

Devadāsī Murai

SASKIA C. KERSENBOOM

Introduction

“Utter the word, and your tongue will be set on fire”. With this warning parents instructed their children at the beginning of our century to keep a safe distance from *devadāsīs* and their community. Now the tide has turned, and the *devadāsīs* are rapidly becoming an object of romantic reminiscences of the past. No doubt the topic is still enigmatic and controversial, even today. Actually, the tradition of the *devadāsīs* forms an intimate aspect of Hinduism that is little noticed, known and understood by outsiders.’

I. ENIGMA

When I expressed these sentiments a few years ago¹ in my dissertation I had no idea how true they would prove to be in the near future, that is, today. The interest in the *devadāsīs* has taken overwhelming proportions to the extent of fierce displays of loyalty to anything *devadāsī*. In reality, the discussion moves further and further away from what or who the *devadāsīs* were and represented. Hardly any member of that professional group benefits from the interest professed in the various colourful discussions. Anyhow, these seem to be more and more an intellectual *divertissement* that operates with methodologies like historiography, sociological analysis, psychological X-raying: playthings for a new élite that is again positively *non-devadāsī*. Instead of erasing the confusion that feeds controversies it seems that such attempts only aggravate the uneasiness about the phenomenon.

The confusions are manifold, indeed, depending upon the viewpoint of the observer. In this paper I would like to outline the nature of the confusions that are possibly at play in our past and present discussions in order to arrive at an understanding that incorporates all extremities of the controversy.

I would like to diagnose the nature of the confusions at play as conceptual contrasts, conceptual shifts, and conceptual imprecisions.

1. Conceptual Contrasts

The first, foremost, and fatal confusion that has arisen in the appreciation of the *devadāsī* tradition is the contrast between crucial metaphysical notions of the West and of India. First, because a conflict of similar magnitude did not arise before the advent of Christian missionaries in India². Foremost, because it still holds the fascination of many advocates³. Fatal, because it triggered off a scrutiny alien to the indigenous nature of the tradition that resulted, with the concurrent socio-economic changes, in a loss of prestige that found its final expression in the Devadasi Act (Tamil Nadu, 1947)⁴. Legally it forbade the dedication of women to gods, religious objects, e.a., as well as their participation in rituals performed in temples. Nothing as drastic as this legislation had occurred ever before. Which contrast ever aroused such strong sentiments?

The term *devadāsī* literally means 'slave of God'. This term almost immediately evokes in the Western mind an association with the well-known phenomenon of the nun. The fact that *devadāsīs* were dedicated to a god who resides in a temple calls to mind the nun who is considered to be the bride of Christ⁵. But the other fact that the *devadāsīs* had children puzzled Western observers and made them ponder for centuries over the delicate issue of their celibacy. Unfortunately the confusion started with the question itself—a totally wrong one. Its persistence can be understood from the nature of the Judaeo-Christian conceptual universe. But seen from the logic of the conceptual universe of the Hindu, this question makes no sense at all: it is as nonsensical as the application of the typical Hindu, this questions of *maṭi* and *acāram* to the crucifixion and Christian liturgy⁶.

The two conceptual universes differ very deeply and so do the cultural phenomena that emerge from them. As Westerners are used to the Judaeo-Christian categories of one creation, one apocalypse, one life, one death, one last judgement, and, finally, one heaven or one hell that lasts *for eternity*—one should be able to understand their preoccupation with following the 'right' path, i.e., the path leading to eternal bliss experienced in heaven. In contrast to these beliefs, the Hindu tradition that is relevant here⁷ imagines being or eternity as a process of cyclically repeated evolution-and-involution. While the subject in the Judaeo-Christian universe has to choose his position well, once and for all, and act accordingly, the Hindu considers continuous observation, attendance and attempted control of the processes of life of crucial importance. What the Hindu encounters is a *pars pro toto* of an eternally ongoing process, and his own life is merely one in a chain. No choice, however seriously considered and followed, will result in eternal bliss—only for those, the very great, enlightened beings, who have progressed beyond the causal chain of

reincarnation. Naively put, it is dogma, ethics and morality *versus* attention, attendance on and 'processing' of life. The former attitudes hit India in its worst form of uptight Victorian Christian morality and as new converts are said to be more Roman than the Pope, one can find in India Victorian attitudes more staunch than Queen Victoria's.

In contrasting the nun with the *devadāsī* we might conclude that the nun has chosen, once and for all, to belong to the realm of God, of the Holy Spirit, to head for heaven and to renounce the forces of the senses as these belong to the empire of the Devil—evil incarnate; her deeds, her appearance, indicate an attitude that turns away from life, its turbulent forces and its inner conflicts. In contrast, the *devadāsī*—as we shall see—is *in charge* of these very forces, temporal and eternal; her deeds and appearance indicate her special vitality and capacity to grapple with the processes of life, of 'being' in its eternity. To pose the question whether the *devadāsī* has chosen the spirit—the supposed realm of the holy—or the senses, the supposed realm of evil, is utterly wrong. This is something which we, both Westerners and present-day Indians, should realize and finally we should stop asking the question or demand an answer. Both are offensive and not to the point. The *devadāsī*, in contrast to the nun, has chosen (if we could call it choice) life—life itself being the only divine reality that *is*. Her attempt is not to gain heaven after her demise but to manipulate the powers at play into human well-being on earth (*śubham*) during her lifetime. In her world the divine is neither transcendent, nor benign or just; it is immanent, composite, ambivalent and even dangerous. Therefore, her task is not an easy one nor without risk.

2. Conceptual Shifts

Hinduism has been a religion, a tradition, a *modus vivendi* that has never postulated dogmas, or operated with an identity to which one could convert, or presented opinions that were open to discussion concerning their existential or metaphysical truth. In short, India was Bhārata, its cultural consensus *Mahābhārata* and *modus vivendi sanātana dharma*. Not so according to the notions entertained by the Hindu Renaissance which dates back to the 19th century. Conversion-sects like Arya Samaj, spiritual brotherhoods such as the Theosophical Society, and the various propagandistic Hindu cults altered the face of Hinduism for the West and eventually even for Hindus themselves.

The magic word was 'spiritual'. In terms of Hindu Renaissance ideas everything Hindu was spiritual, starting from Hindu philosophies—supposedly expressed through Hindu art forms—to traditional customs; true understanding of these would only arise from the spiritual focus. This

focus and its elusive concept of the 'spiritual' is a powerful confusion that has unsettled the compass of many observers and participants in Indian arts. This confusion is too complex and slippery to be discussed at length here. It may suffice to make the interesting point that till today I have not come across an apt equivalent of the term and concept 'spiritual' in any Indian language. In the context of day to day commonsense Hinduism, this is not surprising: the hard-core reality of functionality appraises wisdom in its application (*prayoga*), not in its evanescent 'spiritual eternity'. Similarly, traditional Hindu art is primarily concerned with life: its qualities, its complexities, its vitality and forces interacting with human existence—all these expressed and accessible through the senses, not away from them.

In evaluating Indian art and artists one should be careful to remain within Indian categories of thought and feeling. It seems of utmost importance—if we value true understanding—to prevent generalizations on the basis of a blurred amalgam of half-understood contrastive conceptual universes. This seemed to be the hallmark of the so-called Hindu Renaissance and has left a lasting scar on the understanding, appreciation, and survival of *devadāsī* arts and customs.

3. *Conceptual Imprecisions*

A linguistic dictum says: the native speaker is always right. As this rule holds good for the study of spoken language, we might try to apply it to the expressions of living culture as well.

Devadāsī: what does it mean?

The subjects of this cultural phenomenon in Tamil Nadu, the *devadāsīs* themselves, refer to their own tradition as *devadāsī muṟai* (*tēvatāci murai*) or *devadāsī vṛtti*. These terms prove to be of crucial importance. The Tamil definition of *muṟai* is found as such in the *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* (DED 4115): "order, arrangement, system, regularity, turn by which work is done, time, birth, manners, custom, approved code of conduct, relationship by blood or marriage, justice, antiquity, fate, nature". The Sanskrit term *vṛtti* means "a mode of life, common practice, rule, profession, activity, function".

Both definitions given by the *devadāsīs* indicate that the *devadāsī* is to perform a given task, execute a function, lead a particular type of professional life. The terms refers to function, not to what has been carelessly called the caste of a *devadāsī*. Again, understanding the forces at play would come from a proper understanding of the terminology used. Let us start with examining the terms in use: caste is not an Indian word; it was introduced in the 16th century by the Portuguese who broadly defined the many divisions of Indian society which they encountered as *castas*⁷. If the

term caste corresponds to *varṇa* (literally 'colour', indicating the four strata of Indian society: *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*), the coinage of a '*devadāsī varṇā*' will find no Indian advocate; if caste corresponds to *jāti* (Sanskrit *jan*: to generate), a term meaning "birth, production, *genus*, *species*", it will be clear that the self-definition of the *devadāsīs* defies this meaning. According to them the nature of *devadāsī*hood is *murai* or *ṛtti*—task, function, a type of life—not *jāti*: *genus* or *species*.

Devadāsīs did not sprout like flowers, trees, birds or *jātis*; they were born in various *jātis* and made to fit the life and tasks of a *devadāsī*. Both synchronic and diachronic investigation shows that *devadāsīs* were recruited from many diverse castes⁸. Moreover, to qualify as a *devadāsī* was no easy matter that came automatically by birth. Even a girl born of a *devadāsī* mother had to go through a number of rites of passage (*saṃskāras*) to attain the *status* of *devadāsī* with all its inherent rights and duties⁹.

Stressing once more the fact that *devadāsī* meant a function, a *status*, a way of life—and not a *species*—it may become clear that the *devadāsī* tradition should not be studied as a product of evolution, like a *species* developing through time. To investigate a presumed *devadāsī* caste seems as confused and confusing as studying the *devadāsīs'* asceticism or spirituality. The tradition yields more easily to understanding when it is approached from the angle of its functionality. It is the function that has meandered through time between the extremities of its scope. This scope of function, its multivalence and flexibility expressed in various applications (*prayogas*) seems a much more interesting and fertile focus of research.

II. MURAI

1. Scope

The concept of being or eternity as a process of cyclically repeated evolution and involution, of a divine that is immanent, composite, ambivalent and even dangerous, expressing itself incessantly in the dynamic tension of creation and destruction, of balance and imbalance, of auspicious and inauspicious, gave rise to the need for efficient specialists who could control any critical accumulation or eruption of dynamic force. Throughout history, the ambivalent dynamism of the divine has been felt and, although man could not construct an exact pattern of dynamic change, he distinguished diagnostic features (*lakṣaṇas*) of the basic oppositions at play and sought to regulate their causes and effects for the benefit of mankind. This was attempted by various means: regular communication with the gods through worship in temples, occasional propitiations practised in village

cults, sustenance of the living proofs of prosperity and vitality by attending on the king, and ubiquitous preventive or propitiating measures taken at every step and in every important event. From the lowest and most unsophisticated focus of South Indian culture up to the highest and most refined focus of sophisticated court culture, we encounter this concept of the ambivalent, dynamic divine as well as the attempt to control it¹⁰.

In the process of evolution from the essential, undivided, unqualified, concentrated form of being (*nirguṇa brahman*), the first split causes two poles of dynamic tension: one pole is the active, female principle (*Śakti*) and the other the inert, abstract male principle (*Śiva*). While an excess of dynamism destroys, the same force protects and nourishes when it is harmonized with the male principle. As the sudden eruption of dynamism as seen in illness, drought, diseases among cattle, barrenness and madness was related to the temper of the goddess, a method was devised to control this danger *from within*: a female ritualist was created whose individual female powers (*śakti*) were ritually merged with those of the great goddess (*Śakti*). This ritualist would be ever effective and protective of her fellow human beings:

This in short constitutes the scope of the function of *devadāsī murai*. It encompasses the entire span of existence, hovering between the poles of life and death, integration and disintegration, love and fear. As such it covers all categories of human experience: metaphysical, physical, social and emotional.

2. Qualifiers

The traditional view holds that all women share, by their very nature, the powers of the goddess. A regular process is imagined in degrees of auspiciousness of those powers that correspond to the varying status of women. At the top of the scale is the married woman whose husband is alive and who has borne several children: she is called *sumāṅgalī*, 'auspicious female'. At the lowest rung of the ladder is the widow who is considered inauspicious because her female powers are no longer harmonized by her male counterpart¹¹. As a ritual person, the *devadāsī* exceeds even the *sumāṅgalī* in auspiciousness. Firstly, because her individual femininity is merged with the powers of the great goddess in a special rite that resembles a formal wedding; secondly, because she has been dedicated to a divine husband, i.e., a husband who will never die. Therefore she, in turn, can never lose her auspiciousness; this is what earned the *devadāsī* her status of *nitya-sumāṅgalī*: 'ever-auspicious female'. This status made the *devadāsī* almost 'danger-proof' in any critical circumstance and made her much needed in times of danger, crisis, or of crucial, important events.

The presence and actions of *nityasumaṅgalīs* were believed to be very concretely efficacious. In analogy with the manifold manifestations of the goddess, we encounter many different types of *nityasumaṅgalīs* in South Indian culture. The respect or fear in which these women were held by the public depended upon their association with a particular type of goddess. In the case of the *devadāsī-nityasumaṅgalī* the association was an auspicious one, namely with the great, auspicious form of the divine as found in the major temples.

3. Purpose

The purpose of maintaining *devadāsī-nityasumaṅgalīs* in a temple and society at large used to be twofold.

On the one hand, she would protect the gods and the community against danger. It is interesting to see that one of the main destructive, life-eroding powers was thought to be the evil, jealous eye—*dr̥ṣṭi*—draining all vitality from its object of envy.

On the other hand the *devadāsī* would instil dynamism into the processes of gaining a livelihood, maintaining splendour, preserving good health, obtaining children and rich crops. Her reserves of life-supporting vitality, that is, her especially powerful *śakti*, would attend on and control the processes of life.

4. Implements

The notion of life, being or eternity as an unceasing process that needs constant attention and attendance to regulate the direction of its forces may remind us of alchemy. Much of ritual activity consists of adding, subtracting or mixing substances, halting or stimulating processes. The *devadāsī-nityasumaṅgalī* made use of several implements and ingredients to achieve the twofold aim of either stopping unwanted, excessive dynamism or, on the other hand, instilling dynamism in life processes. Her most characteristic task was to wave the pot-lamp (*kumbhadīpa*); this ritual was remembered by all *devadāsī* informants as the most important. It can be considered the *devadāsī murai par excellence*. *Kumbhārati*, the waving of the pot-lamp before God, validated the status of the *devadāsī* and granted her the use of a house, *prasādam*, and clothes given by the temple¹². The pot-lamp is considered to be the most efficacious lamp in dispelling or absorbing the evil forces of the envious eye (*dr̥ṣṭi*). *Dr̥ṣṭi* is considered so powerful that even the gods do not seem to be immune to its influence. The importance of the *devadāsī* and her ritual performance corresponds to the fear caused by the belief in *dr̥ṣṭi*.

It will be clear that when we evaluate the tradition of the *devadāsīs* from

the point of view of their functionality, a totally different picture arises, far removed from any nun-like asceticism or Hindu Renaissance 'spirituality'. Her actions serve a well-defined purpose; in the process she makes use of several instruments, some of them material, others immaterial. Apart from material ingredients like *āḷam* (coloured water on a brass plate), turmeric paste, *mancaḷ*, *kumkumam*, limes, flowers and black beads, she brought before the deity her presence, her beauty, her auspicious power and its vehicle: her art of singing and dancing. Song and dance are per definition auspicious, they are born of auspiciousness—the fullness and vitality of life—and, whenever or wherever they are performed, they emanate and engender the powers of their origin. They bring luck and ward off evil.

The arts are not part of leisure, romanticism, or a search for the self. In this traditional context they are very powerful media of change and influence.

5. Application

The belief in the vitality and power attributed to the performing arts is very well attested in ritual activities at roughly three levels:

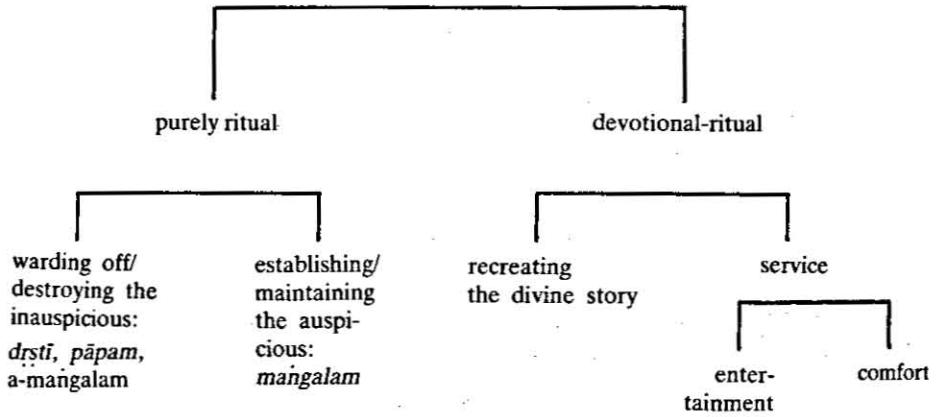
- i. attendance on gods and goddesses;
- ii. attendance on the king and his royal court;
- iii. attendance on the members of society on the occasions of rites of passage (*samskāras*).

The temple, the court, and the house of the patron were the traditional settings of South Indian music and dance before they entered the proscenium theatre by the middle of this century. These three traditional *loci* of performance allowed the arts to develop great differences of sophistication and character. These differences might range from processional 'marching-songs' to the Carnatic equivalent of chamber music. The three *loci* usually had their own types of artistes: the first and third type of attendance used to be performed mostly by *devadāsī-nityasumaṅgalis*, while the royal courts maintained *rājadāsī-nityasumaṅgalis*. However, at times these groups were mutually interchangeable. This explains both the differences in character and sophistication between the three types of repertoire and performance style as well as the evidence of exchange, borrowing and imitation.

Returning to the ritual validation of the art, as found most explicitly in the temple setting, we may distinguish two basic categories of ritual attendance. Taking the risk of over-simplification, we might discern:

- i. 'purely' ritual performance, i.e. instrumental;
- ii. devotional performance fostering the mood of devotion.

These two categories could be subdivided as follows:



5.1 *Sampradāya* (Transmission)

The data which form the basis of the categories of application outlined above are first and foremost the repertoire of a *devadāsī* family belonging to the great temple of Sri Subrahmaṇyasvāmī at Tiruttani. This family has been attached to the temple for generations and used to live in a small settlement behind the temple. The last member of the family to practise music and dance in the temple is Shrimati P. Raṅganāyakī (b. 1914), who was taught by her grandmother Shrimati Subburatnammā (1871—1950). Shrimati Subburatnammā noted down her entire repertoire containing songs in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu besides a number of dance compositions. Whatever Shrimati P. Raṅganāyakī was taught in her youth and remembered she, in turn, taught me; in addition, she gave me the family manuscript for publication¹³.

The songs and dances handed down by these two temple *devadāsīs* strikingly attest the categories of ritual attendance mentioned above. They support patterns of dynamic changes that pertain mainly to the change effected by time. The temple ritual evolves through cycles of the day, week, month, season and year which have been divided meticulously. Each point of demarcation is articulated by song, dance, and ritual action.

5.2 *Rūpam* (Form, Performance Style)

It seems important to devote a few lines to the character of the arts performed by *devadāsīs* in Tiruttani temple. Today, when ancient compositions are reconstructed or rechoreographed to suit the modern stage, the memory of the ritual forms must be preserved. It should be stressed that these traditional songs and dances from Tiruttani are marked by a minimal attempt to achieve aesthetic effect. The songs and dances are extremely straightforward and simple. It is clear that they were considered a ritual task that had to be performed for the sake of necessary occurrence, not of artistic impact. The ritual songs are set to a rhythm and a tempo that resemble a quick military march. The artistes performed them without self-conscious pride; their attitude towards the repertoire is respectful but matter-of-fact.

In its traditional setting, the *devadāsī* heritage did not need to prove anything; being auspicious, it held the universe together and protected it by its very nature. Remembrance through performance was considered both ritual maintenance and worship of the *sanātana dharma*; it was the *devadāsī murai*. □

NOTES

1. S.C. Kersenboom: *Nityasumaṅgalī—Towards the Semiosis of the Devadāsī Tradition of South India*, Ph. D. thesis, State University of Utrecht, Utrecht, 1984.
2. Apart from incidental Muslim rulers who discouraged the practice of performing arts in general.
3. Cf. Amrit Srinivasan, 'The Hindu Temple-dancer: Prostitute or Nun?', in *Cambridge Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1983, p. 73—99.
4. Devadasi Act, d.d. 26.11.2947, for the full text see: Government of Madras, Law (legislative) Dept., G.O. No. 23, 26 January 1948: Acts—The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947, Publ Madras Act XXXI of 1947.
5. Note the fact that the nuns are always considered to be brides, never wives: the engagement ceremony never develops into a marriage ceremony, leave alone its consummation.
6. The terms *maṭi* and *acāram* refer to Hindu ritual purity. This type of purity abhors blood and saliva as extremely polluting substances. The Christian is totally unaware of this when contemplating Christ on the cross with his hands, feet and chest bleeding, the priest, drinking His blood at Mass, and the devotees eating His body.
7. Here *sāmkhya-yoga* and *tantra*.

8. A.L. Basham: *The Wonder that was India*, London, 1967, p. 149.
9. Cf. S.C. Kersenboom-Story: *Nityasumangali*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987, Chapter I—'Diachronic Modifications and Synchronic Occurrence'.
10. Cf. S.C. Kersenboom-Story, *op. cit.*, Chapter III—'Rites of Passage of the Devadasis of Tamilnadu'.
11. Cf. Holly Baker Reynolds: 'The Auspicious Married Woman', in *The Powers of Tamil Women*, ed. Susan S. Wadley, Maxwell School Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, Foreign and Comparative Studies/South Asian Series 6, 1980, p. 35–60, esp. p. 50 ff.
12. Cf. S.C. Kersenboom-Story, *op. cit.*, p. 118–120.
13. To be published by Motilal Banarsidass under the title 'Devadasi Heritage'.