



## The Reference of Devadasi in the Inscription

*Bharati Pal*

The term *Devadasi* which literally means a female servant of the deity. The female singer and dancer attached to the temple. They perform their religious duties at the temple. The *Devadasi* a very specialized, unusual group of women. They do not marry any mortal men and their dedication to temple service is regarded as constituting a marriage to the main deity. The dance in temple's ritual is performed by the *Devadasi*.

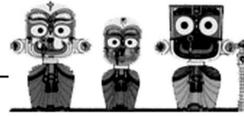
The institution of *Devadasi* or women dancers in temples used to be a pan Indian phenomenon, which survived in few places Odisha being one of them. The institution of *Devadasi* still prevail in Lord Jagannath temple of Puri. In the temple of Bhubaneswar and Konark, we find innumerable scenes of dance and music performed by women. A separate structure known as *Natamandira* was added to the main temple i.e. *Deula* and *Jagamohan* for the performance of music and dance by the *Devadasi*.

The practice of dedicating dancing girl to the temple prevailed in India during very early period. The earliest reference of *Devadasi* is found from the Ramagarh hill cave inscription of Madhya Pradesh of 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. The Inscription states that a *Devadasi* (dancing girl) named *Sutanuka* had a love with a make-up artist who hailed from *Varanasi*.

The practice of *Devadasi* existed mainly in the *Siva Temple* of Odisha during the *Somavamsi* and *Ganga* periods. The *Brahmesvara Siva Temple* inscription of the time of *Somavamsi* king *Udyota Keshari* mentioned that his mother *Kalavati* erected the cloud touching temple for God *Siva* and she dedicated to the *god Siva* some beautiful dancing girls whose limbs were adorned with ornaments set in gems and thus appearing everlasting but playful lightening and who were restless with the weight of ions and whose eyes were filled and extended up to the ears and who looked lovely like the pupils of the eyes of men.

The *Sobhanesvara temple* inscription records the construction of a compound wall in the *Siva temple* named as *Sobhanesvara* located at *Niyali Sasana* in *Utkala desa* by the king named *Vaidyanatha*. The king offered to *Siva* beautiful damsels like the fairies of heaven in whose sweet lips there was nectar and end of whose eyes was cupid whose portion were decorated with various ornaments.

During the *Ganga* period particularly under the support of *Ananta Verma Chodaganga Deva* the system of *Devadasi* extended to *Vaishnavite* temples. The *Korni Copper Plate* grant of *Chodaganga* mentions the *Devadasi* in the *Srikurmam temple* engaged in singing and dancing at the time of the morning and evening



service to the God Kurmesvara, as well as in the Simhachalam temple engaged in singing music, playing instruments, blowing conch and making garlands to the Nrusimha. The Ganga king Narasimha-I dedicated to the Simhachalam temple one hundred beautiful eyed damsels as songsters. Ganga Devi the wife of Narasimha-III made arrangements in the Simhachalam temple “a choir of eighteen beautiful women, who were to sing and dance to the accompaniment of a variety of instruments.

It seems that *Devadasi* in Odisha enjoyed a respectable position in the society. It is said that Chodaganga founded a village named Chudangasahi at Puri for *Devadasi* of Jagannatha temple. They were to perform in addition to the singing and dancing all the routine duties in the temple. They were looked upon with respects. Some of them were in a position to make grants for the maintenance of the temple. The Madhavesvara temple inscription of the time of Chodaganga refers to that a donation was made by a *Devadasi* to the said God. We find sculptural representation of female dancers playing flutes or drums in the Sun temple of Konark as well as in the Lingaraj, Rajarani, Muktesvara and Brahmesvar temple of Bhubaneswar. It is said that Jayadeva the author of the *Gitagovinda* married a *Devadasi* named Padmavati who was associated with the temple of Jagannath.

Available evidence suggests that the existence of the institution of *Devadasi* was prevalent in Odisha during the time of Bhanjas. According to Bhanjanagara Plate of Nettekhanja there is a reference of *Sapta Sata Darika Parivar* which means there are seven hundred *darika or dancer* family might be attached with some temple during that period.

The institution of *Devadasi* also prevalent in Buddhist temple, at Hajo in contemporary Assam. It refers to girls who delighted the Buddhist deities with their dance.

The Ratnagiri plate of Somavamsi Karna mentioned of dancing girls in the Salonapura Mahavihara. The grant which was issued from Yayati Nagara records the grant of the village Kona of Uttara Tosali to Ranikarpursri, daughter of Mahari Mahunadevi and grand daughter of Udayamati. The term ‘Mahari’ means a dancing girl.

The mention of the names of Karpurasri's mother and grand mother instead of father and grand father is rather unusual. She hailed from the Mahavihara of Solanapura in Utkala Desa, which seems to have a Buddhist monastery, though she claimed a Brahmanical Gotra (Kasyapa Gotra). Thus we get reference to at least three generations of temple dancers from the said record.

#### **References:**

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Bharati Pal, Epigraphist, Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar.