8.1 ANTIQUITY OF DEVADASI SYSTEM

Unique and unusual among Indian women, the temple women, commonly known as *devadasis*, have long been objects of fascination as also the focus of controversy. The term *devadasi* literally means female slaves of the deity. They were a specialized group of women, who dedicated themselves to the deities of temples. They did not marry any mortal men and their dedication to temple service was regarded as constituting a marriage with the main deity. The association of religion gave the institution of *devadasi* a hypocritic garb of social sanction in India.

Much of our understanding of the role and status of the temple women of India is derived from the representation of the *devadasis* in the various historical resources, Indian literature, travellers’ and ethnographic accounts etc. The cult of dedicating girls to temples prevailed all over India in different forms and names- as *Maharis* in Kerala, *Natis* in Assam, *Muralis* in Maharashtra, *Patras* and *Maharis* in Orissa, *Basavis* and *Devalis* in Andhra, and *Basavis or Jogatis* in Karnataka.

These servants of gods were expert artists in music and dance, especially in the medieval period, when the system was at its peak. As time passed, society underwent changes and *devadasis* came to be exploited by the dominating classes. In course of time, their services shifted from the gods to the earthly gods and lords like the priests, kings, feudal lords and rich men. The woman so dedicated to the deity started leading a life of a cheap prostitute with religious sanction. The picture emerges of religion and religious institutions rising in prominence as a major authority in a segmented society; of the rich and powerful class controlling and utilising this authority to their ends; of how propelled by the sensuality and sadism of the rich and powerful male society, a class of 'heavenly maidens' was created. They were apparently consorts of divinities - covertly used to satisfy the elites' sensualities.
• There can be no doubt that dancing in the East was once exclusively connected with religious devotion. Further, it is well-known that in ancient times women were dedicated to the service of the temples, like the Vestal virgins of Europe. They were held to be married to the god, and had no other duty but to dance before his shrine. Hence they were called the god’s slaves (devadasi) and were generally patterns of piety and propriety. In the present day they are still called by the same name, but were rather slaves to the licentious passions of the profligate Brahmans of the temples to which they belong. What surprised me most was the number and weight of their ornaments, especially in the case of those attached to the temples in Southern India. They drive a profitable trade under the sanction of religion.


• When temples of Hindu gods came to be built and endowed on a magnificent scale, some people began to feel in course of time that there should be singing girls attached to shrines to play music on the occasions of the different services and worships of the day. The introduction of dancing girls in temples tended to lower their moral and spiritual atmosphere. Some people began to visit shrines not so much to pay their respects to deities, as to carry on their love intrigues with the singing girls employed there.


Ethno-anthropological, religio-mythological and socio-cultural studies have established that the dedication of young girls to divine service was a universal practice, practiced under various nomenclatures, for various purposes and in many forms. In some degree or other, the practice of employing girls in temples was prevalent in almost all ancient societies all over the world. Though not exactly the same as the devadasi system existing in India, these examples are slightly varied forms of religious prostitution.

The fertility cult seems to have existed in all ancient civilizations. Ritual dancing as a part of religious services in a temple also has a long history. The great Mother Goddess appears under different names—Mytilla, Isis, Ishtar, Astarte, Venus, Aphrodite to name a few. The function of these goddesses was reproductive. They ensured the cycle of the seasons which regulated the growth of the crops. They were responsible for the increase of the livestock and the perpetuation of the race.

The earliest records of Babylonia mention prevalence of religious prostitution in Western Asia. Similar cults have also been traced in the Far East, Central America, West Africa, Syria, Phoenicia, Arabia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. In ancient Babylonian Civilization, the temple played an important role, pervading all spheres of human activities. Hence intimate relationship existed between human beings and gods. The ancient Babylonians thought of the gods and goddesses as actually dwelling in the temple, not as symbolically represented there. Herodotus refers to the cult of enforced temporary prostitution of all Babylonian women to please the deity of Ishtar.

In Syria, there existed a permanent as well as a temporary system of religious prostitution at the temple of Astarte. In Egypt, temples of Osiris and Isis were crowded with dancing girls. In Sumer, beautiful women were attached to every temple, who formed part of the god’s household. In fact, the earliest recorded evidence of associating women with temples comes from the temple of Anu, the supreme deity in Uruk. The prostitutes were dedicated to the cult of her daughter, Ishtar.

The custom was widely prevalent in ancient Greece. In the temple of Aphrodite in Greece, the practice of dedicating girls is said to have been first established as a ritual of worship. Strabo says that the temple of Aphrodite (at Corinth) was so wealthy that it was able to keep more than a thousand hetaerae (courtesans), who were dedicated to the goddess by men and women. In Phoenician temples women prostituted themselves for hire in the service of religion, believing that by this conduct they appeased the Goddess and won her favour.

---

In Egypt, the royal priestess entered the profession when quite young, and was given training in the sacred dances and singing the sacred songs. In India, we learn that *devadasis* were dedicated to the temple in the childhood, and were given training in the art of dancing by dance masters, who were appointed for the purpose.

In Cyprus, it appears that before marriage all women were formerly obliged by custom to prostitute themselves to strangers at the sanctuary of the Goddess, whether she went by the name of Aphrodite or Astarte. In Armenia the noblest families dedicated their daughters to the service of the Goddess Anaitis in her temple of Acilisena, where girls acted as prostitutes for a long time before they were given in marriage. Nobody ever hesitated to take one of these girls as a wife when her period of service was over. Sometimes the sending of girls to the temple had a double aim, namely that of serving the deity while at the same time earning their marriage portions.

One can see that the above examples show that religious prostitution did exist in ancient times in countries other than India. The major difference being that in the cases of the other countries, the dedication to the Goddess was not for life and the girls were allowed to marry and lead a normal life, unlike in India.

N.M. Penzer holds that Mesopotamia was the original home of the institution. He traces its beginnings to about 2090 B.C. during the first dynasty of Babylon in the Code of Hammurabi. There were also many classes of priestesses and specialized temple women in Babylonia. In the Old Babylonian period, the daughters of kings and rulers were appointed as high-priestesses of the Moon-God or of the goddess Ishtar. King Sargon of Akkad, a Semitic ruler, (ca.2371-2316 B.C.) installed his daughter, Enkhebuanna as high-priestess of the Moon-God temple in the city of Ur and of the temple of An, the supreme God of Heaven, at Uruk. This practice was then followed by Sumerian and Akkadian rulers for 500 years. The *en or entu* priestesses were the

7. Ibid.
counterparts of male high-priests. Similarly in Thebes, under the XXIII dynasty, a princess became the high-priestess of the temple of Amon.10

In India, the temple women came mostly from the low caste non-brahmin families, although, the cases of Brahmin and other higher caste women are not unknown. Slaves were also dedicated to or purchased by the temple. However, the instances of some higher caste people, including the royal families, are also available. In 1047, Biccabbarasi, the younger sister of Kunda Raja, was donated to the temple of Jagadeka Mallesvara.11 Kulasekhara, the Chera king,12 is said to have dedicated his daughter as devadasi.

An important aspect of the temple women in Oriental societies and in India relates to their marriage, adoption and inheritance. In Sumer, she was allowed to marry a man, but was not allowed to have children by her husband. For that, she would give her husband one of her slaves as a concubine.13 Next in rank to the en and nin-tingir came the naditum priestesses who came from the upper levels of society. The word naditum means 'left fallow' which is consistent with the evidence that they were forbidden child-bearing. A Naditum could provide children for her husband by giving him a slave woman or a low-ranking temple servant called sugitum, as a concubine or a second wife.14 In India, the devadasis were allowed to marry and have children.

In Greece, it was customary for people to dedicate girls to the temple of Aphrodite if the god granted their wishes. In 464 B.C. the great games were arranged in Olympia. The noble and wealthy Xenophon of Corinth was one of the participants in this game. Before entering the fray, he made a vow that in the event of his victory; he would dedicate hundred girls to the service of the temple of Aphrodite. After the victory at the Olympian Games he fulfilled his vow by dedicating a hundred girls to the temple. 15

---

10. Lewinsohn, op. cit., p. 22.
In India, even recently, people dedicated girls to goddess Yellamma of Saundatti in Karnataka in fulfillment of their vow.

There are two ‘historic’ accounts of sexual activities in and around the Babylonian temples, both of which have unduly influenced modern historians. One was written by the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. and purports to describe religious prostitution in the temple of the goddess Mytilla; the other was written by the Roman geographer Strabo four hundred years later, confirming Herodotus. Herodotus’ account is as follows;

- Every woman born in the country must once in her life go and sit down in the precinct of Venus [Mytilla], and there consort with a stranger......A woman who has once taken her seat is not allowed to return home till one of the strangers throws a silver coin into her lap, and takes her with him beyond the holy ground......The silver coin may be of any size......The woman goes with the first man who throws her money, and rejects no one. When she has gone with him, and so satisfied the goddess, she returns home, and from that time forth no gift however great will prevail with her. Such of the women......who are ugly have to stay a long time before they can fulfill the law. Some have waited three or four years in the precinct.

Other than Strabo there is no confirmation for this story, and there are no known ‘laws’ regulating or even referring to this practice. Herodotus may have mistaken the activities of prostitutes around the temple for a rite involving every Assyrian virgin. Another of Herodotus’ stories seems to have a more historic foundation. It described a high tower in the temple of Marduk, at the top of which the high-priestess dwelt in a room with a couch, in which she was nightly visited by the God. The story parallels a historic account, dating from the first millennium B.C., which describes how the Neo-Babylonian king Nabu- naid dedicated his daughter as high-priestess of the moon-god Sin. This would be consistent with the belief that the god visited them nightly, just as he nightly ate the meals prepared for him. Herodotus cites this as an example of ‘temple prostitution’. This can also be interpreted that the function of the priestess as a significant
example of sacred sexual service, whether actually carried out or symbolically re-enacted. In Babylonia, by the middle of the first millennium B.C. there were two kinds of sexual activities carried on in or near the temples; sexual rites which were part of the religious ritual; and commercial prostitution.

The foregone references prove that the institution of religious prostitution was very ancient. It was perhaps a universal phenomenon in the olden days. It was practiced all over the world in one form or the other, with certain variations. It was probably thought that the most important sacrifice that could be made to the goddess was women’s chastity. Hence, probably this form of sacrifice grew i.e. dedicating girls and yielding to strangers. Its origin could also be attributed to the fertility cult, which was very dominant in the ancient world.

8.2 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

The beginnings of religious hegemony over any given society lay in its initial formation. In Indian history from the early days, symbolisms, religious and psychic, went hand in hand. Magic, fear and awe, all played their roles in formulating the first conscious religious beliefs, side by side with the more philosophic and ethical considerations. But the religion of the mass was always more steeped with awe-inspiring rituals and faith in the super natural as well as the in the guardians of institutionalised religion. Moreover, the patriarchal social set-up of India strengthened this hold. The patriarchal society had, from early days, decided on a caste hierarchy with the Brahmins at the top. The Brahmins were the interpreters and guides of religious life.

The origin of the custom is traceable to the practice of ritual dancing which formed an integral part of the ritual service of gods and goddesses. A dance performed with the intention of moving the deity was considered to be the real form of prayer\(^{16}\), and hence its popularity among many ancient peoples of the world.

In India, recent studies relate the system with some of the Indus Valley findings. The bronze image of the dancing girl unearthed from Mohenjodaro in the words of Sir Mortimer Wheeler, ‘is one of the most remarkable of the authenticated Indus figurines.’ The girl standing in a provocative posture is charming. Referring to her Basham with certain reservations jumps to the conclusion that ‘......... this dancing girl is a representative of temple dancers and prostitutes, such as existed in contemporary Middle Eastern Civilization and were an important feature of later Hindu culture, but this cannot be proved.’ (Basham; 1972; 21). Moti Chandra takes her to represent ‘a sacred prostitute carrying out the duties within the precincts of the temple of some Mother Goddess.’

Many clay figurines of dancing girls have been excavated from the ancient cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. It is possible that these dancing girls were connected with religious ritual. But it is not possible to come to a definite conclusion in the absence of any concrete evidence. The development of the practice of employing girls in temples in an institutional form is noticeable much later from about the 6th century A.D by which time the temple itself had emerged as a big employer and landlord.

We find several references to them in Indian literature. The Jogimara Cave Inscription mentions the love of Devadinna, a painter for the devadasi Sutanuka. The Ramgarh hills, located near Benares contain the paintings of a man seated under a tree having dancing girls and musicians at his feet. The custom of the association of dancing girls with temples is unknown to Jataka literature. It is not mentioned by Greek writers; the Arthasastra which describes in detail the life and duties of dancing girls is silent about it (II, 27). The Buddhist text Samyukta Nikaya mentions that the devadasis received shares of food crops. Later in Damodaragupta’s Kuttanimatam the devadasis are said to have received salaries from the state. Kalidasa (fifth century A.D.) mentions girls dancing at the Mahakala Temple of Ujjain, during the evening worship of Siva; The temple girls’ cinctures tinkling with the dance steps, their hands weary with the yak-tail

---

fans' (Kalidasa, *Meghaduta*, trans. Egerton, 1.35). He also describes the glamour, dress, and rhythmic dance of these girls. In his play *Mallavikagnimitra*, Kalidasa describes the dance of the courtesan Mallavika in the royal court. We may therefore surmise that as early as the fifth century dance took place in both temples and courts.

The custom probably became quite common in the 6th century A.D. when most of the *Puranas*, containing a reference to it, seem to have been composed. Hiuen Tsang also refers to girls leading religious processions, playing music, lighting torches and offering flowers and perfumes to the deity all through the day at the famous Sun temple of Multan in Sind. This is a clear reference to *devadasis*. Several of the *Puranas* advocated offerings of singing and dancing girls to the temples to provide vocal and instrumental music and dance at the time of divine service. For instance, the *Bhavisya Purana* (I, 98, 67) recommends the purchase of beautiful girls for dedication to temples to achieve the Suryaloka. The Tejpur copper plate inscription of the ninth century, records the dedication of the dancing girls to a Siva temple there.

In the *Rajatarangini* belonging to the 12th century, we have descriptions both of the gift made by King Jalauka, son of Asoka, of women, to serve in the temple of Jyestharudra (Siva) and of *nartakis* (female dancers) as 'guardians of the temple' (*Rajatarangini* I.151 and 8.708). The story of Rupinika (in the *Kathasaritsagara* of Somadeva) a dancing girl employed in a temple at Mathura, explains that the *devadasi* system was widely prevalent in that region. The 13th century traveler Chau Ju Kua estimated that in Gujarat there were twenty thousand girls singing, serving and offering flowers to the deity. Dancing girls were attached to the temples of the Chandellas as is evidenced by the reference to Mahanachani Padmavati in the inscription of the Nilkantasvara temple at Kalanjara, about 50 miles from Khajuraho. At Bayana, in the region north of Khajuraho, an inscription of v.s.1012 refers to *devadasis* offered by a

---

27. N.M. Penzer, *op. cit.*, pp.231ff.
queen to the temple of Visnu. All these references point to the wide prevalence of the practice throughout India.

Not only the Hindu temples, but also the Buddhist (especially in Eastern India) and Jaina temples of the period, had *devadasis*. In the eighth century A.D. an inscription from Karnataka refers to the employment of 'patra' or *devadasis* in a Jaina temple. We find dancing girls mentioned in the famous Ratnagiri Copper Plate grant from Orissa. The donee of this inscription was a *devadasi* named Karpurasri. She is referred to in the record as *Salonapura-mahavihara vinirgata* i.e. as hailing from *Salonapura- mahavihara.* This provides evidence of the association of the *devadasis* with the Salonapura Mahavihara. Another instance of a *devadasi* from a Buddhist shrine is seen in an inscription of Gaya dated 1270 A.D. Worship is here (offered) three times a day by means of instrumental music in the highest key (*panchama gata*, which is said to be erotic) and Rambah – like (a celestial dancer) *Bhavani* (dancing girls attached to temples) dancing round wonderfully. The noted Indologist Jouveau Dubreuil is of the opinion that the female slaves i.e. dancing girls were admitted in the Jaina and Buddhist temple establishments in many parts of India. He remarks satirically that the Jainas and Buddhists had come to terms with their gods in regard to this. What becomes clear from these is that it had gained wider acceptance among the religions of India. From Chau Ju Kua’s description we know that dancing girls were attached to Cambodian Buddhist temples. They offered food to the Buddha and even danced before him.

The Cholas, particularly Rajaraja I, were responsible for the introduction of the *devadasi* system in Sri Lanka. According to tradition, the *devadasis* of Tamil Nadu used to go there in the month of February and dance in the Hindu temple of Jaffna. It is a fact of history that Rajaraja I constructed a few Hindu *devalayas* in Sri Lanka to commemorate his naval victory. Perhaps he might have carried the *devadasi* system also with him to Sri Lanka. Ibn Batuta, who was in Ceylon probably from A.D.1342-43, says

---

34. Beryl De Zoete, *Dance and Magic Drama in Ceylon*, London,, p.64.
that about five hundred dancing girls, sang and danced whole nights before the God of Dineswara.36

Chamanlal a traveler from India noticed the prevalence of the system among the Red Indians. He says, ‘American Indians had the Hindu system of having Deva Dasis (Maidens of God).’ Incidentally, the starting of the Empire of the Incas in America in 1100 A.D. coincided with the emergence of the Chola Imperialism under Koluttunga I. Chamanlal finds some apparent similarities in the method of dedication. Girls of noble families, who had completed ten years and the prescribed training, had to live as the ‘Maidens of the Sun God’ in the temple of Arukan in the capital city of Incas.37

From the Gupta period onwards, we witness a trend of popularization of both Vedic brahmanical religion and Buddhism- the dominant religions of India. Naturally the temples and monasteries were playing a very important role as centres of mass socio-intellectual activities. These institutions had developed a strong hold on the peoples’ lives. They were patronized by the rulers and the rich, especially the merchant class from their birth. By the Gupta, post-Gupta periods, religion and religious institutions were slowly becoming political strongholds. The ruling classes were using them to further their political hold over the people. The temples and the priests were utilizing their established role as upholders of social norms to furthering the favourite king’s image. Apart from that, the non-ruling elite also projected their hold or superiority in society through the religious institutions. The cultural and intellectual activities generated by the temples were corollaries to these more important roles. The devadasis were an item in this corollary sector of the temple’s world.

The selection of the peninsular region for a detailed study of the devadasi system is not without reasons. The system, though prevalent throughout India, was not as popular and widespread in Northern India as in South India. In the North the devadasi system could not emerge as an institution, having a strong base in the society. Nor was it a common feature of the majority of temples there. This is the reason that we have only a small number of inscriptions relating to devadasis in Northern India.

36. S. Krishnaswami Aiyengar, South India and her Muhammadan Invaders, p.233
But in South India devadasis were a common feature in almost all the major brahmanical temples, particularly the Saivite ones. As an institution the temple appeared on the religious scene of South India around the fourth- fifth centuries A.D. and reached its climax in the tenth- eleventh centuries. It was a matter of prestige for the temples to employ devadasis in good number. The famous Rajarajesvara temple at Thanjavur had four hundred devadasis. In the course of time, the devadasis became so numerous and widespread in South India that they emerged as a separate sub-caste, with their own traditions, rules of behaviour and etiquette.

A survey of the epigraphs relating to devadasis brings to light the fact that the institution took its root during the ninth-tenth centuries and reached the climax in the eleventh-twelfth centuries. [Appendix-1] A period-wise break-up of these epigraphs makes the point more clear. Out of 220 clearly dated inscriptions, 5 relate to the ninth century and 7 to the tenth century. The number rises suddenly to 61 in the eleventh and further rises to 71 in the twelfth century. But the number slowly declines from the 13th century. In this century, we have 52 inscriptions. It further declines to 19 in the 14th century.

The above analysis shows that the period, from the 11th century to 12th century was the high watermark of the institution. It is interesting to note that this is approximately the central part of the feudal age in India. The feudal formation was on its peak in the 11th-12th centuries. From the study of the epigraphs relating to devadasis, it becomes evident that that the institution developed rapidly in the feudal set-up.

We are aware that though the practice of maintaining female dancers or slaves at famous shrines has had a long history in India, the popularization and institutionalization of the practice into the devadasi system started primarily in South India in the early medieval period. Hence we shall look into the development of the temples in South India of this period. This would provide us an understanding of their exploitative role in general especially vis-à-vis the devadasis. This is necessary in view of the fact that the system of devadasis was an integral part of the religious services in temple, and that the temple itself was an essential part of the early medieval society and economy. In India, the whole process of social formation from the fifth- sixth centuries onwards appears to be inseparably connected with developments in the field of religion.
Religious sanctification of political authority is an important characteristic of feudal polity. In South India too, the process of development was similar. Religious authority in early medieval South India was as much rooted in ritual purity of the *brahmanas* as in the institutional authorities of the temple and the monasteries.

The period fifth-sixth centuries A.D. is said to mark the end of the ancient and the beginning of the medieval phase in Indian history. From this period, certain economic factors played a decisive role in paving the way for a new social and political structure based essentially on the land system. During the early medieval period, we notice the emergence of a feudal economic order, the most important feature of which was the system of large-scale land grants to persons of political, military and religious standing who were earlier paid salaries in cash.

In South India, the practice of land grants started during the period of the Satavahana and gained currency under the Pallavas. It is from a Pallava inscription of the third-fourth centuries from Andhra Pradesh that we get the first instance of share croppers being transferred along with the land to the beneficiaries who were *brahmins*. By the fifth-sixth centuries land-grants had become quite common.

The large-scale transfer of lands to *brahmins*, religious institutions and officers of the state, coincide with some of the developments, such as decline of trade and commerce, the disappearance of coins and the decay of urban centres. All this ultimately led to the closed economy of the villages. The situation proved favourable to the expansion of the temple system. Owing to the closed economy of villages, large-scale conversion of agricultural surplus into money was difficult. The surplus had therefore, to be spent within the village or group of villages and preferably on public works, e.g., irrigation channels, wells, tanks and places of public worship.

---

In the matter of building temples there prevailed a sense of competition among aristocrats and royal families for building large and magnificent structures. The king or chieftain wanted to surpass his ancestors and other contemporary rulers in building temples. The Pallava king Mahendravarman I records his achievement in an inscription which says that he made the ayatana (home) for Brahma, Isvara and Visnu without the use of traditional material like bricks, timber, metal or mortar, and calls himself Vicitracitta (of a curious or inventive mind).

In Orissan records, it is recorded that the Ganga king Narsimhadeva I, who built the majestic temple of Konark, aimed at building a temple which would outdo the great temple at Puri. Numerous landowning samantas, princes, and kings of the period wanted to acquire punya (merit) and fame by building temples and donating land and villages for their maintenance. Hence, the temples and the panels of erotic sculptures in Khajuraho, Konark, Bhubaneshwar, Aihole, Badami, Belur, Halebid and other places. Inscriptions show that in villages and mofussil towns temple constructions were entirely financed by land revenue in kind.

Another development which coincides with large-scale land transfers was the growth of the bhakti cult which ultimately led to the popularity of temple building activities. As R.S. Sharma puts it ‘......with the puja was interlinked the doctrine of bhakti of complete self-surrender of the individual to his god, which became a distinctive feature of medieval religion, especially in South India from the seventh century. Bhakti reflected the complete dependence of the tenants or semi-serfs on the landowners in medieval times.’ Bhakti has various and complex strands; the ideology of bhakti brought solace to the subaltern classes, entrenched their servitude by letting their autonomous agency be compromised. This served those in power. A religious phenomenon can have an existence of its own but the economic setting too plays an important role. In case of bhakti tradition, the process of sub-infeudation, proliferation of temple activities and popularity of sectarian cults through the bhakti movement,

45. D.Desai-Erotic Sculpture of India (A Socio-Cultural Study), New Delhi, 1975, p.154.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. R.S. Sharma-'Problem of Transition from Ancient to Medieval in Indian History', The Indian Historical Review, Vol.I, no.1.
especially from eight-century onward were happening simultaneously. And these were important factors for the increased temple dedication. Here came in the role of a large number of girls meant to perform religious/ritual duties in the temples, who used dance and music to explain main elements of religious ideology.

The Agamic traditions and the Bhakti Movement, spearheaded by the Nayanmars (Saivite hymnists) and the Alvars (Vaisnavite hymnists) coupled with the Puranic stories brought about transformation in the society. To attain moksha (liberation), all the saints propagated a state of intense devotion and absolute surrender of body and soul to the Almighty. They prescribed the ways and means of introducing singing and dancing in ritual worship. Convinced of their devotion and dedication, princes, priests and people joined them in their endeavour to bring about a socio-religious transformation. The Bhakti movement provided the opportunity to worshippers of all castes—whether he was a vellala, pulaiya, washerman, or a panar—to serve god and aspire for liberation. Service to gods could be rendered by constructing and renovating temples, cleaning their premises, making garlands of flowers, lighting temple lamps, singing in praise of the deity and dancing for their entertainment. All this presupposed the existence of temples, and proved natural impetus to the construction of temples on a large-scale. This further contributed to the institutionalization of the devadasi system in temples.

The preachings of the nayanar saints were also popularising the temple system to a large extent. Tirumular was a great champion of the temple cult. By advising people to follow the right conduct (carya), he encouraged them to build new temples; for carya consisted, besides other things, in the construction of temples and cleaning their premises. All these factors combined to create a favourable atmosphere for the spread of temple-building activities on a large scale.

51 St. Appar- Tevaram, 40:8.
53 Ibid., pp.169-70.
54 Ibid., p.171.
55 Ibid., pp.147-8.
The Bhakti literature also gives many indirect references to the services of devadasis in temples. The Saivite saints like Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar as well as the Vaisnava saints like Tirumangai Alvar and Antal have given references to devadasis in their hymns. St. Appar portrays the place of dancing-girls in a festival procession of the Tiruvadirai (birth asterism of Siva) day in Tiruvarur. He says that the 'procession of the deity was followed first by the devas, then by vanaramankaiyar (celestial nymphs) and then by the devotees.'59 It is obvious that the celestial nymphs referred to here were dancing girls. During those days, according to him, singing and dancing formed part of temple ritual.60

St. Sambandar refers to the sweet music of the devadasis and galing sound of their music. He calls the dancing-girls of Kumbakonam as tenarmollyar, meaning 'honey voiced women'. They are said to have danced to the accompaniment of music.61 He narrates that the dancing girls of the temple of Puhar performed dances, wearing the fillets (probably of gold) on their foreheads.62 He further says that the sound of music and dance coupled with the sound of reciting the Veda reverberated in the temple at Tiruppiramapuram.63

The practice of employing dancing girls was most widespread among the Saivas and after them the Vaisnavas. The custom was also practiced by the Jains. The earliest inscription referring to dancing girls in temples dates back to 802.64 The custom became widespread as a result of rivalry between the different sects, the Saiva the Vaisnava, the Buddhist and the Jain, each of which tried to popularize its rituals by developing practices with a popular appeal. For Buddhism it was a period of decline in India. But, outside India even the Buddhist sects gave patronage to the system. For example, a Buddhist establishment of Combodia is stated to have employed dancing girls for performing dance services in honour of the Buddhist deity.

Traditionally, the first systematic movement to construct brahmanical temples was started in the third century of the Christian era by a pre-Pallava king, Ko-Cenganan.

60. Ibid, 21:10.
62. Ibid., 371:2.
64. EC, 11, Nm. 61.
He, for the first time, introduced dance and music in the temples, which he built. But archaeological evidence regarding the large-scale construction of temples is not available before fifth century A.D. Between A.D. 450 and 600 the Chalukya kings of Karnataka built as many as seventy temples at Aihole.

The temples were often promoted by the king in capital cities and therefore intimately connected with the court. An example is the Rajarajesvara temple at Thanjavur. The Muktesvara temple at Kanchi, which was built by the queen of Nandivarman Pallavamalla (A.D. 731-96), had fifty-four employees of whom as many as thirty-two were dancing girls. It indicates the significance attached to associating girls and to singing and dancing in the temples. In Orissa an inscription of the ninth century A.D. refers to the consort of the Kesari king, Udhyodha offering dancing girls to the temple of Bhubaneswar.

In the medieval period with large-scale transfer of devadana lands to temples, supplemented by recurring levies in cash and kind, together with the periodic interests charged on fixed sums of money deposited with the temple, added to their wealth and magnificence. The temple grew to become one of the wealthiest institutions of the time. Accordingly, the abode of god now came to be called Koyil, which previously denoted the king’s palace. The term koyil referring to temple occurs for the first time in the Pallava inscription of Sirrambakam belonging to the first year of Paramesvaravarman I (670-700) A.D.

The important dynasties like the Pallavas, Cholas, Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas made valuable donations or devadanas from the eighth century A.D. onwards. The extent of royal control over temple affairs can be judged from the fact that

Rajaraja Chola (995-1010 A.D.) effected changes in the landownership in certain cases with a view to stepping up the revenue of the big temples. The temples were being surreptitiously used as an instrument of royal control over public life. Gradually an association was created between the temple - deities and the king leading up to the practice of establishing the images of deceased kings alongside those of the deities of the temples. Thus the temple’s role became overtly politic. Devadanas were also donated by important officials, merchants and other eminent people. In fact, in the 10th century A.D. a major part of the surplus generated from commercial and agricultural activities were in fact diverted to these temples. Hence it follows logically that the royal and other rich patrons had a privileged position in the temple administration.

From the ninth-tenth centuries A.D. onwards the scene in South India was dominated by such temples. Naturally they consequently influenced the socio-economic life of their neighbourhood more and more. Temples were built and maintained through the donation of guilds and merchants in a city. Temples on a smaller scale were built in the villages, maintained by the village community and under the influence of the village elders. These institutions undertook multifarious activities besides daily religious rituals. They patronized and helped the progress of learning and other cultural activities. In the economic sphere their role varied from that of big landed zamindars to petty landowner, according to their status. The magnificent South Indian temples provide employment to a large number of local populations like the artisans, painters, sculptors, builders, scribes, peasants, labourers, trained musicians, dancers and priests. They even acted as investors and usurers lending out money at high rates of interest.

The growth in the economic resources of the temple led to a corresponding increase in the rituals and festivals of the temple. The temple naturally required a large number of servants to manage its vast property and observe its rituals. The number of priests increased with the multiplication of rituals. In the Pallava period, when gifts in cash and kind were made to the temple on a limited scale, it was not possible for it to engage many persons for its maintenance. Nor was it necessary owing to the

---

76. B.K. Pandeya- Temple Economy under the Cholas, New Delhi, 1984, pp.53-75.
comparatively less complex routine and mode of worship of the deity. During the reign of the Pallava king, Paramesvaravarman I, the Siva temple at Kuram was managed by only four persons who offered daily worship to the deity, watered the mandapam everyday and recited passages from the Mahabharata. But the number of functionaries in the temple rapidly increased during the next century. The Muktesvara temple at Kanchi which was built by the Queen of Nandivarman Pallavamalla (A.D. 731-96) had 54 employees, of whom as many as 32 were dancing girls.

The temples had thus become high-powered institutions. It thus becomes evident that these institutions commanded the respect, awe and acquiescence of the people in the neighbourhood. They dictated the social norms and guided the dharma or custom of the people. It is natural that in the circumstances that any oppression meted out by such a high-powered institution would endure and grow deep roots in the soil of the society. No doubt the practice of maintaining devadasis for religious purposes took deep roots under the auspices of these temples since the 9th-10th centuries A.D. Thus, by at least the 8th century, the Hindu temple was not only a place of religious worship but was also a centre of socio-cultural activities. It also became a place for men to satisfy their sensual urges.

Moreover, the priestly class also promoted the growth of the devadasi system. The priestly class emerged as a powerful layer of the society during the Bhakti age. South Indian temples of the medieval period provided them the means to exercise their ritual authority over the religious institutions as well as the ritual activities of the Hindus. They wrote the dharma of the land and predicted the auspicious and inauspicious in life. They also performed special services for the kings in order to legitimatize their deeds. With royal support the priests emerged as the major cultural arbiters of the temple-centred activities of the medieval period. Their ritual influence and legitimizing powers were used for the growth of the devadasi system.

---

80. Devangana Dasm-Erotic Sculpture of India - A Socio- Cultural Study; New Delhi, 1975; p.163.
A secondary development which encouraged the devadasi system was known as a basavi system. In the absence of a male heir in the family, some women temporarily reverted to the system of descent through daughter (the marumakkathayyam system). The daughter was dedicated to the temple as a basavi among whom descent was always in the female line. After dedication, she became the heir of her parent’s property, and could perform their funeral rites as if she were a son. She could select a man of her own choice of any equal or higher caste. Her son inherited the property of her father. But if she had a daughter, only the daughter would become basavi and renew the attempts to procure a son for the family.

The process may be explained on the basis of epigraphic evidence. In 800, one Aridari Poleyamma of the village Mayile, dedicated a virgin to a local temple along with 8 mattars of land, 1000 cows and a swing for the use of the deity. In 974, the blacksmith Bidi dedicated two young girls to another temple of Shimoga district. An inscription of 889 refers to the prostitute (sule) Kadacchi and her husband Mayadamarasa, who had only a daughter and no son. They dedicated their daughter Kadabbe to some god. Kadabbe, in her turn, took a mate of her choice and tried to procure a male issue for the family of her father. Unfortunately, she too had a daughter whose name was Kalingabbe. Kalingabbe accepted one Pallaraki as her mate and she too gave birth to a daughter who was also named Kalingabbe. The second Kalingabbe ultimately gave birth to a son, whose name was Parakayya. The inscription, which tops with Parakayya, is meaningful in as much as it suggests that Mayadamarasa’s lineage was continued by temporarily reverting to marumakkathayyam system, which resulted in the birth of Parakkaya. The inscription does not mention any of the husbands or mates of the several women who are named. This is in keeping with the insignificant position of a male partner in the basavi system.

82. The basavis are non-Brahmin women dedicated to the gods. The word basavi is the feminine of basava, the bull of Siva. According to C. Hayavadan Rao the term literally meaning the bull carries with it the import of ‘procreator’. This name has been given because she raises the progeny for the family. M.N. Srinivas- Marriage and Family in Mysore, Bombay, 1942, p.176.
84. EC, 8 Sb.9, cited by Nandi, Ibid, p.73.
85. EC,7, H.I.64, Ibid.
86. EC, XI, Dindigul 17, Ibid.
This illustrates the tendency of certain families to temporarily revert to the system of descent through daughters in the absence of a male heir in the family. Such families, in their own way, and for their own purpose, gave succour to the development of the devadasi system.

8.3 SOCIAL STATUS

In India, temple women constituted a social category that was distinct. However, temple women in all times and places in Indian history have not had the same identities, activities, status or significance. Their identities were bound up with a particular place; that is their most important connections were with a temple, a deity, or a village. In the Chola period inscriptions, they are usually referred to as ‘devotee of God’ (tevaratiyar), ‘daughter of God’ (tevanarmakal), and ‘woman of the temple’ (taliyilar, patiyilar). Thus the primary focus for temple women’s identities continued to be a connection with a particular sacred place rather than with family, caste, community, profession or function. There existed a devadasi vrtti (life) or a devadasi murai (devadasi order, hereditary professional right), but not a devadasi jati (devadasi caste). It seems probably that the right to become a devadasi was hereditary; but it did not confer the right to work without adequate qualification. However, whether this hereditary right was used or not, depended on many factors; the wish of the parents, the looks and accomplishment of the girl, her behaviour, and the consent of the different authorities.

The dedication of young girls to divine service was done voluntarily as well as non-voluntarily. In voluntary dedication religious motives and spiritual feelings predominated. However, in non-voluntary dedication economic motives and domestic problems perhaps predominated all other factors. Several circumstances prompted parents to give their daughters to temples. Parents might need to fulfill a vow, have no male issue (a devadasi could inherit) or be too poor to afford a daughter’s dowry. A woman could offer herself out of devotion, for the prosperity of her family or her widowhood. It thus

87. The custom was common among the Mediga, Holeya, Bedar and other castes of South India.
resulted in the 'multiplicity of slaves' in the temples and mathas. Voluntary dedication to temple service was considered meritorious and mentally rewarding. Some of the records of the period state that girls were presented for sacred service, perhaps out of devotion or in perpetuity of the tradition. For example, an inscription of the time of Koluttunga I (A.D. 1070-1120)\(^{90}\) records that a captain of a regiment presented some women of his family as devadasis to a temple. Chola kings are said to have donated many girls of their liking to divine service.\(^{91}\) These instances illustrate that girls were dedicated to sacred service by individuals, families and even by kings by way of presentation, donation, appointment and transfer. Non-voluntary dedication meant abject surrender, a kind of forced servitude. Once they had surrendered themselves to the sacred service, they became the property of the temples. Inscriptions of the Chola period of A.D.948, 1118, 1201\(^{92}\) and many other records of the subsequent periods, make mention of sale of women for certain Kasu.\(^{93}\)

It would be pertinent for us to look into the general sources of recruitment of devadasis. There were several ways in which a girl child got into the institution. Sometimes they were sold to the temple at birth or at a very young age by their relatives or parents- the 'Vikritas'. There were those given over to fulfil a consecration vow-'Bhrityas.' Orphans were handed over to the temples and the authorities got the girls strained in the art of dancing, music-'Hrita.' Often more mature girls coming from a courtesan background were given over to the temples with a dowry to become the consort of the God-'Alankara'. Those who were dancers by heredity and profession also entered the fold-'Gopikas'. Lastly and most important were voluntary entrants to the 'sublime' circle-those who joined the rank of the devadasis due to devotion—the 'Bhaktas'.\(^ {94}\) The last category vouches for a successful creation of a divine aura around the devadasis by the priests and temple authorities. So irrespective of the exploitation that was fated for a devadasi quite often, there was also a spirituality attached to it which attracted many

\(^{90}\) Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy [ARE], of 1921, No.230; Also ibid., Vol. L III (1924), pp.254-255.

\(^{91}\) Sadasiva Pandarattar, History of the Later Cholas,(TI), Annamalainagar, 1974,p.87.

\(^{92}\) ARE., of 1936-37,No.149A; Ibid., of 1921, No. 230; Ibid., of 1911, No. 86; Ibid., of 1904, No.183; Ibid., of 1913, No. 80.

\(^{93}\) KASU means a measure of weight to1/4 palam.

defenceless maidens who perhaps took shelter in the divine garb of the devadasi post to escape the banalities of a common prostitute's life.

There were six prescribed ceremonies of dedication before devadasis could take part in temple ritual; marriage (kalyanam); dedication (muttirai); ritual first dance lesson; the presentation of ankle bells (gejjaipuja); the debut recital (arangetram) after the completion of dance training; and the selection of a patron. All six ceremonies were supposed to be completed, at the latest, just after the first menstrual cycle. Traditionally the young devadasi underwent a ceremony of dedication to the deity of the local temple which resembled in its ritual structure the upper-caste Tamil marriage. The Pottukattu or tali-tying ceremony which initiated the young dasi into her profession was performed in the temple through the mediation of the priest. Following this ceremony she was set apart from her non-dedicated sisters in that she was not permitted to marry and her celibate or unmarried status was legal in customary terms. Significantly, however, she was not prevented from leading a 'normal' life involving economic activity, sexual activity and child-bearing. On completion of her training, the first dance performance of a devadasi (Arangetral) took place in the temple in the presence of the king, who conferred the title of Talaikole on the accomplished devadasi.

Talaikole is the earthly symbol of Indra's sacred banner-staff. In ancient India the Banner Festival of Indra was celebrated for twenty-eight days prior to the rainy season to ensure abundant rains for the crops. On this occasion the Talaikole, a bamboo staff encased in pure gold and set with precious gems, was worshipped and taken in procession. The festival is vividly described in 'Silappadikaram' - the 'story of the anklet', an epic poem in Tamil written in the 2nd century A.D. It is the story of Madhavi, a dancing girl and her lover. The Talaikole was brought in a chariot to the dancing hall placed on the stage for the performance of Madhavi who danced before the king and a large assembly.

The Dwajarohanam or flag-staff ceremony that inaugurated the annual temple festivals of Lord Siva was celebrated with votive dances and music. Devadasis, richly clad and adorned with jewels and flower chaplets, performed the Nava Sandhi

---

93. Ragini Devi - Dance Dialects of India, New Delhi, 1972, p.46-47.
*Nritya*, a dance offering to the presiding deities of the nine junctions, rendered with symbolical gestures and ritual dance patterns appropriate to each god.\(^{96}\) When the holy image of Lord Shiva rode forth in festal splendor to the ceremonial bath *devadasis* danced the sacred *Malappu Nritta* of the Tandava in front of the processional deity. Temple festivals were special occasions for a display of classical dancing when *devadasis* were honoured with titles and gifts for their art conferred by the king. The names of famous *devadasis* are to be found in temple chronicles and inscriptions.

The *devadasi* was considered *nityasumangali*—a woman eternally free from the adversity of widowhood, and in that auspicious capacity, she performed her ritual and artistic duties in the temple. The *devadasi* exceeded even the ‘*sumangali*’ (married woman whose husband is alive) in auspiciousness. Firstly, because the individual female powers of the *devadasis*, who were said to be the ‘sprouting of the *sakti*’, were ritually merged with those of the goddesses, and secondly, because she was dedicated to a divine husband i.e. a husband who could never die. Consequently, she could never lose her (double) auspiciousness and was, therefore, called *nityasumangali*, the ever auspicious female. It was, therefore, felt that the temple women should be employed and protected by the temple because they brought luck, protected the king and the country, provided protection against danger, and supported prosperity, health, fertility and happiness.\(^{97}\) Traditionally a balance was struck between the king, who ruled like a feudal lord and patron, and the powers of religion. All arts and sciences prospered under the wings of the temple, generously supported by the king. On the other hand, the king’s ‘holy strength’, i.e. to be victorious, maintain peace within his own territory, enhance rain and rich crops, was sustained by the temple-priests through ritual and by the *devadasis*, who served in many cases both the temple and the court by their ever – auspicious presence and arts. The *devadasi* had an important role to play in the balancing of the two opposite forces; life-enhancing, fertile or ‘auspicious’ versus life-destroying, deadly or ‘inauspicious’. These two forces must be combined in harmony; they are ever present, active, and cannot be destroyed, therefore they must be balanced. In this context, the *devadasi-nityasumangali* was regarded as vital as a person who is guaranteed ‘danger-proof’; she should be present in those critical moments of balancing the auspicious and the inauspicious. She was also to instill dynamism into the processes of gaining a

---

\(^{96}\) *Op.Cit.* p.47.

\(^{97}\) Saskia Kersenboom - *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition In South India*, Delhi, 1998, p. 204-205.
livelihood, maintaining splendour, preserving good health, obtaining children and securing marital happiness.

Among the devadasis also there existed sharp caste discrimination as was the condition in the society at large. For instance the amorous services of devadasis were restricted to only the first three twice-born castes, excluding the Sudras and untouchable classes. Meanwhile, a Brahmin or a member of the landed and commercial elite was preferred for the good breeding and/or wealth he would bring into the family. The devadasi owed the man neither any house holding services nor her offspring. The children also could not make any legal claims on the ancestral property of their father.

Certain privileges were usually given to the Brahmin devadasis and we find instances of restrictive arrangements for cohabitation with them. Hence, ideally the relations of the devadasis ought to be restricted to the king and the Brahmin priests but it was extended to include the higher castes. In Orissa, it was universally accepted that the devadasis who restricted their relationships to Brahmin priests and the king, had higher prestige. The privileged status of the Brahmin devadasis was also revealed by the fact that they alone could reach near the Ratnavedi (an altar inlaid with jewels in the inner sanctum) of the Jagannath Temple at Puri whereas those belonging to the other castes had to sing and dance at the Natamandira outside the threshold of the inner sanctum. Francis Hamilton who visited India during the late 18th and early 19th century had, while referring to the temples at Tulava, observed that the Brahmin devadasis living in those temples were to confine their amorous services to Brahmans alone.

In South India there were two main divisions of dancing girls, the valangai or right-hand and the idangai or left-hand. The valangai would only dance for or consort with the upper or right-hand castes. The idangai were not selective and were sometimes known as kammadasis because they catered for the artisans, that is the kammalans or left-hand castes. All devadasis were temple dancers, but those who danced at court or for the nobles were called rajadasis and those who danced at weddings and social ceremonies of all kinds were called alankaradasis. The devadasis also differentiated among themselves

on the basis of language. In Southern Travancore the Malayalam-speaking dancers would neither marry into nor even eat with the families of Tamil-speaking devadasis.

Some of the devadasis compared themselves to the heavenly courtesans (swargyabesya, apsaras) who adorn the court of Indra, the king of the gods and master of the rains.\textsuperscript{100} In Indra’s court they were for the pleasure of the gods and in this mortal world they were for the pleasure of the worldly gods such as the kings and the Brahmin priests. It was thus held legitimate that the earthly courtesans like their counterparts in heaven should have relations with the earthly gods. In Medieval Orissa, the priests were addressed by the pilgrims as panda thakur. Panda is the word used popularly to refer to Brahmin priests; thakur means Lord or God. Jagannatha was also addressed as thakur.

The very rituals which marked and confirmed her incorporation into temple service also committed her to the rigorous emotional and physical training in the classical dance, her hereditary profession. In addition, they served to advertise in a perfectly open and public manner her availability for sexual liaisons with a proper patron and protector. Very often in fact, the costs of temple dedication were met by a man who wished thus to anticipate a particular devadasi’s favours after she had attained puberty. It was crucially a woman’s ‘dedicated’ status which made it a symbol of social prestige and privilege to maintain her. For the devadasis their temple attachment granted sectarian purity and the promotional avenues to pursue a prosperous career. The economic and professional benefits were considerable and most importantly, not lacking in social honour.\textsuperscript{101}

The French missionary Abbe Dubois, who spent 31 years of his life in South India, has in his \textit{Moeurs, Institutions Et Ceremonies Des Peuples De L’Inde}, described many aspects of devadasi life and tradition. Though he came much later, his observations and comments provide us with valuable details about the devadasi’s way of life. He was shocked by the fact that any connection with the temple dancers was favourably looked upon, and the same was reflected in the proverb vesya – darsanam punyam papa nasanam,\textsuperscript{102} which literally means ‘to see a courtesan is auspicious and the destruction of sin’. This proverb indeed did full justice to the devadasi as a nityasumangali, the ever-

\begin{footnotes}
\item[100] Frederique Appfel Marglin, \textit{op. cit.}, p.91.
\item[101] Amrit Srinivasan-\textit{Reform and Revival; The Devadasi and Her Dance}; Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XX, No. 44, November 2, 1985; pp.1870.
\end{footnotes}
auspicious female. This auspiciousness is implored by society in the case of wedding ceremonies, in processions of the gods, and while carrying the sacred water to the temple.

The *devadasis* were also well accomplished in learning, which was generally denied to ordinary women at that time. The French missionary Abbe J.A. Dubois has highlighted this aspect in the following words:

> 'These courtesans are the only women in India who enjoy the privilege of learning to read, to dance, and to sing. A well-bred and respectable woman would for this reason blush to acquire any of these accomplishments.'

Dubois admired their cleanliness, their good taste in clothes, their dignity of department and the civility of their language. He says: 'Of all the women in India it is the courtesans, and especially those attached to the temples, who are the most decently clothed. Indeed, they are particularly careful not to expose any part of the body. I do not deny, however, that this is merely a refinement of seduction. Experience has no doubt 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.'

He concluded that this probably arose from their sophistication in the art of seduction. In fact, the high regard for the *devadasis* was also derived because they had undergone a rigorous training in music and dances, were skilled in languages, and polished and dignified in their manners. Dr. Shortt, in his Memoirs read before the Anthropological Society of London during 1867-1868, also praised their beauty and culture and was not at all surprised that so many European officers took them for mistresses.

By co-operating in the ceremonies which conferred prestigious *sumangali* status on a section of its female personnel, the temple permitted the most intimate connections to develop between sectarian specialists and the laity. The triple-cornered communication between the temple, the *devadasi* and her patron permitted the legitimate pursuit of interests even in the absence of market conditions. It was the *devadasi*’s original sacramental husband, the Lord of the temple, who provided the momentum for her subsequent attraction for men who wished to approximate and imitate it in human

---

terms. The fascination for a ‘wife- of- the- god’ may be mythic but what is crucial here is that it converts itself into exchange value when the socialite-client or believer wishes to own the commodity in question for himself. Intimacy with a devadasi consequently demonstrated public success which visibly marked a man apart from his peers. Seen in this light, the devadasi represented a badge of fortune, a form of honour managed for civil society by the temple.105

Land grants were given to individuals by rulers and patrons expressly for meeting their ‘entertainment’ expenses- the upkeep of a devadasi and her band of musicians. The temple for its own part was no disinterested participant - the patronage extended to the devadasi was by no means passive. It recognized that her art and physical charms attracted connoisseurs (in the garb of devotees) to the temple eager to promote her as their protégée in the outside world at large. The devadasi acted as a conduit for honour, divine acceptance and competitive reward at the same time that she invited ‘investment’, economic, political and emotional in the deity. The efficacy of the devadasi as a woman and dancer began to converge with the efficacy of the temple as a living centre of religious and social life-political, commercial and cultural aspects.106

The temple’s sanction to the system of extra- marital alliance described above was particularly evident from the fact that it was the offspring of these ‘mixed unions’ who were given prime monopoly over temple service. The temple also ensured in this way a permanent task- force committed to temple duties over all others. Since the devadasi was supported by the temple and the king; she did not have to depend on her lovers for her maintenance. She received gifts, sometimes very substantial ones, but these would not be considered as payments for services rendered. There was no contract between a woman and a man as in the case of the common prostitute; very simply, provision of sexual services by these women was not a commercial exchange.

In an inter-caste context, the religious sanction given to female celibacy institutionalized sexual intimacy between devadasis and patrons. In an intra- caste context, it enforced sexual separation within the kin group. In this context, we have to

mention the relationship of the devadasis with other men who surrounded them in their social life. The devadasi was permanently denied to all and every man of her community as a marriage or sexual partner. The artificial dichotomy within the community between the householding and the celibate female population gave rise to the ‘pure’ or ‘closed’ and the ‘mixed’ or ‘open’ sections of the community. The former perpetuated itself through marriage, the latter through both marriage and ‘mixed’ sex.107 (The sons and brothers of the devadasi were permitted to marry as also the non- dedicated girls of the group.) These internal divisions were closely linked to aesthetic specialization within the community.

The allied arts of Tamil Bhakti worship - sadir (dance), nagaswaram (instrumental music) and nattuvangam (dance conducting) were traditionally organized into two orchestras; the periamelam (in Tamil literature ‘big drum’) and the cinnamelam (in Tamil literature ‘small drum’). The periamelam was focused around the male nagaswaram virtuoso and was the hereditary specialization of the ‘pure’ section of the community. The cinnamelam on the other hand was focused around the devadasi or female dancer and her male guru or nattuvanar, and was the hereditary specialization of the ‘mixed’ section of the community. Recruitment to the profession was restricted from within each group on the basis of various natural and cultural criteria such as -

- Sex - the nagaswaram as also dance –conducting was meant to be performed only by men while the sadir was danced only by women,
- Inheritance - ‘shares’ in the local service rights to the periamelam were transmitted through male links and to the cinnamelam through female links,
- Initiation - dedication to the deity seen as simple right of incorporation for the men and as a special ceremony of ‘marriage’ for the women, marked entrance into the profession and was compulsory for the attainment of privileges associated with temple office,
- Training - the public demonstration of skill in one’s art subsequent to a ritual and social apprenticeship to one’s teacher was the necessary preliminary to a professional career.108

107 Amrit Srinivasan-Reform or Revival- The Devadasi and her Dance, p.1870-1871.
108 Ibid.
The economic backbone of the dasi household was a female one since it was the women who were the primary source of both earned and ancestral property. The person in charge in the dasi establishment --- the Taikkizhavi or ‘old mother’ was the senior-most female member who was normally one of the more renowned dancers of her time who after retirement, exercised control over the younger members. The strict discipline of this old lady over both the private and professional lives of her relatives, her control over joint income, its pooling and expenditure provided the fundamental source of unity for the dasi household.

Despite female household authority, in the professional sphere it was the male guru who exercised control over the dancer. The dasi or matrifocal household was characterized by the following features: (1) large size and excess of female residents (women married into the house but few married out. Besides girls were adopted for professional purposes); (2) dichotomous power structure (female members exercised household control, male members exercised professional control); and (3) dichotomous ethical structure (conjugal and celibate codes both co-existed).

The conscious theological rejection of the harsh, puritanical ascetic ideal for women in the bhakti sects softened for the devadasi the rigours of domestic asceticism in the shape of the widow and of religious asceticism in the shape of Jain and Buddhist nuns. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the devadasis led a comfortable and even luxurious life and were women of means. The Portuguese traveler Domino Paes said that they lived in beautiful houses besides the best thoroughfare of the city. He was indeed wide-eyed with wonder and amazement at their wealth, especially their jewellery.

‘Touching the dancing women, speaking to them or looking at them,’ was mentioned as a ritual offence in the sectarian texts laying out the etiquette to be followed by worshippers when visiting temples. This misconduct was considered equivalent in blame to other varieties of desecration such as spitting in the temple, turning one’s back to the shrine, looking covetously at consecrated property etc.109

The devadasis commanded social esteem and recognition even in death as in their life. The funeral honours that were bestowed on a devadasi are significant for the

ambivalent attitude and appreciation that the *devadasis* received from society. Indeed, one of the highest compliments, which were paid to the *devadasis*, was their funeral. Flowers, sandal paste and a garland from the god of the temple were sent on the occasion of her last rites. In some temples, the fire of the kitchen in the temple was used to light her pyre and the deity observed 'pollution' for a token period of one day when no *puja* was performed at the shrine. Usually, a funeral procession is not meant to stop anywhere, but in the case of the *devadasi* the bier was placed for a moment on the floor near the entrance to the temple when the gifts mentioned above were made. This ritual status, however, did not translate itself into any definite social status. A *devadasi* always got the funeral of a *sumangali*, i.e., a woman who still wears her *tali* since her husband is alive.

Generally speaking, we may distinguish three features shared by all *devadasis*;
1. Association with the dangerous divine, often in the form of the goddess.
2. Association with rituals that should dispel these eruptions of danger.
3. Association with some specimen of performing arts as a means to dispel evil influences and to assess positive, fertile prosperity.\(^{110}\)

We have the *devadasi-nityasumangalis*, firstly protecting the king’s immunity to evil influences and secondly, adorning his court. The divine base of the valour of and protection by the king is acknowledged in the generous support to temples. Domino Paes has mentioned that the palace dancers could even enter the presence of the wives of the king, stay with them and eat betel with them, a thing that no other person could do no matter what his rank might be.\(^{111}\) Seen in this perspective, the social status of the *devadasis* appears to be quite high. Their art was generously supported and great attention was given to the training of dancers.

The promotional advantages of a temple position for a professional career were obvious both in terms of publicity and income. The invitation to perform at marriages and other auspicious ceremonies in elite homes flowed from the artists’ special status as god’s servants. Temple service provided a kind of ‘union’ membership without which no artist could count as a professional performer. It was the side benefits, the

\(^{110}\) Saskia Kersenboom- *op. cit.*, p. 192.
access to material advantage and artistic patronage in the secular world which made

temple positions so lucrative.

8.4 FUNCTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The devadasi way of life was an entire way of life......They danced for the deity

as an artistic extension of the elaborate worship by the priests....They danced for god

inside the temple and outside too, and again for him when he went outside in procession

and at festivals.

The varied nature of the devadasi’s functions can be gleaning from both literary

and epigraphic records which specify dancing, singing, Chauri-bearing and other duties

entrusted to different devadasis in the same temple. For example, an inscription of 1151

mentions several devadasis who included a singer (gayaki), a dancer (nartaki), fly whisk

bearer (camarikaya) besides twelve entertainers (dvadasa seva vilasini). It is

significant that the terms gayaki, nartaki and camarikaya appear as name- prefixes of the

concerned devadasis which is enough proof of the specialized duties they were supposed
to perform in honour of the god.

The association of dancing girls with the temples was materially beneficial to

both the state and the temple. The keynote of the religious life in early medieval South

India was the various kinds of activities centring round the temple. The temple, in fact,

was the hub of the social and economic life in a locality. At the centre of the temple

network was a principal deity or deities surrounded invariably by his divine associates

and human retinue. The devadasi was an important member of the human retinue. The

deacon of an early medieval temple can be compared to a feudal lord who was provided

with all the amenities and pleasures of life that were needed by a feudal lord. The

devadasi had to participate in almost all the daily rituals and occasional ceremonies. Since

the rousing of the deity from sleep in early morning through the various ritual services in

the day, to the time when the god went to sleep, the presence of the devadasi was

112 A.V. K rishnamoorthy- Social and Economic Conditions in Eastern Deccan, Secunderabad, 1970, p.59-
60.
necessary. Even when the gods went out for a chariot-ride, as during the processions, the devadasis followed the lord as faithful maids in waiting.\textsuperscript{113}

Songs and dance performances by devadasis in the temple were a source of attraction for both the lay worshippers and pilgrims, which ultimately brought more benefices in the form of grants and offerings. Temples with devadasis drew liberal patronage from both rulers and private individuals. The amount of sanctity attached to a devadasi on account of her association with the deity, brought ritual sanctity and social eminence.

Rites and rituals, festivals and processions, consolidated the devadasi system. Rituals and festivals were two essential parts of temple worship. The \textit{Bhakti} literature enumerates a large number of such rituals, festivals and processions conducted in the temples, referred to by Saints Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar. On all these days the devadasis were required for performing ritual functions in the temples. According to St. Sambandar the festival processions were followed by dance performances and music recitals.\textsuperscript{114} Ritual procession meant a time for much merry-making and entertainment, social gathering and cultural activities.\textsuperscript{115} The devadasis provided the devotees with the needed entertainment. Such 'artistic devices' in the opinion of Max Weber\textsuperscript{116}, integrated the diverse elements of popular religion. Impressed by such 'artistic devices', the devotees poured into the temples in large numbers.

By the ninth century, the process of worship and offering had become complex. The worship offered was sumptuous; scented water for the bath, costly clothes and rich naivedya were provided for the god. Besides, some other items were included under the term \textit{angabhoga}\textsuperscript{117} and \textit{rangabhoga}\textsuperscript{118} of the deity for which provisions were made in

\textsuperscript{113} A.K. Singh- \textit{Devadasi System in Ancient India,(A Study of Temple Dancing Girls of South India)}, Delhi, 1990,p.11-12.
\textsuperscript{114} St. Sambandar-Tevaram, 2:6; 8:6; 8:9.
\textsuperscript{115} M. Srinivasa Aiyangar- \textit{Tamil Studies}, Madras, 1929, pp.189-190.
\textsuperscript{116} Max Weber- \textit{The Sociology of Religion}, Boston, 1963, p.244.
\textsuperscript{117} The term 'bhoga' means pleasing enjoyment, the hire of dancing girls or courtesans, food offered to an idol etc.Vidyasagara, Pandit Kulapati Jibananda, \textit{Shabdasagar}, Calcutta, 1900, p.538.The term \textit{anga} means the act of play, ornament, decoration etc., \textit{Shabdasagar}, p.8.
\textsuperscript{118} The term 'ranga' refers to a dancing place, a place of public amusement or for dramatic exhibition, theatre, play house etc., M. Williams., \textit{Sanskrit English Dictionary}, Delhi, 1976 (first published fromOxford,1899), p.862.
several Rashtrakuta and Chola records.\textsuperscript{119} Both these terms \textit{angabhoga} and \textit{rangabhoga} refer to dance and drama performed by the dancing women in the \textit{ranga-mandapa} or \textit{natyamandapa} of the temple (which were built for that purpose) for the amusement and enjoyment of the deity.\textsuperscript{120} During the twelfth-thirteenth centuries a number of inscriptions mention \textit{angabhoga}, \textit{rangabhoga}, \textit{devabhoga} and \textit{kamabhoga} of the deity. In 1235, we hear at Chabrolu (in Guntur district) that Jaya, the famous General of Kakatiya Ganapatideva, erected two-storeyed houses for sixteen \textit{devadasis} and provided for the \textit{angarangabhoga} of the deity.\textsuperscript{121}

Besides \textit{angabhoga} and \textit{rangabhoga}, the number of new items relating to the worship and celebrations in the temple went on increasing during the tenth-eleventh centuries. The process can be illustrated by reference to the Pidariyar temple of Kolar.\textsuperscript{122} Between 966 and 1071 this temple received seven endowments from the Chola kings.\textsuperscript{123} Villages were granted to it in 966, 1006, 1017, 1019, 1033, 1054 and 1071.\textsuperscript{124} The growing income was utilized to meet the expenses of the new cults and ritual services instituted in the temple. It is interesting to note that in 966 when the earliest grant to the temple was registered, no provision was made for dance services by dancing girls. But a hundred years later, in 1071 to be exact, donations were recorded for providing these services in the same Pidariyar temple. The inscription states that temple employed 24 dancing-girls to perform dances in honour of the god and a dance-master was also appointed for the proper training of these girls. An inscription of the time of the Rashtrakuta king Krsna III shows that temple dancing had become a hereditary occupation favouring thereby the formation of a \textit{devadasi} caste in future. The inscription also shows that by this time it had also become customary for dancing girls to dance in front of the deity during festive processions.

The number of priestly and non-priestly functionaries also increased with the multiplication of rituals. The earlier donations merely provided for the offerings of \textit{naivedya} to the deity, without specifying the hours when these offerings were to be

\textsuperscript{120} EC, 10, KI106c.
\textsuperscript{122} EC, 10, KI.106.C
\textsuperscript{123} Nandi, \textit{op.cit.,} p.24.
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Ibid.}
repeated. Sacrificial rites or other rites do not figure in these records.\textsuperscript{125} All these appear later in the grants of the tenth- eleventh centuries. A charter of 1071 refers to such elaborate rituals as the \textit{ardhayama}, the \textit{navahoma}, the \textit{madapattiym} the \textit{matirusandi}, the seven days festival of the god \textit{Astradeva}, and the blood rites performed in honour of the goddess.\textsuperscript{126} All categories of temple servants, including the twenty-four dancing girls and a dancing master, were allotted their allowance in rice and money in the year 1071.\textsuperscript{127}

The \textit{devadasis} were also to present dance and songs before the deity during regular worship. Abbe Dubois in the nineteenth century told of singing and dancing twice a day in temples of importance.\textsuperscript{128} They were also entrusted with the duty of cleaning the temple.

The \textit{devadasi}'s special qualification was her auspiciousness which earned her the epithet \textit{nityasumangali}. In fact, one of the most salient features of the \textit{devadasi} tradition was to spread auspiciousness and remove evil influences by waving the pot lamp (\textit{purnakumbhadipa}) and by dancing (\textit{nrttanam}). Thus, the \textit{nityasumangali} rendered her special power effective in three ways;

- through her female sexuality that is identified with that of the goddess;
- through a number of ritual implements of ritual value like the pot, the lamp, coloured water, certain flowers, fruits and unguents;
- through her art.\textsuperscript{129}

Dancers were important adornments to a royal court, where the king assumed godlike powers. Certain ceremonial activities were performed by dancers, such as holding the royal umbrella and fanning the royal couple with yak-tail fans. They were also present at state occasions such as royal consecrations (Kautilya, trans. Shamasastery 1967:139). The same ceremony was accorded to a king as to the god in the temple. In fact temple ritual was modelled on court ritual. The religious power vested in the king empowered him to transfer \textit{devadasis} to religious duties or to call \textit{devadasis} for secular activities. It is recorded of King Jalauka of Kashmir that :"A hundred out of his seraglio, who had risen

\textsuperscript{125} Nandi- \textit{op.cit.}, p.24.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{127} EC.10, Kolar 106.
\textsuperscript{128} Abbe Dubois, \textit{Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies}, Oxford University Press, 1972, p.585.
\textsuperscript{129} Saskia Kersenboom-\textit{op.cit.}, p.67.
to dance (in honour of the god) at the time fixed for dancing and singing, he gave out of joy to Jyestharudra (Siva)." (Kalhana Vol. I.1 151:28)

The role of the devadasis in the life of secular patrons was mostly to lend prestige to any function or visit, to protect the family or gathering from evil influences, and to spread an auspicious atmosphere of mirth and art. As nityasumangali, the devadasi became an adjunct to conservative domestic society and her presence became more or less obligatory at their social-cum-ritual functions and celebrations of all kinds. These were mostly of the character of rites of passage (samskaras) like the hair-parting ceremony performed for pregnant females, the name-giving and ear-piercing ceremonies for children, and most importantly the wedding-ceremonies. What in ordinary homes was performed by the sumangalis of the family, ceremonies welcoming the bridegroom and the guests, singing songs of festivity at marriages and puberty ceremonies, were, in the houses of the elite performed by the devadasis. In many cases it was the task of the devadasi to decorate the bride, prepare her wedding-necklace and to accompany the wedding procession. A large bulk in the repertoire of the devadasis concerns songs for such occasions. As a picture of good luck, beauty and fame the devadasi was welcomed in all homes, including those of the wealthy, at all happy occasions of celebration and honour. Her strict professionalism made her an adjunct to conservative domestic society not its ravager. They were regarded as indispensable, respectable and most importantly as 'lucky'. Royal patronage and invitations to royal occasions served to enhance their prestige. The devadasis went to the priests' houses only on the occasion of some of the auspicious life-cycle ceremonies, weddings, thread ceremonies, ear-piercing etc.

Abbe Dubois further says,

'Their duties, however, are not confined to religious ceremonies. Ordinary politeness (and this is one of the characteristic features of Hindu morality) requires that when persons of any distinction make formal visits to each other they must be accompanied by

---

130. Saskia Kersenboom, *op. cit.*, p. 85, An important task was the preparation of the tali of the bride. The tali consists of a golden thread, a manical-coloured thread, symbols in gold that indicate the caste of the marriage partners and black beads. The black-beads are believed to ward off evil, and were usually supplied by the devadasis. To have one's /strung by an ever-lasting auspicious female would influence one's own lasting state of auspiciousness (sumangalya).

131. Amrit Srinivasan, 'Reform and Revival; The Devadasi and her Dance', *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 2, Volume XX, No. 44, 1985, p. 1870.
a certain number of these courtesans. To dispense with them would show a want of respect towards the persons visited, whether the visit was one of duty or of politeness.'

Even after retirement from active temple-service, the devadasis of Vaishnava temples were called Kali-Yuga Lakshmi (goddess of prosperity in the worst world-period of kali) and Kali-Yuga Parvati in Saiva temples. There is no doubt that it was her prestigious sumangali status, which lay behind their customary patronage and acceptance by married, financially secured and socially powerful, venerable men. The Portuguese traveller Domino Paes, who visited Vijayanagara in 1520 A.D., describes the devadasis of a Ganesa temple as follows:

‘They feed the idol every day, for they say that he eats; and when he eats women dance before him who belong to that pagoda, and they give him food and all that is necessary, and all girls born of these women belong to the temple. These women are of loose character, and live in the best streets that there are in the city; it is the same in all their cities, their streets have the best rows of houses. They are very much esteemed, and are classed amongst those honoured ones who are the mistresses of the captains; any respectable man may go to their houses without any blame attaching thereto.’

He further describes the palace dancers as follows:

‘The women begin to dance; while some of them place themselves in the circular galleries that I have said were (erected) at their gate of entrance. Who can fitly describe to you the great riches these women carry on their persons—collars of gold with so many diamonds and rubies and pearls, bracelets also on their arms and on their upper arms, girdles below, and of necessity anklets on the feet [.....] there are women among them who have lands that have been given to them, and litters, and so many maidservants that one cannot number their things.’

133 Abbe Dubois, op. cit., p.602.
134 Louis Jacolliot, *Voyage au pays des perles*, Paris, 1879, p.279; ‘...je remarquai plusieurs vieilles Kaly-youga-Parvady, c’est-a-dire epouses mortelles de Siva,qui, le signe du dieu imprime sur la poitrine, se promenaient fierement.....’
136 R. Sewell, op. cit., p.270
A significant aspect of the *devadasi* system was the permanent and hereditary nature of their work in the temple. Once a *devadasi* was appointed for a particular chore, such as dancing before God in the temple during the procession, festivals of waving fly-whisks, etc. not only did her post become permanent, but also the right to do the particular work assigned to her and the endowments set apart for that went to her permanently and hereditarily. It was hence natural that each *devadasi* would like to be associated with that function which fetched more income. The epigraphs suggest that *devadasis* made efforts to be associated with the work of dancing before God in the temple or during the procession festivals, singing or holding *camara*, etc.\(^{137}\)

To illustrate the above point, we may refer to the following epigraphs. An inscription from Tirupulivanam in the Chingleput district mentions that the right of holding *camara* (fly-whisk) before a deity during a procession was presented to a *devadasi* and her descendants.\(^{138}\) In 1119, *devadasi* Nemmaluri Suray donated 6 *uttamandamadas*\(^{139}\) for maintaining a perpetual lamp in the Agastivara temple of Kommuru. The work was entrusted to 300 *sanis* of the place 'for ever and for ever.'\(^{140}\) In 1171, Rajendra Coda Gonka made similar gifts of lands to dancing girls and *sthanapati* (local trustee) of the temple of Ramalingesvara at Sripuram in the Guntur district. The land was gifted to them 'till the sun and moon' (exist).\(^{141}\) There are several other examples of provision of the period "till sun and moon" in the inscriptions.\(^{142}\)

Hence, permanent land grants to *devadasis* permanently fettered them to the temple service. And the vices connected with them also became a permanent feature.

\(^{137}\) There are several proofs mentioning valuable presents made by *devadasis* to the temple for being associated with these functions. *ARSIE*, 1940-41, nos. B. 161, 144,149 etc.

\(^{138}\) *ARSIE*, 1923, C 210.

\(^{139}\) *ARSIE*, 1923, C 210.

\(^{139}\) Madai was standard gold coin under the Colas issued by different kings under their names, e.g. Madai of Rajaraja, Madai of Rajendra Solan etc. From the reign of Kolutunga I several other types of madais were issued by local rulers. KAN Sastri - *The Colas*, (reprint of 2nd edition), Madras, 1975, pp.614-15.

\(^{140}\) *SII X*, No.80.

\(^{141}\) *Ibid.*, No.177.

\(^{142}\) *Ibid.*, No.115,110 etc.
8.5 DEVADASI AND HER PARAMOURS

Though the devadasis were married to gods, they sometimes married respectable persons including the princes and entered the palace as the king's consort. Sundaramurti, the Saiva nayanar, who flourished in the 8th century, is said to have fallen in love with Sangili, a dancing girl in the temple of god Siva at Tiruvorriyur and ultimately married her. Another devadasi, from the same place, named Catural Caturi, is described, in an inscription of 1049, as the wife of a citizen. The Rajatarangini contains an interesting piece of information. Sahaja, a temple dancing girl of Kashmir, was the sweetheart of prince Harsadeva. Later, she married his brother Utkarsa. After 20 years, on being widowed, Harsa tried to win her back, but she refused his offer and became a sati for which she was highly praised. In the Kathasaritsagara, Devasena, the king of Sravasti, fell in love with Unmadini, the beautiful wife of his General. When the General came to know of this, he proposed to offer his wife to the temple as a devadasi, and the king could take her up from there without incurring any stigma. Similarly, in the Rajatarangini, King Durlabhak Pratapaditya of Kashmir fell in love with Narendraprabha, the beautiful wife of his merchant friend from Rohitak (now in Punjab). The husband of Narendraprabha, when he came to know of the matter, came forward with a solution. Narendraprabha was an accomplished dancer and the merchant could offer her, in that capacity, to a temple, and the king would take her from there. Thus, Narendraprabha, the devadasi was married to the king, and, in course of time bore many sons to the king. It thus becomes clear that when a king wanted to enjoy a kulanari or a married woman, which he could not do without incurring social disapproval, the husband of the woman - if he did not mind - could offer the wife to the temple as a devadasi. The king could, then, easily have her without attracting any social disapproval.

One can well imagine the degeneration that had set in the devadasi institution. The king had a command over the 'women of god' who theoretically belonged to the temple. Kalhana informs us that King Harsa of Kashmir saw a beautiful dancing girl of the temple

143. Ayyar-Saivism, p.466.
147. Kalhana- Rajatarangini (tr.by) Pandit Ranjit Sitarlam, New Delhi, 1968 (first published in 1935), Ch.IV, vs.17032.
and took her as a concubine into the royal seraglio (VII, 858). In Assam too, two cousin sisters Phulesvari and Draupadit, who happened to be devadasis in the temple at Joydal, were taken in marriage by the king. In course of time they became ruling queens of Assam, and had even coins struck in their own names. The eyes of the king Sibsingh fell on Phulesvari while she was giving a dance performance in the temple of Joydal, and this set the ball rolling. Later, another devadasi Chinnadevi was married to the Vijayanagara king Krishnadeva Raya.

In addition to the above references to devadasis' love affairs leading to their marriage with mortals, there is evidence to suggest that devadasis were no better than the ordinary courtesans doing their profession in the streets. There is a story in the Kuttanimatam. In the course of his visit to the Visvanatha temple at Kasi, the king of Devarastra had an occasion to witness the drama, Ratnavali, in the temple in which the main role was played by Manjari, a dancing girl, attached to the Gambhiresvara temple. As was expected and planned, pleased with the performance, the king issued a charter containing the grant of a village. In the night, he enjoyed the company of the devadasi in his bed chamber.

There is a similar story in the Rajatarangini. Prince Jayapida of Kashmir once went on a visit to the city of Pundravardhana in the territory of the Gauda king in modern Bengal. He went to witness a dance recital in the Kartikeya temple. When the recital was over, people went home, the dancing girl Kamala, who was very beautiful, whose conversation was refined and wit subtle, taking the king by the hand, entered the bed chamber.

Devadasis were supposed to be the wives of the gods, and expected to lead a pious life. But the priests and ascetics could hardly be expected to be indifferent to the presence of these girls, some of whom are described as surpassing Rambha, Menaka and

---

149. E.P.N.K. Pillai-Kokasandesam, p. 15.
150. Kuttanimatam, Vs. 747-49.
151. Rajatarangini, IV. 421-24, 433-34.
Urvasi in beauty. It is natural that some of these damsels would have illicit relations with the priests or ascetics who lived in the temple.

The Periyapuranam provides us with the instance of the marriage of St. Sundarar with Paravai Nacchiyar, the rudra-ganikai of the Tiruvarur temple. Sekkilar says that Paravai Nacchiyar was engaged in the service of garland-making and dancing in the tiruvolakkamandapa (dance hall) in the temple. With the favour of the priestly class, the marriage of St. Sundarar with Paravai Nacchiyar was solemnised and legitimatized by giving it a divine character.

We find that the Pasupata and Kalamukha sects had acquired the position of the priests in many medieval temples, especially of Gujarat, Mysore and Kashmir. Their philosophy of sex in its decadent state, when combined with the power and wealth of the temple head, was likely to corrupt them and their subordinates. We hear from the Veraval Prasasti of Bhava Brihaspati of Somanatha that the temple was ruined by many evil-disposed gandas (Pasupata priests) and by ‘numerous bad servants of the king’, who had succumbed to the greed of money. Merutunga, in the Prabandhachintamani, (p.26) notes that the Solanki king Mularaja, who lived in the 10th century, was in search of a fit tapsvin for the Tripurusa temple, built by him at Anhilvad Patan, the then capital of Gujarat. The ascetic called Kanthadi, whom he approached, refused to accept the office. However, one of his sisyas agreed to become the head of the temple on the condition that Mularaja supplied him daily with eight palas of genuine saffron, four palas of musk and one pala of camphor for massaging his body, thirty-two women or varangana, a white umbrella and a grant of land. All these requirements by the head of a temple indicate only the lax moral atmosphere of the temple and the luxurious life led by them. In the 8th century work, Kuttanimatam, (verses 538,735, 752) we find the mention of a Pasupata acarya of Varanasi, who built for a courtesan a dhavalagriha, a special type of palatial mansion, which must have been so magnificent that it was considered an ‘ornament of the entire city’. The construction of such a palace must have cost a huge amount of money, indicating thereby the large amount of wealth amassed by the Pasupata acarya. Another reference in the same work shows a paramour telling a vesya that she has

155. Ayyar, Saivism, p.466.
become acharyani by relations with a Pasupata acharya. Manjari, a courtesan of Varanasi, is also shown as the daughter of an acharya. It seems that the heads and officials of mathas and temples had relations with courtesans and devadasis. Ksemendra was fully aware of such possibilities as we get many such instances in his work. In the Samayamatrika (II, 19) we read about a temple official (prasadapala) who had relations with a vesya in the garbhagriha of a temple of Gauri. The same work (VI, 9) refers to a jatadhari (with matted hair) Lilasiva who visited vesya at night and in the morning avoided the main street to reach the matha. This work also relates how a vesya, under the garb of a woman of the vanik (merchant) class, entered a sakta matha, dyed her hair and attracted many men around her.

There are sculptures representing religious teachers with women. A scene on the 10th century Laksmana temple of Khajuraho vividly portrays a dancing girl (Plate-IX) near a pot-bellied, bearded figure wearing rudraksa on arms, sitting on a gadi under a canopy. He seems to be a religious acharya. Disciples, both male and female, are shown attending on him. The Chitragupta temple of Khajuraho and the Nilkanthesvara temple of Udayapur have scenes showing an acharya attended by two female disciples. Erotic scenes are also seen in the Hoysalesvara temple at Halebid and the Kesava temple of Belur besides others. The flagrant display of erotic scenes on the temple walls certainly suggests the degeneration of the priests, ascetics and the devadasis, who lived in the temples.

8.6 ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

(For analyzing the economic activities of the devadasis I have restricted myself to the Chola period epigraphs.)

The temple women constituted a social category that was distinct from other types of women, e.g. from palace women or from ordinary family women-both in their relationship to property and in their social identities. Economic factors seem to have been most significant in determining the different trajectories of temple women and other women. Women apparently did not have control over their stridhana (property), which

was instead transferred by their fathers to their husbands. Thus economic power was largely concentrated in the hands of male heads of households and not women. On the other hand, temple women, being unmarried, enjoyed economic autonomy.\textsuperscript{157} Thus, over the course of the Chola period most women—because they were economically, as well as socially, defined by marriage—found themselves in an increasingly weaker position, whereas for temple women the absence of a connection to marriage, and the alternative linkage to the temple provided a context in which their economic power was strengthened. Their continued access to property was tied to the fact that their social identities were predicated on relationships with temples rather than with husbands, and they increasingly established and reinforced these relationships through their patronage of the temple. This allowed them to continue to act as temple patrons, whereas other women’s donative activities were curtailed. They used donations as a way to forge and strengthen connections with the temple in their locality, connections that were critical to their status and identities as temple women.

Several records of the Chola period bear ample evidence to the wide prevalence of the \textit{devadasi} system throughout the Chola dominion. Women are frequently mentioned in Chola period inscriptions, most often as donors. The records also depict that their socio-economic condition was quite satisfactory. The best instance is provided by the Rajarajesvaram inscription of Rajaraja I of 1014 A.D.\textsuperscript{158} It states that under orders from Rajaraja I more than four hundred dancing girls were transferred to serve the God of Thanjavur. Paragraphs 3 to 402 of the record contain a list of the names of those \textit{talicherippendugal} (temple-girls living in the temple quarters) thus transferred and settled in the various streets of the temple. To the name of each girl is prefixed the name of the temple or village which she belonged to. Each of them received a share of earnings from the temple which included a house and one \textit{veli} of land which yielded net revenue of a hundred \textit{kalams} of paddy annually. This indicates the secure economic position enjoyed by the \textit{devadasis} in the early Chola days who were attached to the temple at Tanjavur. This is further substantiated by the Chola records which register the rich endowments made by them for various public benefactions.\textsuperscript{159} This no doubt depicted their sound

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{South Indian Inscriptions} [SII], Vol.II, pt.iii, No.66.
\textsuperscript{159} B.K.Pandeya, 1984, \textit{op.cit.}, p.37.
economic condition, but more important was the fact that it showed the social acceptance of their status recognizing their benevolent action.

- Regarding appointments against casual vacancies, the following instruction of the king was engraved on the wall of the temple: "Instead of those among these share-holders, who would die or emigrate, the nearest relations of such persons were to receive that allowance (kani) and to do the work. If the nearest relations were not qualified themselves, (they) were to select (other) qualified persons, to let these do the work, and to receive (the allowance). If there were no near relations the other incumbents of such appointments were to select qualified persons from those fit for such appointments, and the person selected was to receive the allowance." 160

The above passage makes it clear that the devadasis were appointed on a permanent and hereditary basis. Once appointed; they could not be disturbed or interfered with by the temple authorities. The above evidence suggests that land, in lieu of her services, was permanently made over to the devadasi and the particular work, for which the land was given to her, had to be continued by her and her descendants. It was her responsibility and prerogative both.

Land was the main source of income of the devadasis. Very often endowments of villages or lands were made to the temples for meeting the costs of specified services, including music and dancing. Sometimes, at the time of making grants, the donors themselves fixed the share for the different categories of temple servants. In some of the temples, such as the Rajarajesvara temple of Thanjavur, the Nagesvara temple of Sudi (Dharwar) and others, the share was fixed for each person. In addition to grants of land, tolls and money were also made. Provision of food for their daily maintenance is also recorded.

8.7 Historical Resources; Temple Women in Chola Period Inscriptions

The role of temple women most frequently seen in Chola period inscriptions is that of donor to the temple. According to the testimony of the Chola period inscriptions, making gifts to the temple was the single most important role for temple women. They used donations as a way to forge and strengthen connections with the temple in their locality, connections that were critical to their status and identities as temple women. Temple women’s gifts, in substance and value, were very similar to those of other kinds of donors. Most of the gifts recorded in inscriptions of the early Chola period were in support of perpetual lamps to be burned in the temple. In the later Chola period, endowments for support of lamps continued, but gifts were also made to support daily or festival services or temple personnel or to help build temples or install images.

- In the eighteenth year of the reign of Nirupatonkavarman, Nakkan Kali, a temple woman (tevanar makaJ) of Srikantapuram, gave 12 kalancu of pure gold for a perpetual lamp for (the god) Tirukkataimuti Perumanatikal.

This gold, the wealth of the Lord (perumanatikal), received from this person of the perunceri of Srikantapuram, is to yield a daily interest of 1 ulakku (of ghee). May the panmahesvarar protect this (endowment)

---SII 7.526; this inscription was engraved in A.D.872 at the Sadaiyar temple in Tiruccennampundi, Tanjavur district.

- In the forty-ninth year of the reign of Sri Koluttunkacoladevar, this deed of land sale was declared and recorded in Manavanakkalamanatu, in Nakarancolakeralapuram, in Venkunranatu, in Venkunrakottam, in Cayankontacolamantalam, with the agreement, on behalf of the (nakaram), of us, the nakarattar of this town, including Nerkunran Kilan Kutameratiruvatikal, Kannuva Pakkilan Vatavayi.....Catina Accinataratippan,Nerkunran Kilan Kaliyan Makiyan, Manappakkilan, Karaikkiyemarrayilaiyan, Nallulan Svami Amutu, and Nerkunra Kilan Ori Vatavayil.
Cuntari Utayainceytal alias Puventiyaeola-manikkam, a temple woman (devaratiyar) of Lord Matukulamatevisvaram of this village (ur), purchased from the town (nakaram) and donated 2 veli of land (whose boundaries are described in detail), to provide offerings (tirupatimarru) and festival lamps for this god and for the goddess ('Queen of the Bedchamber' - tirupalliyyarainampirattiyatiyar) whom she had set up. The whole of this 2 veli of land which we the nakarattar of Colakeralapuram agreed to sell, Puventiyacola-manikkam bought and donated as devadanam for the goddess.

I, the accountant Mampakkamutaiyan Markantaiyan Civakkoluntan Catturukalamakalatittan, sign this deed of sale that has been declared by these people.

He who destroys or seizes this charity will be as one who has sinned on the banks of the Ganges and the shores of Kanyakumari.

-----SITI 118; this inscription was engraved in A.D. 1119 at the Manukulamahadeva temple in Salukki, North Arcot district.

- In the thirty-fifth year of the reign of Sri-Tirupuvanaviratevar, we, the temple servant (tevarkamikal) of Aticantesvaratevar of the temple.... Utaiyaval alias Narpattennayira-manikkam, one of the temple women (tevaratiyar) of this temple.... (having set up deities) Tiruvacuranayanar, Periyatevar, and Nacciyar and made a tax free land endowment for the temple of this Lord, (was assigned) a position (murai) when worship is offered at the early morning service (tiruvelucci), and a senior place at the hunting festival (tiruvettai), and the(singing of) the seventh verse of Tiruvempavai at the Tiruvatirai festival in the month of Markali.....in the order (of worship) in this temple.....and (her) descendents (varkattar).....

We the temple servants of.... Of this temple sign (this agreement); the temple accountant Munnurruvappiriyan, the temple manager (srikariyam) Tennavan
muventavelan, the *srimahesvara* supervisor Kontan, the temple servant (*tevakanmam*) Munnuruvapattan, Palaravayan and Amutan Campantan.

-----NK134; this inscription was engraved in A.D.1213 at the Kalahastisvara temple in Tirupampuram, Tanjavur district.

These three medieval Tamil inscriptions, engraved in stone on the walls of South Indian temples, are among the hundreds of epigraphical records that provide specific and detailed information about the activities and identities of temple women of the past. These inscriptions range in date from the seventh or eighth century up to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and are found throughout India; two-thirds come from the early medieval period – A.D.850-1300 - and the majority are found in South India, from the present states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

**Give and Take**

- On Sunday, in the Asvati *naksatra*, the eighth day in the month of Mina, in the Kollam year 428, Cenkotan Puvanti, a temple woman (*tevaratiya*) of this temple—who had set up the Goddess (Nacciyar) for (the deity) Kunramerinta Pillaiyar in the holy temple of Rajendracolisvarumutaiyar Mahadeva, Lord of Tirukkottar alias Mummuticolanallur- gave a total of 20 *accu* (gold coins) for thrice-daily food offerings for this Goddess.

Having received (this money) from her, we, the temple servants (*tevarkanmikal*) and the *srimahesvara* supervisors of this temple, deposited it in the treasury to provide for offerings, the daily interest being 5 *nali* of paddy, or 2 *nali* of husked rice, for food offerings for the Goddess.

From this paddy, (Cenkotan Puvanti) will measure out on the top of the plank 2 *nali* of rice, and after the food has been offered, we will give her 1 *nali* of the cooked rice daily. On the festival day of the *tirttam* (bath of the deity), we will
give her the parivattam (cloth used in worship). And we will give this 1 nali of cooked rice, the parivattam, and the paddy to the descendants (santanapravesam) of Cenkotan Puvanti.

Thus we, the temple servants (tevarkanmikal) and the srimahesvara supervisors, having received and deposited in the treasury these 20 accu, issue this agreement in stone and copper to Cenkotan Puvanti that the 2 nali of rice will be provided (to the Goddess) for as long as the moon and sun shall shine.

--- TAS 6.15; this inscription was engraved in A.D. 1252 at the Colisvaram temple in Cholapuram, Kanyakumari district.

A unique feature of temple women's giving was their involvement in deals with the temple. In these transactions, temple women received, in exchange for a gift, certain rights, privileges, or support from the temple. Temple dancers usually donated gold, lamps, or cows and sheep, and even land. The revenue from the latter would provide for the supply of oil for perpetual lamps. More frequently, however, the privilege granted was precedence or proximity to the deity in a festival procession or the right to sing portions of the hymn Tiruvempavai before the deity. Usually, the honours granted to temple women were hereditary as also indicated by the inscription translated above.

The temple women used donations as a way to forge and strengthen connections with the temples in their locality, connections, which were critical to their status and identity as temple women.

It is clear from the inscriptions that both the court and the temple supported a large number of female dancers and singers, both of whom were held in great esteem and were generally very rich. According to the testimony of the Chola period inscriptions, making gifts to the temple was the single most important role for temple women. Examples of their valuable donations can be found in epigraphical records. Anukkiyar Paravai Nankaiyar can be considered as an example of the high respect that court dancers

162. Ibid., p.162.
enjoyed in the times of the Chola Empire. She is most famous for her donation to the temple of Tiruvarar. Among them are not only jewels and lamps, but even such large donations which enabled the temple to rebuild its constructions in stone. She endowed large quantities of gold for the purpose of plating and gilding parts of the *vimana* (shrine), the entrance and the four sides of the shrine of Vitivitankar. An inscription of the 20th regnal year of Rajendra I (1012-1044 A.D.) says that the emperor arrived at the shrine of god Vitivitankar along with Anukkiyar Paravai Nankaiyar at his side in his chariot. A brass lamp was set up at the place where the ruler and Anukkiyar Paravai Nankaiyar stood while offering worship to the deity. The affection of Rajendra I for his favourite (anukki 'one who is intimate') seems to have been so great that a village was named after her as Paravaipuram and a temple as Paravai-Isvaram. During the reign of Rajadhiraja I (1018-1054 A.D.) provision was made for offerings to the images of Rajendra and Paravai Nankaiyar in the Tiruvarar temple.

Temple women were most in evidence and most active in the periods and regions in which Chola power and influence were least felt; in the later Chola period, in the northern and southern regions of Tamil Nadu, and at smaller temples that did not attract much royal attention. These transactions became increasingly common in the post-Chola period. It is interesting to note that most of these deals were conducted in regions peripheral to the core Chola territory. Temple women flourished in places and periods in which local politics were strong and the Chola king’s presence and authority were weak. They acquired position and status through their individual efforts rather than by royal patronage. As Chola power waned in these areas, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, temple and local officials may have seized the opportunity to establish themselves as brokers of power and status, using the temple as a base for their authority and using temple honours as a means of creating a network of local linkages - and simultaneously increasing the wealth of the temple by exchanging temple privileges for gifts. Through their gifts, the donors acquired religious merit and public recognition, but

---

163. S. Ponnusamy, *Sri Thyagaraja Temple, Thiruvarur*, State Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1972, p.33-34; the author considers Anukkiyar Paravai Nankaiyar a temple dancer because of her personal name Paravai which is traditionally connected with Tiruvarur; however, we prefer to regard her as a court dancer because of her honorary title anukki, and because of the fact that she traveled with the king in his chariot.

164. S. Ponnusamy, *op. cit.*, p.51 fn.25; Paravai Nankiyar donated numerous ornaments weighing thousands of kalanjus; the ornaments consisted of gold, 428 pearls, 7 rubies and 36 diamonds.


166. S. Ponnusamy, *op. cit.*, p.34.
they also became real participants in temple life, engaged in religious activity that was, in fact, not marginal at all but central to the very existence and the reason for existence of the temple.

Donation to temple dancers consisted in personal grants of lands or in the gift of land for the maintenance of a group of temple artists. From epigraphical material, one may assume that the temple dancers were highly respected members of society who were well provided for by the temple and by the community of devotees. During the later Chola period, their rising public presence as temple patrons contrasts with the dramatic decline in the number of inscriptive references to other kinds of women.

Some inscriptions from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu throw light on the corporate activities of the devadasis. It seems that the devadasis had formed their own association and commanded considerable influence and confidence among the people. They had some say in the management of temple affairs. It is interesting to note that in Andhra Pradesh there were large settlements of devadasis numbering 300 or even 500, who were centred at important towns such as Draksharama, Palakol, Srikakulam, Chebrolu and Velpur. Significantly enough, large settlements of priests were also located in the same towns. The priests were known as the manis and the devadasis as the sanis. In several records, these associations of devadasis are found to be administering the different temple endowments. They were entrusted with the responsibilities of the proper utilization of the endowments, in accordance with the conditions and purpose specified by the donors. Thus, in 1119, an endowment of 6 uttamagandamadas was entrusted to three hundred sanis of Kommuru for maintaining perpetual lamp in the temple of Agastivara. A Pandyan queen made a gift of 30 soliyankasu of worship in the temple of Tiruttalisvara at Tiruppattur in the Ramnad district during sivaratri. The endowment was entrusted to a devaradiyal, named Kulasekhara-manikkam. The naming of the dasi after Kulasekhara and making her the trustee of the queen’s endowment, suggests that she had been enjoying the confidence of the king.

---

169. Ibid.
170. SI1, 10, No.80.
171. ARSIE, 1935-36, B 190.
The devadasis had grown in strength and status and we find them constituting an integral part of the temple management. This is indicated by a number of inscriptions in which they are associated with sthanapatis in managing the temple affairs. Thus, in 1141, dancing girl Proli-Pava of the temple of Vasukravi Somesvara of Duttika made a gift of 50 inupaydlu (sheep) for a perpetual lamp. The sthanapati, the three hundred sanis and the nibandhakartas were enjoined to see that the gift was properly administered.\footnote{SII, 10, no.110.}

The central aspect of temple women’s identities in the Chola period was not linked to their activities in the temple nor to their ritual significance but was, instead, a matter of their relationship to the temple. But if, in the ritual context, the functions or activities of Chola period temple women were incidental to their identities, what these women did in the temple, their actions as donors, was vitally important to who they were. In the course of the Chola period, temple women, through their own initiative and effort, increasingly made a place for themselves as individuals within- or on the margins of- the temple community. It was through their own agency that they established and secured relationships with the temple, not as the consequence of heredity or as the result of ritual necessity or royal sponsorship. And through their actions, they shaped - and changed - the definition of what it was to be a temple woman.

Another important aspect related to their economic status was their hereditary inheritance rights. It was conscious economic motivations which lay behind the temple dedications (whatever the voiced religious reasons for their performance). The insistence on the minor status of the girl to be dedicated reflected this fact since it ensured the retention of hereditary rights to service and land benefits in a given temple. The temple granted a service allotment or maniam which was meant for the enjoyment ‘over the generations’ (vamshaparam-birayam) of a set of dasis attached to a given shrine. They had no right to alienate it since it was not in their name but the temple’s, more specifically in the name of the deity or the head of the controlling matha. The organization of the shares (panku) in this land just as the organization of training and arrangement of daily duties was a matter of internal management by the community. The property transmission within the household recognised the joint and inalienable nature of privilege land-use.
which could only remain with the family so long as there was a member actively
employed in the temple.173

To ensure this hereditary right over income, the status of the girl whom the
senior dasi dedicated to the temple must be of a minor. It is important noting here is the
fact that the devadasis were the only women allowed to adopt a child under customary
Hindu law and often an adopted daughter was favoured over an only son in the matter of
inheritance. Though this right to adopt and the inheritance right over landed income
provided the devadasi with certain power within her household and in her community,
this economic status acquired through temple patronage created a variety of competitive
social pressures among the ‘dasis’ and the men of their community.174 In my view, theirs
was a situation of double-bind. To acquire their economic status, they had not only to be
devadasi, but also should perpetuate the system. In other words, the moment the
devadasi freed herself from the system and refused to perpetuate it by providing a new
minor devadasi, she lost her income too. Thus, this economic independence too was
contained within a certain logic which benefited the men of the landed households.

8.8 DEVADASI AND HER DANCE

The growth in the economic resources of the temple led to a corresponding
increase in the rituals and festivals of the temple. The services of the devadasis became
popular in the religious life of his period. Special architectural arrangements were made
for dance and drama performances in medieval temples. In Orissa a natamandira was
added to the shrine. The natamandira of the Konarak temple is adorned with sculptures of
beautiful women, dancing and playing music. At Modhera in Gujarat a separate
sabhamandapa or rangamandapa was constructed in front of the shrine and mandapa.
The terms angabhoga and rangabhoga refer to dance and drama performed by the
dancing women, referred to in several Rashtrakuta and Chola records, in the
rangamandapa or natya-mandapa of the temple for the amusement and enjoyment of the
deity.

174. Ibid.
The temple women built up a place for themselves within the broad borders of the temple structure. The status they garnered enabled them in the following centuries to have a continuing role in the life of the temple, eventually establishing themselves in hereditary positions as specialists in dance. Among the class of prostitutes, the *devadasis* stood out as a special group with their exquisite artistry and divine aura. She learned, Kapila Vatsyayana has said, to seek that perfect pose that conveyed a sense of timelessness. There was an innocence, a helpless submissiveness about these women which perhaps provided a satisfaction to the fastidious elites. Their beauty and artistic abilities naturally made them inspirations for painters and sculptors. Finely executed murals of beautiful dancing girls became subjects in caves and temples of southern India. The tradition had perhaps begun with the Ajanta but in the south Indian temples a close association with dancing girls can be noticed. Such examples can be seen in the Jaina cave temples of Sittannavasal (near Pudukkottai) and Tirumalaipuram (near Tirunneveli) of the Pandyas, at the Rajarajesvaram (Tanjore) of the Cholas and Thyagaraja, Swami temple (Tiruvarur) of the Nayakas.175

By providing the cultural context for the competitive fever of art to display and prove itself, the South Indian temple institution proved itself a valuable patron. It also gave a degree of respectability to professional skills by encouraging their excellence and ceremonially sanctioning as 'auspicious', not impure, the unusual ways of life that went with them. In the process the *devadasis* and their men folk were able to amass considerable wealth and prestige and organize themselves better professionally. Art as a corporate function and mode of livelihood ensured competence and continuity of practice. An extremely telling metaphor used to justify their artistic capacities was that of the plantain (*vazai*) which kept perpetuating itself over the year from the original parent stock (*vazai- adi- vazai*).

The artistic capacity of the *devadasi- nityasumangali* gave her the respect of society that was necessary for her self-respect and livelihood. Although the tradition of the *devadasis* has almost become extinct today, there are still many good dancers, dance teachers and musicians who owe their skill in these spheres to the *devadasi* tradition. It is they who are the custodians of the tradition, the discipline and the feeling of...

reverence for music and dance, nurtured through hundreds of years. Thus, the aesthetic side of the system received a lot of acclaim. The devadasi's dance was a sacred tradition. Romila Thapar points out that around the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., dancing was being included in the rituals at the temples, especially in South India. Originating with folk dancing, the choreography of temple dancing became highly sophisticated. Complex renderings of religious and mythical themes took shape which is now apparent in the final form of Bharat Natyam - a classical dance form of India. The devadasis were required to be highly accomplished artists. They had to undergo rigorous training and practice. The level of artistic attainment of these women is evident from the different treatises of art relevant to this which were written in the ancient Indian milieu. The Vastushastra points out the close connection between the sciences of citra (drawing), nritta (dancing) and gitam (songs). It was laid down that the dancer had to learn painting to have a complete mastery in the arts. We have the tradition of Matavi, the earliest devadasi that we know in Tamil Nadu, who had mastery in painting. The Bharatanatyam dance form of today is none other than the extension of yesteryear, the preserve of the much-maligned devadasis. The old, traditional name of the dance-style which is now known as Bharata Natyam was Sadir or Dasi Attam.

Since the time that society has removed the art from its natural centre, the devadasi community, it has undergone very far-reaching changes, both in temperament, training and artistic progression. The support later given to the revival of sadir as Bharata Natyam by the Theosophical Society was largely due to the efforts of Rukmini Arundale, an eminent Theosophist herself. The dance masters of South India, Nattuvans, who taught the art of dance to devadasis and rajadasis belonged to an ancient guild, the Nattuva Mela. Their office in temples and palaces was hereditary and they were known to be great musicians and composers of music and dance.

The purely classical art of the devadasis was described by Smt.T. Balasaraswati (one of the last authentic devadasi dancers whose family tradition can be

traced back two centuries to the Tanjore court dancers) and Dr. V. Raghavan. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the dance of T. Balasaraswati, who herself was a devadasi, continues to be regarded as the ultimate in the expression of the ‘traditional’ Bharatanatyam technique. It is the devadasis who come to our mind as the custodians of such glorious tradition in the field of art and culture, and as the nurturer of the feelings of reverence for music and dance through hundreds of years. Whatever else may have been said about them, it is undeniable that art was an integral part of their ethos and existence, and as such pure and untainted. It is to them that we owe the survival and preservation of the oldest classical dance forms in existence today. There is no doubt that Bharatanatyam and Odissi classical dance forms flourished because of the devadasis of South India and Orissa.

8.9 PROSTITUTION IN THE GARB OF RELIGION

In fact, besides the contrast between the devadasis’ high social status and economic power on the one hand and their insignificant role in the ritual and administrative life of the temple - in several other respects also there was an ambivalent attitude of the patriarchal society towards the devadasis- they received appreciation from the society and represented auspiciousness par excellence, yet, on the other hand, there arose in the course of time an implied censure and contempt against them. To cite one example to corroborate this aspect, no devadasis, except those from the Brahmin family, were allowed into the inner sanctum of the Jagannath Temple at Puri.

The devadasi institution, the origin of which was associated with fertility purposes, lost its original meaning and became a means of pleasure garbed in the form of worship. Damodaragupta in his Kuttanimatam (742-51) has provided a vivid dialogue of vitas and vesyas in the vicinity of the Varanasi temple. From these dialogues we get an impression of the medieval temples and the degeneration that had set in there. The temple was visited by vesyas, their paramours and pilgrims who were interested in women. Damodaragupta refers to the fake sadhus who came on the pretext of worshipping Shiva but who secretly looked at women.

The amorous and licentious life of the *devadasis* has been depicted by the foreign travellers like Al Beruni, Abu-Zaid, Domino Paes, Abbe Dubois etc. Though they came and wrote much later, their observations regarding the *devadasis* are worth noting. Domino Paes has described them as the women of ‘loose character’.

Abbe Dubois has made the following observations about them\(^\text{180}\) -

‘All the time which they have to spare in the intervals of the various ceremonies is devoted to infinitely more shameful practices; and it is not an uncommon thing to see even sacred temples converted into mere brothels. They are brought up in this shameful licentious (life) from infancy…..’

John Shortt not only highlighted the miserable condition of the *devadasis* in South India but he has also made the following observations about their exploitation:

‘As soon as a girl attains maturity, her virginity, if not debauched by the pagoda Brahmins, is sold to outsiders in proportion to the wealth of the party seeking the honour, if such it may be termed, after which she leads a continuous course of prostitution - prostituting her person at random, to all but outcasts, for any trifling sum.’

Abbe Dubois observed, much later, that during the car festival at Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh) that the presiding deity of the temple, Lord Venkatesvara, through his servants, the Brahmins, selected new dancing girls to serve him from the crowd that came to celebrate his festival.

‘While the image of Venkatesvara is borne through the streets on a magnificent car, the Brahmins, who preside at the ceremony, go about among the crowd and select the most beautiful women they can find, demanding them of their husbands or parents in the name of Venkatesvara, for whose service, it is asserted, they are destined…… it is thus that the seraglio of Tirupati is recruited.’\(^\text{181}\)

As a matter of fact, whatever the voiced religious reason for the *devadasi* tradition, it was conscious economic and social motivations, which lay behind this

\(^{181}\) Abbe Dubois, *op.cit.*, p. 601.
system. Such an ambivalent attitude towards the *devadasis* is not surprising given the fact that the *devadasi* merely represented a badge of fortune, a form of honour managed for civil society by the temple.\textsuperscript{182} The Brahmins supported and encouraged this practice because of the obvious pecuniary and other concomitant benefits. The *devadasis* were encouraged to select only such patrons who had both social and economic weight. The wealthy and the elite patronized the *devadasis* despite the enormous expense it entailed because intimacy with a *devadasi* demonstrated public success, which visibly marked a man apart from his peers.

The association of dancing girls with the temples was materially beneficial to the state and the temple. The Muslim historians have noted the economic benefits of the Sun temple of Multan, which fetched a big sum from the pilgrims.\textsuperscript{183} The account of the Arab traveler Abu Zeid al Hasan, who came to India in 867, states that "she takes an apartment in this public place and spreads a curtain before her door and awaits the arrival of strangers, she prostitutes herself at a certain rate and delivers her gains into the hands of the priest to be disposed off for the use and support of the temple."\textsuperscript{184}

The fact that the *devadasis* were used to cater to the State’s interest becomes clear from the fact that their earnings were often collected and taken by the kings. The foreign travellers like Al Beruni and Abdullah Wasaf have testified this fact. Alberuni records in the 11\textsuperscript{th} century that income from prostitution in temples used to be taken by the king for meeting the expenditure of the army.\textsuperscript{185} The *Prabandhchintamani* informs us that King Siddharaja of Gujarat (1094-1143) collected tax from pilgrims visiting Somanatha.\textsuperscript{186} It is well known that the famous temple of Somanatha, which Mahmud of Ghazni destroyed in the year 1026, had five hundred *devadasis*, who provided music before the deity all the day and night.\textsuperscript{187}

The influence of the king on the *devadasi* institution is suggested in two inscriptions of identical character dated A.D.1090 from the temples of Sadadi and Nadol in Rajasthan which record a decree of King Jojalladeva. They state that on the occasion of

\textsuperscript{182} Economic and Political Weekly, p. 1870.
\textsuperscript{183} Jan Yun- Hua- ‘Hui Chao’s Record on Kashmir’, cited by D. Desai, p.155.
\textsuperscript{184} B.P.Mazumdar-Socio-Economic History of Northern India, 1030-1194 A.D. Calcutta,1960, p.371.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid, p.372.
\textsuperscript{186} D.Desai-Erotic Sculpture, p.155.
\textsuperscript{187} P. Thomas- Indian Women Through the Ages, Bombay, 1964, p.239.
the yatra (procession festival) of a particular temple the dancing girls of all other temples in the city must attend with their best clothes and ornaments and participate in music and dancing. They explicitly mention that his descendants should see to it that this arrangement continues in future even if objections are raised against it by ascetics, old men and learned scholars. Thus, despite its degeneration into a great social evil, the devadasi system could not be done away with because of royal patronage.

In fact the ruling class on the one hand and the priestly class and the nobility on the other, depended on each other’s support; and the vices connected with the institution of devadasis continued.

For the devadasi, the economic and professional benefits arising out of the devadasi system were considerable and most importantly, not lacking in social honour. Devadasis were the only women allowed to adopt a child under customary Hindu law and often an adopted daughter was favoured over an only son in the matter of inheritance. However, such benefits accruing to the devadasis were, in the course of time, largely eroded with the gradual degradation of their lot, and a vast majority of them were transformed into one of the most exploited, debased and pitiable sections of the Indian society. In fact, even during the phases when the devadasis grew in strength, wealth and social status, not all devadasis were wealthy or well off, and a large number of them led a pathetic life.

In the course of time, several factors contributed to the downfall of a large number of devadasis from the lofty position of the maid servant of the deity to that of the mistress of kings and rulers and the object of sexual pleasures of the rulers, the priests, the elite and even the common men. Initially, it was the prerogative of the kings and royal males to enjoy the pleasure of their company with the priest’s consent and blessings. We must keep in mind that the king was deified since the early Chola period, and hence being considered as closest to God, was the most deserving person to seek the devadasi’s charms. The society accepted this abuse of the slaves of the divinity without a demur. Gradually, the rich and influential merchants, landowners, village-heads started seeking the devadasi’s favour. The devadasis being attached to the temples carried out the daily

---

188 Altekar- The Rashtrakutas and Their Times, p.296.
rituals of the temple, danced before the deity along with serving to please the sexual desires of the rich and the powerful in the localities. The prostitution of the devadasis was conducted by the temple authorities in an organized manner. They even collected a share from the earnings of these devadasis under the command of the so-called guardians of the society. These guardians of the society sat in the village councils as well as in the temple administrative bodies and were themselves members of the elite in the society. Thus, the devadasis danced to the tune of their actual masters, not the deity, but the human patrons and the initiating priests. Yet, here was this aura of divinity and devotion which perhaps appealed to the helpless damsels, helping them psychologically to escape into a sublime world, obscuring the reality of their degradation.

However the chief reason of their degradation was economic. The process of their degradation was accelerated by the decline in the grant from the state, gradual loss of the temple and the kings as patrons. There was further shrinkage of proceeds from the offerings of the worshippers; with the result that the daily food received by them from the 'bhoga' of the deity was so much reduced that it was impossible for the numbers of the devadasis to live upon. Obviously the worshippers were gradually becoming less religious. Thirdly, the population of a devadasi family started increasing, and it became difficult to maintain the members on the grant received from the temple. Thus in the course of time, the devadasis lost the social esteem and respect they enjoyed earlier, and a majority of them turned into ordinary courtesans. The loss of the temple and king as patrons forced them to try to earn a living by means of their art; the prospect of being only a nityasumangali was not an attractive one for any person endowed with such highly developed tastes, artistry and intelligence. Therefore the capacity to sing and dance became essential for the livelihood and self-respect of the devadasis.

So what we get is a carefully nurtured tradition of a divine origin of the devadasis, the human consorts of the God. These human consorts or divine slaves were to attain the heights of aesthetic accomplishments to measure up to their position. In essence, however, it was the authorities in the society who dictated the terms to them and not God. So they were a special class no doubt, segregated from common prostitutes, in that they had a divine purpose, were experts in the culture of dance and music touched with devotion. In spite of the social degradation they faced, there was still the aura of
divine sanction around them and some of them, if not all, fell back on this as a psychological cushion against the crudities of the world.

The artistic capacity of the devadasi-nityasumangali gave her the respect of society that was necessary for her self-respect and livelihood. Although the tradition of the devadasis has almost become extinct today, there are still many good dancers, dance teachers and musicians who owe their skill in these spheres to the devadasi tradition. It is they who are the custodians of the tradition, the discipline and the feeling of reverence for music and dance, nurtured through hundreds of years. Thus the part played by the devadasis in the socio-cultural aspect of the medieval society is of very high degree and besides offering themselves to the service of the gods they enchanted the minds of the public. The inscriptions and the sculptured panels stand as a mute testimony to the unforgettable service the devadasis rendered to the contemporary society.

Devadasis were beautiful not only in body but in their art. It follows naturally that they became inspirations for painters and sculptors. Finely executed murals of beautiful dancing girls became subjects in caves and temples of southern India. In all these renderings of a dancing girl's beauty the exhibition of her sensuality was a must. However richly decorated a bare upper body was an added charm.\footnote{Ibid.} The dancing girl is said to reveal her charm as well as divinity through her exposed bosom. Tamil literature dwells on the beauty of the female body as a pure and sensual vision.\footnote{Kuruntokail, 337; Silapaddikaram-3: 1-7, Akam 161, cited in K.Sadasivan, 1990, op. cit., p. 116.} So it was not enough to master an art, render it before God, the priests and a privileged audience. They in fact had to please the actual masters in the patriarchal society through exhibitionism and physical submission. Thus the devadasis danced to the tune of their actual masters, not the deity, but the human patrons and the initiating priests in the patriarchal set-up.

8.10 PRESENT SCENARIO

Analysing the devadasis in the present context, we find that against these wrongs of Indian womanhood several movements emerged in different parts of our country. In 1890 anti-nautch and anti-dedication movements emerged. Such movements
pressed the concerned governments to ban this practice. Many legislations were passed such as:
1. The Bombay Devadasi Act, 1934.
2. The Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Madras Act, 1947;

In spite of passing these progressive legislations, liberal rehabilitation assistance, anti-dedication campaigns, this cult is still prevailing in many parts of the country, particularly in draught prone, poverty stricken border areas of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh. Even today, hundreds of girls are being dedicated defying laws preventing dedications in the temples. The initiation of such a girl is sold at a high price with endeavour of her own family, and her future is destined, she turns into an ordinary prostitute. Every year hundreds of such girls are exported to the notorious red light districts of Mumbai and other cities.

STATISTICAL DATA

India's National Commission for Women, which is mandated to protect and promote the welfare of women, has collected information on the prevalence of devadasis in various states. The government of Orissa has stated that the devadasi system is not prevalent in the state. There is only one devadasi in Orissa, in a Puri temple. Similarly the government of Tamil Nadu wrote that this system has been eradicated and there are now no devadasis in the state. Andhra Pradesh has identified 16,624 devadasis within its state and Karnataka has identified 22,941. The government of Maharashtra did not provide the information as sought by the Commission. However, the state government provided statistical data regarding the survey conducted by them to sanction a "Devadasi Maintenance Allowance". A total of 8,793 applications were received and after conducting a survey 6,314 were rejected and 2,479 devadasis were declared eligible for the allowance. At the time of sending the information, 1,432 devadasis were receiving this allowance.

In Andhra Pradesh, devadasi practice is prevalent in Karimnagar, Warangal, Nizamabad, Mahaboobnagar, Kurnool, Hyderabad, Ananthapur, Medak, Adilabad, Chittoor, Rangareddy, Nellore, Nalgonda, and Srikakulam. In Karnataka, the practice has been found to exist in Raichur, Bijapur, Belgaum, Dharwad, Bellari and Gulbarga. In
Maharashtra, the *devadasi* practice exists in Pune, Sholapur, Kolhapur, Sangli, Mumbai, Lathur, Usmanabad, Satara, Sindhudurg and Nanded.

Quoting the National Commission for Women, the authority says there are 2.5 lakh "Devadasi" girls who have been dedicated to Yellamma and Khandoba temples on Maharastra-Karnataka border. This includes 16,624 from Andhra Pradesh, 22,941 from Karnataka and 2,479 from Maharastra. The *devadasi* system is prevalent in 10 districts of north Karnataka and 14 districts in Andhra Pradesh. The social evil is thriving because of poverty and absence of opportunities in many families. The social customs combined with economic pressures have pushed girls into the system. In some cases, a sick child had been taken to the temple and survival left in divine hands - recovery led to dedication. The other main factor for dedication was the lack of a son in the family. This is linked to the difficulties of finding a dowry for a girl and the idea that the family will no longer have to support a daughter if she is made a *Jogin*.

Children of *devadasi* are most at risk of being dedicated or becoming victims of trafficking because of their mother's status and the fact that in some traditions the role is handed down through the generations. In addition to religious faith, there are other factors that have a crucial influence on the decision of parents to donate their daughter to the deity. The economic factor is as important as the religious factor. It is no coincidence that all *devadasis* come from poor landless families.

Religion is a most complex phenomenon which pervades a vast range of human activity in society. Its practical dimension is expressed through a number of ways in the culture of the society. In spite of the merits of religion one cannot overlook number of aberrations, crimes, superstitions and exploitations in the name of religion, the *devadasi* system being one of them. Tradition has for centuries locked *devadasis* into a proscribed and highly stigmatized social role. Caught in the web of duties and code of regulations they were virtually captives. They had to clean the temples, make preparation for worship, and perform songs and dances during *arati* besides catering to the sensual demands of the men. They could be termed as bonded labourers of gods. They had to spend their lives as concubines of the priests and well-to-do devotees, the living idols of temples. In fact their lives were under the control and desire only of these living idols. They were maids, so they did not have any right over their bodies which had been offered.
to divine service. The priests and rulers were considered, or they declared themselves, the sole representatives of the deities. The *devadasis* were sacrificed in the name of religion to satisfy the desires of the rulers, priests and other rich men. Thus it can be said that the *devadasi* system was nothing but prostitution under the cover of religion.

They continue to face discrimination and indignities on the basis of caste, remain politically powerless and suffer from acute poverty, oppression and exploitation. They run high chances of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases. Although in independent India, many steps have been taken to prevent the system and rehabilitate the *devadasis*, they are not enough to improve the situation as the root cause of poverty continues to push young girl to the roads of 'sacred prostitution'. It is the powerful sections of the patriarchal society, who control not only the economic and social resources but also the minds of the poor villagers that pose the biggest impediment to elimination of the evil of the *devadasi* system. There is a need for a more comprehensive legislation to emancipate these vulnerable girls. The *devadasi* tradition has taken deep roots and even in the present days these consorts of the Goddess Yellamma sometimes reach the newsprint. Let our modern conscience endeavour to wipe out the deep shame of this 'tradition' by a determined and combined effort of all men and women of our country.

***************