CHAPTER – V

STATUS OF DANCERS AS SEEN IN THE TELUGU INSCRIPTIONS OF VIJAYANAGARA PERIOD
Dance and Dancers of Vijayanagara through Telugu Inscriptions

List of Inscriptions

Apart from the literary and the sculptural representations of the Vijayanagara times, there are a number of insessional evidences which bear testimony that dance was considered as an important part of the Vijayanagara culture. There are numerous inscriptions of the Vijayanagara times. However, the present work focuses on the published Telugu inscriptions belonging to the temples in the Telugu speaking area. In addition, few published details of inscriptions attached to the temples of Hampi are also mentioned, as they give a lot of information regarding the dancers attached to the temple and their role in the temple.

A majority of these inscriptions mention the devadasis attached to the temple. For clarity sake, the inscriptions given in the chapter are placed under the appointment mention the appointment of dancers in the temple, the names of the dancers in the service of the temple, grants given to the dancers, donations made by the dancers to the temple and those that indicate the prominence given to the dancers in the society. Apart from them, few inscriptions mention the folk communities like the dommaras, vipravinodinis, and the grants bestowed upon them. The inscriptions majorly are categorised under:

a) Inscriptions denoting the appointment of the dancing girls.
b) Inscriptions denoting grants given to the dancers.
c) The inscriptions speaking of the grants given by the dancers to the society.
d) The inscriptions speaking of the prominence of the dancers in the society.
e) Inscriptions mentioning the vipravinodinis and dommaras in the society.

Inscriptions denoting the appointment of the dancing girls

The appointment of the devadasi as a temple servant was considered quite important. It was usually, the kings who appointed the dancer to render her service to the temple. The following are a few inscriptions which mention the appointment of the devadasis by the king. An inscription from 1531 A.D. mentions that Muddukupayi who was the court dancer during the time of Achyutadevaraya, was appointed as the
temple dancer in Tirumala to offer her services to the lord. Another inscription from 1540 A.D. mentions the appointment of Hanumasani as one of the dancing girl in the temple of Tirumala by Achyutaraya. Another inscription belonging to the same time mentions Achyutaraya making provision for the maintenance of two dancing girls for the service of the temple by sending them to Srirangam to serve the lord. These dancers were appointed as employees in the temple and had remuneration paid for their services.

Not only the king, other officers or noblemen in the society also dedicated the devadasis in temple. This is known through an inscription which mention about an appointment of a devadasi by nobleman of the society. In 1372.A.D, Nagavva’s son Ramanna presented Ketavve as a dancing girl and gave gift for her support to the god of Ramanatha of Vijayapura.

There are also instances of devadasis dedicating themselves to the service of the god at their own free will. A dancer by name Vambiyakka, dedicated herself to the service of the lord in the temple of Virupaksha, Hampi. This was during the reign of HariHara II. An inscription from the time of Krishnadevaraya mentions Tirumala, daughter of Kuppayamma always bows before the divine presence at Tirumala.

The appointment as a devadasi was considered an honorable one as it included service to god. It brought the dancer a high profile in the society and she was treated as one of the important person in the society. The devadasis were paid remuneration for their services, but they were also given special grants too. These grants were given by the king and sometimes the other noblemen in the society and were quite huge. Given below are few inscriptions which mention the grants given to the dancers.

**Inscriptions denoting grants given to the dancers**

a) An inscription dated November 9, 1531 A.D., Thursday which falls in the reign of Achyuta Raya, records that Sadanandasetti and Devusetti, (who were probably officers or respected person in the society) made gifts of land and money for the service of the god Mahadeva, consecrated by the Achyutadevaraya and for feeding brahmans and sumangalis in the temple, and for the worship of the goddess Durgadevi during the Navaratri festival.
An inscription is dated April 6, 1527 A.D., Saturday and states that Immadi Yellapa-Odeya, the Pradhava (this term might refer to a rank of an officer in the court of Krishnadevaraya) of Krishna Raya granted a village called Chikka-Madapura to the dancer Nilayi.¹

These inscriptions denote that not only the livelihood and maintenance of the devadasis was taken care of by the king and the other officials in the society, but they were benefitted with special grants for their services to the temple. Thus, they earned a respectable position in the society. The devadasis were not mere servants attached to the temple, but also were conscious about the development of the temple and the society around them. Hence, as their contribution to the development of the temple, they liberally made grants and benefactions which were useful to the temple. Given below are few inscriptions which mention the same.

**Inscriptions denoting grants made by the devadasis to the temple and society**

The devadasis were quite rich and is evident from the benefactions they got from the king and the society. This made them liberal donors for the development of the temples they were attached to

a) An inscription from 1457 A.D. mentions about Venkatavalliyar, daughter of Savaripperumal who was attached to the temple of Sri Narasimha swami in Tirumala. She made provision for the interest on 1000 panam deposited by her to be utilized for daily offering for Tiruvenkatamudiyan (Sri Venkatesa).¹⁰

b) Another inscription from 1535 A.D. mentions Peruchchi, one of the Emperumandanadaiyar in the temple of Tirumala depositing the sum of 230 panams for one Tiruvolakakam offering on the day of Makara – Sankramanam festival, celebrated in Tirumala temple.¹¹

c) An inscription written in 1486 A.D. mentions Valandi, daughter of Anaimadi residing at Tirumala who registered the gift of money for providing an offering to Sri Venkatesa (as Dhanurmasa-puja) during margali month.¹²

d) An inscription from the year 1512 A.D. mentions a contribution of an amount of 1000 narpanams was deposited for provision of one daily Tirupponakam to Sri Venkatesa. This was presented by Kuppayini, daughter of Ranjakam Srirangaraja.¹³
e) An inscription from 1517 A.D. mentions Tirumala Amman, daughter of Ranjakam Kuppayan who made a donation of 3000 panam was made for the daily offering of one dosai padi to Sri Venkatesa at Tirumalai.

f) An inscription from the year 1530 A.D. mentions that Govindasani, a devadasi residing in Tirupati registered the gift of money for offerings to Sri Govindarajan in the festival days of Masi-Makham, Panguni-Uttiram.

g) An inscription from the temple of Tirupati, dated 1533 A.D. mentions that the emperumanadiyars Lingasani and Tiruvendakama manikkam, daughters of Tippasani made a provision for offerings to the utsava murtis while seated in their garden mantapam during the Brahmotsava Mahotsavam at Tirumalai.

h) An inscription of 1535 A.D. states that Peruchchi, one of the temple damsels, residing in Tirupati made grants during Makara Sankramanam in Tirupati.

i) An inscription from 1514 A.D in the Kesava Swami temple in the Beragallu taluq of the Kurnool district mentions grant of certain amount of land to the devadasis who helped decorating the Dhawajasthambam of the temple.

Another inscription dated 1518 A.D of Kakandi mentions the grant of the village of Veligandlu by Krishnadevaraya to the devadasis.

j) Another inscription at Madduru of Siddhavatam Taluq in Cuddapah district mentions gift of land of sowing capacity of 10 pandumus of millet to the temple Sani Madalichi attached to the matham of Nammasivaya.

The devadasis not only contributed for the offerings and rituals of the temple, but also contributed for construction of mantapas in the temple. The inscriptions which mention these are

a) In the year 1540 A.D., Hanumasani, daughter of Uddida Timmayyan contributed for the constructed a mantapam in her garden at Tirumalai and thereby made arrangement for 13 arrapadi offering to Sri Venkatesa during the Bramhotsavas. Provision was also made for one dosai padi offering to Chakrattalvar in the temple tower of Sri Govinda Rajan in Tirupati for which a sum of 820 panam was deposited by her in the temple treasury.

b) Another inscription from the year 1545 A.D mentions Nagasani, daughter of Obullayan made grants for the construction of a mantapam in her garden at
Tirumalai and paid the sum of …….(incomplete) for an offering of 13 *appapadi* paid yearly to Sri Venkatesa while he was seated in the *mantapam* on all the 7th days of the *bramhotsavam* festivals at Tirumalai.

c) They were dancing halls constructed specially for the *devadasis*. An inscription from Tirupati dated 1496 A.D states the mandatory construction of a *natyamantapa* for *devadasis* in front of every temple. The streets where the deity was taken in procession were also granted to the *devadasis* for offering their services without any interruption. This is stated in an inscription dated 1545 A.D in the Madhava Deva temple built during the time of Sadasivaraya.

All the above inscriptions denote the contributions which were useful for the services of the temple. The provision of daily offerings, constructions and renovations of the temples, by the *devadasis* indicate that their position was quite important in the temple, and they were not limited to only presenting dance and music in the temple. *Devadasis*, thus earned a respectable position in the society, and they were given certain special privileges as a token of honour.

**Inscriptions denoting prominence of the Devadasis in the society**

a) An inscription of 1356 A.D, mentions that in the temple of Arunlaandaan, the *devadasi* by name Malayetti Sriranga Nayakiyar Manikam, was always the first to start the musical recital in the temple.

b) An inscription around 1356 – 38 A.D states that out of the dancing girls, one Malaiyatti Sri Ranganayakiyar Manikkam, the daughter of Sendikkadevi got the privilege of first turn in the temple of Arundalan and certain land in 1356 A.D. Certain lands were also granted to her sister Varadhi, who also enjoyed the privilege of daily allowance of cooked rice.

c) An inscription of 1535 A.D states that Chikkayasani and her sister Govindasani, daughters of Polunayaka, who were in the service at Tirumala inaugurated a festival called Chittarai-Vishnu (Tamil New Year day) at Tirumala.

d) In 1546 A.D, a dancing girl, *Tiruvenkata Manikkam*, was granted to use a palanquin as a token of honour for the services rendered by her to the Tirumala Temple.
Another inscription in the same temple states that the prasadam of the temple was to be given to the donors and devotees in the name of Elli Tirumagal, a dancing girl, attached to the temple. These were few special honours conferred upon the devadasis for their role in the temple. These kind of privileges were very rarely conferred upon people in the society. During the chariot processions of the lord also, it was only the devadasis who were allowed inside the chariot sanctum, along with priests. All these denote that the devadasis were one of the important classes of the society. There were certain taxes remitted too in favour of the dancing girls. An inscription from 1547 A.D. from the time of Sadasivaraya in the temple of Agasteswara temple in Bapatla Taluk, Kurnool district mentions the remission of taxes to dancing girls attached to the villages of Kommuru, Vorugamti, Ravipadu and Gomgulamudi belonging to the god Agastyesvara of Kommuru, by Mahamandalesvara Nalandimmaraju, an officer in the service of the king. The musicians who accompanied the devadasis were bestowed grants and benefactions. The livelihood of the musicians was taken care by the kings and the temple authorities and this is mentioned in a number of inscriptions.

a) An earliest inscription from the time of Kampana i.e. 1363 mentions the provision all facilities for the livelihood of musicians by a caretaker of the palace, Velliyar.

b) An inscription in the Venkateswara temple in Kamalapuram Taluk of Jammalamadug taluq, in Cuddapah district mentions the gifts of land for the musicians of dolu and nagalswaralavaru who sings songs in the service of the lord.

c) An inscription from 1559 A.D from the Vitthal temple of Hampi recorded during the rule of Sadasivaraya, states the allowances to musicians of the temple, gents and ladies (kovileya vadyakaaru), in connection with carrying out certain services in a mantapa called Parankusa Mantapa, which is seen now, at the other end of the Vitthal temple.

d) Another description corresponding to the date and year November 19, 1523 A.D., records the gift of the village Harigandapuram, renamed Sri Nagalapuram. The income from this village, consisting of the hamlets such as
Kottaikadu, Vatasrimadura, Kitpakkam, etc., to God Nilamanikkadeva was provided for provision of food offerings, dance, music and musical instruments, by the brother (the relation is not mentioned clearly) of Vadamallannan, the best among the ministers.\(^{35}\)

**Nattuvanars**

The other temple servants were the *nattuvanars*. They were the masters who trained the *devadasis* in the art of dance and music. Just as the *devadasis*, the *nattuvanars* were also quite capable of donating funds and grants liberally to the temple. The inscription mentioning *Tippu Nayakar*\(^{36}\), at the Tirumala temple one of the dancing masters to the temple mentions making provision of 2000 *narpanam* paid to the temple treasury for lighting a lamp on every Saturday. They also made huge contributions for construction of tanks, walls and *mantapas* in the temple. As the dancing master of the *devadasis*, the *nattuvanars* were treated with respect by the kings and the temple authorities. They actively participated in all the activities of the temple and enjoyed comfortable economic status.

The *devadasis* were given all comforts and special privileges for their duties. Their livelihood was taken care by the kings and the temple authorities. Apart from the benefits, they had special privileges made to them which speak of their status in the society. There were different taxes levied for the benefit of the *devadasis* during the time of annual festivals of the temples. These taxes were called *Lanja Sunkam*. This is mentioned in the Markapuram Inscription\(^{37}\). This was solely used for the benefit of the *Devadasis*. Another inscription from the time of Harihara Raya dated 1380 A.D mentions levying of taxes on the mirrors held by the *devadasis* in the temple for the god\(^{38}\). The mirrors were put for exhibition and the people who went to see them had to pay a certain amount of tax. This amount of tax was used again for the benefit of the *devadasis*.\(^{39}\)

Apart from the dancers, there are inscriptions which mention the folk communities like *vipravinodinis* and *dommaris*. These communities majorly presented the acrobatic feats and funny anecdotes along with dance and music. There are a number of inscriptions which mention grants made for the welfare of these
people. They included grants to temples, or taxes paid on their income for the welfare of their people. Given below are few of the inscriptions belonging to the dommaris.

a) An inscription from the time of 1548 A.D. from the temple of Chennakesava swami temple from Vadigepalli, Hindupur Taluk, Anantapur District, registers a gift of money to the deities Somesvara and Chennakesava of the village Vodigipalli by Suraparaju Narasaraju for the merit of the twenty four families of the dommari community to which he apparently belonged.

b) An inscription from the time of 1554 A.D. from the time of Sadasivaraya mentions the gift of two varahas for the offerings to the gods of Mallikarjuna and Madhavarayadeva of agarharam Golladinneppalli by Dommari Sangamanayaka, for the merit of 24 castes of dommaris.

c) An inscription from the time of Sadasivaraya mentions the gift of the income derived as dommaripannu were used to benefit of the gods Tiruvengalanatha, Chennakesava and Mahalinga of Narasimhapuram. This income was in turn payable to the benefit of the dommari community.

Most of the inscriptions mention the same kind of information where the taxes or income derived from different sources was used for the benefit of the dommari community.

There are also few inscriptions which mention the grants made for the welfare of the vipravinodini community. These grants too were made by the community members itself for their community development. Few of them are

a) Ruling at Vidyanagara. records that Vipravinodi-Govindayya and his brother Titaraya, and Vipravinodi-Valabhayya, made a grant of the income due to the Vipravinodins in the sarvaamanya-agrarahara Tavaregola, surnamed Krishnarayapura, in Urvakonde, a division of Rayadurganadu, for the service of the god Channakesavadeva of the place in the name of benefit of their community.

b) An inscription from the time of Sadasiva, 1554 A.D. registers the grant of their incomes (tyaga-varttana) from the mahajanas of Kovilakuntla by the Vipravinodins Parvatayya of Chamgalarri, Madhavayya and others to god Pandarangi Vithalesvara at Kovilakuntla Taluk, Kurnool district for
conducting the Sri-Ramajayanti festival for the merit of their community all over the countries such as Vidyanagara, Bedadakota, Kataka, Dravida, etc.\(^{45}\)

The *vipravinodinis* not only gave grants for the benefit of their community, but also made contributions for the development of the temple, and conducting of certain rituals in the temple. These are recorded in the following inscriptions

a) An inscription from the time of Sadasivaraya dated 1547 A.D. mentions the grant of certain amount by *vipravinodinis* Anantayya and Parvatayya for the construction of a *mantapa* in front of the temple of Chennakesava in the Koilakuntla taluk of Kurnool district

b) An inscription from the time of Sadasiva, 1552 A.D., registers the grant of their *vartana* collected from the *mahajanias* of Yaragudi by the *vipravinodins* Parvvatayya, Anantayya and Nallarayya, for conducting *panakalu seva* during the festivals in the month of *Vaisakha*, for the merit of the community.\(^{46}\)

c) Another inscription from the time of Sadasivaraya in 1554 A.D. at the Jammalamadugu taluk of Cuddapah district mentions the gift of the *tyagavarttana* collected by them from the *mahajanias* of Kosinepalle alias Harihararayapuram, a *sarvamanya agrahara* situated in Chernurusima, for the *cherapu-tirunalu* festival of Tiruvengalanatha of Kona by a number of *vipravonodins* in the temple of Anjaneya.\(^{47}\)

Thus, it can be seen that the folk communities too were active participants in the society and made benefactions to the temple and their society in their community name.

**Conclusion**

The courtesans were different from the *devadasis*. The courtesans were called by names like *vesyas, vaarakanta*, etc. Their primary duty was to entertain people through their art.

The various names by which was known include *devadasi* are names referring to God like, *Govindasani, Elli Tirumagal, Hanumasani, Tiruvenkata Manikam*, etc.
Also, the term *sani* means servant, here indicating servant of god. So, it might be assumed that the courtesans were different from the *devadasis*. However, inscriptions speak of the king appointing the court dancers as the temple dancers at some instances. Hence, it might be that the court dancers were at a period of time appointed as temple dancers according to the king’s will. It may be assumed that this might be an enhancement of their status and they continued their dance in service of the lord.

FROM a study of all these inscriptions, it can be said that the *devadasis* were active participants in the temple affairs. They were encouraged and respected by all the people in the society and listed among the important classes of the society. They were held in a respectable position by the royalty. Deputed by the king to serve the lord or dedicated on their own will, either way, they were responsible for the development of the temple in many ways. Besides, serving the lord through dance and music, they performed the privileged role of developing the temple with their contributions and grants. The inscriptional evidences on the whole bring out their role and importance in the temple during the Vijayanagara times.
During the period when a girl is trained to become a devadasi, the talikattu ceremony was performed. This was the ritual of getting the girl married with the god, and hence they were known as sumangalis.

References

2. Ibid : 262.
4. Ibid : 117
5. Ibid .
7. During the period when a girl is trained to become a devadasi, the *talikattu* ceremony was performed. This was the ritual of getting the girl married with the god, and hence they were known as sumangalis.
11. Ibid. Vol IV : 84
12. Ibid. Vol II : 167
13. Ibid., Vol III pg no :98
16. There are quite a number of inscriptions which mention their donations to the temple.
17. (ibid : 42) a) An inscription from the year 1535 A.D mentions that on the day of Tirthavari festival during and Annual *Brahmotsavam*, provision was made for certain offerings to be made to Sri Govindarajan residing Tirupati Temple by Linga and Tiruvenkata Mannikkam, the *devadasis* residing in Tirupati ( ibid: 95) b)An inscription from the year 1540 A.D mentions Lingasani and Tiruvenkatamanikam, daughters of Tippasani, who made a cash deposit for the purpose of presenting 20 rose water vessels and 20 weights of refined camphor to the processional deity of Sri Venkatesa while on a pleasant walk during the 20 days of summer festival at Tirumal as their ubhaiyam. They also arranged for one dosaipadi offerings to Chakrattalvar enshrined in the tower of the temple of Sri Govindarajan in Tirupati ( ibid : 286) c)An inscription from the year 1545 A.D mentions Lingasani and Tiruvenkata Manikkam temple dancers residing at Tirupati and the daughters of Tiruvenkatadasi making provision for the presentation of 20 manohara padi and other offerings to Sri Malayyapaswami while seated in the swing car arranged in the stone car at Tirumalai on the 20 days of the summer festival, the sum of 1600 panam was paid onto the temple treasury as the ubhaiyam of these two sisters. (Vol- V : 83) d)An inscription from the year 1548 A.D mentions Lingasani, daughter of Tiruvenkatadasi making a provision for 10 manoharapadi to be made to Sri utsavamurti on all the 7th festivals days during the Bramhotsavam at Tirumalai as her ubhaiyam. ( Vol V : 315)
18. ibid. Vol- V: 84. The same dancer again made few grants which is known the inscription of 1538 A.D mentions Bejji or Peruchchi, daughter of Malghana Venkatatturaivar Selvi, temple dancer residing at Tirupati depositing the sum of 200 *panam* for the purpose of offering 2 *dosaipadi* and one *tiruppanyaram* to Govindaraja Swami along with one Tiruvolakkam offering previously arranged by
her as her ubhaiyam on every Makara Sankramanam day while seated in the mantapam built by the mahouts. (215)


19 Ibid

20 Lalitha V and Pramila. M. 2007 2007 : 113


22 Ibid.. Vol V :103


24 This is mentioned in an inscription present in the temple at Hampi.

25 In addition to those given, some more inscriptions are from the volumes of IV, V, III respectively. a) An inscription from the year 1843 A.D in the temple of Tirupati mentions Selli, daughter of one of the temple damsels residing in Tirupati who deposited the sum of 1120 panams for the celebration of new harvest festival at Tirumalai on the day of the star Rohini, occurring in the month of Tai for Sri Venkatesa as her ubhaiyam. b) An inscription from the same year mentions Senbaka Vengu, daughter of Timmi, who made a contribution of 600 panam was paid by her as ubhaiyam for the purpose of propitiating Sri Venkatesa with 10 iddalipadi during the churnabhishekam function celebrated in the Tirumamanai mantapam, on all the 9th festival days of the 10 Bramhotsavas at Tirumala. c) An inscription from the year 1563 A.D. mentions Sevvusani, daughter of Angali, providing for capital for the daily offerings of Sri Vighneswara installed by her in the temple of Sri Kapileswaraswami at Kapila-Tirtham in Tirupati. d) An inscription states about Ranjakam Kuppai, the devadasi appointed by Krishnadeva Raya in Tirumala, contributed 1000 panams for the offering of Lord Venkatesa in the year 1512 A.D. e) In 1517 A.D, Rangajam Kuppai’s daughter Tirumalai Amman donated 3000 panam for the nitya dosai padi ritual in the temple of Tirumala. f) Devaraya II, during his reign made a grant of land for dancing girls employed in the service of Varadaraja temple in Kanchi. (Saraswathi .N. 1992 : 117


27 Ibid : 356


32 Lalitha V and Pramila. M. 2007; 357


37 Saraswathi .N. 1992 : 121

38 Ibid

39 Ibid
40 Gai, G.S. www.southindianinscriptions.com
41 Sastry, P.V. Parabramha. 198:293
42 Ibid : 342
43 For more details- see Sastry Prabraham. 1981 and Gai. G.S. www.southindianinscriptions.com
44 Gai. G.S. www.southindianinscriptions.com
46 Ibid