

REFORM OR CONFORMITY?
*Temple 'Prostitution' and the Community in
the Madras Presidency)*

Amrit Srinivasan

This paper describes the changes that affected an artist community of Tamil Nadu in the wake of reform agitation begun in the late nineteenth century, concerning the idiosyncratic life-style of a section of its women — the devadasis. The term devadasi, a shortened form of the Tamil *tevaradiyal*,² was applied to that class of women who, through various ceremonies of 'marriage' dedicated themselves to the deities of temples and other ritual objects. The use of the term 'caste', *jati*, in relation to the devadasis is misconceived; according to the devadasis themselves

The paper draws upon my research work for a doctoral degree at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, England. Data on the devadasis were collected through both field and library research. The documentary material focussed on (i) the specifically British, official and non-official tradition of scholarship on India in the colonial period, and (ii) on the orthogenetic textual tradition. In the field, research was carried out in two stretches covering a total of one and a half years from 1979 – 1981 and focussed primarily on the Tanjore District of Tamil Nadu. The main aim of field research was to contact and interview the devadasis — the living representatives of a changed cultural position, in order to grasp their evaluation and interpretation of the past. All those who could provide eye-witness accounts of the institution of temple-dancing as a working system, such as dance teachers, temple priests, musicians and local landlords, were interviewed as well. Supplementing these interviews was the collection of biographies, extended case-studies and genealogies, archival accounts, temple and social histories, court and temple records and scripts of dance lyrics and ritual songs.

² The term translates (not very well) as 'slave of the gods'; literally it means 'at the feet of the lord' which clearly distinguishes it from the cruder term, *tevaniya* or 'available for men', which is used to refer to a common class of prostitute.

there existed a devadasi way of life or professional ethic (*vrtti, murai*), but not a devadasi *jati*. The profession of devadasi was hereditary but it did not confer the right to work *without adequate qualification*. There were certain local communities associated with the devadasis such as the Melakkarar, the Nayan - akkarar and the Dasi in Tanjore district, who either recruited (through birth and/or adoption) and trained them or were functionally connected with them in the tasks of temple service. But it was only *after* the reforms that these individual and distinctive service categories merged under the prestigious 'caste' title, Isai Vellala,³ in a bid to overcome the disrepute attaching to their past association with the devadasis. In a very real sense this marked the transition from a loosely-integrated occupational, temple social system to a highly politicised, communal caste association which utilised the cultural propaganda of the regional non-Brahmin party organisations, the Dravida Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, to achieve corporate identity and prestige.

The first half of the paper reconstructs the devadasi system as it prevailed prior to the legislation of 1947, which banned all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls were dedicated to Hindu shrines.⁴ The second half describes the 'reforms' instituted in the social, religious and domestic status of the devadasis in the wake of the legislation, and questions to what extent these changes constituted an 'improvement' over their past position. The colonial context of the devadasi debate which kept the whole issue of reform very much at the forefront of conservative, native political activity is borne in mind throughout the discussion.

In Tamil Nadu, or the Province of Madras as it was earlier

³ The term *icai* appears in classical Tamil literature and refers to a special music played in the courts of kings. In association with Vellala, a respected caste name for dominant Tamil non-Brahmins, it represents a modern version of the term *icai-karar* or *icai-panar* which referred to the prestigious bards and court minstrels who performed this music in ancient times. (Tamil Lexicon, Vol. I : 272-3). This title was adopted by the caste association, the Isai Vellala Sangam, at a conference in Kumbakonam in 1948.

⁴ The full text of the Act is found in the archives of the Government of Madras, Law (legislative) Department G.O. No. 23, January 26, 1948: Acts — The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947, Publ. Madras Act XXXI of 1947.

known, it was the devadasi, or D.G. (short for dancing-girl in Anglo-Indian coinage) who was the *nautch* girl of elsewhere. With appropriate variations, she danced this style before the deity in the temple and also at royal courts, the domestic celebrations of the local elite, public ceremonies of honour, and temple festivals. The performance of the *nautch*, the *cinnamelam*⁵ or *sadir kacheri*⁶ as it was variously called in Madras, was obligatory and a matter of etiquette at society occasions. Besides, of course, it proclaimed the wealth and prestige of patrons who maintained the dancing-girls (as concubines) and their bands of musicians, all at great cost.

The campaign against the dedication of women to temple service began in earnest in 1892. Articulated primarily by educated Hindus, Brahmin and non-Brahmin alike, the campaign formed part of the whole complex of reforms relating to women, such as the ban on *sati*, female infanticide, the encouragement of widow-remarriage and the raising of the age of consent, which had earlier been pressed forward by the English missionaries and officials themselves. The overall moral, political and scientific 'experiment' tried out in India by the Utilitarians and enlightened Protestants, had however proved to be a dangerous failure. The 'mutiny' of 1857 and growing local protests had brought home to the British Parliament the impracticality of interfering with their subjects' private lives. In 1858, the governing of India was transferred from the East India Company to the Crown, and Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, promised the Indian people tolerance and non-interference in all matters relating to religious faith and observance. The equal and impartial protection of a rational system of civil law was, in the same breath, offered as a privilege available to all.

The move for greater neutrality in the religious affairs of the Indians had been initiated by the missionaries, who saw in the government's 'protective' attitudes towards the Hindu temples, for instance, a patronage of precepts and practices at variance

⁵ The band which accompanied the dancing-girl, as against the *periamelam* which accompanied the male, temple-pipers.

⁶ The term *sadir* is not a Tamil one; some derive it from the Urdu or Hindustani word, *sadar* meaning public court. In usage it referred to the public, solo concert (*kacken*) dancing at rich mens' homes on ceremonial occasions.

with Christianity. As early as 1833, the Directors of the East India Company sought to withdraw all control and sever connections with the management of religious institutions. Despite the enormous complications of such a move (given the government's deep involvement in temple affairs) they set about it, while yet continuing to draw what benefits they could from the temples, as for instance, the utilisation of surplus endowments on matters requiring public spending. Her Majesty's assurance consequently was increasingly viewed by the Indian public as a desire on the part of the government to withdraw from the responsibilities of **rule**. If earlier the people had made their anger felt at the comprehensive programmes of religious (Christian) attack on idolatry, caste practices and other social customs, they now went about letting the government know that its duty lay not in indifference but in the ratification of the people's wishes and expectations even in private and/or religious matters.

The government's proclaimed policy of neutrality combined with its potential power to legislate was destined to greatly politicise the Indian people who competed with one another to somehow gain official attention. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the tremendous spurt in both constitutional and unconstitutional agitations for secular and religious reform has been well documented by political historians. Lobbies, associations and other pressure groups were formed to let the 'consensus' be known, on which government action could be based and were, in a sense, encouraged by the British. It is in the context of this greatly accelerated political activity that many of the older questions relating to women's issues were regenerated, this time largely through indigenous initiative. There was nothing particularly new in this for Indians; the tradition of liberation and reform was as much a part of shared history as conservatism and conformity and went back to a period much earlier than the advent of the British. What *was* new was that given the alien impersonal bias of British law, these movements were more likely than ever before to be couched in terms of a universalistic jargon essentially insensitive to socio-historical complexity.

If sacrificial infanticide and *sati* had been banned earlier as 'murder', then by the late nineteenth century temple-dancers **were being presented** as 'prostitutes', and early marriage for

women as 'rape' and 'child-molestation'. Given the dual role of the British, both as administrators and legislators, there was a premium on social issues being presented in a 'language' understood by them, on which their actions could be based. This imposition on all manner of public activity, of an alien framework of understanding, played up the apparent contradictions within Indian social reality permitting the politicisation of many civil issues. In the case of the devadasi controversy, if some viewed it as a pernicious social evil, there were others who viewed it as a perfectly valid religious profession with the devadasi having her own distinctive code of conduct. This sympathy extended even to a defence of her legal rights:

'Raising the consent age above 14 in extramarital cases would be unfair to devadasis as that would prevent them earning their livelihood.' (Testimony of Mr. Pandit, Asst. Commissioner of Belgaum, Age of Consent Committee, Poona hearing. Appearing in Associated Press despatch. *Bombay Daily Mail*, 1928, November 5.)

As history informs us, however, the vigour of the reform movement was such that the devadasi had stopped dancing much *before* formal legislation was enacted against temple dedication in 1947. A reconstruction of the devadasi system as it actually worked in the Tamil region may reveal the nature of the incomprehension that underlay the huge success of the reform campaign.

Traditionally the young devadasi underwent a ceremony of dedication to the deity of the local temple which resembled, in its ritual structure, the upper-caste Tamil marriage ceremony. Following this ceremony she was set apart from her non-dedicated sisters in that she was not *permitted* to marry and her celibate or unmarried status was legal in customary terms. Significantly, however, she was not prevented from leading a 'normal' life involving economic activity, sexual activity and child-bearing.⁷ The very rituals which marked and confirmed her incorporation

⁷ In Christian traditions of celibacy for the priesthood and consecrated life, sexual chastity is a normative aspect of the vows taken. Before the Reformation, however, the prevalence of priestly concubinage provides sufficient evidence to indicate that in an earlier period the institutionalised stipulation against marriage was more crucial than rigorous sexual chastity. There is no

into temple service also committed her to the rigorous emotional and physical training in the classical dance, her hereditary profession. In addition, they served to advertise, in a perfectly open and public manner, her availability for sexual liaisons with a 'proper' patron and protector. Very often, in fact, the costs of temple dedication were met by a man who wished thus to anticipate a particular devadasi's favours after she had attained puberty.

It was, crucially, a woman's dedicated status which made it a symbol of social prestige and privilege to maintain her. The devadasi's sexual partner was always chosen by 'arrangement' with her mother and grandmother. Alliance with a Muslim, a Christian or a lower caste man was forbidden, while a Brahmin or member of the landed and commercial elite was preferred for the good breeding and/or wealth he would bring into the family. The non-domestic nature of the contract was an understood part of the agreement, with the devadasi owing the man neither any householding services nor her offspring. The children in turn could not hope to make any legal claims on the ancestral property of their father whom they met largely in their mother's home when he came to visit.

The temple institution's sanction to the pursuit of feminine skills and the exercise of sex and child-bearing functions outside the conventional domestic (*grihasta*)⁸ context was evident in many ways. Till 1910 the rituals of dedication were public and elaborately advertised ceremonies which required the permission

denying, however, that the ordinary understanding of celibacy today implies sexual abstinence. Particularly in the case of nuns the passionless ideal is more strictly enforced and adhered to. For the reform, strongly influenced by Christian monastic ideals in the colonial period, it made more sense consequently to publicise the devadasi system as a degenerate one. Ancient ideals of sexual purity it propogandized had been corrupted by the strength of commercialism and modern-day immorality. But if one is to understand the devadasi system, it is crucial to accept that though the ceremony of dedication prevented her from contracting a legal marriage, it never demanded sexual abstinence. If anything Tamil bhakti traditions, of which the devadasi was an integral part, rejected puritanism as a valid religious ethic for its female votaries.

⁸ In the indigenous tradition, *grihasta* refers specifically to householding life based on the marriage of a man and woman, and the duties and rights that flow from it. The devadasis always lived as members of a household but it was not a 'domestic' (*grihasta*) structure.

and full cooperation of the religious authorities for their proper performance. The *pottukattu* or *tali-tying* ceremony which initiated the young *dasi* into her profession was performed in the temple through the mediation of the priest. The insistence on the pre-pubertal state of the girl was in imitation of Brahminical custom which saw marriage as the only religious initiation (*diksha*) permissible to women. Similarly, the *sadanku* or puberty ceremonies of the devadasi which confirmed her 'married' status as wife-of-the-god, were performed with an emblem of god borrowed from the temple as stand-in 'bridegroom'. On this occasion the procreative and nuptial rites performed at the time of actual consummation of a Brahmin marriage (shortly after the girl attains maturity) were also carried out and auspicious wedding songs celebrating sexual union sung before the 'couple'. From now onwards the devadasi was considered *nitya sumangali*, a woman eternally free from the adversity of widowhood, and in that auspicious capacity, she performed for the first time her ritual and artistic duties in the temple. The puberty ceremonies were an occasion not only for temple honour but for community feasting and celebration in which the local elite also participated. The music and dance and public display of the girl was meant to attract patrons just as amongst upper-caste non-Brahmin groups they served to invite marriage proposals from the family network.

A variety of competitive social pressures and traditional community obligations worked towards the setting up of particular arrangements between dancing girls and rich landed or business households. The men of the patron class were expected to accept a young devadasi as a concubine despite the enormous expense it eventually entailed. The fact that it was the eldest son alone (and that too one who was already married) who had the right to take on such a partnership showed the normative co-existence of a private 'decent' way of life with one that was more wayward and idiosyncratic. For the devadasis their temple attachment granted sectarian purity and the promotional avenues to pursue a prosperous career. The economic and professional benefits were considerable and most importantly, not lacking in social honour.

'Touching the dancing women, speaking to them or looking at them,' was mentioned as a ritual offence in the sectarian texts laying out the etiquette to be followed by worshippers when visit-

ing temples. This misconduct was considered equivalent in blame to other varieties of desecration such as spitting in the temple, turning one's back to the shrine, looking covetously at consecrated property, etc. Life honours were granted to the devadasi at the time of her death. Flowers, sandal paste and a garland from the god of the temple were sent on the occasion of her last rites. In some temples the fire of the kitchen in the temple was used to light her pyre and the deity observed 'pollution' for a token period of one day when no puja was performed at the shrine. Usually, a funeral procession is not meant to stop anywhere, but in the case of the devadasi the bier was placed for a moment on the floor near the entrance to the temple when the gifts mentioned above were made.

As *nitya sumangali*, a woman with the protection of a living husband — the deity and lord of the temple corporation — the devadasi was provided with the excuse to enter secular society and improve her artistic skills amongst the connoisseurs and their families who were obliged to respect her and treat her with chivalry. What in ordinary homes was performed by the *sumangalis* of the family — ceremonies welcoming the bridegroom and guests, singing songs of festivity at marriage and puberty ceremonies, tying the red beads on a woman's marriage necklace, etc.—were in the big houses of the locality performed by the devadasi. As a symbol of good luck, beauty and fame the devadasi was welcome in all rich men's homes on happy occasions of celebration and honour. Her strict professionalism made her an adjunct to conservative domestic society, not its ravager. It is this which lay behind the customary acceptance of married and financially secure family men as patrons. As the wives of men who had maintained dancing women often said, they far preferred a devadasi to a second wife as a rival, as the latter would make domestic life intolerable. Even amongst some non-Brahmin groups where the devadasi could assume the status of a common-law wife of her patron, she never resided with him.

By cooperating in the ceremonies which conferred prestigious *sumangali* status on a section of its female personnel, the temple permitted the most intimate connections to develop between sectarian specialists and the laity. Crucially, however, its mediation helped to simultaneously institutionalise and depersonalise these dyadic, erotic relationships. The triple-cornered communication

between the temple, the devadasi and her patron permitted the legitimate pursuit of interests even in the absence of 'market' conditions. For the civil elite a sexual relationship with temple women did not reflect secret needs of a ritual or orgiastic nature. As far as my field information goes, the man did not go to her to get special powers (*sakti*) or other such magical returns. The very publicity and singularity of the connections between a devadasi and her patron ruled out the cultic context more typical of Tantrik rites which involve high-caste men with female partners who are 'low' with a vengeance — usually untouchable. The competitiveness of the enterprise was evident from the fact that it was the devadasi's original sacramental husband, the Lord of the temple, who provided the momentum for her subsequent attraction for men who wished to approximate and imitate it in human terms. The fascination of a 'wife-of-the-god' may be mythic just as the fascination for a bed in which Napoleon slept or for a saint's relic. But what is crucial for us is that it converts itself into exchange value when the socialite-client, collector or believer wishes to own the commodity in question or touch it for himself. Intimacy with a devadasi consequently demonstrated public success which visibly marked a man apart from his peers.

Seen in this light, the devadasi represented a badge of fortune, a form of honour managed for civil society by the temple. Land grants were given to individuals by rulers and patrons expressly for meeting their 'entertainment' expenses — the upkeep of a devadasi and her band of musicians. The whole idiom of temple 'honours' (*mariyadai*) in which the devadasi participated permitted a privileged contact with the deity and/or his possessions to have a more clearly secular significance and value. The temple for its own part was no disinterested participant, for the patronage extended to the devadasi was by no means passive. It recognized that her art and physical charms attracted connoisseurs (in the garb of devotees) to the temple eager to promote her as their protegee in the world at large. The devadasi acted as a conduit for honour, divine acceptance and competitive reward at the same time that she invited 'investment', economic, political and emotional, in the deity. In this way the competitive vanities of local patrons, their weakness for one-upmanship with their equals and rivals become inextricably linked with the temple institution. The efficacy of the devadasi as a woman and dancer

began to converge with the efficacy of the temple as a living centre of religious and social life, in all its political, commercial and cultural aspects.

The temple's sanction to the system of extra-marital alliance described above was particularly evident from the fact that it was the offspring of these 'mixed-unions' who were given prime monopoly over temple service. The temple also ensured in this way a permanent task-force committed to temple duties over all others. In an inter-caste context, the religious sanction given to female celibacy institutionalised sexual intimacy between devadasis and patrons. In an intra-caste context, it enforced sexual separation in excess of incest prohibitions normally operating within the kin group. The devadasi was permanently denied to any and every man of her community as a marriage or sexual partner. The artificial dichotomy within the community between the householding and the celibate female population gave rise to the 'pure' or 'closed' and the 'mixed' or 'open' sections of the community. The former perpetuated itself through marriage, the latter through both marriage and 'mixed' sex. (The sons and brothers of the devadasi were permitted to marry as also the non-dedicated girls of the group.) These internal divisions were closely linked to aesthetic specialisation within the community.

The allied arts of Tamil bhakti worship — *sadir* (dance), *nagaswaram* (instrumental music) and *nattuvangam* (dance-conducting) — were traditionally organised into two orchestras: the *periamelam* (in Tamil, literally, 'big drum') and the *cinna-melam* ('small drum'). The *periamelam* was focussed around the male *nagaswaram* virtuoso and was the hereditary specialisation of the 'pure' section of the community. The *cinna-melam*, on the other hand, was focussed around the devadasi or female dancer and her male guru or *nattuvanar*, and was the hereditary specialisation of the 'mixed' section of the community. The requirement for both heredity and skill in temple positions was evident in that it was not enough to be born into the community, one had to be competent in order to gain rights to temple service, just as it was difficult to be competent in the particular

service unless born or adopted and resident in the community with its internal training facilities. Professional divisions such as *peria* and *cinna-melam* reflected an involution and greater sophistication of the artistic services rendered by the community under the influence of the Bhakti temple institution. Both the technical instrumental organisation as also the aesthetic and functional speciality of the music provided by the two orchestras reflected this fact. The statutory requirement to live proximate to the deity intensified local community relations which (as they saw it) had helped 'concentrate' and develop their skills. Art as a corporate function and mode of livelihood ensured competence and continuity of practice. An extremely telling metaphor used to justify their artistic capacities was that of the plantain (*vazai*) which kept perpetuating itself over the year from the original parent stock (*vazai-adi-vazai*).

What is significant for our purpose, however, is that in the context of an otherwise shared community culture where the *sadir* 'people' (also referred to as the *cinna-melam*) and the *nagaswaram* 'people' (also referred to as the *periamelam*) lived, married and worked together, it was the female profession which instituted competitiveness. Most of the *nagaswaram* players remarked on the greater wealth, fame and glamour that had been possible for the dancing girls as compared to themselves. Significantly, they claimed this to be the effect of an unfair advantage arising out of the natural attraction of women. According to them the temple authorities gave the dance pre-eminence at festivals knowing that the people would flock to see the devadasis. The devadasis were certainly permitted privileges and honours and a physical closeness to the deity denied to the men of their community. The artistic and monetary dominance of the female art form was also linked to its earnings as a concert item — before the 1940s *nagaswaram* played only at outdoor occasions. Even their sense of comparative social superiority ('we take our father's initials ...') offered the *nagaswaram* artists little recompense since they were forced to acknowledge that it was the devadasi's distinctive life-style which permitted her greater artistic and worldly success. In addition, one cannot help feeling, the privileged access of women artistes to rich patrons and their wealth underscored more sharply their absolute non-availability to their own men. The antagonism felt for the *cinna-melam* was in

⁹ The *periamelam* was constituted of the *nagaswaram* (a kind of oboe), the *tavil* or 'big', outdoor drum, the *ottu* (drone) and cymbals. The *cinna-melam* was constituted by the *mukha-vina* (a diminutive *nagaswaram*), the *mridangam* or 'small' concert drum, the *turd* (a bagpipe shaped drone) and cymbals.

recognition consequently of the power and influence the devadasis had *as women* and as artists. The leading role played by the men of the community in the subsequent reform campaign to abolish the female profession of temple-dancing cannot be understood without reference to this potent fact.

It was the radical factor of female celibacy which permitted the group to go beyond a purely domestic organisation of internal social relations. The professional division within the community between the male and female art forms was not restricted to household specialisation. In the *nagaswaram* tradition the women of the group were scrupulously kept out of public, professional life. In the dance tradition, too, despite the involvement of both men and women in the occupational tasks of the group, various mechanisms operated which kept the relationship free of any domestic obligations. As we have seen, married girls were not permitted to specialise in the classical temple dance and its allied music. Conversely, those girls who were dedicated to the deity were not permitted to cook or perform mundane domestic tasks either for the men of their own household or for their gurus. The latter in fact were necessarily men from a separate household tradition to that of their students even though they might reside together for the period of training.

The *peria* and *cinna* social divisions clearly did not reflect the mechanical repetitiveness of a uniform domestic structure. The 'rationalisation' of diffuse kinship ties and the 'pre-industrial' economy seen as characteristic of caste society was most evident in the structure and organisation of the devadasi household. The methods and means employed here to encourage artistic excellence, monetary profit and a greater systematisation in the achievement of life's goals reflected an unusual household and cultural tradition which saw itself as perpetuated in a natural *and* moral/social sense, by its women. The direct link that obtained between women as the bread-winners, the kind of income they fetched and their household supremacy, not only in spending and managerial matters but in a political sense as well, will now be briefly described.

It was conscious economic motivation which lay behind the temple dedications, whatever the voiced religious reasons for their performance. Although the temple cooperated in the rituals, pressures to perform the ceremony remained internal to

the household and reflected not only the self-interest of the family against 'outsiders' but also internal mechanisms of competition and rivalry which often raised disputes over claims." The insistence on the minor status of the girl to be dedicated reflected this fact since it ensured the retention of hereditary rights by her to service and land benefits in a given temple. The temple tenurial system of pre-colonial India granted a service allotment or *maniam* which was meant for the enjoyment, 'over the generations' (*vamshaparambirayam*), of a set of dasis attached to a given shrine. They had no right to alienate it since it was not in their name but the temple's, more specifically in the name of the deity or the head of the controlling *matha*. The organisation of shares (*panku*) in this land, just as the organisation of training and arrangement of daily duties, was a matter of internal management by the community. The property transmission within the household recognized the joint and inalienable nature of privileged land-use which could only remain with the family so long as there was a member actively employed in the temple.

The clear desire to keep the economic backbone of the household a female one was consequently linked to the fact that it was the women who were the primary source of both earned and ancestral property. But it was also in recognition of the fact, with no recriminations involved, that the moment a boy made good in an independent career, be it in music or dance or trade, he would move out and maintain a separate household with his own wife and children. Men stayed on as appendages of their sister's or mother's household only on sufferance. A man who had made his own name in his particular field of musical specialisation could not allow professional pride to be compromised by continuing to depend on his women. In any case in purely economic terms, he would be able to move out only once he had established his own reputation and consolidated his earnings. Under ordinary circumstances, it was the women who provided the men with a

¹⁰ In the section on devadasis in his prodigious work on the ethnography of South India, E. Thurston, Superintendent of the Madras Government Museum, gives evidence of the increasing involvement of secular law with the devadasis and their disputes in the late nineteenth century. (*Castes and Tribes of Southern India* in seven volumes, 1909, Madras.)

livelihood, arranged their marriages and gave them a home. The men, it was further felt, always had the choice and the opportunity to make their livelihood elsewhere, not necessarily in the art field, but the women were restricted and had no freedom in the matter. For these various reasons women were favoured over men in property matters. Devadasis were the only women allowed to adopt a child under customary Hindu law and often an adopted daughter was favoured over an only son in the matter of inheritance.

The dominance of women even at the level of formal authority within the home was in a large measure due to the very nature of its economic base. Household property was largely earned income acquired in the form of cash, jewellery and goods, and it was through its women that the household made profits in this sphere. The land endowments, by the very terms of their enjoyment, could not be alienated or capitalised on. Neither did the community have the agricultural skills necessary to profit from the land they owned — they saw themselves primarily as artists and professionals.

The person 'in charge' in the dasi establishment, the *taikkizhavi* or 'old mother', was the seniormost female member who was normally one of the more renowned dancers of her time who, after retirement, exercised control over the younger members. The strict discipline of this old lady over both the private and professional lives of her relatives, her control over joint income, its pooling and expenditure, provided the fundamental source of unity for the dasi household. The critical role she thereby played in the status and prestige of an establishment was appreciable. Considering that much of the income brought into the house was made on an individual basis it was the intervention and managerial control of the old woman which prevented household fission. All community members agreed in this and referred to their mother's or grandmother's special gifts with honour and reverence. Most homes had photographs on the walls of previous such leading lights of the family before whom daily worship was offered.

Quite clearly, it was the women who were considered precious in any given household for its social and professional reputation and continuity. The men acquiesced in the priorities of the household for they too saw their future prosperity as inextricably

linked with the emergence of a beautiful and talented sister or niece who would consolidate resources. The alliances made by one's female relatives were significant both for the material and symbolic wealth of the household, and the caste status of the 'father' provided a kind of axis along which different members of the group were graded. Given the peculiarities of the domestic economy in the charge of women, it would not be far wrong to say that it suited men to stay in the background. For not only was household wealth linked to the rather shaming (for men) category of 'women's earnings' but it reflected an area of insecurity and periodic want.

The money flow into a devadasi household remained rather uneven and individual prosperity varied greatly. The excessive life style and lavish spending on hospitality, food and clothing rarely left anything over to be invested in more profitable ways. The *taikkizhavi*, though head of the household, did not gain public recognition or any specific material advantage for her troubles. Given all this, the brothers and uncles of the devadasis acquiesced in their subordinate position because it relieved them of economic cares and responsibilities.

Significantly, these various matri-centred features of the devadasi household encouraged a greater functional specificity and technical excellence of the dance tradition. As mentioned earlier the sexual division of labour underlying the dance was of a non-domestic nature. Despite female household authority, in the professional sphere it was the male guru who exercised control over the dancer. Even when a *nattuvanar* resided with his mother or sister, his superior authority vis-a-vis the female student was ensured by the fact that she came from a separate household. With the achievement of a special renown, however, his subordinate position in his own household clearly led to an ambiguous situation. Given the strong force of the *taikkizhavi* and her complete authority in the household, any man with self-esteem would, it was considered, move out whenever possible and rule supreme in his own domain. Financially as well, the *nattuvanar* who set up on his own had much to gain since he was under no further obligation to pool his earnings with his mother and sisters. Residential separation consequently for the dance guru who continued to be associated with women professionally, conclusively asserted his position of dominance over them.

The self-conscious and competitive functional division within the dance tradition between 'male' (teaching) and 'female' (performing) skills was reflected most dramatically in the emergence of two distinct structures of household organisation. The socio-spatial forces underlying this process related specifically to men and their need to develop an independent tradition for themselves, matching that of their illustrious womenfolk in wealth and prestige." The dasi or matrifocal household was characterised by the following features : (i) large size (an average of thirty residents) and excess of female residents (women married into the house but few married out; besides girls were adopted for professional purposes); (ii) dichotomous power structure (female members exercised household control, male members exercised professional control); and (iii) dichotomous ethical structure (conjugal and celibate codes both coexisted within it). The guru or patrifocal household on the other hand, displayed a consistency of political and moral structure and had a smaller size, made up on an average of an equal number of males and females.

The flexibility and heterogeneity of the dance social organisation described above paid considerable artistic and economic dividends. Members of the community often related dip sophistication of their art as a concert item to the teaching of the dance. It was the access of the women of the community to closely related gurus, specialists in the female classical dance, which made the *sadir* tradition aesthetically perfect. Dance teaching was more closely modelled on the Tamil sectarian traditions of spiritual teaching and secular education which required a close and intimate life-long relationship between the adept and the student. The devadasi, we must not forget, was permitted to learn to read and write and pursue vocational skills traditionally denied to all other women in India. The dasis feared and respected their gurus *as teachers* and artists and informal religious leaders of the community whose curse could ruin a girl's career and prospects. At the same time the community context prevented the inherent asymmetry of the guru-shishya relation-

" The discussion, rather than view the process of household formation as wholly influenced and controlled by customary, kinship factors, seeks to emphasise the play of rational choices and competitive pressures in areas of internal caste organisation.

ship from becoming exploitative. Households very often stood in a 'student' relationship to some and a 'teaching' relationship to others. The chances of permanent structural asymmetry within the dance organisation were in this way obviated. The continuity of marriage exchange, furthermore, between gurus and undedicated women of student households balanced the tensions inherent to the *gurukulam*.

It was the more wealthy and prestigious patrifocal *nattuvanar* households which showed a marked tendency not only to prohibit their women a professional career but also to restrict the circle of marriage exchange. Quite understandably this aggravated specialisation and claim to 'purity' was seen by community members as being detrimental to art. According to them such extreme professionalism on the part of gurus made it unprofitable for the girls to dance. The accumulation of wealth and power through the exploitation of students and their earnings destroyed community and its 'give and take'. It was only through the continuity of the *gurukulam* — the transgenerational exchange between the teaching and practicing adepts and their respective households — that the excellence of a particular 'school' of dance could be maintained. Real motivations of economic self-interest lay behind this professional and community code of conduct. The skill of a particular *nattuvanar* belonging to a famous tradition could directly affect a student's 'market' both in the dance and entertainment world for the better and enhance her household's prosperity. Equally, for the *nattuvanar*, she was the proverbial goose that laid the golden egg whose talents, if handled properly, yielded steady financial dividends over the year in the shape of fees and gifts.

The unusual social gradation described above sanctioned: (i) a particular model of women which constituted a unique religious office — the conscious theological rejection of the harsh, puritanical ascetic ideal for women in the bhakti sects, softened for the devadasi the rigours of domestic asceticism in the shape of the widow, and the religious asceticism in the shape of the Jain and Buddhist nun; (ii) a particular community or 'caste' which was a necessary corollary to the institutionalisation *both* of

celibacy with sexuality in the devadasi's person. The devadasi stood at the root of a rather unique and specialised temple artisan community, which displayed in its internal organisation the operation of pragmatic, competitive and economic considerations encouraging sophisticated, professional and artistic activity. The innovations introduced into the community through the fact of independent *female* professional skills contrasted well with the more conservative male profession which was also poorer, economically. The abstract sectarian truths of Hinduism which see the male element as 'passive' and the female as 'active' in their cosmologies appear here to receive confirmation on the sociological plane.

For the reform lobbyists — missionaries, doctors, journalists, administrators and social workers—strongly influenced by Christian morality and religion, it was precisely these features of the devadasi institution which were reprehensible in the utmost. The publicisation of the devadasi system as prostitution sought to advertise the moral grotesqueness of the subject population for political ends. For those who supported imperialism on the grounds of its 'civilising' function, programmes of reform, it must be remembered, were not without their ideological rewards. The movement urging the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls dedicated themselves as devadasis to Hindu temples, was articulated in the first instance as an *anti-nautch* campaign. The very use of the term *nautch* (a corruption of the Hindi term *nach*, a dance performed by a more common class of northern dancing girl) suggested the smear campaign that was to follow.

The Anti-Nautch supporters, largely educated professionals and Hindus, began their attack on the devadasis' dance, using the declamatory and journalistic skills at their disposal to full effect. Collective public action took the form of signature protests and marches to the homes of the elite who refused to heed the call for boycotting the dance at private celebrations. At the official level memoranda urging legislative action and a ban on the dance were presented to the Viceroy of India and the Governor of Madras who were assured that these performances were '... of women who, as everybody knows, are prostitutes, and Their Excellencies hereafter at least must know to be such ...' After much pressure and recrimination both from the missionaries and the lobbyists,

the government agreed to take sides, and by 1911 a despatch was issued desiring nationwide action to be taken against these performances.

The emergence of a vigorous reform movement focusing on the devadasis' dance was a consequence of its politicisation. The so-called 'reformist' approach which characterised Indian political activity in the latter half of colonial rule was reflected in its organisation. By the 1920s the Anti-Nautch agitation had become inextricably linked up with the communal politics of the Dravidian movement. The abolition of the practice of female dedication became a powerful political and legislative cause espoused by the backward non-Brahmins as part of the over-all self-respect campaign initiated by Ramaswami Naicker in 1925. The extraordinary success of the reforms was not unconnected with the fact that the community menfolk stood to gain by the legislation. Given the shastric sanction to the devadasis' celibate, professional ethic and duty, their marriages could not become valid till the passing of the Act in 1947. In the interim period, the tremendous social disabilities they faced worked to the advantage of the men of the community. For most devadasis there was opposition to their getting married particularly if they had been through the dedication ceremony already. To flout the prohibition placed on profane marriage by the sacrament of dedication was viewed as equivalent in moral blame to remarriage for an upper-caste widow. Community members took advantage of this 'blot' on the girls' character and would either demand sums of money as dowry before agreeing to marry the girl or offer opposition in other forms: the astrologer would tell the boy's family that, if married, such a girl would surely die, and so on. At the time of the reform campaign some eminent men did take devadasis as wives, but these exceptions (as in the case of the few reported widow re-marriages of the time) only served to prove the rule. It was the very beautiful or gifted dasis alone who managed to make good matches — M.S. Subbulakshmi, today's renowned singer, married a Brahmin despite her dasi parentage; Jayalakshmi, the famous dancing girl of Pandanallur became the Rani of Ramnad, to mention only two. For the majority however, marriage remained an expensive and difficult proposition.

The reform campaign forced the devadasis to acknowledge the moral supremacy of domestic values; even more importantly, it

obliged them to relinquish all rights to temple service and its privileges. The men on the other hand continued to perform both in the temples and in people's homes. The immense patronage they received from the DK/DMK regional party organisations favoured them financially. The *nagaswaram* even today is performed as a concert art. With respect to land rights as well, as explained below, the abolition of the devadasi system benefitted the men of the community over the women in direct contrast to the historical situation.

In the 1920s the non-Brahmin Justice Party (the more elitist precursor of the DK) had taken great care to protect service benefits in terms of lands and buildings attached to the devadasi's office before finally pushing through the Legislature Bill in 1930. The Madras Act of 1929 enfranchising *inams* and *maniams*, as the tax-free land privileges were called, was justified on the grounds of social justice: the devadasi 'bond-slave' to the temple authorities could now own the house and land without the extortion of service. The process of converting traditional usufructory rights to public land (attached to office) into private taxable 'property', however, favoured the men over the women in that they, too, could now inherit the shares earlier kept aside for their dedicated sisters. With land coming 'nto the market through the introduction of the *patta* (land deed) system under the British, the economic and moral infrastructure of matri-centred householding suffered. Internal strife over property division increased and the wealthier sections of the community benefitted over the less fortunate. Most interestingly, however, the processes of rational, western, social change initiated by the reform campaign, far from reducing casteism actually increased communal tendencies within the community. The imperial census data of the 1901-1921 period reveal this process of transition of the devadasi community from a professional class with a *higher* percentage of women (quite unusual for India) to a 'caste with a more typical sex distribution.'²

The resentment freely expressed by the devadasis at the loss of power and privilege through the legislation provided ample, verbal testimony that the 'reforms' had been pushed through

largely by a politically aware minority of the community, predominantly men. By contrast, the far greater resistance at the time to reforms seeking to change Brahmin female institutions such as dowry, virgin-widowhood and child-marriage was a consequence of the threat they posed to the interests of elite men. The aggressive anti-Brahminism and anti-ritualism of the Backward Classes Movement of the south 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.

British officialdom's stake in encouraging regionalism and cultural divisiveness directly linked them with those who pressed for its ban. The colonial framework of formal confrontation not only greatly politicised the Indian people but also provided the very rhetoric and 'facts' on which reform action was based. It was essentially alien currents of thought that were utilised by the reform lobby to advertise its public campaign. Even in sensitive areas such as women's reforms it was the power of 'facts' and arguments based on western rationality and reason, and not the authority of the Sanskrit *shastras*, that was increasingly invoked by Indians to bring about socio-cultural change. The reform movement associated with the Hindu temple-dancer continued on the scientific plane, 'civilizing' arguments pushed forward earlier (with far less success) on the religious plane by the missionaries and the British government. The atheist programme of the Backward Classes Movement clearly stressed the benefits of western education and 'rationalism' to bring about desired social change.

Science, religion and the politics of reform became absolutely intertwined in the person of the female missionary/doctor

Census Year	Dasi	
	Males	Females
1901	1568	5294
1911	1691	3290
1921	5050	5970

Sources : Francis, W. *Census of India 1901*, Vol. XV-A Pt. 2, Madras 1902: 158
 Molony, J.C. *Census of India 1911*, Vol. XII Pt.2, Madras 1912: 112-13
 Boag, G.T. *Census of India 1921*, Vol. XIII, Pt. 2, Madras 1922: 114

²The census returns showed the following statistical variations for the Dasi group:

towards the close of the nineteenth century. Through the sensational and selective publicisation of the medical 'facts' of immature sex, missionaries sought to discredit upper-caste customs and habits on humanistic grounds. The patronage of temple dancers and the practice of pre-pubertal marriage were declared equally abominable, and despite official policies of neutrality in civil affairs, the prestige of science gave missionary interference a renewed legitimacy. It is significant that even with direct community involvement, it was a professional doctor, Dr. (Mrs) S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who headed the legislative battle for the abolition of temple dedication.

Paradoxically, however, almost simultaneous with the reform movement there emerged a movement urging the 'revival' of the devadasi's dance. Those seeking to abolish the devadasi system had utilized the British machinery of regional party politics and the rhetoric of empiricism to achieve their local ends. Those urging the resurrection of the devadasi's art, separated from her way of life, on the other hand, consciously stepped outside the requirements of state electoral politics and western scientific traditions to achieve their particular ends. The Theosophical Society's notoriously anti-official stance and interest in an Indian cultural and political renaissance bound them with the revival of the dance. At the same time, the nationalisation of Indian art and life and its almost 'religious' idealisation by the Theosophists and thinkers such as Coomaraswamy, Havell and Tagore was in no small measure itself an effect of westernisation. The re-classification of regional, artistic traditions within a unique territorially-defined framework of unity was now proposed in terms of the spiritual and civilisational advantages of Indian and eastern philosophies and techniques.

¹³ At the time of its inception, the leading lights of the Theosophical Movement, Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott, had toured the southern parts of India and gained support from all sections of the native elite by their public denouncement and denigration of western Christian morality and materialism. In 1882, the Society had set up its headquarters in Adyar, Madras, with the set goal of working towards the restoration of India's ancient glory, her art, science and philosophy. The support later given to the revival of *sadir* as Bharatanatyam by the Theosophical Society was largely due to the efforts of Rukmini Arundale, an eminent Theosophist herself. The direction the dance took under her protective wing cannot be severed from the all-embracing influence of theosophy on her life and career.

The British government officials and missionaries were not slow to play up non-Brahmin suspicion of Indian nationalism, coming as it did from the largely Brahmin-dominated Theosophical circles and Congress alike. With political lines drawn in twentieth century Madras between the British (official)-Christian missionary-'Backward' non-Brahmin complex, on the one hand, and the British (unofficial)-Theosophist-Brahmin complex on the other, it should not be difficult to understand why, by the time the former had done their best to kill the dance and its 'caste' of performers, it should be the latter who would promote it as a 'national' art. When Dr. Reddy's Bill of 1930 asking for the abolition of temple dedications finally came to be passed into law (1947), it seemed to have been pushed through not so much to deal the death of the Tamil caste of professional temple dancers as to approve and permit the birth of a new elite class of amateur performers."

The legislation came at a time when the practice of dedication was already quite dead and it was the official sponsorship and patronage of traditional arts which was at a premium. With newly-won independence to spur on the Congress Party ministry of that time, the Bill was passed into law with the qualification that . . . 'This legislation should not cut at the root of art and culture . . . This culture has come to us from generations past . . . These things should not be killed in our jealousy for social reform.' (The Hon. Dr. P. Subbarayan in the Legislative Assembly Debates on the Bill, October 9, 1947.) By 1947, the programme for the revival of *sadir* as Bharatanatyam, India's ancient classical dance, was already well underway with the patronage and support of Brahmin dominated Congress lobbies of elite Indians drawn from all parts of the country.

All revivals, however, present a utopian view of the past which

¹⁴ In the existing literature on the Theosophical Society's activities in India, it is their anti-Christian image which is constantly portrayed to justify its appeal to the Hindus. Theosophy was rebelling, however, not against Christianity *per se* but against a particular version of it — non-conformist Protestantism, espoused by the missionaries in India.

¹⁵ For background information on the implications of the Brahmin-non-Brahmin conflict of south India for the Nationalist Movement as a whole, readers are referred to: M.R. Barnell, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, 1976; R. Suntheralingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India 1852-1891*, Arizona, 1974.

is usually an interpretation fitting in with a changed *contemporary* situation. Given the upper-class Christian religious biases of the Theosophists and the deep influence of evolutionary theories on their 'science', it was the model of the ancient temple-dancer as a pure and holy, sexually chaste woman which was stressed in their performance. By thus marking her off from the 'living' devadasi, they hoped to attract the right sort of clientele for the dance. The argument that without the attendant immorality the dance was a form of yoga — an individual spiritual exercise— abstracted it from its specific community context, permitting its rebirth amongst the urban, educated and westernised elite. The pre-eminence of the women of this class in the field of Bharatanatyam today conclusively indicates that the art has come to be preserved in that very section of Indian society that had been drawn to theosophy in the first place. The modifications introduced into the content of the dance-style were a consequence not so much of its 'purification' (as the revivalists liked to see it) as its rebirth in a more 'proper' class.

In Tamil Nadu today, the art of nadir/Bharatanatyam is monopolised by Brahmins who clearly see themselves as having 'rescued' it from the fallen 'prostitute', the devadasi. Yet in a very real and practical sense it is only the devadasi dance they are perpetuating. In essence the dance technique remains unchanged and was learnt from the very community *nattuvamars* and performers who had become redundant after the reform agitation. In the absence of any textual choreography, the widespread renaissance of the dance was really only possible with their help. Many of the best known artists in the field proudly acknowledge training in the secrets of the art from old, defunct devadasis. In the midst of new forms of vulgarity surrounding the dance profession today, such as the commercial cinema, it is the devadasi tradition alone which is propagated by the elite schools as representative of the ancient and pure Bharatanatyam. But we may ask, if the devadasi's dance was a sacred tradition worth preserving and the legislation (justified though it was on the grounds of anti-prostitution) came down with a punitive hand not on prostitutes in general but on the devadasi alone — why did the devadasi need to go?