



GLORIFICATION OF DEVADASI SYSTEM IN TAMIL COUNTRY-A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT :

The devadasi system was very popular in southern India. This system was in practice since the Sangam Age in Tamil Country and it was highly prevailed in the Medieval Tamil Country. In the medieval period, the Cholas patronized the devadasi system much because they constructed more than a hundred temples in Tamil Country. In these temples rituals and festivals were given priority and so the services of the devadasis were much needed. A number of devadasis were included in the services of the Chola temples and they were given inam lands for their livelihood. The devadasis discharged a number of duties concerning the temples with which they were attached. They were excelled in singing and dancing. They dominated the spiritual and cultural domains in the Tamil society. The presence of the devadasis was considered auspicious in all the spiritual and public ceremonies in Tamil societies. They were highly regarded and placed in high esteem in the society. Concerning the temple service, they attained the status of the privilege class.



KEYWORDS : Devadasis, Hindu, Temples, Chola, Thanjavur.

INTRODUCTION

The devadasis constituted a distinct group. They belonged to Dancing Girls caste, a regular caste of the Hindu community. They were reverentially called *devadasis* (servants of god) or *devaradiyal* (slaves of god). ¹The *devadasi* was looked upon as the sanctified servant of the deity of the temple. She was committed to serving the deity even before she attained puberty. At the appropriate time, the dedication ceremony was performed when she was married to a sword or the deity of the temple by symbolically tying to it the *mangalsutra* (*tali* or *pottu* in Tamil), the marriage thread. This dedication ceremony was called 'Potukattu' Ceremony. She was called *Nitya Sumangali* - ever auspicious - as she could never be widowed. The young girls who entered this ceremony were never allowed to have anymore legal wedlock with any body. This obviously meant innocent submission of the girls to the service of God and a sign of deep religious devotion. A long virginity was assigned to the girl , keeping a discipline of voluntary celibacy. ²Though kings and nobles patronized them, the devadasi girls lived only in the houses of their parents under their care. They were allowed tax-free land out of the endowment of the temples. As per the law of inheritance that operated among the *devadasis*, they had a share in their fathers' properties. There were cases of revenue officials having frequently registered the *patta* (title deed) of a deceased man in the name of his *devadasi* daughter.³ The caste had its own laws, its own customs and rules and its own *panchayats* to ensure that the rules and customs were strictly

observed. The *devadasis*, therefore, were held "a position which is perhaps without a parallel in any other country."⁴

Parents without daughters adopted girls generally from caste Hindu families and dedicated them to temples as *devadasis*. They were the only class of women, who under the Hindu laws as administered in the British Courts, could adopt girls. They were habitually proficient not only in dancing and singing but also in reading and writing. Many of them exposed themselves by their intelligence, talents and versatility in literature and were well versed in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu at a time when it was considered outrageous for girls of respectable families to receive education. The *devadasis* involved in cultural conversation in homes.⁵ In fact, they were the most accomplished women among the Hindus.

The *devadasis* were allocated religious duties in the temples. The celebrated *Silappadikaram*⁶ (The Epic of the Anklet), one of the five great Tamil epics of the *post-Sangam* era, highlights much on the traditional dance art of *Bharata Natyam*, which itself was originally called *Dasi-Attam*, the dance of the *Devadasis*⁷ as the *devadasis* performed it with great skill and grace. They danced in the temples and along the streets when the deities of the temples were taken in procession. Performance of dance was one of the holy offerings to gods, instructed in the *Aagama Sastras* of South India dealing with rules relating to temples.⁸ Recognition of the status of the *devadasis* was accorded by the *Panchatantra Sastras* and the *Siva Agamas*.⁹

During the period of the great Pallavas and Cholas of the Tamil Country, this custom of dedication of girls to God was considered holy and not taken as considered immoral activity. Further, the practitioners of this custom were held in great esteem and were treated very well. A fragment of an inscription in the Adipureswarar Temple at Tiruvottriyur records that the donations of Uttama Chola to this temple included "fly-whisks for the twenty-four fly-whisk women."¹⁰ Sembian-Mahadevi, the devout queen of the pious king Gandaraditya made substantial donations to the temple at Kuttalam in Thanjavur District "in support of fly-whisk women as well as priests, drummers, musicians etc."¹¹ Inscriptions illustrates the existence of 400 *devadasis* in the Brihadeeswara Temple in 1004 A.D.¹² It is recorded that the 400 temple women belonging to other temples were transferred to the Thanjavur temple by Rajaraja Chola-I.¹³ They were given free settlements in the four streets around the temple and were also allocated tax-free land from the endowment of the temple. It is, thus, obvious that the Chola kings were greatly responsible for regularizing and patronizing the *devadasi* system.¹⁴

Exposing the high social status and the day to day activities of the *devadasis* in the temples, Annie Besant, spoke that in olden days the *devadasis* were highly regarded and much respect was given to them in society. They spent their time in religious service to gods and to the devotees of the temple. The word *dasi* itself was a significant one. They followed the procession of the Gods and sung holy hymns suitable to the occasion. This was the history of the *devadasi* class.¹⁵ That sexual modesty was exceptionally high among them was a fact acknowledged even by the worst western critics of the *devadasi* system.

To conclude, the devadasi system was concerned with the socio-religious aspect of the Tamil Country since the beginning of the well developed Tamil Civilization which dawned with the Sangam Age. It was impossible to assign the date of the origin of this system because it was an universal phenomena. Eventhough they were differently called with various names in the ancient and medieval Tamil Country, their profession revolved around the temples and its related services to the human society. After dedication of the temples, the life of the devadasi girls were attached with the temples and even the devadasis stayed in the temples and lived for the sake of the temple services which promoted the spiritual and moral welfare of the human beings. Indeed, the expansion of this system marked with the expansion of the Chola Power in the neighbouring regions of the Tamil Country. The activities of the devadasis are recorded in the inscriptions for Rajaraja's period to the Thirteenth Century. It was Rajaraja who shoed the gesture of patronizing the temple women. As a consequence of their relations with the temples, the number and activities of the devadasis were increased and their gifts multiplied gradually. The system reached its zenith during the Chola days and for a while the divine services of the devadasis were glorified in the annals of Hinduism in Tamil Country.

END NOTES

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