



## EXISTANCE OF DEVDĀSI SYSTEM IN BUDDHIST AND JAIN INSTITUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT :

*Devdāsi system, in ancient India was considered as an important part of the worship in Hindu temples. It is an old institution formed by dancing girls. This was an important feature of the Hindu temples but it became prominent in early medieval India. Along with north, in south India also a large number of devdāsi's were associated with the Hindu temples. But some of the references show that this system was also prevalent in Buddhist and Jain institutions also. This system was prevalent not only in ancient India but in outside countries also. In early medieval India, a large number of devdāsis were employed not only to serve deities but also for the attraction of the visitors who were also a source of income to the temples.*



**KEYWORDS :** *Dancing girls, Devdāsi, Buddhist, Jain, Temples, Early medieval India, Prostitution.*

### INTRODUCTION

Devdāsi system is an old institution formed by the dancing girls. According to A.S. Altekar the development of the practice of employing the dancing girls in temples in an institutional form is noticeable much later from about 6<sup>th</sup> cen. A.D. (A.S. Altekar: 1938, p.183) In its earliest phase it was prevalent in Hindu temples in India. Girls were dedicated to the temples by their parents for the service of lord. They were regarded as an important part in temple establishment. The word, devdāsi, literally means "female slave of the God". She was considered to be married to the lord of the temple and was expected to dance before the deity as per the custom and was to lead a life of discipline, devotion and dedication to lord. When temples of Hindu gods come to be built and endowed on a magnificent scale, some people began to feel in the course of time that there should be dancing girls in shrines to play music on the occasions of different services and worships of the day. The introduction to dancing girls to the temples was to lower their moral and spiritual atmosphere. Epigraphical records provide very significant information about this system. An inscription in Mauryan brahmi records the name of a devdāsi, Sutnuka, who was in love with a person named Devdatta. This is the earliest inscription bearing the record of dancing girls. The cult of dedicating girls to temples prevailed in all over India in different forms and names as:

1. Maharis in Kerla,
2. Natis in Assam,
3. Muralis in Maharastra
4. Patrās and Maharis in Orissa

5. Basavis and Devalis in Andhra
6. Basavis and Jogatis in Karnataka

In early medieval India, devdāsi system had become so popular. There were four hundred dancing girls in the temple of Rajrajeshwer at tanjore. The famous temple of Somnāth is said to have employed 500 hundred dancing girls for serving the God throughout the day and night. Devdāsi system had the support of princes, aristocrats and interested Brahmins of land although gradually there developed a strong opposition against it, characterising the system as unhealthy and immoral. In the temples of early medieval India a large number of *Devdāsi* were employed not only to serve the deities but also to attract visitors who were a source of income to the temples. During this period this system got prevalent in the Buddhist and Jain temples also.

#### DISCUSSION:

Devdāsi system was a prominent feature of worship in Hindu temples. But some of the records of dancing girls can be seen in the Buddhist and Jain institutions also. It-sing refers to the dancing girls who used to perform dance for the delight of the Buddhist deities. (Takkasu: 1896, p. 147) It alludes to the existence of dancing girls in the Buddhist viharas. An another reference to devdāsi system in Buddhist shrines can be seen in an inscription from Gya, dated 1270 states that, worship is here offered three times a day by means of instrumental music in the highest key (which is said to be erotic) and Rambhā like *Bhāvanis(dancing girls)* dancing round wonderfully with mirth in singing and so on, in a way appearing to be the unions of Anang( Kāma) worship increased by hospitable entertainments. (*Epigraphia Indica: Vol. Xxxiii, p.98*) The noted indologist Jouveau Dubreuil is of the opinion that the female slaves, dancing girls were admitted in the Jain and Buddhist temples in many parts of India. He satirically remarks that the Jains and Buddhists had come to terms with their gods in regard to this. (Jouveau Dubreuil, Indian antiquity, no. 57, p.46) An another reference is found in the Ratnagiri copperplate of Somvansi Karnakesari. ( E.I. Vol. 33, p. 272) This record alludes to the *devdāsis* in Buddhist Mahavihars. The inscription records that a village was donated to a dancing girl named Karpursari, attached to solanpura Mahavihar in Utkaldesha. The donee karpursree who hailed from solanpura mahavihar is described as the daughter of a woman and grand-daughter of an another woman. D.C. Sirkar says that the absence of any reference to Karpursari's father grand-father and her representation as the daughter and grand-daughter of females appear to suggests that she was born of a harlot. (Ibid. p.273) Karpursri's mother was a *Mahāri*, which is an Orria term, means dancing girl or devdāsi. It is improbable that karpursari's grand-mother, also carried on the same profession. Thus we got the reference to at least three generation of temple dancers from the aforesaid record of the Somvamsi period. This institution might have developed out of the practice of allowing nuns in the Buddhist shrines which took place probably in Bhaumkar period. It is likely that the virgins dedicated to a noble cause living as it were, the life of a Buddhist nun, degenerated into temple dancers and were allowed to defile the temple of God. (Biswarup Das: 1978, p.173) Among such reports the earliest reference to the dancing girls of the temples in central India is made by the Chinese traveller in his book *Chau-fan- chi*, dealing with the Chinese and Arab trade in 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. While taking about Gujrat he says that four thousand Buddhist temple buildings, in which twenty thousand dancing girls who sand twice a day and offered flowers. (*Friedrich Hirth and W.W Rockhill: 1911, p. 92*) He mentions that the same custom was prevalent in Combidian temples too. He writes, people are devout to Buddhists. There are serving (in the temples) some three hundred foreign women; they dance and offer food to Buddha. (Ibid. P. 53) Dancing girls were called A-nan, derived from the Sanskrit word *Ānanda* meaning joy and happiness. They offered food to Buddha and danced before him. (*Ibid.*) Probably he took all the temples in Gujrat as Buddhists. But it alludes to the Devdasi system in the temples.

#### JAINISM:

Jainism was known for its puritanical attitude towards sex. The existence of devdāsi's in Jain temples is an interesting thing. The earliest inscription referring to dancing girl in Jain temples dates

back to 802 A.D. A copperplate from Manne, Bangalore Dist., registers the grant of village to the Jain basti to provide subsistence for dancing girls. It refers to the employment of a patrā or devdāsī in a Jain temple. (Awadh Kishore Prasad: 1983, p.149) Chidananda murthy says that devdāsī system being confined to Hindu shrines, its entry in Jainism was because of its popularity in the society as a whole during the period. Buddhist and Jain also tried to popularize its rituals by developing practices with a popular appeal. For Buddhism it was a period of decline in India.

Some of the literary records also testify the existence of the dancing girls in the Jain temples. In *Prabandhchintamani*, Merutunga mentions to the dancing girls in the Jain temples. Updeshrasayan and Kumarpalpratihodh provide evidences of the existence of dancing girls in Jain temples. (Promila Devi, unpublished thesis: 2007, p.188) In early medieval India Buddhist and Jains both adapted some of the principles of Hinduism as tantrism and such systems like devdāsī system. Jainism, in which the women is considered as an impediment in the way of the achievement of Nirvana too adapted such things which refer to the deterioration in these religions. Same thing can be said about the Buddhist ordination also. No orgiastic scenes are found in Jain temples. But in the Pārshavnath temple at Khajuraho, there is a depiction of a *Maithune* scene on *grabhgriha* wall in the interior of the temple. Which show that some of the things which were prohibited in the earliest phase was now started to be accepted now.

### CONCLUSION:

It can be said that Jainism and Buddhism adapted a flexible form during early medieval India. Even they adapted some of the features of Hindu worship as Devadāsī system. During this period Buddhism was going towards its decline. Jainism was also not so popular. In early medieval south India Shaivism and Vaishnavism were becoming popular in which Buddhism and Jainism were highly opposed by Alvar (vaishnavite) and Nayanar (Shaivite) saints. During this period devdasi system was very popular. Probably in order to save their position both Jainism and Buddhism adapted such things or it was because of the popularity of devdāsī system that it was allowed in Jain and Buddhist religion. Probably this time the female sexuality was tried to use to save their existence or to become popular.

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