CHAPTER VI
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THE EVOLUTION AND ABOLITION OF DEVADASI SYSTEM

The term ‘Devadasi’ means the servant of God. It is also interpreted as the slave – servant of God, handmaiden of God, sacred slave girl, temple girl, temple dancer, the harlot of the Gods, and Temple courtesan. The term is also used as an euphemistic sense of reverence to women in the most ancient profession of the world, who claim to practice it under religious traditions and family custom. Hence it was also known as religious prostitution. "A typical Devadasi was a young charming beautiful damsel meticulously trained in the art of singing and dancing as well as public relations, and she was a superb exponent of the art. Hers was a life of excitement of ecstasy and rare fulfillment through are".¹ At her best, she had a life of cultural ease and pleasure, and provided amusement and intellectual companionship to those who could afford. At her worst, she was a temple drudge serving a passing stranger, but who still believed that she was performing an act of worship.²

The system involved the dedication of young girls to a God, Goddess or an object of worship through a public ceremony of marrying the girl to that deity followed by her maiden performance in dancing or singing. In later years, the practice was to stamp the girl with the mark of a *pinga* (Phallus), *shankha*, *Chakra*, or eagle, etc., by tattooing. Preferably on the right breast, with a view to distinguishing temple courtesans from palace courtesans, and these women differ from other classes of women.

The institution of *Devadasis* has a history of more than 1700 years. The term *Devadasi* is of Sanskrit origin, and though it was commonly used, the institution and the women in the profession were known locally under different terms. In Tamil Nadu they were known as *Devaradiar* or *dasis*, meaning slave servants of Gods or servants, respectively; as *Kudidass*, and those belonging to the house in the Travancore region, as dogmas and Sanis in Andrapradesh as Busavis and Joyatis in the Kannada speaking areas; as Bhavis or Bhavinis, meaning beautiful wanted women in Goa and western India.

The Temple girls in North Travancore were originally from south Konkan and Madurai regions, but other were of indigenous class. The female members of the caste, besides being known by the ordinary names of *Tevadial* and *Dasi* both meaning servant of god, were called as *Kudikkass, Den dakal* or women. Those *Kudikkass* who had gained expertise in dancing and singing were conferred the title of *'Rayar'* (king). This appears to have been last
conferred in 1847 (AD). The south Travancore dasis had no social intercourse with the dasis of the Tamil speaking districts. They danced only in temples; and did not accept private engagements in houses on marriage occasions. A dancing girl on becoming old was allowed to retire from the temple service by removing her ear pendants in the palace in the presence of the authorities by paying a nazur (gift). After laying down her profession, she was supposed to lead a life of retirement and resignation. She continued to receive her wages from the temple, but at a reduced rate. There were two types of dasis – the Marukkudi and Chitrappukudi. While the former attended to the daily routine the latter served on special occasions. The South Travancore dasis were enjoined upon the duties of attending two festivals at Sri Padmanabhaswami temple and the Dushera at the capital, meeting and escorting members of the royal family at their respective village limits, and undertaking the prescribed fasts for the apamargam ceremony in connection with the annual festival of the temple; On these days strict conditions was enjoined and they were fed at the temple one meal a day.³

The term *Devadasi* simply means the maid of God or it is also interpreted to mean the servant for the pleasure of the God. These maids of God are given in marriage to the deity of temples. The common concept about them is that they are ‘divine harlots’.

The status of women was further lowered in south Travancore by the introduction of the *Devadasi* which prevailed in Hindu temples. Under this system the young girls were presented by their parents to the temple in fulfillment of a vow or as an atonement for sin. These girls were also formally married to the idol before they entered their temple duties such as dancing and singing.

The Hindus were extremely conservative and followed very strictly the religious rules of conduct nurtured by their ancestors from the early past. Any deviation from the existing manual was viewed by them with suspicion and superstitious dread. As this was the basis of their belief they came to adopt a number of age old practices of which the dedication of children to deities had

a significance of its own. Several factors were responsible for the emergence of this vile system. In times past, in exchange for the recovery of a sick child, the mother took a vow to dedicate her daughter to a temple as a servant.\textsuperscript{6} In order to get wealth, happiness and prosperity for the family, girls were presented to the temple by their parents.\textsuperscript{7} They even bestowed their young ones freely in recognition of a divine gift or an answered prayer.\textsuperscript{8} They firmly believed that they had to dedicate their girls to win some converted favour from the Gods.\textsuperscript{9} Sherring writes that certain caste Hindus dedicated their daughters to the temple after recovering from illness or relief from other misfortune. Parents who had a number female children set apart one of them for the service of God.\textsuperscript{10} It was an established practice among certain castes to present their first-born girl to the temple service for absolving themselves of their sins.\textsuperscript{11} If a childless Hindu happened to be blessed with a child, the same was given to the God for services. It was also a custom among the Hindus to dedicate children simply to escape from poverty. In order to obtain

\begin{array}{l}
\text{7. Edger Thurston, } \textit{Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol.} \textit{II Delhi, 1975, p.125.} \\
\text{9. Frieda Hauswirth, } \textit{op.cit, p.90.} \\
\text{10. A.R. Caton, } \textit{The Key of Progress, London, 1930, p.178.} \\
\text{11. Freda Hauswirth, } \textit{Loc.cit, p.90.} \\
\end{array}
a safe delivery the expectant mothers would often take a vow to dedicate their children to the service of God. In doing so they imagined that they were satisfying a meritorious obligation.12

Though most of the temple girls in Travancore were recruited by temple authorities, a good number of them were dedicated by their parents. It was customary that the Devadasis were not allowed to retire from service until they dedicated their daughters for temple service. For instance, one Ramalakshmi of the Krishnankovil Temple was not permitted to retire till a substitute was dedicated to the temple by adoption.13 Another instance, when custom took the force of law, was that when one Cempakam Bhagavti, a kudikari attached to the temple of Suchindram, applied in 1081 M.E for permission to retire from the service on grounds of ill health. The then Peishkar ordered that her request would not be granted unless and until thalikettu14 of another girl from the same kudi was effected for the performance of temple service.15 The ceremony of thalikettu was compulsory before a girl styled herself as a Devadasi.

14. The ceremony of Thalikettu was popularly known as “Pottukattal” in Tamil and Canarese countries, and “mangalayadharana” in Telugu countries. Krishnamacharya, The place of Devadasis in Society, Madras, 1934, p.4.
In cases of non-availability of female issues, both the Tamil and Malayalam dasis were permitted to adopt girls from another family for dedication. One Laksmimuniyamma, a Devadasi of Suchindram Temple, was granted permission in accordance with this custom to adopt a girl as her successor and heir. Generally good-looking Nair girls were chosen for adoption. Most of these girls were the offspring of widows gone astray.

The adoption of a dancing-girl was marked by a lengthy ceremonial process. The dasi who wanted to adopt a child had to submit an application to the temple authorities first, requesting that the girl to be adopted may be made heir to both kudi and pat, i.e., to the house and temple service, of the adopter. On obtaining such a sanction, all concerned were convened to meet in the house of the adopter in whose presence a document was authentically produced. It was then followed by a ceremony of the nature of the Jatakarma, an essential ritual in the process and recognition of the adoption.

The girl was then subjected to *kaccakettu* ceremony of initiation into the art of dancing. Soon after the *kaccakettu* ceremony the senior *Devadasis* of the temple, presented the application of the girl to the Srikariyakkar of the temple. The application would be in the form of a request that the girl should be admitted to the official rank of *Devadasis* of the temple. It was the Srikariyakkar who decided on the number of girls to be enrolled during the particular year based on the applications and the status of the applicant’s family. Of the girl was closely related to any one of the *Devadasis* in the temple, no further enquiries were considered necessary for ascertaining the status and claim of the applicant. In all other cases formal investigations were insisted. On the approval of an application by the Srikariyakkar, a document was executed by the mother of the girl. The document was then sent to the *Tahasildar* of the taluk, for disbursing the amount to conduct the *thalikettu* ceremony of the girl. If the *Dewan*-peishkar accepted the proposal of the *Tahasilldar* the payment was sanctioned. A sum of five *fanams* and a few


measures of paddy or rice were given to the family, from the temple funds, towards the expenses of the ceremony. However, this amount was later raised to thirty-four and odd fanams.

The parents of the girl then got the auspicious time fixed by the Stanikar (manager) of the Temple for thalikettu ceremony. On the appointed day, the relatives of the girl assembled and the girl was given a purificatory bath with holy water. Then she was dressed in rich clothes and taken in a gay procession to the temple. A tray, containing two new clothes, a thali, money to Brahmins, betel-leaves, arecanut, turmeric, kumkum (saffron) sandal, flowers and other articles required for doing puja was carried by a woman member of the party. Musicians, pipers and drummers were in attendance.

When the procession reached the corridor of the temple, the head priest received the tray of articles and placed the clothes and the thali (marriage badge) at the feet of the image. Some items including a piece of


cloth were taken by him in the name for divine use. The thali consisted of a triangular pottu, bearing the image of Ganesa, with gold beads on either side. Taking the remaining clothes and thali, sitting very close to the girl, the priest asked her to take her seat in the inner sanctuary facing the deity. Kindling the fire, the priest performed all the marriage ceremonies, following the custom of Tirukkalayanam festival when Siva was represented as marrying Parvati. Finally, the priest, reciting a few hymns of behalf of the deity tied the thali round the girl’s neck. Toe-rings were also put on the toes of the girl. The Srikariyakkar, Stanikar and Yogakkar used to witness this ceremony.

Immediately after thalikettu ceremony, the bride was taught by the priest the pancakshra hymn if the temple was Saivite and Ashtaksara if it was Vaisnavite. She then devoutly laid herself at length in front of the image and then before the priest. A formal initiation into the art of singing and dancing by the nattuvan or the dancing-master followed when she came out of

26. N. Subramaniya Aiyar, *Census of India*, 1901, Part I, Trivandrum, 1903, p.120.

27. *Ibid*.


the sanctum-sanctorum. The Turavukkaran then presented to the girl one and odd edangalis of raw – rice for her subsistence, which was symbolical of her dependence on the temple. The girl took the status of a Devadasi thenceforth.

The girls parents and relatives then took her to her house, where the social celebrations of marriage like feasting and merriment would take place for three or four days. As in Brahmanical marriages, the rolling of a coconut to and fro was conducted, the temple – priest dressed in male attire, acting the part of the bride-groom. Presents of money were offered by the kith and kin, suited to the status of the brides family. The Brahmin servants of the temple invariably visited her house and enjoyed free and sumptuous food on these days.

The procedure of thalikettu ceremony is different and more interesting in the temples possessed by the Kaikolan musicians. There the custom was to offer at least one girl from every family as dasi either by regular dedication

31. V. Nagam Aiya, op.cit, p.384.
32. Edgar Thurston, op.cit, p.144.
34. The Kaikolans are a large caste of Tamil weavers found in South Travancore.
to a temple, or by the head-man tying the thali.\(^{35}\) On the day fixed for thali-tying ceremony, the girl was decorated with jewels and made to stand on a heap of paddy. A folded lustrous cloth was held in front of her by two Devadasis, who also had to stand on heaps of paddy. The girl caught hold of the cloth and her dancing-master, who sat behind her, grasping her legs, moved them up and down in tune with the music that was played then. In the evening, she was taken on horse-back to the temple where a brass-plate with a new cloth for the idol, the thali and other necessary things for performing puja were handed over to the temple priest. The girl was seated facing the idol, and the officiating priest gave sandal and flowers to her. Then he took the thali and placed it at the feet of the idol first and took it after a while and tied it round her neck, as though the deity itself was performing the thali-tying. In certain temples, the girl wedded a dagger. Such symbolic marriages used to be held from the age of eight to eleven or before the girl attained puberty.\(^{36}\) On the day of the marriage, another girl, a little elder than

\(^{35}\text{Edger Thurston. op.cit, p.37.}\)

\(^{36}\text{K. Raghunathji, “Bombay Dancing Girls”, The Indian Antiquary.1884, (n.d).}\)
the one about to be married, was asked to put on a male costume to represent the bridegroom. She then stood on a heap of rice with a dagger in her hand. The bride was now brought and made to stand on another heap of rice in front of the first with garland in her hands, and a silk cloth was held between them. The priest repeated verses from the *puranas*, and the guests put a few grains of rice on the foreheads of the pair at the end of every verse. At the proper time the curtain was lowered and the bride had to put the garland round the dagger. Betel, arecanut, coconuts to the guests and money to Brahmins were served in plenty to conclude the ritualistic celebration.

Festival and elaborate ceremonies were gone through before a girl was admitted to the official rank of *Devadasis* in the Siva temple at Suchindram. Certain conventions and rules were strictly followed in connection with the ceremony of *thalikettu*. As a prelude to it a *yoga* (meeting) composed of the *Valiya- Srikariyakkr*, the *Yogattil – potti*, *the Vattappalli – Santi* and others, was held to decide on the preliminaries to be arranged.  

The girl after her ceremonial bath was taken in procession in a palanquin to the temple. She was then taken inside the temple by her relatives with *ashtamangalyam* in which the *thali* was placed. The *ashtamangalyam* with the *thali* was given to the *Vattappalli-Santi* on duty for the day at *vadakkedam*. He placed the *thali* at the feet of the deity till the *muhurtam* and then tied it round the neck of the girl. The Chief *Nattuvan* then gave her the first lesion in the art as a token of her initiation in dancing, and a quality of raw rice was offered to her by the authorities of the temple for her to cook in the temple kitchen. She thenceforward became a *Devadasi* by marriage in perpetual bondage. A daily allowance of two *kattis* of cooked rice was allotted to her from the day of her admittance. As the girl being a minor, she was employed for temple duty only after her attaining puberty.

The *thalikettu* ceremony was also conducted in the temple of Elattor Maduntasvami at Senkottai. It is seen from a *Devasvam* record that the


Devadasis of the first and second kudi attached to this temple asked for a grant to defray the expenses in connection with the marriage of their two daughters. The Tahasildar of Senkottai recommended to the peishkar to sanction rupees five inclusive of the cost of paddy for each girl and get it sanctioned. It is also on record that the Peishkar sanctioned thirty-four and odd fanams for the thalikettu ceremony of Gomathi the grand – daughter of Suppu, a dancing – girl attached to this temple.

The Devadasis governed by Marumakkattayam law had to pay a stipulated amount of money as adiyara when they were first appointed as kudikars. But this amount varied according to the affluence of the temple in which they were appointed. A record of the Devasvam department indicates that one Bhagavatilakshmi and a few other dancing – girls were performing the services of sweeping as Devadasis, only on remitting the adiyara fee to the temple.

42. Ibid.
A socio-religious custom gave rise to the belief that a girl who became a *Devadasi* through the *thalikettu* ceremony was to be deemed as the wife of the deity of that temple; and as such she could not take a marital status in society.\(^4^4\) But strangely enough she could lead a free and promiscuous life with the temple servants.\(^4^5\) The girls were made slaves to the licentious passions of the Brahmins of the temple to which they belonged.\(^4^6\) Chastity was thus at stake, and immorality soon became a synonym for *Devadasis*. In his letter dated 10 April, 1086. M.E, the Dewan-peishkar writes that “through the object of the *thalikettu* ceremony is for the service of dancing in temples, the result of *thalikettu* is that the girls before and after attaining their maturity and found to lead the bad lives of *Devadasis*, and these minor girls have to quit the control of their guardians and obey the orders of the *Devasvam* officers, under *Paricharakars* (cooks) and others in the temple these girls are likely to become bad in course of time, and thus,

\[\begin{align*}
44. & \text{ A.R. Carton, *op.cit*, p.180.} \\
45. & \text{ *Ibid*.} \\
46. & \text{ *Devasvam Department Records, File No.997/1915, Letter dated 15th December 1910.*} \\
\]
the Thalikettu ceremony will be treated as an offence punishable under penal code". In view of this unhealthy practice the government decided to prohibit the thalikettu ceremony of the girls in Hindu temples. The Government declared that it would be a serious offence to have the customary thalikettu conducted before the girls were sixteen years.

The earliest instance of recruitment to the class of kudikaris curtailed, was in 1084 M.E./1909. A.D. when in the case of one Lakshmimuttamma of the twelfth kudi attached to the Suchindram Temple requested sanction for having the thalikettu ceremony of a girl named Isvari performed in the temple. The officer in charge of the Padmanabhapuram division ordered that it was punishable under sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Penal Code to dedicate a girl below the age of sixteen to a temple, and that in the present case it was especially so as to girl did not appear to belong to the Kudikaris. On appeal, the Government refused to interfere with the Division Assistant’s

47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
Another case occurred in 1085 M.E/1910 A.D. when one Muttamma, of the eighth kudi in the temple of Parakai requested permission of the Tahasildar of Agasteeswaram to conduct the thalikettu ceremony of her daughter Parvathi aged seven, and permission was not granted. Similarly, permission was refused to Anticci for dedication of a minor girl for temple service.

Hence representations were made to the Government by the Kudikaris of Suchindram for a reconsideration of the Government order prohibiting thalikettu in temples to girls below sixteen years of age. LakshmiMuttamma wrote to the Government that it is usual to marry girls in the temple who are between the ages of five and twelve, that the marriage of girls above the age of twelve is contrary to custom and Kshethracharam (or practice in temples), and that therefore orders maybe issued canceling the order of the Division


Assistant. In a petition submitted to the Palace, Anticci and others stated that the order of Mr. Raghavachariar will apply only to cases where a girl is bought or sold for prostitution, that the *thalikettu* ceremony is conducted from time immemorial according to the customs prevalent in temples, that if a girl aged 16 is married in a temple, a *Kalasom* and *Puniahom* will have to be conducted in temples, and that sections 372 of the penal code will not apply to the dancing girls attached to the temples. They further stated that in accordance with the present order there will not be any dancing girls in course of time for the performance of certain services in temple, and that therefore sanction may be given for performing the *thalikettu* ceremony of the girls as per the Royal Proclamation and the practice of the temples.

The petition from Esakimuttu, the first *Kudikari* in the temple of Suchindram, contended that “the girls are nearing the age of puberty, and that, if the marriage does not take place, as usual, before puberty, they will be considered as outcaste, and consequent expulsion from the temples will be the result”. In another petition of certain *Devadasis* of Suchindram, it was also

55. *Ibid*.
contended that “a departure from the old custom involves much hardship on them, as the girls can be trained to their profession only after the thalikettu ceremony, and that, when it is deferred, there is every likelihood of the girls taking to bad ways”.  

Though the Devadasi is brought their grievances to the notice of the Government by submitting various petitions, the Government did not think it necessary to reverse the previous decision. So the guardians had to wait till the girls completed the age of sixteen for dedicating them to the temples. Moreover, as the thalikettu ceremony was not conducted in several temples, there was scarcity of girls to attend to the temple service. Hence, with a view to alter the practice of conducting the thalikettu ceremony, the palace Sarvadikariyakar ordered the celebration of the marriage of the girls in their respective houses before the girls attained puberty, and to attend to temple service only on their completing sixteen years of age. A special privilege was however granted to the Illakkaras to conduct the marriage of their girls in the temple before the attainment puberty. This order which came into force 1911, partially revived the previous Governments decision and allowed the enrolment of new members.

57.  Ibid, Letter dated 1October 1915.


Historians hold different opinions with regard to the general characteristics of the songs of Devadasis. In his article, "The Bayadere", John short writes that their songs “filled with repetitions and unmeaning expletives. These songs are often vulgar and lewd, and sung, not only before assemblies of men but even before the deities, with a view to exciting the lasciviousness of the men, but in justice to them it must be said that they change the quality of their songs to suit the place and audience before which they have to appear. More frequently these songs comprise impudent flattery, and praise of the principal individuals present or of the convener of the dance.60 He goes on to say that “some of their songs have a mournful and melancholy tune, but the harsh grunting of the songs of the attendants, and the rattling of the wind instruments and tomtoms are too much for European ears”.61 Abbe Dubois is of the opinion that “their chanting is generally confined to the obscene songs which relate to some circumstances or other of the licentiousness of their Gods”.62 Will Durant is also of the same opinion. He writes that their songs

are "almost always confined to obscene verses describing some licentious episode in the history of their Gods". However, the estimation of Francis Egerton is different. He says that their songs were "more musical than any I have yet hears; in fact, some of them almost pretty".

Dance was the other main occupation of the Devadasis in the temple. They were taught to dance at an early age of five. Older girls, when they adopted the profession, were also taught to dance. For teaching the art of dance to Devadasis, Nattuvankams or dance masters were appointed in temples. Venkitarama Bhagavatar and Kanapati-bhagavatar were the famous dance masters in the Siva temple at Suchindram. In the temple of Parakkai, one Tampa Pillai acted as nattuvankam to the dancing girls attached to the temple. The nattuvankams were appointed by the Dewan peishkar and they were under his direct supervision. The elders among the Devadasis seem to have had also the job of teaching the art of dancing to the young maidens. The lessons in dancing were given daily two hours before day light in the morning. In the evening,

after 4 P.M., the same number of hours was devoted, so that each girl had to practice for four hours daily, and in about three years she was supposed to learn the art of dancing. Thus they were able to make their appearance at about seven or eight years of age. They continued to practice dancing till they were thirty or forty years of age, if not previously rendered unfit by disease or premature old age.

On learning the art of dancing the Devadasis were asked to dance in the temple on all auspicious occasions. Especially, the Devadasis performed dances during installation of shrines, Diparadhana, Sribali procession and street procession of images on festival days. There were generally six chief kinds of dances namely adukiratu, ananeam, Kincininattiam, heriyakuttu, modiyetukkirattu and Kolattam.\textsuperscript{66} The movements of the eyes, breasts, hands and feet were exhibited in different ways during these performances. The Devadasis were required to dance before the altar six times a day. This duty was carried out by them in turns. They conducted a kind of dance by name

\textsuperscript{66} John Short,\textit{ op.cit}, pp. 183-84.
sandikkunippam during installation of new shrines in the temple. When the morning diparadhana was conducted the adumpatrams were charged with the duty of enlivening the God by their representation. At the time of evening diparadhana, eight dasis per day engaged themselves in dancing. They had to perform the dance recital till the three rounds of the attala-sribali procession was over. On the occasion of the street procession, the temple image was carried through streets in a ponderous vehicle by a number of faithful devotees and the main duty of the Devadasis during this time was to amuse the God with their dance. They were also expected to play an important role in connection with the mahotsava for which a special skill in dancing was absolutely necessary. On the eighth day of the mahotsava, a dance of high order had to be performed by the Devadasis.

A few Devadasis used to dance in front of the procession of ethirelpu which means reception to God. It was conducted early in the morning. The distinct feature of this ritual was the presence of a group of ladies carrying vessels of grain. They formed up in a queue before the procession for the while and then withdrew to the temple where they dropped the grain on the

67. Frieda Hauswirth, op.cit, p.89.
mandapas. In the evening also the *Devadasis* had to dance before the Kshatrapala. Classical songs of Thyagaraja were sung.\(^68\)

The devadasis attached to several temples in the *taluks* of Tovalai, Agasteesvaram and Kalkulam were obliged to proceed to Trivandrum in connection with the *Navaratri* and *Mahanavami* festivals in the temple of Sripadmanabhaswami.\(^69\) They were also called during certain State ceremonies like *Pallikettu*. The *Mahanavami* festival was conducted for ten days and the *devadasis* had to sing and dance on these days by turns.\(^70\) Further, a specified number of *devadasis* were sent in connection with the annual festival. In connection with the *pujavaipu utsavam* in the matilakam, *Devadasis* were also sent from the temple of Suchindram.\(^71\)

One specific item of duty appertaining to the *Devadasis* was to conduct religious dramas in the temples on festival days. The reason for arranging such entertainments was to attract masses to the temple. The Brahmanical temples in Kerala were well equipped with *Kuttampalams* or theatrical halls


\(^69\). Devasvam Department Records, *File No.353/1911*.

\(^70\). *Ibid*.

and the dramatic performances took place in these theatres on ordinary days as well as on festival occasions. Special plays were also composed to be enacted during festival days. For instance, Pradyumnabhaydaya of Ravi Varma Samgarmadhira was composed to be staged in the temple of Sri Padmanabhasvamy at Trivandrum.\textsuperscript{72} Dancing – girls of Kalkulam Ramaswamy Temple were even invited to this temple to enact the two dramas named ‘Rugmangadam’ and ‘Sarangam’.\textsuperscript{73} The drama, ‘Sarangadhara’ was staged by the Devadasis at the natakasala of Suchindram.\textsuperscript{74} In the temple of Tiruvalla a drama named ‘Balacharita’ was performed.\textsuperscript{75} Triprayar was yet another temple where kuttu was conducted.\textsuperscript{76}

Besides these artistic performance, the devadasis had a few more responsibilities. It was a common practice of the Maharajas of Travancore to visit temples with the family members on festive and other occasions. During such visits the Devadasis had to entertain the Maharaja and the members of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} \textit{The Travancore Archaeological Series}, Vol. II, part- III, p.143.
\item \textsuperscript{73} \textit{Devasvam} Department Records, \textit{File No.569/1909}.
\item \textsuperscript{74} K.K. Pillay, \textit{op.cit}, p.234.
\item \textsuperscript{75} \textit{The Travancore Archaeological Series}, Vol. II, Part-I, p.267.
\item \textsuperscript{76} V.T. Induchudan, \textit{op.cit}, p.266.
\end{itemize}
the family and they were to be in attendance on them during the entire period of their stay.\textsuperscript{77} The \textit{Devadasis} were also obliged to do personal service to the kings in times when their wives were pregnant or away.\textsuperscript{78}

For the services rendered, the \textit{devadasis} were given a daily allowance of cooked rice, monthly wages, \textit{kaccapanam} and in some cases the enjoyment of \textit{kudimanas}. The allowance was promptly paid to the \textit{devadasis} from the endowments of the temple and it depended upon the availability of the income of the temple. The remuneration was generally paid in cash and in kind. The \textit{Devadasis} in service were, however, permitted to draw their usual emoluments till their death.

The remuneration for attending the services of sweeping and cleaning of the sripalipura, the \textit{mandapas} and the courtyards was five rupees per mensem.\textsuperscript{79} The persons who were entrusted with the sweeping of the courtyard near the \textit{unchalmandapa}, the \textit{natakasala} and the entrances to the temple received an allowances of three rupees a month.\textsuperscript{80} They were also entitled to get two blocks of cooked rice every day.\textsuperscript{81}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} T.K. Velu Pillai, \textit{op.cit}, Vol.II, p.723.
\item \textsuperscript{78} U.P. Krishnamacarya, \textit{op.cit}, pp.6-7.
\item \textsuperscript{79} K.K. Pillay, \textit{op.cit}, p.204.
\item \textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
It appears that in 1081 M.E/1906 A.D., the devadasis applied for an increase of pay to them for their duties in the temple. Yet their salary was not enhanced and hence they struck work. They refused to go to Trivandrum in connection with the navaratri festival and other ceremonies like pallikettu. As a punishment for not going to Trivandrum the Tahasildar suspended them from duty for a period of three months.

Therefore, a petition was submitted to the Tahasildar by Pakysm Sivakami and other Devadasis of the temple. They alleged that the rate of travelling allowance paid to them was quite insufficient to meet the expenses and the parties had to fall back on their private sources for the purpose. It was urged in the petition that each devadasi was paid only two fanams on the eve of their journey to Trivandrum in connection with utsavams and pujavaipus and that they were not paid anything for the return journey. Their mess allowance at Trivandrum was also very poor being only one edangli of rice, four plantains, necessary number of plantain leaves, salt, turmeric and chilly – powder per head. Their expenditure on account of traveling charges and other incidental expenses, accommodation and dress was beyond their means and amounted to much more than the monthly

82. Ibid.
83. Ibid, File No.353/1911.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
allowances of eleven and odd fanams. It was further stated in the petition that it would be hard for them to live on the wages now in force, and prayed that each of them be given rupees eight and a half for the expenses of the journey to and from Trivandrum and a halting allowance of one and a quarter rupee a day.

Realizing the sense of hardship of the Devadasis, the then Peishkar, recommended that the halting and travelling allowances be fixed at quarter of a rupee per day and twelve cash per every mile of the journey to and fro for each individual. He also considered the punishment of three months suspension inflicted by the Tahasildars was very severe and accordingly it was reduced to a find of one-rupee etac.

Apart from their salary, dress allowance was also paid in terms of money to all dancing – girls in the month of Chingam. The dress allowance to the adumpatrams attached with natakasala was seven fanams each. The girls who had not attained puberty were to get only five fanams.

87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid.
It is interesting to note that, not only the Devadasis but also their children were permitted to draw petty allowance during their lifetime.\(^\text{94}\) For instance, it appears that in 1067 M.E./1892 A.D., a daily allowance of an edangali of rice and salt was sanctioned under palace orders to be given to one Parvathi Muthammal and her children from the Padmanabhapuram ottu.\(^\text{95}\) The allowance was paid to them till 28\(^{\text{th}}\) Danu when Muthammal died.\(^\text{96}\)

When the Devadasis became old and unfit to conduct service, they were relieved from work and some allowances were granted from the lemp to. The relieving of the dancing – girls from service was called toduvaippu and it was customary to have it in the palace.\(^\text{97}\) Afterwards, they were paid an allowance of one and a half kattis of food till their death and for sixteen days after their demise.\(^\text{98}\)

In modern times, the social status of a class generally depends on its education, economic condition and political prerogatives. But in ancient times the social status largely depended on religious privileges. There is ample evidence to show that the dasi-kulam enjoyed much religious privileges which placed them in a respectable rank in society.

\(^94\) Ibid, File No.1614./1909.  
\(^95\) Ibid.  
\(^96\) Ibid, File No.281/1916.  
\(^97\) Ibid, File No.997/1915.  
\(^98\) Ibid.
The Devadasis rose to eminence by faithfully discharging their duties such as cleaning and sweeping the temple. Vedic sacrifices were to be offered jointly by them and they were considered fit to participate in the daily and periodical sacrifices along with the other temple servants.

The wealth of the Devadasis made them to lead an extravagant and luxurious life. They spent money lavishly for their dress which consisted of saree, pyjama, bodice, skirt and cloak or wrap. The saree was usually highly ornamented with golden thread and tinsel.\(^99\) Their bodice was tight-fitting, and richly ornamented with pearls, gold, silver, and lace. The shawl was worked with flowers, birds and beasts in gold and pearls. On ceremonial occasions they generally used foreign cloth, and silk or other rich stuff with borders and trimmings of different pattern.\(^100\) Some Devadasis belonging to Suchindram Temple dressed only in white cloth like Nair women.\(^101\)

What surprised one most, was the number and weight of their ornaments. Their head, ear, nose, neck, arm, wrist, finger, angle and toes were


\(^100\) K.K. Pillay, *op.cit.*, p.279.

\(^101\) Ibid.
Over-decked with jewels. Some thirty different varieties of ornaments enriched their body. They covered their hair with a net made of pearls. A gold star-pattern necklace and a pearl string were always found in their neck. Their limbs were encumbered with gold bangles, anklets and armlets and their rings were studded with precious stones. They had a gold or silver waist-belt and also two silver rings on each great toe. A string of small brass bells, known by the name ‘Chalankai’ or feet, bells, was tied around each leg immediately beneath the ankles. The devadasis could most probably afford to put them on because they were very rich.

The food of the Devadasis was highly nutritious. It consisted of rice, pulse, vegetables, fruits, ghee, butter and butter-milk. Immediately after meals they used to chew betel leaves rubbing red lime on their rough side making them into small packets filled with betel-nut, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg, mace, saffron, cinnamon, musk, almonds and spiced tobacco. It is rather curious to note that the malayalee dasis were not accustomed to interdine with dancing-girls of the Tamil speaking districts.

The social standing of *Devadasis* is clearly indicated by the numerous inscriptions and charters registering rich endowments made by them for various public benefactions. They constructed temples, *mandapas*, stately halls, *balivattam*, *nalambalam*, *vilakumadam*, *sribalipura*, *puramatil* and instituted charities. Besides construction enough buildings, they established *Chatrams* and *Dharmasalas* for Brahmins. Countless were the bronze images that they consecrated in the temples. Other endowments relate to the feeding of Brahmins employed to chant the *Vedas* in the temples and the maintenances of musicians and others artists. There is not a single temple where the sacrifice of some members of this caste cannot be seen.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that the *Devadasis* were always honoured by the people. They impressed all those who had the privilege of meeting them as an embodiment of devotion, self - sacrifice, grace, purity and simplicity. They occupied in Hinduism a place corresponding to that of nuns in Christianity. Just as Christian nuns are consecrated to the God of Purity, the devadasis of those days were dedicated to Gods of the Hindu pantheon.\(^{105}\) As nuns are called the brides of Christ, the *Devadasis* in bygone days were termed as the brides of the idol, in whose temple they performed

their function and they were affectionately called as ‘spiritual children.’

Thus, in fact, the devadasis occupied a dignified status in society. In course of time, due to poor income, the Devadasis gradually withdrew themselves from the temple duties. They did perform daily prayers properly and showed themselves only on the days of festivals. They also began to seek other sorts of means for their livelihood. This neglect of duties created more problems like that of constitution and enlistment of young girls to that institution. These minor young girls were more or less induced and hoaxed that by dedication they could lead a prosperous and everlasting free life and mukthi by giving themselves to God and by continuing this vice they would become wealthy. This trade of Devadasis had direct sanction from the Hindu Society as the British Government initially feared to interfere in the Hindu religious customs. Consequently, it enabled the Devadasis to tackle the money problem to eke out their livelihood and afforded lucrative jobs without shame. On the other hand, they received better and more facilities to carry on further trade. They got more advantages, than what the ordinary prostitutes received, for they had better patronage from the rank and file.

106. Ibid.
Apart from this, they displayed various attractive skills like that of singing and dancing. By such unique performances, they attracted a large number of audience and customers in their rostrum itself. It enabled them to lead prosperous lives.

Besides, as the dedicated Devadasis depended for their survival upon the emoluments from their trade, they did not discourage their young girls from doing the same business. Most of the dasis if they did not have any issue of their own, adopted girls from their relatives by purchasing them. Sometimes they even went to the extent of adopting beautiful young girls from other communities. The price for the adoption varied from ten to fifty rupees. The aged Devadasis, involved in the adoption of young girls mainly for the following two reasons. Firstly, by adopting girls, they could secure inam land, and secondly, by dedicating the young girls to the temples, they could satisfy the trustees. In other words, the aged Devadasis thus got success in passing such girls at their own risk and easily cheated the Government officials.

Yet, the social reformers seriously felt that the existence of Devadasis was an evil custom: a hygienic menace, a social injustice, a moral turpitude, and a religious crime. The modern science also proved that the involvement of Devadasis in immoral activities made them the victims of various venereal diseases and advised that the continuance of such a system was not conductive to the health and well-being of the individual, the family and the
future race. The system dealt with sexual immorality, which was responsible for more than fifty per cent of insanities and imbeciles and for many disabling diseases like paralysis, liver, kidney and heart diseases at all ages. It accounted for fifty to seventy-five per cent of abortions, miscarriages and sterility. It became the chief cause for most of the gynaecological disorders in women. Above all, it was a health hazard, capable of being transmitted to one’s children for the second or even the third generation.\(^\text{107}\)

On the other side, the abolition of *Devadasis* system needed some legislative protection due to the following reasons. First of all as the evil custom had once firmly rooted in the society, its immediate disappearance was found to be extremely impossible. The system could take a long time to disappear from the society. Therefore education and enlightenment to reach the lowest strata of the society was found necessary. Though it had reached every nook and corner and length and breadth of society, it became a fertile ground for those who sought pleasures and gains and who never liked to abolish the evil custom. Years of universal education and rational teachings always achieved only partial success, and hence legislation was found to be the only weapon to uproot the system.\(^\text{108}\)


Besides this, the evil custom had immoral standard and was built upon superstition and legendary tales. The people had not knowledge standard to realize the immoral standards prevailing then. The educated and cultured people were aloof and avoided from giving honest verdicts against the evil custom for the measures were connected with the region. In other words the pseudo religious ideas overpowered them, and so, nobody had the courage to defy the orthodox people. It needed a stern hand of law to free the society from such a social canker and leprosy. In addition, the Government too insisted that the law for liberty which allowed the Devadasis to do anything, if it did not incite others.109

Thus the movement for the abolition of devadasi system gained momentum as an offshoot of the social reform movement. In the Madras Presidency an anti devadasi agitation broke out around 1868. In that agitation all high minded Hindus, patriots and benefactors of the society actively took part. Meanwhile, a similar type of movement was started by Josephine Buttler, an eminent English woman in London in 1886, aiming at the suppression of an evil in English Society ‘State Regulation Vice’. In the midst of these developments the Indian National Social Conference, an

Offshoot of Indian National Congress in 1887 decided to secure social legislation on a national scale for the control of prostitution. Following this, an Anti – Nautch Movement was started in Madras in 1894. The pioneers of the movement were attacked as vandals for destroying the ancient arts of music and dance. Yet the movement attained large publicity. During 1906-1907 the Central Government referred the matter to the local Government as it had to attend an International Conference for the suppression of the immoral traffic in women. In 1909 the Mysore State prohibited the Gajja Puja or dedication ceremony in its territory and gave a lead in this crucial movement. The Legislative Council accepted it. In 1912 three bills were brought to suppress the evil custom by Menakhi Dodhabai, Mudhalkar and Madge, the members of the Imperial Legislative Council. Again the Government of India referred the entire matter to the local Governments. On the basis of their opinions, the Government brought forward a bill in September 1913. This bill was referred to the select committee for its report in 1914. Yet, owing to the first World War, success came out of it.


In 1922, H.S Gour brought a resolution in the Central Legislature. He vividly described the existence of *devadasi* system in Madras Presidency, but was accused by the orthodox Hindu representatives of Madras as a “Saint of ignorance, inaccurate, and a non-Hindu Missionary”. Yet, Madame - De-Wittschumberger, a French social worker appreciated the step thus: It rescues each young girl of whom, a good woman created was a small but useful stone for construction the magnificent moral edifice, which must be rebuilt”. Thereupon, after a hot discussion, the bill became an act in 1924 and came into operation since, 1\textsuperscript{st} January 1925. By it, the girls below the age of eighteen should not be involved in the *Pottukattu* and the violaters were punished with one year rigorous imprisonment and fine.\textsuperscript{114}

Reports have been received from the *Dewan* peishkar in charge of the Revision of *Devasvam pathivus* and from the *Dewan* Peishkar, Padmanabhapuram as to the desirability of abolishing the services of the *Kudikkars* in the *Devasvam* of the Southern Division. Mr. Krishna Iyengar’s report is as follows:- He says that there is no objection to engage persons other than *Kudikkars* to conduct the services which the *Kudikkars* used to do except for the services of singing and kelikka. As regards the abolition of

\textsuperscript{114} Central Council of State Debates 1927, Volx, pp.1133-1134.
*kelikka*, the opinions of the *Tantries* were invite by referring the matter to the *Tantries* of Thazhamon, Tharananalloor, Kalpakamangalom, Pampummekkad, and Athiyara. All the *Tantries* except the one last mentioned, have written to say that the performance of *kelikka* by the *Kudikkars* is necessary according to *Tantric* principles, long usages, and time honoured customs. They have confirmed the veracity of their statements by quoting *slokas* from the vendatic scriptures. The Athiyara *Tantri* says that the longstanding customs observed in the temple should not be disturbed except under Royal pleasure. He finds however no *Tantric* objection in making any charges in the *kelikka* service. The matter was also referred to Mr. Ganapathy Sastri, Sanskrit curator. He says that *kelikka* and *tharattu* are included in the *Puja* vides (rules) and are indispensable according to *Tantric* principle, and has recited some portions from *Puranic* lore, *Tantrasamuchayam* to verify the statement. Under these circumstances, the Peishkar says that the Kelikka service should continue to be performed by the *Kudikkars* (*Devadasis*) as long and as far as possible and the service could only be abolished in the course of time by the families of the *Kudikkars* becoming extinct one after another. He however adds that the abolition of the service would in no way affect the management of *Devasvam*.¹¹⁵

The Dewan Peishkar, Padmanabhapuram, was also asked to report whether there is any objection to dispense with the services of the Kudikkars by engaging other persons to perform the services of sweeping, husking paddy and carrying lights and to completely abolish the services of singing and kelikka. The Peishkar's report is now received.

The second point to be considered is whether the change proposed would in any way enhance the religious and moral tone in the temple. Although the people have formed a bad opinion as to the moral character of the Devadasis by the letter's constant stay in the temple, whether the Kudikkars are really so and whether the substitutes that are to be employed would in any way be better in moral character than the Devadasis themselves could not be said with certainty. The services of sweeping, husking paddy and carrying lights in the temple are usually performed by women even where there are no Kudikkars to perform them, and whether men would be willing to take up these services generally allotted to the weaker sex and whether it would be commendable to allow them to do so is a matter worthy of consideration. The Peishkar says that the substitution of other women for the Kudikkars would in no way alter the moral tone of the temple and would on the other hand be a great injustice done to those who have been attached to the temple services from bygone days.

Another point that engages the attention is whether substitutes could be had at all for the Kudikkars. Some of the Tantries are of opinion that
Ambalavasies should be appointed to perform these services. Ambalavasies are hardly to be found in South Travancore and when they have to be brought over from the other parts of the country, it is but natural that they would come away only in families. So they will have to be provided for with proper emoluments to keep them all, away from want. This would entail allowances for which there is no adequate provision in these temples. The substitution of Sudras would in no way better the present state of affairs, says the Peishkar.

The fourth point to be examined is what provision should be made for the Kudikkars whose services are to be dispensed with. It is but fair and just that something should be provided for the kudikkars who have been attending to these services in the temple from a very long time, and who would become helpless and despondent if uncared for. But this would involved double the expenditure if the proposed changes are made. Some of the Kudikkars have already petitioned to the Government on this matter and their petition has been forwarded to the Peishkar for report. The practice of dedicating the lives of the female offsprings of the Kudikkars for the services of the temple by means of the Thalikettu in the temple, has now become a thing of the past and this has resulted in the gradual extinction of some of the families of Kudikkars.

Lastly, the financial effect of the proposed measure is a matter deserving consideration. Reports showing the comparative material benefit and loss to Government consequent on the abolition of the services of the
Kudikkars have been received from the Tahasildars of Agasteeswaram and Kalkulam taluks. The statements regarding Krishnancoil show that the Government would be the loser by this measure by Rs.100 per year. The statements of the temple of the Kalkulam taluk reveal a gain of nearly Rs.1000 but the Peishkar has no faith in the statements forwarded by the Tahasildar of Kalkulam, and strongly says that he could not even believe whether it would be possible to get persons to conduct these services for the very small allowances proposed by the Tahasildar. No report has yet been received regarding Nagercoil Devasvam, and the Peishkar has asked the Tahasildar to expedite his report on the same. In these days of high prices of articles and scarcity of labourers, the substitution of Ambalavasis in the temple for the Kudikkars would in the opinion of the Peishkar involve more than double the present expenditure.

Under these circumstances the Peishkar strongly recommends that the long standing traditions of the Devasvam of South Travancore should be allowed to continue in fact, and if any thing is to be done by way of changes in the present system and immemorial usages, the best course to be adopted would be refuse sanction to adopt children into the families of Kudikkars that are on the verge of extinction, to allow a natural and gradual extinction of their families one by one, and to ameliorate their deplorable condition by slightly increasing their allowances and liberating them from duties which are responsible for the bad opinion formed of their character and which are in the
eye of the public considered to be vulgar. He further adds that as long as the *kelikka* services of the *Kudikkars* and considered indispensable for the *utsavoms* in the *Mathilagom* and *Mahanavami Puja Vaippu* festivals, it is not possible to abolish the services of the *Kudikkars* in some of the temples of South Travancore or if they are abolished in those temples other arrangements will have to be made to meet the requirements of the *utsavoms* and *Puja Vaippu* at Trivandrum.

The Temple in the Padmanabhapuram Division is modeled upon those on the East Coast and the observances in the former institutions are more or less on par with those observed in the latter.

The economic problem is a more difficult one. "I do not mean the additional expenditure which the substitution of these by other servants will entail on the Government, for that is only a bagatelle and may perhaps be incurred". What is of more greater consequence is the fact that these women will be thrown out of employment and left to drift without anything to fall back upon. Many of the families are extremely poor, and can turn their hands to no other occupation. In view of this fact it would be fairer to allow the institution to linger on, and die a natural death as suggested in Mr. Raja Raja

Varma's report. It is enough if no adoption is allowed in these families. It may also be perhaps ordered that no new girl should hereafter be dedicated for service in these temples. With regard to this, the Peishkar says nothing and his definite views may have to be invited. This arrangement will enable the Government to effect a non-violent reform, without causing hardship to any one already in temple services”.

As a logical extension and corollary of Act V of 1929 and to provide effective implementation of it, Muthulakshmi Reddi again introduced the ‘Provention of Dedication of Hindu Temples Bill of 1930’ in the Madras Legislative Council on 24 January 1930.

In the mid-half 1930 the Government of Madras issued an order to the effect that the system was abolished by law. With this, the Queen Regent of Travancore State also abolished the Devadasis system at one stroke of her pen.

