



Contribution Of Women In Dance With Special Reference To Devdasi System

Arshdeep Kaur Bhatti

(Research Scholar)

Banasthali Vidyapith,

Rajasthan.

The worshipping traditions of India are proliferated in every corner of the world. Its culture, its Heritage, its History talks about their 'SANSKRITI' (Their perception about Gods). The tradition of devadasi culture can be traced back to as early as the 6th Or 7th century, particularly in Southern parts of India during the reigns of the Cholas, Chetas and Pandyas. It can also be traced from the figurines of Harppa and Mohenjodaro excavations of the Pre-vedic period. The 'Daasi' Pratha or the 'devadasi' system in India, was the only way to worship and Serve Gods for all the respected temples. As music and dance were the two most essential elements in praying, serving or worshipping Gods. Devadasis had to perform the religious rituals daily and sing and dance the verses in the temples and in front of the kings of respected Regions as well. This system was much vogue in Southern Indian States like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Odisha etc. As these women, were termed as Devadasis widely, they were known by different names on which Dr. K. Jamanadas elaborates further in his article "The Term Devadasi is a Sanskrit Term denoting female servant of deity, but they are known by different names in different areas, such as Mahari in Kerala, Natis in Assam, Muralis in Maharashtra, Basavis in Karnataka, Jogin in Andhra Pradesh".¹

Due to their widespread in South, The Devadasis also learned Classical forms like Bharatanatyam (that was earlier known as Daasiattam or Sadir Nautch too), Kuchipudi and Odissi. Dedicated to the temples in early childhood, after reaching their puberty, they were married to the deity of the temple by the symbolic tying of the marriage necklace (tall) by the Priest of the temple and the imprint of a flower pattern in Sandalwood paste on each shoulder. They were taught the arts of music and dance, sacred and classical literature in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu and certain duties in the temple. Traditionally, the devadasis were categorized into ritualistic and non-ritualistic performers. Ritualistic performers were from the upper caste

¹ Dr. K. Jamanadas, DECLINE AND FALL OF BUDDHISM (A Tragedy in Ancient India) Chapter-11 'Devadasis were Degraded Buddhist Nuns', e-Published by SAMAYBUDHA Mishan. Page-1 (208).

while the ones from the lower caste were assigned menial jobs such as washing, cleaning the temple and fanning the deity.

In the State of Karnataka this system has been practiced for over 10 centuries. Chief among them was the 'YELLAMMA CULT'. There are many stories about its origin. The most popular story indicates the Renuka was the daughter of a Brahmin, married the Sage Jamadagni and was the mother of five sons. She used to bring water from the Malaprabha river for the Sage's worship and rituals. One day at the river, she saw a group of youth engaged in water sports and forgot to return home in time for her husband's worship, which made Jamadagni question her chastity. He ordered their sons to punish their mother one by one, four of them refused on one pretext or the other. The Sage cursed them to become eunuchs and had Renuka beheaded by his fifth son, Parshuram. To everybody's astonishment, Renuka's head multiplied by tens and hundreds and moved to different regions. This inspired her four eunuch sons as well as others to become her followers and worship her head. During an interacting about the dedicating girls and their extent of its prevalence in the Karnataka with a few well-informed individuals from the Bijapur, Belgaum, Dhawar and others, S.D. Panekar and Kamala Rao mentions "we were told that the devadasi system was still in prevalence in the villages of North Karnataka to a distressing degree and that the goddess YELLAMMA was a strong influence in the lives of those rustics, steeped in ignorance and superstitions"².

According to the legend, the Goddess YELLAMMA, fled to the villages of Karnataka and subsequently became a symbol of worship for the lower Hindu castes. Every year, an older Devadasi woman acts as a medium between the deity YELLAMMA and her worshippers during a session at the YELLAMMA Jatre in Saundatti, India. The woman enters a trance like state and the devotees watch in awe as the deity YELLAMMA begins to speak through her. The medium carries out, shakes uncontrollably and often collapses at the end of the session. This provides the worshippers with direct contact with the deity, and the woman is duly compensated. These mediums are central to perpetuating new young Devadasi girls.

The lives, these women lived were entirely different from the other married and unmarried women. On which an accomplished exponent of Indian Classical dance Shrimati Ragini DEVI says "Devadasis had their own customs and traditions of social and family life. Daughter of a devadasi usually followed the profession of the mother and was dedicated to the temples. Sons often became musicians in temples and palaces"³. Once dedicated to the deities of the temple, she (devadasi) was free from her widowhood as she was not allowed to marry a mortal after the dedicating ceremony was initiated. Being the votaries of the Gods, they also enjoyed a great social status in the society and were awarded with Tax free Lands and rich housings by the Kings of those times."Chola King Rajaraja installed four hundred devadasis in his temple at Tanjore. They were housed in Luxurious quarters in the four streets surrounding the temple and were granted Tax free lands"⁴. Her

² S.D. Panekar and Kamla Rao, A Study of prostitutes in Bombay (with reference to family background), Lalvani Publishing House (Bombay-Calcutta-New Delhi- Madras), 1967. Page-75.

³ Ragini Devi, Dance Dialects OF India, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi. ISBN:81-208-0674-3, 2002, Page-47,49.

⁴ Reginald and Jamila Massey, The DANCES OF INDIA, A GENERAL SURVEY AND DANCER'S GUIDE, The Devadasis, servants of the Gods, Tri Colour Books London, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi. ISBN 0 948725 04 . 1989 Page-20

presence in various ceremonies such as birth giving, weddings was very influential as she was thought to be a great possessor of Good Fortune. Invitations from Royal Palaces were often a way to enhance the glory of devadasis. They were honored in the public in the past, and even offered seats alongside the figures of royalty. Although, holding such a status, she had no claim or any right on the 'other' Man, with whom she had an intimacy for a night but a child of a devadasi was considered a Legitimate according to the Laws of those times.

With due respect to the different regions, the dedicating ceremony was performed differently. Whereas in Odisha, there was no violation among the devadasis, as they were treated with genuine respect. The devadasi system never changed into prostitution in Odisha. The term 'MAHARI' meaning 'Great Lady' was used for the devadasis that danced in the temples of Lord Jagannath. These Maharis were well known by the rituals they were asked to perform for Lord Jagannath as it was believed that the Lord enjoyed the dance of the devadasis before retiring to bed at night.

As it is said 'Age before Beauty', the devadasis who reached a greater number in age were treated with low interests. Due to the diseased and old bodies they were not much involved in the rituals. There was a proper channel through which they could step-in into their retirements by writing to the temple authorities for the permission to remove her ear-pendants, (todus). "the ceremony takes place at the Palace of Maharaja. At the appointed spot the officers concerned assemble, and the woman, seated on wooden plank, proceeds to unhook the pendants, and places them, with a nuzzur (gift) of twelve fanams, or four annas seven pieces (one rupee in case it is so intended), on the plank. Directly after this she turns about and walks away without casting a second glance at the ear-ornaments which have been laid down. She becomes immediately a Taikkishavi, or old mother and is suppose to lead a life of retirement and resignation"⁵.

The devadasi system had various fluctuations, at once she was the most honored devadasi but on the other side, because of the interference of the British Government for their own pleasurable satisfaction, they forcefully took these servants of deity to the brothels and abused them. As the centuries passed these devadasis were less servants but more of a prostitution. The government of India then took different measures, set up different Laws as The National Human Rights Commission, in 2013, which recorded 450,000 devadasis within India. The Vimochana Sangha School in Malabad was founded in 1990 and it is the First residential school that has been established to break the cycle of the Devadasi System. This school was established to educate the children of the devadasis and also to remove them from the claws of this deplorable culture, since the society considered that all the children of devdasis should also become devadasis once they reach the appropriate age.

Various Laws have been enacted in the past to stop the menace of Devadasi system. It was first outlawed in 1924 under the British rule and the Princely States of Mysore and Travancore ceased all the customs regarding the devadasi system. Bombay Devadasi Protection Act (1934) was another initiative by

⁵ Santosh Chatterjee, Devadasi Temple-dancer, published by S.K. Chatterjee, June 1945, page-42,44

the Bombay High Court under British India to protect the existing devadasis. Several other Acts in states like Madras and Karnataka for condemnation of such practice were Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947 and Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982. Some of the individuals such as Dr. Muthulakshami Reddi and Mr. Jayakar presented with their bills in the Madras Council in 1930, that claimed the prohibiting the performance of the dedicatory ceremony in any Hindu temple and enabling the dedicated women to contract a legal marriage. Also, all those families which received grants of land belonging to the temples, under an obligation to dedicate some of their girls to the religious service to temple-dancers, by the Religious Endowments Act, such obligation for the women members of these families to render service for land was put to an end.” A Bill was then passed in the Legislative Council in Madras in March 1930 making such dedication to temples punishable”⁶.

In February 2016, Supreme Court took a stern stance in condemning the illegal practice of dedicating young girls as devadasis and also directed to all states and Union Territories, especially Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, to strictly enforce the directives to check such an unethical practice.

The word ‘Devadasi’ has become the synonym for ‘Prostitution’ on which Ankur Shingal says “The modern iteration of the devadasi practice is significantly different from the historic institution, in terms of both, its physical manifestations and underlying goals”⁷. The Government should vigorously act upon these practices and ensure that the various acts/laws that have been implemented for the prohibition of ‘Dedication’ are functioned immediately. So that our women are saved and secured from such traditions and can live lives with dignity and contentment.

⁶ B. Joardar and Santosh Kumar Mukherji (editors), Prostitution in India, introduction to the reprint edition, Inter- India Publications, New Delhi, reprinted in India in 1986, ISBN 81-210-0054-8., Page-318.

⁷ Ankur Shingal, The Devadasi System: Temple Prostitution in India, pg-112 (2015) UCLA Women`s Law Journal, Powered by the California Digital Library, University of California.