



History

DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF DEVADASI WOMEN IN BELLARY DISTRICT OF KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT The custom of dedicating girls to the temples of the Goddess can be traced back to the 3rd Century A.D. during the period of the Puranas. Devadasis at that time worked in temples as entertainers. They sang and danced at temple functions and religious festivals. In India, in the past, the devadasis were a very important functionary of Hindu society. The functions of devadasis were a part of religious services in a long history of temple institution. In India the practices originate and developed during the early medieval period. There are a large number of inscriptions which give us a lot of information regarding the existence of the institution of the devadasis. Several south Indian inscriptions prove the association of dancing girls with temple service from about the 9th century AD. In this an attempt is made to analyze the demographic features of Devadasi women in Bellary district of Andhra Pradesh.

KEYWORDS : Marital Status, Age, Dedication, Goddess

INTRODUCTION

Devadasi means a woman who performed the service for some deity in a temple. They were unmarried temple servants who had been dedicated to temple deities as young girls through rites resembling Hindu marriage ceremonies. Devadasi (Skt. devadasi, Ta. tevataci, lit. 'slave of god'), the term is to be a Sanskritized form of the Tamil term tevaratyal which means a woman who enslaved for the service of some specific deity or sacred object. The word is the feminine form of deva-dasa, a man who is enslaved for the service of a deity. Though the term has its origin in Sanskrit, the prevailing custom and practices are in no way related to the gods or deities mentioned in Sanskrit literature, especially the Trinity. Devadasis were a common feature in almost all the major brahmanical temples. The devadasi or temple women was one, who was a dancer and one who is associated with temple, either by having some kind of regular service function in a temple or because her primary social identity is defined with reference to a temple. Many a times these girls also provided sexual services to their clients.

Farquhar stated that every well-appointed Hindu temple aims at being an earthly reproduction of the paradise of the god in whose honor it was built... The gandharvas are represented by the Temple-band, the apsaravas by the courtesans who sing and dance in the service. These are dedicated to the service of the god; but they give their favors to his worshippers. They are usually called devadasis, handmaidens of the god... They dance and sing in the temple-services and also when the images are carried out through the town in procession. Hence the common name for them everywhere in Nautch-girls, Dancing-girls. Edgar Thurston described devadasis as dasis or deva-dasis are dancing-girls attached to the Tamil temples, who subsist by dancing and music, and the practice of 'the oldest profession in the world'.

The rise of the caste, and its euphemistic name, seem both of them to date from about the 9th and 10th centuries C.E., during which much activity prevailed in Southern India in the matter of building temples, and elaborating the services held in them. The dancing-girls' duties, were to fan the idol with charmaras (Tribetan ox tals), to carry the sacred light called kumbarti, and to sing and dance before the god when he was carried in procession. In a book Religious Thought and Life in India, Monier Williams described devadasis in a way that they were held to be married to the god, and had no other duty but to dance before his shrine. Hence they belonged to the god's and had no other duty but to dance before his shrine. Hence they were called the god's slaves (deva-dasi), and were generally patterns of piety and propriety. He further points out that, in the present day they are still called by the same name, but are rather slaves to the licentious passions of the profligate brahmins of the temples to which they belong. What surprised him the most was the number of these girls and the weight of the ornaments that they wore; especially in the case of those attached to the temples in southern India for they had a profitable trade under the sanction of religion.

The Devadasis do not marry any mortal men and their dedication to temple service is regarded as constituting a marriage with the main deity. Leslie Orr stated that the temple women to be a woman, one who may or may not be a prostitute or dancer who is associated with temple, either by having some kind of regular service function in a temple or because her primary social identity is defined with reference to a temple. Venkatramaiah said that some women were employed in temples as workers and those well versed in dance and music would dance and sing in the temples on certain specific occasions. They were not harlots or prostitutes. They were spinsters who might leave the service in the temples and enter into married life if they should so desire.

Age of Women at the time of Dedication as Devadasis

In good number of cases the women enter in to the profession of Devadasi at an early age. It is the age, when she is able to think herself properly. Table 1 gives the details of age at which the sample Devadasi women entered the profession in Bellary district.

Table 1 Age at which Sample Women Dedicated to Local Deity as Devadasis

S. No	Age	No. of Respondents	Frequency
1	Less than 10 Years	91	53.53
2	11 to 15 Years	42	24.71
3	16 to 18 Years	18	10.59
4	19 Years and above	11	6.47
5	Don't Know/No Response	8	4.71
Total		170	100.00

Source: Field Data

It is evident from table 1 that a preponderant majority i.e. 88.88 per cent of sample women were dedicated to temples as Devadasis before they attained the legally acknowledged age of marriage. To be precise more than half (53.53 per cent) of the sample women in the study area were dedicated to local deity and recognized as a separate creed of Devadasi. The dedication of 24.71 per cent of sample women as Devadasis completed before they attained the age of 15 years. Around 10.59 per cent of sample women reported that their age at the time dedication to temple varies between 16 to 18 years. After completion of 18 years of age 6.47 per cent of sample women were dedicated to temples in the study area. The remaining 4.71 per cent were either forgotten the exact age at which they dedicated or they are not interested to respond.

Pressure Exerted

Generally, no girl shall dedicate herself to a temple as Devadasi. They enter the profession with the consent/ pressure of outside forces. Table 2 furnishes the details of pressure exerted on sample women to enter the heinous profession.

Table 2 Pressure Exerted on Sample Women to Enter in to Devadasi System

S. No	Responses	No. of Respondents	Frequency
1	Family members	62	36.47
2	Village Elders	51	30.00
3	Caste Headmen	29	17.06
4	Outside Pressure	17	10.00
5	Don't Know/No Response	11	6.47
Total		170	100.00

Source: Field Data

It can be found from table 2 that the sample women dedicated to temples with the consent or pressure of family members (36.47 per cent), village elders (30 per cent), Caste leader (17.06 per cent) and outside pressure (10 per cent). In many cases parents force their daughters to become devadasis to sustain the family traditions. Sometimes the absence of any male members in the family becomes a reason for the girl to become a Devadasi. There is no response from the remaining 6.47 per cent of sample respondent women. The consent of young girls is never taken before inducting them into the devadasi order due to the fact that most of the girls are inducted into the order at a very young age.

Marital Status

Several male members satisfy their demands of flesh with Devadasi women. But, no one come forward to marry the Devadasi women. Moreover good number of companions of Devadasi women was already married. The children born to Devadasi women will remain without a putative father. Table 3 gives the details of marital status of sample Devadasi women.

Table 3 Marital Status of Sample Devadasis

S. No	Marital Status	No. of Respondents	Frequency
1	Married	74	43.53
2	Unmarried	91	53.53
3	Don't Know/No Response	5	2.94
Total		170	100.00

Source: Field Data

Table 3 reveals that as many as 53.53 per cent of sample Devadasi women still remained as unmarried as no one is interested to show them as their wives. As per the reports of 43.53 per cent of sample women, they were married to one of their companion. The remaining 2.94 per cent of sample women respondents has not shown interest to reveal their marital status.

Marriage Number

Generally, only few male members will come to marry the Devadasi women. Among them only very few marry them as a first marriage. Otherwise the widowers, separated, divorced and already married persons will marry the Devadasis as second or third marriage. As such during filed survey the sample women who reported that they are married were further requested to give the details of their marriage number to their life partners.

Table 4 Sample Women's Marriage Number to their life partners

S. No	Age	No. of Respondents	Frequency
1	First Marriage	7	9.46
2	Second marriage	54	72.97
3	Third Marriage	8	10.81
4	Fourth and above	3	4.05
5	Don't Know/No Response	2	2.70
Total		74	100.00

Source: Field Data

Table 4 shows that only for 9.46 per cent of Devadasis were tied by nuptial knots during first marriage of their life partners. A preponderant majority i.e. 72.97 per cent of sample Devadasis were second wives for their husbands. Nearly 10.81 per cent were engaged in marriage as third wives. About 4.05 per cent of sample respondents were engaged as fourth or fifth wives. The remaining 2.5 per cent not responded.

CONCLUSION

Most of the Devadasi women were dedicated to the temples, before they attained puberty. As such there is no resistance from them during

the dedication ceremony. As a custom and tradition the family members and other elders of the village dedicated the girls to temples. The temple priests and village level Government officials should be made responsible for all the new initiations of girls as Devadasis. They have to immediately report such events to the police.

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