CONCLUSION

I have attempted, in this thesis to explore the linkages between gender, caste and state formation, with specific reference to the institution of temple dancing in south India. After a brief survey of major anthropological debates on caste and feminist debates on gender, this study looked at the history of temple dancing, the context in which it emerged, the culture of which it was part, and the process of delegitimation of this practice through legal discourse, social reform and revival. The thrust of this thesis has been to foreground the problematic nature of women's involvement in history, the complexities of which are ironed out by colonial/orientalist discourse, social reform, revival and some contemporary reconstructions of women's history. I have also attempted to look at the workings of gender hegemonies especially in the context of matrilineal social organisation within patriarchal caste structures and feudal state formations. A glimpse of matrilineal caste structures, especially the Nayar - Nambudiri case, I believe, shows us that although definitions of marriage, kinship structures and social organisation were at variance, a shared paradigm of social prestige-gender-caste bound patrilineal and
matrilineal caste groups together. The fact of a shared paradigm and ideology that was patriarchal in essence [and was common to the Nayars as well as devadasis in the twentieth century], was borne out in the second chapter through a look at ritual and religious symbolism among the devadasis. Here again, I have suggested that the use of a patrilineal symbol of marriage, the tali, by matrilineal caste groups, reasserts a gender hegemony that vests prestige in the male, and in symbols of auspiciousness that are predicated on the longevity and well being of the male, even while offering varying degrees of autonomy to women.

The devadasi tradition in south India was then traced through the millennium of medieval Hinduism, specifically the rule of the Pandyas, the Pallavas, Cholas and the Vijayanagara Empire, ie roughly from 550-1550 AD. Epigraphic records of medieval south India, pertaining to the devadasis, it was found, point to three kinds of grants that involved these women:

---a. grants made by devadasis for the upkeep of a specified service in a temple;
---b. grants by a donor [usually male and/or member representative of the royal family] of services of a devadasi or a group of devadasis to a particular
---c. grants made to a devadasi by a donor (either king or chieftain) in appreciation of her proficiency in art.

These epigraphic records were also found to offer immense possibilities for reconstructing the character of devadasis as a social group.

At this early stage, dedication did not attach a premium on "maidenhood". Married women and women with children -- especially daughters -- were dedicated. In some instances, this dedication was forced, with women either being sold or donated by men to temples. This is where the absence of class homogeneity among temple women becomes explicit.

Since many temples employed large numbers of women, sometimes three hundred or more, and given the scarcity of labour in the feudal economy of the time, I have suggested that the cases cited above are far more indicative of the general position of temple women than are the rare instances of women artists. Temple women also contributed significantly to the economy, by making grants of land and/or paying for the upkeep of some service in the temple. They invested considerable resources in public works as the Tirupati records show. They are also the only women mentioned in trading accounts of medieval
India. Clearly temple women in precolonial south India were expected to perform functions that were fairly well defined. That they were not monogamous was not a matter of curiosity in their specific contexts. Scriptural prescriptions aside, it was found that the practice of temple service changed and shifted constantly between classes castes and state structures. Gradually, towards the end of the Vijayanagar period, the devadasi institution seems to have crystallised into two distinct classes/castes -- the 'clean' castes and the 'unclean' castes -- each with its own separate spaces in the Sanskritic tradition and the village goddess tradition.

It was in this polarised form that the British found this institution in the nineteenth century. The last two chapters examined the process of production of official knowledge on the devadasis through legal and reform discourse, and the manner in which this knowledge was acted upon to transform ideologically as well as materially the life situation of a large community of women.

The areas of female autonomy and power, patriarchal no doubt, but vested in women, that an earlier society could offer with relative ease and without internal contradiction, were no longer possible in colonial or post colonial India. Here
again, in the discourse on devadasi abolition, while the colonial government is addressing a "community" of women, we find that the manner in which this community is acted upon is fraught with contradictions -- contradictions arising from differences in caste and class within this "community". The upper class elite of this community therefore are drawn into the revivalist project of Rukminidevi Arundale, while the more underprivileged ones are either pushed into common prostitution or continue to be acted upon by the post colonial state.