



## PERCEPTIONS ON TEMPLE PROSTITUTION IN EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA

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### Abstract

*Temple prostitution has been a common phenomenon across varied ancient civilizations across the globe. It flourished under state patronage. Medieval India has been no exception to this. The origins of this process can be traced back to the early period through varied textual sources including prescriptive texts. A contemporary understanding of the devadāsīs or the temple women in service to god is intertwined with that of prostitution, and a perpetual exploitation of women under the facade of religious traditions and practices. Most of it can be impressions formed by the perceptions about temple women found in late nineteenth and the twentieth century, from the ethnographic records and the press and court proceedings (Orr, 2000) and the subsequent abolition or extinction of various forms of devadāsī systems.*

*Drawing from works of Leslie Orr, Sukumari Bhattacharji, and others this paper uses varied examples including the women of the Jagannatha temple of Puri, the joginīs prevalent in Andhra Pradesh and the devaradiyals in the Tamil society. The work tries to ascertain whether the role of the practice of appointing women into the temple as ritual service providers, contributed to a form of prostitution. It tries to examine other factors which led to prostitution within the women appointed or offered to the temple.*

**Keyword:** *Orr, Leslie C. 2000. Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamil Nadu, Oxford University Press: Oxford.*



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Temple prostitution has been a phenomenon across varied ancient civilizations across the globe. It flourished under state patronage. Medieval India has been no exception to this. The origins of this process can be traced back to the early period through varied textual sources including prescriptive texts. A contemporary understanding of the devadāsīs or the temple women in service to god is intertwined with that of prostitution, and a perpetual exploitation of women under the facade of religious traditions and practices. Most of it can be impressions formed by the perceptions about temple women found in late nineteenth and the twentieth century, from the ethnographic records and the press and court proceedings (Orr, 2000) and the subsequent abolition or extinction of various forms of devadāsī systems.

Drawing from works of Leslie Orr, Sukumari Bhattacharji, and others this paper uses varied examples including the women of the Jagannatha temple of Puri, the joginīs prevalent in Andhra Pradesh and the devaradiyals in the Tamil society. The work tries to ascertain whether the role of the practice of appointing women into the temple as ritual service providers, contributed to a form of prostitution. It tries to examine other factors which led to prostitution within the women appointed or offered to the temple.



Gerda Lerner quotes Iwan Bloch in order to suggest that prostitution becomes institutionalized in a society that restricts the access to free sexual intercourse (Lerner, 1986: 236). She also mentions Engel's theory of religious origin of Haeterism where prostitution was a religious act and the money earned by women was meant for the temple treasury as the act took place in the temple of the goddess of love (Lerner, 1986: 237). The *Padma Purāṇa* mentions that donors who gave women to temple would attain a lot of wealth and have a long life in the heaven. Early medieval work the *Kuṭṭanīmata* mentions temple prostitutes having fixed incomes (Bhattacharji, 1987: 35, 39). These possibly imply temple prostitution being a legitimate profession, probably practiced widely.

*Devadāsī* was a young and unmarried maiden dedicated to the temple in the service of its deity. Her services often included singing and dancing before the deity (Patra, 2004: 159). It was a tradition of theogamy where she was ritually married to the deity of the temple. Mentions of temple dancers are extant in Kalidāsa's works pointing towards its origins in early centuries of the Current Era (Bhattacharji, 1987: 35). This practice had found wide prevalence by early medieval period which can be conjured through the inscriptions in South India replete with references to the *Devadāsīs* (Patra, 2004: 160). There are various reasons for origination of dedicating women to serve the deity. A.L Basham traces this practice of dedicating women to the anthropomorphic deity being equated to the earthly king and being given all the paraphernalia like attendants and wives and ritually performing their activities like bathing, eating, sleeping as well as marrying. The Jagannatha temple at Puri is an example for the same. Another possible origin can also be from the Buddhist influence developing from the tradition of *bhikkunīs* or the *therīns* who remained unmarried and dedicated their lives to the *Samgha* and the Buddha (Patra, 2004: 160). Misra and Rao summarize Mahale who suggests that in Karnataka the system may have emerged by drawing legitimacy from the deity when a couple could not conceive but had to continue to lineage and had to go out of the wedlock to conceive (Misra and Rao, 2002: 2). Thus, there are various theories that are suggested to trace the origin of this practice which leads us to question the very belief that temple prostitution was embedded in this practice.

Certain examples even suggest otherwise, that the system itself could not have led to temple prostitution. For instance, in the case of women dedicated to Jagannatha temple of Puri it is evident that women dedicated to the temple were a female form of sovereignty and wealth. They were regarded as auspicious (Marglin, 1981: 161) unlike the prostitutes, who were vilified and even looked down upon (Bhattacharji, 1987: 46, 56). They were initiated through adoption at a young age and were ritually married to the idol. They wore marital symbols and did all the observances that married women were supposed to follow. They were required to lead an austere life that forbade them to marry or have any form of sexual contact with any human (Patra, 2004: 164). On the other hand it can be seen that the *devadāsīs* also came to be associated with goddess *Lakshmi* and the full vessel of water which was associated with fertility (Marglin, 1981: 157). They were called the *mahārīs*, originating from the term *mahā nārī* which suggests they were held at a high esteem in the society at least in the formative period. Although they were forbidden from singing or dancing outside the temple earlier, by late sixteenth century they were summoned in the royal court to perform for entertainment. A reason for this also can be the divinity of the king. The king was associated with *Viṣṇu* (Marglin, 1981: 157). This could be a plausible reason that services of the *devadāsī* were extended to him. The dance of the *devadāsī* was a royal offering (Marglin, 1981: 158). This gradually was extended to wealthy landlords and eventually to anyone who could pay probably resulting into temple prostitution. Certain oral traditions also mention of sexual encounters between the *devadāsīs* and the brāhmaṇa priest, which were punished (Marglin, 1981: 175). This is



indicative of the probable beginnings of sexual exploitation. Another factor causing the rise of temple prostitution was the poverty that befell on these women as the gifts from the landlords or the ruling elite declined and having no regular income they were forced to find a way to earn and were vulnerable to exploitation in the system itself. Before the end of the *devadāsī* system in late twentieth the women struggled for decent living conditions and had to demand it from the temple authorities (Patra, 2004: 171).

It needs to be understood that the very act of dedicating young girls, itself indicated that women were treated as a commodity or a means to achieve an end. It was synonymous to the idea of giving girls as *dakṣiṇā* to the priests. This implied of women being perceived as a utility or a form of enjoyment for men (Bhattacharji, 1987: 41). It needs to be noted that even women were a part of upholding this notion, as there are instances of queens dedicating temple dancers as well (Patra, 2004: 161). However, this does not indicate that such practices would essentially have led to temple prostitution. In the early Indian context there are instances of buying women, and giving them as votive offerings to the deity or the temple to attain a better after life. However, there are not many instances known of temple dancers being mentioned or associated with prostitution until the early centuries of current era (Bhattacharji, 1987: 35).

Although in certain instances, temple prostitution was indeed embedded in the system. The *Joginī* system of Andhra Pradesh can be an example for the same. Gender based sexual exploitation was integral to the *Joginī* system (Misra and Rao, 2002: 2). Sexual exploitation of the temple women who were treated as wives of the god or the priestesses was entrenched in the system. The Lingāyat priests or the *Jangamas* were seen as the ministers of Śiva and represented him in every aspect. Thus, they exploited the temple women by making them their mistresses. Another system of initiation of *Basavi* women into the Lingāyat fold gave the chief of the *Maṭha* a right to consummate with her (Misra and Rao, 2002: 4, 5). Another probable reason for emergence of the *devadāsīs*, was the degradation of original priestesses of the mother goddess into ritual attendants and *devadāsīs* as the mother goddess herself was over shadowed by a male deity and then the priestesses began to be considered ritually impure due to their menstrual cycles (Misra and Rao, 2002: 7).

The twelfth century saw an expansion of the *Joginī* system into lower castes that were predominantly mother goddess worshippers. They began dedicating their daughters to goddess *Reṇukā-Yellammā* who was assimilated into the mainstream religion as the wife of Śiva. These girls represented her and hence were regarded as servants or wives of Śiva. These practices revealed of not only gender based, but also caste based exploitation. The Bhakti movement was encouraged by the ruling classes and the elites and its ideology of complete submission to the lord was focussed in the spirit of slavery. The movement encouraged *Joginī* system as people from lower castes kept offering their daughters into a form ritual concubinage (Misra and Rao, 2002: 6, 8). The *Joginīs* underwent a ritual marriage and could not marry but to have children had to choose a paramour. They were easily deserted and abandoned and could be taken over by another person. Thus they had multiple partners and were paid remuneration in kind for the services they offered resulting into prostitution (Misra and Rao, 2002: 11). The major causes for continuation of the *Joginī* system until the end of twentieth century were poverty of lower castes and the religious dogmas within these communities.

In both the examples stated above, the *Mahārīs* as well as the *Joginīs* seem to contribute to temple prostitution mainly due to poverty amongst other reasons. However, even that is only region specific as the *devaradiyals* in the Tamil society are women who owned and inherited property and thus had property rights (Mukund, 1992: 2). Various inscriptions indicate that they donated lands (Orr, 2000: 51). *Devaradiyal* was a term used for all the attendants in the



temple including the temple dancers. These dancers were under the patronage of state and were paid in land or revenue. They were neither bound to one temple nor did they remain unmarried as instances of dancers being transferred to another temple as well as having married *devaradiyals* are found (Mukund, 1992: 3). They were not ritually married to the deity. There are inscriptions that suggest that even Cola queens are described as temple women or a daughter of the god in inscriptions belonging to eleventh century CE (Orr, 2000: 42). Leslie Orr points out that there were no overlapping roles between temple women and palace women, like rituals or traditions of singing or dancing, leading to association of *devadāsī* with the royal courts, which she suggests occurred only around the seventeenth century and not before (Orr, 2000: 43). It is seen that, unlike other cases discussed above, the temple was not the sole identity of women who provided services to the temple. The temple women mentioned were mainly women donors; their involvement in ritual activities is rather less. (Orr, 2000: 95)

### Conclusion

It is undeniably evident that the women dedicated to temples, subsequently did contribute to the temple prostitution. But the examples reviewed also suggest neither were the origins of such processes homogenous nor was prostitution entrenched in all such systems. While the traditions at Puri were associated with sovereignty, the *Joginī* system was essentially fuelled by the lower castes. Further, the examples of *devaradiyals* in the *Tamil* society help in revealing that all women dedicated in ritual services were not always prostitutes or dancers. These temple women gave land and patronage to the temples and were donors that were called daughters or devotees of god (Orr, 2000: 180). The extant of regional as well as diachronic variations is seen through the usage of varied terms for dancers or temple attendants. The women dedicated were not essentially dedicated to a temple or to a deity. Thus the roles changed synchronically as well as diachronically and did not always contribute to temple prostitution. This work thus, attempts to point that there is a need to gain a deeper understanding into the origin of temple prostitution and the dancers as well as the ritual service providers. There is a need to explore the regional contexts of these processes instead of a generic overarching origin theory for temple prostitutes and the demographics that they represent.

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