

The Devadāsī in the Socio-Religious Context

KALPANA DESAI

At that time the blessed Buddha dwelt at Rajagriha ... At that time Veśālī was an opulent, prosperous town ... There was also the courtesan Ambapālīkā [Āmrāpālī] who was beautiful, graceful, pleasant, gifted with beauty of complexion, well versed in dancing, singing, and flute-playing, much visited by desirous people. She charged 50 kahapanas for one night. Through that person Veśālī became more and more flourishing.

Mahavagga

References to highly placed courtesans are scattered throughout Buddhist and other literature. In the *Jātakas*, especially, we come across numerous references to *vanndāsīs* who, for all purposes, are courtesans. They are *gaṇikās*, i.e. the property of the *gaṇa* or society to which they belong.

The institution of *devadāsī* is somewhat parallel to the *vannadāsī* in as much as the former is the *dāsī* or servant of god and the latter that of society. In both cases there are references to indicate that many of them were pushed into the position involuntarily. The *devadāsī*, like the *gaṇikā*, was an inseparable part of temple rituals, and by and large of the religious and cultural life of the people.

The references to courtesans in later literature are many but very few draw a clear distinction between a courtesan and a *devadāsī*. There seems to be a very thin line dividing the two. The institution is often branded as sacred prostitution, putting a tremendous social stigma on the *devadāsīs*. Though one can neither deny the sexual liberties granted to them by tradition, nor the possibilities of sexual exploitation by men of the upper castes, it would be erroneous to draw a hasty conclusion without considering the social and political conditions in which the institution was born.

A careful study of the relevant literature shows that there were three main purposes behind a woman becoming a *devadāsī*. Some were bought and forced to accept the profession. Some did it out of economic compulsions, and there were some who accepted it for religious purposes.

Devadāsīs were primarily women dedicated to the deity of a temple. There were different classes of *devadāsīs* depending on the intentions behind a dedication. The classes are:

Dattā : One who of her own accord offered herself as a gift to the temple;

Virkritā : One who was sold to the temple;

Bhṛtyā : One who offered herself as a servant of the temple for its prosperity;

Bhaktā : One who dedicated herself out of devotion;

Haritā : One who was enticed and presented to the temple;

Alankṛtā : One who was well trained in the profession and was presented to the temple by the king or a noble after being decorated with ornaments;

Rudrā-gaṇikā or *gopikā* : One who was employed by the temple to dance and sing at regular hours on payment of wages.

The circumstances which led them to adopt the life of *devadāsīs* would have undoubtedly affected their relative position in the temple hierarchy and must have governed their mode of behaviour as well. One can surmise that those who were bought by the temple or those who were enticed and presented there would have been easy victims of exploitation. At the same time literary and epigraphic evidence corroborates the fact that some *devadāsīs* enjoyed a respectable position in society. Numerous records from the Chola country show rich endowments made by *devadāsīs* for various public benefit causes and the recognition offered to them by local powers. An eighth-century inscription at the Lokamahādevī temple at Pattadakal, Karnataka, records that a rich *devadāsī* presented a horse and an elephant chariot to the presiding deity of the temple.

Some *devadāsīs* even enjoyed the status of married women. An inscription from Tiruvorriyur dated 1049 AD mentions a *devaradiyāl*, Chatural Chaturai, who was the wife of the citizen Nagan Perungadan. The marriage of another dancing girl belonging to a temple in Tanjore district is recorded in an inscription of Kulottunga III.

Many *devadāsīs* were economically self-sufficient and had their own means of livelihood. The Mukteśvara temple inscription of the Pallava queen Dharmamahādevī gives the names of 44 dancers attached to the temple who received provisions from the management of the temple. Land was often a source of income for the temple dancers. An inscription in the Bhujjabeśvara temple at Hebbal in Dharwad district mentions a land grant to dancing girls for their maintenance. The system of *devadāsīs* in south India seems to have been well organized during the Chola period. According to an inscription of Rajaraja Chola, dated 1004 AD, he ordered the transfer of a number of temple dancers from the temples in his kingdom to Śrī Rajarajeśvara temple. They received a certain amount of paddy as wages for their services. Even after they migrated, their relatives received

the allowance for doing their work. Four hundred and two *devadāsīs* were employed in the temple, which also employed a number of dancing masters, singers, pipers and drummers. *Kuṭṭanimata*, a treatise on the life of courtesans, also mentions that the position of a *devadāsī* in a temple, and the income accruing from it, was hereditary. Employment of a temple dancer is referred to in the *Śṛṅgāraṁjari* which states that the temple of Bhaillasvāmin at Vidisha had engaged a beautiful courtesan named Lāvaṇyasundarī who danced before the god. It would be wrong to presume that such a *devadāsī* would want to indulge in prostitution even when her financial security was guaranteed. On the other hand, in such cases, their relationships with men would have been of an emotional nature or that of a concubine—a relationship that was accepted by Indian society till the beginning of this century.

The plight of the *devadāsīs* of smaller temples in poorer areas must have been miserable since their emoluments were meagre. There they would have easily fallen prey to covetous priests or other men of higher castes. It may be noted that traditionally the *devadāsīs* were not allowed to cohabit with people of the lower castes or to visit their homes. This situation provided the high-caste people, particularly the priests attached to temples, a chance to exploit the women unpolluted by the touch of the lower castes. This aberration continued in spite of the inhuman sufferings borne by *devadāsīs* who had to dance before the deity.

However, there are other reasons why the society could not dispense with such a system. The life of the people often centred around the temple. A temple answered their cultural and religious needs: there were no other avenues outside the temple or the court. The gorgeous *rangamaṇḍapas* of temples all over India testify to the important role of music and dance in temple rituals—in daily worship as well as festivals. Kings passed special orders for such celebrations. An interesting inscription of Jojaladeva in 1090 AD from Sadadi and Nadul in Jodhpur records the order of the king with regard to the management of festivals connected with various gods—Lakṣmaṇasvāmin and others. It enjoins that at the commencement of a festival, the dancers of the temple concerned as well as those attached to other temples should adorn themselves with costly garments and ornaments and, accompanied by master musicians and superintendents, celebrate it with instrumental music, dancing and singing. This continuous demand for performances resulted in the rich repertoire of Indian dance forms which developed around the temple. It grew out of the religious fervour and keen aesthetic sensibilities of the temple dancers. This was acknowledged by the people and literature is full of praise for the art of the *devadāsīs* comparing it with the dance of the heavenly *apsaras*.

Kautilya devotes a chapter to the duties of the superintendent of courtesans. He was responsible for their appointments, their various functions, their protection, payments, and the collection of their taxes. He also refers to the kings occasionally commanding courtesans to attend to particular individuals for various reasons. Kautilya adds that the courtesans were to be adept in dancing, singing, and in playing the lute. This aspect of the courtesan's accomplishments is especially worth noting. The *Arthaśāstra* is silent about the institution of *devadāsīs*.

The performance of the *devadāsīs* was not only for the worship and propitiation of the gods: their ritualistic dance was also supposed to ward off evil from the town. This is the reason why a *devadāsī* was always a part of temple rituals. It is for this reason too that she was considered auspicious and her presence sought particularly at weddings and other ceremonies.

There was a queer paradox in the attitudes of the people towards the *devadāsīs*. On the one hand *devadāsīs* were considered holy, particularly in eastern India, and pilgrims would make it a point to have her *darśan* almost as a matter of ritual observance. On the other hand, her profession as an artiste classed her as an untouchable.

It is an irony that an institution which grew from valid social objectives gradually degenerated and was debased, attracting a stigma in the past century which seems to have been justified by the prevailing circumstances. Like all other artistes and artisans of past centuries, of whose legacy India is proud, the *devadāsīs* were also condemned to suffer the humiliation accorded to the lower castes. In any case the institution has lost its original context and hence its relevance to society.