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PAPER 3
DETAIL STUDY OF BHARATANATYAM,
DEVADASIS-NATTUVANAR, NRITYA AND
NRITTA,DIFFERENT BANI-S, PRESENT
STATUS, INSTITUTIONS, ARTISTS
PAPER 3

MODULE 2

DEVADASI AND NATTUVANAR

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Paper 3
Module 2
Devadasi And Nattuvanar
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. These practices originated and developed during the early medieval period. There are a large number of inscriptions which offer extensive 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 C.E.\(^1\)

It is believed that the class of temple dancing girls came about due to expansion of the temple system and growth of the bhakti movement. Traditional forms, borne out of divinity, were performed for the divine in formal settings of temples. Dancers thus dedicated primarily for propitiating gods – devas - were dedicated to god, hence called devadasis. These were women of complete knowledge in sahitya, sangeeta and shastra and knew many art forms pertaining to the *alankara shastra* / अलंकार शास्त्र, and hence were complete artistes. They danced in temple precincts on special occasions, worshipping and celebrating god.

The temple artistes had different duties:
Rajadasis danced before the sacred flagstaff.
Alankara dasis danced at the social functions.
Devadasis danced regularly in the temples.
Swadasis danced on special religious occasions.
Pushpanjali dasis danced while flowers were offered to the deity.
Others fanned the image of god, lit the lamps, performing many of the duties of the priests.

Musicians, who accompanied them in the main hall, conducting the performance with cymbals to maintain rhythm and overall presentation, were called nattuvunars. Belonging to the Isai Vellalar community, they were the fulcrum of the group and as head, maintained structure and substance. We learn from inscriptions that a thousand years ago nattuvanars used to train the Chola princess Kuntavai. During the time when dance was performed in the temples by devadasis, the music instruments nadasvaram and tavil were used and to this day, they are played at religious and auspicious ceremonies in South India.

The first reference to dancing girls in temples is found in Kalidasa's Meghadootam. Most of the Puranas contain reference to dancing girls, so most probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples was common during the 6th century. Puranas even recommended enlisting the services of singing girls for worship at temples.

In her book Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India, Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story says: “When a girl would reach the age of 16, an application to be allowed to become a devadasi would be made to the king of Karvetinagar; such a petition would have to be counter signed by ten priests and
ten devadasis. After permission was granted, an auspicious day
would be fixed for the air branding function ... Five days before the
actual muttirai / मुत्तिरई, a geije / गज्जे puja would be held to
conclude the girl's training in dance. From the temple they would
bring the kattari / कत्तारी (the sword, spear or trident) to the home of
the girl. All traditional marriage rituals would be performed. The girl
would then give a dance performance. The girl would be
accompanied to the temple. There she would dance the pushpanjali,
followed by a full dance concert. Hereafter the mark of trisula / त्रिशूल
would be branded on her upper arm... After one month, the devadasi
was free to decide about her future.”

Devadasis were trained artistes, so apart from their temple duties
they also performed dance and music at private functions like
marriages. Bharatanatyam (developed from Sadir dance, Chinna
Melam / चिन्न मेलम and Dasi Attam) and Odissi (developed from the
gotipua / गोटिपुआ and mahari / महारी dances) are both modern
incarnations of the dance of the devadasis of Tamil Nadu and Odisha
respectively. The contribution of devadasis to music is also
significant. Some famous singers like M.S. Subbulakshmi, Lata
Mangeshkar and her sister Asha Bhonsle trace their lineage to the
devadasi community.

In Tamil Nadu, those who danced in Siva temples were called
devadasis. Local kings often invited temple dancers to dance in their
courts, the occurrence of which created a new category of
dancers, rajadasis, and modified the technique and themes of the
recitals. Those who gave dance performances in festivals elsewhere
came to be known as sevadasis. A devadasi had to satisfy her own
soul while she danced unwatched and offered herself to the god, but the rajadasi's dance was meant to be an entertainment.³

Kerala history has many examples of beautiful and attractive ladies of the devadasi sect being accepted as consorts by kings. It is said that devadasis Cherukarakkuttatti / चेलुकराकुर्तत्ती, Kandiyiu Tevitichi Unni / कंडीयीउ तेवितिगल उन्नी and others had been queens. Famous dancers like Unniyacci / उन्नीयाची, Unniyati / उन्नीयती, Unniccirutevi / उन्नीचीरुतेवी and others are described as expert exponents of the devadasi art, attached to Siva temples and residing in their precincts.⁴ Most of the stone inscriptions containing references to devadasis in Kerala have been discovered from Siva temples. Kulasekhara Perumal / कुलसेखर पेरूमळ, the ruler of Kerala in the 9th century AD dedicated his own daughter to the Srirangam temple. So it was not uncommon for maidens from royal or even Brahmin families to become devadasis.⁵

By the end of 10th century, the total number of devadasis in many temples was in direct proportion to the wealth and prestige of the temple. During the medieval period, they were regarded as a part of the normal establishment of temples; they occupied a rank next only to priests and their number often reached high proportions. For example, there were more than 400 devadasis attached to the temples at Thanjavur and Travancore.⁶

Devadasis reached height of glory under Chola kings between 9th and 12th centuries AD. There were 430 dancers in the Thanjavur temple. Their names and addresses have been recorded in the inscriptions. They were paid out of a corpus fund. During the five
pujas in the temple, all 430 dancers danced and worshipped Lord Siva, accompanied by 150 musicians.  

Some devadasis were named after saints, while others were given the title Talaikkoli / तऱैकोऱी to denote that they were experts in dance. There were even instances of kings being so pleased with their dance so as to name a village after a devadasi. Innumerable inscriptions from Chola times tell us of the philanthropy of devadasis. They erected new shrines, rebuilt old and crumbling ones, plated some of the roofs with copper, gold and brass. They commissioned master sculptors to make gold and bronze images of gods, goddesses and saints to be installed in temples. Devadasis, who had specific roles to play in the festivals and processions of temples, donated lands to ensure these celebrations. The wealthier devadasis donated jewelry, lamps, plates and bells made of solid gold for temple service.  

When Maharaja Sayaji Rao married a princess from Thanjavur in 1883, two devadasis came as part of the dowry to the Baroda Darbar along with a full troupe of musicians.  

Since devadasis were dedicated to temples, they were understood to be married to god and hence could not marry ordinary human beings. If they wished an alliance to continue their art, they could have liaison with either with the temple priest, i.e., representative of god on art, or the temple patron/local zamindar since he too paid for and maintained all services to god.  

Male offsprings generally born out of such union were trained in music, hence became musicians and nattuvanars and female offsprings were trained in dance. Thus the twin system of devadasi and nattuvanars continued under the patronage of temples and local
zamindars. Their world was the temple and after entertaining gods, they entertained the patron and other important dignitaries.

In initial years of this parampara / परंपरा, the women were of great repute and intellect. They were treated as sumangali / सुमांगली – always married, hence auspicious, since they were never widowed being married to god who never dies. The devadasis were treated like quasi-royalty and put on a pedestal by the society, for their learning and wisdom. Many famous temples had famous dancers attached to them. Thanjavur, Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Madurai, Kanchipuram were famous temples of learning and had leading practitioners for dance and music.

The term devadasi is of Sanskrit origin. Though it was commonly used, the institution and the women in profession were known locally by different terms. In Tamil Nadu they were known as devaradiar / देवरदिआर or dasis, meaning slave servants of God or slaves respectively; In Travancore region as kudikkars / कुडिक्कर, those belonging to the house; In Andhra Pradesh as dogmas / दौगम and sanis / साणी; In Kannada speaking areas as basavis / बासवी and jogatis / जोगटी; In Goa and Western India as bhavins / भाविन or bhavinis / भाविनी, meaning beautiful wanton women; In Maharashtra (other than coastal area) as muralis jogati / मुरली जोगती or jogtinis / जोगतिनी or aradhinis / अराधिनी; and in Marwar as bhagtanis / भगताणी or bhagtan / भगतण, wife of a bhagat or holy man. Devadasis are also known locally by the names of Nayakasani / नायकसाणी, Rangasani / रंगसाणी, Gangasani / गंगासाणी, Muttukattikondavlu / मुत्तुकाल्लिकोंदाल्यु,
Dvara Sule / दावर सुले, Kasabi / कसाबी, Patradavalu / पत्रदावालू, Jogti / जोगती and so on.  

The rise and fall in the status of devadasis can be seen to be running parallel to the rise and fall of Hindu temples. Invaders from West Asia attained their first victory in India at the beginning of the second millennium CE. The destruction of temples by invaders started from the northwestern borders of the country and spread through the whole of the country. Thereafter the status of the temples fell very quickly in North India and slowly in South India. The temples became poorer and lost their patron kings, and in some cases were destroyed, and the devadasis were forced into a life of poverty.

Towards the 18th century, patronage to temples started to decline due to colonial rule and many small temples could not afford to maintain artists of excellence. Zamindari system was also abolished and further marked the death knell of this tradition because, in absence of patronage, artistic activity suffered. Slowly, devadasis fell on bad days and had to seek other trades to survive and some also took to the oldest profession in the world, thus gaining ill repute not only for themselves but their art. Soon, the entire devadasi system came under legal disputes owing to colonial, especially British prudery.

The first anti-*nautch* and anti-dedication movement was launched in 1882. "Their main aim was to do away with this system. Reform lobbyists were drawn mainly from missionaries, doctors, journalists and social workers. They urged the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which girls dedicated themselves as devadasis of Hindu shrines. They organized seminars and conferences to create a public opinion against the devadasi system. In the later part of 1892
an appeal was made to the viceroy and governor general of India and to the governor of Madras. This appeal also defines the position of the anti-

*nautch* movement.\textsuperscript{11}

Some journals and newspapers like *The Indian Social Reformer* and *Lahore Purity Servant* supported the reformist or abolitionist movement. The movement initially concentrated on building public opinion and enlisting members to refuse to attend *nautch* parties as well as to refuse to invite devadasis to festivities at their homes. Around 1899, the anti-

*nautch* and puritan movement turned its attention to stopping dedications. The anti-

*nautch* movement paved the way for anti-dedication movement. Prominent social thinkers questioned the practice of devadasi system and pleaded for its abolition.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1929, a member of the legislature Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy launched an anti-

*nautch* campaign demanding the demolition of the devadasi system. Despite protests by E. Krishna Iyer and the art lovers of Madras, Dr. Reddy and her anglicized women’s leagues managed to effect crippling legislation against the devadasis in 1927 followed by total abolition in 1947. On January 27, 1948, the Fort St. George Gazette carried the Madras Devadasi Act XXXI in the legal section. Excerpts from it: “ Dancing by a woman, with or without *kumbhaharathy* / कुम्भआरती (pot – shaped temple arathi lamp), in the precincts of a temple or other religious institution, or in any procession of a Hindu deity, idol or object of worship installed in any such temple or institution or at any festival or ceremony held in respect of such a deity, idol or object of worship, is hereby declared unlawful ... Any person who performs, permits or abets (temple dancing) is punishable with imprisonment for... six months ... A
woman who takes part in any dancing or music performance is regarded as having adopted the life of prostitution and becomes incapable of entering into a valid marriage and ... the performance of any (marriage) ceremony ... whether (held) before or after this Act is hereby declared unlawful and void”. When the Madras Devadasi Act took effect, 35,000 temples of Tamil Nadu barred all women performers whether they were devadasis or not. 13

In 1930, with effort of Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Madras Legislative Council banned the pottu ceremony (the processes of the dedication of the devadasi to the particular deity) in Madras Presidency (modern Tamil Nadu). The first legal initiative to outlaw the devadasi system dates back to the 1934 Bombay Devadasi Protection Act. In 1947, the year of independence, the Madras Devadasi Act (Prevention of Dedication) outlawed dedication in the southern Madras Presidency. The Karnataka Devadasis Act of 1982 (Prohibition of Dedication), Andhra Pradesh Devadasi Act (Prohibition Dedication) of 1989 were implemented to abolish the devadasi system in India. The devadasi system was outlawed in all of India in 1988.

Saride Manikyamma / सरिदे मानिक्यम्मा was initiated into the two temples of Madana Gopalaswamy / मदन गोपालस्वामी and Rukmini / रुक्मिणी in Ballapadu at the age of 11, but left in the lurch by the Devadasi Act of 1947, she struggled for 25 years in poverty till she and a few other devadasis were discovered by Nataraja Ramakrishna at a convention in 1972 and brought to his institute to teach abhinaya.
In the 19th century and the early years of the next, it was customary for Doraikannu / दोरैकन्नु, the hereditary devadasi of the Kapaleeswara temple to accompany the procession at the annual festival. She would be dressed as Bhikshatana and a large group would follow her as she danced at particular points in the procession. Doraikannu's daughter was the famed Mylapore Gowri / मयलापोर गौरी/गोव्री who continued the dance tradition at the temple and during the Bhikshatana procession. Gowri was guru to Balasaraswathi and later taught Rukmini Devi too. Following the disenfranchising of devadasis and the revoking of their hereditary rights, Gowri was evicted from the house given to her by the temple. She managed to make both ends meet by teaching dance to people whom she felt would benefit by it. With that ended what must have been a colorful adjunct to the Bhikshatana procession.  

Realizing that Hindu dance and music faced extinction, the Music Academy of Madras reacted to the Devadasi Act by getting Sadir renamed as Bharatanatyam and started sponsoring public performances for devadasis expelled from temples in 1931. Gowri Ammal danced at the Music Academy in 1932 and 15-year-old Balasaraswati danced the following year.

Pioneers like Madam H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott, the founders of the Theosophical movement, undertook an extensive tour of South India and propagated the revival of devadasi institutions and the associated art of Sadir. In 1882, the Theosophical Society of India set up its headquarters in Adyar, Chennai with the set goal of working towards the restoration of India's ancient glory in art, science, and philosophy. The revival of Sadir as Bharatnatyam by the Theosophical Society was largely due to the efforts of Rukmini
Devi Arundale, an eminent theosophist, and E. Krishna Iyer. Rukmini Devi changed the dance repertoire to exclude pieces perceived as erotic in their description of a deity. The product of this transformation was Bharatanatyam, which she then began to teach professionally at a school she established in Madras called Kalakshetra. It was her endeavour to remove the devadasi dance tradition from the perceived immoral context of the devadasi community and bring it into the upper caste performance milieu.\textsuperscript{15}

The revivalists tried to present the idealistic view of the institution of devadasi. According to their view, it was the model of the ancient temple dancer as pure, sacred, and chaste women, as they were originally. They stressed that the dance of devadasi was a form of "natya yoga" to enhance an individual's spiritual plane. The revivalists wanted to preserve the traditional form of Sadir dance by purifying it. As a consequence of purification, some modifications were introduced into the content of the dance, which was strongly criticized by dancer Balasaraswati and other prominent representatives of the traditional devadasi culture. The revivalists mostly belonged to Brahmin dominated Theosophical circles. Many Brahmin girls started to learn the dance from devadasis.\textsuperscript{16}

Devadasis as temple singers and dancers were prevalent in the temples in Goa, Thanjavur, Puri, Mathura, Mysore etc. Even till recent times post-Independence, some devadasis taught music and dance in South India. Towards the decline of this system, many prominent dancers of today learnt from T. Balasaraswati, Mylapore Gowri Ammal and Swarna Saraswati.

The term nattuvanar connotes a man who accompanied the devadasi dance in the capacity of a dance-master, music conductor and vocal
percussionist. In pre-modern South India, particularly among the Tamil-speaking devadasi communities, the nattuvanar would train the dancer and would also join her during the performance by reciting vocalized rhythms (*sollukattu*). The primary visual marker of the nattuvanar was the talam, a pair of small hand-cymbals that he would beat in consonance with the footwork executed by the dancer. Some of the most famous nattuvanars served in the Thanjavur court. The ancestors of the Thanjavur Quartet, for example, had been serving as nattuvanars in the Thanjavur court since the seventeenth century. The nattuvanar tradition, however, is not the only instance of male involvement with devadasi dance. Ritual specialists, such as otuvars (men who recite the hymns of the Tamil Shaiva poets), as well as court poets and other upper-caste composers regularly interacted with devadasis, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The nattuvanar community also became stigmatized as a non-Brahmin community of performers during the social reform movement, but unlike the devadasis, they continued to receive patronage from the new community of urban practitioners who approached these men (and not the devadasi women) for technique and repertoire to create the contemporary form known as Bharatanatyam.”

Some of the traditional nattuvanars could trace their lineage to the days of the Cholas of Tamil Nadu a millennium ago. Many family members of nattuvanars were musicians. Among Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai’s ancestors were veena, nagaswaram and mridangam experts. Govindaraja Pillai of the Rajarajeswari School was a vocalist, mridangam and nagaswaram exponent. The traditional nattuvanar had to sing as well as conduct the recital and was also a choreographer. Since the nattuvanars did not perform on stage,
there was no fear of competition or being upstaged, so they could focus their energies on their star students through whom they gained fame.

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Famous author and jurist K.M. Munshi describes the life of a devadasi at the temple of Somnath in his famous historical novel Somnath. Mahabharata Chudamani has a section entitled "Nattuvan
Lakshanam" (characteristics of a nattuvanar). There are nine verses enumerating them. They are so lofty that no nattuvanar can ever aspire to reach that standard!  

18
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