Devadasi Tradition and Artist Ratnabali Kant's Reaction on the Orthodox Practice through Dance Theater Performance

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ABSTRACT
The tradition of 'Devadasi' was related to the magnificent temples of South India built during the kingdom of Pallava, Chola and Pandya. According to historical and socio-religious records 'Devadasi' was recognized as a learned and talented woman and spiritual devotee to the deities of temples. They were trained in Indian classical dances like Bharatanatyam and Odissi. During this time every temple was reverberated with the sound of music and this profession attributed with high reputation. Till the eleventh century these religious rituals continued under the patronization of Kings or in charge of the temple academicians for smooth functioning. But with fall of Pallava, Pandya and Chola dynasties this dignified tradition of temples undergone to degeneration. At this time temples become poorer and lost their patrons, devadasis suffered poverty, misery and in some cases adopted the profession of prostitution to earn their livelihood. The nineteen and twentieth century withered the personae of devadasisand modern status given to her termed as Mistress. Instead of royal or temple's academician's patronage, rich men of the vicinity came forward to patronize devadasis and exploited their helplessness. After the total collapse of temples some devadasi women migrated to nearby towns or other far-off cities and started practicing prostitution. Corruption kept on growing, consequently tradition of becoming devadasi declared illegal by Karnataka state government in 1982 and Andhra Pradesh in 1988. Presently devadasi's are known as jogin in Andhra Pradesh, who are working as labour and facing further exploitation for fulfilling the needs of livelihood. Artist Ratnabali Kant researched the tradition of devadasis from historical, religious rituals and psychological point of view. She reached to the conclusion that this tradition was inappropriate and against the nature, which caused the whole community of devadasis to get suffered immeasurably. She performed a demonstration through a dance-theatre-performance to convey her opinion about the tradition, which is still continuing at some backward places of India. The above issue has been elaborately and scientifically discussed in the proposed research paper.

The kingdom of Pallava, Chola and Pandya of south India were established as great civilization between seventh to thirteen century. The kings of this kingdom were the follower of the Hindu religion. They built magnificent temples for their God(s) and Goddess(s) adorned with brilliant arts. Also appointed beautiful Devadasi(s) with the purpose to devote their arts (dance, poetry, music etc.) to the divine idols. Primarily tradition of making Devadasi devotee of God came into existence long time back, as a description of 'Amapali' (600-500 BCE) is available in the manuscript of Buddhist Jataka. She received much fame as a talented artist of Vaishali. But she renounced her position as courtesan and instead chose to follow in Buddha's footsteps as a Bhikkhuni (female monk or nun). And she supported Buddhism throughout her life. Similarly, female devotee introduced around 7th century and recognized as 'Devadasi'. Lakshmi Vishvanathan elucidated about her, "These Devadasis were appointed in temples to take care of the God(s) and also given the title as Rajdasi or the royal dancer. Hence, Devadasi enjoyed the high status conferred by the king." With their extraordinary position in the contemporary society Devadasi was recognized as educated and talented woman entrusted with significant responsibilities narrated in following lines, "In addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, these women also learnt and practiced traditional Indian classical dances like Bharatanatyam and Odissi dance. They had a high social status as dance and music were essential parts of temple worship." Some References related to temple dancers are found in Kalidasa's 'Meghadoot', which is cited below: "It is said that dancing girls were present at the time of worship in the Mahakal Temple of Ujjain. Some scholars are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6th century, as most of the Puranas containing reference to it have been written during this period. Several Puranas recommended that arrangements should be made to enlist the services of singing girls for worship at temples."
Devadasis were the central character in Indian religious and cultural life from 10th century onward. In the book 'Prostitution and beyond' author(s) informed that the title 'Devadasi' was substituted with new designation, “In the records of medieval period, the temple girls are barely referred to as Devdasis. In medieval India, they are known as ‘Munurisaru,’ ‘Pedamunnuti,’ ‘Sani’. In the temple they were employed as dancers, singers, musicians and for offering certain services to the deities and some of them were in charge of smooth functioning of the temple academicians.”

Lakshmi Vishwanathan informs about the tradition of building temples and appointing devadasis during the ninth century in Chola. “By the end of the ninth century, there were 190 temples in the Chola kingdom on both the banks of the river Kaveri. Every village had a temple, and every temple reverberated with the sound of music. Saints, who wandered praised each hallowed spot. The picture was never complete without the beautiful devadasis who adorned both ritual and festive activities. They were ‘deivamakalir’ (women of God), ‘rudraganikaiyair’ (confidant of Shiva/Rudra), ‘tenarmoliiyar’ (honey-voiced women) and ‘cirntak-kannimarkal’ (virgins with slender waists). They were ‘pavayiar’ (beautiful maidens) with delicate feet, sweet voices and slender figures. These ‘azhagiyapendiri’ (beautiful girls) and ‘azhagilum’ ‘azhagiyar’ (beauty of beauties!) were chosen to be the consorts of gods and kings.” The glorious tradition of keeping devadasis in temples continued around 11th AD in South India. Pallava, Pandya and Chola dynasties suffered a fall and so was the socio-religious tradition of temples and all related activities undergone a decline.

The Dark Age of Devadasi Tradition:

After 11th century invasion of outsiders in India caused decline in the tradition of the royal temples and devadasis, Lakshmi Vishwanathan stated in this connection, “...the glorious Pallava, Pandya and Chola dynasties, a dark phase marked the history of South India. The richness of the region attracted plunder and destruction. With cruelty and ruthlessness the Hindu of South was conquered by the Muslim forces of North India. From the middle of the thirteenth century for nearly a hundred years, the shadow of terror cast gloom on temples, and the cultural and social life of the South. Devadasis too faded into oblivion. There are no records to show what they did in this period. A few accounts of historians, mainly travellers, pointed to some of the invaders taking hundreds of dancers away as part of their loot to serve them in their own palaces in Central India.”

The rise and fall in the position of devadasis were running parallel to the socio-political ups and down. The beginning of the second millennium CE was important when invaders from West Asia attained first victory in India and spread throughout the country. Thereafter the status of temples fell in South India. When the temples become poorer and lost their patron kings, the devadasis had no choice to escape the life of poverty, misery, and, in some cases, prostitution. Those who could save themselves during such difficult time Lakshmi praised them and said, “Only a few of them survived this downfall purely because of their courage, their extraordinary talent and the support of patrons committed both to the art and the person of the devadasis.”

Making of Devadasi as per the religious belief:

The concept and procedure of making of a young girl to devadasi appears a bit strange, generally it was decided by the mother of the girl before her puberty between her tender age of six to nine. Then the senior devadasi officially recommend the name of the girl to the temple authorities. Lakshmi explains further, “On the final approval an auspicious day would be chosen and announced for the respective ritual ceremony by the temple authorities, so that all employees could be present at the ceremony.” “In a village temple such ceremony would continue for ten or twelve days.” After coming into the service of temple she was given training to become a perfect devadasi. In the following lines Lakshmi explains the whole process of getting devadasi married with to the god, “The girl was dressed in fancy costumes every evening like different mythological goddesses, or the ten avatars of Vishnu and eminent devadasi musicians and dancers performed every evening. Thus the girl was psychologically prepared to enter a relationship with a patron, while at the same time she was aware of the fact that she was formally married to the god.”

Fig. 1. Devadasi, Cover page of the book ‘Women of Pride’ by Lakshami Vishwanathan

Fig. 2. The last group of Devadasis who performed the Kuravanji dance-drama in the Thajavur temple. Seated in the centre is the legendary dancer Veenabhashini Ammal.
The whole ritual of transforming devadasi was exciting as narrated above, which usually was very fascinating for other girls of the village, resulantly many girls thought or dreamt about to become devadasi or get married to the god. The next ceremony supposed to start at the time of puberty, which usually announced through a ceremony for consumption of marriage. Lakshmi Vishvanathan explains the ceremony further, "The prajyajam or the consummation of marriage, was the next step in the new life of devadasi. The ritual consummation was followed by the ceremony to mark the actual taking on of a sexual partner. A patron was usually waiting for the ‘sadanku’ ceremonies to be over. During the waiting period the girl would continue her training in music, dance, literature, and kept away from evil eyes. The ‘parayojanam’ was a moderate affair. A member of prospective men was invited and their offers received. The final selection was with the consent of the girl. The verbal contrast between the man and the devadasis’s family stipulated the amount to be paid as also the duration of the relationship."\(^{17}\)

Further Lakshmi says, "It was not uncommon for the priest to make first claim on the girl, but in many cases the girl was offered to the rich merchant- the patron. After the Pottu ceremony (offering a gold pendant in the Shape of a concave disc to the newly designated devadasi) the girl was sent home where the family arranged the feast. The Pottu was then removed and kept safe to protect it from being pulled at the time of first menstruation."\(^{18}\)

Lakshmi talks about the sanctity of the tradition and its transformation as impure practice at some places in following lines, "Although the original devadasis were brahmacharinis their entire life, even the contemporary sexual aspects of the rituals that accompany dedication are now considered by many Hindus to be exploitative and not mandatory. Nevertheless this practice continues unabated in some places where a devadasi would usually acquire a patron after her deflowering-ceremony. Patron ship in a majority of cases is achieved at the time of the dedication ceremony itself. The patron who secures this right of spending the first night with the girl can pay a fixed sum of money to maintain a permanent liaison with the devadasi, pay to maintain a relationship for a fixed amount of time, or terminate the liaison after the deflowering ceremony. A permanent liaison with a patron does not bar the girl from entertaining other clients, unless he specifies otherwise. In case the girl entertains, other men have to leave the girl’s house when her patron comes."\(^{19}\) Hence, the rise and fall of devadasis were running parallel to the socio-political ups and down.

**Devadasi’s transforming image in the contemporary time:**

Lakshmi discusses in her book how the tradition of devadasi changed its perspective according to the modern time as she throws light in the following lines, "By the nineteen and twentieth century the personae of nineteenth century devadasi was withered further, now the modern status given to her is termed as ‘Mistress’. Instead of kings or priest of temples rich men of the vicinity is patronizing devadasi and exploiting their helplessness."\(^{20}\) The above makes it evident that devadasi's image and performance were modified according to the choice of the elite class but in exchange of their exploitation.

According to the report published in 2004 by the National Human Rights Commission of the Government of India later devadasi tradition was associated with commercial sexual exploitation, in this connection Lakshmi provides a data, "... after initiation as devadasi women migrated either to nearby towns or other far-off cities and started practicing prostitution".\(^{21}\) According to the study of 1990 record, "45.9% of devadasis in one particular district were prostitutes, while most of the others relied on manual labour and agriculture for their income. The practice of dedicating devadasi was declared illegal by the government of the Indian state Karnataka in 1982 and by the government of Andhra Pradesh in 1988. However as of 2006 the practice was still prevalent in around 10 districts of northern Karnataka and 14 districts in Andhra Pradesh."\(^{22}\)

The reformers of the 19th century declared devadasis immoral because of their involvement in sex outside of the traditional concept of marriage, and described them as prostitutes.\(^{23}\) Generally, religious prostitutes (devadasi), professional prostitutes, singers, dancers, call-girls, and caged brothel prostitutes all were categorized as common prostitutes.\(^{24}\) There are a number of regional variations of this institution. Devadasi presently known as Maharis in Kerala, Natris in Assam, Murals in Maharashtra, Basavis in Karnataka, Bhavasis in Goa, Kundikars on the West coast, Thervadiyar in Tamil Nadu and Jogins in Andhra Pradesh. Most of these women come from the lower sections of society and practice prostitution.\(^{25}\)

"National Commission for Women’ (NCW) had written to the State Governments to find out the position of Devadasis in their respective states, the result explored was shocking which is mentioned as under: "In Andhra Pradesh Devadasi practice is prevalent in fourteen districts – Karimnagar, Warangal, Nizamabad, Mahaboobnagar, Kurnool, Hyderabad, Ananthapur, Medak, Adilabad, Chittoor, Rangareddy, Nellore, Nalgonda, and Srikakulam. In Karnataka the practice has been found to exist in SIX districts – Raichur, Bijapur, Belgaum, Dharwad, Bellari and Gulbarga. In Maharashtra the Devadasi cult exists in TEN districts – Pune, Sholapur, Kolhapur, Sangli, Mumbai, Latur, Usmanabad, Satara, Sindhudurg and Nanded."\(^{26}\)
Devdasis presently known as jogin in Andhra Pradesh, though there is a great differences between devdasis and jogins. "This is assumed that the word jogin has been originated from the Sanskrit term yogi. The majority of Jogins are landless and they got a low paid labour. They are considered as socially distinct group because of the compulsions of an inherited social tradition, these girls are sucked into the vertex of concubine and satisfy the lust of the village landowners, once the landlord ditch, and they turn from concubine to prostitute."  

Rohini, Shankar and Hemant gave records related with increasing prostitution in their book ‘Prostitution and beyond’, "Andhra Pradesh has the dubious distinction of topping all states in the trafficking of women. A book devoted to inter-state trafficking named ‘Shattered Innocence’ by Prajwala, a non-government organization reveals that a majority of the women in the age group of 12-35 years in the red light areas of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Goa are from A.P."  

"The catchment areas for the racketeers include almost all the 23 districts spread across coastal Andhra, Rayalaseemaand the Telangana regions. Eighty per cent of the victims belong to socially and economically disadvantaged families. Seventy per cent are from backward and drought-prone areas. Eighty-five per cent are illiterate."  

It is not only surprising but distressing that the tradition of Devadasis which begun during the ancient time with a pious intention of worshipping the Almighty God through all forms of aesthetics such as art of music, dance, poetry etc. but gradually evils and lust infected the spirit of the sacred concept and devadasi tradition transformed into an ugly profession of prostitution. 

Ratnabali Kant, a renowned artist who would strongly condemned Devadasi tradition of ancient times or established atany place in India. She protested against the custom and pronounced it as exploitation in the name of religion. She raised several questions that eight or nine years of age of a girl is such tender age that she should be brought up with love and care and when at this age she becomes pregnant and she does not know what to do? And who would take the responsibility of suchheinous and shameful act? Ratnabali Kant strongly condemned it and expressed her disapproval to this immoralact and sinful practice. To explain her point of view against the evil practice Ratnabalichose a new paradigmof art i.e. ‘Dance theatre performance’through which she displayed her denial against the rotten tradition so that her message could reach to the peoples and could influence their psychology in support of eradicating the above exploitation. 

**Artists Ratnabali Kant’s reaction on the custom of Devadasi:**

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**Dance TheatrePerformance by Ratnabali Kant under the title ‘Religious Ritual Space’:**

The performance ‘Religious Ritual Space’ was organized at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, on May 5, 1991. Through this act Ratnabali Kant condemned the tradition of Devadasi on the whole. In this dance theatre performance as shown in Plate no. 01 Priyamvada (eight years old child) performing as devadasi enters the stage where an image of the Lord Jagannath (South style) is displayed behind her, she enchants dialoguesrepeatedly before the God, “I am a Devadasi. I am married to lord Jagannathan. I wake up the God every morning, feed him, cloth him, and put him to bed in the night.”
After sometime Priyamvadapretends as if gradually entering into her fantasy, dreaming about the day her beloved-God will appear and bring her pleasure and contentment in life. This was devadasi's daily routine, in this manner her day used to begin with singing, dancing and worshipping the God, believing that one day she will meet the God, but in reality, she will never show up instead Pandit or the rich person in charge would get an excess for their immoral inclinations. In plate no. 02, Ratnabali Kant (as an adult) is shown instructing the young girl to make her understand about the evils and odds of her deceptive faiths so that she may stay away from any exploitation and damage.

In this performance Ratnabali has used religious references as a strong tool for conveying her message to the audience, which simultaneously stir their emotions and invite them for their response/reaction on the subject. Ratnabali always plots her performance in a manner, which usually ends up in coordination with audience and profiled with suggestions to resolve the issue. One point is worth mentioning now that when the performer and the audience think on a parallel wavelength, this point is considered as 'Empathy', here in the above performance the audience and performer both strongly condemning the orthodox practice of devadasi, which is the success of the performance.

Ratnabali is well known as a skilled performer, she knows how to use ritualistic elements without being ritualistic and also how to imbibe various concepts/instructions with the performance, which will always engage audience to think or to act simultaneously. The general idea of Ratnabali Kant behind the above performance ondevadasisconcludes that such practice is a social evil and should be removed from the system totally and those who are still following this practice must stopped immediately.

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