DEVADASIS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Dr.Sudash Lama & Sanchita Mahanta

Abstract: The tradition of Devadāsī is a century-old phenomenon. The theme of pleasing the Supreme Being is nothing but a continuous process of devotion and belief in divinity. One association with divine power can be seen in the case of devadasis. These women were considered as the wives of the Gods, but in later periods they were also associated with the Goddesses too. As devadasis was seen as the utmost replica of chaste women because of their connexion with the celestial beings. The temple was the epicentre of the early medieval and medieval society. The temples were mainly donated by the royal families, rich merchants, and merchant guilds to legitimize the feudal polity to form an equation between the deity and the ruler in the world of authority in the agrarian fields as well as in materialistic matters. They were never recognized as widows or deprived of their marital status, as they were married to a god who was immortal. The theme of social constructs changed with in the bygone times; it translated from gender to sex, biological identification to define human beings. The system has gone through erosion in its position because of the existing power struggle of men in the social, political, economic, and cultural yards. In the shadow of patriarchy, devadasis occupied the role of a man, yet remained as like another woman in the social conjuncture. The practice of donating girls in the temples gave birth to a quasi-matrilineal community under the patriarchal equilibrium.

Keywords: Matrilineal, Embedded, Tradition, Honour, Stigma

Introduction

The predefined social constructs of gender that are termed masculine and feminine are being used to label a particular human being. These definitions have been continued for ages. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the journey of honour associated with Devadāsīs. Later, it takes the wrong turn to the path of stigma, which leads them to a blocked destination. The position of patriarchs in the embedded matrilineal system is placed under the formation of a patriarchal society. From the nineteenth century onwards, the suffrage movement has taken the lead in coming up with the visibility and vocality of women in front of the social lens. Women are viewed as receptacles, with their status or position changing to reflect the state of the world around them (Roy, 2011, pp.1-3).

The embedded part of society is a broader causal nexus. The terracotta figurine of the mother goddess excavated from the Indus Valley civilization assures the position of women in social phenomena. The Vedic corpus provides a handful of sources of women sages who renounced the world with their knowledge. They remained unmarried and did not take up the responsibility of procreation for the rest of their lives. Rather, they took part in the procreation of knowledge. They lived in forests, learned *Samhitas*, *Aranyakas*, and, Upanishads, and led their life

on the road of salvation. Though there was evidence of the involvement of women in the Indus Valley civilization and Vedic age, yet it was limited. In the later period of time, with the flow of expansionism and militarism, society evolved into a new stage where the expectations shifted from an instrument of procreation to objectification of women who would produce warrior sons. These changes in society tried to put various new terms and conditions on women's visibility.

Historical Background

In the world of gods and goddesses, to please be an essential theme created by humans. These themes are changed with the course of space and time. As far the discovery of Sītābengā and Jogīmārā caves in Ramgarh hills at Surguja district in Chattisgarh is is concerned, it unravelled the earliest history of devadāsī tradition in the Indian subcontinent. According to Richard Salomon (Salomon, 1998, p.141), a scholar of Indian epigraphy, Sanskrit and Buddhist studies, suggests that both of the Ramgarh caves having inscriptions are dated back to the 3rd century BCE. The Sītābengā cave [Plate-XLIII(a)], written in Prakrit, Saurasena dialect, has a two-line inscription with letters of equal size in Brahmi script just below the roof of the cave close to the top cut-out wall on the northern side of the entrance states-

(L.1) *adipayaṁtihadayaṁ | sabhāva-garukavayo e rātayaṁ...*

(L.2) *dulevasaṁitiyā | hāsāvānūbhūte | kudasphataṁevaṁalaṁg* . [t.]

The above-mentioned inscription (Bloch, 1903-4, pp.123-124) has different translated versions by many prominent scholars. One of the personalities who took the lead was Haraprasad Sastri (Sastri, 1902. pp.90-91) he translates the above inscription as-

> I salute the beautifully formed one who shows us the gods. I salute
> the beautiful form that leads us to the gods. He is much in quest at
> Varanasi. I salute the god-given one for seeing his beautiful form.

The other translation was given by T. Bloch (Bloch, 1903-4, p.123) in his book *Caves and Inscriptions in Ramgarh Hills, Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1903-4*, translating the above lines of the inscriptions as-

"(L.1) Poets venerable by nature kindle the heart, who...

(L.2) At the swing festival of the vernal full moon, when frolics and music abound, people thus(?) tie (around their necks garlands) thick with jasmine flowers."

The above description from *Sītābengā* cave evidently prescribes that caves were not always used as an abode of ascetics to renounce worldly attachments, but sometimes also used as places which may be for reciting poetry, singing love songs, and acting in theatrical performances. The other inscription from Jogīmārā caves [Plate X(b)] written in Prakrit, Magadhi dialect in Brahmi script added more

evidence to trace the tradition of devadāsī. The later cave inscription (Bloch, 1903-4, p.128) states-

(1) Śutanukanama

(2) devadaśikyi

(3) Śutanukanamadevadaśikyi |

(4) taṁkamayithabal [a] naśeye |

(5) devadinenama | lupadakhe |

The latter inscription in the translation (Bloch, 1903-4, pp. 128-129) was given by T.E. Bloch, explains as-

(1) Sutanukā by name,

(2) a Devadāsī.

(3) Sutanukā by name, a devadāsī.

(4) The excellent among young men loved her,

(5) Devadinna, by name, is skilled in sculpture.

As Haraprasad Sastri (Sastri, 1902, p.90) translates-

> The heart of a lady living at a distance (from her lover) is set to flames by the following three:- Sadam Bagara and the poet. For her, this cave is excavated. Let the god of love look at it.

Another translation was given by Professor Luders, (Luders, 1961, p.867.) states-

> The temple-servant (devadasikyi) Sutanuka (Sutanuki) by name. The copyist (lupadakha), Devadina (Devadatta) by name, the Balanaseya (native from Baranasi), loved her.

The translation of the Jogīmārā cave inscription (Bandopadhyay, 1980, pp. 44-45) differs from one scholar to another. This confusion mainly arose due to the interpretation of the words "*lupadakhe"* and *bal[a]naśeye*. K.P. Jayaswal (Jayaswal, 1919, pp. 131) *The Jogimara Cave Inscription* in the Indian Antiquary describes the term "*lupadakhe"(= rudraksha)* meant for some officials or ministers, and Sutanukā was an ascetic, not a beloved one of Devadinna, the *rudraksha*. And the inscription was a decree issued to that ascetic woman related to her worship of *Varuna*. He translates the inscriptions as-

"In Favour of Satanuka, the devadasi (Order) 'Sutanaka,' by name, devadasi, of austere life, (is) now in the service of Varuna. – Devadina (=Devadatta) by name, Rupadaksha.

Scholars like S.N. Ghosal, forwarded his opinion about the translation of Jogīmārā inscription (Bandopadhyay, 1980, p. 44) as-

> Sutanaka by name, a female attendant (devoted to the service of the gods). Her beloved, who came from Benaras, Devadinna by name, skillful in the dramatic performances (i.e.), adept in the historical art).

S C Chatterji (Chatterji,1960, pp.35-36), S Settar (Settar, 2003, pp.35-39), and others also opined about the relationship between Devadāsī *Sutanukā* and *Devadina,* but what is more interesting in this context is the mention of the term Devadāsī, who is none other than the sacred attendants of gods. As Professor Jayaswal defines, the worship of *Varuna* by Sutanukā added more evidence to the tradition of devadāsī and devoted as wives of gods dated back to the cave age era.(Jayaswal, 1919, p.131) The term devadāsī connotes '*devā,'* who is a god, and the subsequent term *'dasī'* is a hand-maiden of god. The definition of devadāsī stands for the maidens of god or wives of gods once who enjoyed the great privileged life of honour in society.

Here we can see that Sutanukā, who belonged to the section of devadāsīs, has provided a place to lie down. The preliminary cave inscription of Sītābengā, where dancers and actors used to perform, maybe for the gods or audiences, and the later inscription found nearby the previous cave denote it must serve as a resting place where performers used to take a rest after performing. In addition to the research by Bloch at Sītābengā and Jogīmārā caves at Ramgarh hills, Professor Luders explains the term "leṇaśobhikā" who were the "cave actresses" (Luders, 1961, p.127) occurs in the Mathurā inscription. Along with that, he also pointed out the passages in Kālidāsā's poems, which, however, show that caves in ancient India were not entirely built for religious purposes but often served in quite different ways as the abode of dancing girls and their lovers. The gap between the Ramgarh cave inscriptions and Kālidāsā's age is counted as almost 700 years, which clearly noted that the practice of Devadāsī was a bygone tradition attached to caves, later with temples and religious institutions.

The Jaina text *Rayapasaneyasutra* explains several dancers who were well-learned in various arts. They also performed thirty-two types of dancing poses in front of the Mahavira. During the early Buddhist period, accomplished dancing girls occupied a recognized position in the society. Buddhist literary sources mention the *nagaravadhus and yikes-magadhavati,* salvation, *basavdatta, Vimala,* and *Amrapali or Amrapali*. From the Maurya period onwards, social stratification came to a new change with the expansion of kingdoms from the core to the peninsula. Kautilya's Arthasastra defines the duties and responsibilities of devadasis and *ganikas;* they had to spend eight years of training and to recognize as cultured people, they needed to learn 64 essential skills (*kalas)*, singing, dancing, performing with musical instruments, and sometimes they were trained as spies also. Kalidasa, in Meghadutam, gave a description of dancing girls performing in Mahakala temple at Ujjain.

During the early medieval period, women were engaged in domestic as well as in economic pursuits. Vatsayana in his book Kamasutra, discloses many passages describing how their conduct should be and always forms a private communication (Vatsayana, 1883-1925, pp. 98-152) with their partners. It is evident from the works of Vatsayana and Kautilya, respectively, that the practice of cryptography and well-known ciphers belonged to the temple dancers (Madras Courier, 2017) because they were well trained in those essential *kalas.* In the 12th century, the *Rajatarangini,* written by Kalhana, speaks about the practice of devadāsīs in Kashmir and other parts of the subcontinent. In this context, we can trace the story of *Jayapida*, king of the Karkota dynasty of Kashmir; he who visited the Pundravardhana of Gauda banga and saw the *Lasya* dance by devadāsī named Kamala (Dutt, 1987, pp. 84-88) in the temple of *Karttikeya.*

Tradition of Devadasi

The practice of devadāsī was not unique in the Indian subcontinent, but the recruitment of girls into the temple was also prominent in the temples of Egypt, Greece, and Babylon. The process of entrance to become a devadasi has seven gates (Mukhopadhyaya, 2000, p. 163); *Datta,* donated by the householder for *punya* or to clean their *papa* or sins; *hrta,* captured and gifted to the temple*;* birth, sold in lieu of money*; baryta,* self-donated in front of the deity; *bhakta* or devadāsī*,* donated herself as a nun, *Malankara* or *Malankara,* after completion the course of *kalas* of singing and dancing they jewelled and donated to god. The royal women and princesses were donated as *Malankara.* Lastly, the *Topeka,* or *rudraganika,* was paid to perform on some special occasions conducted in the temple complexes. These illustrations depicted that the devadāsīs were coming from different social backgrounds. The initiation ceremony of devadāsī is held in the ambit of the temple, and the grandeur of the ceremony depends upon the social class belonging to devadāsīs. The process of inclusion was both ritualistic and non-ritualistic in nature, the first was customary, and the latter one is obligatory (Pande, 2005, p. 12).The ritualistic induction of girls into the temple by performing the marriage ceremony to the deity by wearing the thread of *nityasumangali* (Kersenboom, 1984, 1984, pp. 13-30*),* after marriage, she was considered auspicious at times and a deviant woman, who socially outcast for the rest of her life, yet termed as a divine shadow (Sharma, 2018, pp. 79-93). They were never recognized as widows or deprived of their marital status, as they were married to a god who was immortal. As the elite section of society voluntarily donated their daughters to the service of the temple, they were termed as *sampradayamvaru,* devoted as *Markakis* and *kayaks*.

On the other hand, the girls, who belonged to the lower class, worked as fan-bearers and decorators of the temple complex; in short, they were given labour-intensive work. The temple girls hardly identified as devadāsī*;* instead of that, they were referred to as *munuti sanulu, sani* or *munuri, basavi, Patri, devarasule,* (Pande, 2005, p. 9) etc, clearly indicating their social status within the embedded matrilineal system under the umbrella of patriarchy. Since the temple girls and women had to

perform most of the services of the temple, they often provided residences near the temple with separate quarters belonging to different classes. The temples could have 300-500 devadāsīs, depending upon their location and importance. They often performed the *margaritas* and *namasankirtanas* for the audience. Tirumala Tirupati inscription (Pande, 2005, pp. 9-10) mentions that the temple dancers accompanied the procession of deities through the streets and markets.

There are mainly two reasons for donating girls to the temples, one is raising the social status, and the precedence is the economic reason that is in lieu of money. The former occasion was pre-eminently for the Kings and the elite' donation of girls to the temples; as an act of virtue, and the latter occurred by the parents who donated their girl child as an act of religiosity and favouring their economic condition. One such instance was the merchant of Elesvaram, who donated his two daughters to the temple. The devadāsī of the prestigious class were allowed to marry kings and noblemen. This rule was not followed by thedevadāsīs, who belonged to the lower class of society. During the 9th – 10th centuries, the theme of pleasing god was changed from *sringara rasa* (Takako, 2014, pp. 321-323) to *bhakti rasa,* emphasizing the religious attributes rather than the loved relationship between god and humans. In the context of devadāsī, *deva,* or the god, is the beloved, and *dasi*, or the maiden of god, is the lover, but with the flow of time, this state of relationship transforms into devotion towards the supreme.

Northern India

The temple was the epicentre of early medieval and medieval society (Pande, 2005, p.7). Almost all the early medieval ruling dynasties went through the process of legitimization and cult imbibition (Chattapadhyaya, 2005, pp. 171-190) during this period. The ruling dynasties implored the warrior sons of gods and goddesses, who upheld their position in the social strata. To brighten up the glory among the other dynasties, it is important to maintain a cordial relationship with the temple, as it ranked at the pinnacle of the social ledge. The rulers assumed dual sovereignty of both political and ritualistic aspects. Thus, the Vedic concept of *dana-dakshina* was replaced by the process of legitimization. In the later period of the Gupta-Vakataka age, the grants of devadāsī and *brahmadeya* given to the temples and Brahmanas, respectively, soon got their institutionalized characterization.

Temple architecture in India has always embodied an underlying vision. It is a representation of experience, moulded in space and time. The art and architecture involved in the construction of temples are well defined in the Shilpasastra, which mentions about three major types of temple architecture in India: Nagara, Vesara, and Dravida. The temples of Khajuraho are magnificent examples of Nagara ornate style, built by the Chandra rulers between 900 CE.-1130 CE. Devadāsīs were once a major part of temple activities. Majorly they were brought from Magadha and Malwa regions and trained as devadāsīs in the temple. The practice of devadāsīs was in vogue and reflected in the figures of surasundaris (Ladies with musical

instruments), who covered the interior and exterior walls of the temple and were believed to be taken from real-life and juxtaposed with the sculptures of gods and goddesses.

The practice of Devadāsī is an age-old tradition, and the general assumption of the term Devadāsīs is that they might be associated with temples or religious institutions. So, the architectural evidence of Devadāsīs from the temple complexes is extraordinary in manner and presentation. The Natamandira is a striking architectural feature of Odisha which was added to the main temple which are *Deul* and *Jagamohan*, an arena for the performance of music and dance. One such example is traces from the Bhubaneswar and Konark in Odisha, the Jagannath temple (Marglin, 1985, pp.30-37) and Konark Sun Temple displays ample scenes of music and dance performed by women.

Other sources from the Brahmesvara *Siva* temple inscription (Pal, 2012, p. 124) of the time of Somavamsi ruler Udyota Keshari mentioned that his mother Kalavati built the cloud-touching temple for Lord *Siva* and dedicated beautiful dancing girls to the god; the girls were adorned with ornaments made in jewels and appeared everlasting but playful lightening and looked lovely like the pupils of the eyes of men. The *Sobhanesvara* temple inscription (Rajguru, 1903, pp.242-284) states that the king named *Vaidyanatha* constructed the compound wall in the *Sobhanesvara Siva* temple, offering beautiful dancers like the *apsaras* of heaven who have nectar in their sweet lips and ornamented with jewels and bijou. From the Ganga period onwards, especially under the rule of AnantaVarmanChodaganga Deva, the practice of Devadāsīs extended to Vaishnavite temples. The Korni Copper plate grant of Chodaganga describes in the *Srikurmam* temple that the Devadāsīs were appointed to the service of God Kurmesvara; they performed singing and dancing in the morning and evening for the deity.

In the Vaghli stone inscription (Epigraphia Indica, 1898, p.227) dated *saka* 991(1069 – 1070 CE.) grant of Govindraja making provision for *vilasinis*, who were dancing and singing damsels in the temple. In the other inscription issued by Cahamana king Jojaladeva dated *samvat* 1147 (1090 – 1091 CE.), the courtesans of all temples are said to have been ordered to come in their best dress and celebrate a festival of music (Epigraphia Indica, 1911, pp. 26-27). Here we can see the change in the position of devadāsīs, the king who recognized himself on the grounds of religiosity, polity, and society as equal and supreme, and he makes an order over temple dancers who mainly serve the temple deity.

Southern India

In many instances, the practice of devadāsī is one such informed precedent. The term devadāsī is traced back to its origin from the legendary tradition of the southern part of India about the story of sage *Siva Jamadagni* and his wife*, Renuka.* The story narrates (Jagnathan, 2013, pp. 1-5) that her chastity was so pure that she could make a pot out of sand that could hold water. But one such day when she

tried to make pot but failed because she saw a couple enjoying intimate desires in front of the river and lost her chastity. After questioning her chastity, sage *Jamadagini* cursed his wife and ordered his four sons to cut their mother's head. Three of his sons refused to do so, except his fourth son, *Parasurama*; he beheaded his mother and asked for a boon from his father. That her mother also live once again. But sage *Jamadagini* accepts the boon only the alive *Renuka*'s head, not the whole body. Thus the goddess *Yellamma* (Jaganathan, 2013, pp. 1-12) was born; she is worshipped by the devadāsīs in the southern part of India.

Chennakesava temple at Belur displays exquisite carvings of bracket figures, including male and female dancers dedicated to lord Vishnu. The Hoysala temple complexes show the variations of dancers or devadāsīs dedicated to the deity, where both male and female dancers are devoted to the lord. Figures like *tribhangisundari* (Tri-style dancing lady), *gaanasundari* (singing beauty), *Martina lole* (lady dancing with drum), Natyamohini, etc. represent female dancers who please the god with their arts (*kala*).

Kolappa Kanakasabhapathi Pillay in his monumental work, *The Sucindrem Temple* (Pillay, 1953, pp. 205-230) writes- *"O Thanumalaya, who resides in the Sucindrem with woman as one half! ..."*, which states that the principal deity of *Sucindrem* resided with women, who basically were the devadāsīs dedicated in the temple. The entrance porch or *natakshala* of the temple has eight pillars at the base, each of which is a statue of a woman, commemorating the eight devadasis who contributed to the construction of the space in the 16th century CE. Contemporarily, the in front of the Ilayanayanar or Subramanya shrine, which is the work of devadāsī Sitamma. She and her mother, Malaikutty, are commemorated with statues at the entrance. The elegant pavilions (*Chitrasabha)* and the *Vasanthamandapam*, where lord Nataraja worshipped, are also attributed to devadāsī Malayakutty Malayamma (Pillay, 1953, p. 210) of the 19th century.

The information regarding the status of devadāsīs displays that they had a prestigious position in society and were looked upon as one of the closest members to the deity. This also suggests that they had a pretty well-lavished life so they could contribute to the construction of the temple at Sucindrem, were bestowed with responsibilities of the temple, and erected statues of themselves, which not common for other women in existing society. The devadāsīs were richly honoured by the kings of successive dynasties, and it is interesting to note that during the period of Venad rulers of Kerala (c. 8th/9th CE – 1729), some of the devadāsīs were given the title of Rayar in Sucindrem. Titles like Rayar given to devadasis represent their social importance in many parts of the temple and are attributed to donations by devadasis and their well-economic position. The status of devadasis was further deteriorated during the colonial era when the colonial mindset imposed the concept of prostitution on the temple dancers and devadasis as well.

The archaeological evidence from the inscriptions of 1004 C.E. of the Rajarajesvara temple at Tanjore decodes that 400 devadāsī stayed and held second place after the priests in the temple complex (Pande, 2006, pp. 5-14). From the 6th century onwards, devadāsī bestowed high dignity and moral respect in society during the reign of Cholas and Pallavas. This evidences confirmed the existing system of donation for girls in the temple continued till ages

The residential address for Devadāsīs was temple buildings, and the magnificent temple architecture created a sense of competition among the royals and aristocrats to showcase their victories and achievements in front of ordinary people. Pallava king Mahendravarmana records his achievements in the *Mandakapattu* inscription (Prasad, 1999, pp. 129-136) written in Sanskrit in Pallava Grantha script dated to the early 7th century CE. At *Mandakapattu Tirumurthi* temple, located in Tamil Nadu, states about building ayatana(home) for the gods. In the Orrisan sources, it is recorded that Ganga king Narasimhadeva I built majestic temples supplemented by recurring levies in cash and kind, together with periodic interests charged on fixed sums of money deposited with the temples, added to their wealth and magnificence. The Ittigi inscription (Epigraphia Indica, 1913-14, p.58) dated 1112 CE. who recorded a Brahmana named *Mahādevahas* who donated houses for the retinue of dancing girls of the temple. Records like this show that to earn *punya* as well as a prestigious position in society, people used to donate land to devadasis. Thus, temples grow into the wealthiest institutions of the time.

The temples were mainly donated by the royal families, rich merchants, and merchant guilds to legitimize the feudal polity to form an equation between the deity and the ruler in the world of authority in the agrarian fields as well as in the materialistic matters. These suggestions indicate that God was an earthly king, like the king in the court. Thus, the distinction between rajas and devas diminished with the interchangeability of women in the temple services with those of the king's court.

On the grounds of polity and society, the king emerges as the Supreme Being, as he compares himself to god, blurring the line between deity and human being. The *Kalahasti* temple records describe that the king ordered him to transfer dancing girls and their descendants from his service to the amenity of that temple. This shows that the devadāsīs crossed from the king's court and entered the temple boundary. The *Mukhalingam* temple records (Pande, 2006, pp.7-8) mention *vasama,* a *gudisani* of *Madhukesvara* temple, *Sanjaya* was of *Doddapanyaka,* an officer of king Rajendra Chola.

Transition from the stage of honour to stigma

Initially, devadāsīs were subject to two great honours. First, they were literally married to the deity, were to be treated as a portrayal of the Goddess herself, and secondly, they were considered to be those great women who could control natural human impulses and submit themselves completely to God. Though the honours

were distinguished between the *varnas*, they provide shelter for the maidens to earn their own. They have a unique lifestyle similar to men in society. Like; they have similar rights over property and inheritance. Other than property rights, devadāsī can perform *shradh* after the death of her father, which no women were allowed to perform in general.

The Dharmaśāstras allow retired devadāsīs to take up weaving and spinning as a source of livelihood (Thapar, 2003, p. 413). The Arthasastra also made the same statement on acquiring wealth from women. Temple dancers were generally paid in kind, with a share in the temple property. They were paid in cash occasionally during the festivities. Inscriptions found in Karnataka suggest that land was the major source of income for them*;* they were given both dry and wetlands and stipulated that they were also allowed to lease out the land for earning. Thanjavur inscription attests that Rajaraja I assigned lands to 400 devadāsīs according to their ranks, which gave them financial independence by managing lands and living on their own wage. They were leading their lives with full privilege and honour.

From the 12th century onwards, recruitment of devadāsīs and their service in the temples became hereditary. As the literary sources remark, that they belonged to various social groups, from royal women to the poverty-ridden girls becoming hand-maidens of God. So, with the changing course of time, they formed an 'occupational group' (Sriram, 2007, pp.) rather than a caste within the matrilineal structure. The term caste itself is a Portuguese-originated phrase, later added to the Indian societal hierarchy. Changes also occurred in the process of the initiation ceremony, including the deflowering ceremony or *uditambuvadu,* whereby the priests would have intercourse with every devadāsī enrolled in the temple as a ritual of religious sanctity. There are several factors that made contributions to change the gaze towards devadāsīs, but religious beliefs, poverty, caste system, male domination stands out loud among them.

As Aparimita Sahoo (Sahoo, 2006), in her essay*,* pointed out that the institution of temple dancers lost their patrons, their principal financial sponsors, due to the frequent Islamic invasions at that time. She also asserted that the exploitation of lower varna women came into prominence, which made dance and prostitution inseparable. Professor Rekha Pande clearly defined that, with the passage of time, the practice of devadāsīs is viewed as 'performer-cum-prostitute' and as an 'isolated form', not as an 'associated form' or component of sacred complexes (Pande, 2005, pp. 39-65). During this period of time, the dedication of girls in the temple was completely shifted from an act of honour to improving the economic condition of that family.

One of the main instincts of dedication of young girls was that they were daughters. People from the lower varna dedicated their young daughters to the temples because they were viewed as expenditure in the family. These incidents led the existing practice of devadāsī to take a new turn, which is the donation of girls from the lower

varnas to rid of their responsibility of taking care of her. Jinadatta Suri, a 12th-century Jaina saint and author, wrote *Apabhramsakavyatray* states, the worshipping area became *kamadhyavasaya* instead of *dharmadhyavasaya*. It shows how the place of *Dharma* became the arena of *kama*, later taking the shape of evil in the society. The question of dignity and chastity started to be defined by the terms and conditions of the upper classes of the social order. It is important to mention here that the Westernized elites define a dichotomous character of women as a chaste or a prostitute. This demarcation of character left a deep impact on how we gaze towards women. Here the truth lies that devadāsīs were holy artists, not prostitutes in general. They maintained the sanctity of dance and devotion to the deity. The profession of prostitution is considered immoral in society. However, the dedication of girls from lower varnas used to justify the practice of prostitution, hence devadāsīs escape the furnished social stigma.

There is a saying in Marathi, *"Devadasi deva chan, byako saaraya Karachi"* (Pande, 2005, pp. 5-14) - servant of God but the wife of the whole town. This above statement confirmed that in real scenarios, the embedded social stigma associated with them could only be felt through the question of gazing. In the context of chastity and prostitution, historian Leah Lydia Otis states that, the institution is a "phenomenon in which socially identified group of women earn their living principally or exclusively from the commerce of their bodies" (Otis, 2009, pp. 7-25). So, we can trace the beginning of the state of the stigma that after the destruction of the temple and patronization from the upper classes, devadasis fell into a condition of major economic stress. They were the handmaidens of the gods and not permitted to lead a normal life of women. Thus, they choose the spontaneous option of dancing with prostitutes to live their lives on their own.

Abbe Dubois, a French missionary who spent nearly 30 years in the southern part of India, recorded his observations in his *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies–*

> *Once the devadasis sanctuary obligations are finished, they start to open and show their cells of shame an irregular change over the sanctuary itself into a stew. A religion more disgraceful or acute disgusting has never existed among socialized people.*

It suggests that the practice of devadāsī fell into disrepute with the phase of exploitation of women from the lower varnas by the socialized people of the upper varnas (Dubois, 1905, pp.577-612).

In the later period of time, when they moved from hand-maidens of God to a synonymous substitute with *ganikas* or prostitution and living on their own made them self-independent in lieu of depending on patriarchs for wages. The patriarchal religio-social corner allows them to practice social rituals like giving blessings as divine shadows, inheritance of property, *shraadh*, etc. In the shadow of patriarchy,

she occupied the role of a man, yet remained as another woman in the social conjuncture.

Conclusion

The theme of social constructs changed with in the bygone times; it transited from gender to sex, biological identification to define human beings. The system has gone through erosion in their position because of the existing power struggle of men in the social, political, economic, and cultural yards. The donated temple girls belonged to various varnas, thus giving different ranks associated with its social position. From the perspective of, varnas though they were donated and controlled by men of the society, yet formed a embedded matrilineal hierarchy among themselves that continued till date.

Devadāsīs, in a general manner, were the wives of gods and associated with temple services, leaving a murky inception of their existence yet surviving on their own strength. The reference to Vishnu as the presiding deity of *sringara-rasa* traces in the text *Natya-sastra* (Ghosh, 1950, pp. 33-42) of Bharatmuni is which defines the divine relation between god and temple dancers. This seems like the zenith of devotion to building a close relationship with the Supreme Being. But in the substantive world, the temple priests were the ones who claimed themselves as the nearest to God and built a sexual relationships with the devadāsīs. Afterwards, the dilution in their position pushes them into the 'performer-cum-prostitute' (Pande, 2005, p. 1-2) platform of penny-provider and receiver respectively. Thus, it originated the crux of absentee sire in the system.

As we have seen, that daughters are marked as expenditures, it is sons who are expected to perform as providers of the family and parents in their old age. But in the embedded system of matriarchs, sons or the men born from the devadasis experienced the opposite. Though they were said to bless other people for well-being, sons for inheritance, but the whole scene changes in the case of sons of devadasis. It is the daughter who inherited the property of her mother. Both the sons and daughters borrowed their mother's surname and sometimes their profession too. The devadasis from the lower varnas and their children witnessed oppression from the upper varnas. Men were unable to get work available to others. Thus, they are also left with the stain of other men (Documentary, 2012) on the social stage. The men in the system lack the patriarchal features that existed previously in society, which led them to a status of shame about the stigma amalgamated with the abode of devadasis.

As we have traced the threads linked with the devadasis of her, *nityasumangali* privileged life (Dalrymple, 2008) transform into a life of impoverishment and dishonour with changes in societal, political, and economic needs. The emergence of nationalism in the 19th century lit up the nationalists but, in Westernized attire, recognized devadasis as nautch and their institution as socio-religious dogma. With the beginning of the Anti-nautch movement (Rao, 2018, pp. 44-45) in Madras in

1892, they were marginalized as prostitutes in the social category. The new identification of devadasis shoves them to unify and uplift them as a caste in society. The *Sengunthar Mahajan Sangam*, founded in Coimbatore in 1913 by men born from devadāsīs, was the earliest example of caste formation of devadasis. The women of this practice maintained a non-conjugal sexual relationship with upper-varna men in society. This system of donating girls to the temples gave birth to a quasi-matrilineal community under the patriarchal equilibrium.

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