

Traces Have We Lost the Contributions of Devadasis to the Tamil Society and Their Social Responsibility

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The Devadasi system, an ancient religious institution had played a significant role in the medieval Tamil Society. The expression Devadasi in Sanskrit or Devaradiyar in Tamil refers to not only a dancing girl dedicated or attached to the spiritual service to Gods and Goddesses in the temples but also played a vital role on public utility services. They were known by different names as Tali-Cerip Pendiugal.¹ Manikkattar, Ganikaiyar, Devaradiyar, Padiyilar, Rishabhattaliyilar, Kavirippina and Rajadasis.

Since they served the Gods at all times they came to be known as Devaradiyar. As they were experts in dance they were called Ganikaiyars, and few dedicated servants remained unmarried throughout their life were called Padiyilar. A Mark of Sula or Rishapa was punched on the shoulders of a few Devadasis to show that they were specially dedicated to serve in the Siva temples and they were called Rishabhattaliyilar.² The Devadasis were profusely endowed by the Pallavas and the Imperial Cholas in the form of money, land and Cattle.

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This paper focuses on the existence of Devadasi system, their spiritual involvement, their social activity and social responsibility, when the rare concept Devadasi came into being, how they honoured during the period of the Cholas, the assimilation of this institution with temple and this article also turns the pages of history to see how the Devadasis stood as a testimonial for the public utility and social responsibility.

As an institution it takes back its origin from the Pallavas and the Early Pandiyas. The Devadasi system assumed great prominence under the Imperial Cholas. The Chola popularised this institution through dedicating women of great merit for the services of Gods religious service of the temples and public service.

The Devadasis were in different categories.³ Some Devadasi gives herself to the temple as a gift, some offered herself for the prosperity of their own family, some were sold, some joined out of devotion, while some others were presented to the temple by the Kings and Noble men. The epigraphic sources reveal the fact that in the beginning women folk of the *Kaikola* community and the *Mudaliar* community were generally preferred to this service.⁴ In due course of time they were taken from irrespective of all castes. In 1099 A.D. it seems that three Vellalas sold two women as Devaradiyars at Tiruvakkarai in Villupuram District.⁵ Another epigraph makes mention that one of the Villikal (bowman) of Early Banapuram namely Ganapathy Nambi alias Alagiya Pallavaraiyan dedicated some women of his family as Devaradiyars to the temple of Tiruvallam Udiyar after stamping them with the trident or Sula.⁶

In addition to various categories it is useful to know the sale and voluntary dedication of Devadasis. For illustration another inscription of Rajadhiraja II Chola in 1175 A.D. recorded a sale of four women to the temple of Tiruvalangadu for a sum of seven hundred katus.⁷ Sometimes the dancing girls voluntarily dedicated themselves to the service of Gods. It is evident from some of the inscriptions of the Imperial

Chola period that the Devaradiyars were honoured with the title of "Talaikkoli"⁸ by the Kings of that line for their accomplishment in dance. The Devadasi System under the Imperial Cholas reached its high level during the time of Rajaraja I Chola. An inscription records that some ladies sold themselves and their relatives to a temple in the Thanjavur District.⁹ Thus the number of dedicated women increased every year due to the increase of rituals and festivals in the temple. The two distinct divisions among the Devadasis, *Valangai* (right hand) and *Idangai* (left hand) seem to have played an impressive role in the Social and Cultural history of the Tamils.

Another famous inscription¹⁰ of Rajaraja I Chola in 1004 A.D. recorded that for the service of the great Temple at Thanjavur, four hundred dancing girls were recruited by him from among those of the other temples in the country and they were granted lands. They lived in free quarters in the four streets round about it called *Vadasiragu* and *Thensiragu* and they were assigned each a *pangu* share comprising a house and one Veil of land a net revenue of 100 *Kalams* of Paddy per year.¹¹ They were called Tali-Cerip Pendugal. Generally they assumed the word *Nakkan* as prefix with their names. Thus Rajaraja I Chola the great centralised the institution.

Besides, the family women also served as Devadasis. For illustration an inscription¹² from Tiruvorriyur dated 1049 A.D. states that Devaradiyal Catural Caturi was the wife of Nadan Perunagdan. Sundarar one among the Trios married Paravai Nachchiyar, the Devaradiyar. These facts showed that even family women served as Devaradiyars.

Some of the Devadasis accompanying the King to the temple and especially Rajendra I Chola visited the Tiruvarur temple along with his Anukkivar Paravai Nangaiyar (the Devaradiyar) She made large endowment and presented costly jewels to this temple. During the time of famine in the Chola Kingdom, Paravai Nachchiyar a Devaradiyar wife of Saint Sundarar gave large quantity of paddy to the peoples of Thiruvarur. Whatever it is these Devadasis also dedicated their life to obtain

fundamental needs of the mass and provide the basic needs of the society. Devadasis assumed the honorary title conferred on them with the name of the place from where they had hailed or the name of the place of their residence.¹³ The Pallavas, the Imperial Cholas, the Pandyas, and the Vijayanagara family patronised this system out of much devotion. After entering the temple service, the Devaradiyars did the following duties with proper care and devotion. They cleaned the temple premises spread cow dung, cleaned the vessels cleaned the rice off its husk, fanned the idols with *chamaras*, collected flowers, prepared garlands, lit the lamps and to sing and dance before the God.

Here it is worthwhile to understand the temple construction of Devadasis. For illustration an inscription of Rajanarayana Sambhuvaraya issued in his 12th regnal year found on the south wall of the Kalyana Mandapa in the second prakara of Periyannayagi Amman shrine registers the construction of the Kalyana Mandapa of the principal shrine, Kuzhandaiandar temple by dancing women Devaradiyars.¹⁴ Moreover the inscription clearly refers the names of the Devaradiyars namely Sambarmahal, Amarabathi and Kaththarmahal. From this it is clear like the rulers the Devadasis also patronized the temple by constructing a separate a Kalyana Mandapa during the days of Rajanarayana Sambhuvaraya. The construction clearly reveals the high social and economic status of the Devadasis.¹⁵

Another partially Grantha and partially Tamil epigraph of Devaraya Maharaya of Vijayanagar found on the west and south walls of the central shrine in the Tatakapurisvara temple makes mention the genealogy of the Vijayanagar rulers of Sangama dynasty. The record also refers to a gift of land to the temple by the Vijayanagara ruler at the request of one Aramvalatta Nachchiyar, the Devadasi for conducting ritual services and daily pujas. From this it is clear that the Devadasis are closely associated with the temple and they approached the ruler for the continuation of spiritual services and the daily pujas of the temple regularly.¹⁶ It shows their association on the spiritual significance of the temple, affinity to the principle deity

and responsibility on the continuation of ritualistic rites. Thus the Devaradiyars not only contributed lavishly on spiritual services to temples, but were loyal to the kings and entrusted themselves on essential service. They were trustworthy and highly confidential. The Imperial Cholas seem to have trusted them and entrusted them with the task of spying and detecting law breakers and heretics.¹⁷

The Devadasis promoted the temple arts like music, dance drama and painting as they were excelled in these fields for a long time. The Devaradiyars were the master of "Chatir natya". The Bharatanatya the classical dance of Tamilnadu is still in existence and preserved till now by them. The Devaradiyars were not only masters of Arts but also served as Teachers of various Arts. The Devaradiyars were considered to be the meritorious and the most blessed members of the Society.¹⁸

They were married to the primal deities of temples and dedicated their life to serve the Gods, spiritual services and temple services. When the Devaradiyal died, she was given much respect. The body was covered with a new cloth removed from the idol. Flowers the sacred ash and funeral fire were sent from the very same temple to which she had dedicated herself. No puja was performed in the temple till the dead body of disposed off, as the deity, being her husband, had to observe Pollution.¹⁹ Thus with all ceremonies and festivities the life of the Devadasi came to an end. The above mentioned facts clearly reveal that they were recognised and regarded sacred and holistic. Thus the Devadasis undoubtedly enjoyed a high status in the society due to their spiritual services in the temples of Medieval Tamil Country. In course of time in the subsequent period the Devadasis slowly losing their social prestige and lost their spiritual importance.

In this juncture it is highly useful to understand the Devadasis who were not only devoted themselves to spiritual services of the temple but also concentrate the social activity, the social utilization services and the social responsibility. For illustration an undated inscription found on a rock near the public village tank makes

mention that this pond was known as Venkalamman Kuttai was dug by one Thiruppani Nachchiyar, a Devadasi of the Madam Tatakapurisvara temple. The record also refers to the execution of Venkalamman Kuttai a small public pond, village tank for public purpose by one Thiruppani nachchiyar, a Devadasi. Thus the Devadasi who were accommodated in the temple not only look after the temple religious service but also concentrate public utility service.²⁰

Here it is highly useful to understand excellent water provision establishment of the Devadasis. The village tank brimmed with clear water was used by the temple servants and the inhabitants of the local settlements which was the main source for domestic usage of the village during the medieval ages in Tamilaham including the village Madam. Perhaps the people used to draw water from this reservoir which was the only water resources of the village Madam. Thus the village pond served the basic needs of the public for cooking and bathing. Many village residents would also use the water to wash their clothes. The peasants and cattle breeders used the village Pond for drinking off their Cattle.²¹ Thus the village tank which had been established by the Devadasis became the centre of religious and social activity of the village Madam.

In addition to the establishment of village pond it is also useful to know Sustainable administration, Good old traditional maintenance and technology on water reservoirs. During the medieval age the village society used to desilt the village Pond and temple tank regularly. After the upkeep of the pond, it was left to the local civic body during the Chola period. Thus the villagers have close connection with the Pond maintenance by officials of the local bodies during the Chola period and it is attested by an inscription. For illustration an inscription also mention the involvement and dedication by trade guilds and traders. The record contains the symbols of whisks, lamp, dagger, plough and horns and the symbols refer to mercantile guilds. From this it is clear that the guild members who were also involved in agro-based activities might have managed the tank with the help of their guards.

Apart from direct maintenance and regular maintenance, the repair was an important duty of every inhabitants and village assemblies. Here it is interesting to analyse the source of water and water management of the village Madam temple tank and public pond. The main source of water for the village public pond is from one of the sluices of the branch of river Thenpennai main canal. Until the later medieval ages, this Pond had clear water. Perhaps the water from the nearby canal fills a village public *kuttai* and the surplus is carried through a channel into the nearby temple Pond during the medieval age. At present the nearby village *Kulam* canal has now been blocked and not seen as houses are constructed on the path of the canal. The rainfall is currently the only source of water for the village Pond. Recently the residents of the village, complains the local body authorities pertaining to the pond has not been desilted for the several years.

In course of time it seems that they did not follow the customs and conventions strictly. There were many instances of marriages and concubinage. Though they had maintained a high level of dignity and standard of morality, they lost their importance in course of time. It is said that the decay of the system started immediately after the death of Rajaraja I Chola. The Devadasis system which lost their prominence decayed beyond revival and continued until the dawn of the 20th century. In 1922 during the Justice Party rule the Panagal Ministry took efforts to put an end to this system. As a result finally it was abolished in the Madras Presidency by the orders of the Government of Madras in 1930.

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