

Dancing Bodies Through Centuries: Analyzing Devadasi Roles as Representatives of Changes

S. Jeevanandam¹

Introduction

Devadasi and their institution is one of the important cultural elements in the history of South India. The system was embedded in the Hindu religious and ritual order. Devadasi were considered as an important functionary of the Hindu society. They are very expressive semiotic unit, who signifying the mythical- ascetic- cum- ritual objects which residing in the collective consciousness of the Hindu tradition.¹ The institution of devadasi had taken such deep roots in the temple organization in South Indian society. They were an integral part of the temple organization. Their ritual performances were a part of religious services in a temple has a long history. There are large numbers of inscription which elucidate the information on devadasi. The inscriptions of South India proves that the association of dancing girls with temple and their valuable contributions to Indian culture and art. These temple girls were commonly referred as 'devadasi' in literature and their duties were to perform various sacred duties of the Hindu rituals. Historically, devadasi are the prominent women in public domain whom often played prominent role in the political and social events. They did multiple roles in the society. They were employed in temples as dancers, singers, musicians and offering certain services to the deities. The cultural history of South India cannot be completed without the inclusion of the institution of temple dancing girls.

In South India, the devadasi were very important functionary of Hindu society and were associated with the cult of fertility.² The performing art is considered as one of the prominent duties of devadasi. Daveshe Soneji mentioned that there were no important function of the courts is considered complete without the presence of these ideal dancers.³ This paper emphasizes the role of devadasi as representatives of changes in the South Indian tradition and their hold over the performing arts throughout the centuries. Further, it does not focus on the controversies which are surrounded during the early 20th century C.E. on Bharatanatyam.

Sources

This paper has used various sources from inscriptions, epigraphy, numismatics, manuscripts, literature and travelogues. The inscriptions provided valuable details on the different aspects of devadasi system. From 11th century C.E., the inscriptions related to devadasi are available in almost all parts of the Indian peninsula. The earliest epigraphic reference to devadasi was dated back to the reign of the Pallava king Nandivarma Pallavamalla (731 C.E. to 796 C.E.).⁴ The earlier epigraphic sources are mentioned devadasi in different names such as *devaradiyar*⁵, *patiyilar*⁶, *talichery pendukal*⁷, *nakkan*⁸,

¹ Doctoral Research Fellow, Centre for Women's Studies, University of Hyderabad, India.