

## THE ANTI-NAUTCH AGITATION IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY

Article Particulars: Received: 27.03.2018 Accepted: 19.04.2018 Published: 28.04.2018

**S. ANGALESWARI**

Ph.D. Scholar, Center for Historical Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

### Abstract

The early twentieth century social reform movement in India were shaped with intricacy due to the presence of diverse groups like the Colonial rule, Christian Missionaries, and the Indian elite social reforms in attempting to define modern and post-colonial view of Indian tradition. One such reformed group was devadasi community that this paper focuses on. The term *deva* means god and *dasi* means servant, who had been dedicated to Hindu temples as minor girl thorough rites resembling Hindu marriage system in South India. . The devadasis was dancers and singers either by having some kind of regular service functions in temple. However the decline of the indigenous rule under British they lost their royal patronage. At the end of nineteenth century, the above social reform group heavily influenced by the western ideology questions about the practices of devadasi system; later it turned into the movement called Anti- Nautch or Anti- Devadasi dedication in Madras Presidency. This paper is an attempt to study the process of the displacement and degradation over the end of the nineteenth century, by which the notable devadasi system were renamed and finally driven to become a community of prostitutes in Madras Presidency.

---

### Prelude

The Anti- Nautch agitation was a movement in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to abolish the traditional of dedicating minor girls to the Hindu temples in India. The movement was on track by Colonial government, Christian missionaries and Indian social reformers. The colonial rule and missionaries state marginalized *devadasis* in various ways claiming that the Indian tradition in which *devadasis* were seen to represent, was inherently immoral. The colonial government began regulating gender norms in the public sphere based on western understanding of morality; whilst the Indian social reformers marginalized the *devadasis* by appropriating this particular western discourse and claiming that their construction of religion was scared and needed to be rescued from *devadasis*.<sup>1</sup> These ways the *Devadasi* system was ultimately pushed to fringes of the society and into void.

Much has been written about the socio-political history and the transformation of the Anti-*nautch* movements by scholars, however; so far studies have not looked at the support and refute voice of *devadasis* and *devadasi* associations against Anti-*nautch* movement in Madras Presidency. In this paper, I am not pointing to a before/ after picture, idealising the position enjoyed by *devadasis* foremost up to the social reform movement. I begin by recitation of the make up to the controversies of this period since it is impossible to understand the atmosphere of anti-*nautch* movement without examine the pressures over them by colonial government and the social reformers.

### Pre-History of the Anti-Nautch Agitation

The transfer of power from Indian rulers to the British government was declined the earlier centers of the traditional arts. The princely sates, feeble of revenues by the British power, gradually withdrew their support to temples and court performance like dance and music.<sup>2</sup> Anon the colonial government intervened in the temple economy and disrupted the relationship

---

<sup>1</sup> Davesh Soneji. *Unfinished Gestures" Devadasi, Memory and Modernity in South India* (London: University of Chicago Press), 2012, p.117.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas B.Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: Indian and the Creation of Imperial British*. (USA: Harvard University press), 2006.

between the temple and the king in the pretext of preventing misappropriation of temple funds.<sup>3</sup> As a result, royal patronage to temple and performance arts began to be withdrawn forcing performers to migrate to the urban centre, colonial Madras, to look for new opportunities among the increasing audience of British since even in colonial Madras, *devadasis* livelihood depended on private patrons who often were their sexual partners and hence the possibility of common sexual partners, who had the skill to entertain through dance and music. Moreover the winding historical process by which the traditional dance became 'the art of lust'.<sup>4</sup>

During this period there was a debate whether, a *devadasi* could be charge of prostitution. Prostitution was a classical offence under penal code Sec 372 and 373. However scholars were argued that the Vedic *dasi* found no place in the colonial idea.<sup>5</sup> But prostitution was a change that could not be easily proved because colonial and Indian conceptions of prostitution differed. Indian did not consider it as deviant behavior. When the *devadasi* was designated as 'prostitute' her lifestyle came within the purview of the modern science of British as applied in India.<sup>6</sup>

By the time, the colonial government tried to regulate the sexuality of common prostitute in the cantonment towns of Madras Presidency. To control the venereal diseases in the armed force, the 'Lock Hospital' system was introduced in the cantonment towns. The rhetoric became especially influential when it became necessary to justify the Indian Contagious Diseases Act, passed in 1868, to regulate prostitution in towns. The colonial government ordered sex workers to register and to undergo compulsory medical examinations. When the law was in place, *devadasis* were forced to register as sex workers.<sup>7</sup>

The perception of *devadasis* as prostitution and an embodiment of degeneration was prevalent in the society that later served as a black drop to the Purity movement (1880) in south India by the protagonist, Ragupathi Venkatarathnam Naidu.<sup>8</sup> The consequence of Purity movement bowed into the movement against the *nautch* performance in between 1881 to 1910 called the Anti-*Nautch* movement. The movement was initiated in Andhra and extended upto Madras.<sup>9</sup> The arguments raised by the reformers did not receive direct administrative and legislative help for considerable time so reformers decided to send a memorial to the officials.<sup>10</sup> The first recorded appeal direct to the colonial officials was the petition submitted by the Indian Social Association in 1893 that was joined missionaries and was forwarded to the Viceroy and Governor General of colonial India, and to the Governor of Madras.<sup>11</sup> The petition was organized into nine points, this appeal argued, that the *devadasi* women were invariably prostitutes and there was already an agreement between reformers to the discourage *devadasi* entertainments. These appeals were refused by both the Viceroy and the Governor of Madras in 1893, on the grounds that the suspected immoral character of the *devadasi* performance was not proven.<sup>12</sup> Finally the reformers attempted to limit the practice of the *devadasi* on two levels: Legislative acts were requested from the government to prohibit adoption of minor girls by *devadasi* and banning the dedication of girls to temple service.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>4</sup> A. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Danve" *EPW*, 20, no. 44:1869-76, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Chakravarthi Uma, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationlism and a Script of the past", (ed.) K Sangari and S.Vaid, *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Kalpana Kannabiran, "Judiciary, Social Reform and Debatae on 'Religious Protitution' in Colonial India", *EPW*, Oct 28, 1995.p.60.

<sup>7</sup> *Op.cit.*, Davesh Soneji, p.117.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>9</sup> *Op.cit.*, Kalpana Kannabiran, p.62.

<sup>10</sup> Fuller, M.B. *The Worngs of Indian WomanHood*. (New York: F.H.Revell), 1900, pp, 182-85.

<sup>11</sup> Singh, Kr. Nagaendra. *Divine Prostitution*, (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publication), 1997, pp. 164-168.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, Fuller, p. 137

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, Davesh Soneji., pp. 120-121.

### Legislative Debates on Adoption of Minor Girls

In the early twentieth century, *devadasi* tradition began to face pressure from social reformers protesting against their tradition. For instance, legislator, Maneckji B. Dadhabhoy introduced a Bill in 1912 known as “the bill to make further provision for the protection of women and girls for further other purposes.”<sup>14</sup> Though the bill received much acclaim in India from the government and the public, some orthodox Hindus and *devadasis* extended their protests against the Bill. They pleaded with the government that they should be permitted to adopt minor girls for the purpose of successions.<sup>15</sup> As a result of the government’s cautious attitude, no legislation was passed either to increase the protection of female minors or to ban *devadasi* dedication until second phase of the legislation debate.

In the second phase of the legislation debate were basically three trends evident at the time. Dr. Mrs. Muthulakshmi Reddi represented the first trend, the *devadasi* associations and the oppositionists. In 1928 Dr. Reddi, a medical doctor and legislator was hailing from a *devadasi* community, introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislative Council to amend the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, 1926. Subsequently, the Bill became an Act known as the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1929, with a new section 44A added to Section 44.<sup>16</sup> This act freed *devadasis* from the stipulation of temple service by imposing instead a quit-rent payable to the local government, either for renting temple land or for any land revenues received by them for their *inam* lands.<sup>17</sup> Though this act provided the right of holding *inams* but it did not stop the dedication of girls as *devadasis*. Hence Dr. Reddi decided to have a new Act enacted in 1930 as “A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Hindu Women in Temples in the Presidency of Madras.”<sup>18</sup> According to the Bill, dedication of Hindu girls in temples was announced illegal who, instead, could now contact valid marriages.<sup>19</sup> Though many memorials and counter memorials were sent by *devadasis* and other members of the community to support and oppose Dr. Reddi’s Bill.

#### Memorial and Counter Memorials from Devadasis Community on Dr. Reddi Bill

In majority, *devadasi* associations from the Madras Presidency supported Dr. Reddi’s Bill, some of them opposed it. For instance, many associations and organizations particularly Women Indian Association, Kalavanthalu Community of Andhra and the *Devadasi* Association of the Tamil region extended their support to the legal measures. Another group of people, who participated throughout the debate on *devadasi* abolition, were the association of those castes from which *devadasi* were, by and large, drawn such as *Sengundars* and *Isai Vellalar* of Tamil region. While they sent, resolutions in their associations in support of the *Devadasi* Abolition Bill, they denounced *devadasi* as a dishonor to their community and as an obstacle to their progress as caste groups.<sup>20</sup>

Among the anti- abolition groups, the Madras Presidency *Devadasi* Association was a prominent one led by Jeevaratnammal and T. Doraikannummam. The Madras Presidency *Devadasi* Association mobilized to instigate their peoples to express their solidarity by sending memorials to the concerned authorities with signatures. The other prominent members of the anti abolition groups including Veena Dhanammal, Bangalore Nagartnammal and Mylapore Gowriammal distributed printed notices outside the Legislative Assembly buildings and at prominent locations of the city. In courtly and elegant language, these bills set forth the position of the *devadasis*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Govt of Indian, Legislative Dept, Proceedings, May 1914, No. 100-107, No. 100

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>16</sup> G.O. No Revenue Department, 373, 25 February, 1930, MR, MMNL, New Delhi

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>19</sup> Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council, Government of Madras, Madras, Vol. LI. No, 1920, 1-10, p. 498.

<sup>20</sup> Fort St. George Gazette, Government of Madras, Madras, 28 January, 1930, Part IV. P. 191.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*,

*Devadasis* who opposes abolition formed into groups and proposed bill tabled against Dr. Reddy in the Legislative Assembly. The following appeal was sent by *devadasis* to the law member of the Madras Legislative Council: "We condemn Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi's Bill. There is no connection between our ancient and noble practice of *Pottukkattal* and the disgraceful profession of prostitution. We appeal to the government not to enforce any law that destroys our rights."<sup>22</sup>

Instead of banning on dedication, the *devadasis* proposed that society educate rather than eliminate their community. In closing, the *devadasis* asked the government not to pass any legislation interfering with their right to dedicate themselves to a life of religion and service. They pleaded "Give us one birth right to live and work for the cause of our country."<sup>23</sup> In these memorials, the *devadasis* observed that abolishing *devadasi* dedication was not the only course of action available to the government. They suggested education and patronage as eradicating the prostitution associated with their community.

### **The Madras Devadasi Prevention Act 1947**

During the 1930 M. R. Jayakar gave notice in the Indian Legislative Assembly about the introduction of "Bill to prevent the Dedication of Hindu Women in Temples as *Devadasis*" But it got denied. Hence, Ammannaraja introduced the Madras *Devadasi* Prevention of Dedication Bill in the Madras legislative Assembly on 1938.<sup>24</sup> Following that, the select committee considered and reported on the Bill but before it could be taken into consideration, the Congress resigned from the office in 1939 due to the Second World war. In order to compensate the legal measure, in 1938, K. Raman Menon introduced the Madras Suppression of Immoral Traffic Bill. The Act as a whole did not make any distinction between *devadasis* and pimps. The Bill lay dormant till it was finally enacted with the help of Dr. P. Subbarayan in 1947 after independent India.<sup>25</sup> P. Subbarayan introduced the Madras *Devadasi* prevention of Dedication Bill in the Madras Legislative Assembly and suggested that it be referred to the select committee.<sup>26</sup> However all members of the House supported the Bill. The Bill finally became the Act No. XXXI of 1947 known as the Madras *Devadasi* Act. The Act not only prohibited the practice of dedicating girls or women to idols or anything subjected to worship, but also permitted the *devadasis* to marry.

However, the miser contribution outcomes of various acts result to expel of *devadasis* from the temples immediately. A considerable number became beggars operating in front of every temple where they once served. This happened because government did not take any rehabilitative measures to help the expelled women. Thus, a positive social reform to remove the *devadasi* system for its demerits of social degradation and a threat to the public hygiene was fulfilled. Some unsettled matters of this evil were dealt with an amendment in 1956. Section 40 of the act of 1956 dealt with the enfranchisement of *devadasi* service imams and lays down the manner in which such imams might be freed from the condition of service.<sup>27</sup>

### **References**

1. Srinivasan, Amrit. "Reform and revival: The devadasi and her dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1985): 1869-1876.
2. Srinivasan, Amrit. "The Hindu Temple-Dancer: Prostitute or Nun?." *Cambridge Anthropology* (1983): 73-99.
3. Oddie, Geoffrey A. *Social protest in India: British Protestant missionaries and social reforms, 1850-1900.* South Asia Books, 1979.
4. Tangirala, Maruthi P. "Anti-nautch, anti-lawyer? Representation of colonial law in Gurajada Apparao's *Kanyasulkam*."

<sup>22</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddi Papers, File 11, Vol. 2, MMNL, pp. 349-351.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>24</sup> V. Sriram. "The Devadasi and the Saint", *Madras Musings, Fortnightly, Dec, 1-5, 2002, pp. 4-5*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>26</sup> G.O.No. 97/20, *Judicial Department*

<sup>27</sup> *Madras Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. IV, No.1-14, 1947, p. 629.*