
THE ROLE OF DEVADASI SYSTEM IN THE TEMPLE OF TAMILNADU WITH A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PUDUKKOTTAI

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The purpose of the paper is to highlight the devadasi system in the temple and monasteries of Pudukkottai, Tamilnadu. A devadasi was a female artist. The word devadasi derived from Sanskrit¹ or Devaradiyal in Tamil language. The term devaradiyal has divided into three parts Devar +adi+al (ar) which means first one 'Lord', 'God', or 'King'. Second one stands for 'Foot', 'Base', 'Bottom' (denotes Slaves, Adimai) last one means person. It means 'Servant of God'². Devadasi were considered the wife of goddess.

This group of women belongs to mostly poor and downtrodden section of the society. But they are well learned and practice classical artistic traditions. Some of them did not interest to learn dance. So they served as menial servants and slaves of temples and monasteries. But 6th century to 13th century devadasi had a high rank and dignity in society. During this period kings or royal people provided them with gift of property, land and other things. Devadasi are most popular terms called in inscription like 'Padiyilar, Devaradiyar, TaliccheripPendugal and Emperumanadiyar³. There are 35 inscriptions about devaradiyar in Pudukkottai.⁴

The status of women:

Devadasi is the humiliation of women. In the early days women played a major role in the economy. They were involved in pottery making, weaving, and animal husbandry and of course, the crop industry also. Women participated in all productive activities.

Women have declined as economic participation has begun to decline. Women and oppressed people who were pushed to the point of inability to dominate the means of production were degraded in the social system. This trend began in Vedic period. Women were treated like slaves, pogiyar (pogaporul), pentati, the possession of male.

Women Slaves: Fifteen types of slaves in India. Both male and female were slaves bought for price. The slave's wife was also treated like slave. Most of them slaves were women. They were engaged mostly domestic work, agriculture also.

¹ Lexicon, vol.IV, pts. I – IV, Madras, 1930,P.2064

² Dr.S.K.Sadasivan, Devadasi System in Medieval TamilNadu,akani veliyeedu,Vandavasi,2011,p-1

³ Ibid ,p-1

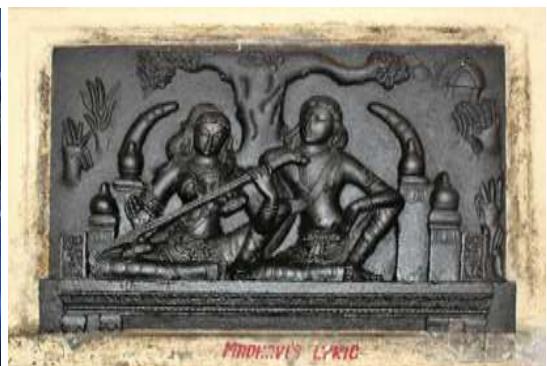
⁴ Avanam vol.21, Journal of the Tamilnadu ,Archaeological society, Tanjore,2010, P-223



During the war time success army was looted from opposite group. Not only wealth they are burned cities, killed children and martyrs and women also captured by success army.

In early time some women were considered as priest (shaman). They performed the rites of worship. Later women were denied this right. During that time the men dressed like women and performed rituals. Panar, viraliyar, and other were seen as male and female priest in the ancient Tamil society.

The female parathaiyar faction also appeared to be a drain on the misconduct of men in the privacy society. For example silappathikaram⁵



It is the earliest hindu-jain-tamil semi legendry epic. The epic is a tragic love story of an ordinary couple, kannaki and her husband kovalan. Kannaki and kovalan is newly married couple, in love and living in bliss. Overtime, kovalan meets Matavi (dancing girl) and fall for her, leaves kannaki and moves in with Matavi. Later kovalan feels Matavi is unfaithful to him, and leaves her. Kannaki is still waiting for him. Later kovalan joined with kannaki.

⁵ V.R.Ramachandra Dikshitar, Studies in Tamil Literature and History, Madras, 1936, p.289



Mauryan Empire considered being the first empire of India. During this period they were collected tax from parathaiyar.⁶

The land ownership and status of devaradiyar: The first to tell us in the Warapur inscription mentioned about devaradiyar of Pudukkottai area during the period of Rajendra Chola I. Next one according to the Siva temple inscription mentioned about the Melmana nallur villager and Vikramasozhiswarar temple donor together sell to thirunala kundrathu nayanan kovil devaradiyar umaiyal periya nachi during the period of the Maravarman Sundara pandian I at the place of kudumianmalai. In many such inscriptions, devaradiyar bought the land from the temple donor. The land was called as gudi devadanam. It means permanent owner of the land.

During the colonial period they were called as Natana Mangaiyar (nachchu) their customs and traditions vary by region and caste.

In the mid of the 19th century the devadasi system emerged as an issue, deviating from the basic tenets of religion in order to eliminate prostitution and protect women and youth.

Thurston classifies devadasi women into seven categories.

1. The one who gives himself as a gift (adoption) to the temple.
2. The one who sells himself to the temple.
3. The one who dedicates himself to the temple for the welfare of the family.
4. The one who dedicate themselves as devotees due to devotion.
5. Deceived by the upper class people and gifted to the temple.
6. The next practice is to present a gifted, beautiful and well trained woman to the temple of the ruler.
7. Who are paid by the temple to perform a women's dance, song. They were called as Rudraganigai or kopigaiyar⁷.

Some historians say, the first confirmed reference to a devadasi was during the kesari dynasty in the 6th century A.D in south India systematically evolved in the 10th or 11th century.

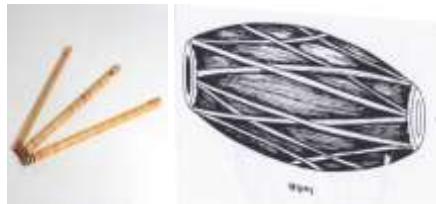
⁶ Navasakti, Vol.IV, 13 th Nov,1925,p.9

⁷ Edkar Thurston, Thennindia Kulangalum Kudigalum vol-II,Tamil university, Tanjore,2010,P-161

Devadasi and fine arts:

The devadasi of the medieval period were repositories of these arts. They performed the time of arts in temple rituals and festivals. They were performed during the pujas daily. In special occasion like marriage ceremony, religious festivals, and during rich people visit to the temple. The devadasis have enriched the tradition of fine arts. They also served as models to the sculpture and painters who have depicted them in beautiful scenes and images.

The instrumental music was very popular in the temple of the period instruments such as calari, kokkari, yal, kulal, udukkai, talam, vinai, and mulavu.⁸



Kulal and mulavu were played which the devadasis danced. The songs and music of devadasi have evoked both the feelings of praise and condemnation. Their arts with devotion and dedication. Devadasi dance was called as dasi attam⁹. A devadasi for having enacted the sokkam dance was conferred the title of sokkataiyandar. The lord of the Agastyesvar temple at Vellanur in Pudukkottai was called sokkak- kuttar.¹⁰

Later devadasi's were suffered a lot for example did not get married to anyone, illegal to dedicate girls to Hindu temples and monasteries. During that time O.P.Ramaswamy Reddiyar and Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced devadasi abolition bill enacted 9th oct 1947. Muthulakshmi, daughter of a devadasi Chandrammal .Chandrammal was married to Narayanaswamy. He was the principal of Maharaja's college in Pudukkottai, became the first girl student of the college. Also, she was the first Indian girl student in the department of surgery at the Madras medical college.

When she was allowed to maharaja's high school, parents of boys pressurized to withdraw their children from the school. Her father had been ostracized by his family for marrying a devadasi and Muthulakshmi became closer to her maternal relatives and saw the situation first hand. After she became a doctor, among the first things Muthulakshmi began to fight against superstition

Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy

It was in 1893 that the madras Hindu reform association sends to appeal to put and end of devadasi dance practice during private and public function. In 1900 M.Ramachandran, openly protested against the devadasi system and published articles and distributed Pamphlets. In



⁸ St.Sundarar,Devaram,48:5

⁹ Rina Singha and Reginald Massey, Indian dances: Their History and Growth, London, 1967., p-31

¹⁰ ARE, of 1928 -29, No.8

1927, V.R.Pantalu made a resolution in the council of the state to prohibit dedication of girls. During that time Muthulakshmi Reddy was nominated to the post of the first women deputy president. She was organized several meetings and seminars and interviewed several hundred devadasis. Many devadasis were supported to their ideas. The 1957 devadasi protection (Extension) act was passed. But some devadasi still practice the system illegally back in 2006, the national commission for women had found between 44,000 and 2, 50, 000 devadasi in India. All these details and present condition of this system will be discussed in this paper¹¹.

Reference Books

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¹¹ Puthiya agarathi, Devadasi murai olippu porali Muthulakshmi Reddy, July 30,2019