

# SOCIAL STATUS OF DEVADASIS DURING THE 7<sup>TH</sup> AND 8<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES IN TAMILNADU

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*Abstract: Religions are not just systems of belief; they are also organizations, or parts of organizations. They have a communal and social significance, which goes by the name of social dimension. The social shape of a religion is of course, to some extent determined by the religious and ethical ideals and practices that it harbors. Conversely, it often happens that the religious and ethical ideals are adapted to existing social conditions and attitudes. It is incidentally, clear that the ongoing patterns of ritual are an important element in the institutionalization of religion, if it is believed that certain ceremonies and sacraments can be properly performed only by a priest, then the religious institution will be partly determined to the need to maintain and protect a professional priesthood and the institution of the devadasis in the temples. The devadasi system was a popular institution in the history of early India. Were serving the gods in the temples throughout India. M. S. Aiyangar says that the aesthetic arts were given a religious tone from about the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE when dancing and playing dramas were encouraged to draw large crowds of devotees to every temple. Thus, hundreds of dancing girls or gandharvins were attached to every important temple. According to K. K. Pillay the system became common in South Indian temples only after the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. The creation of the institution of devadasis, the carving of the Maithuna sculpture in temples, and the exhibition of sex influence in religious rituals in India. These, raised their ugly heads only after the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, a period of decadence in Indian culture.*

## Introduction

Religions are not just systems of belief; they are also organizations, or parts of organizations. They have a communal and social significance, which goes by the name of social dimension. The social shape of a religion is of course, to some extent determined by the religious and ethical ideals and practices that it harbors. Conversely, it often happens that the religious and ethical ideals are adapted to existing social conditions and attitudes. It is incidentally, clear that the ongoing patterns of ritual are an important element in the institutionalization of religion, if it is believed that certain ceremonies and sacraments can be properly performed only by a priest, then the religious institution will be partly determined to the need to maintain and protect a professional priesthood and the institution of the *devadasis* in the temples. (Archer, 1957, 265)

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### I. Devadasi

Dedicating girls in the temples was a common feature. The parents offered their daughters to the temples of their own likings. This custom was called *Pottu kattudal*. They were used for executing their duties to god. It was not a common feature but was an unique feature carried out by particular communities alone. 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 respected of their economic status the parents dedicated their daughters to temples. It is obvious that those women were always pious. With social status they preserved dance and music. (Bhattacharya, 1984, 124-127) The custom, however, had come into vogue by about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C. E. Sharma says this custom is at least as old as *Kautilya* and *Saletore* writes the *devadasis* were clearly mentioned in the literature of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. 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 *Shutrasala* (weaving department) when they reached old age. (Behera, 1987, 163)

Kunjan Pillai crumbles to pieces when he says that *Somadevas Kathasaritgarga* of the *Gupta Age* contain the first undoubted reference to the *devadasi* system in northern India. Reference is made to the *devadasis* in the *Kumarapanha* of *Buddhaghosha* of the fifth century CE in *Kumara panha* when the learned monk says the deity descends into the body of a *devadasi* and answers the questions. Citing the crude form of *Maithuna* types of sculptural remains from the Indus Valley at least some five thousand years ago. The sexual organs and sexual reproductive processes have been subjects of ritual songs even in Vedic times, and he cites a number of passages in support. (Brown, 1959, 127)

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When "we hear of women dancers called *Aadigalmar*, otherwise known as *manikkattar* and *kanikaiyar* in the inscriptions of the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. But Pillay thinks these women attendants and dancers must have arisen probably with the emergence of structural temples. On the other hand. H. D. Sankalia is of the view that the system made its first appearance only after the emergence of the structural temples. His contention is that the temples of early days were inconspicuous little things, (James, 1940, 165) where dance could not be enacted. He also says the *sabhamandapa* (later called *rangamandapa*), which made this gradual appearance in tune the emergence of the structural temples, was not more than 100 or 200 feet square even by the 8<sup>th</sup> century

CE. Therefore, he concludes “since the *Mandapa* was originally nonexistent, and later very small, possibly there was no dance before the deity that is there was no institution of the *devadasi*”. (Pillay, 1975, 378)

## II. Social Status of Devadasis

The institution of *devadasis*, it must be mentioned, did nothing do 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 *davadasis*, prostitution was, if anything, encouraged by the state and the Temple. We are, perhaps, unduly harsh on the Hindu, dancers all over world have held a low social position and even in the highly civilized nations of 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. (Ayangar, 1929, 189-190)

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 Alwar, a *Vaishnava* mystic savant, is said to have dedicated his own daughter Neela, as a *devadasi* to the temple of *Srirangam*. The kings and nobles never thought it disgraceful to marry *devadasis*. Inscriptions in the *Sucindram Temple* show that a theatre and various *mandapams* in the temple were endowed by *devadasis*. (Pillai, 1970, 154-160) The *devadasis* held an important position in the temple activities. 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* were deputed to walk at the head of Hindu marriage processions. (Atlekar, 1973, 182)

The *devadasis* had their own law of inheritance, customs, rules of etiquette and Panchayats to settle 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* were associate with the temples and they were experts in dance and music. They were *devadasi*. (Pillay, 1979, 321-322) Though Marco Polo, Barbosa, Caesar, Frederic, and others have referred to *sati* and *devaradiyar*, due to their dedicated services. They had privileges in temple worship also, during the second regnal year of *Varagunall* (864 CE) *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 the women in general. (Ayangar, 191) At the times, due to economic reasons they were even sold as slaves to the wealthy people and they directed to carry out men a service. Thus, the status in general was not at all an appreciable one. There were many up and downs in the society with regard to women. As an overall measure it must be noted that they had no social mingling and their life was secluded one. (Atlekar, 1934, 295)

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. *Paripatal* 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 flute, lute and drum. According to *Vishnudharmottara* the dedication of dance and music to *Vishnu* is far more meritorious than flower and food offerings. (*Pudukkottai Inscriptions*, 253) Literary evidences show 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. (*Tolkappiyam, Purattinai Iyal*, 30)

In the *Tamil literature* of southern India we find much prominence has been given to *Siva* as *Nataraja*, and *Chidambaram* has been given a very high place as a sacred *Tirtha* (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 by means of renunciation. Temples of various size 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. (*Sambandar, Tevaram.276-277*)

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. *Silappatikaram*, 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 the 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 *vettiyal* and *poduviyal* is given with a stress in a suggestive manner. (Sharma, 1872, 74)

### III. Epigraphic Evidences of Devadasis

As 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 times. (Madras, 1974, 321)

As the last one includes *Natanam* in its fold; the references to *Muttamil* call the attention of our enquiry 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 *Muttamil*. *Natakattamil* which includes dance was kept in par with the others if not more. (A. R. E. 211 of 1912) The dance was to be performed before the *Temple of Tiruvelgaivayil Andar* in *Chittirai* when the chief festival was in celebration. For the purpose, the dancing girl was given lands free of tax and, furthermore, 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. In the same temple King Rajadhiraja II states in another inscription that in order to perform *Santikkuttu* six times in the *Tiruvadirai* 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 with each other at least in certain respects. (A. R. E. 306 of 1928-29) 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 *Pattamadai* 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. (A. R. E. 190 of 1935-36)

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 '*Niritutta-mantapam*' 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. (S. I. I., Vol. XIX, No. 275) 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*, adept in 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*). (A. R. E. 127 of 1913) 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 a number of *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* (order of a devadasi). (*S. I. E.*, 215 of 1936)

The later *Pandyas* had also continued the *Chola practice* in good stead. Under the *devadasis* were conferred various honorifics such as *mannaraimudisuttum perumal* (the "king-maker"), *Kulasekhara manikkam* (the "ruby of Kulasekhara"), *Tiruvencatamanikkam* (the 'ruby of Tiruvencatam), etc. — a title of honor very rarely conferred on select *devadasis*. The earliest reference to this title occurs in an inscription of the time of *Pandyan Nedunchilyan* (probably of 3<sup>rd</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) from *Minakshipuram* near *Madurai*. It was conferred on some important persons of the state as a symbol of state recognition. Inscriptions of the *Chola* period inform us that it was conferred on some government officials. However, it is learnt from inscriptions that it was conferred not only on artists such as *devadasis*, but also on those artists who had the supervisory powers. The *Rajarajeswaram* record of *Rajaraja I* (CE 985-1014) refers to one *Araiyar Manalilingan* alias *Sembian Perun Kavidi*, who enjoyed the supervisory power and received one share as remuneration. If this view is taken into consecration, then the mention of this term in the above *Pandya* record may refer to that *devadasi* who held the post of supervisor of other artists. (*S. I. E.*, 215 of 1936)

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 on a regular basis 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. (*S. I. I.*, Vol. XIX, No. 128, 430) 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. Which the devotee is to touch, serve, adorn, worship and take refugees and the most frequently used term for devotee is "*adiyar*". *Adiyar* is more often applied to 'devotees' rather than slaves, and temple women are counted among both "*adiyar*" meaning devotees and *adiyan* meaning slaves. (Kasinathan & Damodaran, 1976, 38)

None of the *talichcheri pendir* hails from far away *Kanchipuram*. All the fifty-four of the town mentioned in the inscription are from the home towns. These women are in the core *Chola* region of *Tanjavur* and *Tiruchchirappalli* districts. Forty-six *talichcheri pendugal* came to the *Tanjavur Temple* from *Tiruvarur*. One from *Palaiyarai*, twenty-one from *Niyamam*, eighteen was from four temples at *Tanjavur*, seventeen from *Tiruvidadimarudur* and sixteen from *Ayirattali*. (*S. I. I.*, Vol. XIV, No.16) Surrounding the temples there are sculptures exposing the various dance postures. The east and west *gopurams* situated in the outer *prakara* of the *Chidambaram Temple* display figures posing in 108 postures of dance with their names inscribed above each in *grantha*. These figures seem to have been engraved during the time of *Kopperunjingan* in the middle of the thirteenth century CE. In the *Vimanam* of the *Big Temple at Tanjavur*

only 84 such figures are found while the others left are incomplete. (Muddaliyar, 1981, 420) From these epigraphic evidences, it is quite clear that the art of dance was held in high esteem both by the king and the people. Titles were conferred upon the best dancers. *Tirunelveli Udaiyar* temple inscription speaks of a dancing girl known as *Alagiya Perumal Talaikkoli*. Here it is seen that the title “*Talaikkoli*” is added with the name of the dancer. Royal patronage had fed the art sufficiently well, and so it had thrived fully well. Various *kuttus* were in vogue, perhaps more developed and sophisticated than those mentioned in the earlier literatures. The themes of the dance performances were mostly *Puranic*, and they were ordinarily conducted in temples during festival times as part of the customary aspects of the celebration. (*Maduraikkanchi*, 1.499) As the *devadasis* were associated with temples they enjoyed a venerable position in the society. It also suggests the prevalence of the custom of *Pothu kattudal* during the period of *Pandyas* themselves.

The *Thiruvorriyur* inscription of *Rajadhi raja* dated 1049 CE refers to the marriage of a *devadasi*. They were purchased by temple authorities for singing *Thiruppathigam* and flying whisks to deities. There are inscriptions from *Thiruvallan* (1119 CE) and *Thiruvlangadu* (1175 CE) which state that *devadasis* were purchased for temples. They reveal the once it in of women. It was a custom among women to sell themselves the along with their friends and relatives to temples to keep away from the atrocities of the families as well as the society. As they had wealth they too were donors of grants to others. (Ayangar, 1929, 191) The 49<sup>th</sup> year inscription of *Kulothunga I* (1070-1120 CE) suggests that one Pallavaroyan, an army chief, sold four women of his family to the temple *Thiruvallan* after estimating the *Trisulamark*. Vayiradharan, an official, sold the girls when he obtained them as *Stridhana* for his wife. Thus, the *devadasi* system during the *Chola* period was a black spot in the *Tamil society* as it converted women into prostitutes due to their deteriorated economic positions. Their identities enable them to be approached by others easily. Any attachment of women to temples was due to economic reasons - such as the impossible nature of giving dowry. But that was executed with religious *Sanctification*. (*S. I. I.*, Vol. XIV, No.16) Twenty thousand dancing girls who sang twice daily while offering food and flowers to the *Buddha* (or the idols). Alberuni confirms the existence of the institutions of *devadasis* being maintained by the kings. Four hundred *devadasis* were attached to the *Temple of Tanjavur* during the reign of Cola King Rajaraj I (1004 CE). Bhattabhavadeva, minister of King Harivarman of East Bengal, gave a hundred dancing girls. (Nagaswamy, 1969, 128)

It was, therefore, only appropriate that, in keeping with her elevated status, she was depicted on temple walls. That also explains why erotic couples and *alaskanyas* were provided with lotus pedestals and thus invested with an aura of divinity. According to *Bhavisyapurana* (an ancient Śūdra account of the origin of castes), the best way to win *Siryaloka* is to dedicate a heavy (crowd) of prostitutes to a solar temple. The *Padmapurana*, *Sristikhanda* recommends the purchase of beautiful girls for dedication to temples. The *Matsyapurana* advises that prostitutes should live in the capital and temples, and treat kings and their sons as their husbands. (Govindarajan, 1987, 31) *Devadasi* is a euphemistic term for *vesya* (prostitute). No wonder, therefore, that the kings and aristocrats glorified the *devadasis* by portraying their erotic activities

on temple walls. On this basis, no tour de force is needed to explain the sculptures exhibiting sexual perversions. It is also not unlikely that, in course of time, the original motivation and purpose of these sculptures was forgotten, but copulating beings survived as an auspicious motif even after the institution of *devadasis* had declined in the North. (Talim, 1972, 191)

### Conclusion

The fact that erotic sculptures were not displayed on many temples in the North, especially in Tamilnadu and Kerala in the South, does not invalidate our suggestion. Though no widespread *devaddsi* 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 *Sanysis* who have fallen from the path of virtue and who have used the garb of a *saydsti* to enjoy physical pleasures. A public display of this dichotomy between their preaching and practice could help the *devaddsis* to meet the threat of the orthodox opinion, which emphasized virtues of *brahmachary*, *chastity* and renunciation. The *dmaidstras* and the contemporary liter rapture contain ample evidence of the social status the *ganikas* or courtesans so enjoyed, and the atmosphere of permissiveness that prevailed. Coupled with the philosophy of *Vimacirathism* they have helped to promote sexual promiscuity as well as made such sculptures acceptable to the *elite*.

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