

[Devadasis, Part II](#)

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Devadasis, Part II

Part I introduced the complex and severely misunderstood tradition of the devadasis, Hinduism's ritual temple artists. Four points were made: 1) the devadasi was highly trained in music and dance from girlhood; 2) at 16, she was ceremoniously "married" to a temple Deity and served as a full temple employee; 3) she was permitted a "patron" of good bearing from the community; 4) and she was distinct from other women who sang solely in palaces and wealthy homes as well as the various strata of courtesans high and low.

Despite all the bizzare accounts by mainly Western writers, the devadasi temple tradition was not some twisted turn of a patriarchal Indian society nor a heartless Hindu institution of "religious harlotry." Hardly. Its origins trace deep into the Saiva Agamas (circa 1,500 bce), which dignify her as a bonafide ceremonial officiant, with specific duties, training and and rules of conduct. Both the devadasis and the priests were a part of the subtle, sacred task of invoking the shakti, divine energy, of the Mahadeva and making it a palpable experience to devotees. The priests employed Sanskrit mantras; the devadasis used music, mudra and dance. Both regarded themselves as "temple servants." They carried an attitude of humble self-respect, joyfully filling an occupation that garnered little worldly reward. Their deepest fulfillment was completely inner.

The Kamikagama describes many categories of female ritual temple artists, including the Rudraganika, Rudrakkannikai and the Rudradasi. Contemporary high priest Sadyojatasivacharya summarizes from Agamic passages: "The Rudraganika should wear her hair in a knot above the collar bone; her waist should be adorned by a saffron cloth. She should wear the Siva mark of three stripes of holy ash and the rudraksha as the sole ornament. She should wear a silken blouse. The acharya gives her Sivadiक्षा (initiation) and teaches her the Panchakshara Mantram and ties on her the golden sign of the linga onto her wedding pendant. For all three [ganikas] after the bottu (lingam) has been tied, it is necessary for her to perform nrittnam, pure dance. If this is done with lust, or otherwise, the king and country will

be destroyed."

Other sects, Sakta and Vaishnavite, scripturally sanctioned and adopted the devadasi tradition. To her village, she was considered a "harbinger of auspiciousness," a true embodiment of the Deity. Devotees invited devadasis to private homes on auspicious occasions, especially weddings. Here they were worshiped and then asked to sing and bless. They went in groups of two or more, never alone. One Puri Temple retired devadasi relates: "People used to take sand from our door [as a blessing] and bangles from our hands to give to their daughters. But today, people think sinfully about us and [don't do this anymore]."

The devadasi's schedule was highly routine. She performed daily, or more infrequently if many were attached to her temple. She lived in her own small house, alone, on temple lands, and ate both temple prashadam and cooked for herself. She rose before dawn, performed her personal worship and arrived at the temple with the priests. She sang, lit lamps and danced generally in two different locations--right before the inner sanctum and also at smaller shrines in outer mandapams (halls) where devotees were uplifted by her sublime worship. At other times, she performed in festival processions and part of dance dramas that continued around the year keeping Hindu teachings and stories alive. In the evening, she sang but only the most honored "inner division devasasis" performed at the close of the final evening puja, waving the last arati. Some learned and played the flute and veena.

Her "Private" Life--Fact Versus Fabrication

Nothing has so hypnotized the prurient imagination of Western writers than the devadasi's "private" life. French missionary Abb[?] Dubois seeded a breeding nest of vilification with his baseless statement circa 1800: "Once the devadasis' temple duties are over, they open their cells of infamy, and frequently convert the temple itself into a stew. A religion more shameful or indecent has never existed amongst a civilized people." Other Western writers further fictionalized this warped portrait. By the early 1900's, an [?]lite group of Anglicized Indians, brainwashed by decades of Christian moralizing--along with a party of avowed anti-Hindu atheists--led fierce campaigns against temple dancing. Several unusually courageous devadasis such as Balasarawati (left) and stalwart brahmin sympathizer E. Krishna Iyer fought against the zealous "reformers." But to no avail. The temples were legally "cleansed" in late 1947. (See side bar.) The sacred art form was frantically and

awkwardly passed on to high-caste brahmin girls to learn and then perform as "high" secular entertainment, like ballet, where it stands today.

Ironically the dismantling of the devadasi tradition only fueled an even more radical rural religious practice. In this, girls are "wed" to a God or Goddess, but with no temple to serve in. Often called jogtis, (or, confusingly, devadasis by the Indian press) they carry an image of the Deity and worship it daily. Considered "auspicious," they beg at five homes a day and are openly "public women," with rural society's religious sanction. State governments have banned the practice and are desperately trying to eradicate it.

During 1975-1981 Fr[?]d[?]rique Marglin, an anthropologist who studied Indian dance, visited India and befriended the last remaining temple devadasi of the Jagannath Temple at Puri. Her remarkable 400-page sober and sensitive account of their tradition, *Wives of the God/King*, faithfully retrieves one of the clearest pictures of the original devadasi tradition in all its complexity.

The Puri devadasis repeatedly told Marglin that fraternizing with "outsiders," (pilgrims) was strictly taboo. If they had "relations" with a temple devotee, they were dismissed. However, they shared something that was common knowledge amongst temple brahmin families but to few others. In the words of Radha, a Puri devadasi: "It is a custom for us to keep relations with a brahmin temple servant, but never with 'outsiders.' Why should I hide these things? When I had my puberty, I exchanged garlands with this priest [a widower] in whose brother's house I live and I have lived within the boundaries of that relationship always." The Puri devadasis explained that they grew up with the priests and felt a natural closeness to them as both had dedicated their lives to being temple servants. The brahmins' wives were fully aware of these "second wife" situations. Until "reformers" came, they were never a moral concern. The sinfulness Christians attached to non-monogamous marital arrangements was not yet known. For years, the devadasis feared revealing this area, painfully aware that already they were considered prostitutes by educated society. Now, demoralized and disbanded, they feel they have nothing to lose in confiding everything, for they have nothing left, except a hauntingly deep love of devotional song and dance.

Part III will include interviews with famous contemporary dancers, including Mrinalini Sarabhai, Ratna Kumar and Vidya Sridhar. *The Law that Damned*

Dance

The sun rose bright over Madras on January 27th, 1948. It seemed to be an everyday morning. But when the Fort St. George Gazette hit the streets, there were cries--cheers and tears. The legal section carried the long-expected decree--The Madras Devadasis Act XXXI, (reproduced in part):

"Dancing by a woman, with or without kumbharathy (pot- shaped temple arati lamp), in the precincts of a temple or other religious institution, or in any procession of a Hindu deity, idol or object of worship installed in any such temple or institution or at any festival or ceremony held in respect of such a deity, idol or object of worship, is hereby declared unlawful... Any person who performs, permits or abets [temple dancing] is punishable with imprisonment for... six months.

...A woman who takes part in any dancing or music performance... is regarded as having adopted the life of prostitution and becomes incapable of entering into a valid marriage and... the performance of any [marriage] ceremony... whether [held] before or after this Act is hereby declared unlawful and void."

From that day onward, 35,000 temples of Tamil Nadu barred all women performers, devadasis or not. Most had already. Today, Indian girls perform Hinduism's sacred dances in high school basketball gyms, rented Christian community centers and hotel dance halls. The temples meanwhile are void of devotional song and dance, except occasional tourist shows like at Khajarao.

Amrapalli of Puri

Amrapalli was a dancer/singer in Puri's Jagannath Temple and began in her early teens. In her mid-twenties, the local king suddenly banished her from the temple. She says it was because she refused his royal order to bed with him (a king's right, exercised for centuries). Others said it was because she lived for a period in Calcutta with her "patron," breaking the rule that devadasis never leave their temple's town.

Amrapalli broke another rule, one of the first to do so. When she saw her tradition being trampled into ruin by the "anti-dance" reformers, she trained her four adopted daughters in music and dance, but married them to high caste husbands (including one brahmin), instead of dedicating them as devadasis. The fourth she married to a devadasi's son. He became an Orissi dancer and now teaches at a dance school.

Amrapalli came from the karana caste, hereditary temple scribes, and was dedicated to the temple at age 9 by her mother. She was highly trained, studied literature, wrote poetry, was considered very beautiful, danced inspirationally and had an unusually sweet, devotional voice.

"[The 'reformers'] say I was just a concubine of [my patron]. But he was also one of my gurus. Sometimes, he even worshiped me as a devotee, giving me sandalpaste and flowers and doing puja to me. He was very religious and built a shrine and a hospital."

As of 1982, Amrapalli was happy, living alone and associating closely with a Vaishnavite monastery in Puri, worshiping and attending talks by sadhus.