



A MARCH TO END : ABOLITION OF THE TRADITIONAL DEVADASI SYSTEM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY TAMIL REGION

R. Kalpana Devi Priya
Assistant Professor of History ,
JKK Nataraja College of Arts and Science ,
Komarapalayam Post Namakkal District ,
Tamil Nadu State.



ABSTRACT

In the Modern Tamil Country, consequent upon the cessation of royal munificence and protection to their families, the devadasis ran into difficult times and morality began to decline. Legal interventions the Madras Legislature were engineered by Muthulakshmi Reddy. The explicit purpose of her activities was to criminalise the 'dedication' of young girls (Pottukattutal). For reformers, the ritual of dedication enabled prostitution and the abuse of women that resulted from relationships unsanctified by marriage. The abolition of the devadasi system or the devadasi reform aimed to detach modern India from the archaic and patriarchal sign of temple dedication by instituting a new form of citizenship for devadasi women. Muthulakshmi Reddy was not alone in clearing pathways to matrimonial life for devadasis. The devadasi abolition movement stood at the interaction of Congress party and non-Brahmin politics in Madras, and was strongly backed by both Gandhi and E.V.Ramasami

KEYWORDS: Devadasis, Hindu, Temples, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Madras, Nautch, Mayo.

INTRODUCTION :

From the spiritual and sacred atmosphere, they entered the secular and blasphemous world falling a prey to the profligacies of lecherous wealthy men. These men of affluence practically purchased not only the *devadasis* but also their *nattuvanars* (Dance Masters). Hence degradation began when the *devadasis*, who hitherto addressed the deity in their dance, began to address their patrons praising them much. There developed an unhealthy rivalry among the *nattuvanars* as to "who could produce the most erotic and seductive pupils as trap for untold wealth and patronage."¹

With the *devadasi* system losing the patronage it once received, the society began to shun the *devadasis*. The entire clan of *devadasis* earned the public disgrace of "nautch girls." There was an anti-nautch movement spearheaded by the Hindu Social Reform Association, which succeeded to some extent in its mission. But it was a great pity that some of the zealous social reformers, who abhorred the nautch girls, were hell-bent on banishing the millennia old traditional *Bharata Natyam* itself, associating the art, out of ignorance, with prostitution. The result was damaging as girls of cultured families were forced to ban the art for decades. But very soon, the anti-nautch reformers were confronted with a pro-nautch movement led by E. Krishna Iyer, a legal celebrity and an ardent supporter of *Bharata Natyam*. Carrying on its campaign through the medium of the Madras Press, it saw to it that the anti-nautch movement was "quietened down completely." Unable to tolerate the social exclusion, some of the *devadasis* gave up the profession.

Yet, a few *devadasi* families continued to foster their *kula dharma* (sacred family duty) by imparting to their offspring the precious fine arts of hoary past. Due credit ought to be given to these repositories of the fine arts, who, even in the absence of any emolument or patronage, toiled to preserve them. In this context, special mention to be given to some of the outstanding exponents of classical music and *Bharata Natyam*. They were the distinguished descendants of the *devadasis*. Dhanammal, the foremost *veena vidwan* and M.S. Subbulakshmi, the renowned vocal enchantress, were legends in their own lifetimes. Endowed with a voice that was "a perfect amalgam of the melodious, the meditative and the devotional," Subbulakshmi, the doyenne of Carnatic Music had fascinated millions of music lovers by her captivating performance throughout the world for over seven decades. In the sphere of *Bharata Natyam*, the dancers who preserved the visual perfection of their sacred art with deep religious conviction, were Balasaraswati, the Kalyani sisters - Rajalakshmi and Jeevaratnam, Varalakshmi, Bhanumati, Pandanallur Jayalakshmi, and K.J. Sarasa. In this way, the descendants of the *devadasis* had achieved a certain artistic immortality. In the light of these facts, it was wrongly observed by Abbe Dubois who stated that that some of the temples of south India were converted into mere brothels.²

About the *devadasi* system ill account was supplied by western scholars and on the wrong information was furnished by capricious European writers. One such writer, Katherine Mayo, "an American woman of vanity," indulged in sweeping generalisations. She wrote in the "yellow press style" about the *devadasi* system with the aim to gain good sale for her book *Mother India*. Bengal was the opening bombardment in what proved to be "a tirade" against *Mother India*. Apart from describing that province as "the seat of bitter political unrest, the producer of India's crop of anarchists, bomb throwers and assassins," she had the boldness to attribute the terrorism in Bengal in the wake of the *Swadeshi* movement launched to protest against the partition of Bengal in 1905, to "over sexuality and venereal disease." Mayo had her own version of the *devadasi* system also. She said they were not "servants" but "prostitutes of Gods" and were actually dedicated for the use of priests and pilgrims. Authors like Mayo who were mostly tourist writers and who habitually stayed in European houses imbibed the sentiments of their chief informants who were unfair, unkind and unfriendly to India.

LASH PHASE OF THE DEVADASI SYSTEM

In the early decades of the Twentieth Century, many attempts were made in bringing legislation to remove the custom of dedicating women to Hindu temples. In the 1910s, Members of the Imperial Legislative Council raised this question in the House. Some of the resolutions had the strong support of the House. There was also a Bill in the making to put a stop to the system but, because of the First World War (1914-1918), the Bill was not proceeded with. In 1922, in the Central Assembly, a resolution on the subject was moved by Hari Singh Gour, the patriot-saint of ignorant and a brave champion of women's cause. The resolution supplied facts and figures accurately and vividly on the prevailing evil custom in the south in its true colour. It was passed unanimously but there was no follow up action on it.³ It was significant that during the discussion on this motion, members like Shiva Rau and A. P. Patro defended the institution of *devadasi*.⁴ On 12th September 1927, V. Ramadas Pantulu, representing the Madras Presidency, moved a motion at the Central Legislature to ban the *devadasi* system. He wanted the Government to disallow temple expenditures for the *devadasis*. But the Government refused to do so.⁵ The Law Member, S.R. Das, while appreciating the genuine intention of the mover, defended the Government's refusal to accept the contention that employment as a *devadasi* was equivalent to employment as a prostitute.⁶ It was pointed out that the Madras High Court itself did not unequivocally equate the *devadasi* dedication with the employment as a prostitute.⁷ There was a question on Pantulu's resolution in the British Parliament also.

On 4th November 1927, the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council, S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who was a well-known doctor, social worker and champion of the cause of women, moved a resolution in the Council to ban the *devadasi system*.⁸ In her speech on the resolution, she blamed the Local Government for its apathy and the Central Government for its apprehension to interfere with social matters. She made quite a few challenges to the authority of the Government. She said that only in India such a system was allowed to exist. Referring to the State regulation of the vice

under the British Indian Government, she said "In my opinion it (the State regulation of vice) is a more humane method of tolerating vices" and added that even that abominable practice had been "abolished in 1886, not only in Britain but also in her colonies " She further stated that the *devadasi* system was a barbarous and wicked institution .She insisted State regulation to prevent the innocent and ignorant young devadasi girls being committed to an immoral life which would spoil their entire life.⁹

A day before Muthulakshmi Reddy moved her resolution i.e. 3rd November 1927, the *devadasis* protested the move by sending an eloquent memorial to the members of the Council appealing to them to oppose the Bill. C.P. Ramaswam Iyer, who was the Law Member then, while appreciating the concern of the mover of the motion, pointed out certain factual errors in her speech. Stating that in countries like Mexico, Rome and Egypt, it was a custom to dedicate young women to serve in temples as "vestal virgins," he said the *devadasi* system was part of an old system of society and as such "to say that India is alone in this feature is to utter a libel."¹⁰ He also told the House that in the temples of Tanjore, Trichinopoly, Madura, South Kanara, Vizagapatam and many other places, there were many endowments which were appurtenant to services in the temples. Since the inheritance of these properties proceeded in a particular form, the Government needed sufficient time to consider what would become of these *inams* and services before taking a decision.¹¹

Muthulakshmi Reddy persisted in pursuing the subject in the Legislature. On 31st January 1930, when she presented "A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to Hindu Temples," the members voted to delay its passage. In the first place, they feared that public reaction against a Bill that contained drastic measures like a fine of Rs. 1000 and imprisonment of persons who believed that they were only "performing a religiously mandated duty."¹² Secondly, by this time, some of the members, who had earlier supported the Bill, were no longer in the Council. Thirdly, the Congress members were boycotting the Legislature. Lastly, Muthulakshmi Reddy had resigned her seat on 8th May 1930 as a protest against the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi. Hence, even after the comments of the local officials were received, the Bill was not reconsidered.

Credit should go to Muthulakshmi Reddy for her firmness in fighting against the *devadasi* system. In her relentless war for the cause of these women, she had the support of a band of patriotic social workers who played a crucial role in combating the evil. Her activities led to an awakening among some of the *devadasis* themselves. Their cooperation for their emancipation gave a stimulus to her movement to abolish the system.

In the next four years, there was a lull in the attempt to ban the system. On 17th August 1934, the passage of the Bombay Prevention of Dedication of Devadasis Bill by the Bombay Legislative Council led to a resurgence of this subject. Bombay's achievement itself came only 25 years after the princely State of Mysore had blazed the trail in putting an end to the institution of *devadasi* when the Royal Orders of 1909 outlawed it. But in Madras, it was only on 5th December 1947 that the Madras Legislative Council passed the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill. The *devadasi* system is now died out.

The efforts and services to bring devadasi reform by the frontline reformists S.Muthulakshmi Reddy, Yamini Purnatilakm and Moovalur Ramamirtham were commendable . In 1936, Ramamirtham published novel on the lives into which devadais were trapped.¹³

Upto the Thirteenth Century, the devadasis maintained their status and helped the temple organization in all possible ways .The situation underwent sea changes and the deterioration started after the Thirteenth Century. The ultimate decline of this system coincided when it lost its religious significance and marched towards an economic procession. When the empires collapsed , they lost their patrons. When the zamindari system was in full swing, the Zamindars and Land Lords misused their services for the, instead of the temples. They became the exclusive properties of the influential men of the society and even the British Officials exploited their services for their personal lust. At last the system was linked with the profession of prostitution. This degeneration of this system in course of time forced the leaders like Gandhi, E.V.Ramasami and Muthulakshmi Reddy to wage a relentless struggle in all stages which paved the way for its abolition in the second quarter of the Twentieth

Century. An erroneous impression about the personal life of the *devadasis* had gained ground over the years mainly owing to the distorted activities of the devadasis of the modern days.

END NOTES

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