

DEVOTION TO MARGINALIZATION: THE FATE OF THE DEVADASIS IN COLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the evolution and decline of the Devadasi pratha in colonial India with a special emphasis on the Kalavantulu community of Andhra Pradesh. It examines the colonial legal intervention, its Victorian morality and the civilizing mission which misrepresent the indigenous culture in particular and society in general which equates the sacred performance traditions with prostitution. The study tries to trace the transformation of temple dancers from respected and honourable position of custodians of classical art to marginalized sections under colonial and nationalist scrutiny. The paper invokes a critical engagement with Marxist and Postcolonial feminist frameworks which helped in interrogating the intersections of caste, gender and state policy which shaped the lives of Devadasis. The paper tries to challenge the notion that Devadasis were passive victims by throwing light on their cultural agency, resistance strategies and continuous efforts to reclaim their voices and identities. Through this the paper tries to reposition the Devadasis not as a “barbaric” past but as a symbol of artistic resilience and political assertion against the colonial modernity.*

KEYWORDS: Cultural Agency, Victorian Morality, Colonial Modernity, Kalavantulu, Andhra Natyam, Postcolonial Feminism, Civilizing Mission, Occupational Group

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the ancient period, institution like Devadasi pratha was not in practice instead what we get are the courtiers who were the Royal dancers and musicians, not only served with their skills but also were the personal companions or concubines of the rulers they received royal patronage and were quite wealthy there are instances in Kautilya's Arthashastra that at the time of emergency, state collected taxes from the courtiers. These women were literate and although stigmatized still held respectable position in the society. The origin and institutional working of Devadasi system required some merit of the ancient institution of courtiers as with the ravage of time the courtiers gradually transform into Devadasis in medieval period and in the colonial period took a new turn towards deterioration.

"Devadasi" as the name suggests is the one who is the dasi of the deva simply putting servant of god thus it involves dedicating young girls to temple services where they were expected to serve the diety with artistic performances like dance and music. According to Veenus Jain the tradition goes back to 3rd century AD.

There were different communities of Devadasis across India such as Jogati in Karnataka, Murali in Maharashtra, Mahari in Odisha, Kalavantulu in Andhra Pradesh, Nati in Assam and Bengal. The colonial intervention in the lives of the Devadasis is justified by their civilizing mission which they believed would ultimately lead to breaking off from the barbaric traditional customs and rituals of India and embarking on the path towards Westernisation. The Paper is an attempt to address the impact of oppressive Colonial legal laws on the lives of the Devadasis which is further alienating them from "the self" also their continuous struggle to reclaim their lost voices with a special emphasis on the Kalavantulu community of Andhra Pradesh..

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- (i) To examine how colonial legal laws and Victorian morality reshaped, stigmatized, and criminalized the Devadasi institution in colonial India.
- (ii) To trace the historical transition of Devadasis from respected temple performers to socially marginalized women under colonial and nationalist scrutiny.
- (iii) To analyze the intersection of caste, gender, and state policy in defining the identity, status, and oppression of Devadasis.
- (iv) To evaluate the specific experiences of the Kalavantulu community of Andhra Pradesh while highlighting their cultural contributions and struggles under colonial rule.
- (v) To investigate the agency of Devadasis by looking at their resistance, cultural resilience, and strategies to reclaim their voices and artistic identities.
- (vi) To study how Devadasis and their traditions have been represented, misrepresented, or erased in nationalist discourse and contemporary Indian cinema.
- (vii) To explore the ongoing legacy, stigma, and social consequences of the Devadasi system in contemporary Indian society.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

- (i) The scholarship on the Devadasi institution in India is rich and varied. It explores its historical development, cultural importance, and later marginalization. Veenus Jain's "Devadasis of India: Tradition and Travesty"(2021) provides a crucial understanding of the Devadasi system by placing it in its early historical context. Jain shows that Devadasis were once respected guardians of music, dance, and temple rituals. Their roles were tied to sacred traditions instead of being linked to immorality. Jain also highlights the many regional differences among Devadasi communities in India and emphasizes the local cultural frameworks that defined their roles before colonial reinterpretations distorted their identities.

- (ii) A complementary view is presented in Harishankar and Priyamvada's National Commission for Women report, "Exploitation of Women as Devadasis and Associated Evils" (2016). This report offers a modern socio-legal analysis. It examines the exploitation that Devadasis have faced in recent decades and the ongoing practice despite it being legally banned. The report highlights the overlap of poverty, caste, gender-based vulnerability, and institutional neglect. It indicates that remnants of the Devadasi system persist in rural areas, fueled by deep-rooted discrimination and economic need. This matches historical accounts of marginalization but places them in current contexts.
- (iii) The historical details of the institution are further enriched by A.K. Prasad's article "Functions and Gradations of Devadasis" (1984). This work is one of the earliest scholarly efforts to categorize Devadasis based on their roles in temples and rituals. Prasad offers detailed insights into the hierarchical structure of Devadasi functions within temple settings, which range from ritual specialists to performers. His work clarifies that Devadasi status was neither uniform nor singular; instead, it included various categories with different responsibilities, social recognition, and ritual significance.
- (iv) Arudra's "Kalavantulu of Andhra Natyam" (1990) takes a region-specific look at the Kalavantulu community in Andhra Pradesh. Arudra explains that these women were not just temple workers; they played a vital role in preserving and passing down classical dance forms such as Andhra Natyam. His research supports the idea that the Devadasi heritage in Andhra Pradesh has historically been linked to artistic excellence and ritual authority, contradicting later colonial and nationalist efforts to erase or misrepresent their cultural contributions.
- (v) Yashoda Thakore's article "Dancing Caste, Rethinking Heredity" (2022) builds on Arudra's historical account with a personal and critical perspective from the Kalavantulu community. Thakore criticizes colonial narratives that labeled Devadasis as immoral. Instead, she argues for viewing them as hereditary artists who protected rich dance and music traditions. She confronts the caste and gender biases that undermined these women, emphasizing their artistic heritage, cultural power, and ongoing resilience.
- (vi) Sumanta Banerjee extensively discusses the colonial reframing of Devadasis in "Under the Raj: Prostitution in Colonial Bengal" (1998). He analyzes how Victorian morals and colonial rule mixed Devadasi traditions with prostitution, leading to stigma and criminalization. His Marxist-feminist viewpoint suggests that colonial officials and reformers imposed bourgeois moral standards on indigenous practices, turning temple dancers from respected performers into "fallen women" in the new colonial narrative.
- (vii) Lata Mani's "Contentious Traditions" (1998), although focused on the sati debate, provides an important theoretical framework for understanding how colonial and nationalist patriarchies reshaped women's bodies, sexuality, and religious roles. Mani's analysis is useful for placing Devadasis within wider patterns of colonial influence, where women's traditions were redefined through competing moral, political, and ideological perspectives. Her insights make it clear how Devadasis became points of ideological conflict rather than neutral cultural participants.
- (viii) Teresa Hubel's 1993 article in "Modern Fiction Studies" expands on this critique by looking at how Indian women's anger, agency, and representation are shaped by patriarchal narratives. Although her work centers on literature, it reflects how Devadasi identities have been minimized, reinterpreted, or silenced in nationalist and reformist discussions.
- (ix) Lastly, Daves Soneji's "Unfinished Gestures" (2012) provides a significant anthropological and historical perspective by reconstructing the experiences, memories, and artistic legacies of South Indian Devadasis. Soneji emphasizes the neglect of Devadasi contributions in modern classical dance narratives and calls for recognition of their crucial role in cultural history. His work uncovers both the trauma and resilience present in Devadasi stories.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study explores the devadasi system in colonial period particularly how the legal laws shaped and impacted their lives attacking their identity and the continuous struggle of these women to restore their culture, traditions and identity. Mostly secondary sources are referred to which includes the works of Yashoda thakore, Veenus Jain, Sumanta Banerjee, Lata Mani, Daves Soneji. It involves textual analysis of their works drawing a comparative study. I engaged with the Marxist- feminist theoretical framework of Sumanta Banerjee which critiqued the bourgeois moral framework of 19th century reformers also I used Lata Mani's Postcolonial feminist framework that helped me in analyzing the agency that these women held in their everyday lives.

5. COLONIAL LEGAL LAWS: INTERVENING THE DOMESTIC SPHERE OF SOCIETY

The domain of sovereignty can be divided into 2 spheres- inner and outer. Inner domain is the spiritual sacred domain of the people of East which the Nationalists perceived to be superior compared to the West whereas the outer sphere is the domain which is materialistic, under the hegemony of the colonialists. The outer sphere is the space where to a certain extent nationalists urge to inculcate certain aspects of Western elements that would help them overthrow the British.(Partha Chatterjee,1993). The fear of "politicization" of sacred inner domain stopped the nationalists from implementing social reforms.

However, the legal laws passed by the British against the Devadasi pratha highly politicized the institution which received criticisms to a larger degree. The Madras and Mysore Devadasi prevention act of 1947, The Bombay Devadasi Protection Act of 1934 were an attempt to abolish the system from its roots. It not only prevented dedication of women to temples but also prohibited their right to marry.

5.1 Tabooing the lives of Devadasis

Devadasis were highly respected performers of music and dance, dedicated to temple deities. They held special status with economic independence and cultural prominence. Colonial modernity's successful attempt to differentiate spiritual and political domains pushed the temple dancers from the inner sacred space to the outer impure space with the nationalists and colonialists attempt to redefine society in general and womenhood in particular.(Partha Chatterjee,1993)

The Victorian moral lens of the Colonialists and Christian missionaries viewed Devadasis as immoral linking their profession with prostitution thus stigmatizing and socially ostracizing them. Coming of Colonialists saw a steady decline in temple patronage thus alienating them from their source of livelihood and eventually forcing them into prostitution.

Many reform movements like The Brahmo Samaj of Ram Mohun Roy , Arya Samaj of Dayanand Saraswati promoted the idea of women chastity and piety which conflicted with the public and sexual roles of Devadasis. They campaigned for abolish of the institution.

The tabooing of Devadasis was also the result of an intersection between caste and gender oppression. They were treated as unworthy of respect not because of their temple services but also because of their low caste status.

5.2 Widows as Devadasis

Traditional India saw widows as disgrace and they were socially excluded. They were seen as inauspicious and were forced to adopt with intense austerity. Many young widows from Bengal were sent to far off temples like Mathura to live their life dedicating themselves to the service of the deity. This however, outwardly is a sacred practice but inwardly involved series of exploitation of the widows and were eventually included in the forceful practice of prostitution.(Sumanta Banerjee,1998). They were often not paid and had to depend on temple patrons for sustenance which degenerated them into "sexualized roles".

5.3 Occupational groups or caste groups?

Linking devadasis solely with being a caste group is highly problematic. Initially not only women and widows from lower caste family were dedicated but women and widows from middle class families were also dedicated. However, the colonial rule brought a new dimension, the colonialists continued to view Devadasi system as immoral and lowly which led to them integrating the system with the poor strata of the society. They assumed all Devadasis to come from lower castes thus eventually linked it with the “caste institution” of the society. This further stigmatized and marginalized these women leading to social ostracism.

There are instances of devadasis from upper caste and middle caste families in pre colonial India such as the dominant temple serving families like the Isai Vellalars in Tamil Nadu. These women were in turn trained in music and dance like Bharatnatyam and also in Sanskrit however the colonial period saw the upper caste family’s disassociation from temple services which led to a “caste shift” and eventually was associated with women of lower caste families.

It would be wrong to judge them through this lens; they were more than caste communities. They were professional groups hereditary in nature but rooted to their caste communities.

5.4 Kalavantulus of Andhra

Kalavantulus of Andhra Pradesh was a hereditary community of women performers. They were not just entertainers but also custodians of classical dance and music traditions like Andhra Natyam. Kalavantulus devoted their performances to the temple deities and also were an integral part of the royal courts (Arudra,1990). Arudra’s observations lead us to the fact that the term “devadasi” is not frequently found in Telegu inscriptions and literature. Terms like “Sani” and “bhogam” were in existence. “Sani” probably denotes woman of a ran or a dancing girl. “Bhogam” probably signify a dancing or theatrical caste.

Dealing with Kalavantulus require a special mention of Dr Yashoda Thakore, who hails from a Kalavantulu family and wrote large volumes on Kalavantulus, their traditions, exploitations that they faced under the British Raj and also their effort to reclaim their voices. Thakore challenges the colonial interpretation of these women as prostitutes instead she addressed them as custodians of classical dance and music, educators, performers and trainers.(Yashoda Thakore,2022)

Colonial and Nationalist interpretations alienated them from their cultural and artistic contributions in the field of dance and music like Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi eventually these dances were considered to be classical, part of a larger Brahmanical domain without giving due credit to these women.

6. THE FATE OF DEVDASIS IN CONONIAL INDIA

6.1 Did the devadasis have agency of their own?

The term “agency” talks about the capability of individuals or groups to act independently make choices, decisions of their own accord. When it comes to addressing the “agency of devadasis” it means despite being shackled by the patriarchal and caste based norms they had voice of their own. They could choose their patrons, maintain control over property, many were trainers and performers of classical dance and music.

In the Pre colonial period particularly in the Chola and Vijaynagar period the Devadasis had significant social and cultural power. Many were landowners, patrons of arts, literate, well versed with Sanskrit or Telegu. Patriarchy was still in existence (as it is today, something that is rooted in the soil of every society’s .a customary practice), control was exerted over the sexuality of the Devadasis however, they were not bounded by marriage structures and could choose patron of their choice. The colonial period saw degenerative situation in the agency of the Devadasis. The passing of regressive Colonial laws like the Madras and Mysore Devadasi Prevention acts of 1947 stigmatized their public

identity. The religious and cultural roles were delegitimized thus putting a constrain on the agency of these women.

6.2 Reclaiming the lost voices

The voices of the Devadasis were suppressed to a larger degree by the colonialists however, the unwavering spirit of these women cut across the colonial prohibitions. Devadasis of all communities collectively fought to restore their culture, traditions, practices, and their identity. Of all Kalavantulus require a special mention. They actively reclaimed their voices and negotiated new spaces of agency in the domain of performance, authorship and cultural preservation. The decline in temple patronage couldn't stop them from performing, they continued their performances in secular arenas like courts, salons and eventually in public theatres. They broke through the caste identity and reshaped themselves as professional artists asserting their legitimacy over Andhra Natyam, Kuchipudi, and music. Many Kalavantulus embraced modernity, adopted public performance but resisted being labeled as "victims". Through their performances they ridiculed the colonialists and their intervention into the sacred and religious domain of the society.(Davesh Soneji,2012)

Not just the Kalavantulus but the Devadasis collectively at a broader level continuously resisted to the colonial labeling of them as "fallen women" (Sumanta Bannerji,1998), "immoral" which ostracized them. Many even petitioned courts against the oppressive colonial laws that criminalized them.

6.3 Nationalistic views on the Devadasis and their cultural traditions

Eventually the nationalist period saw the devadasis as the prime targets because of their sexual independence. Their tradition was represented by female autonomy, temple dedication and public performance which was in contrast to the obedient, marriage bound womanhood which was shaped by the colonialists, social reformers and the nationalists. The need of controlling the sexuality of the devadasis led to equating them with prostitution which was done by both the colonialists and the nationalists. This comparison with chaste "bhadramahila" woman and "barbaric" immoral devadasis led to un dignification of their roles. The campaign to dismantle them commenced with the anti nautch movement in 1892 that represented their roles as immoral appealing the public to disconnect with them. This movement eventually translated into the 1947 Madras Devadasis Prevention Act that outlawed their traditional practices. Their marginalization was seen as an opportunity for the men of their community to reclaim control over cultural, religious and familial authority that women failed to comprehend. They formed alliances with Indian elites and political groups like the Indian National Congress and Dravidian Self respect Movement, these viewed devadasi tradition as a barbaric one thus the need to erase was most prominent among them. Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi, a feminist also joined such campaigns against devadasi tradition. The legal reforms of 1920s led to criminalization of temple dedication and stigmatized their identity. The devadasis were seen through the lens of helpless victims who were to be saved.

Nationalist perspective was divided into two between the reformists like Dr Muthulakshi Reddi who tried to abolish the devadasi system because of its immoral practices and another is the process of preservation that was undertaken by the cultural Nationalists who tried to separate the art from the artist and institution i.e. devadasis and preserving the dance and music without recognizing their origins and roots, disconnecting them from their historical past.(Teresa hubel, 1993)

6.4 Legacy of Devadasi System in Contemporary Society

Although the Devadasi system has been outlawed, still its legacy cannot be neglected. Tracing the legacy of devadasi pratha requires some merit to its historical background. The original form of devadasi pratha was not exploitative it involved the dedication of women to temples and they were highly respected also were financially independent but with time, the decline in royal patronage and shift in political structures reduced them to destitution. Although theoretically the practice has been banned but even in some areas especially rural areas like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra the

practice continues. In these regions girls are still dedicated before puberty and this leads to a life of stigma, exploitation, oppression, losing one's own agency.

Even today the stigma did not go away, in many devadasi families the offsprings specially daughters even after attaining education and becoming financially independent are still shackled to the devadasi identity. It is like a shadow that follows them everywhere and shapes their identity. This stigma is generational thus even if the girl does not follow her mother's occupation still the stigmatization of society made it difficult for them to lead a peaceful life, chase their dreams, marry whoever they want to. However, there are many women who grew up and are fighting, resisting the norms imposed on them. Some are even associating themselves to NGOs to support and educate each other.

Thus, the devadasi legacy was not just about outdated rituals but also about how the society marginalizes women based on their caste, gender, and history. The legacy marks destruction of the deeply rooted inequalities that shaped the system.

7. REPRESENTATION OF DEVADASIS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CINEMAS

Indian Hindi cinemas also some South Indian movies have represented women in both modest and immodest ways. Modest women are those who are societally considered to be chaste, obedient, adhering the feminine roles, submitting to pativrata such as Paro in Devadas who is depicted to be graceful, traditional, one who accepts restrictions imposed by both the society and her family without any resistance, Radha in Mother India where she is depicted as the ideal Indian woman who is dutiful, self-sacrificing and morally unshakeable. These kinds of movies became the cornerstone for the society to judge and misjudge the Indian women.

Amidst these, there are movies that depict subaltern women like devadasis, prostitutes also independent women making their own decisions in economic, political and social spheres as going against the normative structure of the society. Movies such as Vaisali, a Malayalam movie revolves around the story of a Devadasi called Vaisali and a saint Rishyashrunga here Vaisali is depicted to lure the saint with her sensuous dance and exotic look but eventually falls in love with Rishyashrunga. The story begins with a drought scene in Angarajyam under ruler Lomapadan he sought advice from his Rajaguru who upon receiving a mystic vision advises him to bring Rishyashrunga to perform a mahayaga which would save Angarajyam from drought. Vaisali was sent to forest to lure the saint and bring him into consciousness of the real world as he was completely unbothered of the existence of other humans eventually, he performed the mahayaga and the rajya was saved from continuous drought but in this process Vaisali was completely forgotten after the event where she was represented in a sensuous way. It shows the marginalization of these women and they were simply objectified depicted in an evil way and ones who are considered to be a negative influence in the society. The character of Vaisali represents easy subjugation of women and their inability to question the authority. The king Lomapadan takes advantage of both Vaisali and her mother Malini for his sexual pleasures. This does not move beyond the normative tradition of the society which expects the subjugated women to stay silent.

However, evolution of devadasis can be traced through the character of Chandramukhi in the movie Devdas. Here, Shah Rukh Khan plays the role of Devdas who is depicted as a wealthy, handsome law graduate who returns from London to marry his childhood lover Paro (Aishwarya Rai) but societal restrictions didn't favour the marriage which eventually led to him becoming an alcoholic. He confides and becomes emotionally dependent on a courtesan, Chandramukhi (Madhuri Dixit) here Chandramukhi is depicted in a sensible way that has the power to make decisions and yield with her body. She isn't merely submitting to the societal norms instead chooses the men rather than letting the men choose her. Although her profession is to dance and attract men but she doesn't let her identity be

shaped around her profession of being a devadasi. She has her own agency and stood for herself. She doesn't let anyone hurt her dignity which stands out of the very notion of Devadasi.

Pranali, another movie which shows the transformation of the protagonist from devadasi to a prostitute. It starts with Pranali's dedication to "Dev" which made her the servant of the god thus a devadasi. She is exploited, molested and eventually sold to a politician for 20 acres of land although she is able to escape from the scenario but eventually she was sold to Akka, the brothel owner where her life of destitution continued. She even gave birth to a girl called Roshni. However, even after facing such misfortunes she still fought to get out, educate her daughter and protect her at all odds. The character of Pranali differs from Vaishali and Chandramukhi as she is depicted as a woman who breaks the barriers, the stigmas attached to her identity and emerges as an independent woman who freed herself of the shackles that the society tied her with.

8. OUTCOMES

- (i) Colonial laws like the Madras Devadasi Prevention Act (1947) and Bombay Devadasi Protection Act (1934) made devadasi practices illegal. This changed their identities and took away their cultural legitimacy.
- (ii) Victorian morals and missionary views combined Devadasi traditions with prostitution. This led to severe social exclusion and loss of income.
- (iii) Devadasis were once respected performers with their own financial independence. However, colonial modernity forced them out of sacred spaces and into dishonorable ones.
- (iv) Caste and gender played a major role in the stigma against Devadasis. Colonial views only reinforced caste-based stereotypes.
- (v) The Kalavantulu women of Andhra Pradesh were the guardians of classical arts like Andhra Natyam. However, colonial and nationalist stories erased their contributions to the arts.
- (vi) Devadasis had important cultural power. They chose their patrons, owned property, performed on their own terms, and resisted being seen as victims.
- (vii) Many Devadasis fought against colonial oppression. They continued to perform artistically, reclaimed spaces in courts and public theaters, and challenged nationalist efforts to erase them.
- (viii) Nationalist and reform movements helped marginalize Devadasis by linking their traditions to immorality and promoting new standards for womanhood.
- (ix) Modern cinema often reinforces stereotypes, but it also sometimes shows Devadasis as women who navigate their own agency, face challenges, and deal with social stigma.
- (x) Even after laws ended Devadasi practices, the associated stigmas still exist in some parts of India, impacting new generations socially and economically.

9. CONCLUSION

The history of the Devadasi system, particularly in colonial India, presents a complex and layered narrative that is rooted in cultural vibrancy, colonial disruption, gendered marginalization, and ultimately, resistance and resilience. This paper traced the transformation of the Devadasi institution which was once a respected system of temple service and gradually lessened into a stigmatized identity under colonial modernity, moral reform movements, and nationalist interventions.

The central argument is about the decline and criminalization of devadasi tradition which was not organic but was the result of colonial intervention, Victorian morality, caste gender hierarchies and nationalist politics. The transition of devadasis from courtesans to devadasis is a historical evolution and not a process of degeneration. The stigmatization of devadasis was casteist i.e. immorality is linked with lower castes. Through the Kalavantulus, I sought to focus on the suppressed voice of the devadasis & their continual fight for reclaiming their voice, and resistance

towards victimhood. Through the visual representation (movies) I sought to focus on the societal construction of the identity of devadasis, it at times stigmatizes them and at times portrayed them challenging the oppressive patriarchal norms.

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