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Devadasis

Devadasis India's legendary temple dancers

It is hard to imagine a class of people once so venerated and then so dishonored as the devadasis--India's ritual temple artists. For millennia, these highly trained performers filled India's temples with devotional song and rigorous dance. Then in the early 1900's, Christian influence inspired a moral brigade of Anglicized Indians to cleanse India of such "backwardness." They branded the devadasi a harlot and had her legally outlawed. Few Hindus know this. Fewer comprehend how a society that once called her nityasumangali, "the ever-auspicious woman," could later chase her into the streets. In a three-part series, we will help explain this, identify her Agamic origins, detail her duties and discuss controversial efforts to "rehabilitate" her. The devadasi never married in the normal sense. Raised in the temple environs under years of rigorous training in classical singing and dance, she was ceremonially "wed" to a God or Goddess at about 16. She rose before dawn, sang as she lit the temple lamps and danced as part of the worship offered to the Deity during pujas, festivals and processions. As the priest conducted the puja, she sang devotional songs while offering flowers or waving the alankaram lamp. This sublime choreography transformed temple ceremonies into beautiful spectacles uplifting all the senses as shakti flowed forth from the Mahadeva. In order for her to continue her lineage, the devadasi was encouraged to secure a "patron" from the community. He was to be "a religious man of good status, taste, wealth and tradition" as it was considered important that their offspring be of high-breeding. Respected elders in the community often made this choice. Brahmins were commonly selected. She could change "patrons" if felt necessary. She never cooked for him, stayed at his house or performed routine wifely functions. Children born of their alliance were hers and learned music and dance. Sons never danced in the temple, but became the dance masters, natuvanars, and taught younger girls, who came to look upon them like fathers. It was these natuvanars who protected the devadasis and saw to their happiness and welfare. This unique tradition was Hindu society's strategic way of guaranteeing the preservation of the classical arts as religious, not secular expressions. The devadasi's marriage to the Deity was more than a spiritualizing arrangement. It was a practical necessity, society felt, because the demands of a female family member--daughter, wife or mother--are so consuming, only someone unmarried could commit the time and energies needed to master the classical arts. "They could practice and perform all day long and not think about anything else," examines Mythili Kumar, a famous contemporary dancer, herself trained by a devadasi. "Even if they had some family, they didn't

have to, or want to, really worry about all that. This is so different from the training a girl now gets in India where you have to always put family first before the art. Whether that is positive or negative depends on how you look at it. It really comes down to dedication to the art. For them, the art always came first and family came second." Her Tarnished Image--an Explanation In Hindu society there were other classes of dancing girls besides the devadasis. Much of the negative stigma attached to her comes from the chronic misidentification of her with them. There were the famed ganikas, highly educated dancer/courtesans such as Ambapali who Buddha once dined with. The Muslims spawned a giant class of dancers and singers to entertain in their courts. There were also dancers who were clearly identified as "public women." Prostitution in ancient India was legal and regulated by the state. The state taxed it, licensed practitioners, monitored their health, kept records and policed all involved. In an effort to debase Hinduism, several Western scholars classed the devadasi with these public women. One of the most widely referenced encyclopedias on Hinduism in the world, The Hindu World, slanderously writes: "The institution of temple harlotry was prevalent in India till the end of the last century. Large temples such as those at Madura, Conjeeveram and Tanjore were worked like brothels." This bizarre idea is based on a temple inscription that simply said Tanjore had 400 devadasis. After the devadasis were banned from the temples, most struggled on the fringe of society. Some were driven to unflattering means of livelihood--a fact they suffer with to this day. While the government today spasmodically tries to "rehabilitate" them, devadasis themselves, and sympathizers, are asking for bolder, more creative solutions. Part II next month

Sidebar: Saride ManikYamma

Interview by Vijay Shankar Saride Manikyamma was initiated as a child danseuse in two temples in Andhra Pradesh. She became the most beloved dancer at her temple until 1947 when the government banned the devadasi tradition. She struggled alone in poverty for 25 years until a dance director found her and hired her to teach dance at his institute. Today, Saride leads a retired life in Hyderabad. In 1991, she was honored with the prestigious Central Sangeete Nataka Akademi Award for her outstanding contribution as a danseuse. In this rare interview she speaks about her past. Hinduism Today: Could you tell us about your initiation as a temple danseuse?

Saride Manikyamma: I was initiated to the temple of Madana Gopalaswamy (Lord Krishna) and Rukmini (Goddess Lakshmi) in Ballapadu, at the age of 11. I never realized the significance of what I was doing. Being an obedient child, I did what my elders asked me to do. My day started with the early morning worship. Commencing with the Suprabhatam in the early morning worship 'til the Ekantaseva late in the night, I performed several rituals in the temple. Some of them had to be performed through dance. In the evenings, there were occasional congregations of people when a Deity was worshipped and the Asthana Utsavam (sun-setting festival) was performed as an offering. This was also a program for entertainment and devotional purpose. For many years, my family line has been dedicated to the temple. My grandmother, Seshamma, and two paternal aunts, Mutyam and Madhuram, were the temple danseuses before me. I learned dance from my ancestors but also had other teachers. Rudrabhatla Ramamurthy was the original guru of the temple. I

studied under him for quite some time. Then there was a dispute between him and temple management, and he had to go. Another scholar, Purughalla Subbaiah, was appointed as a substitute. He was both a musician and a dance scholar. He taught me abhinaya, mimetic expression, and the Adhyatma Ramayana. HT: It is well known that though the temples are closed to devadasis, the custom of dedicating girls to Deities still continues in parts of India. Many then sing and beg for a living, an almost unrecognizable mutation of the original system. The government is now mounting a drive against these girls. What is your reaction? SM: A drive against the devadasi system hardly has any significance. What the government should do is to rehabilitate the devadasis by providing them with basic needs and vocational help, but moreover encourage their artistic talents instead of looking down on them. It is not fair to blame the devadasis alone, as society holds equal responsibility in the deterioration and degradation of devadasis. There are many devadasis who are completely left in the lurch and lead a secluded life. HT: Tell us about the temples you were associated with in Ballapadu? SM: The two temples stretched over 136 acres. This was truly a rich endowment considering those times. The entire income of the temple was spent for the Deity only, for the daily and periodical rituals, festivals and maintenance of artists, servants, etc. I was the prima donna until the endowments were abolished along with the devadasi system in the 1930's. HT: What was the impact on your life? SM: I remember, it was about fifty years ago, suddenly the temple staff was dismantled. I had nowhere to go, I felt miserable. We fought a losing battle in the courts. The case even reached the high court. Finally, I moved to Duvva, another nearby village, after selling all my personal property. HT: How did Dr. Nataraj Ramakrishna spot you? SM: In 1972, there was a sadassu (convention) convened by Dr. Nataraj Ramakrishna (right). All the artists rich in experience in traditional arts assembled. I was discovered by him along with many others and was brought to Hyderabad. At his institute, I was assigned to teach abhinaya. If not for his timely support, I would be leading the secluded life of a recluse. HT: You are an expert in the interpretation of Munipalle Subrahmanya Kavi's Adhyatma Ramayana? SM: Yes. It's a ballad form of Ramayana. Written in the 16th century, it consists of about 108 songs in which the story of Rama is narrated from his birth to his ultimate coronation. Perfect lyrics, the songs have classical tunes. Each song has its own substance, culminating in a climax. Adhyatma Ramayana became an integral part of the repertoire of the numerous temple dancers in Godavari regions. HT: What has been your reaction on receiving the Sangeeta Nataka Akademi Award? SM: It was all due to the Divine Grace and through Dr. Nataraj Ramakrishna who was instrumental in my being able to surface and see the world from the seclusion to which I was forced to retire. I was not existing at all for the rest of the world until Dr. Nataraj noted my presence. But now I have the satisfaction of having passed on my knowledge to some students at least, especially my disciple Tara Priyadarshini. I am glad that my singing and dance version has been recorded by Central Sangeeta Nataka Academy. Today, due to the grace of Almighty, I lead a contented life. **Sidebar: Their Talent**

Persists

Though not widely known, many of India's greatest contemporary dancers, singers

and instrumentalists are from a devadasi lineage. One such artist unashamed of her devadasi lineage is Kishori Amonkar, one of India's most extraordinary classical singers. An article on her (India Perspectives, 1991, by Rashmee Seghal) candidly revealed the prejudice she suffered as a girl: "Born in Goa in 1931, her mother Moghubhai Murdikor herself a famous singer, came from the oppressed stratum of society, the devadasis. So although she grew up in an atmosphere of music, Kishori faced many privations in her youth. Describing one such incident, she says, "Once I was sitting on the parpet of the Someshwar temple in our home village Kurdi, when I was rudely asked to get down from there and sit on the step below. Why? I failed to understand. I did not budge. Later on I came to know that our low social status automatically assigned us to a place at the bottom." "It is not fair to blame the devadasi alone. Society is equally responsible for her present degradation. The government should provide not only vocational help, but encourage her artistic talents instead of looking down on her." --Saride Manikyamma