

The Devadasi System in Mysore

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The Devadasi System in Mysore: Patronage, Prestige, and Prohibition

Context

- The **Devadasi system** was a long-standing institution in South India, where young girls were dedicated to temples to serve as dancers and musicians.
- Over time, it evolved into a **social and economic system** with both religious significance and deep-rooted gender inequalities.
- By the **18th century**, the status of Devadasis declined, leading to **reform movements and legal abolition**.
- Recently, historian **Janaki Nair** discussed the **rise and fall of the Devadasi system in Mysore** at the **Bangalore International Centre**.

Origin and Evolution of the Devadasi System

Historical Beginnings

- The system traces its origins to the **8th century**.
- An **inscription from 800 AD** in **Mayile village** records the dedication of:
 - A **virgin girl** to the temple.
 - **8 mattars of land**, **1,000 cows**, and a **swing** for the deity.
- **Devadasis** existed in **Jain, Shaivite, and Vaishnavite temples** across South India.

Royal Patronage and Cultural Growth

- **Mysore Wadiyars** played a key role in patronizing and institutionalizing the system.
- By the **10th century**, dedicated young girls performed various **religious and cultural services**, such as:
 - **Dancing and singing** during temple rituals.
 - **Carrying sacred aaratis** and participating in **processions**.

Training and Contributions

- Devadasis received rigorous training in:
 - **Nritya (dance)** and **Geeta (vocal music)**.
- **Krishnaraja Wadiyar III** hired **Chinnayya Pillai of the Thanjavur Quartet** to train dancers.
- The **Thanjavur Quartet—Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivananda, and Vadivelu**—contributed

to the **development of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.**

Economic Support and Sustenance

- **Devadasis were financially supported through:**
 - **Land grants and money from temples.**
 - **Donations from merchants, landlords, and art patrons.**
 - **An epigraph mentions a grant to maintain "the looking glass of the dancing girls", with an assurance that "it would continue as long as the sun and moon exist."**
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Social Status of Devadasis

Wider Presence

- **Devadasis were present in temples across Mysore, Bangalore, Mulbagal, Kadoor, T. Narsipur, and other towns.**

Independent Social Class

- **Devadasis had their own:**
 - **Laws of inheritance and panchayats.**
 - **Rules of etiquette and governance.**
- **They hailed from diverse castes, including:**
 - **Kurubas, Bedas, Gangadikara Vokkaligas, Telugu Banajigas, and Lingayats.**

Matrilineal System and Role in Weddings

- **Women inherited property through a matrilineal system.**
- **Devadasis were considered nitya sumangalis (eternally auspicious women).**
- **In many weddings, apart from the groom, Devadasis tied a second tali (sacred thread) around the bride's neck.**

Reasons for Social Importance

1. **Expertise in Fine Arts** - Mastery over music, dance, and literature.
 2. **Higher Learning** - Exposure to multiple languages, scriptures, and royal circles.
 3. **Acceptance of Polygamy** - Their relationships did not face societal stigma.
 4. **Economic Independence** - They received grants, owned land, and had financial stability.
 5. **Permanent and Hereditary Posts** - Devadasis had lifelong temple employment, and their death led to temporary halting of temple activities.
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Decline of the Devadasi System

Factors Leading to Decline

1. **18th Century Onwards** - Exploitation of Devadasis became widespread.
2. **Western Morality & Colonial Influence** - British rule led to:

- A **negative perception**, equating the system with **prostitution**.
 - Increased **protests against the practice**.
 - 3. **Anti-Nautch Movement (19th-20th Century)** - Aimed to:
 - **Abolish the dedication of girls** to temples.
 - End **public performances** by Devadasis.
 - 4. **Sanitization of Sadir Dance** -
 - **Sadir (Dasiyattam)**, performed by Devadasis, was seen as **erotic**.
 - **Dominant caste women** adapted and transformed it into **Bharatanatyam**.
 - 5. **Administrative Reforms** -
 - **Muzrai Commissioner A. Srinivasacharlu** played a pivotal role in abolition.
 - **1898** - Announced **no new Devadasis** would be appointed after their predecessors passed away.
 - Discontinued **appointments in Muzrai temples across Mysore, Kadur, Tumkur, Kolar, etc.**
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Legal and Social Reforms

Progressive Reforms in Mysore

- **Infant Marriage Regulation (1894)** -
 - Banned marriages for girls below 8 years.
 - Restricted age gap to 30 years.
- **Hindu Women's Property Rights Act (1933)** -
 - Gave **Hindu women inheritance rights**, increasing their financial security.

Abolition of the Devadasi System

- **Mysore became one of the first regions in India to abolish the Devadasi system in 1908-09.**
 - **This was much earlier than the Madras Devadasi Abolition Act (1947).**
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Conclusion

- **The Devadasi system evolved from a respected temple tradition to an institution plagued by exploitation.**
- **While it flourished under royal patronage, it later faced criticism due to colonial influence and social reform movements.**
- **Mysore played a pioneering role in abolishing the system, setting the stage for wider legislative reforms in India.**
- **Despite its decline, the artistic and cultural contributions of Devadasis continue to thrive in Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.**