



Tradition of Devadasi : A Conceptual Framework in India and Abroad

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The antiquity of the *devadasi* tradition mystifies its origin. But the inscriptional sources and the temple architectures provide certain relevant and significant information regarding this holy tradition.

A *devadasi* was popularly known as devoted temple dancer. She uses to perform her dances with a view to entertaining the Lords or Gods, but certainly not to the human beings. But because the people use to witness such dances, *Devadasi* became a source of entertainment for the folk.

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 became identified as "*Gopika*" or "*Rudraganika*". These classes of the *devadasi* were receiving fixed remunerations and some landed property for their personal use.

The *devadasi* tradition was prevalent in the Hindu Temples of Southern India. There was a custom amongst the Korea (weaver) community of Chigalput district of Madras that they had to donate or offer their eldest daughter to a temple. These girls were called "*Basava*" in Telugu and "*Murali*" in Maharashtra. Some of them were actually led a sacred and celebrated life devoting themselves to God. Some others became the victims of the sexual lust of the priests and other temple officers and sometimes even of the influential people of the community.

The *devadasi* tradition was prevalent in Karnatak, Maharashtra, Madras, Kerala, Goa, and Andhra Pradesh. In the inscriptions of southern India some kings, queens and royal families donated lands for the perpetuation of this holy tradition in a particular temple. There are



some information available regarding *devadasi* traditions in the temple inscriptions of *Korangunathan*, *Pipilikeswar* and *Sundereswar* of Trichinapalli district. In 12th century, Chalukyaing Vikramaditya I established a holy temple in the name of *Chandaleswar* and collected some beautiful ladies from different countries and employed them as temple-dancer or *devadasis*.

This tradition was also prevalent in some places in the eastern India. Now in the Garo hills of Assam there is a tribal community who has known as “*maharies*”. There are some similarities between the *maharies* of Puri and Garo hills.

In the holy temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri, this dancing girl tradition was prevalent too. There is a dancing ritual in the temple of Lord Jagannath at the time of the Lord’s retirement to sleep. For this purpose special *sebakas* were employed. They were known as *devadasis* and their dance was known as *devadasi* dance or *mahari* dance.

Descriptions on the rituals of dancing in different inscriptions of India were available. In the stone inscription of *Yogimara Cave* (3rd century B.C.), *Bhujabeswar Temple* (975 A.D.), *Kalipadaswami Temple* (1018 A.D.), *Brahmeswar Temple* (1053 A.D.), *Megheswar Temple* (1070 A.D.), *Sovaneswar Temple* (1080 A.D.), *Narendreswar Temple* (1083 A.D.), *Mukhalingam Temple* (11th century A.D.), *Jaladiswar Temple* (1144 A.D.), *Agastiswar Temple* (1158 A.D.), *Laxmi Nrusingha Temple* of Simanchalam (15th century A.D.) and *Sri Jagannath Temple* (16th century A.D.) there were some evidences of dancing rituals or the *devadasi* traditions.

Even in the ancient Indian culture the queens in the royal palace were adept in dance and music. The queens of Gangaudayaditya and

the three queens of Hiochillaballa 1st were experts in dancing. Sabaldevi, the queen of Somadeva of Kalachuri was also an expert in singing and dancing. During the reign of Raj Raj 1st of Chola four hundred dancing girls were appointed in the temple of Tanjore. Bhattadeva, the minister of Haribarman of East Bengal also appointed one hundred dancing girls in the temple of *Ananta Basudev*. In a Siva Temple of Deopara of East Bengal many Devadasis were employed during the reign of Vijaya Sen. At the time of Chandellamadan Verman, Padmabati was appointed as the dancer- in- chief in the *Nilakantha Temple* of Kalanjar.

The rain-dance of Rajabansi of Kuchvihar bears resemblance to the *devadasi* dance. They called this dance as nude-dance. Some women were dancing nude in front of their holy deity in a forest.

In Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* there are some descriptions about the dancing girls, who were attached to the temples in Kashmir from ancient time. In Kalhana’s own time the dancing women of the temples appear to have been keenly interested in politics. In this book he gave some information that there were some instances of dancing girls of the temples who became consorts of kings.

In the *Meghadutam* of Kalidas, *Mruchhakatika* of Sudraka, *Kultinimata* of Damodara Bhatta, *Samayamatruka* and *Srungarmanjari* of Kshemendra, *Ramacharita* of Sandhyakara Nandi, in *Saduktikarmamruta* there were some information about the dancing girls.

Not only in India but also in some of the Western countries, such types of ritual dances were in vogue. From the Ankor Borei inscription of Cambodia or ancient Kambuja, it is found that seven dancing girls, eleven singers and four



violinists were appointed in the temple. The time of this inscription is 533 *Sakabda* i.e. 611 A.D. In the countries like Egypt, Greece, Assyria, Phinisia and Babylon etc. this type of dance was also found. In Arsmenia there was a tradition or principle that the nobles employed their unmarried daughters for the service of Goddess *Anaitis*. In Babylon not a single girl before her marriage could be spared from this type of duty. This was a binding obligation at the time. But the custom of dancing after marriage was not an obligation. In the exodus of Bible there are also some references to such dances. There was also information regarding *devadasi* tradition of Babylon. Ishtar was the famous deity of Babylon. *Devadasis* were appointed as the Ishtar. A strange custom was prevalent in Babylon in which the matured girls were asked to sit in the temple Ishtar, whoever would drop a silver coin to any girl of the queue, she used to become his property and the person establishes his relationship with her. This practice was not at all appreciated by many, as it laid open the sexual escapades. They treated it a kind of exploitation. But at the same time the historians Herodotus recorded that the money earned through such practice by the girls was considered to be holy in Babylon and Cyprus. The Hebrew Quadeshah belonged to this category. *Arthasastra* of Kautilya informed that the royal treasury accepted such money as the property of the Kingdom.

Marco Polo also described that in his time parents were dedicating their daughters to the Gods. They (parents) kept their daughter with them for dancing services in the temples on important festive occasions. This ritual was repeated till the day of their marriage.

This *devadasi* tradition prevailed in Missore, the most ancient civilized country of the world. The deity of this country was Amman. In

1400 B.C. Amos Hotep Thibes III of Missore constructed a beautiful temple and established the deity. He had conquered many countries and collected funds. To accredit his triumphal march he had constructed temples, donated funds for the rites and rituals of the temple and engaged *devadasis*. There was a document known as Great Harris Papyrus in which there was description that Ramesis III donated 84, 486 servants and *devadasis* etc. and many landed property to the temple of Amon. Some historians are of the opinion that this was the most primitive record of *devadasi* tradition of the world.

In the history of Greece there is some information of *devadasis*. The *devadasis* were appointed in the temple of Apple, the Sun God. They were exhibiting dance in the temple and it was enjoyed by the temple priests, kings and powerful persons etc.

But in Carthege town situated on the northern coast of Africa, there was a traditional religious belief which was known as "Punic". This religion imposed the human sacrifice and child sacrifice. Tanith was the famous deity of Carthege. In this temple a record was available which indicated that ladies were also purchased along with the animals for the purpose of the temple. Some historians interpreted it as an evidence of dancing girl tradition. But in Phinicia in northern coast of Africa, there were some instances about the tradition of temple dancer or *devadasis*.

The tradition of dancing girl could be located in Rome. Historical evidences of the appointment of dancing girls or *devadasis* in the temple of Juno, Venus and Jews at Rome were also recorded.

In the Inca civilization of South America, there were some instances about the dancing girl tradition. The king of Inca identified himself as the son of the sun. In this state sun temple were



managed by the priests. The priests were selecting tiny and pretty girls and took them to Cuzco, an educational institution and educated them. When these girls got maturity, they had to live as the kept of the king or they had to stay at the temple as the virgins of the Sun.

From these above information we came to know that in India and abroad some girls were engaged in the service of the Gods and Goddess as dancing girls. But analyzing the history of religious tradition it is found that some matured girls were appointed or employed as the temple-dancers or *devadasis* for the entertainment of the Gods. It was a sacred service. From these girls those who were not maintaining their sacred life, they were constrained to accept prostitution. For this not only the *devadasis* were responsible, but also the priests who were creating manipulation in the religion were also responsible.

Consequently this tradition of converting women particularly virgins into *devadasi* was responsible for spreading prostitution in ancient Near East (Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, Analolia, Cyprus, Greece). The Goddesses concerned were Ishtar, Astrate, Ma, Anaitis and Aphrodite etc.

This sacred *devadasi* tradition was responsible for the establishment of prostitution as an independent service. So in the temples, temple-dancers or *devadasis*, in the courts the court dancers, and city dancers in cities were seen. In the countries like Greece, the city dancer was given the highest privileges. These city dancers were known as “*hataera*”. Many intellectuals and educated persons used to visit their houses. They not only discussed with the dancers but also learnt their opinions, proposals and suggestions on various issues. Like Greece, geisha dancers in Japan had a social reputation. These geisha dancers were very beautiful, educated as well as fond of dance and music. They could attract the public by their art performances. But in the later

period they did not maintain their sacred life and joined in the profession of prostitution.

The tradition of *devadasi* was very famous not only in India but also in the countries beyond India. But due to the illegal, irreligious attitudes of some priests, nobles and powerful persons, this sacred tradition became extremely polluted. Because of the degeneration of the sacred tradition, the reformers were compelled to abolish ritualistic practice of *devadasis*.

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