keralapuram inscription of 1317 A.D. of Vira Udayamarthanda Varman records that Nilammai Kuttimadammai, who belonged to the Murarakudi of dancing girls set up the bearing the image of Kulasekara perumal in the South Western corner of the Rishabha-Mandapa of Keralapuram Siva temple.¹⁷

In order to escape from the severities and hardships associated with the customs like smartha vicharam, parappedi, pulappedi, mannarppedi and the women from among the Namdudiri Brahmans might have resorted to a life dedicated to the Gods and Goddesses in the temples as Devadasis. When a section of the womenfolk remained under the threats of divorce, another section of the women who hailed from among the higher strata became the victims of the Devadasi System. If a girl becomes a Devadasi and the wife of God, she can, in no case, take human husband.¹⁸ The Devadasi System became popular in the region following the establishment of the Brhmanical supremacy. The

temple priests and trustees changed the temples as brothels by their promiscuous relations with the Devadasis.¹⁹ Devadasi means a woman who performed the service to the gods or deities in a temple. They were unmarried temple servants who had been dedicated to temple deities as young girls through rites resembling Hindu marriage ceremonies. Through the Devadasi System a woman is enslaved for the service of some specific deity or sacred object and became a slave of god'. The word is the feminine form of deva- dasa, a man who is enslaved for the service of a deity. Though the term has its origin in Sanskrit, the prevailing custom and practices are in no way related mentioned in Sanskrit literature.²⁰ Devadasis were a common feature in almost all the major Brahmanical temples.²¹

The devadasi or temple women was one, who was a dancer and one who is associated with temple, either by having some kind of regular service function in a temple or because her primary social identity is defined with reference to a temple.²² Dance was the main duty of the Devadasis. They were taught to dance at an early age of five. Older girls, after being adapting to the profession were taught to dance. Nattuvankams or dance masters were appointed for teaching the art of dance to Devadasis in the temples.²³ They were asked to dance in the temple on all auspicious occasions. They were required to dance before the altar six times a day. This duty was carried out by them in turns. During the time of street procession of deities, it was the duty of the Devadasis to amuse the God with their dance.²⁴ Edgar Thurston described devadasis as dasis or deva- dasis are dancing- girls attached to the Tamil temples, who subsist by dancing and music, and the practice of 'the oldest profession in the world'.²⁵

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In the succeeding years the social reformers felt that the existence of this system was a social injustice to society. Hence they wanted to uproot the system. In addition the government also insisted a law for the liberation of Devadasis. In the meantime Muthu Lakshmi Reddi introduced the Prevention of Devadasis of Hindu Temples Bill of 1930 in the Madras Legislative Council.³⁰ However in the middle of 1930 the Government of Madras issued an order for the abolition of this system. With this Sethu Lakshmi Bai, the queen Regent of Travancore also abolished the Devadasis system in August 1930.³¹ Thus the liberation of Devadasis reflected a kind of divine divorce from the iron grip of orthodoxy and conservatism. They became totally free to lead a family as per the laws of the land. The practice of divorce in Kerala is very much associated with the Brahmanical traditions both in terms of family and temples.

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