

DANCING GIRLS (DEVADASIS) AT THE TEMPLES- WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE JAGANNATH TEMPLE, PURI, ORISSA, INDIA

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Introduction

The dance of devadasis or dancing girls is considered as an inseparable part of the worship at various Hindu Temples. The Devadasi system may be centuries and centuries old. The word devadasi literally means “Dasi of the Lord” and these dancing girls are considered to be married to the Gods and are expected to dance before the Lord as per the custom and are to lead a life of strict abstinence, dedication and devotion to the Lord.

Unlike the devadasi system in other part of India, in Lord Jagannath’s Temple, the devadasis dance only before the Lord. Public dancing is banned. In Travancore, in olden days, the marriage ceremony of devadasis to Lord Sachidananda was considered as a highly auspicious occasion and this marriage was compared with that of Lord Siva with Parvati. The devadasis were respected as Goddess Parvati.

At one stage Rajeswara temple at Thanjavur was boasting of 400 (four hundred) devadasis, the temple at Palakot 500 (five hundred) and Chebrulu in Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh with 300 (three hundred) devadasis.

As per one version, during the Ahom period in Assam 10,000 (ten thousand) devadasis were settled at Hajo. However, they were never venerated by the Assamese people.

The system of worshipping at Lord Jagannath’s temple is unique in itself. Like human being, the Lord is equally fond of wearing various dresses on different occasions and partaking various foods depending on season and festivals. Even he takes Navakalebara and discards his old body at fixed duration like the death of ordinary mortals. Hence, like ordinary human beings as the custom prevails, it is the dance of devadasis with recital of Geet Gobinda that seduces him to sleep.

Antiquity of the Custom of Dancing at the Temples

Ritual dancing as part of religious services in a temple has a long history. In India the practice originated and developed during the early medieval period, but in countries like Mesopotamia (Iraq), Egypt and Greece the system flourished several thousand years earlier.

In Egypt, Temples of Osiris and Isis were crowded with dancing girls. At Corinth, in Greece thousands of women were associated with the temple of Aphrodite. The custom was prevalent in Babylonia (Iraq), Cyprus and other countries.

In Sumer (Iraq), beautiful women were attached to every temple, who formed part of the god's household.

In Egypt, four professions were open to women-priesthood, midwifery, mourning and dancing. The royal priestess entered the profession when quite young and was given training in the sacred dances and singing the sacred songs.

The custom was widely prevalent in ancient Greece. It was the temple of Aphrodite in Greece, where the practice of dedicating girls is said to have been first established as a ritual of worship. Strabo says that the temple of Aphrodite (at Corinth) was so wealthy that it was able to keep more than a thousand courtesans, who were dedicated to the Goddess by men and women.

In India, the temple women came mostly from the low caste non-brahmin families. Slaves were also dedicated to or purchased by the temple. However, the instances of some higher caste people, including the royal families, are also available. In 1407, Bicabbarasi, the younger sister of Kunda Raja was donated to the temple of Jagadeka Mallesvara. Kulasekhara, the Chera king, is said to have dedicated his daughter as devadasi. Some high caste Hindu women became devadasis in order to escape widowhood.

In India, the custom of devadasi centered round the saivite temples and in a few cases vaisnavite and Jain temples. In the state of Assam the custom was popular among the saivite temples of Hajo, Pariharesvara temple of Dubi, the Siva temple of Dergaon and Jaysagar.

The Jagannath Temple

Construction of the world famous Janannath temples was started by Ananta Varman Chodaganga Dev during 12th Century A.D. and was

completed by Ananga Bhima Dev. This vast temple complex occupies an area of over 400.000 square feet and is bounded by a 20 feet high wall. This compound contains about 120 shrines. The top of the Jagannath Temple towers to a height of 192 feet. This temple stands on an elevated platform of stone, which measures about 10 acres and is located in the heart of the town. The temple has four halls, outermost being the Bhogmandir, hall for having food. Next one is the Nata-mandir, a hall for music and dance. The next is the Jagamohana, the gathering hall for devotees and the last one is the Deul, enshrining the deities. The temple has four gates at the eastern, southern, western and northern side and are called Lions gate. Horse Gate, Tiger Gate and the Elephant Gate respectively. The architecture of the temple follows the pattern of many Orissan temples of the classical period.

Enrollment and Initiation of Devadasis

The prerequisites for a girl to be dedicated were several. She had to be whole of body, not be lame, deaf, or blind, or have any bleeding or suppurating wounds. It must be a devadasi who adopted a girl child for propagating the system. The adoption could be done by any of the following ways:-

1. Datta- A girl child given away by her parents to an older devadasi.
2. Vikrita- A girl child sold to an older devadasi.
3. Bhrutta- A girl child born to an adopted son of a devadasi to be trained as a devadasi.

Parents used to give or sell a daughter to a devadasi in any of three circumstances:(1) the parents, or more usually the mother, may have made a vow to Jagannatha to dedicate their daughter to his service. Such a vow is made usually at the time of the illness of another child when Jagannatha is prayed to cure the child; (2) the parents being very poor and cannot afford the expenses of marrying their daughter. (3) the mother of the girl being a widow and finding herself pregnant, had been driven from her house or had left it. Case 2 and 3 were the most frequent. Devadasis also used to offer money to poor parents in exchange for their daughter. There is no adoption ritual. The child is simply to live in the devadasi's house. **(P-79, Wives of the God-King; Marglin,F.)**

The devadasis did not marry. They considered themselves to be married to Jagannatha. Two ceremonies represented this marriage. First the devadasis

were dedicated to temple service per-pubertally, and this constituted a marriage to the deity. Then at the time of puberty, another ceremony was held which was for them like a wedding. It was at the puberty ceremony that the devadasis used to consummate their marriage to the deity with either the king or a Brahmin temple servant.

The ceremony of dedication to temple service was called Saree bandhana.

After the temple dedication ceremony, the devadasis could perform the morning dance ritual but not the evening singing ritual. The latter, they would be able to perform only after puberty.

Temple Ritual

The Devadasi system may be centuries and centuries old. The dance of devadasis or dancing girls was considered as an inseparable part of the worship at various Hindu Temples. The word devadasis literally means “Dasis of the Lord” and these dancing girls were considered to be married to the Gods and were expected to dance before the Lord as per the custom and were to lead a life of strict abstinence, dedication and devotion to the Lord.

Unlike the devadasis system in other parts of India, in Lord Jagannath’s Temple, the devadasis danced only before the Lord. Public dancing was banned. In the Devadasi community itself, there were many sects, emerging at various stages of history. The sect known as the Bhitara gaunis could perform at the innermost chamber of the temple at the time of Bada-Shringar (bed time of the lord). The Bahara gaunis or nachunis danced only in the outer hall near the Garuda Sthambha, during the morning offering. In the various festivals also, the duties of the two communities were divided.

Till the end, the two communities, bhitara gauni and bahara gauni (nachuni) survived. The Bhitargaunis sang in the ‘Duar Paka’ ceremony at representative of Lakshmi. They also sang in the Jhulan festival of Nabakalebar. The Bahara gaunis danced in the main hall, in the morning, in the boat at Chandanjatra festival and participated in Nanda utsav. Likewise, in all festivals, their duties were divided, but it is obvious that Bhitargaunis held a higher status.

The system of worshipping at Lord Jagannath’s temple is unique in itself. Like human beings, the Lord is equally fond of wearing various

dresses on different occasions and partaking various foods depending on season and festivals. Even he takes Navakalevara i.e. discarding his old body at fixed duration like the death of ordinary mortals. Hence, like ordinary human beings, as the custom prevails, it is the dance of devadasis with recital of Geet Gobinda that seduces Him to sleep.

The devadasis perform twice daily in the temple; in the morning and in the evening. The morning ritual of bahargaunis consists of a dance not accompanied by songs. This dance takes place simultaneously with the first major offering in the inner sanctum. The dance of the devadasi takes place in the dance hall (near Garuda Stambha) and by contrast, is a public event.

The bhitar gauni would sing at the Badashringhar, the main ceremony for ornamenting and dressing the God. Lord Jagannath, at bedtime, would be first served by male attendants - they would fan Him and decorate Him with flowers. After they leave, a bhitar gauni would then enter the room, stand near the door (Jaya Bijay) and sing Geettagovinda songs and perhaps perform a ritual dance. After a while, she would come out and announce that the Lord had gone to sleep and then the guard would close the main gate.

Throughout the year, there were festivals and in most of the festivals the Devadasis danced.

Chandanjatra

Chandanjatra is celebrated for 21 days in the month of June. The Lord was taken for a boatripe in Narendra Pond. The Devadasis danced throughout the event- in the procession, in a separate boat, next to Madanmohan boat and also in the island while the Lord rested. This ritual was the duty of the bahar gaunis. The last part of the Chandanjatra is spent in the temple and is called Gupta-Jatra. The bhitar gaunis used to perform this ritual.

Rath Jatra

On the day of the Rath-Jatra, the Devadasis would go in a group and dance in front of the Gundicha Mandap. On the Hera-Panchami day, the Lord still in the Gundicha Temple, a group of Devadasis would go to the Gundicha Temple, break a stick of the chariot to indicate Lakshmi's jealousy and anger. The Devadasis, as Lakshmi's friends engage in a mock quarrel with the Pandas outside, who were supposed to be Lord's friends.

Apart from these festivals, there were many others in which the Devadasis participated, like Jhulan, Naba-Kalebar, Rukmini Vivaha, Snan-Jatra etc. For each of these festivals, the Devadasis had specific songs and dance.

Another interesting feature of the ritualistic worship in the Lord Jagannath Temple is tantric panchamakara mode which is partly adhered to:

The Panchamakaras are (1) Matshya (Fish), (2) Mansa (Meat), (3) Madya (Wine), (4) Mudra (Money) and (5) Maithuna (Sex). Matshya is substituted for green vegetables cooked with Hingu (Asafoetida). The second i.e. Mansa represented by the preparation of Adda (ginger), the third Madya is substituted for green coconut water. The fourth is Mudra consists of a pudding prepared with sugar and flour named as Kanti. The fifth i.e. Maithuna which consists of a peculiar dance of devadasis.

Brundabati was the last Devadasi who performed the daily evening ritual. For this she received from the temple administration 30 Indian rupees a month. Such a meagre sum was of course totally inadequate to support her. **(P-35; Wives of God kings; Marglin,F)**

Payments to the Devadasis

In South India, land was the main source of the income of devadasis. Very often, endowments of villages or lands were made to the temples for meeting the cost of specified services, including music and dancing. In the temple of Lord Jagannath, the Devadasis were patronized by the King, temple priests and the Devotees.

During the dance of the devadasi in the dance hall of the main temple, the priests called the attention of the pilgrims to the devadasis. It is believed that viewing (darsan) of a devadasi has the same merit as having viewing of Jagannatha. At the end of the dance, pilgrims would place in front of her offerings of sindur, feet dye, Bangles, saris, ornaments, money. Such worship of the devadasi could also take place when she was all dressed for the dance on her way to or from the boating festival in Narendra tank.

The pilgrims from all parts of India requested the visit of the devadasis to their lodging houses. They did puja with flowers and sandal paste to the devadasis, washed their feet and gave them money. As revealed by Brundabati . She could receive anything between 15 and 100 rupees from such occasional visits. According to Brundabati and the other devadasis, pilgrims had stopped calling them .

Exploitation of Devadasis

Devadasis were considered themselves married to Lord Jagannath but after the puberty ceremony they used to consummate their marriage to the deity with either the King or a Brahmin temple servant.

Due to their religious status and maintenance by the King and the temple, the Devadasis were made to be exploited sexually by the king and the temple priests. So in effect the number of eligible partners is extended to include higher caste residents of Puri. The devadasis did not sell their services. Their relationships with men would be more accurately described by the word concubinage.

Some devadasis considered it legitimate that they as earthly courtesans like their counterparts in heaven, should have sexual relations with these earthly Gods .i.e. the King.

A devadasi named Brundabati said that typically they had sexual intercourse with the Brahmin priests at night after they return home from the temple where they have just performed the last ritual of the day, i.e. of putting the deities to sleep (pahuda). **(P-92; Wives of God kings; Marglin, F.)**

“Why should I hide these things? It is a tradition among us to keep relations with the Brahmin temple servants and with the king” said Radha, a devadasi. According to her, the devadasis must have their first sexual relation with the king. **(P-37 Wives of God kings; Marglin, F.)**

After independence of India and end of royal patronage, the earning of the devadasis fell drastically. Due to dwindling importance shown to them by the devotees and meagre maintenance paid by the temple authorities, the devadasis were almost reduced beggars and become more and more vulnerable to exploitation.

Brindavati, the last devadasi was paid Rs 30/- per month for her services at the temple. Hence one could easily comprehend her plight. Another devadasi named Shashimoni used to receive Rs. 300/- per month as her Pension.

Prevention

The main obstacles in weeding out the devadasi system were the endowments and perquisites which these women received from the temples and the reverence they commanded from the devotees. It was a normal practice for an aging devadasi to induct her daughter into the temple service

and thereby retain the benefits in the form of perquisites and income. In the absence of a daughter, a devadasi would go to the extent of securing an heiress, either by way of adoption or by way of purchase.

Another obstacle was the prevalence of superstition among the devadasi that the God would visit them with some punishment if they did not continue the practice.

The first effective step for abolishing the system was undertaken by the Princely Family of Mysore in the first decade of the present century.

In 1930, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi brought a Bill in the Madras Council, prohibiting the performance of the dedicatory ceremony in any Hindu temple and enabling the dedicated women to contract a legal marriage. In 1934, the Bombay Devadasis- Protection Act was passed. Thus, by the close of the third decade, preventive legislation covered almost the whole of the area where devadasi system was prevalent.

The provision in the India Penal Code, which prohibited the dedication of girls below the age of 18, made little headway in putting an end to the practice. The law was rendered ineffective by the guardians or the parents of the girls waiting till the completion of the eighteenth year and then dedicating them to the temples.

With the coming into force in 1861 of the India Penal Code, the recruitment of girls for employing them as devadasis was an offence punishable under section 372 of the I. P. C.

Ceasing of royal patronage, non-patronization by the devotees, degeneration of the dancers along with the punitive legislation brought an end to the age-old practice in 1990s.

Unfortunately, the temple authorities made a futile attempt to revive this tradition of dance in 1995. They advertised to recruit devadasis. In total five number of applications were received. Due to public outcry against the revival and non-fulfillment of the criteria, no body could be appointed as a devadasi. Celebrities such as noted Bharatnatyam dancer Swapna Sundari volunteered to be a devadasi and demanded to recruit married women as devadasis. Renowned Odissi dancer Late Sanjukta Panigrahi also advocated in favour of the revival.

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