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**Y Ramachandra Reddy**  
Professor, Department of  
History, Sri Krishnadevaraya  
University, Ananthapuramu,  
Andhra Pradesh, India

**RM SrIdevi**  
Research Scholar, Department  
of History, Sri  
Krishnadevaraya University,  
Ananthapuramu, Andhra  
Pradesh, India

## The origin and historical development of Devadasi system in India

**Y Ramachandra Reddy and RM SrIdevi**

### Abstract

In India, in the past, the devadasis were a very important functionary of Hindu society. The functions of devadasis were a part of religious services in a long history of temple institution. In India the practices originate and developed during the early medieval period. There are a large number of inscriptions which give us a lot of information regarding the existence of the institution of the devadasis. Several south Indian inscriptions prove the association of dancing girls with temple service from about the 9th century C.E. In this paper an attempt is made to trace the historical development of Devadasi system in different parts of India.

**Keywords:** God, myth, theories, medieval period, temple

### Introduction

Devadasi means a woman who performed the service for some deity in a temple. They were unmarried temple servants who had been dedicated to temple deities as young girls through rites resembling Hindu marriage ceremonies. Devadasi (Skt. devadasi, Ta. tevataci, lit. 'slave of god), the term is to be a sanskritized form of the Tamil term tevaratiyal which means a woman who enslaved for the service of some specific deity or sacred object. The word is the feminine form of deva- dasa, a man who is enslaved for the service of a deity. Though the term has its origin in Sanskrit, the prevailing custom and practices are in no way related to the gods or deities mentioned in Sanskrit literature, especially the Trinity. Devadasis were a common feature in almost all the major brahmanical temples. The devadasi or temple women was one, who was a dancer and one who is associated with temple, either by having some kind of regular service function in a temple or because her primary social identity is defined with reference to a temple. Many a times these girls also provided sexual services to their clients.

Farquhar stated that every well- appointed Hindu temple aims at being an earthly reproduction of the paradise of the god in whose honor it was built... The gandharvas are represented by the Temple- band, the apsarases by the courtesans who sing and dance in the service. These are dedicated to the service of the god; but they give their favors to his worshippers. They are usually called devadasis, handmaidens of the god... They dance and sing in the temple- services and also when the images are carried out through the town in procession. Hence the common name for them everywhere in Nautch- girls, Dancing-girls. Edgar Thurston described devadasis as dasis or deva- dasis are dancing- girls attached to the Tamil temples, who subsist by dancing and music, and the practice of 'the oldest profession in the world'.

The rise of the caste, and its euphemistic name, seem both of them to date from about the 9th and 10th centuries C.E., during which much activity prevailed in Southern India in the matter of building temples, and elaborating the services held in them. The dancing- girls' duties, were to fan the idol with charmaras (Tribetan ox tails), to carry the sacred light called kumbarti, and to sing and dance before the god when he was carried in procession. In a book Religious Thought and Life in India, Monier Williams described devadasis in a way that they were held to be married to the god, and had no other duty but to dance before his shrine. Hence they belonged to the god's and had no other duty but to dance before his shrine. Hence they were called the god's slaves (deva- dasi), and were generally patterns of piety and propriety. He further points out that, in the present day they are still called by the same

### Correspondence

**Y Ramachandra Reddy**  
Professor, Department of  
History, Sri Krishnadevaraya  
University, Ananthapuramu,  
Andhra Pradesh, India

name, but are rather slaves to the licentious passions of the profligate brahmins of the temples to which they belong. What surprised him the most was the number of these girls and the weight of the ornaments that they wore; especially in the case of those attached to the temples in southern India for they had a profitable trade under the sanction of religion. Saskia C. Kersenboom- Story understand the devadasi as an expressive semiotic unit which signifying the mythical-aesthetic- cum- ritual object residing in the collective consciousness of Hindu tradition. Marglin considered devadasis as a very specialized, unusual group of women and one who acted as the harbingers of auspiciousness to a state and society. They do not marry any mortal men and their dedication to temple service is regarded as constituting a marriage with the main deity. Leslie Orr stated that the temple women to be a woman, one who may or may not be a prostitute or dancer who is associated with temple, either by having some kind of regular service function in a temple or because her primary social identity is defined with reference to a temple. Venkatramaiah said that some women were employed in temples as workers and those well versed in dance and music would dance and sing in the temples on certain specific occasions. They were not harlots or prostitutes. They were spinsters who might leave the service in the temples and enter into married life if they should so desire.

### Overview of Literature

Gailomvedt, (1983) <sup>[11]</sup> considers that the devdasi system enslaves women and oppresses dalits in the name of religion. The devdasi's life was unique, not only because of her sexual function or because she was supposed to be sacred to and often possessed by the goddess. Her whole way of life was far removed from the life of ordinary women, was in fact almost a reversal of their life. She was free to wander anywhere, in or out of the village, free to work at any profession or occupation, and earn an income.

Pratibha Desai (2007) <sup>[17]</sup> opines that the devadasi cult is evil system where many backward women are exploited in the name of religion. It is more in the borders of Karnataka and Maharashtra States. devadasi cult is one of important Prostitute Fitting Centre through which more number of devadasis are provided to the brothels of nearby towns. This is major cause to spread of HIV/ Aids. Poverty and employment are the major factors to encourage the devadasi cult. Hence, it needs to be tackled properly for its eradication.

Maria-Costanza Torri (2009) <sup>[16]</sup> explores the origin of 'devadasi' practice and its evolution over time as well as its religious and ritual meaning, while attempting to identify the main factors explaining the signification of the 'devadasi' system in the past. Secondly it analyses the social status and economic condition of 'devadasis' and draws a global view of the reasons why young girls are still today consecrated in rural areas. Our argument is that the sanctions provided by social custom and apparently by religion are strictly combined with economic and social pressures. The social control and hegemonic masculinity of upper caste men is asserted and maintained through defilement and appropriation of lower caste and 'dalit' women's sexuality. The symbolic meaning of the devadasis relies upon the gendering and sexualising of caste relations of domination and subordination. The article examines the intersections between gender, caste and violence.

Nash Colundalur (2011) <sup>[14]</sup> regrets that the devadasis 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'.

Babasaheb S. Ghatage (2012) <sup>[12]</sup> suggests that illiteracy, superstition and poverty among the backward caste communities are the root causes behind the continuation of the Devdasi tradition, it would be appropriate to attack these through organized effort; particularly, the Government should spread head this effort by allocating trained personnel and resources for eradicating Devdasi and such other evil traditions. Radio, Television, Mass Media should not accept such belief for propaganda in the name of part of culture but should work with anti-superstition drive. Government should stop the facilities such superstitious fairs such as provide S. T. Buses, Drinking Water Supplies, Security, Medicines and Protection of the people.

Kaveri Gurav *et al.* (2013) <sup>[13]</sup> examined the role of Devadasi brothel madams in promoting safe sex practices among sex workers. Qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve brothel madams as a follow-up of a larger cohort study that aimed to understand the patterns and determinants of sex workers migration from northern Karnataka to southern Maharashtra, in India. Our research identified that madams were ex- sex workers, who entered into sex work through the traditional Devadasi system and currently manage Devadasi sex workers in their own brothels. The social and kinship relations between the madams and the sex workers form the basis on which these brothels function. Brothel madam's role in the promotion of safe sex and their influence on sex workers in seeking health care is tied to reciprocal kinship relations, reveals an important area of opportunity for HIV prevention efforts to fully exploit these positive aspects of these relationships within intervention design and service delivery to achieve more desirable health outcomes and to effectively address HIV risk and vulnerabilities within the context of brothel environment.

Kalaivani R., (2015) <sup>[12]</sup> considers that almost in all the parts of India, there is an ancient tradition of offering young boys and girls to deities; the tradition is prevalent in many rural areas. Particularly southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka state young boys and girls of tender age are offering to the Goddess Yallamma (or Renuka), whose main Shrine is situate in village "Soundati" in the nearby Belgaum district of Karnataka State (South India). These living sacrifices are known as "Devadasi" and they lead a wretched life. The word "Devadasi" might connote "Servant of god", but in reality a girl child who is dedicated to the goddess is no more than a prostitute. For centuries the repressive tradition of Devadasi system has been prevailing in many parts of India. Devadasi system is not only exploitation of men, women and impotents but it is the organizational exploitation of lower castes Dalits in the religious rituals. Sanction given to prostitution of helpless economically and socially deprived young girls and women; it is the glorification of humiliation of women.

### Theories Related to the System

There are many speculations and theories regarding the origin of the devadasi system. The theories are occupation and mother goddess theory, religious tradition theory, sanskritization theory, racial theory, political or selfless citizen theory, matriarchy to patriarchy theory, lineage continuation theory and traditional theory. The system of dedicating women for the ritual service was an ancient and universal practice. The customs were differed from each country on the basis of the period and their culture. Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Babylonia and Cyprus were the few countries which the system of dedicating women to the religious service was flourished from several thousand years before. In the temples of Osiris and Isis, Aphrodite-Anu, and Ishtar were accumulated the women for sacred service respectively.

Generally the practice of dedicating women in the name of religion is termed as theogomy. James Frazer viewed that theogomy is the result of Mother Goddess worship. The custom was found in ancient India. Religious women were occupied a divine status and their roles were personified in the forms of Mother Goddess. Numerous material gifts offered to her. In mean time the Mother Goddess tradition came under the influence of Sanskritic tradition in a two way process. One was that the new myths were created and propagated, and another one was they were subjected by powerful male deities. The powers and capacities of the male deity were glorified. The concept of ritual purity and pollution were introduced. The shift from matriarchy to patriarchy reduced their status as mere ritual functionaries.

### The Myth

The myth behind dedication of girls to the goddess goes like this. Renuka, consort of sage Jamadagni, was a pure woman. She was so pure, that she could carry water in a freshly-moulded pot. She would mould one pot everyday on the banks of the river where she went to fetch water. On one of these trips, she happened to see a *Gandharva* couple bathing in the river. She was struck by the handsome looks of the male partner as she saw his reflection in the river waters. But, because of this „alleged violation“ of her marital vows, the pot broke and her husband „caught“ her in this „act of adultery“. He decided that she had „sinned“ by coveting a man who was not her husband. Angered by this puncture to his saintly ego, the sage at once ordered their 12-year-old son Parasuram to behead his own mother. The son did as told. Happy with his son's unquestioned obedience, Jamadagni wished to bless him with a boon. The clever son requested his father to bring his mother back to life. At this point, the sage saw a *matangi* pass by. He beheaded her and attached the head to Renuka's body. When Renuka was thus resurrected, with the body of a saintly woman and the head of a *matangi*, Jamadagni wished to make amends for having acted in fury. He blessed her saying that unmarried girls would worship her as their Goddess and these girls would be dedicated to her for the rest of their lives by „marrying“ her and would then be ready to satisfy all sexual demands made on them by her son Parasuram, present as he was, within every man. The girls, said Jamadagni, would look at every man as Parasuram in human form and would thus readily satisfy his sexual needs without asking for anything in return – marriage in any form, or any kind of permanent bonding, or anything in cash or kind. These girls, Jamadagni endorsed, would have no right to turn back a man even if he

was a leper asking for sexual favours. Their source of livelihood would come from begging for alms from door to door on the Friday of every week in the name of *Yellamma*.

### Historical Development of the Devadasi System

Parasher-Sen considered the service of women in the temples in India was an innovation of the puranic religion. But the devadasi institution in India does not go back to 3rd century B.C.E. because the practice of worship in public temples was taking shape in the early centuries of the Christian era. Though the system existed in early centuries it was much practiced and prevailed in early medieval period onwards. Altekar pointed out that after the magnificent construction of the temples of Hindu gods, 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. Leslie Orr also suggested that the system is prevailed from early medieval period onwards. M.G.S. Narayanan believed that the expansion of the temple system and growth of the bhakti movement brought into existence the class of temple dancing girls.

The medieval temple organization did not strike roots before the 4th century C.E. to 5th century C.E. Though the practice of worshipping images in public temples was taking shape in the early centuries of the Christian era, but the institutional character of the temple, its importance in the socio-economic life of the people, does not become noticeable before the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. The study of inscriptions shows that the inscription of devadasi started taking roots in the 7th century C.E. and 8th centuries C.E. The central part of the feudal age in India, from the 9th century C.E. to the 12th century C.E. marked the origin, development and maturity of the devadasi institution in South India. In India the whole process of social formation from 5th to 6th centuries C.E. onwards appears to be inseparably connected with developments in the field of religion. The conflict between Saivism and Vaishnavism and other religious values propagated the new religious ideology. This marked the new era in the religious temple preface. Religious sanctification of the political authority is an important characteristic of feudal polity. The temple was the hub of the social and economic life in a locality. Temples with devadasi drew liberal patronage from both rulers and private individuals. Even outside the temple devadasi was an integral feature of the social life. They emerged as sub-caste, with their own traditions, rules of behaviour and etiquette. The inscriptions also reveal that the 11th and the 12th centuries C.E. marked the period of maximum growth. Though the system started and flourished even before 10th century C.E., the development of the institution was not uniform everywhere. This was concentrated in some particular pockets which were economically and politically developed during 14th and 15th centuries C.E.

The custom got support from religious, political, economic and social situations which prevailed in the society in the period and region. All the royal courts in India were associated with the devadasi who were good dancers and singers. Though, the devadasi system was prevalent throughout India but it did not flourish to a great extent in northern India due to various reasons. In the north it did not emerge as an institution as having a strong base in the society nor a common feature of majority temples there. On

the other hand the political instability of the North and the strong non-Hindu rulers like Persian and Moghuls were not ready to patronage the temples and to accept their alien custom. Kafi Khan, famous historian noted about the pathetic story of devadasi of North India especially on Aurangzeb's reign. He pointed out that Aurangzeb issued a public proclamation prohibiting singing and dancing by women and at the same time ordered all the dancing girls to either marry or be banished from the kingdom. At the same time very little sources were available on devadasis of central India. However, it is not clear if these women are devadasis or courtesans. Even in South India the development of the devadasi institution was not uniform in nature. In South India the system existed. The supernatural beings were not much affected by the non-Hindu invasions or influence from outside. So the details of the rituals were completely deep-rooted in the minds of the people in the rest of South India. As a part of Hindu ritual structure, devadasi custom had its own status, roles, functions to play and rules. In South India, temples became the hub of the social and economic life in a locality. Temples with devadasi drew liberal patronage from both rulers and private individuals.

### Categories of Devadasis

In the ancient times the Devadasis were divided into seven categories. They are known as

- Dutta,
- Hruta,
- Bikrita,
- Bhrutya,
- Alankara
- Gopika or Rudraganika.

Such categories reveal the origin and status of the Devadasis. When a sacred man offered his daughter to a temple as a Devadasi, she is known as "Dutta Devadasi". But when a lady was kidnapped and subsequently employed in a temple, she is known as "Hruta Devadasi". Sometimes when a lady was sold to the administrator or the priest of a temple, she is known as "Bikrita Devadasi". If a lady voluntarily worked in a temple as a Devadasi, she is known as "Bhrutya Devadasi". Some women who devotionally offered themselves to serve the temple are known as "Bhakta Devadasi". When a woman after-attaining a certain degree of competence, is offered to the temple with ornaments, she is known as "Alankara Devadasi". The Devadasis who were getting remunerations for offering dance and music in the temple in a particular time is identified as "Gopika" or "Rudraganika". These classes of the Devadasis were receiving fixed remunerations and some landed property for their personal use.

### The widespread System in India

Due to the cultural and geographical variations in different regions, devadasis were denoted by several names such as tevataci, tevaratiyar, patiyilar, talicceri pendukal, tevanar makal, cottikal, atikalmar, manikkattar, kanikaiyar, emperumanatiyar and koyil pinakkal in Tamilnadu, tevidicchi, nangaimar, kudikkari, muraikkari, kootachi, koothichi, and attackari in Kerala, suleyar or sule, poti, basavi and jogtis in Karnataka, sanis and bhogam in Andhra Pradesh, darikas, patras and maharis in Orissa, kurmapus and kudipus in Assam, bhavin and kalavant in Konkani and Marathi and in Bombay presidency each shrine had its own name for its girls.

### Conclusion

In the modern society, social, economic and political emancipation of the weaker sex, i.e., women in general, has become an important issue. New pressures from the social environment started exercising their impact on all religious traditions. Discriminative, unequal and biased religious traditional preachings pertaining to the general status of women is being challenged. These challenges demand justification from different religions.

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