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**DEVADASI SYSTEM IN TAMIL NADU –A SYSTEM OF PAST IN ECLIPSE AND  
REVIVAL IN BHARATHA NATYAM****P. Latha<sup>1</sup> and Dr. A. Farida Gani<sup>2</sup>****<sup>1</sup>M.Phil., Part-Time Research Scholar, in History, Mother Teresa Women's University,  
Attuvampatty, Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu.****<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of History, Justice Basheer Ahmed Sayeed for Women College,  
Teynampet, Chennai, Tamil Nadu .****ABSTRACT:**

The Devadasi system was connected with the socio-religious institution of Tamil Nadu. The term 'devadasi' denotes the dancers attached to Hindu temples. The dancers were the servants of the gods. The word 'dasa' in Sanskrit means slave. The feminine form of this word 'dasi' refers to female slaves. Sanskrit culture promoted the Devadasi system. The dedication system for girls was established only during the Chola period. In the poem, the famous Saiva Saint Manikkavasakar first described the girls serving in the temple and indicated their duty. The system had been described in the Pancharatra Agama of Hindu scriptures which mentions the practice of Devadasi in the temple. The Devadasi system was most successful socio-religious institution in the period of the ancient and medieval kings of Tamil Nadu. During the colonial British rule the system was ruined the society because of the negligence of the patronage. The Devadasis were left with poverty and so they lost their moral character and involved in immoral activities.

**KEYWORDS :** imagery analysis , spectral analysis, light spectral based.**INTRODUCTION:**

The rise of this devadasi institution, dating back to the Ninth and Tenth Centuries, during which many activities related to the construction of the temple and the elaborate service performed by Cholas.<sup>1</sup> The intention of the founder of that institution was that ordained girls should lead a single and pure life and devote themselves to religion and temple services.<sup>2</sup> According to Edgar Thurston there were seven classes of Dasis mentioned in ancient Hindu works.<sup>3</sup> The devadasis who were recruited for the Hindu temple went through the ceremony called 'Pottukattu or Gajjepuja'.<sup>4</sup> To enroll a girl as a devadasi, certain conditions had to be met. The sanction of the temple authority was needed. A girl was normally six to eight years old, and before puberty was permitted to attend temple services.<sup>5</sup>

Devadasis were respected as auspicious women as they were dedicated to a divine husband, the God, who can never die. As a result, she never lost her auspiciousness and was therefore called upon 'Nityasumangali', the ever auspicious woman.<sup>6</sup> They were said to be the offshoot of Sakti, bring good luck, protect the king and country. They were respected in society and were an asset to the town where they lived in. They were also treated as a symbol of good luck and protectors from bad luck and were hired to accompany people who went on important missions. As the Dasi never became widow, the

beads their *talis* would bring good luck to the women. Some people sent the *talis* needed for marriage to a Dasi, who prepared the goad and attached black beads from her own *thali*.<sup>7</sup>

The most important function of the devadasi in the house of the patron was to be present at his social and ritual functions. Mostly they recited Sankara songs for pregnant women, giving names, ear piercings, wedding ceremonies for children and wedding ceremonies for new couples. They were asked to extend their invaluable service to the homes of Brahmins and other high caste non-Brahmins. However, they were forbidden to visit the houses of the Sudras. The devadasis of the Vaishnava temple were called Kaliyuga Lakshmi and the women dedicated to the Siva temple were called Kaliyuga Parvati.<sup>8</sup> Women, consecrated to Vishnu, had the image of garuda tattooed on their chests as a distinctive sign. Shiva's Devadasis wore the lingam mark tattooed on their thighs. These women were known to be the mistresses of priests and other dignitaries.

These devadasis were the only women allowed to learn and read, sing and dance. As for their singing, it was almost limited to obscene verses describing some licentious episode in the history of their gods. Usually they were the unfortunate victims of immortality. The priest who reconciled the families, who had been dishonored, put all the blame on Vishnu and Siva.<sup>9</sup> Over the centuries, there were hundreds of female dancers attached to the temple in Kanchipuram, Tanjore and Madurai.

The British wanted to control the spread of venereal disease among the Devadasi and passed the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868. According to the provision of the Act, prostitutes were to be free from venereal disease and infected prostitutes were confined in Lock Hospitals until they were released. they have improved. He cured diseases. Even the natives and the Devadasis vehemently opposed the British and declared that they were doing godly work in the temple and felt that the British administration should not interfere with the Hindu religion.<sup>10</sup>

The disease affected the general population of the county in large numbers. According to Muthulakshmi Reddy, in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, fifty to seventy percent of the people were suffering from various manifestations of venereal disease in the Madras Presidency. She regretted that the Devadasi system, the social evil that was responsible for the origin and spread of the disease. Because they lived by an infamous trade, they were victims of tradition. It was made to believe that it was not a sin to be devadasi.<sup>11</sup> In 1925, the total strength of the devadasis in the Madras Presidency was 2,00,000.<sup>12</sup>

### Abolition of the System

In the early Twentieth Century, intellectual awakening and Western education kindled people's consciousness. Public opinion gradually developed against the continuation of the system. Christian missionaries and social reformers called to disrupt the system. Lord Wenlock (1891 - 1896), the Governor of Madras was the first prominent official to refuse to endorse the nautch. In 1905, the executive committee of the Prince and Princess of Wales unanimously decided not to stage the nautch girl show to the entertainment to be given to His Royal Highness in Madras.<sup>13</sup>

The bad publicity the Devadasi tradition received during the first half of the Twentieth Century led to the rapid impoverishment of the Devadasi system. Most of the Devadasis believed that someone came to throw mud on them. Aggressive publicity affected their prosperity. The Devadasis who previously loathed temple rice now somersaulted for poor rice. The loss of patronage forced them to exchange cultural tradition for mercenary values. Faced with public pressure, the Government enacted Act of XVIII, 1924 which amended Sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Penal Code. It increased the age limit for dedication of girls from 16 to 18 years old. The amendment prohibited the issuance of buying and selling of minors for the purpose of prostitution. However, the amendment had not achieved results. Sections were bypassed by temple authorities permitting dedication after the girl turned eighteen. However, in rural areas, even minor girls were dedicated because temple authorities, parents, and the devout public believed the dedication was based on religious sanction.<sup>14</sup>

The educated section society had taken measures to abolish the system. Public opinion was advanced enough not to tolerate immoral trafficking under the cloak of religion. On 12<sup>th</sup> September 1927, V. Ramadass Pantalu, a social reformer, introduced a resolution in the central legislature to

abolish the system. In this phase the intention was to control the system and protect underage girls. Numerous women's associations in the country had urged the government to abolish the dedication of girls and condemned their life. Consequentially, the Central Legislature passed a resolution Accordingly, it recommended that the Governor-General in Council should introduce legislation as soon as possible to prohibit the practice of unmarried girls from dedicating themselves to temples as devadasis.<sup>15</sup>

On 5<sup>th</sup> November 1927 in the Madras Presidency, Muthulakshmi Reddy, a social crusader, introduced a resolution in the Madras Legislature to end the practice of young girls for immoral purposes in the name of dedication. In 1929, the Justice Ministry under Subbarayan passed an Act to prevent the dedication of the devadasis at the temple. The Act V of 1929 ended the practice of dedicating young girls as devadasis for Hindu temple service. The land they held for their service had been freed. Inam lands of the devadasis had been authorized and had imposed a ransom fee payable to the temple. According to the Act, the devadasis were not to render any service at the temple. It authorized the service inam held by the devadasis and exonerated them from any obligation to serve the temple. Public consciousness had actually been raised against the continuation of this institution. There had been a great awakening among the communities themselves and efforts had been made to uproot the system.<sup>16</sup>

The Act of 1929 partially prevented the system. The practice of dedication continued in several permanently established zamindarys and estates, as the zamindars owned the different zamins, still the dedication followed. When Congress assumed power in the Madras Legislative Assembly, a select committee prepared a report. But the Congress Ministry resigned over the war issue. After independence, the Madras Government introduced a bill to ban all forms of dedications. The bill was approved by the Madras Legislative Assembly on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 1947 and the Legislative Council on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1947. It declared dedication of women as devadasi illegal and null and void. It announced a punishment for the dedication of the girls. The maximum penalty imposed was imprisonment extended to six months or a fine which can be extended to Rs. 500 or both. The Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Law of 1947 was published in the Fort. St. George Gazette as Madras Act XXXI of 1947 effectively ended the system. The abolition of the Devadasi system had finally liberated women from the ancient tradition.<sup>17</sup>

However, the Act did not provide for any rehabilitation measures. It had contributed to the misery in the life of the devadasis. When expelled from the temples, the poor women wandered as free slaves in the temple towns. A considerable number of them became mendicants who worked in front of the temples. Many of them left the temples and migrated to urban areas to become clandestine prostitutes. The devadasis with the money remarried their daughters to decent people and started a new life. Many educated their children in urban schools and established them as ordinary citizens. Some devadasis started schools which taught Bharathanatyam.<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, the Brahmins now began to train their daughters in art, music and dance by involving musicians and *nattuvans* from the devadasi community. Thus, the art of dance and music passed from the illegal descendants of Brahmins to their legal descendants. Indeed the devadasi system which was considered a social evil since the beginning of the Twentieth century was declined and it got its renewal as a dance of Bharatanatyam, well nurtured in contemporary Tamil Nadu and spread all over the world spreading spirituality in the form of dance. The devadasis lost their influence in the society but their dance gained influence in the present cultural world.

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