Introduction: The Intellectual and Political Context of Colonial Discourse on the Devadasi Question

British presence in India was gradually beginning to make itself felt in the seventeenth century. With the growth of trade and the rapid rise in volumes of British remittances from Indian territories made possible through the exploitation and impoverishment of the Indian people – peasants and artisans in particular – it seemed inevitable that the British would soon seek territorial expansion which was imperative for the continued prosperity of British industry. The period between 1798 and 1818 saw the expansion of British territories in India. Madras and Bombay graduated from mere coastal settlements to the administrative capitals of two large Presidencies. Control over the entire Indian coastline – with the exception of the Indus delta – shifted to British hands with rulers of native states being reduced to dependents. [1]

The latter half of the eighteenth century – the period of the industrialisation of England and the consolidation of colonial rule in India by the East India Company – was, however, significant not only in terms of trade and its effects on the Indian
population. This period was also marked by the cultural encounter of West with India, made possible in no small measure by the East India Company.

Orientalist interest in India, rooted in the trade interests of England, was initially directed at "reintroducing the Hindu elite to the impenetrable mystery of its ancient lore".[2]

The Jones-Colebrooke portrayal of the vedic age (which to this day structures our understanding of that period) is a rich example of Orientalist writing. It depicted a 'golden age' and romanticised the virtues of the North Indian Aryans. The reconstituted Aryan was a robust beef-eating man living in a tribal republic that was characterised by social equalitarianism. He was not idolatrous and was neither inclined towards Tantrism nor towards worship of malevolent manifestations of Kali.[3] This portrayal of the 'golden age' was strengthened by Max Mueller's work on Aryan-Vedic society and religion. "So great an influence has the vedic age ... exercised upon all succeeding periods of Indian history, so deeply have the religious and moral ideas of that primitive era taken root in the mind of the Indian nation, so minutely has almost every private and public act of Indian life been regulated by old traditionary precepts that it is impossible to find
the right point of view for judging Indian religion, morals and literature without a knowledge of the literary remains of the Vedic age."[4] It was posited that Aryan Indians shared a common ancestry with "European who spoke languages that belonged to the original Indo-European family and were distinguished from the Semitic races in Europe and the Dravidian race of Asia, the peoples of which had yet to attain the level of civilisation and culture attained by the Aryans. The Aryan was clearly identified with vigour, with race, in general with positive attributes.

The reconstitution of gender identity was an integral part of this ideology of Aryan superiority. The Aryan woman - learned, free and civilised - also the symbol of domestic bliss and conjugal love (Gargi, Maitreyi) was the new ideal to be emulated. "Ardent piety, spiritual and acetic tenderness, complete abnegation of herself, unlimited devotion to her family, a boundless need for love, formed the character of such women."[5] This was the Orientalist perception of Aryan-Hindu (read Brahmin) womanhood. With the Orientalist-colonial enterprise in India the 'Aryan-Hindu' became synonymous with the 'Brahmin' - which was considered the norm, social reality in other castes being measured up against this new Brahmin norm. The norm which was now being held up as
worthy of emulation, was one that was constructed and reconstituted by the colonial power. There is no doubt that this was possible only because of an already existent Brahmin hegemony that derived its power from the elaborate textual tradition that conditioned and regulated every aspect of their lives. But it is also true that the colonial government appropriated the textual tradition of the Brahmins, especially through translations [6], reinterpreted it and produced what could perhaps be called a colonial Brahmin ideal.

While the Orientalists were thus engaged in a rediscovery of India's glorious heritage, utilitarianism was fast becoming the ideology of the future colonial masters of India.

Utilitarian political economy formed the basis of the intellectual and moral training for civil servants in India. The basic principles of this science were - the promotion of free trade and private enterprise, non-interference on the part of the government in the working of labour and money markets, creation of private property in land and the creation of a socio-political structure that would sustain free enterprise and extract maximum gain. The trade and profit economy was predicated on the dismantling of 'obsolete' social structures.
'Primitive customs' and native institutions, it was believed would only be a repressive influence on economic development. In these circumstances, the benefits of free trade could be realised only if society was purged of all its growth-inhibiting characteristics.[7]

Trade however was only one of Britain's concerns. The British brought with them the belief in the absolute right to property - especially in land.[8] Land revenue was the core of Indian administration. Utilitarian philosophy based on Ricardian political economy therefore set about "inaugurating a competitive society based on individual rights in the soil, depended as much upon the revenue assessment and the registration of land holdings which accomplished it, as upon the superstructure of judicial codes and establishment."[9]

Since law courts were established and the codes of judicial procedures systematized, the important task left to the colonial government was that of documenting 'native' religious practice in a manner that would bring it as close to the brahmanic textual tradition (which was itself a product of official discourse and involved the privileging of western ideals of consistency and uniformity over variations in indigenous interpretation) as possible and in a
manner that would uphold the essential morality of brahmanic ideal as defined by the colonial state.[10] This chapter will examine the production of 'official knowledge' of devadasis in Madras Presidency by the legal machinery of the colonial state, and the legitimising of this official knowledge by the different strands of the movement for social reform.

The evangelical view of the devadasi institution, which could be a convenient point of departure, is best exemplified in the work of the Abbe Dubois on hindu manners and customs[11]. Characteristic of this stand (and of those whose positions are derived from similar assumptions) was the statement of a moral nature prior to an account of the practice. Needless to say, the account of the practice itself is woven into and through these moral webs, and constituted the new "truth" about the essence of the system that bore little relation to the actual history of the practice or to the complexities inherent in the practice even in the nineteenth century.

The official duties of devadasis, says the Abbe, "consist in dancing and singing within the temple twice a day, morning and evening, and also at public ceremonies. The first they execute with sufficient grace, although their attitudes are lascivious and their gestures indecorous. As regards their singing,
it is almost always confined to obscene verses
describing some licentious episode in the history of
their gods."[12] For these services the devadasis
were paid a fixed salary which was supplemented by
"selling their favours in as profitable manner as
possible". Describing their skill in the art of
seduction, he says, "of all the women in India it is
the courtesans, and especially those attached to the
temples, who are most decently clothed. Indeed they
are particularly careful not to expose any part of
the body". This, according to the Abbe, far from
being an indication of their modesty, "is a mere
refinement of seduction...", experience having taught
them that "for a woman to display her charms damps
sensual ardour instead of exciting it, and that the
imagination is more easily captivated than the
eye."[13] This the Abbe attributes to the 'fact'
that the hindu, no matter how loose he is in his
morals, places a great premium on the maintenance of
strict decorum in public.[14]
This decorum, for the hindu, must be maintained not
only by "respectable" women but also by women who
lead a life of immorality. How does this perception
link up to the official production of knowledge
regarding devadasis?
Devadasis and Legal Discourse

This concern over moral degeneracy that seemed endemic to the Hindus haunted official legal discourse on any matter relating to the devadasis. There were, generally speaking, two kinds of issues that came up for adjudication after 1861.[15] The first — and one which addressed itself directly to the moral question — related to whether or not a devadasi could be charged of prostitution, which, under the Indian Penal Code, was a classified offence.[16] This issue was the site of very complex and interlocking articulations, among other things, of the True Hindu Tradition. Deeply entrenched in this conception was the ideal of Hindu womanhood constructed through Orientalist scholarship on the Indian past, that was in turn based on the study and resurrection of a pure brahminical sanskritic textual tradition. This ideal was also therefore the foundation, in a sense, on which Orientalist scholarship on Hinduism was based. The ideal projected the Vedic Aryan woman as the embodiment of Hindu culture and also as the ancestor of women in colonial India. As with the debate on sati and social reform, this notion of womanhood privileged a high caste textual tradition that had opened and offered itself to colonial intervention.[17] The Vedic dasi
for instance, as Uma Chakravarti points out, found no place in this colonial scheme.[18] This is no doubt because the weight of the history of subjugation and oppression that the vedic dasi bore on her shoulders crossed the threshold of colonial tolerance. And clearly the threshold itself is determined by the interests of the colonial state to keep histories of subjugation, problematic histories, out of the reckoning. It was not, however, just the vedic dasis who were out of colonial schema. All those women in colonial India who could not lay claim to the genealogy of the Aryan women - chaste, monogamous, high caste, pure - were also pushed out. There was a definite process of selection, not just of historical antecedents but of contemporary subjects.

Charging a devadasi with prostitution, like forcing marriage reform on Nayar society should be seen as an attempt by the colonial government to resolve its own contradictions in bringing the entire Indian population within its ambit either through a process of exclusion (as with the devadasis) or through cooptation (as with the Nayars). An earlier chapter examined family structures, rituals and inheritance patterns among the Nayars and among the Jejadasis. Predictably, the most unacceptable part of social organization of both these groups in the
eyes of the British, was the legitimate polygamy on the part of the women. That social practices in both these groups were tied to and in a sense defined by the upper caste brahminical norm even in pre-colonial society was irrelevant to the new administrators. The argument, therefore, that the colonial administrators and the orientalists before them sought to create a new brahminical norm that could directly trace a continuity with western modes of social organisation, acquires a new relevance here. A further point of significance is that the choice of either exclusion or cooptation appears to hinge on the caste status of the women concerned. The Nayars were a politically powerful, upper caste group against whom an accusation of immorality or prostitution could scarcely be sustained. This must be seen in the light of the argument about the linkages between the king and the brahmin in an earlier chapter. Some Nayar sub-groups were rulers in Travancore and were as necessary to the legitimacy of the Nambudiri brahmins as the latter were to them. Typically therefore, colonial reform on the Nayar question focussed on the need to introduce "marriage reform", thus conferring on their existing relationships a new legitimacy. There is no doubt that this resulted in considerable erosion of
existing structures, but the change was allowed more
time and was more gradual and gentle. For the
devadasis, on the other hand, reform focussed on
abolition of the devadasi system itself and not on
marriage reform among the devadasis. Measures in
this case aimed at denying their right to exist by
removing their means of existence.

The only way the devadasi could be fixed within
the colonial scheme was by shifting her out of the
religious sphere (where 'barbarity', if located
within the Hindu family was tolerated, even
encouraged by the colonial government)[19] to the
'secular' sphere where she could be charged with an
offence that came within the purview of British Penal
Law - prostitution.

The discussion of the official discourse on the
devadasi question that follows assumes this
framework, and sees the various articulations as
entrenched in and arising from this framework.

Not surprisingly, this was a charge that could
not be easily proved because colonial and 'native'
conceptions of prostitution differed to begin with.
Even assuming that 'prostitution' was widely
prevalent in India, the probability that it was not
an 'oifence' in precolonial India would of itself
have negated the British charge.
Framing this charge, therefore, was not as simple as the British perhaps anticipated. Early in the history of British penal law, this charge was framed by accusing the women not of prostitution but of the disposal or procurement of a minor for purposes of prostitution. I would argue that the shift effected by the colonial state of the devadasis out of the purview of religious law into that of secular law necessarily entailed a shift from proof of the offence to speculation on motives of the accused. Proof, thereby, came to be constituted by the painstaking orientalist discourse on Hindu society rather than by the facts of the case. To say that the judicial system and the battery of principles of Utilitarian justice were used by the state to construct The Truth behind Hindu religious practice hence justifying colonial intervention would be to state the obvious.

The following excerpt from a judgement gives us the general narrative framework of the official discourse.

"... every naikin must needs be a harlot. She is taken as a child. She is taught lascivious arts, forbidden marriage, but wedded to a daggar [sic] by rites of corrupt significance, and then at the moment of aptitude sold to some epicure in licentiousness. Her livelihood thenceforth depends on her zeal and skill in her base profession. Dancing and singing are subsidiary accomplishments, but they are subsidiary only to simple harlotry. As the naikin herself wanes in attractiveness, she must adopt a daughter, if nature has not provided her with one; and as a severance is strongly opposed to the class sentiment, the worn out harlot recoups herself for the past by
inflicting a like wrong on a new victim. Thus the evil system is perpetuated from one generation to another and it may be that, as long as a coarse sensualism prevails amongst a wealthy class, the means of inflaming and gratifying their libidinous tastes will not be wanting.” [20]

It would be interesting to look at the facts of a typical case in which the father of a girl is charged under section 372 of the IPC.[21]

"In this case 1st prisoner presented an application for the enrolment of his daughter as a dancing girl of the great pagoda at Madura. He stated her age to be 13, and it has throughout been admitted that she is under 16. She attained puberty a month or two after her enrolment. Her father is the servant of a dancing girl, the 2nd prisoner, who has been teaching the minor dancing for some 5 years. Her father and herself lived in the 2nd prisoner's house and after the ceremony returned there ... [Both 1st and 2nd prisoners were present when the Bottu was tied and other ceremonies of the dedication performed; ... 3rd prisoner as Battar of the temple was the person who actually tied the Bottu, which is equivalent to the Tali of an ordinary marriage, and denotes that the Dasi is wedded to the idol. There is the usual evidence that dancing girls live by prostitution ... the fact being admitted, it was not necessary to multiply witnesses on this point.”[22]

The reluctance to multiply witnesses was also in large measure because witnesses resisted the inference of prostitution. The only evidence they unequivocally testified to was regarding the actual dedication ceremony. To frame this charge, therefore, the judiciary had to rely on "The implicit admissions of the witnesses who resist the inference, no less than the direct evidence of those who assert that inference to be irresistible, renders it abundantly clear that girls so sold and so registered are brought up as prostitutes, and that one principal purpose of such a transaction is that they shall be
This inductive reasoning was deemed valid by the law courts because "The Abbe Dubois and many other authorities had placed the matter beyond historical doubt."[24]

In charging devadasis under sections 372 and 373, the colonial government was striking at the foundation of Indian family structures. The accused in each of these cases was a close relative often a parent - of the minor girl. In calling into question the motives of parents of an entire community, therefore, the colonial state recognised that if the justification for colonial rule was to be provided, it would have to be predicated on the nature and functioning not just of 'natives' but also of native institutions -the family being the crux of native institutions for the colonial state. The Hindu family was rearticulated by the state on many sites, the devadasi institution being one important one.

The entire structure of relationships in the extended devadasi family hinged, for the state on the highly individualistic profit motive of members of a community, the pursuit of which knew no taboos. However, questioning the motives of parents was perhaps the only way the colonial government could legitimate its own project of breaking down institutional structures and resolve its own
contradictions. At a more general level it was the only important legitimation of colonial rule itself.

It must be pointed out here that the resolution of contradictions and the legitimating of colonial interventions did not go unchallenged. The privileging of generalisations over the facts of the case, and the creation of distinctions - which did not previously exist - between different groups of people, was seriously contested by Indian judges.

Ramabai was the daughter of parents who belong to the "Bhogam or dancing class". She was given in adoption to an aunt of her father's. This aunt had four years earlier, adopted a girl from another community and used her for prostitution in her minority. She was charged by the Deputy Magistrate and convicted of the offence by the Sessions Judge. In Ramabai's case, however, it was argued that she could not be convicted because the child belonged to the Bhogam caste even prior to adoption. To support this contention the Sessions Judge interpreted the section 372 and 373 of the Penal Code as being "directed against a disposal of a minor which takes her from a position where she is not liable to become a prostitute and places her in a position where she is more liable to become a prostitute ... these sections [do not] apply to adoptions among the
dancing women themselves, who do not alter for the worse the status of the child."[25]

In the official discourse this view was contested in keeping with the 'universal principles of jurisprudence'. It was argued that the law could not differentiate between minors on the basis of caste. At a subterranean level, this judge, Muttuswami Iyer was really contesting the authority of the British in forcing interpretations that were transparently alien on Indian society. On yet another trajectory, this was a line of argument that asserted the civil rights of prostitutes.[26] The earlier argument, if allowed to remain uncontested, would also imply that if a girl was born into a 'prostitute class' she could not redress her grievance in court.

They further contended that hindu law in general recognised adoption as a way of ensuring the continuance of the lineage, dancing girls being no exception to this. These contentions were part of a much wider and encompassing critique of colonial interpretations of hindu society. While this contest was also part of 'official' discourse on the question, the manner in which the trend towards monolithic, ahistorical narratives was inverted by 'native' judges (though small in number) is a matter of significance. Through the contesting of
interpretations, 'native' judges forced the colonial government to recognise and address its violation of the very principles of jurisprudence on which it built its entire judicial system and to admit of its biases. The argument they forwarded was that since Hindu law generally recognised adoption as a way of ensuring continuity of the lineage, "it should therefore not in the case of dancing girls be confounded with prostitution which is neither its essential condition nor necessary consequence but an incident due to social influences."[27] It further asserted that the devadasi was entitled to civil rights and hence had the right to adopt a daughter if she chose to, and to offer the girl a choice between her mother's profession and marriage when the time came. [28] For the colonial government however the devadasi practice, which was in strict accordance with the personal law violated the spirit of public law itself. [29] The resolution of this contradiction was far more crucial than the immediate issues in question. The initial exercise of the courts in privileging the textual tradition over the customary or oral tradition now shifted to the privileging of Penal Law, which was based on 'universal principles of the science of legislation', over Hindu law, both textual and customary. The attempt to effect this
shift became necessary because "such prostitution [was] strictly in accordance with Hindu law and customs" and a judge (upto this point) was bound to pass a decree which was in conformity with private law.[30]

English judges generally felt they could ill afford to turn a blind eye to the "main purpose of the devadasis' profession - prostitution". Although the issue in question relates to religious services, "it is still impossible to regard their religious services as disconnected from the other inevitable pursuit of their profession as devadasis." Recognising custom, they felt, was giving sanction to "an association of women to enjoy a monopoly of the gains of prostitution, a right which on the score of morality alone, no court could countenance."[31] In their view a practice founded on error and misconception could not constitute customary law by the mere fact of repetition. A blind adherence to usage which was against public interest and in the process of extinction would work to the detriment of 'social progress'. The court therefore reserved the right to overrule a custom which violated 'natural reason'.

The entire judiciary, however, was consistent in its perception of this institution as an
'unfortunate' and 'undesirable' reality. The disagreement was on the manner and degree of intervention that the judiciary could arrogate to itself. Almost without exception English judges were insistent on pressing charges of immorality and moral depravity, while Indian judges, more sympathetic to the reality hoped that "As the mind of the community becomes enlightened, its legal convictions will change, and this will constitute a change in its common law as that law must from time to time be recognised and recorded in the courts."[32]

The colonial government was also compelled to recognise its bias towards Aryan history. By positing an alternative dravidian history, 'native' judges emptied out the contents of history and attempted to reassemble it.

"Though the srutis and smritis are applicable only to the Aryans, yet the text-writers have extended the law to all the residents of India, and the courts have applied the Hindu law to all the races inhabiting this vast country in the absence of proof of any special or local custom. The Dravidians of southern India who are of Turanian origin had settled in India long before the Aryans entered it. They had their own laws and customs which are prevalent even today. The Aryans when they settled in this part of India (tried to impose their own laws which) were never completely successful. The laws relating to family relations and succession and inheritance laid down by Manu and the commentators like Yajnavalkaya and Vijnaneswara were never accepted as binding by all the people. It was the East India Company's courts that held for the first time that the laws contained in the ancient srutis and smritis were applicable to all Hindus in southern India in the absence of any custom or customary law governing any class of people. Manu in order to extend the influence of the Aryans compendiously uses the term 'sudras' to the people of this country who are not Aryans in the same way as the Europeans use the word 'native' to all those who are not of European descent, and postulates that they are all sudras who have fallen away from the
high place once occupied by them in the Aryan polity. ... This attempt on the part of the law-giver Manu to extend the influence of the Aryans among the races who inhabited this land was always pushed in the direction of influencing their religion and rules of succession. In course of time the courts have come to regard Manu and the commentators as authoritative exponents of the law applicable to all the inhabitants of this country who don't profess any distinctive faith like Muhammadanism or Christianity. The customary law was considered as an exception to that contained in the srutis and smritis." [33]

Hindu Law, the very texts the colonial judiciary relied on, sanctioned the existence of courtesans and their rights to property. Also, the laws of Manu which were given immense credibility by Europeans, sanctioned a moral order that was altogether alien to their experience. The following passage, an excerpt from a judgement illustrates this point:

"Courtesans have no doubt been a recognised institution in India from very early times. It is plain, from the rules laid down by the Smritis ... that unchastity was, at the time of their composition, a very common and comparatively venial offence. Manu's code indicates the influences under which it was composed, by exempting from penalty the virgin who makes advances to a high caste man. ... The case is contemplated of men who make money by their wives' prostitution. Narada recognises the class of courtesans, and allows intercourse with them as with their slaves who are not kept secluded. ... He exempts their ornaments from confiscation, as he does the instruments of musicians ... [Harlotry was an occupation of which the Hindu law took cognizance and has been deemed important enough in modern times to be made the subject of special rules in the Vyavahar Mayuka and Vivada Chintamani." [34]

In the face of personal laws that so radically opposed utilitarian norms of the right and justice, the earlier assertion of the primacy of public law over private law could possibly have been the only way to administer utilitarian law.
Drawing from various textual and customary sources, the judiciary, over a period of five decades built a broad framework within which devadasi inheritance, the second kind of issue addressed by the courts, could be decided.

Devadasis, according to this framework, were hindus, although their exact position in the caste hierarchy was difficult to determine. Male members of this 'caste' as well as married female members were governed by the ordinary hindu law of inheritance. It was not imperative, however, that female members of this caste marry. They could remain unmarried, and become professional dasis without risking any degradation or stigma as long as they observed caste customs. Hence, the dissolution of relationship between degraded women and their relations who remained in caste could not be held to apply to members of this caste. "But it will be seen at once that [the ordinary hindu law of inheritance] which is based on a system of legal marriage and consequential relationship, cannot be applied at all or at very least without very considerable modifications to the property of a woman of this caste who except her own children can ordinarily have relations only through females."[35]

If a woman of this community elected to marry,
her rights to inheritance would be in conformity with the ordinary hindu law and subject to the disability of the ordinary hindu woman to take absolute estate. This would also apply to women who married and 'lapsed' into their traditional calling later, as regards property they held while they were part of the ordinary hindu family.[36]

Where the case was one of the inheritance by dasi descendants of dasis, judgements were governed by the general principle that daughters inherited 'as sons' in this community. There were, however, important exceptions which could not be decided by analogy. For instance, self-acquired property of one member of the undivided Hindu family was not subject to partition according to textual sources. In the case of Chalakonda Alasani, it was decided that she, as head of the family was entitled to the possession and control of the property that her daughter by adoption claimed to be her own self acquired property.[37] The ground for this stand was that the business of the daughter started with the use of the mother's resources and property and hence the mother's claim as the eldest member of the Hindu joint family could not be but upheld. Apart from textual sources, European text writers like Strange supported this view when he wrote in his Manual of Hindu Law that "
the essence of the exclusive title exists in the acquisition having been made by the sole agency of the individual without employing for the purpose what belongs in common to the family."[38]

This was a provision that could be applied to all the devadasis in general because the profession or traditional calling was hereditary and the younger generation was schooled into the profession by the older one.[39]

A second departure from the analogous textual tradition was made with reference to the norms of patrilineal inheritance, that entitled sons to coparcenary rights in the property of the undivided hindu family. A coparcenary of dancing girls was constituted only of their rights to survivorship. Daughters did not acquire an interest in ancestral property by birth.[40] This departure was essential in order to bring the question of adoption within the ambit of legality. Adoption did not need authentication through a ceremony. A unilateral act of adoption by a woman was legally binding. A daughter thus adopted would inherit her mother's property in preference to the latter's eldest surviving male relation.[41] If this male relation was an illegitimate son, he could still not inherit his mother's property because the sapinda or
propinquity principle was applicable only to male offspring governed by the hindu law of succession. The propinquity principle was however applicable when the rights of illegitimate female offspring were at issue,[42] irrespective of whether they were married daughters or dasi daughters.[43]

Defining the marital status of a dasi daughter was problematic. The texts, primarily the Mitakshara, made mention of only two classes of daughters - Kanyas and Kulastri. The law for the Sadharan stri might have been applicable to these women if it had been codified. That it was not codified was probably because any woman "laping into prostitution, became a disqualified heir as either a patit (outcaste) or apapataki (vicious woman) and forfeited absolutely all right of inheritance."[44] Clearly the dancing girl was not a sadharan stri either. It was this very ambiguity about the position of the devadasi that colonial discourse on the inheritance rights of devadasis attempts so hard to iron out. These rights had to be clearly defined and textualised so that the absence of a textual source is filled in.

This 'fixing' of devadasis was an intrinsic part of the larger effort of the colonial government to create a system which would fit into its definitive framework and its nexus of power.
Orientalist-Indologist thinking undergirded the rhetoric of the movement for social reform in India. Tradition in this framework was monolithic, resistant to history (resistant to change) and had an identifiable, universal genealogy. In one sense it was the Orientalist's apology for the disrepute forced upon this tradition by the corrupt accretions of the centuries. In another sense it was an offer, to colonial administrators, of a model on the basis of which the colony could be administered. In yet another sense (and this perhaps unintended) it was a model held out to be emulated by the Indian elite and celebrated by them as their True and Glorious heritage. [45]

We are now looking at a colonised country over a period of a century and a half. In the course of this time, the models shifted constantly in minor, sometimes in major details.

To begin with the focus of colonial/orientalist discourse was on the exploitation and oppression of women - child marriage, widowhood, sati - in which women were mere victims, acted upon by the orthodoxy on the one hand and activists of reform on the other. The ideal was to establish an apparently harmonious and equal conjugal relationship - itself a Victorian
feminist ideal.

However, in the last decade of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there were changes taking place within Western societies. Notions of conjugality and its underbelly, prostitution, were changing and being redefined. This was also a shift from the perception of women as victims of degenerate custom to its agents. Women were beginning to be seen as acting in an undesirable direction justifying thus, greater control and social sanctions against them.

Concurrently with these shifts in the west, similar shifts occurred in India, and the agenda of the reform movement in the south shifted from earlier concerns of education etc. to "nautch" or temple 'prostitution'. The morality of the community was now predicated on the ability to strictly control women's sexuality.

While the women's question was embedded at the base of Orientalist discourse and all that followed, it acquired a new dimension at this point. The moral strength was defined in terms of the sexual morality of its women. As a result of this not only was there a reconstitution and restoration [46] of the devadasi, but for the first time the ideal of the true Indian womanhood was being held out to a
community of women who were till then treated as marginal at best.

This section is an examination of the character of the movement, especially in its second phase beginning in the early 1920s. Muthulakshmi Reddy was central to the movement at this time and most of the information accessible to us of this period are in her private papers. It seems inevitable, therefore, to weave the discourse of the movement for devadasi abolition around its vocal protagonist.

Alongside attempts to push for reinterpretation through law courts, the movement for social reform gained momentum and joined issue with the courts on the devadasi question.

Efforts at reform in Madras Presidency began in the 1830s. These efforts however, developed into an organised movement for reform under the leadership of Kandukuri Veeresalingam. In his efforts at reform, Veerasalingam's thrust was primarily towards the rearticulation of the moral question. This rearticulation was directed not only at the issue of sexual relationships and notions of conjugality, but also towards social hygiene - the ideal education, religious practices, corruption in administration etc.[47]

Reform movements during this period were focused
almost exclusively on women's emancipation. The need was urgent. "Deprived of all education, confined within the four walls of the house, seeing little of the world and knowing little of it, immersed in superstition and opposed by customs, our women - to our shame be it said - are no better than slaves."[48]

The most important route to emancipation was thought to be education. This occupied the pride of place on the Evangelical agenda [49] was soon taken up by Indian reformers, especially Veeresalingam, who started a girls school in Dowaleswaram in 1874. He then started a journal to propagate ideas of reform.[50] Women's associations (Stree Samajalu) came up all over the region and boosted Veeresalingam's efforts. Ladies Conferences were organised where women themselves lectured on female education, women in ancient India, the domestic economy, sanitation, etc.[51]

The other issues that reformers of this period took up were infant marriages, bride price (Kanyasulkam), and enforced widowhood. The Widow Remarriage Association was formed in Madras in 1874 but it was not until December 1881 that a widow was actually remarried. This caused considerable indignation among the people and every effort was
made in vain to stop the event. [52]

Orthodox opposition apart, many women were indignant at the reformers' efforts to force remarriage on them when they themselves consciously, wanted to remain single and self reliant. These women expressed their views in journals. [53] The devadasi question at this early stage was not a central concern.

Nautch, as the devadasi system was described by westerners to begin with, and then by Indian reformers, came to occupy centre-stage in social reform as part of the Social Purity movement. This movement, had as its chief objects "the total abstinence from intoxicating drinks, purity of private life, (and) the abolition of the devadasi system." [54]

The protagonist of the movement, Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu (1862-1939) was born in Machilipatnam and grew up in North India. Throughout his formative years he displayed a keen interest in Sufism and a sensitivity to social reform. His views on reform were modelled not just on the views of Bengali philosophers especially Brahmo philosophers (whose writings no doubt exercised a considerable influence on him) but also on western philosophers, especially Carlyle and Emerson. While at Madras in
the 1880s he started the movement for Social Purity. [55]

The timing of the Social Purity Movement is significant. It was around this time that the Purity Crusade in England and America caught momentum and was assuming the dimensions of a mass movement. It is also significant that the 'parent' movement had as its chief objectives the prevention of intemperance in sexual life and with regard to alcohol. Eroticism in art and literature was widely condemned. Prostitution hitherto defined as "sexual intercourse, except for propagation," was redefined to refer to corruption and moral depravity in life. [56] While the social purity movement served middle class interests, the values of social purity were internalised among some portions of the working class in the late nineteenth century. This is a dimension of social reform that is crucial to our understanding of the movement for devadasi abolition. This involvement of the working classes was part of a conscious effort on the part of the pioneers of social purity. Elice Hopkins, for instance, in the mid eighteen eighties, constituted chastity leagues and organised over two hundred ladies rescue committees. She also addressed the need for male chastity in meetings of working class men, who were
also recruited in thousands into white cross armies that were dedicated to promoting the single standard of chastity and attacking vice. Walkowitz suggests that there was a rationale behind this easy acceptability of the agenda of social purity by the working classes. "Sexual respectability," she says, "became the hallmark of the labor aristocrat, anxious to distance himself from the 'bestiality' of the casual laboring poor, as increased pressure was placed on the respectable working class to break their ties with 'outcast' groups. Other structural factors were at work as well...Changing employment patterns seem to have re-inforced patriarchal tendencies among skilled sectors of the working class by the end of the century, as the proportion of married women working outside the home declined and the family wage for male workers became a demand of trade unions. Seen in this context, social purity, which called upon men to protect and control their women, served as the ideological corollary of the family wage, morally legitimating the prerogatives inside and outside the family. Thus, social purity served to undermine working class solidarity, while tightening the definitions of gender among respectable workingmen and working women."[57] In general the moral question was being reinscribed and
moral codes rewritten in the West at this time.

The framework of belief in which these changes came about was located firmly within the mid-nineteenth century notions of absolute social progress. It projected a view of the development of the world's history which compared the social, scientific, and material conditions of the western Christian nations with the Hindu and Muslim societies of India, and pronounced their superior social progress to be the result of belief Christian truths.

The material basis of this view can be found in the stark discrepancies in material successes between India and that part of the west that was presented to India. Take for instance the emergent capacity of western societies to understand and manipulate the material world. The advances of nineteenth century science were projected as one aspect of Christian religion, as opposed to Hindu astrology and geography that was predicated on divine forces. The political sphere too seemed to present "objective truths" about the incapacity of Indian society to protect itself against enemies, let alone ensure a stable internal order.[58]

The intellectual and ideological influences on India from the West came from two apparently divergent sets of ideas -- one, a missionary
statement on protestant Christianity and the other a distinct radicalism both in religious and political matters. In practice, however, in the Indian subcontinent they worked together to reinforce one another. Together they helped to produce a breakdown of belief in existing Hindu institutions amongst a highly influential section of Western educated people. This was not quite the paradox that it seems at first sight. In attacking superstition and idolatry, the protestant critique of Hindu society bore a strong structural resemblance to the arguments put forth by European religious radicals against the corruptions of the European catholic church. O'Hanlon suggests that the similarities between these two trends arose from the strategies that were adopted by the missionaries as the most effective means of undermining Hindu religious beliefs.[59] That Venkatratnam Naidu adopted most of the ideas of his precursors in the West is obvious not just from the almost identical agendas of both the Purity movements but also from his rhetoric which is cast in a western mold. His ideas are constructed in and expressed through frameworks that bear strong influences of Western Christianity.[60]
Social purity for him was

"chastity in body and chastity in mind - stern uncompromising repugnance to whatever is base and vulgar, indecent or immodest in study or pleasure, speech or song, faith or sentiment, thought or life - stout, unrelenting opposition ... to every habit or custom, regulation or institution that defeats or tends to defeat the high purpose of human life by gilding shame with fashion, or condones carnal longing as venial."[61]

"On the one hand, it honours the life that never deviates into guilty pleasure, and counts him a hero who always keeps the citadel of his senses. It upholds the law that vindicates morality, and espouses the custom that conforms to righteousness ... It welcomes the song that softens the savage in man ... and lives by the faith that adores the All Holy."[62]

Then there is of course the concern for the purity of the nation (expressed in terms of the Augean stable that needed to be cleansed). Superstition and blind adherence to custom, for Venkatratnam, were just 'outer abasements' which once removed would reveal the 'native grandeur' of the nation.[63] Western premises, however, cannot stand on their own in the context of social reform. They had to find (and did find) support within the native textual traditions. The Mahabharata, for instance describes the wife as 'the friend in solitude, the father in duty, the mother in distress and the refuge in wilderness'.[64]

This redefinition of conjugality was crucial to the movement for devadasi abolition. Gunabhushani in the The Treacherous Net, for instance says,

"Love cannot be confined by marriages or visits to dasis houses. Until marriages based on love become common in our country, men's visits to dasis houses, their hatred for their own wives and their desire for other women will not stop. There are no devadasis in advanced countries. Although prostitution exists, men and women don't indulge in immoral behaviour. This is because of the
widespread prevalence of marriages based on love. There are no women (in advanced countries) who are possessed of divinity. They do not have the kind of prostitution we have in this country. Basically they are believers in love, and they marry only when they love."[65]

Western liberal ideas of love and marriage, it seems, found advocates not just among the respectable upper class elite but also in a group struggling to survive.

The fulfilment of this agenda for purity began with the anti-nautch agitation. While 'secret vice' was found to be common the world over, India was the only nation in which immorality was practised as a "hereditary and acknowledged profession, living in peace and amity with and amidst other avocations, fortified against attacks of time and change and endowed with the privileges of social sanction."[66]

Summing up his position on the 'nautch' question, Venkataratnam envisaged two changes, which, if induced would lead to the healthy moral regeneration of the race. These were the allotment of temple-service for sacred purposes to anyone with a proven record of chastity and secondly, the education and improvement of the male members of the community who were "mostly drones or parasites."[67] This way "[a] caste, chartered to a vicious life, will cease to be; and though some poor sheep may deplorably go astray not a few of the daughters now deliberately prodigal will be restored to the longing bosom of the Divine
One finds very strong echoes of Venkatratnam in Muthulakshmi Reddi as well. She too believed in the civilising potential of the West and in the moral superiority of the colonial rulers. In urging them to expedite legislation, she frequently referred to their Christian birth and training and to their Christian ideals and sense of dignity. This belief in the moral superiority of the colonial masters coexisted with a belief in a glorious Hindu past in which the devadasis who served in temples were pure and chaste like the vestal virgins of ancient Greece. Her aim was to rescue Hindu society from the clutches of blind superstition and obscurantism, which, she believed, could only spell its doom: "[Prostitution] is a question that vitally concerns the dignity and status of every woman in India, inasmuch as it is a stigma on the whole womanhood, and a blot on Hindu civilisation." The question of the influence of Christian or other western ideas upon social reform is very significant. Most reformers accepted the missionary critique of Hindu institutions without identifying themselves with any specific Christian doctrines, to which the critique was tied. Rather, says O'Hanlon, "Hindu social reformers ... accepted a religious worldview that seemed to belong to no particular
confession. This worldview emphasised the desacralisation of the natural world, and put forward the idea of a unique Creator removed from his creation, a Creator who represented the ultimate standard of goodness and justice for the guidance of man's moral and spiritual life. This idea was then applied to human social affairs, to assert the basic equality of all men before the creator, the contingency of all human hierarchies, and the greater value of individual effort and merit in human society over status ascribed by birth or office."

Adopting most of the ideas of its precursor in the west, Social Purity in Madras Presidency roused the consciousness of people—especially, students. Between 1881 and 1910 the anti-nautch agitation had spread all over Andhra. Public opinion forced the Government to consider the question of nautch reform seriously. On March 3, 1911, the Indian Government Home Secretary, Butler circulated a letter to the elders of the Presidency asking for opinions on the efficacy of sections 372 and 373 IPC in curtailing the devadasi system."

In his reply to this letter, Narayana Iyer, the Madura Magistrate said that devadasis, traditionally, protected the chastity of married women. But poverty had now forced them into common prostitution. He
attributed their poverty to two reasons: first, their not being invited for marriages as a result of reform activity and second, the famine of 1876. A pre-famine and post-famine census of prostitutes, he felt, would demonstrate his point. The measures he suggested to curb this practice are significant because they are representative of the general tone of reform rhetoric:

1. Prostitutes should be isolated.
2. Their numbers should be monitored by frequent censuses.
3. They should be penalised if they patronise men.
4. There must be a ban on adoption.[73]

In 1914, the Bill for Protection of Minors was passed which authorised magistrates to give custody of minor girls who fear adoption for prostitution, to suitable males belonging to the same caste. The custodian would according to this Bill be given an allowance, decided on by the magistrate, towards maintenance of the minor girl.[74]

The movement for social reform was being asked to complete the process started by the state, because the colonial government, despite public support, was not in a position to take any conclusive steps towards abolishing the devadasi system. To put it in
the words of the Law Member of the Council of State the "Government... would be prepared to assist the House in every way to suppress the evil, if as a matter of fact, the dedication of a girl does amount to her employment as a prostitute... this is an assumption the government as such is not in a position to make."[75] The colonial government found itself unable to make this assumption because its own design was inextricably linked with and supported by the Hindu religious orthodoxy right from the start. With Brahmin opposition to abolition, taking any step in this direction would mean alienating Brahmin support and providing an impetus to the Tamil Nationalists who were extremely vociferous in their demand for abolition. Legal abolition therefore, had to wait for the Nationalist Government till 1947.

At about the time when the colonial government expressed its inability to outlaw the devadasi system, Muthulakshmi Reddi, a medical doctor and legislator, launched a massive campaign, for abolition, urging her sisters who belonged to the community out of their 'life of vice' and instead to fulfil their role as "loyal wives, loving mothers and useful citizens."[76] In the second phase of the movement in the 1920s Muthulakshmi rapidly became the undisputed leader of the movement for abolition. Her
authority is clear from the extremely subservient attitude that other abolitionists assumed in relation to her. The Secretary of the Andhra Kalavanthula Association at Repalle, for example tells her: "The whole community has every faith in you that you would earn the world-wide fame of taking away the evils of the community by popularising the marriage system and by taking away every other status with and practices and customs of social life like the other sects of Hindus". [77]

Muthulakshmi was in a position of unquestionable authority. She had had an advanced education (which included specialised medical training in Britain) and had come into political power. She was on par with the political elite in the Presidency and the British bureaucracy - both almost entirely male - and with women who were active in the movement for women's emancipation in the West. This clearly set her apart from the devadasis whose cause she was championing. In writing to a white woman friend, she said that they should "view matters in the light of our conscience and in our individual sense of right and wrong: because fortunately you and I are in a position to instruct and lead people in the path of virtue." [78] How did Muthulakshmi perceive the situation of women? "We women ought to realise that
the degradation of one woman is the degradation of
the whole sex. Women alone can protect women's
interests."[79] She writes referring to
prostitution: "Of all the laws, rules and regulations
which for centuries have helped place women in a
position of inferiority, none has been so powerful in
creating in the minds of men and people a sentiment
of scorn and contempt for women as the degrading idea
of the double standard of morals."[80]

Quoting a passage from the Labour Women's
Magazine in London, Muthulakshmi Reddi reminded the
government of its duties towards protecting people
from four great dangers - disease, ingorance,
starvation and disorder. She saw no reason why women
in India should even be expected to differ from women
in progressive countries. Addressing the Seventh
Andhra Provincial Women's Conference at Ellore, she
demanded compulsory and primary education for
children, sanitary housing for the poor, reform in
marriage laws and inheritance rights, equal and high
moral standards between the sexes and the suppression
of immoral traffic in women and children.[81]

In November 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddi proposed a
Bill in the Madras Legislative Council to amend
section 44 (a) of the Madras Hindu religious
Endowments Act of 1927.[82] The amendment was
introduced and inam lands held by devadasis were enfranchised and converted into ryotwari pattas which conferred independent titles to land. There were numerous pro-abolition devadasi Sangams in the districts, which held regular meetings to express their support for the bill. Of these groups, whose members came primarily from the devadasi community, the Tanjai Zilla Devadasi Sangam seems to have been particularly vocal. Its secretary, Moovalur Ramamirtattammal, drew upon her experience as a devadasi to write a novel in support of abolition.[83]

In seeking to abolish the devadasi system, Muthulakshmi Reddi was explicitly following in the footsteps of Josephine Butler, whose campaign against prostitution in England was, by her own admission, her chief source of inspiration.[84] This reform was for her only the first step in a much larger endeavour: "Once the Bill is made into an Act and the sanction of the temple to such a practice is taken away, this caste will naturally and spontaneously disappear from our midst. Then we will have to deal with wider question of the international problem of prostitution and protection of young women and children from the indecent attacks of men, which I feel will be an easier task."[85] It might be useful
to dwell for a while on the western feminist position on prostitution that Butler represented. The crusade against male vice in both America and England began with an opposition to state regulation of prostitution. This opposition challenged the Contagious Diseases Act and called for its repeal. The people who opposed it were a coalition of middle-class nonconformists, feminists and radical workingmen. Around the same time, the Ladies National Association was founded by Josephine Butler, as a separatist feminist organisation. A "Ladies Manifesto" was issued which argued that the Acts not only deprived poor women of their constitutional rights and forced them to submit to a degrading internal examination, but they officially sanctioned a double standard of sexual morality. Like earlier female reform efforts, the feminist attack on state regulation reinforced women's self conscious participation in a distinct female subculture. The feminist campaign also drew hundreds of women into the political arena for the first time by encouraging them to challenge male centers of power. They rejected the prevailing view of "fallen women" as pollutants of men and depicted them instead as victims of male pollution. From the point of the middle class feminists, this entailed a strong
identification with the fate of prostitutes. Says Walkowitz, "Prostitution also served as a paradigm for the female condition; it established the archetypal relationship between men and women, repeated in a more subtle manner within genteel society."[87]

Muthulakshmi's preoccupation with larger issues coexisted with a limited understanding of the devadasi question. The limitation was not hers alone but one that belonged to the time. A strictly utilitarian sexuality was increasingly becoming the norm in British India. Young boys were exhorted to practice continence as it would lead to the moral regeneration of the race. "Our educated young men and women ... must take the vow of Brahmacharya and ... take light and knowledge to every poor and ignorant home in the [village]."[88] Further, the debate on abolition was located in British India and the promulgation and execution of laws was the preserve of the British. Propagandists for abolition therefore often felt compelled to express themselves in, and to translate reality into, language that would be comprehended by the British.[89] The Hindu religion, here represented by the dedication of girls to gods, was alien to British experience. The first step towards narrowing the gap between the Indian
experience and the British one was to use the words 'devadasi' and 'prostitute' interchangeably. This also translated reality into categories that were consistent with the rapidly changing perceptions of Indians themselves. Contemporary polygamous relationships among the devadasis, according to this argument were aberrations which did not reflect the glory and sacredness of the Hindu nation.

As the situation demanded, Muthulakshmi too either used the terms synonymously or spoke a difference that had existed in the past. Her reactions were close to those of the nineteenth century social reformers, especially, Rammohan Roy, who was her patron saint.[90]

To Muthulakshmi and some of her precursors and followers the devadasi institution epitomised the "loss of masculinity and cultural regression of the Hindus."[91] The devadasi system, in their view, was a slur on the Hindu nation. The integrity of the Hindu nation which was by definition Aryan in character had to be safeguarded against the onslaughts from the Dravidian non-Brahmin movement on the one hand and from the Christian evangelical efforts to counter the system through proselytisation. Crucial to their defence was the need to account for a practice which was not only so
widely prevalent in the contemporary society, but also found mention in the Agamas.[92] The abolitionists' defence therefore involved an exploration into textual origins. These explanations revealed to them that devadasis were originally a band of pure virgin ascetics attached to temples. They were believed to have lived a holy life, wearing only the simplest clothes and subsisting on the food given to them by the temples.

All women were not, however, capable of protecting their interests. In Muthulakshmi's view, those devadasis who opposed her bill, demanded the right to determine their own future and were unwilling to transformed by her into "loyal wives, loving mothers and useful citizens,"[93] were only a "set of prostitutes who have been set up by their keepers."[94] She urged the government "not to pay heed to such protests from a most objectionable class of people in society."[95] This superior self perception is again not something that was peculiar to Muthulakshmi alone. Rather, it seems characteristic of middle and upper class women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who took up the cause of women's emancipation in the West and India. In the West, for instance, feminists insisted on their right to defend prostitutes by
invoking two kinds of authority relationships -- "mothers" and "sisters." The invocation of the mother-daughter relationship, while at one level subversive of the father's control over his daughter in a patriarchal system, was in this context also one that was hierarchical and custodial. Further, although they were no doubt capable of articulating a radical critique of prostitution, middle class feminists in the West as well as in India were ambivalent about prostitutes and the right of women from lower classes to control their own sexuality. Walkowitz says that "feminists tended to share the same feelings of anxiety over youthful female sexuality as other members of the middle class... for them as for more repressive moralists, the desire to protect young girls thinly masked coercive impulses to control their voluntary sexual responses and to impose a second code on them in keeping with the middle-class view of female adolescent dependency."[96]

This disdain, was not restricted to those women whose cause she was championing. In a letter written to an associate while her bill was being discussed in the Legislative Council, she says, "I find that none of these women M.Litts. are up-to-date and capable of piloting any Bill. It would have been better if a
gentleman had been given the opportunity of introducing the Bill and getting it through."

In the Tamil areas of the Presidency, most of the abolitionists were in the non-Brahmin movement and held Brahminism and the Aryan religion responsible for the evil of dedication. Their organisations, however, unlike some newspapers which carried scathing attacks, did not take a firm stand either in support of religion or against it. Ramamirtattammal provides an extremely illustrative critique of brahminism. "If Brahma is really a great god he should arrange marriages between people of the same age. How can he marry a six year old girl to a sixty year old man? Even if this is possible why then is it not possible for a sixty year old woman to marry a six year old boy? Can our women not see that all this is done by brahmins to ensure their livelihood? All these groups, dasis, prostitutes, priests, brahmins etc. need a god who will provide them with a means of livelihood." This understanding of caste and brahminical Hinduism undergirds the entire novel. The question she poses "God is the protector of the world, will he watch silently while his wives prostitute themselves?" is a powerful indictment of not just the nationalist defence of the essential Hinduism but also of the pro-Hindu biases of
prominent abolitionists.[99]
The Kovai Senguntar Mahajana Sangam was among the most active bodies in the Tamil areas. Its activities antedated the arrival of Muthulakshmi on the scene: "For the past fifteen years, the Kovai Senguntar Mahajana Sangam has been working towards abolishing this custom, but since it has not had the support of the government, it has met with little success. Finally as a reward for their efforts, Muthulakshmi Reddi ... came forward to propose the Bill for abolition."[100]

The Tamil Nationalists used the devadasi practice as a stick to beat Brahminical Hinduism with. In this view religion and god (both terms by implication Aryan and Brahmin) created caste differences, untouchability, enforced widowhood and prostitution that was practised under the guise of euphemism. The devadasis according to them were mere instruments of Brahmin treachery. The Brahmins were seen as conspiring to ensure the continuance of their oppressive hegemony by perpetuating disgraceful customs like these.[101]

In the Andhra areas of the Presidency, the Andhradesa Kalavanthula Sangham was the most active pro-abolition body. It had close ties with the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj and most of its male members
belonged also to one or other of these movements. 
This organisation held periodic social conferences on 
devadasi abolition. The resolutions of the sixth 
conference asserted that devadasis should be 
considered prostitutes, and their entry into temples 
discouraged. "Acceptance of temple service by 
prostitutes", the second resolution reads, "violates 
the canons[sic] of self respect of the Kalavanthas, 
hinders their moral reform movement, and endangers 
the sanctity of temples and the morality of the 
general public". The conference also resolved to 
constitute an Executive Committee that would function 
as a marriage bureau for parents of prospective 
brides and bridegrooms and stressed the need to get 
all grown up girls of the community married, and to 
legalise such relationships as did exist without 
legal sanction, under the Civil Marriage Act. The 
Kalavantha community in Andhra apparently comprised 
of four subsects. With the consolidation of the 
movement the need for free interdining and 
intermarriage across these subsects was felt.[102] 

Generally, support for the cause of abolition was 
mobilised in three ways, depending on who was being 
addressed. Since the primary attempt was to wean the 
women and men away from their community, they 
constituted the primary target for the
abolitionists - a target the abolitionists could afford to be extremely ruthless with. The self esteem of the men and women was undermined and an abhorrence was created in them of their moral laxity and material dependence.

The accusation of immorality was directed against devadasi women: "The dasi herself is a recognised prostitute. The result is that a depraved woman who has wrecked many a family and who is a curse to humanity is considered to be entitled to an office in the temple of God and is allowed to tempt God's bhaktas away from the path of morality, by her dancing and singing, even at the time they are praying to overcome temptation."[103] The men of the community, on the other hand were exhorted to realise "how they have lost their individuality by their abject and servile dependence on their women." They were told that their manhood lay in their self respect and self reliance and on their capacity to assume their "rightful place as the economic unit on the family in place of the woman".[104]

The second group being addressed was the Hindu orthodoxy. The support of the caste Hindus and the colonial government was crucial to the abolition movement - the support of the latter being predicated on that of the orthodox Hindus. At the time when the
non-Brahmin movement was gaining ground in Madras Presidency, the colonial government took over the control and administration of temples which were hitherto controlled by zamindars or the landed aristocracy. Whether or not it was intended, this move by the colonial government helped retain Brahmin control over Hindu religious institutions. The importance of Brahmin support as a result could not be dismissed even in the face of the rapidly spreading non-Brahmin movement.

In order to woo Brahmin support, Hindu scriptures were invoked to show that servants of God were expected to be chaste and pure and that the Hindu religion did not sanction sexual promiscuity.

Finally there was a strong anti-Brahmin lobby within the movement. This group held Hindu religion and Brahmins responsible for the existence of such disgraceful institutions: the only solution being the overthrowing of the religion itself.

Among social reformers themselves there was no unanimity of opinion on the precise direction that reform should take. What they did share in common, however, was the public hostility for practices that were not just central to Hindu religion, but were also responsible for undermining the credibility of Hinduism. According to O'Hanlon, "reformers
reflected, in a slightly different way, most of the concerns and attitudes which constituted the ideological framework of Christian belief. Since they were convinced that Hindu society had suffered from a gradual descent into the economic and spiritual poverty of the present, they were determined to convey to India what they saw as the material and human advantages enjoyed by western societies. In their prescriptions for social and religious renewal, reformers identified themselves with subjective as opposed to ascriptive values, with all that this implied for the hierarchies of Hindu society, the privileges of Brahmins, and the devaluation of women and the lower castes. They felt that the most valuable kind of knowledge was that which was useful to man in his worldly life. This asset should be available to every individual through the creation of a channel of intellectual intercourse which all men shared in common."[106]

There were many devadasis who opposed abolition, but they were badly organised. We find, for example, that in 1927 the anti-abolition Devadasi Sangam of Periyakanchipuram had 28 members; that of Chinnakanchivaram had 50; that of Tirukkalkunram had 100; and the one in Chingleput had 25 members.[107] It is specifically stated that all belonged to the
devadasi community, which underscored the fact that the anti-abolition lobby had virtually no members or support from other sections of society.

These groups had no say whatsoever in government at any level. Their access to the press was very limited, and it can be safely assumed that many of their meetings went unreported. Swadesamitran and The Hindu which did carry a few such reports, were subjected to severe criticism by their readerships and non-Brahmin newspapers like Dravidan.

With these handicaps, the anti-abolition groups were in effect helpless and unable to articulate themselves, although there were many things they felt that they could or should defend: that part of religion which sanctioned their existence; the art that was their profession; their right to property and control over domestic resources; and their honour and dignity which were increasingly coming under attack. The heterogeneity of the abolitionist groups led to the levelling of a range of criticism of devadasis and their way of life that was too wide to be easily countered.

The voices of the women who opposed abolition are feeble and scattered, but they reveal a depth of understanding and a native feminist sensibility that is not to be found in the women abolitionists. The
Madras Rudrakannikai Sangam was an active anti-abolition body. In its view, "the people who propose the Bill offer the lame excuse that Isai Vellalar themselves support it. But Isai Vellalar are men born of Rudrakannikais. It is strange that they are supporting the Bill. We will soon see that selfishness prompts them to support the Bill. The women of this class have the sole right to property and the right to funeral honours ... It is a fact that in this world men have always had a selfish motive. The men of this class wanted to have the right to property and therefore they bite the hand that feeds them."[108] And from the same group: "A bill to abolish prostitution ought to exert control over and punish the men responsible".[109]

Another anti-abolitionist says, "Some members of the Madras Legislative Council, especially Dr. Muthulakshmiammal and some Congress leaders ... have ... been carrying on propaganda work under the misapprehension that the morality of Hindu society would be improved thereby ... No healthy social conditions can be founded on inequality and injustice. Without male chastity female chastity is impossible".[110]

The existence of the devadasi institution was also predicated on Hindu religion and the traditional
Hindu family. The tensions within the family, between the women and their mothers—and sisters-in-law and the mandatory distance and reserve between husband and wife in a traditional marriage forced the husband into easier relationships with dasis. The solution to the dasi question would be reached if the structure of marriage was loosened to accommodate a greater ease in conjugal relationships.

The new ideal of marriage was based on the redefinition of Ideal Womanhood. Brahminical ideals of the unquestioning, self-effacing, obedient wife were clearly inadequate and even detrimental to the interests of women. "Mere education," Ramamithammal says, "is not enough to broaden the mind [of women]. Worldly knowledge is essential. Some villagers hesitate to give their wives new jewellery, they do not give their wives a chance to wear new types of clothes, they will not speak directly to them: they address their sisters instead."[111]

By the time the movement for abolition reached its peak, colonialism and the developments associated with it had brought about many changes. Of interest here is the substantial alteration that had taken place in the structure and the ideology of the family. This had marginalised or excluded those women who did not come within the very narrowly redefined
boundaries of the monogamous family: an adult female had to be either a wife or a prostitute.

Perhaps inevitably an important part of the devadasis defence was their attempt to portray themselves in a role that was both sanctioned by religious custom and acceptable to the changing ideology. The sanctity of marriage became a central issue: "As soon as a virgin who is born into that caste ties the tirupottu she acquires the name tevaradiyal ... Just as a married woman belongs to her husband, so also the kannikai belongs to Iswaran and her tirupottu symbolises this".[112]

Summing up the pro and anti abolitionist stands,, we can probably say that the compulsive self-deprecation of the abolitionist devadasis was the reaction of a group isolated by rapid change and hungering for acceptance. That this acceptance was not easily made available to them is best illustrated by Gunabhushani's predicament in *The Treacherous Net*. Gunabhushani, although reformed, is faced with the same predicament was her unreformed cousin - she is not free from the accusation immorality. "Alas! Although I live with only one man, the title dasi does not leave me. When women of other castes prostitute themselves will anyone dare [to question their behaviour]? The upper castes remain upper
castes no matter how many atrocities they commit. In the same manner, the label dasi does not leave us even if we live chaste, virtuous lives. High caste women will never earn such a reputation inspite of committing many sins."[113] Anti-abolition devadasis too, on the other hand, could not dismiss the emerging ideal of womanhood - marriage and the family - because they themselves could seek shelter only behind another form of the same ideal. Their only defence, therefore, was to demonstrate their morality within the frameworks of the emerging ideal.[114] Some devadasis were carriers of a rich cultural and artistic heritage, that was now threatened with extinction. This caused much concern among the revivalists, who now began to draw a distinction between art and morality. E.Krishna Iyer, a brahmin, criticised the abolitionists for confounding the art with the vice of immorality.[115] As part of his impassioned defence of the art he performed the sadir on stage even in female guise to try persuading girls of upper castes and the humiliated artists to further the cause of the art.[116] By now, however, the artists had moved away, emotionally and politically from their art.

It was left to Rukminidevi Arundale to take up the task of revival from Krishna Iyer. Under the
wings of the Theosophical Society, she started an academy of arts in Madras—Kalakshetra—which was instrumental in the rebirth of the sadir as Bharatanatyam.[117]

Rukminidevi's involvement with Bharatanatyam must be viewed in the context of the antipathic relationships between the Theosophical Society on the one hand, and British officialdom, Indian reformers and Christian Evangelicals on the other.

The philosophy of Theosophy was heavily influenced by Hindu Buddhist teachings. It had a three fold object:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.
2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.
3. To investigate unexplained laws of nature and man's latent power.

While denouncing all dogmatic religious attitudes, Theosophy was extremely tolerant of Indian religions [118]

- Vedic Hinduism and Sanskritic traditions in particular. The most important aspect of Theosophy, however, was that it made the defense of Hinduism less self conscious and more affirmative. It also
generated an increasing sense of pride in the cultural heritage of India.[119] This perception was readily accepted by the Brahmin and upper class elite. While defending cultural traditions, however, the Theosophists did not feel compelled to oppose the uprooting of the devadasis from temples and public functions and the denial of their existence. Instead, they created a new context for the art with the support of the upper caste "culture-hungry, nationalist elite".[120]

The revival and purification of the 'ancient temple dance involved the privileging of a textual tradition in dance. In order to privilege a textual tradition, however, it is essential that such a tradition exists. Since there was no single tradition - each temple being characterised by its own dance form - important on the Kalakshetra agenda was the creation of such a tradition through a study of classical texts and Bharata's Natyasastra.

Those devadasis who were not carriers of an artistic heritage, but enjoyed land in lieu of payment for temple service, were given individual title to the land, if the original title was in their names, or given a monetary compensation if their title was to the revenue from the land and not to the land itself. Customary rights to food and clothes
from the temple and from worshippers, which might have been crucial to their daily services were henceforth denied.[121] Finally, those devadasis who belonged to the non sanskritic tradition and came from the lowest castes were simply pushed out of visibility. The situation is perhaps best illustrated by a statement made by an unreformed devadasi in The Treacherous Net: Trapped in a hopeless situation, Kantha offers in the end the ultimate solution. The only way to stop devadasi practice for her was to exile all women of the community to the Andamans. There is here a recognition of the denial of their right to exist.[122] And Kantha, here, can be seen to be speaking for the 2 lakh odd devadasis who at the end of the reform movement, had no option but to retreat into oblivion and invisibility.

With this the circle was complete: the process of Brahminical and Sanskritic reconstitution of 'The Indian Tradition' that was begun by the Orientalists was completed by the Theosophists. Widely differing political ideologies came together to achieve a common end: the creation of a 'normal', 'uniform', and 'pure' society, through either the cooptation of delegitimation of difference.
ENDNOTES

2. Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?"
5. Quoted in ibid. p. 46.
7. Busnagi Rajannan, "American Free Thinkers and South Indian Free Thought."
9. S. Ambirajan, Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India.
11. Abbe Dubois, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies.
12. ibid, p. 585.
13. ibid, p. 586.
14. Here again, as in the writing of James Mill, the character of a nation is predicated on the morality of its women.
15. The Indian Penal Code came into force in the year 1861.
16. Sections 372 and 373 of the IPC enable prosecution of people involved in the disposal or procurement of a minor girl for purposes of prostitution.
17. See Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" and Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions."
18. Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi."
19. See Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions."


21. Section 372 of the Indian Penal Code is as follows: "Whoever sells, lets to hire, or otherwise disposes of any minor under the age of 16 years, with intent that such minor shall be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or for any unlawful and immoral purpose, or knowing it to be likely that such minor will be employed or used for any such purpose, shall be punished" with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

22. Reg. V. Arunachellam, ILR 1 (1876-8) Madras, p.165

23. The direct evidence was without exception given by the agency that charged the accused - invariably the state. Exp parte Padmavati, MHCR 5 (1870) p.416

24. Ibid.


26. Ibid. p.276

27. Venku V. Mahalinga, ILR 11 (1888) Madras, p. 396


32. Mathura Naikin v. Esu Naikin, p.563

33. Visvanatha Mudali v. Doraiswamy Mudali, MLJ 49 (1925) p.687

34. Mathura Naikin v. Esu Naikin, pp. 550 - 1

35. Subbaratna Mudali v. Balakrishnaswami Naidu, MLJ 33 (1917) p.208

36. Ibid, pp. 208 - 209

38. Quoted in ibid.
39. ibid.
46. The title is borrowed from Richard Schechner’s concept of restorative behaviour. See Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*.
47. V. Ramakrishna, *Social Reform in Andhra*. This has an extremely informative account of reform trends in Andhra in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
49. The first attempt to set up a girl’s school in Madras was made in 1821 by the Church Missionary Society. Later, between 1830 and 1837, the L.M.S., the Wesleyan Mission, the American Mission and the Christian Missionary Society started several boarding and day schools for girls. For further details see V. Ramakrishna. ibid., pp. 91-93.
50. Veeresalingam through this journal as well as Satihitabodhini inaugurated an epoch in women’s journals in Andhra. ibid. p. 94.
52. ibid. p. 120.
Rao in a play, Kanyasulkam made subtle use of humour to undermine reform rhetoric.


55. ibid, pp. 156 - 157.

56. 'Sexual Reformation,' Alpha, July 1, 1879, p. 10 cf David Pivar, Purity Crusade, pp.33-34.

57. Walkowitz, "The Politics of Prostitution."


59. It must be remembered that in substance, the missionaries were very strong critics of Enlightenment ideas. The strategies were similar because missionaries and European radicals perceived similar features in the respective objects of their reforming zeal. Both set themselves in opposition to a priesthood that wrongly interposed itself between the believer and God. Both attacked a conception of the divine that blurred and obfuscated both the uniqueness of the Creator and his essential separation, both from the natural world, and from all the constructs of human society; and each condemned the elaborate rituals to which this had given rise. They questioned faith in religious tenets that failed to stand the test of human reason. Finally each claimed that religious systems, with the endowment of human authorities and hierarchies with divine sanction had produced a stagnation in society that denied proper freedoms, stifled individual merit and talent, and impeded the workings of man's reason and the progress of human knowledge. O'Hanlon, Caste, Conflict and Ideology, pp.52-53.


61. ibid, p. 259.

62. ibid, p. 260.

63. ibid, p. 264.

64. Manu too "demands of him that would be a father ... to be wholly satisfied with her he has taken unto wife, and guarantees good fortune to the house where the husband is content with the wife and the wife with the husband". ibid. pp. 253-254.

65. Ramamirtham, The Treacherous Net of the Oasis or the Minor Grown Wise, p. 44. The author was a reformed devadasi
who was active in the movement for abolition. The plot in the novel is woven around a family of devadasis whose entire existence revolves around enticing rich men away from their wives while they are still rich and returning them to their families in a state of penury. This is set against the background of devadasi abolition with characters in the novel playing the role of active abolitionists. The novel ends with the reform of this devadasi family in a Social Reform Conference. Although this is a novel and the characters "fictitious", each character is modelled either on stereotypes that were current at the time, or on actual abolitionists.

The work is also strongly autobiographical and narrative of the trends in the movement, which is why it has been used here more or less as a text on the abolition movement. The novel is in Tamil and is called Dasigal Mosavalai Ahadu Mahipura Maimar.


67. Ibid, p. 279. This is a recurrent theme in the rhetoric of reform. The novel discussed at the end of this chapter is not an exception.

68. Ibid, p. 279

69. MRF, sf. 11.


71. O'Hanlon, Caste, Conflict and Ideology, p. 52.

72. Krishnapatrika, July 7, 1911.

73. Krishnapatrika, May 15, 1911.

74. Krishnapatrika, Jan 17, 1914.


76. Letter dated 8-10-1927, MRF, sf. 11, 2 : 349 - 51

77. Letter, MRF, sf. 11,2, p. 380.

78. Letter to Miss. Girrard dated 15.08.27, MRF, sf. 11,1,p.131.


80. Ibid.

81. Muthulakshmi Reddi, "Presidential Address delivered at
82. She proposed the Bill for the enfranchisement of inams, she said, in support of the

"women's associations in this Presidency who feel this practice of dedicating young girls or young women to temples for immoral purposes as a slur on Indian Womanhood and a great wrong and injustice done to the innocent youth of this country, and in response to the incessant demands of the enlightened sections of those aggrieved communities themselves whose rightly developed moral sense naturally revolts at such a notorious custom prevalent among the unenlightened of their community and who, with their persuasive method and educative propaganda work ... are unable to suppress this vice without further legislation and above all, in deference to my own personal conviction that, in the cause of humanity and justice, we can no longer delay this piece of beneficial legislation, a reform by which we can rescue thousands of young innocent children from a life of immorality and vice, from life-long invalidism, suffering disease and death resulting from infection with venereal disease." Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council for November, 1927, pp. 415 - 416

83. Ramanirthammal, The Treacherous Net

84. Josephine Butler, "Male and Female Morality."

85. Extract from untitled speech (?). MRF sf. 11 2 : 349 - 351.

86. In 1864, the British Parliament passed the first of three statutes providing for the sanitary inspection of prostitutes in specified military depots in southern England and Ireland. This came to be known as the first Contagious Diseases Act. See Walkowitz, "The Politics of Prostitution."

87. ibid., p.147.


89. For a similar view, see note 58.

90. Margaret Cousins, Indian Womanhood Today. Muthulakshmi Reddi corroborates this observation in a letter to Dr. C.R. Reddi in which she speaks of her frequent visits to the Brahmo Temple in Madras. See C.R. Reddi Papers at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.
91. Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?", p.5

92. In point of fact, the system was justified on these grounds by the anti abolition devadasis.

93. See note 25.


95. ibid.


98. Ramamirthamal, The Treacherous Net, p.46.

99. ibid, p. 58.

100. Press statement, reference undecipherable, MRF, sf 12. Such organisations were not restricted to British India. An example in Goa was the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. In 1930, Prof. Narain Bandodkar, a legislator proposed a bill in the Goa Legislative Council to abolish the sessa system of women's betrothal and surrender to the temple. He had the support of Rajaram Painginkar, a reform activist from the devadasi community. See Mario Cabral e Sa, "The Evolution of a Community".

101. Press Clippings, MRF, sf 12.


103. ibid.

104. ibid.

105. Muthulakshmi herself was a staunch supporter of their cause although anti-Brahminism for her did not entail a rejection of Hinduism.

106. O’Hanlon, Caste, Conflict and Ideology, p.95.

107. Press Clippings, MRF, sf 12.

109. ibid.


112. See note 110.


114. We could, after Foucault, see their defence of their profession as a reverse discourse, where, as in the case of homosexuality in the West, the devadasi way of life began to speak for itself; to demand that its legitimacy be recognised and acknowledged often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was being increasingly denounced and denigrated. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, p. 101.

115. E. Krishna Iyer, "Should the art be penalised for a defect of society? Is it really the arts that lead to concubinage? The killing of the art will only doubtfully lead to less vice," The Hindu, 7 December, 1932, p. 5.


117. ibid.

118. Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society in India believed that ancient scriptures held the secrets of human happiness. See Busnagi Rajannan, "American Free Thinkers and South Indian Free Thought."

119. ibid.

120. For an account of this transformation see Amrit Srinivasan's work, cited in the bibliography.

121. This aspect is dealt with in Chapter 4.