

# The Historical Evolution of the Devadasi System in Various Indian Regions

Dr. K.Ajayi Babu

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, SRR & CVR Government Degree College,  
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.*

---

## **Abstract**

*Devadasi System had a significant role in Hindu society in India in the past. Temples have a long history of using devadasis as part of their religious rites. The early medieval era in India is when the customs first appeared and evolved. There are several inscriptions that provide us with a wealth of information about the Devadasi institution's existence. From around the ninth century C.E., a number of inscriptions from south India demonstrate the connection between dancing females and temple services. This article aims to document the historical evolution of the Devadasi system in various Indian regions.*

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

---

## I. INTRODUCTION

A lady who served a god at a temple is referred to as a devadasi. They were unmarried temple workers who, as young girls, had undergone rituals akin to Hindu marriage ceremonies to commit themselves to temple deities. Devadasi (Skt. devadasi, Ta. tevataci, lit. "slave of god") is a Sanskritized version of the Tamil word *tevaratiyal*, which refers to a woman who was enslaved in order to serve a particular deity or holy item. The term is the feminine variant of the phrase *deva-dasa*, which refers to a male who works as a slave for a god. Despite the term's Sanskrit origin, the prevalent customs and rituals have nothing to do with the gods or deities—particularly the Trinity—that are referenced in Sanskrit literature. In practically every significant brahmanical temple, devadasis were present. A devadasi, or temple woman, is a dancer who is connected to a temple either because she performs regular services there or because her main social identity is based on her affiliation with a temple. These females frequently offered their clients sexual services as well. "Every well-appointed Hindu temple strives to be an earthly replica of the paradise of the god in whose honor it was built," Farquhar said. The Temple band represents the *gandharvas*, while the courtesans who sing and dance throughout the ritual symbolize the *apsarasas*. Although these are devoted to serving the deity, they benefit those who adore him. Typically, they are referred to as *devadasis*, or the god's handmaidens. They sing and dance during temple services and during the procession of the images around the town. 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'.

Around the ninth and tenth centuries C.E., when there was a lot of activity in Southern India about the construction of temples and the development of the services conducted there, the caste system and its euphemistic term appear to have originated. The dancing ladies' responsibilities included carrying the sacred light known as *kumbarti*, fanning the idol with *charmaras* (Tribetan ox tals), and singing and dancing in front of the god while he was brought in procession. Devadasis were characterized by Monier Williams in his book *Religious Thought and Life in India* as being wedded to the deity and having no choice but to dance in front of his shrine. They therefore belonged to the deity and were obligated to dance in front of his shrine. They were hence referred to as the god's slaves (*deva-dasi*), and they were typically exemplary of decorum and piety. He goes on to say that although they are still referred to by the same term today, they are actually slaves to the lustful desires of the squandering brahmins of the temples they are a part of. The quantity of these females and the size of the decorations they wore shocked him the most, particularly the ones connected to southern Indian temples, where they operated a lucrative business with religious approval.

According to Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, the devadasi is an expressive semiotic unit that represents the mythological, artistic, and ceremonial object that is ingrained in Hindu tradition's collective consciousness. According to Marglin, devadasis were a particularly specific and unique group of women who served as omens of good fortune for a state and its people. Their commitment to temple duty is seen as a marriage with the

primary god, and they never marry any mortal man. According to Leslie Orr, a temple woman is a woman who may or may not be a prostitute or dancer who is connected to a temple, either because she defines her primary social identity in relation to a temple or because she performs some sort of regular service function there. According to Venkatramaiah, some women worked at temples, and on particular occasions, those who were skilled in music and dance would perform songs and dances there. They weren't prostitutes or harlots. They were spinsters, and if they wanted to, they could quit the temple service and be married.

## **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

According to Gailomvedt (1983), the devdasi system oppresses Dalits and enslaves women in the guise of religion. The devdasi's life was special for reasons other than her sexual role or the fact that the goddess was said to revere and frequently possess her. Her entire lifestyle was very different from that of typical women; in fact, it was nearly the opposite of what they did. She was allowed to go wherever she wanted, both inside and outside the town, work at any job, and make money. According to Pratibha Desai (2007), the devadasi cult is a wicked institution that exploits many underprivileged women in the guise of religion. It is located closer to the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. One of the major prostitute fitting centers is Devadasi Cult, which supplies additional devadasis to the brothels in neighboring towns. This is a primary factor in the transmission of HIV/AIDS. The two main things that promote the Devadasi religion are poverty and work. Therefore, it must be appropriately addressed in order to be eradicated.

In an effort to pinpoint the primary elements elucidating the significance of the "devadasi" system in the past, Maria-Costanza Torri (2009) investigates the beginnings of "devadasi" practice, its development over time, and its religious and ritual significance. Second, it examines the economic standing and social standing of "devadasis" and provides a worldwide perspective on the causes of the continued consecration of young girls in rural communities. We contend that social and economic constraints are tightly coupled with the penalties imposed by social norms and, it seems, by religion. By defiling and appropriating the sexuality of lower caste and "dalit" women, upper caste males express and uphold their hegemonic masculinity and social dominance. The gendering and sexualization of caste relations of dominance and submission is essential to the devadasis' symbolic significance. The relationship between caste, gender, and violence is examined in this article.

Nash Colundalur (2011) laments that the Devadasis endure severe poverty, oppression, and exploitation, are subjected to caste-based discrimination and humiliations, and lack political clout. Their risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections is great. The main reason of poverty still drives young girls to the streets of "sacred prostitution," despite the fact that several efforts have been made in independent India to stop the system and rehabilitate the Devadasis.

According to Kalaivani R. (2015), there is an old custom of presenting young boys and girls to deities in practically every region of India; this custom is particularly common in rural regions. The Goddess Yallamma (also known as Renuka) is worshipped by young boys and girls, especially in southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka state. Her primary shrine is located in the village of "Soundati" in the neighboring Belgaum district of Karnataka State (South India). Known as "Devadasi," these living sacrifices have miserable lives. A girl kid who is devoted to the goddess is actually nothing more than a prostitute, despite the title "Devadasi" suggesting "Servant of God." In many regions of India, the oppressive Devadasi system has been in place for generations. In addition to exploiting men, women, and impotents, the Devadasi system also organizes the exploitation of Dalits from lower castes during religious rites. Prostitution of defenseless young girls and women who are economically and socially disadvantaged is sanctioned; it is the celebration of women's shame.

### **THEORIES RELATED TO THE SYSTEM**

The genesis of the devadasi system is the subject of several theories and conjectures. These include the following theories: the mother goddess and occupation theory, the religious tradition theory, the sanskritization theory, the racial theory, the political or unselfish citizen theory, the matriarchy to patriarchy theory, the lineage continuity theory, and the classical theory. It was a long-standing and widespread custom to dedicate women for the ceremonial function. Every nation has different customs depending on the time period and culture. The few nations where the practice of committing women to religious service existed many millennia ago were Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Babylonia, and Cyprus. Aphrodite, Anu, and Ishtar gathered women for holy service at the temples of Osiris and Isis, respectively.

Theogomy is the general term for the practice of devoting women in the name of religion. According to James Frazer, the worship of Mother Goddesses leads to theogomy. It originated in ancient India. Religious women had a position of divinity, and Mother Goddesses were the embodiment of their responsibilities. She was presented with several material things. During this period, the Mother Goddess tradition was influenced by

Sanskritic tradition in both directions. One was that strong male deities subjugated them, and the other was that the new stories were constructed and spread. The masculine deity's abilities and capabilities were exalted. Ritual purity and defilement were presented as concepts. Their position as just ceremonial servants was diminished by the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.

#### THE MYTH

The following is the myth surrounding girls' devotion to the goddess. Sage Jamadagni's consort, Renuka, was a chaste lady. She could carry water in a freshly molded pot since she was so pure. On the banks of the river where she went to get water, she would mold one pot every day. She chanced to spot a Gandharva couple taking a river bath during one of these excursions. When she noticed the male partner's reflection in the river water, she was astounded by his good looks. But the pot shattered and her husband "caught" her in this "act of adultery" due to this "alleged violation" of her wedding vows. He concluded that she had "sinned" by having feelings for a guy other than her spouse. This blow to his pious ego infuriated the guru, who immediately gave his 12-year-old son Parasuram the command to decapitate his own mother. The son followed instructions. Jamadagni was pleased with his son's unquestioning loyalty and wanted to bestow a boon upon him. The astute youngster asked his father to revive his mother. The sage then noticed a matangi walking past. He severed her head and affixed it to Renuka's body. Jamadagni wanted to atone for his angry actions when Renuka was revived with the head of a matangi and the body of a holy woman. He bestowed upon her the blessing that unmarried females would revere her as their goddess, commit themselves to her for the rest of their lives by "marrying" her, and then be prepared to satiate all of her son Parasuram's sexual desires, present as he was within every man. According to Jamadagni, the females would view every man as Parasuram in human form and would therefore effortlessly satiate his sexual cravings without expecting anything in return, whether money or kind, marriage of any sort, or a lasting tie. Even if a man was a leper requesting sexual favors, these females would have no right to refuse him, according to Jamadagni. Every Friday, they would go door-to-door pleading for charity in Yellamma's honor in order to support themselves.

#### THE DEVADASI SYSTEM'S HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

According to Parasher-Sen, women's service in Indian temples was a creation of the puranic faith. However, as the practice of worship in public temples was developing in the early centuries of the Christian period, the devadasi institution in India does not date back to the third century B.C.E. The system was widely used and dominant from the early medieval era onward, although having existed in earlier eras. Altekar said that following the spectacular building of the Hindu gods' temples, people gradually developed the idea that singing ladies need to be affixed to shrines in order to provide music throughout various rituals and workshops throughout the day. Leslie Orr said that the system was in place starting in the early medieval era. According to M.G.S. Narayanan, the class of temple dancing girls emerged as a result of the bhakti movement's growth and the temple system's expansion. Before the fourth or fifth century CE, the medieval temple organization did not take root. Even while the practice of worshiping images in public temples was beginning to take shape in the early centuries of the Christian period, it wasn't until the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. that the institutional nature of the temple and its significance in the socioeconomic lives of the populace became apparent. The analysis of inscriptions reveals that the devadasi inscription began to take root in the seventh and eighth centuries of the common era. The emergence, growth, and maturity of the Devadasi institution in South India occurred during the core period of India's feudal era, which lasted from the ninth to the twelfth centuries CE. From the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. onward, India's whole social formation process is inextricably linked to advancements in the religious sphere. The new religious philosophy was spread by the struggle between Vaishnavism and Saivism as well as other religious beliefs.

The religious temple preface entered a new era with this. One significant aspect of feudal politics is the religious sanctification of the political elite. A community's social and economic life revolved around the temple. Both kings and private citizens generously patronized temples with devadasi. Devadasi was an essential part of social life even beyond the temple. They became a sub-caste with its own customs, codes of conduct, and manners. The inscriptions also show that the greatest increase occurred in the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E. Even though the system was established and thriving prior to the tenth century C.E., the institution's growth was uneven across the board. This was focused in a few specific areas that had grown politically and economically in the 14th and 15th centuries C.E.

The religious, political, economic, and social circumstances that dominated the society at the time and in the area provided support for the tradition. The devadasi, who were skilled singers and dancers, were connected to all of India's royal courts. Despite being widely used throughout India, the Devadasi system did not

thrive in northern India for a variety of reasons. In the north, it did not become a prominent institution with a solid social foundation or a characteristic shared by the majority of temples there. However, the North's political unrest and powerful non-Hindu rulers, such as the Persians and Moghuls, made them unable to support the temples and embrace its strange traditions. Famous historian Kafi Khan wrote about the pitiful tale of Devadasi in North India, particularly during the Aurangzeb's rule. He cited Aurangzeb's public declaration that forbade ladies from singing and dancing while also ordering all dancing females to marry or be exiled from the realm. There weren't many resources on central Indian Devadasis at the time. It's unclear, though, whether these ladies are courtesans or devadasis. The devadasi institution did not evolve uniformly, even in South India. The system was in place in South India. The non-Hindu invasions and outside influence had little effect on the supernatural entities. As a result, the remainder of South India's population was deeply ingrained with the rites' specifics. Devadasi tradition had its own status, roles, responsibilities to perform, and laws as part of the Hindu ceremonial system. Temples formed the center of a community's social and economic life in South India. Both kings and private citizens generously patronized temples with devadasi.

#### 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

These classifications show the Devadasis's status and place of origin. She is referred to as a "Dutta Devadasi" when a holy father donated his daughter to a temple as a Devadasi. However, a woman who was abducted and then hired by a temple is referred to as "Hruta Devadasi." A woman is often referred to as "Bikrita Devadasi" when she is sold to a temple's administrator or priest. A woman is referred to as "Bhrutya Devadasi" if she willingly served as a Devadasi at a temple. "Bhakta Devadasi" refers to a group of ladies who voluntarily donated their services to the temple. When a woman after-attaining a certain degree of competence, is offered to the temple with ornaments, she is known as "Alankara Devadasi". "Gopika" or "Rudraganika" are the Devadasis who were paid for performing dance and music at the temple during a specific period. In addition to getting set salaries, these Devadasi castes also received some landed property for their own use.

The widely used system in India In Tamilnadu, devadasis were referred to by a variety of names due to regional cultural and geographical differences, including tevataci, tevaratiyar, patiyilar, talicceri pendukal, tevanar makal, cottikal, atikalmar, manikkattar, kanikaiyar, emperumanatiyar, and koyil pinakkal; in Kerala, tevidicchi, nangaimar, kudikkari, kudikkari, muraikkari, kootachi, koothichi, and attakkari; in Karnataka, sanis and bhogam; in Orissa, darikas, patras, and maharis; in Assam, kurmapus and kudipus; in Konkani and Marathi; and in Bombay presidency, each shrine had its own name for its girls.

### III. CONCLUSION

The social, economic, and political liberation of the weaker sex—that is, women in general—has grown in importance in today's society. All of the religious traditions began to feel the effects of new societal forces. Traditional religious teachings that are discriminatory, unfair, and skewed toward women's status in general are being contested. Various faiths must provide reasons for these issues.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Parker M Kunal. A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes' Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800-1914. *Modern Asian Studies*. 1998; 32(3):559.
- [2]. Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, Nityasumangali. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1987, XV.
- [3]. Tarachand KC. Devadasi Custom: Rural Social Structure and Flesh Markets. New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1991, 1.
- [4]. Singh AK. Devadasis System in Ancient India. Delhi: H.K. Publishers and Distributors, 1990, 13.
- [5]. Orr, Leslie C. Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamil Nadu. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [6]. Farquhar JN. (Rpt. 1967). *Modern Religious Movements in India*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1914, 408- 409.
- [7]. Marglin, Frederique Apffel. *Wives of the God- King*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, 18- 19.
- [8]. Altekar AS. (Rpt. 1983) *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959, 182- 83.
- [9]. Jeevanandam S. *The Sacred Geography of Medieval Tamilakam-A Study of Saiva and Vaishnava Temples*. in Birendranath Prasad. *Monasteries, Shrines and Society: Buddhist and Brahmanical Religious Institutions in India in Their Socio-Economic Context*. New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2011, 242- 252.
- [10]. Shankar, Jogan. (Rpt. 1994). *Devadasi Cult: A Sociological Analysis*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1990.
- [11]. Gailomvedt. *Devdasi Custom and the Fight against It*, Manushi. 1983; 19:16-19.
- [12]. Kalaivani R. Devadasi System in India and Its Legal Initiatives - An Analysis, *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 2015; 20(2):50-55.