

## Temple Dance and the Devadāsī in Karnataka

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### A. ANCIENT KARNATAKA

**M**usic and dance as integral parts of services offered to a deity in a temple are known to Karnataka since at least the 7th century. There are numerous literary references to it. Many Jaina, Brāhmaṇa and Vīraśaiva poets in Kannada describe dances performed in temples. The Cālukyan emperor Sarvajña Someśvara III, for example, includes *dāsīs* among the gift offerings which should be made to a temple (1.61). This study, however, will be confined to the presentation of some epigraphical evidence—by no means exhaustive—for the practice of *devadāsī paddhati* in temples.

It may be noted at the outset that the term *devadāsī* or its synonym *devagaṇikā* or *devaḍiti* is only occasionally employed in literary or epigraphical references in Karnataka. These may be mentioned first: Śivakoṭyācārya uses the word *devagaṇikā* in his *Vaḍḍāradhane* (81.6). It also occurs in an inscription of about 800 AD (EC.8.10-9) and in Nijagūṇa's *Vivekacintāmaṇi* (4.30, p. 370). *Devaditi* or *devaḍitti* occurs in some inscriptions in the sense of *devadāsī* (e.g. EC. 4, Chamarajanagar 18-8, c. 1000 AD EC.6. Koppa, 37-5, c. 675). The word *devadāsī* is used to mean a dancer dedicated to a temple in another inscription of 1113 AD in Shimoga (EC. 7, Shimoga, 97-55). In most epigraphical references, however, the words *pātra* and *sūle* are used instead of *devadāsī*. *Sūle* connoted a woman who was part of the establishment of a temple, appointed or dedicated, who offered services in music or dance till about the 11th and 12th centuries. Thereafter the word meant an auxiliary dancer or a woman who performed non-aesthetic or functional chores, whereas *pātra* connoted exclusively the chief temple danseuse. The *sūle* performed such chores as cleaning the temple, fanning with a flywhisk, preparing the sandal-paste, floral garlands weaving the *kumbhārati*, etc. Sometimes she served as an assistant dancer to the *pātra* during a performance and occupied a fixed place near a pillar in the *raṅgamaṇḍapa* of the temple. She was then called *kambaḍa sūle*. Her position and status were inferior to those of the *pātra*, who commanded high respect and esteem in society. The *pātra* usually came from a high

respectable, cultivated and aristocratic family with invariable professional excellence and led a pious and spiritual life. Some *pātras* were attached to a temple, while others were married and occupied a lofty position in the community; indeed some were the wives of ministers, generals, chieftains; some belonged to the royal family. But all *pātras* performed *nartanasevā* in temples besides secular performances. Phonetic and character degeneration overtook both the word and the person; the words *pātur*, *pātar* or *paturīya* came to denote in north India a prostitute. Similarly, the word *sūle* suffered a parallel degeneration and came to refer to a prostitute. Originally, *pātra* probably connoted expertise in both the theory and practice of dance whereas *sūle*, especially *kambaḍa sūle*, probably meant one who was proficient only in the practice of dance.

As the Gudnapur inscription recording the grant by Ravivarma of the Kadambas testifies, dance halls were built as annexes to a Jaina temple for dance service by *devadāsīs* and others as early as the 6th century (inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh, Gb. 3). An inscription dated 778-79 AD in the Virupākṣa temple at Pattadakal records a grant by temple *sūle* (*devadāsi*) Baḍili Poḍḍi, daughter of Govinda Poḍḍi, who was attached to the Lokamahādevi temple there (IA.II. p. 124). A temple dance named Vijayalakṣmī (?) is mentioned in another inscription of the same place (IA. 8) in 1169-70. An inscription of about 800 AD mentions a *devadāsi* danseuse, Calabbe, in the Vijayeśvara temple (IA.10. p.170). In 802 AD Nirūpaṇnadeva Prabhūtaṇḍa provides for dancing girls in a temple (EC.9.NI.61). A copper-plate grant from Nelamangala dated 802 AD records an endowment for vocalists, instrumentalists and for dancing by *vāravilāsinīs* in a Jaina temple (EC.9.NI.6). It is interesting to learn that the establishment expenditure of temples in Karnataka included provisions for the livelihood of an officer called *sūlevala* who superintended the functioning of the *devadāsīs*, if they were attached to a temple in large numbers. This is comparable to the *gaṇikādhyakṣa* mentioned by Kautilya (2.44.27, pp. 130-32).

The *devadāsīs* attached to a temple were housed in rent-free and tax-free houses in streets surrounding the temple. Four such streets housing 400 dancers, dance masters (*aṇṇāvi*) and musicians around the Bṛhadiśvara temple in Tanjore has already been mentioned. In Karnataka these streets were called *sūlekeri* and were built adjacent to or near the temple. Some such examples may be cited here. The queen Akkādevi not only consecrated a temple to Akkeśvara in Sundi but built a streetful of houses for *devadāsīs* near it in 1054 AD (EI.15.p.82). In the same place, Nāgideva built a temple for Nāgeśvara in 1058 AD and a *sūlekeri* near it (EI.15.p.87). In 1112 AD the general Anantamayya consecrated a temple to Lord

Svayambhū in Puligere and built streets for *devadāsīs* adjacent to it (SII.20.No. 75). The practice continued till the 17th century during which a whole street in Srirangapattana near Mysore resounded to the sounds of music and dancing when Kaṇṭhirava Narasarāja Waḍiyar ruled Karnataka (Govindavaidya, 6.176).

In south India, especially Karnataka, cultural, religious and spiritual activities flourished in the *agrahāra*, *brahmapuri*, and *ghaṭikāsthāna* which were built with a temple as the nucleus. Similarly the *maṭha* was a place of higher learning, usually attached to a temple or to a cluster of temples. There is profuse epigraphical evidence of these four kinds of cultural seats in Karnataka. While the majority of the *devadāsīs* (*pātras* and *sūles*) in a temple made their living from grants of land, house money and/or other gifts, there were quite a few in Karnataka who made rich endowments for permanent service of various kinds in the temples. Many *devadāsīs* were highly pious and gave rich grants for permanent services of various kinds in temples where they offered *nartanesevā*. Some of these are Maṇigāra Māḍavve, Āneya Māḷavve, Vissavve, Lakhavve, Candevve Nagavve Devavve and Mallavve (BC 5.2BI.106-111, pp. 231-233); the terminal '-avve' in these names are added to the name of women in Karnataka out of respect and means mother. Such gifts of course were not confined to the *devadāsīs* alone. Witness for example the munificent grant made to the temple by the chief drummer Lakhayya who was a *mukharī*, i.e. dance teacher and dance composer; he was the father of Bommaladevi, queen of Boysala Ballāladeva (EC.5.2.Cn.254).

#### B. MEDIEVAL KARNATAKA

The growth of the *devadāsī paddhati* in its medieval phase in Karnataka will be briefly traced now, based largely on epigraphical sources and literary reference in the travel accounts of visitors from foreign lands. Most of the data pertain to Vijayanagar and its provinces.

The following data are available for Vijayanagar in the 15th century: in 1403, all the *nāyakavāḍīs* of Ālūru made a grant for the maintenance of *devadāsīs* (EC. 4, Ch.45). In 1443 Abdur Rāzak states that the beauty and skill of dancing girls of the palace and royal court of Vijayanagar surpassed all description. Each such girl was bedecked with pearls and gems of great value and was dressed in costly raiment. He also describes the street of *devadāsīs* in Vijayanagar (called *sūlegeri* elsewhere in Kannada literature) in which the houses were spacious, aristocratic, had forecourts and high *pials* of stone. Both sides of the avenue were painted with lions, tigers,

panthers, and other animals. The street was 300 yards long and 70 yards wide (Elliot, Vol. 4, pp. 111-2 287.M.p.22).

In the 16th century Duarte Barbosa (1504-14) states that the *devadāsīs* were recruited to temple service by their parents before they were ten and married to the deity (Saletore, p.242). Paes (1520-22) says that the *devadāsīs* were held in great consideration and lived in the best streets of the city which had the best houses in Vijayanagar. They had special privileges; they could sit before the king and eat betel (*pān supāri*) with him (Sewell, pp. 234-259). They could also wrestle; a whole day was set apart during the *navarātri* festival for their dance and wrestling (*ibid.* pp. 240-258). According to Nuniz the duties of the *devadāsīs* were confined to dancing before the deity in the temple or festivals, especially during worship on Saturdays (*ibid.* pp. 357-9). They also danced in car festivals of deities before the car (*ratha*) and along with the procession (*ibid.* pp. 240-255). At every dawn during the *navarātri* festival the emperor held court when a thousand dancing girls passed before him, dancing. There were many *devadāsīs* who were rich and possessed lands, palanquins, precious jewels and countless servants.

Pietro della Valla (K 1614-23) describes a *daṇḍarāsa* dance by a group of 8-10 danseuses in a procession to and at the temples of Mahādeva and Aghoreśvara and at the royal court at Ikkeri. He also describes *devadāsīs* dancing in a car festival under the leadership of a *naṭṭuva*. They wore saris, golden waistbands, golden ankle rings, many necklaces and a golden pectoral studded with precious stones to cover the bosom. Some of them were singing, to which the chief *devadāsī* danced with *recakas*, *utplavaṇas* and *valanas* (Kagegowda, vol. 4, pp. 196-251).

#### C. RECENT KARNATAKA: MYSORE

After the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire in 1565 AD its cultural traditions were continued and strengthened by its feudatory states in Karnataka (Mysore, Srirangapattana, Ikkeri), Tamil Nadu (Tanjore, Madras) and Andhra (Vijayanagaram).

Raja Wāḍiyar (17th century) purchased Srirangapattana from the Vijayanagar viceroy Srirangaraya and shifted the capital from Mysore to Srirangapattana. He and his illustrious successors succoured the arts and ushered in an era of glory for music, dancing, painting, sculpture, architecture, etc. Raja Wāḍiyar inaugurated the famous *navarātri* festival, held court regularly on every Friday evening, and systematized the presentations of music and dancing. He added an elegant dance hall to the

palace which contained statuettes sculpted in lovely dance poses. His successor Cikadevarāya developed the hall further and brought refinement into the stage presentation and technique. The dance dramas *Gītagopāla* and *Cikadevarāya-saptapadi* of Tirumalāya were performed in the royal court. Kanthirava-narasaraja Wāḍiyar succeeded him; during his reign, a whole extension of the capital flourished with music and dance. Performance conventions and a concert repertoire consisting of *melaprāpti*, *puṣpāñjali*, *narasimhastuti*, *gīta*, *prabandha*, *rambhā nartana*, *urvaśī nartana*, *jakkiṇi*, *rājakīra*, etc had developed at this time in the royal court. Dancers from far and near provinces thronged to the capital to present their art before the king. Elaborate arrangements were made to house them, organize their presentation, etc. under a single supervision. Such organization continued in the Mysore royal court even during the reign of Krishnarāja Wāḍiyar IV in the 20th century. Haider Ali and Tippu rose to power and usurped power during the nominal rule by Krishnarāja Wāḍiyar II and Khāsa Chāmarāja Wāḍiyar in the 18th century. These kings patronized the arts of music and dance lavishly and the *devadāsī* system flourished.

Haider Ali patronized music and dance in his capacity as *sarvādhikāri* (attorney for the king) and was tolerant of the *devadāsī* system in the temples. However, with the fall of Tippu in the Fourth Mysore War of 1799 AD at Srirangapattana, and under the generous patronage of the *rasika* and cognoscente kings Krishnarāja Wāḍiyar III, his son-in-law Aliya Lingarāja, his adopted son Chāmarāja Wāḍiyar, and Krishnarāja Wāḍiyar IV, dance again rose to a golden era in both temples and royal courts. The scope of this presentation precludes a detailed description of the history of individual *devadāsīs* of Karnataka. It will therefore be confined to merely mentioning only those dancers who were and are quite renowned in different parts of Karnataka from about 1850 AD. These will be shown in a *paramparā* (of children or disciples) and with reference to the towns they lived in and flourished. This list may contain errors of both commission and omission from my ignorance, for which I crave pardon.

#### Mysore

Koramara Deveri—Chāndravādāna—Vyasamme  
 Papada Kuttammā—Nāgaratna (disciple of Dasappa of Nanjnagudu)  
 Bhavānī of Ballepura—Lakshmammānni—Akkammānni  
 Sitammā of Shivarampet (of Mysore)—Nilamma—Kamalamma  
 Rangammā of Shivarampet  
 Tāyakkā of Muguru Puttadevemamma—Mariyammā—Chinnammā  
 Amritappa of Muguru—Gowrammā—Jejammā—Sunderammā

*Nanjanagudu*

Serukadle Subbamme—Lakshmi—Kamalā  
Seshammā—Rajammā—Rangammā—Nagarathnammā  
Puṭṭammā—Mariyammā—Chinnammā—Puṭṭalakshmammā

*Tirumakudalu Narasipura*

Sundaramma—Minammā—Chikka Chowdammā—Chandravadanā  
Sundarammā Sarasvati(sseri)—Chandramukhi—Minākshi,

*Srirangapattana*

Lalithā Puṭṭadevammā—Chikkadevamma

*Holenarasipure*

Jayammā

*Hassan*

Sundarammā—Gowrammā

*Madikeri*

Rajammā—Channamme

*Melukote*

Narasammā

*Bangalore*

Kanchi Sadashivayya—Venkatasubbanna—Mamulpet Kappannapa  
Hosakote Annayyappa—Yajaman Kittappa

*Kolara*

Kittappa—Puṭṭappa—U.S. Krishna Rao, Chandrabhaga Devi and numerous disciples  
Manjundasani—Kolara Nagarathanammā—Naṭṭuva Puttaswamy (violin)

*Mulabagalu*

Panasekayala Venkatasubha Bhaṭṭa—Seethakkā of Gunigunti  
Bālya Ratnammā  
Bairakur Venkatalakshmammā  
Venkatasāni of Jougupalya—Kalamasani  
Gourakke—Padmavati—Naṭṭuva Medhavayya  
Tulasasāni  
Naṭṭuva Appajappa and his daughters

*Konanuru*  
Nattuva Sitaramayya

*Kuduru*  
Chandrammā

*Chikkajajuru*  
Mariammā—Chandrammā—disciples of Tirumakudalu Chikka Chowdammā.

Mention must be made of some great dance teachers of this period. Among *nattuvās* of *devadāsī* family were Mūgūru Subbana, Mūgūru Amritappa, Nanjanagudu Dasappa, Bangalore Yajaman Kittappa, Kolara Puttappa, N. Gundappa, Kanchi Nattuva Subbarayappa, Kanchi Sadashivayya, and Arani Appayya. Some of the veteran danseuses who taught and performed *nattuvāṅga* were: Mūgūru Thayakkā, Mūgūru Jejammā, Kuduru Chandramma, the Tirumakudalu sisters, Tripura Sundarammā, Chandravadanā, Jatti Thāyammā and Venkatalakshmammā. Special mention must be made of erudite *brāhmaṇa* scholars who were inspiring dance teachers: Kashiguru, Giriyappa, Muḷabāgalu Panasakayala Venkatasubba Bhaṭṭa. Renowned *brāhmaṇa* poets/composers such as Giribhattara Thammayya, Kashiguru, Chandrasekhere Sastri, Sringeri Subramanya Sastri, Devaottama Jois, Mysore Vasudevacharya, Veena Seshanna and Veena Subbanna significantly contributed to the development of the art by composing specially for the dancers.

#### TRADITION: A SYNTHESIS

The temples and royal court of Mysore and other temples in Karnataka boasted of a galaxy of dancers and dance teachers; from these gradually emerged what came to be known as the Mysore school of Bharatanatyam. Performance conventions (*kaceri paddhati*), repertoire, *āhārya* (costumery and make-up), teaching and techniques, compositional forms—in these and others a distinctive, characterizing system emerged. Such crystallization could only be the culmination and convergence of several forces of synthesis. There are indications of this from at least the 17th century in Karnataka, especially in Mysore/Srirangapattana. Three instances would have to suffice in this connection:

- a. During the reign of Kaṇṭhīrava-narasaraja Wāḍiyar, hundreds of



dancers thronged to the capital from all over south India to seek an opportunity for performance in the royal presence on occasions such as royal birthdays, weddings, the *navarātri* festival, etc. Their repertoire and performances were collimated by an overseeing expert into cogent, coherent presentations.

b. During the reign of Krishnaraja Wāḍiyar III, Chinnayya—the eldest of the Tanjore Quartette—sought royal patronage in, and settled at, Mysore; he had such brilliant local disciples as Bhavāni and Cikkadevammā; he composed many *jāvalis* and *padavarnas* and dedicated them to Krishnaraja Wāḍiyar II. He was the *āsthāna vidvān*. At this time, the art of dance in Mysore flourished under two leaderships. Inside the palace fort (*koṭe*) Chinnayya trained the dancers and presented them at the court.

Outside it (*peṭe*, town) Mūgūru Subbanna was the *yajamān* and led a host of *devadāsī* dancers. These artistes were highly accomplished in music, dance, literature, rhetoric, aesthetics, etc. and attracted the generous patronage of the wealthy, transient *santhepeṭ* (shandy/bazar street) merchants. After Subbanna, Guṇḍappa was offered the job of heading the group but he refused. Mūgūru Amritappa was then persuaded to be the *yajamān*. He supervised the dance activities of the entire *devadāsī* community and that of the Chinnayya group and organized the repertoire, presentation, etc. of dance programmes in the palace. Thus the empirical bases of dance acquired homogeneity again. In fact, Amritappa was so liberal in his views on dance and its education that he broke a strong, rigid convention and taught aspirants outside the community. He attracted the wrath of his caste, which excommunicated him. But his stance won the approval of the king and he was even permitted to collect a penal fee from those who had boycotted him and was readmitted into the caste. This was an important breakthrough; enlightened sections of the society, including several *brāhmaṇa* families, were taught dance by *nattuvans* and *devadāsīs*; this soon became a general phenomenon in south India, including Tamil Nadu and Andhra.

c. Krishnarāja Wāḍiyar IV was somewhat puritanical but very progressive in his outlook. He innovated in every area of administration and development and earned for Mysore State the deserved description *Ramarājya* and for himself the equally deserved epithet *rājarsi* (royal sage). Among other things he even experimented with the possibility of aligning the differences in technique and tradition in dancing into a homogenous, coherent entity. It was during his reign in May 1909, when Seshadri Iyer was Dewan and Arcot Srinivasachar the officer for temple endowment and



temple administration (*myzerai*), that the last named proposed the abolition of the practice of dedication of *devadāsīs* to temples and their dance performances in temples by law. This was accepted and enacted. Mysore became the first state in India to take this bold step; the Centre and the other States followed in its footsteps some three decades later. However, the *devadāsīs* were rehabilitated both in profession and society and the excellent traditions of the art suffered but little because patronage shifted from the temples to the royalty and aristocracy, as it has now shifted to the government and the people.

It is through such a process of synthesis that the Mysore school of Bharatanatyam eclectically developed from its many streams into a coherent form and definite style. Many of the dancers—most of them *devadāsīs*—were, like their teachers, scholars in Kannada, Sanskrit and Telugu, and were erudite in *kāvya*, *nāṭaka*, *alaṅkāra*, etc. They had a vast repertoire of *jāvalis*, *padas*, *padavarṇas*, *tillānās*, and *ślokas*. Some of them even participated in *vakyārtha* in learned assemblies. They were adept not only in the theory and practice of dance, but were quite familiar with comprehensive, authoritative, textual sources in *rasa*, *alaṅkāra*, *nāṭya*, *sangīta* and *koṣa*. Their curriculum for *rasābhinaya* included the *aṣṭapadīs* of Jayadeva supported by textual bases on *nāyaka-nāyikā bhāva*, *nāyaka-nāyikā bheda*, *nāyikā svarūpa*, the four-fold *bhāvas*, 16 *alaṅkāras*, *riti*, *vṛtti* and *prasāda gunas*. The *nāṭya* curriculum included 55 *abhinaya* modes of *aṅgas*, *upāṅgas* and *pratyāṅgas*, *hastas* and kinematic techniques of *karāṇa*, *aṅgahāra*, *maṇḍala*, *bhramarī* as also the postural stance *sthānaka*. Their libraries boasted of rare, precious and important manuscripts of treatises on these arts at a time when copying facilities were scarce, when texts were jealously hoarded, and when theory was acquired largely by oral transmission. They were taught *naṭṭuvaṅga*. Music was an integral and indispensable part of their training; in fact the *devadāsī* had to dance to her own singing and recitation. She was examined in these three subjects—dance, music and literature (poetry)—before she was admitted and employed in the palace or temple. It was such artistes who sculpted the Mysore school of Bharatanatyam.

Of the several streams of Bharatanatyam which prevailed in Karnataka over the last two centuries, two deserve special mention. The Mūgūru stream, which gave a new dimension to the *nṛttāṅga* with its vigorous disciplined sophistry, variety and excellence in *āṅgikābhinaya* through beauty in line, posture, leaps, *aḍavu*, *tirmāṇa* kinematics, physical stamina and other 'internal vital forces' (*antardaśa-prāṇas*). The Jetu Tāyanna stream, on the other hand, excelled in *sāttvikābhinaya* and developed a

large repertoire of song material for this, e.g. *jāvaḷi pada śloka*, *kandapādyā*, etc. A third recension led by Tejamañ Kittanna rendered yeoman service by preserving traditional dance forms from the past.

Till now the term *devadāsī* is used in the sense of a dancing girl dedicated to a Hindu temple. While this is its chief meaning, it must be made clear that it encompasses other girls also who are similarly dedicated to a deity and who perform other services like plying the flywhisk (*cāmara*) or general servitude (*paricaryā*). Further, the term includes two other major communities of women who are similarly dedicated but are not professional dancers in Karnataka. These are the Jogiti and Basāvi.

*Basāvi*: The Bayas, Bedas and certain other communities living in Dharwad and Bellary districts practise the *basāvi* custom. If a family has no male issue, it vows to dedicate one of its daughters as a *basāvi* (literally, cow). The girl is taken to a temple and married *ex voto* to the deity therein. She is not married to any particular man but becomes a public 'cow'. However, she does not consort with anyone from a caste lower than her own. This type of prostitution is not frowned upon by her community; on the contrary, she is sought out to prepare the *tāli* for a bride at a wedding of even higher castes since she is, like a *devadāsī*, a *nityasumaṅgalī*. She enjoys an equal share in the inherited property, like the sons, by consensus and convention. If she has a son, he takes the name of her father whereas a daughter would, in turn, become a *basāvi*.

*Jogiti*: The *jogiti* (women) and *jagappā* (men) are *ex voto* dedicated to the goddess Ellamma—the presiding deity of a temple on a hillock called Ellammana Gudda near Saundatti in Belgaum district which borders on adjoining Maharashtra. The custom of dedicating both men and women to the goddess is an ancient one. At least one girl must be dedicated from every village in which the *jogitis* live. The ritual of dedication is very rigidly followed. With the passage of time the idea of service to the goddess has dimmed and today these helpless women live a life of degradation and prostitution. □