

## SERVING TWO WORLDS: THE DEVADĀSĪ OF TAMILNADU IN RELIGION AND SOCIETY

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### **ABSTRACT**

The devadāsī, or temple dancers, were a complex faction of the South Indian population that contradicted the typical female stereotypes that were prevalent in ancient Tamil society. The women who became temple dancers were highly accomplished individuals who obtained unique rights as a result of their extreme religious contributions, which included both their roles in the temples and their relationships to the gods. However, the delicate balance between the religious significance and sexual promiscuity of the devadāsī led to a more contradictory view of the temple dancers within the larger context of Indian society. This became particularly true after the British colonization of India, at which point the influence of Christianity and the implementation of reform measures led to the decline of the devadāsī.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout Indian history, women have often held a complex place in society. That has been due, in large part, to a severe imbalance between familial importance and social restrictions. For instance, although women were considered to be valuable for their purpose as devoted wives and mothers, they nevertheless faced extreme limitations with respect to the rights and privileges they were permitted to receive. The accepted patriarchal hierarchy of Indian society ultimately dictated acceptable female requirements, all of which centered on chastity – emulating beauty, bearing children, and maintaining obedience to one’s husband.<sup>1</sup> Despite the conformity of the majority to those idealistic models, some women diverged from that path. The devadāsī – also known as temple dancers – were one group that epitomized those contentious minorities. They represented a unique and controversial faction of the Indian population that served not only as religious icons, but also as a metaphorical bridge between the ideologies of northern and southern India. In fact, it was only through the exceptional dances of the devadāsī that the southern population was able to understand the northern belief systems, which were recorded in Sanskrit – a language foreign to the South.<sup>2</sup> It was in part due to this immense social and cultural importance that the devadāsī became so significant in the performance of temple rituals and, therefore, Hinduism in general. The devadāsī were highly accomplished individuals who obtained unique rights as a result of their extreme religious contributions, which included both their roles in the temples and their relationships to the gods. However, the delicate balance between the religious significance and sexual promiscuity of the devadāsī led to a more contradictory view of the temple dancers within the larger context of South Indian society.

### **WHO WERE THE DEVADĀSĪ?**

The devadāsī were a very unique group of women who had complex identities and histories. Based upon the temple inscriptions in Tamilnadu, it is apparent that temple dancers were referred to with a variety of titles – devadāsī, tevaraṭiyāḷ, tevaṇār makaḷ. Though there were other names that were also applied to temple women, those three were utilized the most frequently. However, regardless of which label was used, the titles associated with temple dancers expressed the connection and dedication that those females were believed to have to the deities. In fact, the three most common names – devadāsī,

tevaraṭṭiyāḷ, tevaṇṇār makaḷ— labeled the temple dancers as “handmaidens of the gods,”<sup>3</sup> temple devotees,<sup>4</sup> and “daughter of God,”<sup>5</sup> respectively. As the many titles suggest, the devadāsī were committed patrons of the temples and servants to the devas. That devotion and servitude was enacted through religious involvement, which included monetary contributions, daily responsibilities, and participation in rituals. However, many of those activities required extensive training and physically demanding requirements. Therefore, many temple dancers began their careers as young girls. Due to such arduous conditions, becoming a devadāsī was a lifelong commitment to the gods, which began in a variety of manners.

### **BECOMING A TEMPLE DANCER**

The process of becoming a temple dancer was both multifaceted and complex. In fact, it depended largely upon familial decisions, life circumstances, and commitment to training. As previously mentioned, a woman typically became a devadāsī at a young age. This was most likely due to the training and physical requirements involved in temple patronage. Since most of the devadāsī entered the profession as children and adolescents, the decision to become devotees was generally made by a third party— in most cases, parents. This usually took the form of parents offering their daughter to the temple as a gift,<sup>6</sup> thereby destining her to become a temple dancer. However, not all women became devadāsī in this way. Rather, some females were born into the profession. For instance, due to the matriarchal delineation of the devadāsī, many of the daughters of temple dancers were raised to pursue the same lifestyle as their mothers.<sup>7</sup> Although being given away or born into the occupation were two of the most common ways for a female to become a devadāsī, there were other, less typical methods as well. For example, there were “distress sales of girls to the temple, recruitment of local beauties under moral pressure, or girls abducted from helpless parents, girls won as war booty or recruited through superstitious practices.”<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates that there were many ways in which girls became temple dancers. However, becoming a devadāsī was much more complex than simply being recruited and labelled as such.

Once a girl was designated as a temple dancer, she was compelled to undergo extensive training in the arts. Although all Indian girls experienced some degree of instruction in music and dancing,<sup>9</sup> the devadāsī were subjected to a particularly rigorous routine. The devadāsī would receive a detailed education in singing, dancing, and playing instruments. In fact, an exploration of such preparation was demonstrated in the *Silappadikaram*, an ancient Tamil epic. At the beginning of that particular story, the training of Madhavi, an emerging temple dancer, was described:

From the early age of five, for seven years, Madhavi had been put through a course of rigorous training. Every single day her teachers would arrive... Morning and evening she sang scales and practised dance movements. More masters came. She learnt to accompany herself on the *yaal*. She learnt the fine points of the flute and drum. Later still came the composers, insisting that she should bring out all possible shades of meaning from every song she sang or danced to.<sup>10</sup>

This particular part of the *Silappadikaram* demonstrated the substantial instruction that the devadāsī experienced. Although all aspects of the musical arts were important to temple activities and veneration of the deities, perhaps the most vital facets that temple dancers learned were those related to dancing and singing. This was due primarily to the fact that each movement and lyric was deeply rooted in tradition and symbolic meaning. Based on a text outlining each dance movement, every part of the dances had special significance in honoring the gods.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the songs utilized in temple rituals were also imperative in showing reverence to the devas. The verses that were sung were often correlated with specific movements, and each verse addressed a specific deity.<sup>12</sup> This created a unified performance of dance and song that expressed respect and devotion to the gods and goddesses. Although these mantras were frequently sung as a part of large ceremonies, they were also used for daily rites, such as lullabies. These lullabies usually concluded the circadian temple rituals,<sup>13</sup> and were supposed to assist the deities in falling asleep.<sup>14</sup> Such examples show the intense meaning that was ingrained in the songs and dances that

the devadāsī performed. As a result, the two arts – singing and dancing – appeared to be the central focus of the extensive training of the devadāsī. It was this training in the musical arts, which very few other women were able to attain, that established the temple dancers as particularly accomplished individuals within Tamil society.

### TEMPLE RESPONSIBILITIES

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The devadāsī had many significant responsibilities within the temples. One aspect in which this was seen was through their monetary contributions to the temples. In ancient India, it was rare for women to be paid for their labor.<sup>15</sup> However, temple dancers in Tamilnadu did, in fact, receive a salary from the state.<sup>16</sup> That may have been a result of their religious significance and social esteem. It was that societal importance that contributed to temple dancers' acquisition of other privileges as well, such as their fiscal freedom. Since the devadāsī obtained their own personal salary, they were able to use that money according to their own desires.<sup>17</sup> Many of the devadāsī often contributed a portion of their salaries as donations to the temples. In most cases, the donations were made to the temples at which they worked, which may have indicated loyalty to the temple or to a particular god.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the reasoning behind the contributions, the money given by the temple dancers was extremely important to the daily functions of the temple. For instance, it allowed for the general upkeep and preservation of the temples while also providing a means of purchasing items that were essential to religious rituals. In fact, one of the most common uses of monetary donations was to buy food for religious offerings and oil for the temple lamps.<sup>19</sup> Such items were utilized in religious rituals and activities, and were therefore indispensable. Therefore, the donations of the devadāsī were instrumental to religious life, which only increased the status of the temple dancers in society. Although their fiscal contributions were necessary to the maintenance of the temples and religious rituals, the devadāsī also contributed greatly to temple life through their servile responsibilities.

The devadāsī had many minor, yet important duties in daily temple life. In most cases, the devadāsī had some of the more rudimentary tasks of the temple. In ancient Indian societies, "god and goddess are treated as if they were human, and all human comforts are offered to them."<sup>20</sup> Hence, many of the everyday activities with which the devadāsī were entrusted were based upon that belief. For instance, many devadāsī were responsible for "carrying lamps... weaving garlands or pounding paddy."<sup>21</sup> In addition, temple dancers were also held accountable for "attending the deity as a flywhisk bearer"<sup>22</sup> and singing lullabies to the gods every night.<sup>23</sup> Such responsibilities were mortal manifestations of providing comfort and caring for the devas, which was an essential basis of Tamil religious life. For example, carrying lamps was necessary for illumination purposes as well as for rituals directly associated with the gods.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the tasks of bearing flywhisks and singing lullabies were indispensable to the daily rites that were enacted for the deities. Without any one of these functions, the rituals would not have been complete and the religious traditions would not have been successfully upheld. Therefore, the temple dancers were crucial to the fulfillment of the daily tasks not only in the temples, but also in the broader scope of Hindu religion and life in ancient Tamilnadu.

Although the devadāsī were vital to the preservation of the temples and religious rituals through both their monetary donations and their participation in daily responsibilities, perhaps their most obvious contribution to the temples was their involvement in prominent religious ceremonies. Throughout the year, the temples would hold several large celebrations to honor the gods.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the *Silappadikaram* mentioned one such ceremony, which was "a festival in honour of Indra, King of the gods."<sup>26</sup> During such commemorations, the devadāsī enacted their training in the arts. They would sing, dance, and play instruments during the procession of the deity<sup>27</sup> in accordance with the rituals and traditions associated with that particular ceremony or god. Such responsibilities were of vast importance, as they constituted the majority of the religious rites. The *Silappadikaram* described the significant roles of the devadāsī on such occasions.

The festivities went on for twenty-eight days, with dance performances, song and story recitals, market fairs and all sorts of other side-shows. It was the last day of the festival. Madhavi had played a prominent role in the festivities that year... That year she had danced in an elaborate series of eleven dances of the gods, beginning with Shiva's dance of destruction, and ending with Indrani's dance at the northern gates of the city of Vana. She had been absorbed in this for days, rehearsing strenuously and planning out every detail. The audience had received her enthusiastically, and she returned home from the last of the series, tired but triumphant.<sup>28</sup>

That description demonstrated the vital role that the devadāsī had in large ceremonial rituals. Based upon such accounts, it would appear that the temple dancers were at the center of those celebrations. Without their knowledge and talents with respect to the arts, the rituals would not have been able to be enacted as effectively, if at all. Therefore, just as with the more daily aspects of temple life, the involvement of the devadāsī was indispensable to the ceremonial services, which served to dramatically increase their status of significance and respectability within the society of ancient Tamilnadu.

### DEVADĀSĪ AND THE DEITIES

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Although the devadāsī were greatly respected as a result of their invaluable contributions to the temples, one of the aspects that made the temple dancers even more revered was their direct relationship to the deities. As servants of the gods, many of the activities in which temple dancers participated were intended to establish a religious connection between the temple dancers and the devas. For instance, the devadāsī utilized their dances and songs in temple ceremonies, such as weddings,<sup>29</sup> recitations of ancient texts,<sup>30</sup> funerals,<sup>31</sup> and sacrificial rites.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, each of the movements and verses that were performed generally contained a unique theme— celebration, death, sacrifice— and were dedicated to different deities.<sup>33</sup> For example, in the *Silappadikaram*, Madhavi's dances and songs during the Indra festival were celebratory and strictly devoted to the god Indra.<sup>34</sup> The same was true of other gods and goddesses as well. However, musical practices were not the only tasks the devadāsī had in regards to prominent ceremonies. They were also frequently required to carry lamps and weave garlands.<sup>35</sup> In fact, in some instances, the devadāsī were "assigned a turn... to sing, wave the lamp... before the god, and attend on him."<sup>36</sup> Due to the more personal nature of those tasks, such activities held direct significance in honoring the devas. Again, these scenarios reiterated the servitude and the indebtedness of the devadāsī to the deities.

Another instance that demonstrated the unique relationship of the devadāsī to the gods was the special case of marriage to the deities. Although such occurrences were not looked upon favorably by the rest of Indian society, such a connection was nevertheless considered honorable and sacred amidst the community of the temple dancers. Most devadāsī, as a result of their servitude to the gods, simply viewed themselves as being married to the devas.<sup>37</sup> The most common example of this was witnessed by the temple dancers who were given to Yellamma. Being given to Yellamma was a particularly unique process that was based primarily upon familial decisions. Generally, a family chose to give a daughter to Yellamma for two reasons— "gift and trouble."<sup>38</sup> Any signs of affliction<sup>39</sup> or generosity<sup>40</sup> were enough to tie a woman to the diety. Once a temple dancer was bonded to Yellamma, she was considered to be married. At that point, the devadāsī were "both *muttaide* (wife) and *rande* (prostitute, widow). Indeed this double valence is precisely what makes them, and the devi they embody, powerful, *valuable*. As wives of the devi, devadāsī can and must transition from *muttaide* to *rande* and back again."<sup>41</sup> Therefore, being given to Yellamma and marrying a god were representative of the influence that the temple dancers held within Indian society, as well as the intimate connections that all devadāsī had with the deities.

In *Manimekalai*, which is the sequel to the *Silappadikaram*, the relationship between the devadāsī and the gods was further expressed. *Manimekalai* was based upon the experiences of Manimekalai, the

daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi. Manimekalai was, like her mother, a temple dancer.<sup>42</sup> However, she refused to follow the same courtesan lifestyle. Instead, she devoted herself to religion.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps because of that religious dedication and her former status as a temple dancer, she frequently had personal encounters with the gods and goddesses. The most prominent of her interactions occurred with her namesake, the goddess Manimekalai. According to the epic, the goddess Manimekalai appeared to Madhavi's daughter to warn her of her past life and teach her about dharma.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the goddess showed Manimekalai her future destiny, supplied her with two secret mantras,<sup>45</sup> "a begging bowl that is also a source of abundance."<sup>46</sup> Receiving the advice, mantras, and magic bowl of the goddess Manimekalai was an extremely special occurrence, as such personal encounters with the deities were considered rare and unique. Therefore, this particular passage of the epic was representative of the special and personal relationship that the devadāsī were believed to have with the devas. It also reiterated the exclusive position that the temple dancers held in both religious life and society.

### **PROPERTY RIGHTS OF THE DEVADĀSĪ**

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As a result of their religious contributions and honorable positions, the devadāsī often managed to obtain rights and privileges that were not available to other women. Although women in Tamilnadu during ancient times did have some property rights, such as those associated with *stridhana*,<sup>47</sup> it was ultimately the men who were granted the rights to property. However, the devadāsī were one faction of women that were seemingly exempt from those typical societal standards. In fact, the temple dancers demonstrated a case in which women obtained and maintained nearly complete control over their property. For instance, the devadāsī had the unique capacity of receiving a salary from the state in return for their service in the temples.<sup>48</sup> The temple dancers had complete control over their salaries, and were able to use them according to their own desires.<sup>49</sup> In addition to fiscal property, the devadāsī also had access to other forms of property as well. For example, "the arrangements that the temple women had with the temple could result in their acquisition of land, houses, clothing, gold, or daily or yearly allowances of food or grain."<sup>50</sup> The ability to own such property was an extremely unique scenario for women. The even more remarkable aspect was that society accepted and promoted female property rights strictly within the confines of the realm of the devadāsī. That unique manipulation of gender norms demonstrated the extreme significance, power, and respect that the temple dancers possessed in Tamil society during ancient times.

### **CONFLICTING RESPONSES TO THE DEVADĀSĪ**

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Although the devadāsī were a revered population of women, they nevertheless held a very convoluted and contradictory position in Tamilnadu throughout Indian history. For instance, certain social views regarded the devadāsī as an immoral faction of society. These accusations were due primarily to the participation of the devadāsī in acts of prostitution. For instance, as patrons of the temples, there were some instances in which the devadāsī were sexually exploited by priests<sup>51</sup> and certain wealthy members of Indian society.<sup>52</sup> However, such situations did not occur as frequently as believed. In fact, the temple dancers were generally in command of their own sexual relations. For example, there were many situations in which the devadāsī voluntarily chose to work in brothels<sup>53</sup> and have sexual clients.<sup>54</sup> These instances were found mostly amongst those temple dancers who chose to marry a deity.<sup>55</sup> Even the practice of marrying a god, which was seen as a representation of great honor amongst the temple dancers, was looked upon unfavorably by society because of the explicit sexual connotations and the supposed illegitimacy of the marriages.<sup>56</sup> Although all of the aforementioned sexual activities in which the devadāsī participated were viewed as contradictory to typical societal norms, the most disputable practices appeared to be those in which the temple dancers chose to embrace their sexual encounters, such as employment in brothels. This is most likely because such practices were considered a denial of the important female standard of chastity. Therefore, despite the reverence that embodied the devadāsī, there were nevertheless certain contradictory stigmas associated with them.

As previously discussed, the voluntary participation of the devadāsī in acts of prostitution were perceived by Indian society as the most controversial aspect of their behavior. This was proven by the discussion of such instances in certain sources of literature. For example, the *Silappadikaram* expressed the contradictory views surrounding the devadāsī by describing a situation in which an extraordinarily talented temple dancer participated in an affair with an affluent, married man. In the *Silappadikaram*, Kovalan, who was the son of the “wealthiest of pearl merchants,”<sup>57</sup> became involved in an affair with the temple dancer Madhavi. Although Kovalan was already married, he contributed the majority of his attention to Madhavi. In fact, Kovalan and Madhavi pursued a serious relationship and eventually had a child together, who they named Manimekalai.<sup>58</sup> Kovalan spent most of his time and money on Madhavi and Manimekalai,<sup>59</sup> and he began to go into debt.<sup>60</sup> The affair between Madhavi and Kovalan, as well as the birth of their illegitimate child, were symbolic of the prostitution that was frequently associated with the temple dancers. Additionally, Kovalan’s transition from extreme wealth to severe debt as a result of that relationship represented the negative societal connotations associated with sexual promiscuity – especially that of the temple dancers – within Tamil society.

Although the *Silappadikaram* illustrated some of the social views surrounding the devadāsī and their participation in acts of prostitution, it also reinforced the more powerful feelings of honor and admiration that were related to the temple dancers. For instance, upon first beginning her career as a devadāsī, Madhavi was described as “an accomplished dancer and a carefully finished young lady.”<sup>61</sup> Her performances during temple ceremonies were depicted as “faultless”<sup>62</sup> and “promising.”<sup>63</sup> Although there were certain aspects that implied that her affair with Kovalan was socially unacceptable, she was still primarily seen as respectable temple dancer. In fact, with respect to her temple performance, it was stated that “the finest musicians now considered it an honour to accompany her.”<sup>64</sup> She was “a prominent part in the festivities”<sup>65</sup> and was able to draw crowds from great distances.<sup>66</sup> These descriptions indicated that Madhavi was greatly venerated and extremely important to religious rituals. Therefore, it can be surmised that, although ancient Tamil society viewed the sexual activities of the devadāsī in an unfavorable manner, those practices did not detract from the honor and respect that were connected with them. However, this balance between respect and immorality led to an extraordinarily complicated and contradictory status of the temple dancers within the context of Tamil society.

#### **DEFERENCE AND DISAPPROVAL**

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Although all of the contributions that the devadāsī made to Indian religious life were viewed with the utmost deference in ancient Tamilnadu, there were still many conflicting feelings surrounding the temple dancers. The more immoral view of the devadāsī as sexually promiscuous beings appears to have become more adamant in modern times. In the *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*, the temple dancers were expressed in a primarily positive light. In fact, in the *Silappadikaram*, there was only a brief description of the relationship between Madhavi and Kovalan, which implies that the sexually licentious behavior of the temple dancers was of little importance in ancient times. Similarly, it supported the temple dancers’ unique deviation from social and gender norms. Instead, the text illustrates that a great focus was placed on the accomplishments of the devadāsī, as demonstrated by the following statement about Madhavi.

A few years passed by. Madhavi continued to be radiantly happy, both in her private life with Kovalan and her growing daughter, and also in her public performances. Her dance was improving all the time, her fame had begun to spread throughout the Chola country. The finest of musicians now considered it an honour to accompany her.<sup>67</sup>

The positive language that was utilized and the complimentary description of Madhavi’s flourishing dancing career implied that, in ancient Tamilnadu, temple dancers were admired and revered despite any sexual promiscuity they may have exhibited. However, modern analysis of the devadāsī often focuses solely on the sexuality of the temple dancers. It would appear that, as the British began to occupy

India,<sup>68</sup> very little emphasis was placed on the significance of the devadāsī. Instead, the British, who practiced Christianity, focused only the sexual practices of the temple dancers.<sup>69</sup> Since such behaviors, according to Christian beliefs, were viewed as vastly immoral, the temple dancers, too, became subjects of criticism. As a result, the British attempted to eliminate the devadāsī through the use of reformers and the implementation of legislation.<sup>70</sup> Since then, the honor and respectability associated with temple dancers has seemingly become overlooked in most cases.

## **CONCLUSION**

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The devadāsī of ancient Tamilnadu constituted an extremely complex population of Indian society. The temple dancers were extremely accomplished individuals who obtained unique rights as a result of their vast religious contributions, which included both their roles in the temples and their relationships to the gods. However, the delicate balance between the religious significance and sexual promiscuity of the devadāsī led to a more contradictory view of the temple dancers within the larger context of Indian society. In fact, it was most likely British occupation that began to transform the devadāsī from an image of honor and religion to one of prostitution and immorality. Yet it cannot be denied that, before the introduction of Christianity, the devadāsī were indispensable within the realms of religion. Their responsibilities in temple life and their intimate relationships to the deities were two extraordinary aspects that propelled the temple dancers into a position of reverence. For women, such a status was unique. Therefore, it is unsurprising that temple dancers had the exclusive rights associated with property. Despite having such a special and valued standing within Indian society, the devadāsī did participate in numerous acts of prostitution. It would be those activities of sexuality that Christianity would emphasize and condemn, labelling the devadāsī only in terms of sexual promiscuity. Reformers began to focus their efforts on modifying the practices of the devadāsī,<sup>71</sup> and various forms of legislation diminished and eventually “put an end to the existence of the *devadāsī*.”<sup>72</sup> Although colonization ultimately led to the downfall of the devadāsī, their glory will live on in the traditions, culture, and history of India.

**ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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<sup>71</sup> Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God*, 179.  
<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

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