

UPPSATS



“No Rules Apply to Another Man’s Wife”

Social Reforms of the Devadasi System in South India

Julia Ask

Examensarbete för kandidatexamen

Vårterminen 2014

Religionshistoriska avdelningen

Stockholms Universitet

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“The dancing girl, who was formerly more than filled with good food in the temple, now turns a somersault to get a poor man’s rice”¹

1. Introduction

The fate of the *devadasis* is fascinating. These women, of economic independence and in possession of legal rights unheard of for women of the time, were known as ritual specialists, ever-auspicious women married to deities, celebrated artists in the courts of south India, courtesans of kings and guardians of the classical south Indian dance form, *sadir*. Today the situation and perception of these women could not be more different. Indian newspapers report; “Davangere girl forced to be a devadasi,”² “Supreme Court asks Karnataka Chief Secretary to take steps to stop ‘devadasi system.’”³ The British Guardian writes “Devadasis are a cursed community.”⁴ How did these women, once revered, end up making these headlines? In 1947 the Madras Devadasis Act was passed⁵ making the dedication of girls to the devadasi community illegal.⁶ This act not only banned the dedication of young girls to deities but also banned the devadasis livelihood, their dance. The reasons for abolition were several, the most prominent a moral one. The devadasis were thought to be degenerate, immoral prostitutes. But this did not only forbid prostitution, it rather resulted in the disenfranchisement of a whole community. The devadasis were not an isolated phenomena. Their culture existed in a wider context of colonial politics and social reforms, which were active during the turn of the century. Through studying these reforms, the discourse used by the opposition and the supporters, and the change of patronage of the devadasis performing arts; this paper aims to create a comprehensive picture of these womens’ changed social situation.

2. Purpose of the study

That religion affects society, politics and the everyday life of most people is already a widely known fact, but the opposite may occur as well. The image of the devadasi as a religious phenomenon which transformed under seemingly external influences such as British colonialism or political influences is therefore interesting as an object of study. However, one cannot separate the religious sphere from the secular as, in the case of the devadasi there are no such boundaries. Religion, politics, nationalism, public opinion, colonialism and economic factors are all intertwined and affect each other. This study investigates the social reforms for women in south India that resulted in the abolition of the devadasi system, and how these worked in relation to the creation of the ideal Indian woman. This study thus aims to discover the factors that culminated in the change of the devadasis status and ultimately led to a ban on their profession. Through exploring this, the study will give glimpses of how nationalist and political culture was created as a reaction to colonialism.

¹ proverb, Thurston 1909:153

² The Hindu, 2014-04-20

³ The Times of India, 2014-02-13

⁴ The Guardian, 2011-01-21

⁵ Madras corresponds roughly to today’s Tamil Nadu.

⁶ A similar act had already passed in Bombay 1934.

It was not only created as opposites to each other, but rather as “*products of . . . comparisons and contrasts*, where each side’s sense of its cultural distinctiveness resulted from *discursive maneuvers* dedicated to constituting and redefining their distinction.”⁷ Furthermore, in the light of legal interventions, the indigenous political discussion of social reformers and their opposition to the anti-dedication ban of 1947 will be analyzed. As a major part of the devadasi professional identity and livelihood were the performing arts, this study will also investigate how the devadasi dance and music has been reformed and revived within the discourse of nationalism and normative morality. How and for what reasons were the devadasi art reconstructed?

3. Method

A feminist perspective has been used to give special attention to the construction of gender and to the shaping of the ideal Indian woman against the backdrop of colonialism. Feminist methodology, as defined by Neitz takes in consideration the effects the researcher has on the material and recognizes that all research will in itself be rather incomplete and local.⁸ One could suggest a temporal influence to complement the local one, as the way one writes is affected by both the time and place in which it is written; in addition to ones’ own political opinions and background. This essay strives for objectivity and tries to avoid the passing of judgment or to view the devadasis as victims of any kind. Complete objectivity must however be seen as an unattainable goal. Leslie Orr explains that Indian women and third-world women in general have been, and still are, studied as victims or patients, often without viewing them as agents of their own life.⁹ In this study the devadasis are represented as both objects of study and as autonomous subjects. Objects in the sense that many interpretations made in this paper are drawn from those already made by others, subjects as their voices are heard in their reactions to the anti-dedication act.

Within the framework of feminist methodology this paper highlights the context from which the dialogues, here in analyzed, are produced. In contrast to Kwok, who analyses how the notion of ‘white men saving brown women’ is deeply imbedded in colonial social reform,¹⁰ this study tries to bring forth texts that show a more complex reality. Although ‘white men’ were part of the reform, the disenfranchisement of the devadasis was largely an indigenous reform, with both ‘brown’ women and men in the lead.

⁷ Narayan 1997:16

⁸ Neitz 2011

⁹ Orr 2000:12

¹⁰ Kwok 2001

4. Previous research

To create an analysis as comprehensive and complete as possible, literature from different fields have been chosen, such as: anthropologic and ethnographic research, feminist literature, articles from dance and theater scholarly journals, missionary accounts, social history and works focusing on law, gender and colonialism. Some of the key works and authors used are as follows:

Soneij is associate professor of South Asian Religions. He specializes in modern religion and its relations to colonialism, gender and the performing arts, such as music and dance. In his works he investigates dance and gives special interest to the secular salon performance of the devadasis, and how it works as an embodied memory for disenfranchised devadasis.¹¹ This approach differs from that of other authors. For instance, Kersenboom¹² focuses mainly on the meaning of devadasi temple performance. Soneij includes in his works,¹³ especially in *Unfinished Gestures*, an extensive appendix with primary material from the files of Muthulaksmi Reddi. These are in the form of handbills, newspaper clippings, letters and memorandums written around the time of the anti-dedication act in 1947. This material would otherwise remain inaccessible to many scholars because of language and physical distance.¹⁴ In *Bharatanatyam; a reader*¹⁵ for which he is editor, he presents more primary material from the voices raised during the social reform. This includes files from Muthulaksmi Reddi, The Madras Devadasi association, Tanjavur Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi. With these files one is provided with the opportunity to hear the voices of reform in their original state. Recognizing the bias of using only one author's chosen material the research has been completed with several other sources as to maintain certain objectivity.

Frédérique Apffel-Marglin's¹⁶ anthropological research on the devadasi of Puri provides extensive material of their rituals and way of life, based on her own field studies. This work has been chosen even though Puri is located in Orissa¹⁷, eastern India, as there are very few extensive anthropological works written on the devadasi. She does however, largely interpret the rituals in terms of *sakti*, female power and the dialectic auspiciousness–inauspiciousness, which Orr gives valid a critic of, as it limits a full comprehension of these women.¹⁸

In *Women and Law in Colonial India*¹⁹ Janaki Nair develops a feminist perspective on the laws and interventions concerning women and their status in colonial India. By looking at legal measures taken for 'traditional' female practices, such as *sati* and child marriage, one can see the measures taken for the devadasis in its larger context.

¹¹ Soneij 2004, 2012

¹² Kersenboom 1987

¹³ Soneij (ed) 2010, Soneij 2012

¹⁴ The files are written in both Tamil and English and located in Nehru memorial, Delhi.

¹⁵ Soneij (ed) 2010

¹⁶ Marglin 1985

¹⁷ Today's Odisha.

¹⁸ Orr 1987:12

¹⁹ Nair 1996

Accounts from Edgar Thurston and Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois²⁰ are used both as primary and secondary sources. Firstly to show the colonial discourse regarding devadasis, and secondly, for their contemporary anthropological accounts of different communities of devadasis, within a colonial perspective and language.

Furthermore, several authors, such as Marglin, O'Shea, Natarjan, and Kersenboom are themselves students or performers of *Bharatanaytam*²¹ the name given to the reconstructed classical dance of the devadasi. This gives them a personal relationship to their object of study and can on one hand give them a deeper understanding of the dance, but on the other also a hindrance to their objectivity.

Finally, while some political phenomena, such as nationalism, may be seen as pan-Indian, there are also those that are of a more regional or local nature. One can attempt to analyze the political situation of the devadasis, or make interpretation of their sexuality and autonomy but whatever the interpretation, generalization is not possible as the devadasis represent a heterogenic group. This essay attempts to take into consideration such factors as: economic status, class, caste and region.

5. Introducing the devadasis

5.1 The devadasi

The term devadasi literally means female servant of god. There are barely any references to 'devadasis' in Indian literature or inscriptional records before the twentieth century, as traditionally regional names were used²². Women associated with temples, arts and music has, on the other hand, existed for more than a thousand years.²³ The term devadasi gained widespread popularity when the British colonial state and Indian social elite enforced the label on all women "who were married to a deity or a symbol."²⁴ For instance, Dubois refers to them as 'deva-dasis' in his work, which originally is from 1816.²⁵ The term was used as a way to classify and degrade her. As this is the term used in the discourse for the abolition of devadasi, it is also the term used in this essay. It is important to understand that there are different varieties of devadasis, depending on region, language and caste. To mention a few: Dalit girls who are dedicated to the outcaste goddess *Yellamma* may be referred to as *jogatis* and are often associated with prostitution,²⁶ whereas the women Soneij interviews in *Unfinished Gestures*,²⁷ are highly skilled in their arts and come from the *Kalavanthulu* community in Andhra Pradesh. Finally, the devadasis of Puri, which Marglin studied, are dedicated to the deity *Jagannatha* and referred to as *mahari*.²⁸ The devadasi thus remain a

²⁰ Thurston 1909, Dubois 1906

²¹ Marglin 1985, O'Shea 1998, Natarjan 1998, Kersenboom 1987. Marglin is however a student of Odissi, another form of Indian classical dance.

²² Orr 2000:5

²³ Orr 2000:3-4

²⁴ Subramanian 2006:119

²⁵ Dubois 1906:585

²⁶ Soneij 2012:7-9. This essay will not be concerned with this group of devadasis.

²⁷ Soneij 2012

²⁸ Marglin 1985. Mahari derives from queen.

heterogenic group with regional and social varieties both financially and in stature. One cannot refer to the devadasi as a specific caste, but rather as a way of life or as an order.²⁹ These communities are instead identified by their artistic skills in music and dance.³⁰

One can define the devadasi as the *nityasumangali*, the ever-auspicious woman.³¹ Of pre-pubertal age, as according to high-caste Brahmin values, she is dedicated to a deity or a symbol such as a dagger. Since she is not married to a mortal man, she can never be widowed and therefore, remains *nityasumangali* and a symbol of good luck and beauty.³² Kersenboom, who subscribes to this interpretation argues that a devadasi's respect and status is not only derived from her likeness to the great goddess, *sakti*, but because she also is the great goddess.³³ In her status as a *nityasumangali* her basic ritual function is to avert "the anger of the goddess, evil eye and other dangerous effects from spirits that hover around."³⁴ This was her capability alone due to auspicious stature. Thurston presents a similar approach in his anthropological work: "it is believed that Dasis, to whom widowhood is unknown, possesses the power to ward off the effects of inauspicious omens."³⁵

The devadasi is considered married to a deity or a symbol once she has been dedicated. The ritual of dedication is commonly referred to as *pottukkattu* or *tali-tying*,³⁶ but may have other names depending on region. The importance of this rite of passage was and still is less that of being married to god, but rather more an initiation into an economic system, such as that of a dancer and a courtesan, functioning outside the confines of a traditional marriage. Soneij argues that marriage to a god or a symbol must be seen predominantly "as a way of marking a woman's inscription into an alternative non-conjugal lifestyle."³⁷

Marglin offers various reasons as to why parents would chose to dedicate their daughter. One being because of a promise to the deity made, for instance, when someone fell sick. If the deity cured their relative, their daughter would be dedicated. However, the most common reason was poverty; the parents could not afford to marry their daughter. Thirdly the mother may have been a widow who had fallen pregnant and forced to leave her house. Alternatively, sometimes devadasis would offer money to poor parents for the adoption of their daughter.³⁸ Young girls, often orphans, were also both bought and sold within the royal court to become courtesans.³⁹ As the girls rarely had any say in the decision, this may be considered a form of slavery, depending on the definition of the word. The combination of the devadasi as an economic investment, *hors normes*, and the adoption of minor girls from poor families are important factors that contributed to the arguments for their abolition.

In terms of caste, a girl could come from any caste that could give water to Brahmins, but there were high requirement pertaining to her physical health.⁴⁰ Both

²⁹ Kersenboom 1987:179

³⁰ Subramanian 2006:119

³¹ Kersenboom 1987

³² Srinivasan 1988:181-182

³³ Kersenboom 1987:197, 206

³⁴ Kersenboom 1987:60

³⁵ Thurston 1909:139

³⁶ Srinivasan 1988:181, 1985:1869.

³⁷ Soneij 2012:40

³⁸ Marglin 1985:79

³⁹ Soneij 2012:33,36

⁴⁰ Marglin 1985:68

Kersenboom and Marglin speak of the difficulty of being chosen to have the *tali* tied.⁴¹ Sending a petition to the king, vouching for the girl's eligibility was considered the only way this was achieved. However, this is debatable as the three petitions found in Thurston's *Castes and Tribes in Southern India* were sent to a European magistrate and superintendent. It may be concluded from this that there must be variations between both regions and communities. To illustrate, a petition to become a *Basavi* found in Thurston.⁴²

“Petition of _____ aged about 17 or 18

I have agreed to become a Basavi, and get myself stamped by my guru (priest) according to the customs of my caste. I request that my proper age, which entitles me to be stamped may be personally ascertained and permission granted to be stamped

Thurston does not reveal from what year the petition comes, nor in which language it was originally written. The reference to ‘caste’ is ambiguous, as scholars do not agree on the devadasi being a specific caste.⁴³ It could however, be a reference to the Basavi community, which by Thurston's definition is a caste. Alternatively, it could be an error in Thurston's translation or interpretation. The girl makes a reference to ‘being of age’ which may be related to the dedication or minors, as this was a major point of contention in the political discourse of the time. It is written in first person, leading one to believe that this was an expression of self-autonomy and evidenced a willingness to become dedicated. But it is also possible that it could have been written by someone in her place. This petition thus becomes more a reflection of the interpretational difficulties presented by colonialist sources rather than an unbiased indication of devadasi culture or traditions.

5.2 Non-conjugal relationships

One of the major characteristics that separated the devadasis from the conjugal wife was her sexual activities. Whether or not the devadasis could be defined as ‘sacred prostitutes’ is disputable. It indeed becomes a question of how to define a ‘prostitute’. Today's western view would most likely describe a prostitute as a woman who gets paid for sex, the proletarian sex-worker. The devadasi non-conjugal sexual activities could be taken for prostitution, simply due to the lack of a better term, as discussed by Wald.⁴⁴ Another proposition is to view the devadasi as *prasada*; an offering made to the deity giving the devotee contact with the divine. This would thus make her a direct link between the worshipped god and his devotees.⁴⁵ While these may serve as *interpretations* of her sexuality, there were several factors that served to regulate these activities. The devadasis of Puri had relationships with high-caste men, preferably Brahmin priests or the king. They were not allowed to have relationships with men from non-water-giving castes. Such concubinage often lasted a long time, even a life time.⁴⁶ The Kalavanthulu of Andhra Pradesh were not restricted to any caste,

⁴¹ Kersenboom 1987:187, Marglin 1985:68

⁴² Thurston 1909:134

⁴³ Srinivasan 1985, Kersenboom 1987, Subramanian 2006

⁴⁴ Wald 2009

⁴⁵ Orr 2004:16, Kersenboom 1987:166

⁴⁶ Marglin 1985:90-91

any applied restrictions would have been set by the girl's parents.⁴⁷ Srinivasan, on the topic of the women in Tamil Nadu, writes that a liaison "with a Muslim, a Christian or a lower-class man was forbidden, while a Brahmin member of the landed and commercial elite was preferred."⁴⁸ The first relation a devadasi would have was often with that of a man who paid for her puberty feast or temple dedication.⁴⁹ On the other hand, one of Marglin's informants argues that it is traditionally the king who should take her virginity.⁵⁰ What these different accounts have in common is the non-conjugality and non-reproductive purposes of the sexual relationship. For example, children were often unwanted, mostly because a pregnancy was a hindrance for active dancers.⁵¹ The sexuality of the devadasis thus stands in sharp contrast to the ideal wife and mother. A final interpretation of her concubinage is that of the social honor and status it provides for the man who maintains a devadasi⁵² as "intimacy with a devadasi consequently demonstrated public success which visibly marked a man apart from his peers."⁵³ Soneij argues that the sexuality of the devadasi must be seen in "a larger world of servitude that focused on the fulfillment of male desire."⁵⁴ In the arguments for the abolition of the devadasi system, their sexuality was often interpreted in two ways. One perspective was driven by a fear of their non-conjugal sexuality and the perception of them as vicious prostitutes. The other was that of victimization though male exploitation. Both these interpretations lack any consideration the autonomy of the woman herself.

5.3 The devadasi as a professional artist

An individual devadasi would belong to a professional guild of performers of dance and music, called *melam*. She was the dancer in the group and was often the only female. The melams, also called *bogam melam* or *chinna melam* performed both in temples and in private homes.⁵⁵ A devadasi was, along with her instructor and dance-master, the *nattuvanar*, the core of these guilds. Their relationship as teacher-student often lasted a life-time, and the devadasi was professionally dependent on the skills of her *nattuvanar* for the continued success of her career.⁵⁶ Furthermore, dancing in public was not executed by any other women, as dancing by any no devadasi carried a social stigma. Marglin describes how dancing was synonymous with prostitution until 1920.⁵⁷ Through her initiation to the devadasi community, the dedicated girl received the hereditary rights to learn and perform the dance. Even up until "the first two decades of the twentieth century, women from the devadasi community were the

⁴⁷ Soneij 2004:41

⁴⁸ Srinivasan 1985:1869

⁴⁹ Marglin 1985:76, Srinivasan 1985:1869, Thurston 1909:138

⁵⁰ Marglin 1985:75-76

⁵¹ Soneij 2004:41

⁵² Srinivasan 1988:181

⁵³ Srinivasan 1985:1870

⁵⁴ Soneij 2012:3

⁵⁵ Soneij 2004:32

⁵⁶ Srinivasan 1985:1983

⁵⁷ Marglin 1985:95

only women performing Karnatic music in public.”⁵⁸ The dance performed by the devadasi was called *sadir*, a term which was generally applied to dance in nineteenth century Tamil.⁵⁹

Most common in the devadasi’s dance repertoire were the *padams* and *javalis*. In the nineteenth century they were often performed in salon-settings. A *javali* is a short, fast-paced musical composition to be interpreted through dance. It often carries erotic and playful messages which are set in a romantic devotional *bhakti* context, for example, between Krishna and his lover. The *padam* is slower, with less flexibility and often less explicit lyrics. In her dance the devadasi used different hand-gestures called *rati-mudras* illustrating different sexual positions to describe her union with her lover.⁶⁰ It was the performance of compositions like these, particularly those performed in private homes, which were the driving force behind the anti-nautch campaign.⁶¹

To illustrate the openness these compositions included is an example of a *padam*, written by Ksetrayya around the seventeenth century. The song is sung in the female persona and the lyrics express a deep intimacy between the god and his devotee.

It’s true, I have my period
But don’t let that stop you.
No rules apply
to another man’s wife
I beg you to come close
But you always have second thoughts
All these codes were written
By men who don’t know how to love
When I come at you, wanting you, why do you back off?
You don’t have to touch my whole body
Just bend over and kiss.
*No rules apply*⁶²

In this song a woman’s sexual desires are illustrated, she is the active agent demanding physical love. It also displays openness about sexuality and menstruation in a public setting which clearly contrasts to the private sexuality of the married woman. While this openness and explicitness may be seen as positive in ways of female liberation, it needs also to be seen in a wider context as the *melams* often performed for male entertainment within a patriarchal society. The song is not written by the devadasi, but simply interpreted by her with the instruction of her *nattuvanar*. It is hence not her desires that are expressed, but she did serve as a medium that, through her hereditary status, could perform these compositions.

Devadasis also composed poetry themselves. *Muddupalani*, a courtesan at the court of the Maratha king of Thanjavur, wrote a love poem about Krishna’s love for his new wife. *Muddupalani* consulted her guru after Krishna had appeared in her dream, asking her to

⁵⁸ Subramanian 2006:132

⁵⁹ Peterson and Soneij (ed) 2008:11

⁶⁰ Soneij 2012:95-103, 105. See also Kidron’s documentary “sex death and the gods”.

⁶¹ The Anti-nautch campaign aimed to eliminate dance performances, mainly salon based ones.

⁶² In Narayana Rao & Shulman 2002:239-240. Translated from Telugu to English by the editors. This is not the full song.

write the poem. The poem was written around the mid-eighteenth century, but was prohibited by the British a hundred years later as it did not conform to their moral standards.⁶³ This poem illustrates how the devadasi were highly literate, and expresses female desire, as it is written by a woman. It thus confirms the devadasis as active agents in their profession, and their artistic skills. The poem is quite fascinating as it is Radha who instructs Ila, Krishnas new bride, in the art of love.

Make love very, very gently
Don't be wild.
I must be crazy to talk like this
When you and she are deeply in it,
Wrestling with each other,
These rules of mine won't hold"
Then she handed Ila over to Krsna.
But really wanted to come too,
And held on to Ila's sari. Ila loosened her fingers:
"I'll be back soon", she said
And Radha went, her mind a jumble
Of misery and joy⁶⁴

Both these poems refer to love making by 'another woman' and are highly erotic. It is therefore not too difficult to understand how these explicit lyrics could have led, in part, to the negative attributes associated with the devadasis during the reform. The language was in no way compatible with the idea of the reproductive, monogamous sexuality of the wife.

5.4 The devadasis household and her legal rights

The devadasi held certain privileges in comparison to other women. From the time of her dedication she was not only taught in music and dance⁶⁵ but also to both read and write.⁶⁶ According to the French missionary Dubois: "the courtesans are the only women in India who enjoy the privilege of learning to read, to dance, and to sing. A well-bred and respectable woman would for this reason blush to acquire any one of these accomplishments."⁶⁷ Not counting the royal families, the devadasis were the most literate women in the early colonial period.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the devadasis enjoyed *inam*, tax-free land grants from the temples or the kings.⁶⁹ This land was given in return for the services they performed. The land only remained in their possession for as long as one person in the family was employed.⁷⁰

⁶³ Narayana Rao & Shulman 2002:293

⁶⁴ In Narayana Rao & Shulman 2002:295. Translated from Telugu to English by the editors. This is not the full poem.

⁶⁵ Srinivasan 1985:1869

⁶⁶ Nair 1996:165

⁶⁷ Dubois 1906:585

⁶⁸ Vijasri 2004:150

⁶⁹ Marglin 1985: 83, Soneij 2004:30

⁷⁰ Srinivasan 1988:187

The rights displayed here were all hereditary, but the devadasis rarely had children of their own. Instead, their main option was adoption.⁷¹ Here too the devadasis are an exception to the otherwise patrilineal society. Thurston observes that “the Deva-dasis are the only class of women under Hindu law, as administered by the British Courts, allowed to adopt girls to themselves.”⁷² As their household was matrilineal, with both the profession and the property being inherited by the women, girls were preferred.⁷³ Sharma argues that there laid a strong economic reason behind the passing of the dedication and the property through matrilineal lines, as the devadasi was the main provider of the household.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the income generated by the devadasi had other political values; what she paid in taxes would allow her to vote in the elections of Municipal commissioners.⁷⁵ She was thus given a power that was rarely given to other women, as the “ability to vote was [. . .] linked to the ownership of property from which most Indian women were excluded.”⁷⁶ Despite these rights the devadasis lived in a dichotomous power structure, with the household of the devadasi being controlled by an elder woman, but with her dance teacher and guru, the male nattuvanar having control over her dance and thus her professional life.⁷⁷

5.5.1 The devadasi patrons

The income the devadasis obtained from the temple was more than the inam lands. She was also provided a direct salary and food from the temple. This income originally came from donations from the king or wealthy citizens to the temple.⁷⁸ For the temple, the devadasi could be seen as an economic investment as she attracted clients, pilgrims and patrons for donations.⁷⁹ Marglin explains that the devadasis used to dance twice a day in the temple, but that the performance stopped when the state government took over the temple administration.⁸⁰ Kersenboom, who aims to interpret the meaning of the devadasi rituals, writes that the probably most important role she held in the temple, was to “remove evil influences from the deity.”⁸¹

The devadasis additionally performed in secular homes. These secular patrons were often wealthy high-caste people or *zamindars*, landlords. In the private homes of these patrons, the devadasi and her dance troupe, the melam would perform either as part of a life-cycle celebration or as entertainment.⁸² Kersenboom writes that one of the most important functions of the devadasi was to be present at these life-cycle events which could vary from ear-piercing ceremonies to births and weddings. Their presence at private homes was more

⁷¹ In Marglin’s study (1985) some of her informants does refer to their children as adopted, even though they are biologically theirs.

⁷² Thurston 1909:151

⁷³ Srinivasan 1988:188

⁷⁴ Sharma 2007

⁷⁵ Vijasri 2004:155

⁷⁶ Nair 1996:133

⁷⁷ Srinivasan 1988:190

⁷⁸ O’Shea 1998:49

⁷⁹ Srinivasan 1985:1870

⁸⁰ Marglin 1985:171-172

⁸¹ Kersenboom 1987:119

⁸² Soneij 2004:34-35

ritual than artistic, as she was there as a prestigious nityasumangali, protecting the function.⁸³ Similarly, her status as nityasumangali made her an important component at high-society weddings, where she was to ensure a long life to the husband.⁸⁴ However, not all dancing girls were dedicated, there was also a large culture of courtesan dancing girls, whom belonged to melams and performed in private homes without being associated to a temple.⁸⁵

Many of the south Indian princely states supported the performing arts of the devadasis. Ramusack refers to the princes as key figures in bringing music and dance from the court to the masses.⁸⁶ The support of religious specialists, temples and dancers may be seen as a part of their *rajadharma*, and could therefore aid in legitimizing the ruler.⁸⁷ For example, music was given support in princely states and provincial courts such as Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu.⁸⁸

5.5.2 The example of Thanjavur, Tanjore.

One of the most famous inscriptions that can be ascribed to devadasis dates back to 1014 AD. It records the names of the temple women engaged by King Rajaraja I for the Brhadisvara temple founded by him in Thanjavur. The temple itself was built in order to proclaim the greatness of the Chola dynasty and the king's victories in battle.⁸⁹ The inscription mentions 400 women belonging to the temple, including references to their hometowns, residence and shares in the temple.⁹⁰ While these women were employed mainly as dancers and artists to promote and draw people to the temple some of them worked as trustees and administered temple funds.⁹¹

Between 1565 and 1856 Thanjavur and the Tanjore kingdom developed the culture of the royal court, as the kingdom largely remained independent.⁹² Music produced in and around the court would dictate the form of south Indian music over these decades.⁹³ Kersenboom writes that "a most striking characteristic of the developments of music and dance during the Tanjore period is the integration of the performing arts in the court and those practiced in the temple."⁹⁴ There was in other words a great exchange of music, but also of dancing-girls between the court and the temple. The most famous innovators of music were the Tanjore Quartet, four nattuvanar brothers who composed lyrics, music and choreography for devadasis's court and temple performances.⁹⁵ The Tanjore court, because of its strong patronage of the arts, became a popular resort for some of the best Hindu artists. The repertoire performed in Tanjore strongly influenced, and became the normative standard for

⁸³ Kersenboom 1987:66-67

⁸⁴ Soneij 2004:35, Vijasri 2004:96

⁸⁵ Soneij 2012:71-71

⁸⁶ Ramusack 2004:156-157

⁸⁷ Ramusack 2004:44,140

⁸⁸ Peterson & Soneij (ed) 2008:9

⁸⁹ Vanamamalai 1974:26

⁹⁰ Orr 2000:33-34

⁹¹ Anandhi 1991:739

⁹² Kersenboom 1987:39

⁹³ Peterson & Soneij (ed) 2008:9

⁹⁴ Kersenboom 1987:41-42

⁹⁵ Soneij 2012: 55, 44

smaller temples. Unfortunately, after the death of King Shivaji II in 1855, and the incorporation of Tanjore into the British Empire in 1856, there was a rapid decline in these traditions as they were so heavily dependent on the royal patronage.⁹⁶

6. Missionary accounts, colonial law and discourse

6.1 Colonial interpretations of Hindu law.

In 1772, with encouragement from Warren Hastings, the study of Indian language by scholarly orientalists began. Hastings was an administrator working for the East India Company and became around this time governor general of Bengal.

It was Hastings who sponsored the beginning of Indology in order to learn more about Indian traditions.⁹⁷ This was done with the aid of literate Brahmans for references to *sastric* texts.⁹⁸ In the orientalist reading of Indian textual sources, they colonialists aimed to create a universal Hindu law, in the process favoring texts such as the *Srutis*, *Smitris* and *Dharmasastras* and not taking into account the non-textual custom in India.⁹⁹ Sugirtharaja writes that Hinduism was perceived “largely through the lens of brahmanical textual and ritual traditions [. . .] in other words, textual Hinduism is given primary consideration.”¹⁰⁰ The scriptures were then interpreted within a Christian and Western world view, associating West with reason, and India with the opposite, imagination.¹⁰¹ Through the study of these texts by orientalists, a new form of civil law was applied. This ‘Hindu civil law’ would make Brahmin law the basis, leading to a more strictly governed life for lower-caste women, as more rigid brahmanical values were emphasized.¹⁰² Later, some of these laws were loosened, as the British “liberaliz[ed] laws against suttee, remarriage and child marriage.”¹⁰³ This was done within the larger discourse of ‘saving’ India’s women from the barbarities their tradition put them through.¹⁰⁴ The brahmanical values reinforced by the colonialist would however ultimately prevail making patriarchal households the normative model.¹⁰⁵ The idea of the British as saviors of brown women also served as a justification for, or to camouflage the methods used. Making violence as a part of a social mission was more acceptable.¹⁰⁶ It should also be noticed that the British did not interfere in patriarchal affairs such as dowry, polygamy and male inheritance.¹⁰⁷ This can be attributed to their caution, sometimes even abstinence, when dealing with religious matters, as they was considered too explosive¹⁰⁸ and could risk

⁹⁶ Krishnan in Peterson & Soneij (ed) 2008:73, Kersenboom 1987:44, 47

⁹⁷ Kulke & Rothermund 2010:172,179

⁹⁸ Bayly 1999:100-101

⁹⁹ Nair 1996:20-21, 26

¹⁰⁰ Sugirtharaja 2003:140

¹⁰¹ Sugirtharaja 2003:139-140

¹⁰² Bayly 1999:101

¹⁰³ Young 1994:80

¹⁰⁴ Nair 1996:51

¹⁰⁵ Wald 2009:1474

¹⁰⁶ Kwok 2012:63

¹⁰⁷ Kwok 2012:65

¹⁰⁸ Vijasri 2004:148

the success of their colonial rule.¹⁰⁹ In fact, when Hindu reformers, with support from British missionaries, demanded the devadasis to be declared as prostitutes the British court in India did not directly succumb to their calls.¹¹⁰ Wald does however describe how British colonialism played a large role in *defining* the devadasis as prostitutes, as they lacked a term for these women who had non-conjugal relations. This definition was broad as it included concubines, courtesans, temple dancers and bazaar prostitutes. These were all women that were not traditionally married, and had non-conjugal sex, and had not before been perceived to be or labelled as prostitutes.¹¹¹ In the end of the eighteenth century, lock hospitals, to treat bazaar prostitutes from venereal diseases, were installed to ensure the health of British soldiers. This system, together with the Indian Diseases act of 1868 would aid in the definition of *nautch* girls and temple dancers as prostitutes, not because they were included in the act, but rather because of attempts made by army surgeons to include them.¹¹² The *nautch* dance is the salon performance that took place in the homes of elite patrons, as compared to the temple.¹¹³ The word *nautch* itself originally came from different Indian vernacular words of sanskrit origin for dance and has then been anglicized.¹¹⁴ The British interference thus indirectly led to an association of devadasis and prostitutes.¹¹⁵

6.2 Devadasis in missionary and anthropological accounts.

In the nineteenth century stories and accounts highlighting the eroticism, exoticism and sensuality of India reached western ears. These accounts were of course interpreted within a Western world view and through the continued belief of the superiority of Western culture. “Practices such as *nautch*, temple dancing and concubinage were described simply as prostitution [and] it was stressed that these were accepted in Indian society.”¹¹⁶ The result of this both marked the devadasis as prostitutes, and served to highlight the perceived moral defaults of Indian society. The devadasi were also depicted through vivid illustrations such as postcards, paintings and photography.¹¹⁷ There they were portrayed either with their melam, or in sexually charged positions, but which still were respectable to western sensibilities. This was a way to show the exoticism of the devadasis, while still ensuring British morality was not corrupted; since in reality these women performed for the colonialists in salon settings.¹¹⁸

On the subject of devadasis the accounts of French missionary Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois and anthropologist Edgar Thurston have been chosen to illustrate the language used to describe them. Marglin sees Dubois accounts as “the typical Western response to the devadasis”¹¹⁹ and Vijasri explains how his work influenced the public

¹⁰⁹ Nair 1996:52

¹¹⁰ Orr 2000:15

¹¹¹ Wald 2009:1470

¹¹² Wald 2009:1476-1477

¹¹³ Soneij 2012:11

¹¹⁴ Marglin 1985:6

¹¹⁵ Wald 2009:1476-1477

¹¹⁶ Wald 2009:1471

¹¹⁷ Soneij 2012:76, Soneij 2010:39-40

¹¹⁸ Soneij 2012:75-76

¹¹⁹ Marglin 1985:3

conception of the devadasis and how it was received a wide salutation.¹²⁰ The following extract from Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* illustrates (1) the status and respect they held (2) the colonial view of them as prostitutes. And finally, (3) the ambivalent attitude towards Hindu customs.

(1) Though these women are known to be the mistresses of the priests and other dignitaries, still, for all that, they are treated with a certain amount of consideration and respect amongst their own sect¹²¹ (2) All the time which they have to spare in the intervals of various ceremonies is devoted to infinitely more shameful practices; and it is not an uncommon thing to see even sacred temples converted into mere brothels. They are brought up in this shameful licentiousness from infancy, and are recruited from various castes, some among them belonging to respectable families [. . .] (3) In fact, however loose the Hindus may be in their morals, they strictly maintain an outward appearance of decency, and attach great importance to the observance of strict decorum in public¹²²

It is interesting to see how the devadasis were portrayed in colonial literature, as the opinions expressed in these documents would later become the established view of these women in society. The juxtaposition between the devadasis traits of decency, prostitution and respect creates a contrast to the perception of the proletarian prostitute of the West

The second work chosen is Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. The seven volume large book was written, by order of the Government on India, with the purpose of creating a systematic ethnographic survey of India. Thurston, being superintendent of the Government Museum in Madras, thus recorded the castes and tribes of the Madras Presidency.¹²³ This extract illustrates (1) the notion that the devadasis profession had already started to degenerate, (2) the difference between the devadasi and the normative housewife and (3) their dubious economics and sexuality.

(1)The profession is not now held in the consideration it once enjoyed. Formerly they enjoyed a considerable social position. It is one of the many inconsistencies of the Hindu religion that though their profession is repeatedly and vehemently condemned by the Shastras, it has always received the countenance of the church¹²⁴. (2) "The daughters of the caste . . . are carefully taught dancing, singing, the art of dressing well and the *ars amoris* and their success in keeping their clientèle is largely due to the contrast which they present to the thus ordinary Hindu housewife¹²⁵. (3) Dasis drive a profitable trade under the sanction of religion, and some courtesans have been known to amass enormous fortunes. Nor do they think it is inconsistent with their method of making money to spend it in works of piety¹²⁶

The first passage both illustrates the status of the devadasis, and their relationship to the temple, which here, is used to emphasize the moral ambivalence and degradation of the Hindu tradition. The latter part describes the devadasi as skillful and economically independent, yet still as morally inferior to the housewife. These passages are important, as similar discourse was used in the social reform of the devadasi, and the installation of the house-wifely ideal as norm for the respectable Indian woman.

¹²⁰ Vijasri 2004:138

¹²¹ Dubois 1906:133

¹²² Dubois 1906:587

¹²³ Rangachari 1910: 625

¹²⁴ Thurston 1909:126

¹²⁵ Thurston 1909:128

¹²⁶ Thurston 1909:130

6.2 The British and the nautch.

The British colonialists in the nineteenth century were both consumers and purveyors of devadasi performance. They both attended and provided such entertainment.¹²⁷ According to Soneij “the space of the salon served to cement relations between Indian elites and Europeans in the sociological theatre of colonial Madras.”¹²⁸ There are even accounts of melams performing to English tunes and with European instruments,¹²⁹ which clearly indicates an exchange between the colonialists and the artists. Later the authorities began to discourage the presence of British people at devadasi performances and eventually forbidding it altogether.¹³⁰ This was likely due to the view of nautch as vulgar dancing¹³¹ or with its association to prostitution.¹³² As a result, the presence of dancing girls went from being fascinating and enchanting to a way for the colonialists to prove the corrupt morality in India.¹³³

Natarajan offers a few reasons for the delay in British interventions to eliminate the nautch; the policy of non-interference in religious affairs and their own affection to the dance.¹³⁴ Furthermore, she mentions, although not as a reason, the non-violence of the dance. In contrast to sati or child-marriage nautch dance was only menacing due to its display of female autonomy and sexuality. This lack of physical violence could possibly have made it less of a priority.¹³⁵ Inoue sees their non-interference in the devadasi question as a “delicate problem, situated in between religion and social reform.”¹³⁶ Even if the British did not directly interfere in the reform of the devadasis until the early twentieth century, dancing girls were indirectly affected by the colonialist opinions and attitudes toward them.¹³⁷

7. Social reforms in the turn of the century

To understand the context in which the ban on the dedication of devadasis took place we need to look at the political environment during this period. Here focus is on the princely states, social reforms and the political activities leading up to the Madras Devadasis act of 1947. According to Natarajan colonialists and missionaries were at one point the agents of normalization.¹³⁸ This changed as upper caste and middle class social reformers became more active in the (re-)building of the nation. For both British colonialists and native Indians normative gender roles had become the ideal. The husband was to be a pious supporter and the wife chaste and pure.¹³⁹ The negative colonial view of many Indian traditions did however shape the indigenous reforms that took place in the turn of the century.¹⁴⁰

¹²⁷ Spear & Meduri 2004: 439

¹²⁸ Soneij 2012:75

¹²⁹ Soneij 2012:79

¹³⁰ Spear & Meduri 2004: 439

¹³¹ Young 1999:55

¹³² Wald 2009: 1473

¹³³ Wald 2009: 1471

¹³⁴ Natarajan 1997:78

¹³⁵ Natarajan 1997:78

¹³⁶ Inoue 2005:109, my translation.

¹³⁷ Natarajan 1997:96

¹³⁸ Natarajan 1997:75

¹³⁹ Bayly 1999:188

¹⁴⁰ Nair 1996:164

This section addresses some of the discourse and political activities regarding women, sexuality and the devadasis.

7.1 The loss of royal patronage

In colonial India, the British put into practice an indirect rule over the Indian states, with the princes as indigenous leaders or vassals in a feudal society.¹⁴¹ Ramusack explains how several complex factors were involved in the initial political activities, such as social reforms, in the princely states. Even if they were under British rule, the states had a significant autonomy and were for the most part left alone until late in the colonial era.¹⁴² It was therefore not the outsiders of British India who initiated political activities such as the reform of the devadasi. Ramusack furthermore offers a few explanations for the smooth integration from princely states to independent India, which can be summarized as a lack of unison and organization between the states themselves and the British and by pressure from the Indian National Congress.¹⁴³ The gradual dissolution of the princely states would have a direct impact on the devadasis' daily life. Kersenboom explains, on subject of the Tanjore court, that with the loss of patronage the devadasis were made redundant and had to find new patrons. Her role as a nityasumangali, who could deal with the dangerous divine was respected, but not always enough to make a living. It was her skills in dance and music which were crucial for her economic survival.¹⁴⁴ As Subramanian writes:

the break up of indigenous polities in south India in the first half of the nineteenth century and the gradual dissipation of Tanjore principality divested traditional communities like the devadasis of their immediate social context, and materially affected their economic status. The temple and the court ceased to provide them with the larger ceremonial setting and access to material support¹⁴⁵

In the example of Mysore, a princely state that was under direct rule by the British from 1831-1881 and later under indirect rule through King Chamaraja Wodeyar X, support to the devadasis, in form of land revenues etc. was withdrawn primarily for economical and moral reasons. The temple was to be 'cleaned up'. In the beginning of the twentieth century, a Muzrai secretary, or superintendent was appointed to manage land grants and allowances for religious purposes. Under his influence the devadasis were prohibited from dancing in temples, had their payments and resources suspended and, most irrevocably were not replaced in the temple when one of them retired. This eventually led to the discontinuation of the profession.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Ramusack 2004:92, 130

¹⁴² Ramusack 2004:243-244

¹⁴³ Ramusack 2004:246-247

¹⁴⁴ Kersenboom 1987:48-49

¹⁴⁵ Subramanian 2006:122

¹⁴⁶ Nair 1994

7.2 The effects of Indian nationalism

In early and mid-nineteenth century, during ‘the Bengal renaissance,’ the question of woman’s legal rights and place in society was a hot topic in the public debate. Practices such as sati, child-marriage and widow remarriage were the most contentious issues on the agenda. According to Chatterjee attitudes towards more liberal rights for women would change in the following decades with the rise of cultural nationalism, where India’s past was glorified and juxtaposed against Western colonization.¹⁴⁷ Nair explains that the “early form of Indian cultural nationalism sprang to the defense of a tradition they believed was under fierce attack.”¹⁴⁸ Looking at accounts of everyday life during these times, one can see how the outside world was now perceived as profane and only suitable for men, while the house and women became keepers of spirituality and India’s true identity.¹⁴⁹ The Indian woman, who the British saw as unfree and oppressed, became juxtaposed against the Western woman, who was seen as vulgar, loud and promiscuous by the Indian nationalists.¹⁵⁰ The systematic division of women into either respectable or immoral categories was already institutionalized in Western societies, but India’s women’s moral inferiority surpassed even these distinctions.¹⁵¹ The view on devadasis thus also coincided with the colonialists view on Indian women as a whole as “the sexually unrestrained, inferior ‘native.’”¹⁵² Sreenivas argues that alongside feminism, nationalist politics aided in the creation of the conjugal female ideal where marriage was the proper way for a woman to live.¹⁵³ The brahmanical patriarchal family, with women as wives and mothers thus became the norm.¹⁵⁴ For the devadasis the construction of gender and sexuality in the nationalist discourse meant that their life style, with non-conjugal sex was seen as morally degenerate.¹⁵⁵ The objective for the reform of the devadasis was to turn them into monogamous, married women according with middle-class sexual ethics.¹⁵⁶ On the subject of women and nationalism Chatterjee writes that:

. . . nationalist emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal. Because it would confer freedom only by imposing at the same time a whole new set of controls, it could define a cultural identity for the nation only by excluding many from its fold, it could grant the dignity of citizenship to some only because the others always needed to be represented and could not be allowed to speak for themselves¹⁵⁷

As such, the devadasis were excluded from the national identity. They could not fit into the norm of what was seen as a respectable Indian woman and therefore were marginalized and dishonored. The identity of the ideal Indian woman was created against the West and British colonization, logically enforcing commonly accepted and respected people, such as the

¹⁴⁷ Chatterjee 1993:116

¹⁴⁸ Nair 1996:36

¹⁴⁹ Chatterjee 1993:120

¹⁵⁰ Chatterjee 1993:118,127

¹⁵¹ Ward 2009:1471-1472

¹⁵² O’Shea 1998:55

¹⁵³ Sreenivas 2011

¹⁵⁴ Nair 1996:37

¹⁵⁵ Soneij 2012:112-113

¹⁵⁶ Soneij 2012:19-20

¹⁵⁷ Chatterjee 1993:154

middle-class, simultaneously repressing unwanted communities, such as the devadasis. Narayan writes on the subject of women and the ideology of cultural superiority. She states that “colonialism and nationalism played their own ideological parts in the construction of gender roles, in both Western contexts and in the colonies, sometimes with surprisingly similar results.”¹⁵⁸ While this process of nationalism and revivalism may be called conservative or traditional, it was also the same process that pushed for reforms and modernization.¹⁵⁹ Cultural nationalism in India can thus be seen as both forming and reforming social groups.¹⁶⁰

7.2.2 Gandhian nationalism

Gandhi was an important political agent and leader in the building of Indian nationalism. He had the objective of creating an independent, unified, Indian nation under *swaraj* or home-rule which would be inclusive for all religions in India.¹⁶¹ Gandhi’s view of women, however, remained traditional in the sense that he saw her mainly as a conjugal wife and mother.¹⁶² Within the role of a middle-class wife, women did have a certain level of political involvement. The women brought with them certain respectability and their political appeals were in the name of nationalism, rather than as women’s rights. It was partly because of women’s involvement, and the respectability they brought, that the political sphere managed to penetrate the religious one.¹⁶³ In the case of the devadasi, Gandhi after a visit to Andhra Pradesh, where he met the dancing devadasis allegedly wrote in condemnation of these women: “I charge these sisters who are sitting behind me to go from place to place, find out every dancing girl, and shame men into shunning the wrong they are doing.”¹⁶⁴ Thus Gandhi himself openly rejected the devadasi life style, and the men supporting them. Moreover, he was not interested in their opinions as “the opinion of immoral parties cannot count.”¹⁶⁵ How widespread his notions of the devadasis became we do not know. What is known is that the Indian National Congress had an irrevocable impact on Indian political history and that Gandhi did not, in fact defy patriarchal norms, even if he believed in the freedom for every man and woman to follow their own path.¹⁶⁶

7.3 Sexuality, feminism and gender in colonial India.

First of all the abolition of the devadasi system needs to be seen in the larger context of reforming all women’s’ rights during this period. Colonialists, nationalists and Indian feminists were all part of several reforms that aimed to ban sati, child infanticide, widow-remarriage and to raise the age of consent.¹⁶⁷ The discourse on these phenomena in the

¹⁵⁸ Narayan 1997:19

¹⁵⁹ Chatterjee 1992:127

¹⁶⁰ Subrahmanian 2006:56

¹⁶¹ Nanda 1989, Sugirtharaja 3003:137

¹⁶² Young 1994:83

¹⁶³ Nair 1996:126-127

¹⁶⁴ M.K Gandhi 1942:174 in Soneij 2012:133

¹⁶⁵ M.K Gandhi 1942:203 in Soneij 2012:133

¹⁶⁶ Young 1994:82

¹⁶⁷ Srinivasan 1988:177, Vijaisri 2004:135

nineteenth century was disseminated and dominated by the British. Sati was murder; Child-marriage rape or child-molestation.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, the shift of the century saw an increasing concern for children and sexual consent. In 1872 the first appeal was made to enact legislation to protect minor girls from becoming and being used as prostitutes.¹⁶⁹ This concerned the devadasis as they were dedicated pre-pubertually.¹⁷⁰ Hubel does however bring forth a different opinion. She examines how the Indian feminists worked for legal interventions that would ensure rights for some women, but also deny legal rights and even ban others, for example widow-remarriage vs. anti-naught.¹⁷¹ It is essentially a conflict in definition, with Indian feminists viewing the devadasis as minor girls being forced into a profession. Hubel finds the lack of solidarity between the women's movement and the devadasis surprising, as the devadasis were a category of women who already possessed legal rights traditionally not given to women.¹⁷² This may be an oversimplification by Hubel, or rather an example of a westernized viewpoint. What to our western sensibilities may be seen as self-autonomy and independence may, in this case, have come at too a high price. It needs to be remembered that young girls, often orphans, were both bought and sold within the court to become courtesans.¹⁷³

Furthermore, even for the feminists the non-conjugal sexual lives of the devadasi were not accepted. The aim remained to reform them into decent and socially acceptable wives.¹⁷⁴ One example of a feminist organization during this period was the Women's India Association, founded by Irish feminist and theosophist Annie Besant and led for a long time by Muthulaksmi Reddi.¹⁷⁵ Reddi raised the issue of the devadasis at the All India Women's Conference in 1927, together with issues on child marriage.¹⁷⁶ She would later become one of the strongest voices of anti-dedication. If one compares Indian feminism to Western feminism, it is easier to understand why even Indian feminist strived to create loyal wives of the devadasi. While western feminism during this period focused on giving women rights as individuals, the discourse for Indian women was more relational. For example, rights given would be exercised as a family, a community or a caste for both men and women.¹⁷⁷ In this sense, feminist social reforms working within the discourse of conjugal marriage make sense, as women's identities not seen as independent, but were merged within family relations. In her work about the sexual division of labour, Maria Mies¹⁷⁸ refers to this process as 'housewifization' and 'domestication' of women, arguing that "sexual autonomy is closely connected to economic autonomy."¹⁷⁹ While she mainly refers to male power and colonization it is interesting to see the similarities between colonialists and indigenous feminists.

¹⁶⁸ Srinivasan 1988:178-179

¹⁶⁹ Soneij 2012:120

¹⁷⁰ Srinivasan 1988:181

¹⁷¹ Hubel [2005] in Soneij (ed) 2010

¹⁷² Hubel [2005], in Soneij (ed) 2010:172

¹⁷³ Soneij 2012:33,36

¹⁷⁴ Sreenivas 2011

¹⁷⁵ Natarajan 1997:113

¹⁷⁶ Rappaport 2001:581

¹⁷⁷ Subhadra 2013:88-89

¹⁷⁸ Miers 1998

¹⁷⁹ Miers 2008:70

7.4 Politics of the 'backward' castes.

E.V. Ramasamy, or Periyar in 1920 created a movement to ensure equal rights to the backward castes. This was called the self-respect movement and was essentially a non-Brahmin movement. The movement was for the abolition of the devadasis for two main reasons. The first being, the style of life it risked leading to, sexual slavery and an overall immoral lifestyle: sex outside marriage. Secondly, as devadasis were mainly courtesans to upper-caste Brahman, or water-giving castes they were viewed as being exploited by these men for their sexual services.¹⁸⁰ It was in the eyes of Periyar, an institution that concretized the subordination of lower-caste women to the advantage of upper-caste men.¹⁸¹ The abolition of dedication became a powerful political tool through which the non-Brahmin movement could make their cause.¹⁸² The self-respect movement aided in the enforcement of the self-appointed caste *isai vellala*, which was essentially comprised of men of the devadasi community who aimed to raise the status of their community by creating a caste of hereditary and unified musicians and dancers.¹⁸³ In the devadasi household, the women were the main providers and supported their brothers and sons. As the female members of the family were the financial supports, the men were cast as parasites, drones or appendages.¹⁸⁴ These men thus held a low position and often moved out of the household if they gained economic independence. Srinivasan argues that the creation of *isai vellala* "marked the transition from a loosely integrated occupational temple social system to a highly politicized, communal caste association."¹⁸⁵ It was political in the sense of it being integrated with the non-Brahmin, self-respect movement. The creation of a respectable caste also allowed the men from the devadasi communities to gain a place in the political sphere in Tamil Nadu.¹⁸⁶ Although Periyar did not openly advocated marriage as a solution for the devadasis,¹⁸⁷ the self-respect movement worked to make heterosexual monogamy a part of their program and of Tamil culture. This was done by fighting child-marriage and supporting widow-remarriage and inter-caste marriage.¹⁸⁸ To sum up, this section has shown how many complex aspects played a part in creating the ideal Indian woman as a mother and wife, effectively rejecting the devadasis way of life. It needs to be remembered that this ideal woman was not only an indigenous product but also a result of the interaction between the colonialists and the colonized. The concept of class was superimposed on the caste system by the British,¹⁸⁹ thus creating new norms for women. It is not possible, however to pin-point one political agent as more prominent than another, Narayan explains:

¹⁸⁰ Srilata 2002:441

¹⁸¹ Soneij 2012:140

¹⁸² Srinivasan 1985:1873

¹⁸³ Soneij & Peterson (ed) 2008:16, Soneij 2012:143

¹⁸⁴ Vijaisri 2004:184, Srinivasan 1988:187

¹⁸⁵ Srinivasan 1985:1869

¹⁸⁶ Soneij 2012:150

¹⁸⁷ Soneij 2012:140

¹⁸⁸ Sreenivas 2011:69

¹⁸⁹ Subhadra 2013:36

In many colonial and post-colonial contexts, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between the facts of change of time and “changes due to Western influence” since many of these changes involve complex “complicities and resistances” between aspects of Western culture and Third-world institutions, agents and political agendas¹⁹⁰

8. Legal interventions and the ensuing dialogue.

8.1 The anti-nautch campaign

The anti-nautch campaign began in 1892, in Madras, by English-educated Indians, British Christian missionaries and native social workers. It was a movement which aimed to eliminate the nautch, which was seen as impure and degenerative to Hindu society. While the campaign focused on the secular nautch dance, temple dancing women were included as well. Neither did the campaign exist in isolation, but was linked to other movements of social reform.¹⁹¹ The supporters of this campaign would go door to door in order to influence the patrons of nautch dancers to abandon them and boycott the dance.¹⁹² The campaigners organized themselves into the ‘Hindu Social Reformers Association’ in 1893. Under this name they sent a memorandum to the Viceroy, Governor of Madras asking for measures to be taken to combat the nautch. While the government did not take direct action in response to the memorandum, medial debates directed to abolish nautch dance would lead to some government officials publicly condemning the dance.¹⁹³ The memorandum, which had two thousand signatures, read as follows:

1. That there exists in the Indian community a class of women commonly known as *nautch* girls.
2. That these women are invariably prostitutes
3. That countenance and encouragement are given to them, and even a recognized status in society secured to them, by the practice which prevails among Hindus, to a very undesirable extent, of inviting them to take part in marriage and other festivities, and even to entertainments given in honour of guests who are not Hindus.
4. That this practice not only necessarily lowers the moral tone of society, but also tends to destroy that family life on which national soundness depends, and tends to bring upon individuals ruin in property and character alike¹⁹⁴

In this part of the memorandum a few important observations can be made: (1) the definition of dancing girls as prostitutes, (2) British also enjoyed the company of nautch girls (3) the reforms aimed to purify Hinduism within the framework of the patriarchal family. This last point is focal, as it both highlights conjugal family life and its importance to nationalistic discourse in creating a pure and respectable Indian society. The work of the campaigners was a fatal blow to the devadasis, as with the loss of patronage from the temples and the court the devadasis very much had to rely on private patrons for financial support.

¹⁹⁰ Narayan 1997:24

¹⁹¹ Marglin 1985:8, Wald 2009:1478

¹⁹² Srinivasan 1988:192, Nair 1996:164, Inoue 2005:107

¹⁹³ Inoue 2005:108

¹⁹⁴ Hindu Social Reformers Association, in Vijaisri 2004:145

Even if the government hesitated in taking measures, because of their politics of non-interference in religious affairs,¹⁹⁵ public opinion, which was strongly influenced by such a campaign, made it hard for the devadasis to earn a living. In 1911, reformers succeeded in issuing a dispatch encouraging a nationwide action against the nautch dance.¹⁹⁶ As a result, “in the early twentieth century, when traditional systems of patronage [. . .] were dismantled, in a self-fulfilling prophecy some younger devadasis indeed turned to prostitution.”¹⁹⁷ Natarajan does point out that the devadasis still held some support from the public and remained important to secular homes as nityasumangali until their community completely became disintegrated.¹⁹⁸

8.2.1 Muthulaksmi Reddi

Muthulaksmi Reddi was the first female legislator in India, and in 1927 she became the first woman nominated to the Madras Legislative Council. She was also the daughter of a Brahmin father and a devadasi mother.¹⁹⁹ Her legislative work may be referred to as social feminism, as she initiated several bills that would improve women’s rights. Among these were “bills to abolish [. . .] child marriage, bills making medical examination in all schools and colleges compulsory, reducing educational fees for poor girls, establishing a children’s hospital and securing grants for women training destitute women.”²⁰⁰ The sum of this gives the impression that Reddi worked *for* the women, rather than *against* them. In 1927, she did, however, introduce a bill to end the dedication of girls, a bill that would end in the Madras anti-dedication act of 1947. The reason for prohibiting the dedication of girls was primarily their age. She saw it as way in which minor girls got condemned into a life of prostitution. In her work, “Why Should The Devadasi Institution be Abolished,” from 1929, through which she aimed to argue for her bill, she wrote that the reform was:

a reform by which we can rescue thousands of young innocent children from a life of immorality and vice, from life-long invalidism, suffering, disease and death resulting from infection with venereal disease [. . .] the training for this immoral trade begins for these girls even from their childhood, that is an age in which they cannot think and act for themselves [. . .] these victims are taught from a tender age to look upon this practice as their caste-duty or dharma [. . .] at an age when they are helpless and innocent, these children are allowed to be exploited and initiated into all these unhealthy ideas which having a demoralizing tendency converts them into mental, moral and physical wrecks²⁰¹

In this excerpt, the devadasis are clearly portrayed as victims of tradition. They do not possess self-autonomy or independence but are seen as subjects needed to be rescued. In contrast to her earlier view of the devadasis as innocent victims, Reddi took a different tone when speaking of those devadasis who chose to defy her bill.

¹⁹⁵ Inoue 2005:108

¹⁹⁶ Subramaninan 1999:148

¹⁹⁷ Soneij 2004:39

¹⁹⁸ Natarajan 1997:99

¹⁹⁹ Soneij 2012:113

²⁰⁰ Nair 1996:134

²⁰¹ Reddy [1929];, in Soneij (ed) 2010: 115-117

As far as the local devadasis' protest, they are all a set of prostitutes [. . .] How can the government take cognisance of such a protest from a most objectionable class of people in the society²⁰² and that "In the first place it is well known that the very word devadasi means prostitute. Therefore I cannot understand how a petition from an association of such women could be countenanced and further sent out for opinion from others²⁰³

Reddi may be seen as a third world feminist, as she confronts issues related to Indian women, as an Indian woman herself. Despite this, the above quote displays structures that Orr writes about where third-world women are viewed as victims rather than subjects.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, it illustrates power-structures found within nationalist Indian feminist discourse. Since the middle-class married woman was now the norm she was the one given the right to political space. Anandhi claims that in the case of Reddi and the devadasis, the aim was not to rescue or protect them but rather to protect the self-image of Indian womanhood.²⁰⁵ The reform aiming to protect 'innocent' girls must therefore also be seen in the larger political context of creating and protecting the respectable woman. On the other hand, as Reddi was the child of a devadasi herself, her upbringing could be a factor contributing to her work against the devadasi system. It could therefore be her own experiences that reflected in her work, rather than influences by nationalism or Westernization.

It must also be said that Muthulaksmi Reddi recognized the financial loss the women would experience due to the loss of their career. With this in consideration, she sponsored an amendment to the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act which separated the traditional inam lands from the temples. By doing this, the devadasis became outright owners of their land, without expectancy of providing services to the temple.²⁰⁶ To complicate matters further, the separation between land and temple ultimately favored the menfolk of the devadasi community. Before they had been deprived of hereditary rights, but through the endowment act they were now able to inherit land previously reserved for the dedicated women.²⁰⁷

8.2.2 The Madras Devadasi Act of 1947

The reform against devadasis proceeded at an uneven pace though south India. While in Mysore, legislation for the abolition of the devadasi system passed as early as 1909, it took until 1947 for Madras to take legislative measures. The strategies between the two states were also different. Mysore wanted to be a model state so as to avoid the reinstatement of British direct rule²⁰⁸ and their tactic was to make it financially impossible for the devadasis to support themselves.²⁰⁹

²⁰² Reddy cited in Anandhi 1991:741

²⁰³ Reddy cited in Soneij 2012:127

²⁰⁴ Orr 2000:12

²⁰⁵ Anandhi 1991:741

²⁰⁶ Nair 1996:166

²⁰⁷ Srinivasan 1988:194

²⁰⁸ Vijasri 2004:142

²⁰⁹ Nair 1996:168

Madras on the other hand, took measures to make it a crime to dedicate minor girls.²¹⁰ This culminated in *The Madras Devadasis Act of 1947* which was introduced by the following statement:

Whereas the practice still prevails in certain parts of the Province of Madras of dedicating women as "devadasis" to Hindu deities, idols, objects of worship, temples and other religious institutions;

AND WHEREAS such practice, however ancient and pure in its origin, leads many of the women so dedicated to a life of prostitution;

AND WHEREAS it is necessary to put an end to the practice²¹¹

This act made dedications void, allowing dedicated women to marry. It also mentions several communities of devadasis, including the Kalavanthula, and categorized their participation in melams as prostitution. It also made dancing by a woman unlawful "in the precincts of any temple or other religious institution."²¹² The passage is fairly ambiguous, but was clearly directed towards the relation between the devadasi and the temple. Furthermore, the act made participation in the dedication of girls a punishable offence. This act was thus not only a ban on the dedication of minors, but also must be seen as a ban of the community and their profession as a whole. That this act gave the women the option to marry may be seen as positive, but it had several complications. They were often asked to give unreasonable sums for dowry and astrologers would advise against such marriages, telling them it would result in the death of the boy's family.²¹³ The possibility of marriage should not only be seen as a way for financial support, but also as a way to confine the devadasis to monogamous conjugal sexuality.

8.2.3 Devadasis opposing the bill.

One part of the opposition to this act was comprised of the devadasis themselves. This was illustrated in the memorandum "*The Humble Memorial of Devadasis of the Madras Presidency*", which was presented to Sir.C.P Ramaswami Iyer, a law member of the Madras Government in protest of Muthulaksmi Reddi's bill. It contains references to their religious services and expertise, anchored in Hindu tradition, and clearly aims to separate them from prostitutes. What is interesting about this memorial is first how they strongly identified themselves with ancient tradition, religion and as experts and guardians of music and dance. The second aspect is the near confession of how a few members had 'gone astray' and that the whole community should not be judged by them:

We are given to understand that prostitution as such is not an offence in India and we can have no objection to any measure, however severe it may be, to check prostitution. We welcome such a measure because if an act is passed preventing prostitution, the few of our members who have erred would become rectified²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Nair 1996:168

²¹¹The Madras Devadasis Act of 1947, in Soneij 2012:235

²¹²The Madras Devadasis Act of 1947 in Soneij 2012:236

²¹³ Srinivasan 1985:1873

²¹⁴ The Madras Devadasi Association [1928] in Soneij (ed) 2010:130

This is particularly interesting, as the literature, written by scholars or by feminists, tends to portray the devadasis as ‘victims’ of political and social circumstances. They also bring up the issue of poverty, and how a ban on their community could actually lead to prostitution. Here they put forth the importance of education for their community, for their survival, and for their arts. While this bill was signed by eight members of the association²¹⁵ it is important to note how well thought out and written it was. This would suggest that it was written by well-educated and prominent members of the community. It was therefore not representative of all devadasis in Madras, but rather the more privileged ones. Sreenivas confirms that the devadasis have been a heterogeneous group since the colonial era, both in economical and symbolic terms.²¹⁶ However, it does show that the devadasis were active agents of their fate who did not shy away from making their voice heard when their profession was threatened. Furthermore a newspaper report from a meeting of twenty five devadasis in cheyyur states that:

The ancient honorable religious practice of tying *pottu* in the temple is not related whatsoever to the mean practice of prostitution. This meeting vehemently condemns speaking and writing in a base manner about a respectable community, comparing them with dishonorable prostitutes, in the context of forging a bill to eradicate prostitution²¹⁷

Here the use of ‘honorable’, ‘religious’, and ‘respectable’ clearly served to delink the devadasi community from prostitution and instead emphasize their traditional religious customs. These texts also confirm that at least some devadasis were women of great autonomy who would fight for their way of life; not hapless victims passively accepting their fate. A final letter worth citing is an open letter to Aiyar Avgl and Reddi, by written by B. Varalakshamma, the daughter of a devadasi, in 1928. The letter states that:

By simply passing some enactment with regard to the dedication of girls to temples, it is impossible to clear out our cities of prostitutes, until men cease to consort with them, for without male chastity, female chastity is impossible²¹⁸

The letter pinpoints the ambiguity of male versus female sexuality and brings forth the complications a ban would have without a proper social welfare system to support the devadasis.

In terms of opposition to the bill, it should also be noted that some upper-caste Brahmins supported the devadasis. One can see this in two ways. As a way for men to keep their rights to devadasis as concubines or, as they presented it, a way to preserve Hindu culture and religious traditions.²¹⁹ Of course, one cannot know if their support was grounded in selfish interest, but by using religion as an argument they used similar rhetoric to their protégées.

²¹⁵ Soneij (ed) 2010:408

²¹⁶ Sreenivas 2011:67

²¹⁷ A meeting of the *Devadasis*, in Soneij 2012: 229-230

²¹⁸ Varalakshamma [1928], In Soneij 2012:234

²¹⁹ Soneij 2012:129-130

8.2.4 Devadasi community menfolk in support of the bill

Support for Reddi's bill did not only come from external public opinions, but also from the devadasi community, especially their menfolk. There were three main reasons for this. (1) New advantageous rules for male inheritance. (2) The fact that previously, dedicated girls had been unavailable to men of their own community and instead reserved for wealthy, higher caste men. (3) Women were the financial supporters of the community, making daughters highly favored over sons.²²⁰ In short, a ban on the dedication of the devadasis would ultimately give the men more autonomy, influence and self-respect. Their support was expressed in the self-respect movement or in other anti-Brahmin movements. Srinivasan writes that such movements "provided the men of the devadasi group with a powerful ideology to overcome the humiliation of the Anti-nautch campaign and fight for dominance both within the household and in the wider political society."²²¹ One can draw from this that the political factors aimed to create a conjugal feminine sexuality also fostered a new masculine superiority within the community, where men held the financial autonomy and provided for their families. The following extract is from a handbill written by men from a devadasi community in support of Reddi's bill and in response to *The Humble Memorial of Devadasis of the Madras Presidency*. This handbill clearly exudes an attitude of disrespect and disdain:

Having heard of our support of this bill, some in the *Cennai Uruttiakanikaiyar Cankam* have opposed this bill and described us as "selfish" individuals who have clamped down like an axe on our own clan [. . .] It is pathetic to know that their intention is to wear the *pottu* under the pretext of serving god only to satisfy the sexual lust of the so called aristocratic devotees of the temple²²²

The religious and sexual references in this text are especially fascinating as it was the same rhetoric seen in colonial accounts to condemn the immorality in Hindu tradition. While colonialists were fascinated by the relation between religion and sexuality, the men of the community describes this relation as being used as a justification for prostitution. This handbill can thus be seen as an example of how colonial opinion had influenced the native population. How much of these opinions that originated from colonial voices or from native reformers is hard to however hard to distinguish.

It was not only the men from the devadasi community that supported the bill. Yamini Purnatilakam from the Kalavanthulu community became a leader in the male-dominated reformist movement. Her activities in aid of the reform of the devadasis included: "training in spinning, weaving, basket making, tailoring etc."²²³ These must be seen as ways for the women to earn a living without turning to prostitution, as earning money from dance performance became increasingly difficult. For Purnatilakam, marriage still remained one of the main means through which to abolish the devadasi system. For example, the reform organization made house visits to Kalavanthulu in several towns such as; Rajahmundry, Masulipatnam and Vijayawada.

²²⁰ Srinivasan 1985: 1871-1872

²²¹ Srinivasan 1988:195

²²² Handbill from the members of the Icaivelar Cankam, Tanjore, in Soneij 2012:228

²²³ Vijasri 2004:186

In these home visits they made the families or women sign pledges stating that they would stop dancing and ensure their children married.²²⁴ Purnatilakam was herself influenced by gandhian nationalism²²⁵. It was therefore not a coincidence that her work aimed to rehabilitate the devadasis within the traditional form of marriage.

9. The devadasis and the reinvention of her performing arts

9.1 Preserving or reviving?

The anti-nautch movement had an impact not only on the devadasis way of life but also on their performing arts. The devadasis' profession was hereditary, and dance was confined to their group. How did the art of dancing survive the anti-nautch and disenfranchisement of the devadasis? This section will explore how their music and dance was both preserved and reformed before it was reintroduced to the public under the new name of Bharatanatyam. The change of names separated the dance from the devadasis and connected it instead to ancient theory. The dance was also domesticated by removing erotic content and gestures.²²⁶

In 1927, the Madras Music Academy was created by the Indian National Congress to promote, define and preserve classical south Indian music.²²⁷ The Madras elite aimed to reform the tradition and unlink it from the devadasis so it could be made accessible to the middle-class a part of their 'new' cultural heritage.²²⁸ The revival of indigenous artistic traditions served as a tool in the promotion of nationalism as it was seen as a source of pride for the south Indian culture.²²⁹ Subramanian describes three means by which this heritage was preserved: (1) a written tradition instead of the oral hereditary one (2) the promotion of 'correct' interpretations of texts within the relevance of performances (3) finding adequate compositions and making them accessible to the public.²³⁰ What is seen here was the loss of the exclusive of the guardianship of dance and music by the devadasi community. The process included a standardization of dance by means of written production. Krishnan comments on this standardization: "it is important that printed texts serve, to some extent, to undermine traditional authority, or displace hereditary or other specialized knowledge."²³¹ The dance and music previously reserved for the devadasis was thus reshaped to fit into a nationalistic image of Indian heritage. Allen does however point out that the nationalist rhetoric used by the Music Academy ceased well before India's independence.²³² Krishnan argues furthermore that the standardization that took place was linked to the social reforms instituted against the devadasis. The scripting of their dance culture thus served to preserve and ensure the survival of the tradition.²³³

²²⁴ Soneij 2012:136

²²⁵ Soneij 2012:132

²²⁶ Peterson and Soneij (ed) 2008:19-21

²²⁷ Subramanian 2006:78-79

²²⁸ Subramanian 2006:132

²²⁹ Allen [2007] in Peterson & Soneij (ed) 2008:91

²³⁰ Subramanian 1999:148-149

²³¹ Krishnan in Peterson & Soneij (ed) 2008:77

²³² Allen [2007] in Peterson & Soneij (ed) 2008:124

²³³ Krishnan [n.d] in Peterson & Soneij (ed) 2008:85

The devadasis were, to some extent, encouraged to share their tradition with the Music Academy. For example, Veena Dhanammal was sought for advice and skills. She did however remain somewhat of an exception, as devadasis were generally marginalized within the Academy.²³⁴ Furthermore, compositions made for dances such as the javalis and padams were assigned a lower status in the repertoire of classical music.²³⁵ Neither were all padams deemed suitable for performance. As even though the Music Academy “continued to extend support to traditional woman artists and honour them for their services to classical music, it never lost sight of the need to consolidate the retrieved classical music and locate it within the middle class.”²³⁶

9.2 Turning the hereditary into public

The reconstruction, reform or ‘revival’ of south Indian dance started in the 1930’s, before the anti-dedication ban. One of the key revivalists was Rukmini Devi Arundale. She was the first high caste woman to dance the Bharatanatyam, which previously had been forbidden to women of her class.²³⁷ She was a prominent theosophist, and was named “world mother” by their organization. In possession of this title, she was backed up by her fellow theosophists to revive the art of sadir. The ‘revival’ of the devadasi would take form through modifications to the dance styles such as (1) the removal of explicitly sexual elements, (2) the invocation of classical Sanskrit literature to revive and purify the dance (3) and a ‘sanskritisation’ of the dance where a brahmanical way of life was supported to purify the dance.²³⁸ Allen also noticed a change of tempo and rhythm as the dance was transferred from the temple and salons to the public stage.²³⁹ The reason for the revival, according to Rukmini, was the degradation of the art. The dance needed to be purified and patronized by respectable women instead of the traditional devadasis.²⁴⁰ Rukmini writes herself on the subject of the heritage of Indian dance:

In every temple and on all auspicious occasions there were dance performances. The art very nearly died as it had become a means of remembering the body rather than forgetting it. Yet, those whom the world denounced as having become corrupt gave themselves up with devotion and sincerity to the art they loved²⁴¹

In this short passage there is a clear reference to the devadasis and their sexuality. The view she conveys of the devadasis is negative. They were part of, or even the reason for, a degeneration of the art. She is quoted to have said that “I was happy [. . .] I was able to prove I could do without them.”²⁴² In the same passage she criticized their previous hereditary exclusivity and expresses her content that the dance was now in the hands of “good families.”

²³⁴ Subramanian 1999:162

²³⁵ Subramanian 2006:149

²³⁶ Subramanian 2006:135

²³⁷ Young 1999:54

²³⁸ Srinivasan 1985:1874-1875. A brahmanical way of life; for example, vegetarianism.

²³⁹ Allen [1997], in Soneij (ed) 2010:225

²⁴⁰ O’Shea 1998:47

²⁴¹ Arundale [1981], in Soneij 2010:194

²⁴² Arundale in Allen [1997] in Soneij (ed) 2010:207

Here again she distanced herself from the devadasis and laid claim to their art. Rukmini also founded a school of dance, the *Kalakshetra*, for upper and middle class girls, thus opening up the dance to higher castes.²⁴³ The school itself had support from the Madras Music Academy. The training in the dance would shift, from a close relationship between the devadasi and the nattuvanar, with the dance guru being largely in control of her professional career, to a more secular, commercial way of learning where the student paid tuition to her teacher.²⁴⁴ As the dance was taken out of the temple and onto public stages, the deity Nataraja was introduced as a patron deity of the dance. His icon would be placed on stage to recreate the atmosphere of the temple. Rukmini Devi was one of the first dancers who started this tradition.²⁴⁵ While Devi had a central role in the re-construction of the dance, she was not alone. Tanjavur Balasaraswati stood in contrast to her, and came from a different school; the Tanjore court style. She was also one of the few women from a devadasi community that was accepted by the Chennai elite to convey her heritage, not all devadasis have been allowed to share their knowledge of the art, Balasaraswati thus needed to be seen as exceptional.²⁴⁶ Compared to Rukmini Devi, Balasaraswati was proud of her artistic heritage and thought the dance was perfect:

The effort to purify Bharata Natyam through the introduction of novel ideas is like putting gloss on burnished gold or painting the lotus [. . .] therefore there is no need to purify perfection by amending, adding or subtracting any of the elements in the traditional order of recital²⁴⁷

Allen concluded that it took around thirteen years for the dance to undergo “a profound metamorphosis from nautch to bharata natyam, from [an] ‘untouchable’ activity to [a] national art form and [a] finishing school desideratum for young women of marriageable age.”²⁴⁸ As for the dance itself, Kersenboom argues that the dance had gone from being interpreted by highly estimated professionals to an independent style, far away from the authentic art of the devadasi.²⁴⁹

10. Concluding remarks

This study has shown that both the devadasi and her dance went through a domestication to fit into the middle-class norms that pervaded the political climate during the reformation of an Indian nation. It was not the work of one factor, but rather the sum of many voices. What matters is that the devadasis were one of these voices. They were not hapless victims of male exploitation, but active agents in the political and social sphere. Whether the abolition of the devadasi system is positive or negative is not a straightforward question. A study of this reform can however broaden our understanding for how conjugal sexuality was reinforced

²⁴³ O’Shea 1998:47

²⁴⁴ Allen [1997], in Soneij (ed) 2010:209-210

²⁴⁵ Allen [1997], in Soneij 2010:226

²⁴⁶ Soneij 2012:224

²⁴⁷ Balasaraswati [1975], in Soneij 2010:201

²⁴⁸ Allen [1997] in Soneij 2010:246

²⁴⁹ Kersenboom 1987:152

and how norms for women were created. The system as it was in before the nineteenth century had both advantages and disadvantages. Again, the importance is that, at least some, devadasis were both organized and part of the resistance. Even if the devadasi system may raise ambiguous feelings it is exactly this factor, their resistance and fight for their rights that can help us to understand the devadasi in a positive matter. Their life style was, at that point in time, worth preserving. It may of course not be that simple, as there was not any attractive or well thought out alternatives for the devadasi. It is also easy to highlight the economic independence and self-autonomy they had as devadasi, forgetting both the mainly patriarchal system they existed in, and the financial loss they would have if their profession was prohibited. The aftermath of the reform would be hard on the devadasi community, some devadasis would marry, some turn to prostitution, others managed to obtain permission to teach their dance to other women.²⁵⁰ Nair concludes that:

The gradual erosion of material support for the artistic abilities of the devadasi resulted in her decline as a professional dancer, producing in its place the proletarian sex worker with nothing to trade but her sexual services²⁵¹

While this was not true for all devadasis, one cannot overlook the consequences of their disfranchisement. The reform of the devadasis resulted in them being even more marginalized than before. Beeban Kidron's documentary gives an historical overview from the traditional devadasis to the contemporary dalit jogatis in Karnataka. As the traditional devadasi communities have been pushed to the margins the system has expanded in the outcaste communities. The system is used by these communities for its economic profits, giving poor families a mean to support themselves by dedicating their daughter. Their dedication does not have the same connotation as the devadasis in this study. Here, young girls are dedicated to the outcaste female deity Yellamma and they are often deprived of education. Instead they are expected to 'do business,' in other words work as prostitutes in order to support their families.²⁵² Treena Orchard has also conducted research on the views of sexuality, relationships and health amongst dedicated girls in Karnataka.²⁵³ Both Kidron's documentary and Orchard's paper deals with the ambiguity of the devadasi profession, the women are both seen as financially independent and in possession of self-autonomy, but also as being exploited by the system for their bodies. The fate of the devadasi stands in stark contrast to their dance, which has become "a standard element of the cultural repertoire of young women of the middle classes, not only in south India, but also all over India, and especially in the Indian diaspora."²⁵⁴ The original devadasi dance is however still performed today. Kalavantulu women still gather in private settings, in the confinement of their own homes. These private performances Soneij refers to as remembering their past, and their aesthetic heritage.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ Soneij 2012:190, 201

²⁵¹ Nair 1996:167

²⁵² Kidron 2011. 'Supporting their families' here means being able buy food.

²⁵³ Orchard 2007

²⁵⁴ Peterson & Soneij 2008:21

²⁵⁵ Soneij 2012: 210-221

11. Suggestions for further research

This study has barely scratched the surface of what can be learnt of the devadasis. It would be interesting to make a comparative analysis of different devadasi communities and how they were affected by the reform. Especially to see the relationship between the *jogatis* and former elite devadasi communities, since the majority of devadasis today consist of dalit girls. This relationship is only briefly mentioned by one of Soneij's informants who remember men coming to watch her perform and expecting the same treatment as from the dalit prostitute. To trace caste associations and marginalization's within the construction of gender identities could be a future topic for the study of the devadasis. This would be useful as there is not much literature which highlights the heterogeneity and the backgrounds of the devadasis. There are however difficulties in retrieving accounts of the jogatis past life, as their history remains fairly unknown.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ Soneij 2012:8

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