



Historical perspectives of devadasi system

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Abstract

The devadasi system was a popular institution in the history of early Tamil Nadu. They were serving the gods in the temples throughout Tamil Nadu. The devadasi system is essentially connected with temple worship, as a bhakthi movement results in a large number of temples coming into existence. Dedicating girls in the temples was a common future. The parents offered their daughters to the temples of their liking. The devadasi system is essentially connected with temple worship. This custom was called Pottu kattudal. They were used for executing their duties to god. It was not a common feature but was a unique feature carried out by particular communities alone. The system of devadasi has a history of more than 1700 years. To understand the devadasi system of Tamil Nadu in its proper perspective, it is necessary at first to understand the roots of devotion and temple movement. This custom, first noticed in the 3rd century AD, as mentioned in silappadhikaram, continued even in Chola times in the 12th-13th centuries AD. Inscriptions in the Sucindram Temple show that a theatre and various mandapas in the temple were endowed by devadasis. The devadasis held an important position in the temple activities. With social status, they preserved dance and music. The institution of devadasis, it must be mentioned, did nothing to elevate the social position of dancers. These dancers of the temple degenerated into more prostitutes and their quarters adjoining the temple into brothels, chastity among the Hindus was a virtue of the women of the three higher castes, and among the women of some of the other classes and the unwanted devadasis, prostitution was, if anything, encouraged by the state and the temple. There are instances of rich and aristocratic families dedicating their daughters to the temple to become devadasis. The devadasis have had a very important place in the history of mankind and the system was a popular institution in the history of early Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: devadasi system, institution, bhakthi movement, pottu kattudal, communities, bhārata natya, silappadhikaram, devotion, chola, dancers, prostitutes, aristocratic families, epigraphical records

Introduction

Women motivated by intense devotion to god dedicated themselves to the service of God and came to be called devadasis. The devadasi system was a popular institution in the history of early Tamil Nadu. They were serving the gods in the temples throughout Tamil Nadu. The devadasi system is essentially connected with temple worship, as a bhakthi movement results in a large number of temples coming into existence. To properly understand the devadasi system in Tamil Nadu we have to understand the roots of devotion and temple movement. According to Narada Bhakti is the love of God and no wants or sorrows. Devotion to God means cultivating love and love alone in the form of perpetual service and perpetual love. Silappadhikaram dance in Tamil Nadu was an integration of Bharata and regional practice. The present article is a study of the devadasi system in Tamil Nadu.

Origin of Devadasi System

Dedicating girls in the temples was a common future. The parents offered their daughters to the temples of their liking. The devadasi system is essentially connected with temple worship. This custom was called 'Pottu kattudal'. They were used for executing their duties to god. It was not a common feature but was a unique feature carried out by particular communities alone. The system of devadasi has a history of more than 1700 years. The term devadasi had its origin in Sanskrit and though it is commonly used. In Tamil Nadu, they were called *Devadasis* or *dasis*, *Busavis* in the Andhrapradesh region, *Toyatis* in Karnataka, *Bhavis*, or *Bahavinis* in western India. In Travancore, they were called *Kudidass* or *Devadasikkal*. The survival and popularity of the Bharatanatyam tradition in Tamil Nadu are to be traced to a large number of ancient temples that came into existence long before, and several thousand during the time, of the Cholas (9th-13th century AD). Such a large number of temples came to be built as a result of the bhakti movement, spearheaded by the Saivite Nayanmars and the Vaisnavite Alvars in the 6th-9th century AD. This devotional upsurge was the main plank of the devadasi system. To understand the devadasi system of Tamil Nadu in its proper perspective, it is necessary at

first to understand the roots of devotion and temple movement. The establishment of the Chola empire in the middle of the 9th century AD may be termed the golden age of Bharata natya as it was in other fields. The epigraphical records throw a flood of light on the devadasi and their rights and privileges. In hundreds of records, they are either endowment of villages, gifting lands, or endowing money for services in the temples. They were economically well off and participated in the functions of society. They were called devaradiyals or santikkittigal. Some of them received the title Talaikkoli from the king. A dancing girl with the title Talaikkoli built a Vishnu temple at Thiruvudaimarudur and named it Talaikkoli Vinnagar in the reign of Parantaka Chola in the 10th century.

The king witnessed the arangetram and conferred the title Talaikkoli. This custom, first noticed in the 3rd century AD, as mentioned in silappadhikaram, continued even in Chola times in the 12th-13th centuries AD. The most important record of dancing girls of the Chola age is that of Rajaraja Chola I (985-1014 AD) who transferred over 400 dancing girls to the great temple of Thanjavur built by him from other temples of the Chola mandalam. In the Tiruchendur temple at the time of Mahapuja and Andhikappu, devaradiyars were allowed to exhibit dance and music performances. For that a specific kattalai i.e., trust was created to respect their economic status the parents dedicated their daughters to temples. Those women were always pious. Inscriptions in the Suchindram temple at Kanyakumari district show that a theatre and various mandapas in the temple were endowed by devadasis. The devadasis held an important position in the temple activities. With social status, they preserved dance and music. The custom, however, had come into vogue by about the 3rd century C. E. Sharma says this custom is at least as old as Kautilya and Saletore writes the devadasis were mentioned in the literature of the 4th century A.D. Both of them refer to Kautilya's statement that the women connected with temples were studiously taught the arts of music and dancing, and were employed in the weaving department when they reached old age.

Social Status of the Devadasis

The institution of devadasis, it must be mentioned, did nothing to elevate the social position of dancers. These dancers of the temple degenerated into more prostitutes and their quarters adjoining the temple into brothels, chastity among the Hindus was a virtue of the women of the three higher castes, and among the women of some of the other classes and the unwanted devadasis, prostitution was, if anything, encouraged by the state and the temple. Perhaps, unduly harsh on the Hindus, dancers all over the world have held a low social position and even in the highly civilized nations of the west, respectable people fight shy of sending their daughters to act on the stage or for the screen. All the blame for this, however, does not appear to lie with society. The conduct and social behavior of professional actors and dancers have also something to do with it. The post of a devadasi was considered dignified and respectable. There are instances of rich and aristocratic families dedicating their daughters to the temple to become devadasis. Kulasekhara Alvar, a Vaishnava mystic savant, is said to have dedicated his daughter Neela, as a devadasi to the temple of Srirangam. The kings and nobles never thought it disgraceful to marry devadasis. The devadasis had the right to perform pujas in the temple if the priest happened to be away on a journey. The water required for the sacrificial purposes was brought by them. They also participated in the consecration of fire and offering of oblations. The devadasis were also consulted for conducting various festivals in temples. The devadasis, because of their high position in the society were invariably patronized by the Hindus. The presence of a devadasi at a wedding was most auspicious because she never becomes a widow. The beads in devadasi tali were considered to bring good luck to women who wear them. Sometimes devadasi was deputed to walk at the head of Hindu marriage processions. The devadasis had their law of inheritance, customs, rules of etiquette and Panchayats to settle the dispute. Among the dasis, sons and daughters inherited equally, contrary to ordinary Hindu usage. The sons usually remained in the caste, playing music for the women to dance. The daughters followed the caste profession and are carefully taught dancing, singing and the art of dressing well. Devaradiyar was associated with the temples and they were experts in dance and music. They were devadasi. Though Marco Polo, Barbosa, Caesar, Frederic, and others have referred to devaradiyar, due to their dedicated services. They had privileges in temple worship also, during the second regnal year of Varaguna-II (864 A.D.) Santhandeyam, a devaradiyar of Brahmapuri Temple had donated a perpetual lamp. In the same way, the devaradiyars of Mannarkovil Gopalasamy Temple on behalf of the members of Ur Sabha of that place had donated land and houses.

Thus, the status of the devaradiyars was not at all a despicable one during the Pandya period. It will enable one to estimate the condition of women in general. At the time, due to economic reasons, they were even sold as slaves to the wealthy people and they were directed to carry out men a service. Thus, the status, in general, was not at all an appreciable one. There were many ups and downs in society about women. As an overall measure, it must be noted that they had no social mingling and their life was a secluded one. Frequent reference to the pujas and festivals, dance and music and processions accompanied by lamps appear throughout the Sangam works. Tolkappiyam says that pujas and festivals were conducted to please the gods. Paripadal informs that dance and music were performed with great enthusiasm. Pattinapalai refers to the frequent processions of the deity of Murugan to the accompaniment of music and dancing parties and the sound of the flute and drum. According to Vishnudharmottara the dedication of dance and music to Vishnu is far more meritorious than flower and food offerings. Literary evidence shows that the system was in vogue in South India many centuries earlier. Pattinapalai informs that Karikala, an illustrious Chola king of the Sangam age dedicated his captive women called Konti-Magalir to sweep and smear the floor with cow dung. Light the perpetual lamp and spread flowers

on the floor every evening. Appar's Tiruvarur Tiruttantakam attests to the continuation of the tradition of such temples' service. Sambandars Tiruvorriyur Padikam bears witness to the tradition of dancing and singing by girls of tender age every day.

In the Tamil literature of Tamil Nadu, much prominence has been given to Siva as Nataraja, and Chidambaram has been given a very high place as a pilgrimage. They compare the burning ground to the human heart in which the deity dances her eternal dance, where the heart has become the burning ground using renunciation. Temples of various sizes and nature constructed of mud and timber are referred to in early Tamil works. Pattinapalai speaks of the construction of a Siva temple at Kaveripattinam where the captive women were dedicated by Karikalan. Kochenganan, a Chola king, probably of the phase of the Sangam age, is said to have constructed some seventy Siva and a few Vishnu temples in his domain. He is said to have systematized worship in the temples with music and dance.

Performing Dance

Dance as an art was not alien to the ancient Tamils. Many forms of dances in the name of kuttus were in constant practice among them. Their ancient literary treasures reveal this fact by referring to them in ever so many places. As it is known from Sangam literature kuttus like kuravai, tunankai, venri, very, valli, etc., were performed by them mostly during festive occasions. They were designed to honor the gods they were worshipping. Silappadikaram, the Tamil epic, gives a vivid account of the dances to mark the prevalence of such performances among the various sets of people and to emphasize their importance in society. Adiyarkkunallar, the renowned commentator to this epic, shows himself an exponent in giving detailed pieces of information's regarding the art of dance, the main division of the dances into vettiya and poduvial is suggestively given with stress. As the dance was one of the items of life held in high esteem, it was referred to in many inscriptions. The different kinds of dance popularly performed in temples during festival days find expression in them. They serve as a useful source of information to know something about the art of dance during that time. As the last one includes Natanam in its fold; the references to Muthamil call the attention of our inquiry about dances. Further, it states about the talents of the dancing girls in addition to an account of the musical instruments they had used. This inscription leaves sufficient room to think that dance occupied an important position among Muthamil. Nataka Tamil which includes dance was kept on par with the others if not more.

The dance was to be performed before the Temple of Tiruvelgaivayil Andar in Chittirai when the chief festival was in celebration. For this purpose, the dancing girl was given lands free of tax and in case of crop failures, it was ordered to give her grains and other materials through other sources. Such was the respect given to dance. It seems the king had felt that the dance performances in the temple should not suffer under any circumstance. At the same time King Rajadhiraja II states in another inscription that to perform Santikkuttu six times in the Tiruvadira festival conducted in Vaikasi, two dancing girls were given lands Santikkuttu. This may give place to infer that both these dances would have been related to each other at least in certain respects. The best of the dancers was conferred the title of Sakkaimarayan. Pirapantakkuttu, Nankiyarkuttu, and Kudiyattam are three other famous forms of dance developed out of Sakkaikkuttu. As inscribed at Pathamadai in Tirunelveli district, a group of Devadasigal under Yasoda enacted a play every year in the temple at Srivallisvaram. For this, they were given lands free of tax. These inscriptions at Tiruvallisvaram, Tirukkalunkunram, Tirupadirippuliyur and Attur also contain good evidence for dramatic performances in these temples. The Pandya kings also encouraged dances and constructed theatres called Natakasalai. Further, there are dancing halls found in the famous temples. In the Ekambranatha temple at Kanchipuram it is called 'Niruttam-mandapam' and at Tirukkuralam it is named 'Chittirasalai'. It can be noticed that the dancing halls are located in such a place which can be easily accessible through the main gopura-vayil. Further, there is sufficient space for the selected audience who were allowed to witness the performance. In the medieval days, great honors were heaped upon a few qualified devadasis for their attainments in the arts or their meritorious service to the state. The Imperial Cholas had profusely conferred a select few high-sounding honorifics such as talaikkoli, santikkutti, and manikkam. A large number of inscriptions mention devadasis with the suffix talaikkoli in their names. Expert dancing girls, from the days of Madavi, were recipients of this honorific as a mark of their proficiency in the art. Madavi, about the sixty-four arts, was conferred this title of honor by Karikala Cholan for her majestic performance of dance on the auspicious day of her dance debut (arrangerru). The honorific of santikkutti was conferred only on those devadasis, who had already established their mastery in performing the particular dance form called santikkutt. The title manikkam, literally meaning 'ruby,' is found in inscriptions of medieval days as another honorific conferred on quite several devadasis throughout Tamil Nadu, perhaps indicating their uniqueness. The Cholas had even gone to the extent of naming villages after the names of devadasis and permitting their benefactions to go on records as devadiyal kattalai

Category of Devadasis

The temple women are categorized as follows, the temple woman is referred to in the inscriptions by several terms like devaradiyal, devanarmagal (daughter of God) and Patiyilar or Taliyilar. She is said to have some functions in a temple and to receive regularly food, rice, cloth, or rights over the land from the temple. She is identified in the inscriptions as being a woman of this temple or devotee "of the lord of such and such a place. In the Chola inscriptions, the term 'devaradiyal' is used, temple women. The first part of the compound, devan, means "God" or king and it is derived from the Sanskrit term 'Deva'. The second term 'adi' is a Tamil word

meaning foot. The devotee is to touch, serve, adorn, worship and take refugees and the most frequently used term for the devotee is 'adiyar'. Adiyar is more often applied to 'devotees' rather than slaves, and temple women are counted among both 'adiyar' meaning devotees and adiyar meaning slaves.

Conclusion

The devadasis have had a very important place in the history of mankind and the system was a popular institution in the history of early Tamil Nadu. The fact that erotic sculptures were not displayed on many temples in the North, especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the south, does not invalidate our suggestion. Though no widespread devadasi institutions or sculptures moralizing their achievements were universally employed. The strength of orthodox public opinion against pornographic disfigurement of temple walls adequately explains it. As regards the portrayal of ascetics, there have always been Sanyasis who have fallen from the path of virtue and who have used the garb of a sadist to enjoy physical pleasures. A public display of this dichotomy between their preaching and practice could help the devadasis to meet the threat of the orthodox opinion, which emphasized virtues of brahmacharya, chastity and renunciation. The darmastras and the contemporary literature contain ample evidence of the social status the ganikas or courtesans so enjoyed and the atmosphere of permissiveness that prevailed.

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