

## [Devadasis](#)

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# Devadasis

Parts One and Two of our 4-part series introduced India's legendary ritual temple artists, the Devadasis. Part Three-drawn extensively from Kay Jordan's unusual study "From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute-The Changing Legal Status of the Devadasis: 1857-1947"-examines the complex saga of how, in a land where God is worshiped as a dancer, dance became a sin.

As the East India Company's 17th century "looting spree" turned into permanent business by the 1800's-"bleeding India, judiciously," as British Prime Minister Salisbury coolly decreed-waves of Christian preachers and teachers were dispatched to Anglicize the "savages." Vicious in their ridicule of Hinduism, the missionaries won converts amongst the Indian [?]lite who were quick to adopt novel European ideas and eager for social acceptance by those in power. Gradually the seeds of cultural shame were sown and an Indian clone of British mentality successfully bred. From then onwards, the most effective critics of Hindu tradition were Indians themselves. By the late 1800's, a reform movement was in full bloom comprised of "missionaries, doctors, journalists and [Indian] social workers heavily influenced by Christian morality and religion," notes social historian Amrit Srinivasan. "Civilizing the Indians through enforcing a uniform adoption of the Victorian ethic for women" became a central goal of the reformers. And the Devadasi tradition-with its custom of allowing her an alliance with a respectable "patron" in the community-stood out as the most ungodly, un-Christian violation. "An insult to womanhood," reformers indignantly fumed, and insisted on "the imported conjugal monogamous ideal for women as the only code of conduct permissible for all Indian women," Srinivasan further examines.

## Devadasis in Court

The earliest court cases involving devadasis appear in the 1860's-mostly petty

grievances with temple management over the devadasis' temple land grants and their selection rights regarding new devadasis. A statement by Bombay's Chief Justice Holloway in 1864 typifies Britain's cautious legal policy of avoiding, whenever possible, any legislation on matters of Hindu religion that might inflame the Hindu populace. He wrote: "This [devadasi custom] is not at variance with Hindu law; our courts are therefore bound to administer to them that law, uninfluenced by a fastidiousness founded upon Western views of morality." Social activists however insisted that girls dedicated to temples were inducted into lives of prostitution and demanded the courts ban the practice. (The Indian Penal Code, established in 1861, allowed for prostitution but made "trafficking" illegal.) Pressured by an Indian [?]ite who felt embarrassed by a tradition that Westerners had convinced them "violated international 'moral' standards," the Central Government in 1872 requested an official report from each of its provinces on the extent and nature of its devadasi tradition as well as the Hindu public's opinion relating thereto.

The Governor General of Madras responded: "It seems to be the most general opinion that dancing girls are necessary adjuncts to the Hindu ritual and that also their attendance on private families is customary and necessary on many domestic occasions. That to legislate with the intention of the gradual extinction of the dancing girl caste would be viewed with extreme dislike by the great majority of Hindus." Bombay agreed and penned: "There would be no advantage to interfere in long established usages in this respect which are in a great measure founded on the religious tenets of the people." Trichy's District Magistrate replied: "These girls, by definite title or by prescription, occupy a defined position and perform defined duties in Hindu temples and from that point of view, their services must be considered lawful and necessary and are also recognized by the Civil Courts as being so." Sholapur Collector A.F. Maconochie expressed that the dancing girls should be tolerated because if they were outlawed, they would be abused. "Private [Hindu] people would be unwilling to receive them, and there are no public institutions in India for their reception. The [Christian] Missions, of course, would take them in, with the object of making Christians of them. But as the mass of Indian public look on change of religion, especially the adoption of Christianity, as a far worse sin than prostitution, the change would stir up very bitter religious opposition, and be interpreted as a practical propagation of Christianity by the government." H.C. Mules, Karachi district magistrate, answered: "However objectionable the lives of the girls may be in our eyes, it does not appear they follow their calling under pressure, and are not looked upon as outcasts or regarded so by their co religionists."

Britain's Home Secretary responded to the reformers' argument that dedicating girls without their consent was cruel: "In India, females of disposed of one way or

another, long before age 16; whether their volition has or has not matured by that age is not very material since they seldom are allowed to exercise it at any time."

After judicious review, the Central Government concluded that regardless the extent of alleged sexual excesses it perhaps encompassed, the devadasi tradition was nevertheless a bonafide Hindu custom and that existent "trafficking" laws provided adequate protection by forbidding girls under 16 to be given or kept for the proven express purpose of prostitution. But, as reformist zeal mounted, some judges showed less restraint. In 1880, Justice West of Bombay called the temple dancer tradition of his precinct a "manifestly evil tendency, essentially vicious" and denied devadasis protection under all civil law. Madras High Judge Muttusami Ayyar objected: "Whatever may be the change in the sentiments of Hindus in regard to the dancing women in Bombay and Poona, I am unable to say that there is considerable change in this presidency in the general mass of the Hindu community as contra-distinguished from a comparatively small section that has come under the influence of Western culture."

But continuing pressure and "criticism of the court's recognition of the devadasis and their customs from England and from both Indian and missionary social reform organizations demanded the British Indian government take action," notes author Kay Jordan.

In 1912, legislation to "protect female minors"-aimed at banning the devadasi system-was again introduced by a Parsi and a Hindu, Mr. Mudholkar. Mudholkar presumed: "Neither Hinduism as now practiced, nor Hinduism as it was inculcated by our rishis, recognized this [devadasi system]. It was to them a most abhorrent thing." Moral indignation voiced by the male sector of Hindu society was new. Associate Professor of Asian Studies at Mt. Holyoke College Dr. Indira Viswanathan Peterson explains this phenomenon: "In reaction to the British, Indians acted in two contradictory ways: they became great reformers; but also suppressed some of the more erotic and sexually liberated aspects of women's culture, thus turning Indian society more rigid and conservative. Devadasis, or temple dancers, were now considered obscene prostitutes, whereas earlier they were not. This was because Indian men had to prove to the British that they were moral, moral in a Christian, Victorian sort of way."

All along, the central question of alleged prostitution, or a degree thereof, within the devadasi tradition remained a blur. The Madras Legislature wrote in 1924: "We

have not definitely assumed that employment as a devadasi is equivalent to employment for purposes of prostitution." The Central Government generally concurred: "Even if it is true in many instances that temple dedication is synonymous, in practice, with prostitution, we should hesitate to make a legal declaration to that effect, so long as this was not admitted by Hindus generally." It then advised Bombay and Madras to strengthen prostitution trafficking laws and to encourage their ladies' vigilante associations as such rather than outlaw devadasis.

Then in 1929, a brahmin woman and member of the legislature, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, launched a furious anti-nautch (dance) campaign, demanding wholesale demolition of the devadasi system—a "revolting custom, calling for immoral trade of women," she raged. "The dharmakarthis [temple heads] and general illiterate public imagine that the Gods in the temple want these dasis for service!" she added. "The Gods in the temple do not want any dancing or music," thundered a Mr. K. R. Karant, a Hindu. "It is a sacrilege to say that religion requires all this nonsense."

"Don't Exterminate Us!" Throughout the 60-years of legal assault against them, the devadasis remained silent. But Dr. Reddy scared them out of that shy profile. Overnight, scores of hand-written pleas and protests—personally signed by devadasis—poured into the Madras Legislature. One stood out. It was signed by the "Deputation of the devadasis of the Presidency of Madras" and "Devadasi association of the Tinnevely District." In eloquent language, they pleaded for their survival. They denied being harlots, and lamented this cruel stigma attached to them. They confessed a minor degree of prostitution had crept into their society and sincerely invited that such women be dealt with in accordance with existing laws. They maintained: "Our institution is similar to the mutts presided by sanyasis for the propagation of religion. We can be compared to female sanyasis who are attached to respective temples. We marry none but God and become devotees of God." "They described themselves," writes Kay Jordan, as "guardian angels of dance and music with a devotion that bears comparison with the ardor of the pundits reading Vedas in preference to modern pursuits." They quoted the Saiva Agamas to substantiate their scriptural origins—"Shiva said: 'To please me during my puja, arrangements must be made daily for shudda nritta (dance). This should be danced by females born of such families and the five acharyas should form the accompaniments.' Since these Agamas are revered by every Hindu, however modern and educated they are, what reason can there be for our community not to thrive and exist as necessary adjuncts of temple service?" They averred Dr. Reddy's proposed abolition of their tradition punished the many for actions of a few, and painfully assessed: "In proposing this legislation, the legislators attempt to do away for ever with our sect. Such legislation is unparalleled in the civilized world."

They asked for more soulful training: "Give us education-religious, literary and artistic-so we will occupy once again the same rank which we held in the past. Teach us the Thevarams of the Saivite saints and the Nalayaram of the Vaishnavite acharyas. Instill into us the Gita and the beauty of the Ramayana and explain to us the Agamas and the rites of worship." This would, they argued, inspire devadasi girls to model themselves after female saints like "Maitreyi, Gargi and Manimekalai and the women singers of the Vedas that we might once again become the preachers of morality and religion... You who boast of your tender love for small communities, we pray that you may allow us to live and work out our salvation and manifest ourselves in jnana and bhakti and keep alight the torch of India's religion amidst the fogs and storms of increasing materialism and interpret the message of India to the world."

Despite fervent protests by E. Krishna Iyer and a "pro-art" Madras contingent-Dr. Reddy and her Anglicized women's leagues prevailed. Crippling legislation passed against the devadasis in 1927, followed by total abolition in 1947 [Hinduism Today, Sept. '93]. Dance was relegated to a secular art, renamed Bharata Natyam, and then adopted, restylized and nurtured by mostly married women of the brahmin caste.

Part IV includes messages from famous dancers as well as an explanation of the current rationale of the Anti-Nautch Law from a Tamil Nadu government spokesperson.