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## Devadasis; servants of God or slaves of tradition

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**Abstract:** The history of women across the Indian subcontinent had been rather eventful and just like its expanse and cultural diversity, the regional trends with respect to women have been equally interesting, varied and largely paradoxical too. This is visible in the existence of all sorts of practices ranging from Sati, to matrilineal system of family in some places, to worship of women as Goddesses, to polygamy and what not have all existed on this soil and often simultaneously. Some of these practices fell out of relevance or changed form, while some other continued in essence though not in form whereas degenerative tendencies crept in a few of them and hence some practices got corrupt. One such practice which has seen the transition of women from sacred zone to profane spaces over the period of time has been the practice of Devadasi system.

**Keywords:** Devadasi, Goddess, Women worshiping, Slave, Tradition

‘Devadasi’ is a Sanskrit term and it literally means ‘female servant of God’. The term though itself was not always very popular earlier and came to regular usage only in post-colonial period.<sup>1</sup> Devdasi was a girl in her early age (probably 8-16 years) dedicated to the temple for the service and worship of the deity for the rest of her life. The Bombay Devdasis Protection Act 1934 defines Devdasi as, “any unmarried women who is dedicated to any Hindu deity, idol, and object of worship, temples or other religious institutions.”<sup>2</sup> Gradually this became the most popular nomenclature however there are many other names also given to such women depending on the region as Kuddikar in Travancore, Basavi or Jagati in Kannad speaking regions, Bhavinis or Bhavins in Goa and Konkan area meaning beautiful women, Muralis, Jogatinis, Aradhivis in Maharashtra, Natis in Assam, Bhagtanis or Bhagwan in Marwar region, Davarsule, kasabi, Patardavalu, Jogti and so on. However devdasi was like an umbrella-term used to refer to all such women who belonged to temple and performed duties and tasks entitled to them. The practices revolved generally around Yellamma (goddess) cult.

Many interesting stories are attached to the origin and propagation of the devdasi system in Indian legends. The most popular one narrates that Renuka was very chaste and pious wife of sage Jamdagini. She was so pious that she could fetch water even in a new mounded pot (kachha ghada). She used to go daily to fetch water from the nearby river where she would mound pot and get the water from. On one of such trips she saw a Gandharva couple romancing in the riverside water. She was struck by the masculine attractive appearance of the male partner and as such though occurred in her mind her pot broke and water fell. When sage Jamdagini realised this he was furious on her violating her marital vow. He ordered his sons to execute Renuka to which his warrior sage son Parshuram obliged and beheaded Renuka. Jamdagini was pleased with his unquestioned obedience. He granted him boons to

which his clever son responded by requesting his father to make Renuka life again. Jamdagini relented but since Renuka's head could not be traced immediately then they saw a Matangi (low caste women) passing by And Parshuram beheaded her and placed it on Renuka's body h nice she was resurrected with the body of a holy women and head of matangi. Jamdagini in order to amend his act of fury blessed her that all unmarried girls would worship her and would be dedicated to her by marriage and as Parshuram is present in every man so they would satisfy the sexual desires of every man even if he is a leper they would not turn him down, also they would not desire anything in return from them. These women were to fulfil their needs by asking form alms in name of goddess Yellamma.<sup>3</sup> There are many versions of story, the one in Renuka Purana makes no reference of devdasi practice.

The subject of religious prostitution, it's rise and development has long been subject of apathy for long hence a lot cannot be said about any particular period. There are many references about existence of similar practices but exact reference of practice per se is bit late. Though the institution is claimed to be older but first confirmed reference dates back to Keshari dynasty of South India in 6 th century AD.<sup>4</sup> There are references about existence of secular dancers , prostitutes and courtesans but no direct reference of sacred devdasi earlier than this. Many texts mention similar practices as Arhshashtra mentions about ' ganikaadhyaksha'(superintendent of prostitutes) and suggests ganika were taxed ,Vatsayayan mentioned about courtesans in his Kamasutra but there is no reference of temple girls. However Kalidasa's Sanskrit works cite that religious prostitutes or dancing girls were attached to famous Mahakala temple of Ujjain.<sup>5</sup> However it is believed that the practice of donating girls to temples grew and became common around period of Puranasas most texts belonging to this period make a note of this practice.

The roots of origin of the Devdasi system can be traced in the social, economic and religious scenarios of the time. The non-aryan practices indicate tantric tendencies in ancient period and also emphasise importance of female fertility and sexuality. There is also reference of Pamushchali, a kind of religious prostitute in ancient period.<sup>6</sup> The background for the emergence and development of devdasi system lies in the significant increase in relevance of temples and emergence of temples as important centres serving as focal point of socio-political economic activities carried in a town .Local chiefs and rulers constructed huge temples and made land grants. Temples gradually began to control large parts of land especially in south India where by means of religious grants they emerge as focal point of authority in both religious and secular spheres. And along with land grants the donations of women also gained ground, even a great deal of sacredness to such grants was attached and it was believed that this earned the donor the heaven.<sup>7</sup> “ Bhavishya Purana suggests that the best way of winning striyaloka is by dedicating a bevy of prostitutes to a “sun temple”.<sup>8</sup> Thus all sorts of merit began to be attached to donating young girls to temples. The choice had become a ritual by 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The expansion of temple construction activities required labour and also led to amalgamation of hilly and forest areas and communities(panchlad and Kaamsali community) got inducted to society as lower classes .These communities provided Devdasis to temples in large number for along time they belonged to lower caste.<sup>9</sup> The

women who were homely devoted to wifely and family responsibilities were generally home bound and these were generally upper class women bound by strict restrictions. The women out of these bounds were those who were more flexible and mobile . This was propagated that they could contribute to greater good of whole society and such women generally belonged to lower classes . Hence most Devdasis belonged to lower castes.

When a devdasi was inducted into order she was to be trained in classical dance. Performance of dance and singing was a daily ritual at the temple by them (therefore many British scholars name them as ‘nautch girls’) along with the service of the temple and deity. They were also instrumental in maintaining moral code of the society as they served in satisfying men who were sexually unsatisfied with their marriage without attracting any stigma or blame. This suggests that Devdasis were not unwelcome in the society rather they formed an essential part of the social structure and they were considered sacred.<sup>10</sup> Texts belonging later half of ancient period mention seven types of female servants as ; Datta, who voluntarily surrenders herself to temple . Vikrit are those who sell themselves to temples. Bhritya are those female servants who accept the life of temple servitude for prosperity of their family. Bhakta are those who join the temples owing to devotion. Hrit are those who are made to join temple service by persuasion and manipulation. Alankar are those women slaves who were profiting their art and gifted to the temples by kings and other people of higher order. Then there were ganika or Gopika only appointed for performance of song and dance at the temple and they received salary in lieu of all this. All these categories indicate towards various ways by which women were incorporated into arrangements of temple fold.<sup>11</sup> There was defined procedure for donating girls and accepting them to fold.

The duties of Devdasis revolve around arena of impurity of sex and its auspiciousness in the eyes of many scholars. They were to perform various rituals and observe defined way of life as ascribed to them . “On the day of seva( service of deity ) they have to observe chastity and refrain from sex. They were to not even gaze at men and if any male desire her body during seva- has to be heavily punished.”<sup>12</sup> She had to remain chaste and observe fast called habisa, during her performance of seva. She was supposed to dance while offering of food to deity. The deity here viewed as king who used to have feast with the performances of many women in front of him. Hence some of these Devdasis compared themselves to the to some of the apsaras (heavenly courtesans) in the court of Indra. Their sexual relationship with other men was part of their service to humanity. These relationships were a private affair though but they were not illegitimate or unethical. Even wives of such men would be open to it. “The king had a special officer whose function was to supervise who the Devdasis had sexual relations with (this officer is called dosadhi prichha).”<sup>13</sup> Ideally the Devdasis were expected to maintain sexual relationships with king and priests only ,this practice however used to fall short of this ideal . The Devdasis those who restricted their relationships with Brahmin priests and kings had higher prestige. Except for the king where she was supposed to visit him, the activities used to take place in the Devdasi house itself after she had performed her last ritual at the temple which was pardah (putting deity to sleep). They pleased on earth the highest

beings which mean the king and priests just as they pleased gods in the court of Indra.<sup>14</sup>

The Devdasis here it is important to be noted were not considered prostitutes nor did they functioned as present prostitutes. They were considered holy unlike the latter. It was not unethical for a man to have sexual relationships with them. It was not illegitimate more appropriate word would be concubinage rather. Moreover the Devdasis unlike prostitutes did not charge any price for this . It was not a barter rather it was considered a service for them to satisfy men in agony or those unsatisfied with their marital life. The Devdasis unlike prostitutes were supported by the temple and the king hence she did not depend upon her lover for the maintenance. She received gifts and sometimes very precious ones but these were not in exchange of her services. Theirs was not a commercial exchange. Though often the nomenclature were used interchangeably but in essence the two were different at least in conception and inception. Moreover the Devdasis held high prestige in temple order they were regarded next only to the priest .<sup>15</sup>

There can be no denial of the fact that by the end of tenth century, the total number of devadasis in many temples was in direct proportion to the wealth and prestige of the temple. During the medieval period, they were regarded as a part of the normal establishment of temples; they occupied a rank next only to priests and their number often reached high proportions. For example, there were 400 devadasis attached to the temple at Tanjore; so also at Travancore. <sup>16</sup> They were regarded with great honour because it was believed they were married to God the immortal and hence they possess power to bless and curse. And also because they chose to give up worldly greeds hence they had controlled human impulses.” The Patrons were considered to have higher status for their ability to financially sponsor Devdasis.”<sup>17</sup> So, in nutshell they were essential thread in socio economic fabric of the times and preserved many ancient forms of classical dances, music and art forms. So what led to the degeneration of this system?

There can be no denying for the fact that increase in the size and stature of temples contributed to strengthening the practice of devdasi and raising their prestige and stature. Devdasis were integral part of temples all parts of India like Ujjain, Varanasi , Assam ,Orissa ,Somnath in Gujrat etc. Another phenomenon that corroborated with the decline of devdasi practice was regular invasion of India by foreign invaders and gradually some of them settling in India. This is to be perceived in the light of the establishment of Muslim rule in India and aggressive policy of large scale destruction of many temples .This also led to fall of regional patrons as local kings and chiefs and hence absence of all forms of support and appreciation. The fall of temples also forced them to give up their traditional way of living and hence move away to other places. Hence many of them migrated to other places, specially south . While others lacking any other skills sought to opt for most lazy form of trade that was involving in sex in lieu of payment. This was also same in case of British rule who were not aware of traditional Indian culture and viewed them as prostitutes only and sought to ban them. It is to be noted here that since Muslim rule could not hold and penetrate as deep and strong in southern part of India hence the practice remain in continuum and in more institutionalised form in southern states for

long. Many South Indian rulers were even great patrons of their arts for example chola rulers patronised the devdasi system in its sacred form. Thereafter the temples fell very quickly in north India and slowly in South India "As temples became poorer and lost their patron kings and in some cases were destroyed, the Devdasis were forced into life of poverty, misery and in some cases prostitution."<sup>18</sup> However with establishment of colonial rule and their lack of understanding of peculiarities of Indian culture the practice received a set back. They considered the Devdasis as religious prostitutes. The reform movements too followed the suit. Meddling with the practice without being aware of its actual form brought forward many legal interventions which only increased their dichotomy.

The beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the reform movements which were also based on legal initiatives. These reforms also focussed on eradicating religious prostitution which was a logical corollary to the social purification and anti nautch protests. There were reformists and abolitionists who were mostly Christian priests and European missionaries, lawyers, doctors and social workers. This lobby considered devdasi practice a social evil and also carried a bias that every devdasi was a prostitute. The British government was eager to bring all the folds of society into the folds of its law whether by means of inclusion or exclusion in the same series to bring Devdasis into legal fold, the first anti-nautch and anti dedication movement was launched in 1882<sup>19</sup> However the initial attempt to bring this practice into the frames of law was made in 1868 and is related to communicable diseases act.<sup>20</sup> The main aim of the act of 1882 was to do away with the system.

The attitude of regional states was supportive towards reformist movements. Mysore king ordered the ban on Devdasis in temples to keep the temples pious.<sup>21</sup> The logical corollary was visible in the government order of 1909 where Devdasis were prohibited in Muziris temple. The fallacy in the act was that it considered only the Devdasis attached to temples and not of the ones outside temple ambit. In the later part of 1892 an appeal was made to Governor General of India and to Governor of Madras<sup>22</sup> The portrayal of devdasi system as prostitution sought to advertise the grotesqueness of the subject population for political ends, while the British colonial authorities officially maintained most brothels in India. However the south Maratha region saw avid reformist in the form of Jyotiba Phule who was demanding its abolition. As a result in 1920 Kolhapur province declared it illegal. Belgaum and Dharwad also started demanding same. But there was no provision of rehabilitation of such women which was biggest flaw of such acts. The Bombay Devdasi Act of 1934 was brought by Bombay presidency in 1833 to stop the dedication of girls to temples which they believed to be main cause for the continuation of this practice. The logic put forward was that this practice pollutes the temples and mind of innocent kids. Many new castes and sub caste, especially lower classes were included in the definition of Devdasi and this classification was based on belief that the procedure of dedication of girls that was followed by them was basically based on Hindu culture. The ownership of lands of Devdasis was also considered here. The responsibility to issue orders after investigations were granted to collectors. However this Act too failed to provide any alternative source of employment to them. The Secretary of State in 1911 sought advise from Governor

General of Madras presidency regarding present provisions and reforms . Group of devdasi community also suggested about alternative arrangements for rehabilitation and abolishing donating of girls to temples. Dada Bhai Naroji added statement regarding banning donation of very young girls in the 'Protection of Girks and women bill'.<sup>23</sup> The Madras Dharmada Act of 1929 authorised the Revenue Department for necessary action and also empowered Collectors to issue notices to temple authorities and inam Devdasis .The Act sought to ban donation of girls by allowing them to continue to provide service to temple on the condition of relinquishing their claims on the lands they held.This was a big win.After independence government of India passed an act to ban temple prostitution by the name of Prohibition of Devdasi Act 1947 this was for Madras presidency which included some Kannada and Telugu speaking regions. This act specifically mentioned hereditary Devdasis as bogam,nag,sulu,sani etc . Public performances both religious and secular were banned and punishable if the law was violated by six months of imprisonment or a fine of rs500 or both. The span of this act was narrow and this act further restricted these women from both public and religious spheres. All these acts could do little to provide them alternate employment or rehabilitation. Most of untouchable communities remained out of the ambit. As a result the number of pseudo Devdasis continued to increase.

There was also the revivalist lobby who believed in the sacredness of the institution and argued that the Devdasis community were repositories of classical ancient Indian dance forms(Sadir), music and culture. Some of which only these women practiced and performed were bound to get lost if not revived . The pioneers were Madam Blavatsky and colonel H.S.Olcott the founders of theosophist movement. They travelled extensively in south India and propagated revival of devdasi system. They were ardent votary of India's past glory and rich culture and its restoration. Rukmini Arundale also was their light bearer in the movement."The revivalists basically belonged to Brahmin dominated Theosophical circles. Many Brahmin girls started to learn the dance from Devadasis. The espousal of the dance by Brahmin dominated Theosophical (and Congress) circles was used by the British Government officials to play up suspicion in non-Brahmin circles against not only the dance but also against the movement of Indian nationalism. "<sup>24</sup>The debate is history now but in nutshell the devdasi was neither a prostitute niether a prostitute nor a nun and her life was different from typical women in the social setup. She was proud women unlike portrayed by colonial theories.

The times changed and they no longer enjoy the same prestige. Many laws banned the practice but due to many loopholes and socio economic compulsions the practice continues in many places. The plight however is not good."The traditional institution of Devadasi endows masculine privileges to the dedicated girls. A Devadasi is entitled to inherit her parent's property and perform their funeral rites. Her children belong to the lineage of their mother and not to the lineage of their biological father. If she has a son, he inherits her property and perpetuates her father's family. If she has a daughter then the daughter is again initiated into the same system. This has an interesting but evil twist. In some regions based on superstition it is customary that a jogati must dedicate her own daughter, otherwise her funeral rites

would not be held and the corpse would be eaten by dogs and other beasts. Though an economic aspect is also involved, her daughter would take her responsibility when she becomes old. <sup>25</sup> But things are different now the legitimacy and upbringing of children is also an issue. The attached social stigma hinders mobility in the social ladder let also be economic restraints. Many government schemes like Devdasi rehabilitation project of Belgaum and Bijapur, Dr B.R.Ambedkar development corporation Rehabilitation programme for devdasi women for various districts in Karnatak etc and many NGOs are functioning in improving their lot and rehabilitation process.

**Conclusion-**The Devdasi was as much pious and impious as any other women at least in conception . Just as any other Nitya sumangali (which means a women with living husband) was to perform her duties towards her husband and family and for which she was entitled to honour and respect similarly the devdasi was Nitya sumangali as she was married to God/goddess and she was dutiful in this regard and was meant to serve the family of god which comprised of material worldand traditionally no stigma was attached to her and her children .They kept the tradition of odissi, bharatnatyam alive for centuries. She was immune from widowhood as she was married to the Gods. The poor condition of the temples and fall of patrons dwindled her position and forced many to darker paths. The atrocious inconsiderate rulers further worsened her case and gradually she became slave of tradition.

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