History of South India Devadasi

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Introduction

The word Devadasi is generally translated as 'servant of God'. However, this simple translation does not cover its full cultural and religious meaning. The Agamas and Puranas explain that a Devadasi is a woman who has dedicated her entire life to the service of God through art. There are many mythological stories about the origin of Devadasis. The Padma Purana states that the wives of the Devas were captured by Asuras. After that event, they lost their celestial position and were born on earth as Devadasis, where they served the Lord and finally attained Moksha.

The Kamikagama gives another explanation. In its chapter called Nupurasaptham, it is said that from the three powers of Lord Shiva - Ichcha Shakti, Jnana Shakti and Kriya Shakti - two divine women, Rudrakannikai and Rudradasi, were created. The Agama describes their character, moral code and daily temple duties in detail.Their work area was from the Maha Mandapam to the Garbhavarana Prakaram. Their duties were to clean the temple, decorate it with Thiruvilakku and Thirumekhukittu, wear Panchabharanas, carry lamps, sing devotional songs and perform Nritham during poojas. The Agamas classify dance into three types - Suddha, Misra and Kevala. It is said that Suddha Nritham was prescribed only for Rudrakannikais.

Another legend says that when Urvashi was dancing in Indra's court, she and Jayantha, son of Indra, looked at each other with affection. Sage Agastya saw this and cursed them to be born on earth. The Matsya Purana says that the children born from them on earth became Devadasis.Similar references are found in Tamil literature. In Silappathikaram, Madhavi, the mother of Manimekalai, is called the daughter of an Apsara. Another story mentions that the Rishipathinis of Darukavanam were attracted to Lord Shiva who came as Bikshatana, and they abandoned their children. Nandideva named those girls as Rudrakannikais and taught them the art of dance. By chanting the Panchakshara mantra and maintaining purity of body and mind, they became Nitya Sumangalis. This is mentioned by Thirukokarnam Ramaswami Nattuvanar in his book Rudrakanika Kautvam written in 1678.

About Kanikai

According to Natya Shastra and Vatsyayana's Kamasutra, a Kanikai is a woman who is an expert in 64 arts, who can express emotions effectively, and who possesses kindness, integrity and pleasant nature. Generally, women serving in temples were called Devadasis and those serving in the king's court were called Rajadasis. But in common language both were called Devadasis. It must be understood that Devadasi is not a caste, but a profession of those who dedicated their lives to God and art.

Devadasis in South India

Because they served the Lord through dance, they were called by many names: Devaradiyar, Koothiyar (because they did Koothu), Padini, Virali (because they excelled in dance). In Tamil they are Devaradiyal and in Sanskrit Devadasi. This tradition existed from the Sangam period and became very popular during the Nayak and Maratha periods. In inscriptions they are called Devaradiyar, Padiliyar, Thalicheri Pendugal, and Emperuman Adiyar. Agamas call them Narthakis, Kanikais and Dasis. The name Devadasi became popular all over South India during the Vijayanagara Empire.

The practice of dedicating women to temple service was not only in India but also in many other countries. In ancient Tamil society, groups like Panar, Koothar, Agavunar and Porunar used to sing the praises of kings. Dances like Thunangai and Kuravai were performed in war fields. Later, as society changed, these folk arts became part of temple rituals. When Vedic traditions spread to the South, Buddhism and Jainism also started spreading.

History says that Neela Devi, daughter of Kulasekhara Azhwar, served as a Devadasi in Srirangam, and Cholavalli, daughter of a Chola king, also served similarly. In Tamil literature, female artists are called Virali and Padini. Although literature mentions different names like Bharathi, Podu Makalir, Kamakizhattiyar, they all eventually merged into one group.

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From a social angle, early human society was matriarchal and later became patriarchal, which led to women becoming dependent on men. From a political angle, during wars the number of men decreased and women brought from battlefields or abandoned by husbands became Dasis. Later, due to the Bhakti movement, many women who were dedicated by family, sold, or came for protection became Devadasis. It was during the Pallava period that women were formally employed in temples.

During the Sangam period, Kanikais were experts in arts but they were mainly for entertainment of men and not for temple service. For example, in Silappathikaram, when Madhavi wanted to join Buddhism with her daughter Manimekalai after Kovalan's death, her mother insulted her.

During the Pallava period, there was a revival of Saivism and Vaishnavism. Pallava kings carved puranic stories as sculptures. Women who helped in making temple idols were later appointed for permanent temple service. Hence they were called Thalicheri Pendugal, meaning those who made the temple their home. Women in Shiva temples were called Rudra Kanikai and in Vishnu temples as Srimanikkam. Scholar P.M. Sundaram says Manikkam means precious gem, showing their high respect.A Kanikai troupe is also called Nattumuttu. Nattu means dance and muttu means small group. It includes a dancer, Nattuvanar (teacher), singer, Mridangam player and Thuthikkar.

Agamas describe the qualities of a Kanikai: purity, gentleness, beauty, youth, well-arranged body parts, not greedy, fit for dancing, bathing twice daily, wearing clean clothes, ornaments and white flowers. After washing her feet, she should go to the Natya Mandapa, worship Nateswara and perform Pushpanjali with Padma Mudra. The dance of Rudrakanikai is said to be superior.It is also said that they did not belong to a particular caste. They came from different social groups. However, later they became a separate community.Great respect was given to Rudrakanikais. Thirunavukkarasu Swamigal mentions them in his hymns. Paravaiyar, one of Sundaramoorthy Swami's wives, was a Rudrakanikai. Periyapuranam says Paravaiyar was born in Padiliyar family. Mazhavai Mahalingaiyar says Rudrakanikais are those who serve Lord Shiva and have only one husband without formal marriage.

The initiation ceremony is called Pottukattu. It is performed by an elderly woman of the family or by the temple priest in the sanctum of the deity. Pottu is equal to Thali (Mangalyam). By wearing it, she is considered married to the Moolavar of that temple and becomes a Nitya Sumangali. The ceremony is usually done when a girl attains puberty or at age 12, sometimes even at age 10. One cannot become a Devadasi by birth only; Pottukattu is compulsory. A woman dedicated to one temple must serve only that temple and cannot marry again, though there were some exceptions.
Devadasis who were experts in dance, music and instruments performed in front of the Lord. Saiva and Vaishnava Agamas emphasize the necessity of Kanikais dancing during poojas. Women who danced in front of the king were called Rajadasis. Sometimes a mother was a Devadasi and her daughter was a Rajadasi. But it was strictly followed that Rajadasis should not dance in temples.

An inscription of 1174 AD says that during Rajadhiraja Chola's rule, a person bought four women for 700 coins and dedicated them to Thiruvalangadu temple. Devadasis had to perform specific dances during Kala Sandhi, Uchi Kala, Saya Ratchai and Artha Jama Poojas. After Artha Jama Pooja, when idols are taken to the Palliyarai, they sang Lali, Oonjal and Kadaikappu songs. If more than one family served, work was done by rotation. Those who did not know dance did other jobs like making garlands. It is said that about 80 years ago, in temples like Thiruvarur Thyagarajar and Thiruchendur Murugan temple, Devadasis performed Sodasopachara Pooja (16 Upacharas) which was done by priests. This was later stopped.

Large numbers of Devadasis worked in big temples like Suchindram, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruchendur and in Sri Lanka. They were skilled in arts and had good character. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer mentions in his autobiography that a Devadasi once paid the tax for a scholar and saved him from jail. When Kamban staged his Ramayana in Srirangam, one of the three scholars who approved it was a Devadasi named Thanjavur Anjanam. Chandralekha in the court of Vijayaraghava Nayak of Thanjavur excelled in Bharata Shastra and literature. Similarly, Rangammal also excelled in dance and poetry.Many Devadasis lived in wealth and lived like Kula Magalir with one husband. Some spent their wealth for charity. The Sirkazhi Selvam and Ammani sisters (19th-20th century) built Selvavinayakar temple. Anukkiyar Paravai Nachiyar (11th century) donated 428 pearls, 36 diamonds and 1000 gold coins to Thiruvarur temple as per an inscription. In the last century, Rajambal of Thiruvidaimarudur gave all her property to charity. Bangalore Nagarathnammal, a devotee of Thyagaraja, also did similar charity.Some Devadasis also showed bravery.

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Vaipi of Chidambaram Nataraja temple protected the Nataraja idol during Tipu Sultan's invasion. It is said that when Malik Kafur invaded Srirangam, a Devadasi named Ranganatha Manikkam saved the idol of Lord Ranganatha.
When the Utsava Murthy goes around the four streets, Devadasis performed Kumbha Aarathi to remove Drishti Dosha. This right was considered very honourable. They were given priority in all festivals. During a king's coronation, mud from the front of a Devadasi's house was used to purify him, as mentioned in Agni Purana. An inscription says a Devadasi crowned a king. Linga Purana says seeing a Devadasi is auspicious.A Devadasi could retire from service due to old age or illness with permission from temple authorities. When she died, the cloth from the Moolavar was draped over her body, her body was kept for two minutes in front of the gopuram as a symbolic farewell to her Lord, and fire from the temple kitchen was used for her cremation.

Seven Types of Devadasis
In the Pallava system, Devadasis were divided into seven types:
1. Datta - who dedicated herself
2. Vikreetha - who was sold to temple
3. Bhritya - who served for family's benefit
4. Bhakta - who came due to love for Lord
5. Harita - who was possessed by God
6. Mankai - who was sent by king for her art skill
7. Rudra Kanikai - who was born in high family and performed pure dance during worship

Besides dancing, they also did other jobs like weaving, lighting lamps, arranging flowers and making perfumes.With the emergence of temple women, it became a practice for every king to send women for temple work. An inscription says Chola King Rajaraja I brought 400 Devadasis to Thanjai Peruvudaiyar temple, gave them houses, monthly wages and lands called Nattuvakani. After Cholas, Pandyas, Nayaks and Marathas supported Devadasis and encouraged their dance and music. They were divided into Valangai and Idangai groups. Due to Mughal and European invasions, and during Nayak-Maratha rule, their position changed and they became dependent on upper classes. The dress code for Dasis was also defined during Maratha rule.

It was because of their desire that they were transformed into dasis of the upper classes. This change took place during the rule of the Nayaks and the Marathas. That is why the dress of Dasis was defined in those days. Evidence is Devadasiya during the time of Maratha king.

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