INTRODUCTION

This study began as an exploration of 'patriarchy' in a caste based agrarian society. Less than halfway through the work, I realised the need for a specific historical time frame and also the impossibility, given the present level of knowledge regarding patriarchal practices, of evolving any kind of an overarching theoretical framework to analyse patriarchy in caste society—a impossible task I had assigned to myself. There was another important reason for my abandoning this project. This had to do firstly with the discovery that it is impossible to do fieldwork in caste society that was purely academic, that did not implicate the researcher in the structures of dominance that orders its entire existence. Secondly, it had to do with my own disenchantment with the construction of monolithic histories that gloss over the specific ways in which realities are constructed, even if it has to do with a universal fact like the subordination of women. Gender is a structural factor in history: it determines the agendas that systems of dominance have both for men and women throughout history. It intersects with caste, class and state formations to produce varied articulations of patriarchy. Different articulations of patriarchy often overlap
and coexist in the same context—in kinship systems and between castes and classes—at the same point of time. The state plays a crucial role in the constitution of gender which then becomes a component of a larger political strategy of the particular state. This constitution of gender is basic to identity formation in the wider society. It undergirds notions of kingship, martial character, caste, race, etc. Feminist sociology therefore needs first to focus on specific productions of patriarchies—regional as well as chronological—before any attempt is made to develop overarching theoretical frameworks. In a sense, this is what this study attempts to do. Again here, I began by examining the confrontation between the West and India—a confrontation that threw up new models of gender identity, and uprooted the older 'native' processes of gender formation. It soon became obvious, however, that the shift effected by the colonial encounter, while it might provide a starting point for studying constructions of gender, was only one of a series of shifts that had occurred through history. In privileging the colonial confrontation, therefore, there was the real danger of slipping either into Orientalist assumptions of an unchanging decadent society that was rudely awakened from its
stupor by 'progressive forces', or into the apparently contradictory Orientalist assumption of a society whose rich cultural history was negated and abused by the colonizers. This latter assumption underwrites much contemporary scholarship on Indian history and culture too. In order to get a feel of the institutions and people the colonial government was addressing (and more importantly to avoid falling back on the same assumptions that I was trying to critique), I decided to go back to the point of origin of the religious practice of dedicating women to temple service and to move chronologically from there to the colonial and post colonial period. This, I felt, would tell me, not only of the impact of colonial intervention on 'native' structures but also of the nature of women's engagement with history --agrarian history, cultural history, the history of state formations and the history of kinship structures. I will anticipate my argument by asserting that it is necessary to problematise women's involvement with social structures, and historical processes and to reckon, not just with the fact of their victimisation by patriarchal processes, but also with their agency and complicity in systems of dominance and power. Women, like men, exist within specific social contexts, and their situation
within these contexts determines the role they play in social processes. This assumption would immediately preclude the possibility of constructing monolithic histories of "women's oppression" and their victimisation. Patriarchies oppress women on the one hand, and implicate them in oppressive practices on the other. It becomes possible to reckon with this fact at an analytical level the moment we recognise that the concern of feminist research is not necessarily the study of women-as-victims but a concern with systematic oppression of people/groups whose labour and bodies are expropriated—-a system of oppression in which gender is a basic determinant of systems of dominance. This would by definition involve a 'violation' of established disciplinary boundaries and methods of sociological inquiry. In defense I argue that feminist research is premised on the extension and overflow of boundaries of established disciplines—-the only way that one can touch the core of the processes of gender formation. Medieval inscriptions relating to temple women, for instance, help understand and unearth layers of older forms of hierarchies that structured the lives of temple women and more ancient layers of gender discrimination.

While it is true that the British colonial
enterprise in the Madras Presidency aided by the introduction of commodity production did introduce the kind of gender hierarchies and family structures that typified the home country, the resultant gender hegemony was a result of the interweaving of modern forms of political and economic dominance and earlier more ancient forms idiosyncratic to the specific region or state. However, the most comprehensive information we have today is about the process of emergence of the new structure after the initial colonial push. In this situation, one way of balancing out the picture is to bridge the gap between medieval and modern history and between history, anthropology and sociology.

While on the surface this thesis represents an attempt to study the social history of a group of women widely known as devadasis in South India, at a deeper level this study attempts to disentangle the different layers of an extremely complex social reality - to map for instance, the linkages this group of women had with other groups they coexisted with at different points in history and the implications of these interrelationships to our understanding of caste; to understand the workings of gender hegemonies especially in the context matrilineal social organisation within patriarchal
caste structures and feudal state formations; to understand the manner in which colonialism interprets and represents these gender hegemonies and the manner in which social reform and later nationalism accepts and acts on colonial interpretations. To restate our aim, this thesis will look at the transformation of gender hegemonies from the medieval to the colonial to the post colonial state.

In looking at temple women, my attempt will be to explore the linkages "on the ground" that these women are imbricated in at specific points of time, the movement from one historical specificity to another, and the manner in which women's positions shift along with a shift in their social, historical and political context. In the ultimate analysis, the necessity of constant shifts back and forth between sociology, social anthropology and history will be emphasised.

This thesis will be divided into two sections. The first section will set out the theoretical framework and situate the institution in its current sociological context both in terms of sociological debates on gender, caste, and matriliny, and in terms of the actual functioning of this institution as revealed to us both by post-colonial scholarship on devadasis as well as the practice of this
institution in a post-colonial context.

The second section will look at the early beginnings of this institution and trace the course of its historical development from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial state and the different socio-political contexts in which it functioned, with the aim of relocating sociological interest within a historical context.

**Methodology**

I have relied primarily on epigraphic records and the records of the colonial government, both of which constitute primary sources from the standpoint of history but secondary data from the standpoint of sociology. My anthropological field work has been strictly action-oriented. I have lived and worked with different groups of women, and have attempted, for my own sake to understand the politics of mobilisation and interest group formation. In my doctoral work, however, I have made a conscious decision against using traditional anthropological field work because, the only devadasis in post-colonial India are an extremely oppressed, exploited section belonging to the most underprivileged castes. Being part of a movement for liberation, when one is confronted with a reality of this kind, the only
field work that is politically permissible is that which facilitates a search for liberating strategies -- action research whose findings would be used solely to build such strategies.

I did do a spell of field work in an upper caste village in Tamilnadu in 1987-88, to try and understand how gender is constructed in a non Brahmin upper caste context. And I went to this village not as an activist in the women's movement, but as a research scholar engaged in doctoral work. Although some of my experiences on the field were rather unnerving [because I was immediately slotted into the hierarchy of castes in that village and all my subsequent interactions were mediated by this new identity that had been conferred on me], I did learn a lot about the dynamics of caste in a rural context "from within". This experience was invaluable where I was concerned, because it was not something I would have experienced in the normal course. Being in the situation I was in those months at Meesalur, helped me understand the workings and internal logic of power and dominance in upper caste society, and threw new light on my understanding both of the dalit question as well as the women's question. Therefore, despite my physical and ideological discomfort at that time, looking back now I realise that the
experience has not been a waste.

My "field work" with women, while it determines my argument throughout the thesis, cannot be found in the form of interviews or "cases". For "cases" I have relied solely on records/work that has already been documented.