



DEVADASIS IN INDIA: SANCTITY, STIGMA, AND CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The Devadasi system occupies a significant yet deeply contested place in the social and cultural history of India. Traditionally associated with temple service, ritual performance, and sacred dedication, the institution originally carried religious prestige and artistic value. Devadasis were attached to temples as dancers, singers, and ritual specialists who participated in the community's spiritual life. Their performances sustained classical traditions of music and dance while also reinforcing the symbolic relationship between deity and devotee. Over time, however, changing political structures, colonial intervention, and social reform movements altered the institution's meaning and status. The colonial administrators and missionaries increasingly interpreted Devadasis through moral and legal categories associated with prostitution. At the same time, Indian reformers sought to abolish the system in the name of social purity and women's upliftment.

The present paper examines the Devadasi system through literary, historical, and cultural perspectives. Rather than approaching the institution through fixed moral categories, the study situates it within changing historical contexts that have shaped Devadasis' identities and experiences across centuries. Drawing upon Sanskrit texts, Bhakti poetry, temple inscriptions, colonial accounts, reformist writings, and modern feminist scholarship, the study explores the transformation of the Devadasi from a sacred ritual figure into a stigmatized social identity. The study argues that the Devadasi system cannot be understood through simplistic binaries of sanctity or exploitation alone; rather, it must be approached as a historically layered institution shaped by religion, patriarchy, caste, colonialism, and artistic tradition.

Keywords: Devadasi System, Temple Culture, Gender Politics, Bhakti Tradition, Colonial Discourse, Cultural Memory, Bharatanatyam, and Feminist Scholarship.

Introduction

The Devadasi institution has remained one of the most debated and misunderstood aspects of Indian social and cultural history. The term “Devadasi” literally means “servant of God,” referring to women dedicated to temple deities and attached to temple service through ritual consecration. In earlier periods, these women occupied an honoured place within temple culture. They participated in religious ceremonies, preserved traditions of dance and music, and were considered spiritually auspicious because they were symbolically married to the deity. Saskia Kersenboom remarks that “the Devadasi was the bride of the god, beyond mortal marriage, and hence carried a unique social and ritual authority”

Despite this sacred position, the institution underwent a profound transformation over the centuries. By the colonial period, the Devadasi had become a subject of moral anxiety and social reform. The colonial administrators, missionaries, and Indian reformers increasingly viewed the practice through Victorian notions of sexuality and respectability. Consequently, the Devadasi was no longer represented primarily as a ritual artist but as a symbol of social degradation. Amrit Srinivasan observes that “the Devadasi tradition, once sanctified as an integral part of Hindu temple culture, was stigmatized under colonial scrutiny and nationalist reform”.

The history of the Devadasi system therefore reveals a complex interaction between religion, gender, caste, colonialism, and artistic performance. It also raises important questions about how societies remember women whose identities do not fit conventional social categories. The Devadasi occupied an ambiguous social space: she was neither wife nor widow, neither entirely autonomous nor fully protected by social institutions. Yet she remained central to temple ritual and cultural production for centuries.

The present paper examines the Devadasi institution from literary and historical perspectives. It also seeks to understand how historical narratives were constructed and how they continue to influence present-day perceptions of gender, culture, and religious tradition in India. It explores the religious origins of the system, its role in medieval temple culture, its representation in Sanskrit and Bhakti literature, the impact of colonialism and reform movements, and its reinterpretation in modern feminist scholarship. The study also investigates how the Devadasi continues to survive in cultural memory through literature, cinema, and contemporary debates about gender and tradition.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions of the Devadasi system have evolved considerably over the last several decades.



Earlier studies often approached the institution from legal or religious perspectives, whereas later works introduced feminist, anthropological, and cultural analyses.

One of the foundational studies remains P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmasastra* (1941), which traces references to temple women and ritual dedication within Hindu legal and religious traditions. Kane's work is important because it situates the Devadasi system within broader structures of dharma and temple organization rather than reducing it to questions of morality alone.

Amrit Srinivasan's influential essay "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance" (1985) transformed scholarly understanding of the institution. Srinivasan argues that colonial and nationalist reform movements fundamentally reshaped public perceptions of Devadasis. According to her, the anti-Devadasi campaigns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries erased the ritual and artistic significance of these women. They replaced it with a discourse of moral degeneration.

Frederique Marglin's *Wives of the God-King* (1985) offers an anthropological understanding of Devadasis as ritual specialists. She emphasizes the symbolic significance of divine marriage and explores the relationship between sexuality, ritual, and sacred power. Her work highlights the religious significance of Devadasi practices

within temple culture. Similarly, Leslie Orr's seminal work, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God* (2000) expands the historical framework by examining medieval South Indian inscriptions. Orr demonstrates that temple women were active participants in economic, religious, and cultural life. Far from being socially marginal, they often possessed property rights and received institutional recognition.

Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures* (2012) focuses on memory, performance, and modernity. Soneji examines how former Devadasi communities negotiate social stigma while also preserving artistic traditions. His work is particularly significant because it foregrounds the voices and experiences of Devadasi descendants. In contrast, Lucinda Ramberg's *Given to the Goddess* (2014) explores the intersection of caste, sexuality, religion, and social exclusion in contemporary Devadasi communities. Ramberg's work demonstrates that the issue cannot be understood solely through historical analysis; it also remains relevant to ongoing debates about women's rights and caste-based inequality.

Together, these studies reveal the complexity of the Devadasi institution and challenge simplistic interpretations that reduce it either to sacred devotion or sexual exploitation. The scholarship increasingly demonstrates that the institution existed within changing networks of power,

patronage, ritual authority, caste hierarchy, and artistic production.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach. Since the Devadasi system intersects with literature, religion, gender studies, anthropology, and history, the research combines textual analysis with historical interpretation. The primary sources include Sanskrit literary texts, Bhakti poetry, temple inscriptions, colonial records, reformist speeches, and cinematic representations. These sources are studied comparatively to understand changing perceptions of Devadasis across historical periods.

The secondary scholarship of historians, anthropologists, literary critics, and feminist scholars provides the theoretical basis for the discussion. The study also uses discourse analysis to examine how categories such as sanctity, morality, purity, and stigma were constructed in different social contexts. The objective is not merely to reconstruct the institution's history but to analyze how representation itself shaped Devadasis' social identity over time.

Myth, Sacred Origins, and Oral Traditions

The origins of the Devadasi system are closely connected with mythological traditions and oral narratives. In many South Indian regions, Devadasis were associated with goddess worship and were believed to possess sacred authority

because of their ritual dedication. The legends surrounding Goddess Yellamma and other regional deities often portray temple women as spiritually chosen individuals whose service ensures divine blessings for the community. Such narratives reinforced the belief that dedication to the deity brought both religious merit and social prestige.

Oral traditions also played an important role in preserving Devadasis' cultural memory. Folk songs, ritual performances, and local storytelling traditions frequently celebrated these women as custodians of sacred art and devotion. Through these narratives, Devadasis came to symbolize auspiciousness, fertility, and continuity. Marglin judiciously explains that the symbolic marriage between Devadasi and deity represented a sacred bond that separated temple women from ordinary social categories. This ritualized status allowed Devadasis to occupy a distinctive position within temple society.

At the same time, oral traditions reveal regional differences in practice. In Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, the institution developed distinct ritual forms and social meanings, shaped by local customs and patronage patterns. In some communities, Devadasis enjoyed considerable respect and patronage, while in others they occupied socially vulnerable positions. These



variations demonstrate that the institution was never entirely uniform across India.

Historical Origins of the Devadasi System

The historical evidence suggests that forms of female ritual dedication existed in India from ancient times, although the specific term “Devadasi” emerged later. Kane aptly notes that while the institution may not have existed in its later form during the Vedic age, the idea of women participating in sacred ritual service can be traced to early religious traditions.

The most detailed evidence regarding Devadasis appears in South Indian temple inscriptions from the Chola and Vijayanagara periods. These inscriptions indicate that temple women were attached to major temples and received land grants, salaries, and institutional patronage. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri observes that the Brihadeeswara temple at Thanjavur employed hundreds of women who participated in singing, dancing, and ritual ceremonies. Their role was not marginal but central to temple functioning.

The Devadasis were trained in music, dance, and ritual performance from an early age. Their education was often rigorous and included mastery of rhythm, gesture, poetry, devotional literature, and ceremonial etiquette. Their artistic training contributed significantly to the preservation of classical traditions that later evolved into Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.

Kersenboom emphasizes that the Devadasi's status as *nityasumangali*—a woman eternally auspicious because she could never become widowed—gave her a special ritual position within society. This concept distinguished Devadasis from ordinary married women and reinforced their symbolic association with prosperity and sacred continuity.

Literary Representations in Sanskrit Literature

The figure of the temple dancer appears frequently in Sanskrit literature and classical aesthetics. In many literary texts, dance and music are represented not simply as entertainment but as sacred offerings. Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* describes women performing dances within temple spaces, suggesting the close relationship between artistic performance and ritual worship. Such representations portray temple women as embodiments of grace, devotion, and aesthetic refinement.

The *Natyashastra* of Bharata also establishes an important connection between performance and spirituality. Bharata describes dramatic art as a divine gift intended for both instruction and worship. This understanding later influenced the ritual status of dance traditions associated with Devadasis. The temple inscriptions from medieval South India further confirm the recognized status of temple women. Leslie Orr rightly notes that inscriptions frequently list temple

women alongside priests and donors, indicating their institutional importance.

These literary and inscriptional references challenge later colonial portrayals that reduced Devadasis solely to sexual identities. Earlier textual traditions generally portrayed temple women within frameworks of sacred service, artistic accomplishment, and ritual responsibility. In earlier traditions, artistic performance itself was regarded as sacred labour.

Bhakti Poetry and Devotional Imagination

The Bhakti movement significantly reshaped ideas of devotion, gender, and divine love. The female saints such as Andal and Akka Mahadevi articulated forms of spiritual longing that resonate strongly with the symbolic world of Devadasi culture. Andal's devotional poetry imagines the devotee as Krishna's bride, emphasizing complete surrender to divine love. Her declaration that spiritual union transcends worldly marriage reflects themes also associated with Devadasi ritual identity. Similarly, Akka Mahadevi rejected conventional social expectations and described herself as spiritually wedded to Shiva. Her poetry challenges patriarchal authority and foregrounds female spiritual agency.

The Bhakti tradition, created a religious atmosphere in which devotion could be expressed through emotional intensity, artistic performance, and symbolic marriage to the deity. Such devotional

expression blurred the boundaries between spirituality, aesthetics, and personal identity. These ideas strengthened the cultural legitimacy of Devadasis within temple society.

At the same time, Bhakti literature also reveals tensions surrounding women's bodies, sexuality, and religious authority. The female devotion was celebrated spiritually but often regulated socially. This contradiction remained central to the historical experience of Devadasis.

Medieval Temple Culture and Artistic Performance

During the Chola and Vijayanagara periods, temples became major centers of political, economic, and artistic life. Within this environment, Devadasis played an essential role in maintaining ritual continuity and cultural expression. David Shulman observes that South Indian temples functioned not only as religious institutions but also as cultural centers where music, poetry, and dance flourished. The Devadasi occupied a central position within this cultural world.

The dance tradition known as *Sadir* formed an important part of temple worship. Dance was considered an offering to the deity, and every gesture carried symbolic meaning. Douglas Knight remarks that dance was “not outside worship but its very heart”. Devadasis also participated in festivals, processions, and community rituals. Their presence was associated with



auspiciousness, and they were often invited to bless marriages and social ceremonies. Mines notes that in many villages, the participation of Devadasis was considered essential for ensuring ritual success and prosperity. This demonstrates that their significance extended beyond temple walls into broader social life.

However, despite their ritual authority, Devadasis remained dependent upon systems of patronage controlled largely by male elites. Their position, therefore, remained unstable, particularly during periods of political change when temple economies weakened or royal patronage declined—their status, therefore, combined cultural prestige with structural vulnerability.

Colonial Encounters and Reformist Criticism

The colonial period brought dramatic changes in the perception of the Devadasi system. The European missionaries and administrators often viewed Indian religious practices through Victorian moral frameworks and interpreted temple dedication as institutionalized immorality. Abbe Dubois described Devadasis as “sacred prostitutes,” a phrase that significantly shaped colonial understanding of the institution. Such descriptions ignored the ritual and artistic dimensions of Devadasi culture.

The colonial census operations and legal categories further reinforced this

interpretation. The British administrators increasingly classified Devadasis under categories associated with prostitution, thereby erasing distinctions recognized within indigenous traditions. Eric Stokes argues that colonial legislation collapsed ritual service into criminalized sexuality, transforming social perceptions of temple women.

The Indian social reformers also criticized the institution, though often for different reasons. Influenced by both Victorian morality and nationalist concerns about social reform, many reformers argued that the Devadasi system degraded women. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy emerged as one of the strongest voices against the practice. She argued that dedication reduced women to objects controlled by temple institutions and male patrons.

Yet the reform movement also produced contradictions. The nationalists sought to preserve India’s cultural heritage while simultaneously condemning the women who had historically sustained important artistic traditions. Sumanta Banerjee notes that reformers were caught between admiration for classical culture and anxiety about female sexuality. This tension shaped much of the public discourse surrounding Devadasis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Modern Literature and Feminist Reinterpretation

Modern Indian literature frequently uses the figure of the Devadasi to explore themes of oppression, desire, spirituality, and social control. Subramania Bharati employed the image of the Devadasi symbolically in his nationalist poetry, comparing colonial India itself to a woman trapped within structures of exploitation. His poetry reflects both sympathy for marginalized women and broader anxieties about cultural decline.

U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* examines the contradictions of ritual purity and social hypocrisy within orthodox society. Although the novel does not focus exclusively on Devadasis, it critiques the structures that regulate women's bodies and sexuality. Similarly, Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* explores patriarchal control, female desire, and ritual imagination. Through myth and folklore, Karnad exposes the tension between women's lived experiences and socially imposed moral codes.

The Feminist scholars have further complicated these literary representations. Uma Chakravarti argues that the Devadasi often appears in literature as a paradoxical figure situated between reverence and subjugation. Contemporary feminist scholarship also challenges narratives that portray Devadasis solely as passive victims. The scholars increasingly emphasize their

artistic contributions, ritual authority, and forms of agency within restrictive social systems.

Cinema and Popular Culture

The cinematic world has played an important role in shaping public memory of the Devadasi institution. Various films in different Indian languages have portrayed Devadasis as tragic victims, sensual performers, spiritual devotees, or symbols of social injustice. Early films such as *Devadasi* (1948) and *Dhaasippen* (1943) reflected reformist concerns and often depicted temple dedication as a source of suffering for women.

Later films, such as *Giddh* (1984), focused on caste oppression and economic exploitation associated with Devadasi practices in rural communities. *Sringaram* (2007), on the other hand, attempted a more nuanced portrayal by emphasizing artistic discipline and emotional complexity.

These cinematic representations significantly influence how contemporary audiences understand the institution. Popular culture often simplifies historical realities, but it also keeps the memory of Devadasis alive within public consciousness. Soneji argues that representations of Devadasis in modern media continue to shape debates about morality, heritage, and women's agency.

Decline, Abolition, and Persistence

The legal abolition of the Devadasi system during the twentieth century marked



an important turning point in Indian social history. The reformers viewed abolition as necessary for women's emancipation. Yet, the consequences of legal reform proved far more complicated than anticipated—the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 officially criminalized temple dedication.

However, legislation alone did not eliminate the practice. In many regions, poverty, caste discrimination, and lack of social opportunities contributed to the continuation of informal dedication practices. Sen aptly notes that although the institution disappeared legally, socio-economic conditions allowed forms of the practice to persist in marginalized communities.

At the same time, classical dance traditions associated with Devadasis underwent transformation and institutional revival. Bharatanatyam became celebrated as a national cultural form, but many Devadasi communities remained excluded from the new cultural establishment. Kersenboom observes that while the art survived, the women who historically preserved it were often erased from mainstream cultural memory. This selective preservation reveals how societies often appropriate artistic traditions while marginalizing the communities associated with them.

Contemporary Activism and Legal Perspectives

In contemporary India, activist organizations continue to work with former Devadasi communities and women vulnerable to ritual dedication. The laws, such as the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982, sought to criminalize the practice, yet enforcement remains inconsistent.

Renowned organizations such as Mahila Abhivrudhi Mattu Samrakshana Samsthe (MASS) and Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) advocate for rehabilitation, education, healthcare, and economic support for women affected by the system. Modern activism increasingly frames the issue not only in moral terms but also in relation to caste oppression, labour rights, gender discrimination, and economic inequality. Ramberg emphasizes that contemporary Devadasi debates reveal how religion, sexuality, caste, and state power continue to intersect in complex ways. Thus, the Devadasi question remains relevant to broader discussions about social justice and women's autonomy in modern India.

Devadasi in Contemporary Academic Discourse

The recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need for nuanced interpretations of the Devadasi institution. Earlier colonial and reformist frameworks tended to portray Devadasis

either as immoral women or helpless victims. The contemporary researchers, however, argue that such interpretations ignore the diversity of historical experiences associated with the institution.

The interdisciplinary studies now examine Devadasis not only through religious history but also through performance studies, gender theory, anthropology, and subaltern historiography. This broader approach reveals the institution as a historically changing phenomenon rather than a static social category. The scholars have also emphasized the importance of recovering women's voices from archival silence. Much of the available historical material was produced by male administrators, reformers, or religious authorities. The oral histories and ethnographic accounts therefore play an essential role in reconstructing lived experiences.

The Devadasi system remains a subject of continuing debate because it raises difficult questions about agency, exploitation, tradition, and modernity. Some scholars emphasize ritual dignity and artistic accomplishment, while others foreground structural inequality and sexual exploitation. A balanced understanding requires acknowledging both dimensions simultaneously.

Ultimately, the study of the Devadasi tradition reveals how cultural institutions evolve across time and how women's

histories are often reshaped by changing political and moral frameworks. The institution survives today not as a single social reality but as a contested memory embedded within literature, dance, cinema, law, and public discourse.

Concluding Reflections

The history of the Devadasi system cannot be reduced to a single narrative. It was neither entirely sacred nor entirely exploitative. Instead, it evolved in response to changing historical conditions that shaped the lives and identities of temple women in different ways. In its earlier forms, the institution provided women with ritual authority, artistic training, and social recognition within temple culture. Devadasis contributed significantly to the preservation of classical dance, music, and devotional traditions.

However, patriarchal structures, changing systems of patronage, colonial moral frameworks, and reformist interventions gradually transformed public perceptions of these women. The sacred performer became recast as a social outcast.

Modern scholarship has attempted to recover the complexity of Devadasi history by restoring attention to women's voices, artistic labour, and cultural contributions. As Soneji observes, remembering the Devadasi means confronting "the entanglement of beauty, devotion, and dispossession". This



observation captures the central contradiction of the institution: a tradition that produced extraordinary artistic and spiritual cultures while simultaneously exposing women to forms of social vulnerability. The study of the Devadasi system therefore remains important not only for understanding India's cultural past but also for reflecting upon contemporary questions of gender, representation, memory, and social justice.

Conclusion

The Devadasi institution represents one of the most complex intersections of religion, gender, art, and power in Indian history. For centuries, Devadasis functioned as ritual specialists, dancers, singers, and custodians of sacred traditions within temple culture. Their performances were not merely artistic displays but integral elements of devotional practice. Yet, historical transformations gradually altered the institution's meaning. The colonial administrators and missionaries redefined Devadasis through moral categories rooted in Victorian ideology, while Indian reformers sought abolition in the name of social progress. In the process, much of the ritual and cultural significance attached to temple women was overshadowed by narratives of stigma and degradation.

Despite these changes, the legacy of Devadasis continues to survive through classical dance traditions, literary memory, oral histories, and feminist reinterpretations.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that the institution cannot be understood through simplistic moral binaries. Instead, it must be approached as a historically layered phenomenon shaped by devotion, caste, patriarchy, artistic performance, and political change. The Devadasi remains a powerful figure in India's cultural imagination because her history reflects broader tensions between sanctity and social exclusion, tradition and reform, and visibility and erasure. To study the Devadasi is, therefore, to engage with broader questions concerning women's agency, cultural memory, and the politics of representation in Indian society.

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