

## The Institutions of Gaṇikā and Devadāsī From Ancient to Medieval Times

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**T**he arts of dance, music—vocal and instrumental—and acting (though in ritual contexts) have their roots in the hoary past and can be traced back to the times of the *Rgveda*. Indra is addressed as *nṛto* (vocative from *nṛtu*, dancer, from *nṛt*—to dance—with the suffix *ku* (*u*): VIII. 24.9<sup>b</sup>, 9<sup>b</sup>, 12<sup>a</sup>, 92.3<sup>b</sup>, 1.130.7<sup>b</sup>). The twin gods Aśvins are said to be *nṛtū*. There are also references to the dance of creation. The Maruts (storm gods) are said to be dancers (RV VIII. 20.22; V. 52.12). The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* states (II. 5.3-20) that when Indra went forward to slay Vṛtra, the sportive (*kṛidinaḥ*) Maruts were sporting (i.e. dancing) around him, singing his praises. Uṣas (Dawn) is said to assume charming forms like a dancer.

The art of vocal music was fully developed in the period of the *Rgveda*. This can be substantiated, above all, by referring to the description of the Maruts as heavenly singers. They generated valour in Indra by singing a song.

The *Vājasaneyī Saṁhitā* and the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, in the context of symbolic sacrifice, refer to the song offerings of Rebha, of a humourous nature (*narmāya*). Rebha seems to be a bard or a singer, skilled in making and singing agreeable compositions. *Kumbyā*, *gāthā* and *nārāśamsī*, which are mentioned in several vedic texts, were the songs sung on various occasions.

That the art of instrumental music was well developed in the vedic age is indicated by the variety of musical instruments mentioned. Vāṇa is said to be blown by the Maruts. As the Maruts are the storm gods — connected with strong gales—the Vāṇa appears to be an instrument producing sounds that depend on the force of the wind. The *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* points out that the Vāṇa had a hundred strings. Most probably some of the strings of the Vāṇa were thick and the others thin; it may have been an instrument like the harp in modern times. The *Rgveda* mentions Nālī, which appears to be the flute. The *Atharvaveda* states that where the Āghātā and Karkarī (instruments like the drum) are played, the *apsaras* are aroused. The *Rgveda* mentions Āghātīs, which are interpreted as Kāṇḍavīṇas by Sāyana.

Other instruments mentioned are Kāṇḍavīṇa, Talava, Tūṇava, Dundubhi, Nāḍi (Nālī) Vāṇa, Vāṇici, Āḍambara. The *Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa* refers to a realm where there are five rivers with honeyed waters and lotuses, dancing, music, and hosts of celestial nymphs (*apsaras*). We have the words Viṇāgāthī, Viṇāgāthināu and Viṇāgaṇagaṇiṇaḥ in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. That the sound of a drum (Dundubhi) is an expression of speech (*vac*) is made clear by the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*.

Thus there are numerous textual evidences to show that the arts of music and dance flourished in vedic times.

It is, however, interesting to mark an occasional discordant note in the same tradition regarding these arts. Though singing of a *gāthā* or *nārāśaṃsī* is laid down in many rituals, the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (I.2.3.6.) calls these the *śamala* (unclean part) of speech, as wine (*surā*) is the unclean part of food. This shows that these songs originated in the non-priestly, i.e. secular circles. The arts of dance, music and acting originated in the secular tradition, though the priestly tradition later accepted and absorbed them in prescribed rituals.

This takes us to the institution of courtesans or public women, which must have had a prominent role in keeping the arts of dance and music alive. Courtesans in vedic literature are referred to by terms such as *sādhāraṇī*, *hasrā*, *vrā*, *yatī puṃścalī* and *yavyā*.

An enquiry into the exact status of such women shows that there was conceptually a broad distinction between a *gaṇikā* (courtesan) and a *veśyā* (prostitute) though in later times this difference disappeared. The *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana clearly states (I.3.17.18) that a prostitute endowed with good character and appearance, having risen in status by grasping the 64 arts, attains the title of *gaṇikā* and secures a place in society. She is revered by the king and approached by people desirous of learning the arts.

What these 64 arts were is difficult to ascertain, since the topic is dealt with differently at two different places in the *Kāmasūtra*. Thus in the first *adhikaraṇa* (I.3.15) are given arts such as music, dance, instrumental music, etc. In the second *adhikaraṇa* (II.2.1-6) 64 sub-divisions of the sexual union are given.

Whatever may be the implication of the number 64, it is certain that the courtesan (*gaṇikā*) was far superior to the prostitute (*veśyā*) in social status due to her knowledge of the 64 (or 'many') arts. In the Sanskrit plays *Cārudatta* by Bhāsa and *Mṛcchakatika* by Śūdraka, Vasantasenā is shown as a courtesan (*gaṇikā*). In the *Mṛcchakatika* (Act IV) she is shown speaking in Sanskrit with Maitreya, the *vidūṣaka*. This is against the norms of language for female characters in Sanskrit drama, who are to generally use Prakrit. But since Vasantasenā was a *gaṇikā*, she was expected to carry

on conversation in Sanskrit with cultured people. It is worth nothing that at the end of the play *Mṛcchakaṭika*, Vasantasenā receives the title of *kulavadhū* from the king.

In the *Daśakumāracarita*, Dandin explains how the mothers or guardians of dancers—who were generally courtesans—used to take care of the latter. Kāmamañjarī, a beautiful dancer, having failed to seduce an ascetic, joins a hermitage. The mother approaches the ascetic to bring her daughter back and relates how she had taken care of her daughter right from childhood. She was taught dancing, music, acting, as well as disciplines such as literature, grammar, logic, astronomy and philosophy.

The institution of *ganikā* thus played a vital role in keeping alive the arts of dance and music, which in the beginning originated in secular circles. With the rise of temples and temple worship, singing and dancing came to be regarded as necessary adjuncts of image worship. And here we can trace the origin of the temple girls or *devadāsīs*. In the *Meghadūta* (*Pūrvamegha* v. 38), there is mention of courtesans (obviously associated with the temple) dancing and holding fly-whisks (*chowries*) in their hands at the Mahākāla temple in Ujjayinī.

By the time we come to the fifth century AD, i.e.—the acmé of the Gupta period—we find that the practice of attaching courtesans or dancing girls to temples had already come into existence. In later times, it became an established practice, as can be seen from literary works and inscriptions. The *Nilamata Purāṇa* from Kashmir prescribes dances on religious occasions like the awakening of the god Viṣṇu (vv. 408, 412), Śiva-caturdaśī (v. 559), the birthday of the Buddha (v. 758), worship of Aśokikā and Umā (v. 801), Bhadrakālī (v. 788) and Śyāmā (vv. 464, 468), and the installation of divine images (v.862). These would have been performed by dancing girls attached to temples. Kalhaṇa of Kashmir not only refers to the association of dancing girls with temples but also speaks of the personal interest shown by some kings in this art. King Kalaśa took to collecting dancing girls as a hobby. King Harṣa of Sthāṇvisvara personally instructed dancing girls in the art of acting. In Damodaragupta's work *Kuṭṭanimata* (8th-9th cent. AD) there is mention of the enactment of the first act of the play *Ratnāvalī* written by king Harṣa. It is interesting to see that all the roles, both male and female, in the drama were played by a troupe of women. These were either ordinary courtesans or temple maids. The role of princess Sāgarikā in the play was enacted by Māñjarī, who was attached to the temple of Kalaśeśvara.

The *Skanda Purāṇa* (VI. 89.33.ff.) relates an account regarding the origin of temple girls. At Hatakeśvara the *brāhmaṇas* started worshipping other gods and goddesses with flesh and wine. The gods who were neglected

approached Śiva. The latter meditated for a while and produced a young girl from his third eye and asked her to go to Hatakeśvara, where she would find a pair of sandals (*pādukā*) of the goddess, the Mother of the Universe, which she should worship. He told her that whosoever did not worship a daughter born to her would be eaten by the Mother. She herself, observing celibacy, must worship the *pādukā*. To her question as to how she could give birth to a daughter if she were to remain celibate, Śiva replied that any maiden whom she gave a *mantra* would become her daughter. Thus a line of descent would be formed and the tradition would continue. Along with the worship of the *pādukā*, worship of girls (*kumārī*) was also enjoined (*ibid* VI.89.45).

It seems that most of the dancing girls were attached to Śiva temples. They were said to have been created by the god Viśvakarman to serve Śiva with songs, dance and other arts (*ibid* I.2.8.54) and at festivals Śiva was said to be surrounded by these girls (*ibid* I.2. [a] 8.54). The *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* (II.4.8.11-12) divides slave girls into four types: *devadāsī* (temple girls), *brahmadāsī* (a girl serving a *brāhmaṇa*), *svatantrā* (free girl), and *sūdradāsī* (a girl of *sūdra* varṇa or one serving a *sūdra*). The first two had the status of a *kṣatriya* woman and the other two were on par with prostitutes. The *Padma Purāṇa* (*Sṛṣṭikhaṇḍa* 23.86ff) says that in war, when the wives of gods and titans were ravished by the members of the other side, they were asked to follow the life of prostitutes at temples (*ibid* *Sṛṣṭikhaṇḍa* 23.104). Temple girls dedicated to the Śiva-linga were thought to be sacred. The *Padma Purāṇa* (*Sṛṣṭikhaṇḍa* 56.93) states that a person killing such a girl goes to hell. One should never have sexual union with such a girl. The *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* (*Brahmakhaṇḍa* 93.67) mentions a group of temple girls donated to the sun temple.

In the tradition of *gaṇikās* or *devadāsīs*, a prostitute (*veśyā*) no doubt stands on a lower step of the ladder. All the same, a *veśyā* was shown much respect both on religious and secular occasions. The *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* (*Uttarakhaṇḍa* 104.31) states that in the festival of lights (*Dīpāvalī*), after the banishment of Alakṣmī (non-wealth or non-glory), in the morning of the new moon day, a prostitute goes from house to house uttering auspicious words, heralding the advent of the goddess Lakṣmī. The sight of a prostitute while going out on an errand is said to be auspicious. The *Brahma Purāṇa* (*Śrīkṛṣṇakhaṇḍa* 77.21) notes that the sight of a prostitute in a dream was a sure sign of gaining wealth. According to the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* (*Uttarakhaṇḍa* 137.18), a prostitute is said to be a must at a king's *raksābandha* ceremony. The *Agni Purāṇa* (218.16) says that with the clay from the gate of a prostitute's house, the king's waist is purified. The *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* (*Uttarakhaṇḍa* 139.26) records that prostitutes could mix freely with people

in the festival of Indradhvaja. Crooke rightly says that prostitutes are at present tolerated in India to an extent which can hardly be paralleled in any other part of the world. In Maharashtra, in the times of the Peshwas of Pune (early 19th century AD) the prostitute was specially invited and offered auspicious things (in the rite of *oṭi bharāṇe*) on the day of the consummation of marriage. Even today in the villages, a prostitute is invited to wreathe the *mangala-sūtra* (sacred necklace of black beads) of the bride. The belief obviously is that a prostitute can never become a widow, whose appearance is taken to be an evil omen. The greatest possible recognition of this section of society and the highest honour shown to it in modern times is seen when from the clay gathered from the residential area of prostitutes is made the face of the goddess Kālī when her image is installed in the famous Pūjā festival. □