

The Devadāsī Tradition in Orissa

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Singing and dancing as an essential part of ritual services appear to have developed with the growth of temples and of Shaivism in Orissa. The tradition of dedicating dancing girls to the deities of Hindu shrines is very ancient. The *purāṇas* contain several references to the custom.

Owing to various reasons, mainly social and economic, the cult of the *devadāsīs* is now extinct everywhere except in Orissa. And in Orissa, the cult is at least 12 centuries old, as is evident from inscriptions. A considerable number of inscriptions testify to the consecration of dancing girls to the temples of Orissa. The earliest commemorative inscription is the Brahmeswar temple inscription of Udyota Kesari, the last king of the Kesari dynasty. The inscription records the erection of the temple of Brahmeswar by his mother Kolavati Devi (10th century AD). A free translation of the lines referring to the consecration of dancing girls to the temple follows:

She [Kolavati Devi] dedicated to Lord Shiva some beautiful women, whose limbs were adorned with ornaments set with gems... who were restless with the weight of their loins and breasts, and whose eyes were fickle and extended up to their ears...

The Megheswar temple of Bhubaneswar was built by Swapneswaradeva, the brother-in-law of Rajarajadeva II of Ganga dynasty, towards the last part of the 12th century. Commemorative inscriptions from the temple, now removed to the Ananta Basudeva temple, bear evidence to the appointment of dancing girls.

The temple of Sobhaneswara near Niali in Cuttack district was built during the rule of Anangabhimadeva (1190-1198 AD) of Ganga dynasty by a king named Baidyanath. The inscription here refers to several works of public welfare by the king along with the dedication of dancing girls.

Although there are no *devadāsīs* now in the Sobhaneswara temple, we find—in the *matha* at Khambakal village near Balikuda, some 15 miles from the temple—singing girls appointed to sing before the deity on ceremonial occasions throughout the year. It is possible that such a system was earlier adopted at Sobhaneswara.

Prataparudradeva was a powerful Gajapati ruler of Orissa. His first inscription in Oriya dated July 1499 AD in the temple of Jagannath records the king's devotion for the deity. In this inscription orders are issued for dance performances in the temple from the evening till Balarama's bedtime, and songs from the *Geeta Govinda* when food was offered. The order strictly forbids songs other than those from the *Geeta Govinda*:

...four Vaishnava singers have been appointed only to sing from the *Geeta Govinda*. The uneducated would learn the tunes of the *Geeta Govinda*, listening to them and no other song. One who performs other dance and music would go against Lord Jagannath.

During the rule of the most powerful Suryavamsi ruler, Kapilendradeva (1452-1479 AD), his chief minister Mohapatra Gopinath Das built a temple at Gopinathpur on the model of the Jagannath temple of Puri. He installed the images of Balabhadra, Subhadra, Jagannath and Gopinath. The ruins of this temple are in the village of Gopinathpur in Cuttack district. It has a large *naṭa maṇḍapa* (dancing hall) on which a small temple has been built recently to house the deities.

There are steps going up to the hall and on its facade there are beautiful carvings of dancing girls. On the left side of the staircase leading to the hall there is a stone inscription recording the glorious achievements of the powerful king Kapilendra. One of the verses states that the temple was provided with maidens as charming as Rambhā.

In the temple of Jagannath at Puri dancing girls were first appointed for the essential ritual services of the deity by Anantavarma Chodagangadeva in 11th century AD. All the female attendants of the temple are known as *mahārīs*. They are again divided into several groups according to their services. The dancing girls are known as *nachunī* (female dancer) and the others are *bhitara gaunī* (female singers of the inner apartment), *bāhāra gaunī* (female singers who perform outside the temple), and *gauḍāsani* (those whose duty it is to fan the Lord). Their accompanists are all males. They are the *Viṇākāra* (the Veena player) and the *Madela* (Mardala or Pakhawaj player). The *nachunis* perform in the *naṭa mandir* (dance hall) which is part of the temple building or near the *garuḍa stambha* (the ceremonial flagstaff) outside the temple. The *bhitara gaunīs* who constitute an exclusive group are admitted to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple and it is only they who are allowed to dance and sing at the Lord's *baḍā singāra* (bedtime) every night. The *bāhāra gaunīs*, on the other hand, are not permitted to enter the innermost sanctuary of the temple.

The *sebāyats* (servants) of the temple of Jagannath are allocated different streets in Puri. Some opine that the street where the *mahārīs* used to live was known as Mahārī-palli or Anga-alasa Patna. But there is no record to

prove this. Now the *mahārīs* live in Matimandap Sahi, Kundheibenta Sahi and Bali Sahi in Puri. Formerly two officers named *Mina Nāyak* and *Sahi Nāyak* were appointed by the temple to regulate the services of the *mahārīs*. It was the duty of the *Mina Nāyak* to escort the *mahārīs* to the temple and back home. The duty of the *Sahi Nāyak* was to see that they led a chaste and honourable life. A royal *firman* in possession of an old *mahārī* throws light on the various stipulations which governed the duties of the *mahārīs* in former times. It says:

Mahārīs are forbidden the company of men. They are to dance at ceremonies and festivals connected with Lord Jagannath. After initiation they are always to adorn themselves with the *tilak*. They are not to partake of food prepared at home. They are to wear clean clothes on the days they have to dance; they are not to speak with any man. They are to be conducted to the temple by the *Mina Nāyak*.

At the time of performance, they are not to look at the audience. Their dance must strictly follow the *śāstras*. They must dance in the following *tālas*: Pahapata, Sarimana, Parameswara, Malashree, Haracandi, Chandan Jhoōla, Shreemaṅgala, Bacanika and *Jhuti atha-tāli*. They are to perform *bhāva* only from the *Geeta Govinda*.

The *mahārīs* were initiated into the order after a compulsory marriage with Lord Jagannath at the age of nine. In the selection of the girls certain rules were followed. Firstly, the girl should not have any deformity or mark of a cut on the body. She must belong to a caste from which a Brahmin can accept water. A *mahārī* wishing to enrol her own daughter or an adopted daughter must submit an application to the Raja of Puri with a fee of 15 rupees. The Raja, on receipt of the application, referred it to the *Pūjā Paṇḍā* and *Deula Karana*—two important *sebāyats* of the temple—to verify the eligibility of the girl. If the girl was selected, an auspicious day was fixed for her marriage.

On the day of the marriage the girl is bathed after being annointed with turmeric paste. She remains on fast. She wears a new sari and new ornaments. Then the *guru* of the *mahārīs* gives her *dikṣā* by which she is accepted in the *mahārī* community. Then she is taken to the temple by her mother, grandmother, sister and other female relatives as well as other *mahārīs*. They arrive at the *naṭa maṇḍapa* and stand at the gate of Jayi Vijaya. The ceremony is simple—a sari is tied on the neophyte's head. The sari is tied by a *sebāyat* in the presence of the *pattajośi mohāpatra*. A garland is then taken off the image of Lord Jagannath and the girl is garlanded as the representative of the god. Then a *vaiṣṇava citra* is painted on her forehead and, on the sandal-paste base painted earlier, a big vermilion mark is put as a sign of a married women. Like a new bride she goes round the temple holding in both hands unparched rice and betel nuts.

Thereafter she returns home. On her arrival *ārati* is offered at the altar of Brundābati and everybody is served *mahāprasāda*.

After initiation, the girl is presented with a *paṭasārī* (of local silk) by the temple authorities which she uses during her performances in later years. In the evening she is taken to the palace of the Raja by her mother and other female relatives. She is then required to sit with the Raja. Afterwards she is taken to the bed-chamber where she is asked to touch the bed. This is called *śeja mada*. Then she is asked to look into the eyes of the Raja, which is called *caṅṣyumiṇa* (meeting of the eyes). This part of the ritual is observed as the Raja of Puri is venerated as the moving image of Lord Jagannath.

Though the *mahārī* is married to God she remains a spinster for life. If she does get married, she loses her *sebā* or profession. After her ritual marriage the girl is given intensive training in dance and music by the traditional *guru*. When she qualifies in the arts the *mahārī* begins her service as a dancer. The *mahārīs* dance in the temple according to their terms. Whenever they have to dance they come to the temple after a purificatory bath. The *rājguru* always presents himself during the dance as a representative of the king. Holding a gold-mounted cane as a symbol of authority, he stands near the dancer. The *mahārī*, before her performance, pays her obeisance to the deity and bows to the *rājguru*. She then begins her dance to the accompaniment of the Mardala (Pakhawāj) and Gini (small cymbals). The dance that takes place in the *naṭa mandira* during the morning offering (*sakāla dhūpa*) is pure dance, *nṛtta*. There is no song accompaniment to this dance. The dance during *baḍa singār* (bedtime) in the innermost sanctuary is exclusively for the deity. This dance is expressional and the songs in accompaniment from the *Geeta Govinda*.

The *mahārīs* are divided into two classes—those who take part in the daily rituals and those meant only for festivals. The daily rituals are dance during the morning ritual, singing in the evening ritual (*sandhyā dhūpa*), singing during annointment of the images with sandal-paste, and singing at the bedtime of the gods late at night. The following are the occasions for singing and dancing during festivals:

1. Singing of songs (*bhajan* and *chhanda*) during the 42-day festival of Candan Jatra.
2. Dance on the float during the 21-day festival of Candan Jatra (*bāhara candana*).
3. Singing during the enactment of Rukmini Haran (abduction of Rukmini).
4. Singing at the marriage pandal while carrying the letter of Lakṣmī.

5. Dance on the occasion of Snāna Pūrṇimā (bathing festival).
6. Singing in the *cahāni mandap* while carrying Lakṣmī.
7. Breaking of the *ratha* as representative of Lakṣmī.
8. Dance in the *jhulan mandap* during Śrāvaṇ Pūrṇimā.
9. Breast-feeding Kṛṣṇa as Yaśodā and Rohiṇī.
10. Dancing and singing during the morning and evening rituals in the *soḍaṣa pūjā* of Vimala.
11. Dance in the early ritual (*bāladhūpa*) during the month of Kārtika.
12. Playing with colours as *gopi* during Holi.
13. Accompanying the Raja on special occasions.
14. Singing at marriages.

Records show that there was another class of *mahārīs* known as *samparada niyoga* whose duty was to dance during the ceremonial procession (*patuar*) of the deities. Religious texts mention such dances during Ratha Jatra, Chandan Jatra, Uthapana Utsava, Dola Jatra (Holi), Jhoolan Jatra, etc. As the *mahārīs* of this class were also to dance at in *patuars* (processions), they came to be known as *patuarī* (one who accompanies a procession). *Mahārīs* of this class are completely extinct.

From the beginning of the 17th century till the conquest of the Marathas in the middle of the 18th century the political life of Orissa remained in turmoil. This also affected the religious, social and cultural life of the people. During this period of 150 years the Muslim as well as Hindu *subedars* of the Mughal court raided the Puri temple successively and looted its property. The idols were often removed and concealed for fear of defilement. The temple services had to be suspended on such occasions. Due to successive Muslim invasions and the weakening of political authority a degree of moral degeneration must have overtaken the *mahārīs*. It is from this period that the *mahārīs*, who were originally intended for temples alone, came to be employed in royal courts as well. From now on, the *mahārīs* ceased to be respected as *dāsīs* of the Lord and came to be associated with concubinage.

Around the middle of the 18th century the powerful Marathas came to power. Their occupation of Orissa marked a revolutionary change in the religious and cultural life of the people. The continuous attacks on the Jagannath temple came to an end. As staunch Hindus the Marathas invigorated the religious movement. The temple services were again regulated. The Marathas also built a number of temples and religious institutions and patronized art and literature. During their rule of more than 50 years till the British takeover in 1803, a number of poets and

dramatists flourished in Orissa and enriched Sanskrit and Oriya literature. Though special reference to *mahārī* dance is not found, cultivation of dance, drama and music is evidenced in the literary works of the time.

The British did not to interfere in the religious life of the people in order to gain popular support for their administration. The earliest account of Jagannath temple was recorded by William Hunter in 1872. L.S.S. O'Mailey, I.C.S., gives the following report in 1908:

The chief festival is the Chandan Yatra which lasts for 21 days. On this occasion Madana Mohan comes forth from the temple every day and is escorted in procession to the Narendra tank. The idol is then placed on a boat and carried round the tank with music and dancing.

Formerly the *mahārīs* received rent-free land grants. These lands were mostly allotted in Numapara and Kakatpur near Konarak. Besides the yield from the lands they received a portion of the food offering prepared for the Lord every day, known as *khei*. They received nothing more from the temple. It is perhaps this pecuniary circumstance that forced them to lead an immoral life. For perpetual succession to their service the *mahārīs* purchased or adopted daughters from poor families. When they grew old and retired their daughters inherited the right to serve in the temple.

At present there are a few old *mahārīs* in Puri who still serve in the temple. They are no more interested in continuing the tradition. The daughters they adopted are getting married and taking up other professions—teaching, nursing, etc. It is feared that the tradition will come to an end with the present few *mahārīs*. Two ageing *mahārīs*, Harapriya and Kokilaprabha, have asked for financial support from the State government as well as the temple administration for continuation of the tradition.

Mahārīs are not only attached to the *Vaiṣṇava* shrine of Jagannath. They are also attached to the Shakti shrines of Mangala at Kakatpur in Puri district and Khambakul in Cuttack district. They are popularly known as *dāri* (*dārikā*) or prostitutes. They not only dance in the temples but also dance on social, religious, and festive occasions. In some other parts of Orissa they were known as *gunī*. But the *gunīs* had no connection with the temples. They used to dance and sing during festivals or in the courts of rajas and zamindars. This class of dancing girls is completely extinct today but were to be seen till the '40s of this century. □