

## **Devadasi System In India – An Overview**

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### **Introduction**

Devadasi means ‘*Servants of God or Goddesses*’ and the practice of Devadasi was prevailed in Ancient India. The devadasi system has a hoary antiquity. This term could be translated generally as women in the service of God. This system is not peculiar to any region, although in nomenclature and typology there are differences.

Devadasi system is a religious practice in parts of southern India, whereby parents dedicate their daughter to marry a deity or a temple. The marriage usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires the girl to become a prostitute for upper-caste community members. Such girls are known as *Jogini or Devadasi*. They are forbidden to enter into a real marriage.

The Indian institution of Devadasi, a religious practice consists of the votive offering of girls to the deities in Hindu temples. The dedication usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires the girl to become sexually available for community members. Traditionally, it is believed that these girls are “serving” society as “ordained” by the goddess. In other words, “the Devadasis are courtesans in God's court”. Due to her sacred condition and her belonging to the divinity, a devadasi cannot be married to one particular man, as in the traditional idea of marriage women are transferable

property gifted to husbands. Instead, she is a property of a divinity that benevolently concedes her to the whole community. This concept is well summarized by a saying in that goes: "a Devadasi is servant of God but wife of the whole town".<sup>1</sup>

Devadasis are mostly young girls given to the temple by their parents. There they are taught sacred dances and ceremonies pertaining to the God of the temple. Devadasi literally means God's female servant (Dasi), who are young, pre-pubertal girls 'married off' or 'given away' in matrimony to God or local religious deity of the temple. These girls are not allowed to marry as they were married to the temple God. She had to serve the priests, inmates of the temple, the Zamindars (local landlords) and other men of money and power in the town and village. The 'service' given to these men is considered as equal to service of God. The Devadasi is dedicated to the service of the temple deity for temple.<sup>2</sup>

### **Origin and Practices**

With regard to the origin of the Devadasi system in India there is no unanimous opinion among the scholars. On the basis of archaeological findings of the temple structure and the cult of Tantricism from the Indus Valley an approximate date is given to the origin of this system as 3000 B.C. The literary and epigraphical evidences prove that this system came into existence much later, but long before the 8th century A.D.

M. Srinivasa Aiyangar, K. K. Pillay and H. D. Sankalia hold that the emergence of structural temples paved the way for the birth of devadasi system in India. M. S. Aiyangar states that aesthetic arts started acquiring a religious colour from about the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., when dance and drama were encouraged to draw large number of devotees to the temples.

Thus, hundreds of dancing girls or Gandharvis were attached to every important temple.<sup>3</sup>

Prof. K.K.Pillai states that the system became common in South Indian Temples only after the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. When “We hear of woman dancers called adigalmar, other wise known as Mannikkattar and Kanikaiyar in the inscriptions of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.”<sup>4</sup>

Devadasi is one of the complex problems, caused by the social milieu in which male are domineering and females are sub-servant. Literally, ‘Devadasi’ means a “handmaiden of God (or Goddess)” or temple prostitutes. The Devadasi tradition is deeply entrenched in the states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Orissa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. These are known by different names in different parts of the country, such as ‘Devadasi’ (female), ‘Jogata’ (eunuchs, men dress like women and engage in prostitutes work ) dedicated to Goddess Renuka or Yallamma in south Maharashtra and north Karnataka, ‘Potraj’(male) dedicated to Goddess Laxmi all over Maharashtra, ‘Murali’ (female) and ‘Vaghya’ (male) dedicated to God ‘Khandoba’ in Central Maharashtra, ‘Bhavin’ or ‘Devali’ (female) dedicated to numerous local deities in Konkan and Goa, Kadaklaxmi / Ladlaxmi (male) dedicated Goddess laxmi, ‘Basavi’ and ‘Kasabin’ (all females) in some parts of Maharashtra and ‘Naikin’ (female) in Uttar pradesh and South India. ‘Sule’, ‘Devara’, ‘Diyan’, ‘Guappa’, ‘NirwanHijara’, ‘Devdas’, ‘Dev’ in Maharashtra, Sanis, ‘Kurampus’, ‘Bogmus’, ‘Vallangai’, ‘Idngai’ in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and also some other parts of India. ‘Hijara’ mostly found in M.P. and U.P. and Maharashtra’s capital cities like Bombay, Agra, Delhi, Lucknow, Calcutta, Pathana, Kanpur etc. In reality the tradition serves as a large conduit for the supply of new flesh to the country’s commercial sex trade.

The institution of devadasi is prevalent in the nookand corner of the country but is known differently indifferent regions exhibiting certain unique as well as common

features. The devadasis were known as *Bhavins* in Goa and western India; as *Muralis, Joginies* and *Aradhinisetc.*, in Maharashtra; as *Bhagtani* in Marwar; *Basavis* in Karnataka and Rayalaseema regions of Andhra Pradesh, *Devaradiyar* in Tamil Nadu, and as *Kudikkarin* Travancoreregions.

### **Devadasi System in other Cultures**

The custom of Devadasi is not unique in Indian culture alone. There are several parallels in various other cultures. Terms like *Hierodouloiof* Ancient Babylonia, the *'Concubines' of Zeus* (Amman) of Egypt, the *Lepodovroiof* Corinth in Greece, the *Kosioof* Slave Coast of Africa, the *Geishas* of Japan, *the a-nan* of Combodia, the *'VestalVirgins'* of Ancient Rome etc., undoubtedly support the prevalence of similar institutions in other parts of the world.

### **Status of Devadasi**

One of the greatest advantages of the Devadasis was that they could never be widowed. This allowed them a higher status than most other women, as being widowed can lead to losing everything. This may be one of the reasons that the Devadasi were seen as ranking higher than most other women in social status. They were sometimes seen as the development of the female Brahmin. Since women were no longer allowed to be priests, it can be said that the Devadasi took over the women's portion of the ritual performances. At first Devadasis were simply seen as the wives of the God or married to the temple. They performed sacred dances, sang and played instruments as a part of their relationship with the temple and its rituals. By the Chola Period, 850-1300 CE, they had become far more popular and were gaining much attention by their rituals. At this point many believe that their role as sexual beings became exploited.

Temple girls were provided with sufficient means for their livelihood. Kings, chiefs and rich devotees made arrangements by way of granting villages, lands, money, houses, sheep etc., apart from annual wages. The Sanis could enjoy respect and their music and dance were capable of winning the hearts of common folk and leading them on the path of devotion. Some of them also could become wealthy and made magnificent grants to temples. However, serious degeneration has thrown this profession from the high pedestal of sanctity to dust in course of time due to historical reasons.

### **Conclusion**

Devadasi, member of a community of women who dedicate themselves to the service of the patron God of the great temples in Eastern and Southern India. Devadasi system existed in most of the temples. DEV (GOD), Dasi (slave) means marrying god and Goddesses and devoted themselves to them and its rituals for the whole life. Devadasi existed right from the age of Ancient Veda time to help in temple rituals apart from that they were to sing and dance for Gods praising. For this ritual practice family donated their younger girl child to the temple. Status of devadasi was high in the society and known as divine girl. As the time passed, system changed and they were used for sex obligation for high caste and class people. Major percentage of low caste and tribal girls are forced to this practice under the cover of religion and some adopt for the reason that family had a history of Devadasi.

The women that so served slowly came to be considered as belonging to a separate and distinct class of society. Some of them dedicated all their lives in the service of their masters who maintained them. They slowly became accomplished in dancing and such other fine arts, so that even in temple ritual offering music and dance as part of service to the Gods became a feature. This system of offering themselves as devotees to God and to their own masters in the mundane life was not confined to anyone region or country but

assumed universal proportions. This system was in vogue from the earliest periods of history in different parts of the world.

## **END NOTES**

1. Torri, Maria Costanza, **Abuse of Lower Castes in South India: The Institution of Devadasi**. Journal of International Women's Studies. Vol.11, No.2, September, 2009. P.31-48.
2. Slavery International, **Devadasi Practice**. London: Anti – Slavery International, Thomas Clarkson House, 2007.
3. M.Srinivasa Aiyangar, **Tamil Studies**, PP. 189-90.
4. K.K.Pillai, **A Social History of the Tamils**, P.378.