



Mahari Tradition of Sri Jagannath Temple

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The worship of Lord Jagannath involved with a number of daily rituals. The rituals of worshipping the Lords are characterized by a royal manner. As a king is meticulously served by his servants daily from morning to night, so also Lord Jagannath is served in the like manner. Hence, there is a dancing ritual in the temple of Lord Jagannath at the time of the Lord's retirement to sleep. There are special Sevakas (servants) employed for this purpose. They are known as "Mahari or Devadasi" and their dance is known as "Mahari Nrutya" or "Devadasi Nrutya".

Such dancing girls of the temples are known by different names in all over India. In Tamilnadu they are known as Devaradiyar, Padiyilar, Taliccherippandugal, Empuremanadiyar, Adukkalaip-pendugal; in Keral they are called Tevidicchis, Nangainar, Kudikkaris, Muraikkaris; in Karnatak as Poti, Jogtis,¹ in southern part of Karnatak they are called as Nayaka Sani, Ranga Sani, Muttukatti Kondavlu, Devarasuli, Nityasumangali, Kasabi,



Patradevalu² where as in central Karnatak as Basavi which are grouped as Gudi Basavi, Nadikola Basavi, Balgada Basavi, Ura Basavi, Nadikola Basavi and Chowri Basav.³ In Andhra

Pradesh the dancing girls are identified with Sani and Bogam.⁴ The dancing girls of Assam are named as Kurmapus,⁵ Kudipus, Nati or Natin⁶. In Goa they are known as Bhavin. But in Bombay the dancing girls are named according to the presiding deities as Murali, Bhavin, Jagavins, Naikine, Kalavanti, Devali, Matangis and Sharnis.⁷ In Odisha the dancing girls of Sri Jagannath Temple are called Mahari and Nachuni.⁸

In Sanskrit lexicon Sabdartha Kalpataru, the Devadasis are mentioned as

Deva paricharika or attendant of the Lords. In Bengali Viswakosa they are known as the Deva Nartaki or dancing girls and Devadasi or servant of the Lords. In Purnnachandra Bhashakosha, the Odia Lexicon, the Devadasis are termed as the



female dancing attendants of the Gods. On the whole, the female dancing attendants who are offered to the Lords are known as “Devadasi”.

In the ancient times the Devadasis were divided into seven categories. They are known as Dutta, Hruta, Bikrita, Bhrutya, Alankara and Gopika or Rudraganika. Such categories reveal the origin and status of the Devadasis.

When a sacred man offered his daughter to a temple as a Devadasi, she is known as “Dutta Devadasi”. But when a lady was kidnapped and subsequently employed in a temple, she is known as “Hruta Devadasi”. Sometimes when a lady was sold to the administrator or the priest of a temple, she is known as “Bikrita Devadasi”. If a lady voluntarily worked in a temple as a Devadasi, she is known as “Bhrutya Devadasi”. Some women who devotionally offered themselves to serve the temple are known as “Bhakta Devadasi.” When a woman after-attaining a certain degree of competence, is offered to the temple with ornaments, she is known as “Alankara Devadasi”. The Devadasis who were getting remunerations for offering dance and music in the temple in a particular time is identified as “Gopika” or “Rudraganika”. These classes of the Devadasis were receiving fixed remunerations and some landed property for their personal use.

The origin of the Devadasi system should be properly investigated. In the Kashikavrutti of Panini, the prostitutes are taken as dancing girls.⁹ But it is still doubtful about their dancing performance in the temple premises. At the time of the eminent classical writer of Sanskrit literature Kalidas (4th century A.D.) there were some distinct evidences that the prostitutes were dancing in the temples. In the Meghaduta of Kalidas, it is mentioned that the prostitutes were dancing in a Saivite temple known as Mahakala Temple. Not only that they were dancing exclusively in the

Saivite temples but also the prostitutes were dancing in a Sun Temple as mentioned by Gaidhani quoting the description in the Vikramorvasiyam of Kalidas.¹⁰ Some information about the dancing girls were found in Mruchhakatika of Sudraka, Kuttinimata of Damodara Bhatta, Samayamatruka and Srungarmanjari of Kshemendra, Ramacharita of Sandhyakara Nandi, in Saduktikarmamruta. From these, it is evident that during the time of Kalidas, there was a tradition of dancing ritual before the Gods.

We can also find the description of dancing rituals in the inscriptions of different parts of India. In the stone inscriptions of Bhujabeswar Temple¹¹ (975A.D.), Kalipadaswami Temple¹² (1018A.D.), Brahmeswar Temple¹³ (1053 A.D.), Megheswar Temple¹⁴ (1070 A.D.), Sovaneswar Temple¹⁵ (1080 A.D.), Narendraswar Temple¹⁶ (1083 A.D.), Mukhalingam Temple¹⁷ (11th century A.D.), Jaladhiswar Temple¹⁸ (1144A.D.), Agastiswar Temple¹⁹ (1158A.D.), Laxmi Nrusingha Temple²⁰ of Simanchalam (15th century A.D.), and Sri Jagannath Temple²¹ (16th century A.D.), we find the evidence of dancing rituals.

In the Gita Govinda stone inscription at the Jaya- Vijay gate of Sri Jagannath Temple, it is found that Gajapati Prataprudradev of Surya dyanasty had reintroduced the dancing ritual before Lord Jagannath.²²

From the preceding discussions it is evident that the dancing rituals are prevalent in the temples since the 4th century A.D. In the 16th Century A.D. inscription of Gajapati Prataprudradev, it has been mentioned that the dancing rituals were introduced in the Jagannath Temple during the reign of Gajapati Kapilendradev (1435-1466 A.D). These dancers were from the local as well as from Telenga community.²³ From this we can assure that the Devadasi tradition



began from the period of Kapilendradev in Orissa which was influenced by the South Indian Culture latter. H.K.Mahatab also accepted that Kapilendradev in 1450 A.D. has introduced the dance rituals of the Devadasis from 'Dhupa' to 'Badasinghar' (morning puja to sleeping at night) in the Jagannath Temple.²⁴

In a stone inscription of South India, it can be found that during the reign of Jatavarman alias Virapandya, a dancing girl named Virasekhar Nangai received grant of land for enacting dance on festive occasions.²⁵ Vachaspati Mishra also refers to the dancing girls who gave performance on the stage.²⁶ On the Northern wall of Korangunathan Temple of Trichinapoly district of Southern India there is an inscription which mentions the provision made for the playing music during the Srivali service by seven persons during the time of Rajaraja-I.²⁷ Besides these, on the south wall of Pipilikesvara Temple of Trichinapoly Taluk it is inscribed that the land was endowed to the temple by the purchaser for the maintenance of four artists for singing the Tirupaddiyam.²⁸

On the north wall of the Sunderesvara Temple of Trichinapoly district it is also mentioned that two persons were singing the Triuppadiyam hymns during three services (every day) in the temple of Paramesvara.²⁹

From the above evidences we can assume that the introduction of Devadasi tradition in the temple of Lord Jagannath was influenced by the South Indian Culture during the reign of Gajapati Kapilendradev.

There is an interesting legend regarding the recitation of Gita Govinda in the Jagannath Temple. Once upon a time it was believed that the-Lord-was fascinated by the Gita Govinda recitation of a girl and followed her. In the process garments of Lord Jagannath were torn by this wild adventure. Next day the Sevakas discovered the

torn clothes of the Lord and informed the matter to the Gajapati. Then the God explained the incident in a dream to Gajapati. As a result the concerned girl was employed as a Devadasi in the temple of Lord Jagannath.

According to tradition, the famous Odia poet Jayadeva had accepted Padmabati, the dancing girl of Lord Jagannath as his wife.³⁰ The eminent scholar of Odisha Late Kedarnath Mohapatra on the basis of some verses of Gita Govinda has proved that Jayadeva was inspired by Padmabati, the devotional dancing girl of Lord Jagannath³¹ for composing the monumental work Gita Govinda.

The 17th century Assamese Poet, Rama Saraswati also describes these things in his long poem entitled 'Jayadev.'³² The biography of Jayadev by Maitheli Chandra Dutta, it is also mentioned regarding Padmabati the Devadasi and Lord Jagannath.

The dancing ritual is a part of the services (sevas) of Lord Jagannath since the time of Jayadev 12th century A.D. The persons employed in these services (seva) are known as Devadasi, Mahari, Gitagovinda etc. According to their respective duties they can broadly be divided into three classes such as Angila or Anangia, Gahana Mahari, and Bhitara Gayeni. The Anangia girls were the attendants of the Gajapatis. They were considered as superior to the other attendants in the palace.³³ The Gahana Mahari class of dancing girls is at present partially meant for Lord Jagannath. At different occasions they are with Goddess Laxmi. The third category of dancing girls is called Bhitara Gayeni who exclusively dedicated to Lord Jagannath. They are permitted to go up to the Kalahat door of Lord Jagannath.

The surname of these dancing girls is Devadasi. Some scholars term them as Mahari.



These girls resided at Anga Alasa Patina.³⁴ However, we do not find any such place in Puri Town now. In the Record of Rites the residence of these girls are recorded as in Baseli Sahi, Markandesvar Sahi, Kundheibenta Sahi, Bali Sahi, and Matimandop Sahi of Puri Town.³⁵

At the time of dancing they put on typical Odishan garments and ornaments. They also put vermilion and collyrium as a mark of married woman.

In their respective turn days of duty they used to go temple with all types of sanctity and purity. The Devadasis were serving at many points in the temple of Lord Jagannath. They used to perform the 'Alasa' dance at the time of Sakaladhupa (morning puja). Col. Phipps observed that "this meal lasts about an hour during which period the dancing girls attached to the temple dance in the room with many Pillars.³⁶ This many pillar room is identified with Jagamohan or Natamandir. At the time of Lord's retiring to bed after the 'Badasinghar Besa' they stood near the 'Kalahat door' and were reciting the Gita Govinda. In this time the Devadasis were singing songs devotionally in a dancing posture.

Besides the daily routine service, they also served during some special festive occasions like Chandan Jatra, Snan Jatra, Jhulan Jatra, Rukmini Haran Ekadashi etc in the temple. At present, out of so many duties only a few of them survive. The rituals observed in the temple of Lord Jagannath had been stopped after the death of Kokilaprabha Devadasi since 1993. Sashikala the last Devadasi of Srimandir only participated as Jashoda on the occasion of Nanda Utsab, on Bhadrab Krushna Nabami.

For these services the Devadasis were granted 18 Bati (Nearly 80 Acs) of landed property near the village Usunabarapada and were also given Rs.9/- annually. They had also the right

to receive the sacred fire (Vaishnabagni) from the temple of Lord Jagannath. Once they attained the skill of singing and dancing they were presented 'Sarees' as a token of appointment.

Lastly, from Madalapanji official records as well as from other inscriptional sources it can be proved that the dancing girls of Sri Jagannath Temple are known as Mahari or Nachuni. They are different from the Devadasis of the South Indian culture. This Mahari tradition was introduced in the temple of Lord Jagannath by Kapilendradev, the king of Surya dynasty. He had a noble ambition of providing an opportunity as well as right to women to serve for the Lord. For this noble purpose, the Maharis of Sri Jagannath temple were maintained a holy and pious life. But in some other temples of the country due to the illegal, irreligious attitudes of some priests, nobles and powerful persons, this sacred tradition became extremely polluted. When the degeneration of the sacred tradition as well as the holy conduct and character of Devadasis were exploited, the reformists tried to abolish this ancient tradition, for which now-a-days this tradition is going to be abolished from the temples.

Footnote:

1. K. Sadasivan, Devadasi system in Medieval Tamil Nadu, Trivandrum, 1993, p.1.
2. K.C. Tarachand, Devadasi Custom Rural Social Structure and flesh Markets, New Delhi, 1992, p.2, 14.
3. K.G. Gurumurthy, Indian Peasantry, New Delhi, 1982, p.70.
4. Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. II, Delhi, 1975, p.128.
5. K. Sadasivan, Devadasi system in Medieval Tamil Nadu, Trivandrum, 1993, p.1.
6. Rajatananda Das Gupta, "The Institution of Devadasis in Assam", Journal of Indian History, Vol.43, Pt.1, Sec.A-128, Trivandrum, p.565.



7. K. Sadasivan, Devadasi system in Medieval Tamil Nadu, Trivandrum, 1993, p.2.
8. Gopal Chandra Praharaja, Purnnachandra Bhashakosha, Vol.V, Cuttack, 1934, p.6530.
9. Paniniya Kashikavrutii-iii, I, 145.
10. Dr. Dimbeswar Sarma, An interpretative study of Kalidas, Calcutta, 1968, p. 356. (See-Vikramorvastyam of Kalidas Ed. by Kavyatirtha R. N. Gaidhani, Ch. IV., p. 75.)
11. Epigraphia Indica, Vol. I, No. 50.
12. R. Sharma Sastri (Ed.), South Indian Inscriptions, Vol. IX, Part I, No.80.Madras, 1939.
13. JRASB, Vol. XIII, No.2, p.71 & JASB, Vol. VII, Calcutta, pp.357-362.
14. Epigraphia Indica, Vol. VI, p. 198.
15. Journals of Bihar Orissa Research Society, Vol. XVII, Patna, p.123.
16. S. N. Rajguru, Inscriptions of Orissa, Vol. III, pt. 1, Bhubaneswar, 1960, p.32.
17. Ibid, p. 98.
18. Epigraphia Indica, Vol. V, No.17.
19. Nellore Inscriptions, No. 27, p. 3.
20. South Indian Inscriptions, Vol. VI, Inscriptions, No. 752.
21. K. B. Tripathy, Evolution of Oriya Language and Script, Cuttack, (nd.), pp. 300-301.
22. K. B Tripathy, Evolution of Oriya Language and Script, Inscription No. 42, Line 4-6, Cuttack, (nd.), p. 300.
23. Ibid- p.300.
24. Dr. H. K. Mahatab, Orissa Itihas, Vol. I, Cuttack, 1964, p. 250.
25. Ayyar, A.S.R. (Ed.), South Indian Inscriptions, Vol.XIV, No. 132.Delhi, 1962.
26. Dr. C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, The Cultural Heritage of India, Vol. II, Madras, 1969, p.600.
27. G.V.S. Rao (Ed.), South Indian Inscriptions, Vol. XIII, 1953, Inscription No.3, Madras, 1953, p. 2.
28. Ibid- Inscription No. 50, p.22.
29. Ibid- Inscription No.141, p.72.
30. Sri N. N. Pradhan, Odia Sahityare Jayadev, Cuttack, 1971, p. 104.
31. Sri K. N. Mohapatra, Sri Jayadev O Sri Gita Govinda, Bhubaneswar, 1973, p. 47.
32. Rama Saraswati, Jayadev Kavya, Stanza 80.
33. Most probably the girls were so called Anangia because they were able to excite the king erotically. The English equivalent of the word Ananga is the "sexual passion". The other explanation could be that these girls were introduced by the king Anagabhimadev.
34. Dr. Mayadhar Mansingha, The Saga of the Land of Lord Jagannath, Cuttack, (nd.), pp.132-133.
35. The Orissa Gazette No.205, Cuttack, 3rd September, 1956, pp. 44-45.
36. Col. Phipp's Account of Jagarnaut-1823, pp. 6, 7.
37. The Orissa Gazette No.205, Cuttack, 3rd September, 1956, p. 45.

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