

# *Devadāsī* cult in Assam: A historical study from 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Binita Nath, Research Scholar,

Department of History, Assam University, Silchar.

**Abstract:** *Devadāsī* means the servant of god, the “female servant of the deity”. The female dancer associated with the temples known as *devadāsī*. Motivated by deep devotion people began to dedicated girls to the temple voluntarily to the service of god. It was considered very honourable duty to dedicate the girls to the temple. Temples began to build for the residence of god and in course of time people feels that for the entertainment and service of god girls should be attached to the temples or shrine. Dance and music have been found as an important part of religious rituals from very early time. In that way the practice associated with dancing girl prevalent widely from very ancient time in all over India. In India the traces of the cult found back to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. The custom not only dominated in India only, but traces of the cult have been found in the temples of Babylon, Syria, Phoenicia etc. places of the world. In Assam the cult was prevalent from ancient time to the last phase of medieval period. The temple dancers were regarded very auspicious and enjoyed respectable status in the society. But gradually the sacred nature of the cult lost its nobility. The cult has a great impact on the position of women in the society. Through this paper it is try to have a glance about the origin of the system, impact of the system on the society as well as on the position of women especially in Assam.

Key words: *Devadāsī*, cult, religion, women, dancer

## 1.Introduction:

Religion is a very complex phenomenon and it acquires a vast range of human activities. The status of women was very according to religious beliefs. In Indian perspective there are many minor religious beliefs except among major religions. Therefore, there are ideological differences among these religions. It is seen that Buddhism and Jainism permits greater freedom for women rather than the Brāhmanical religion. Women’s participation in religion had been seen more or less according to the ideologies of religion. In the Vedic period women’s participation in religion was mandatory but in later period religious belief almost detached women from its rituals and practices. The domination of Brāhmanical religion gradually leaves women from their active participation in religion and they were begun to unseen in that particular field. Dance was the art form to entertainment the people and was regarded as an accompaniment of worship in the temples for a long time. *Devadāsī*, who were the sacred servant of the god, was a very old and popular institution. In India the system traces back to Indus valley civilization. It was most popular in the southern part of India. The *devadāsī* were resided in the temple complex and regarded as the property of temple. The dance performed by the *devadāsī* was ritualistic one and people dedicated themselves in the voluntary service of god. In Assam the

system was prevalent mostly in the Siva temples. In the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century CE., the cult began to deteriorated. The laxity of moral values contributed a serious setback to the system and the women position also deteriorated side by side. The essay tries to find out the nature of the cult and its impact on the position of women in the society of Assam.

## 2.Objectives:

The objectives of the study as follows-

- To trace the origin of the cult in Assam.
- To find out the impact of the system in the society.
- To examine the position of *devadāsī* as a woman.

## 3.Methodology:

The methodology of the study is descriptive. On the basis of religious belief the study has been analyses. The data collected from both secondary and primary sources. Based on the sources an effort is made to find out the genesis and development of *devadāsī* system. There are various literatures relating to the topic have been reviewed. The past history of religious belief which related to the cult has been indicated on the available literature which is helpful to reconstruct the past. The study tries to find out the authentic information as must as possible.

## 4.Review of literature:

Various literary work is related to the topic has been studied to prepare the paper. The scholars of ancient history have mostly indicates about the system. There are many literature mentioned about the *devadāsī* system in Assam or India. But fewer scholars have given importance about the topic. There are few books reviewed in the course of study related to the topic.

J. Sankar, (1990) in his book *Devadāsī Cult, A Sociological Analysis*, is most important book on the system. Here the author discusses about the system prevalent in India. The author discusses about the prevalent cult and its impact on the status of women. Though the book not directly related to the *devadāsī* system in Assam but, it gives the idea about the development of the cult and how it impact on the society.

P.Barua's (2008), *Axomor Devadāsī Nrityar oitihya*, is deal with the history of temple dancers of ancient Assam. It is a good attempt of the author to focus on the topic where discusses mainly about the rise of the system and its impact on the society. The author also discuss about the *devadāsī* system of Assam and its similarities with other contemporary Indian society. The book gives a good idea about the system in Assam especially.

A.S.Alteker (2016), *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, is a good source of women history in Indian civilization. Here the author discusses about the *devadāsī* system in India and its impact on the society

and culture. Though the author discusses about the cult prevalent in India mainly but it also helps to reconstruct the history of *devadāsī* of Assam.

K.P.Goswami (2000), *Devadāsī Dancing Damsel*, is a research work about the temple dance of Negheriting Siva temple. It gives ample source about the system and the condition of *Devadāsī* of Assam mainly. The author has a good attempt to find out the dance from its origin to downfall of the system.

### 5.Origin of the cult:

The devotional dance forms generally the outcome of the king, which divinity was accepted from very early time. In ancient time king was regarded the representative of god or the part of the god. Therefore people like to serve the king willingly and it was considered a sacred duty for them. So, there was not seen far distinction between divinity and loyalty. The kings were pleased by song and dance and people may consider that like a king god should be entertained through music and dance. Scholars suggested that the root of the cult related to the concept of king-God concept, even though it was not approximately defined. It is difficult to determine whether the dance evolved as rituals, pastime of aesthetic pleasure, but it was actually performed to appease the god. The practice of dedicating virgin girls to the temples in India was prevalent from very ancient time. The dancing figure discovered in Harappa and Mahenjodaro give idea about the existence of the cult. Very little has been known about the *devadāsī* or dancing girl of Vedic civilization. However the Rg. Veda often mentioned about the secular prostitution indicates the practice of the cult. Evidence have been found in the inscriptions during the rule of Asoka indicates that the cult was prevalent during his rule. Kalidasa in his work Meghadutam refers about the *devadāsī*. It may come from outside India, because in outside India the system was prevalent from very early time. The earliest records about the cult have been found in Babylonian civilization. It is not definitely say that from where it developed exactly for the first time. But it is clear that it has a long past before it evolved in India. In ancient time temples plays very important role and it actually controls all sphere of human activities. There were many male and female engaged in temple services according to the size of the temples.

The tradition of the system was very ancient in Assam. Especially the practice was firstly related to the Siva temple but later on the practice was extended to other *Śāka* temples also. But where from the cult came to Assam was not exactly known. Scholars opine that it was developed in Hajo and suggested that it came from Puri. In the Jagannath temple of Puri the cult was prevalent and the probability was not refuting totally. N.C. Sarma stated that from Hajo the practice was spread to other temples like Doobi, Negheriting, Viswanath etc. The evidence found about the cult indicates that the system was developed in Assam within 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. to 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. . The system was fully developed in 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. and in later period the cult rose prominent which patronized by the royal house. The ancient historical evidence about the custom has been found from the inscription of Vanamala Varman. The Bargaon grant of mentioned about the *natīs* who were the dancing girl in the Siva temple. The Yoginī Tantra, Kālikā Purāna etc. literary sources also refers about the system in Assam. The custom continued its domination from ancient time to till the Āhom

and Vaishnava period in the temples of Assam. From the time of Āhom king Siva Singha the system regain its glory.

### 6. *Devadāsī* system in Assam:

In Assam the *devadāsī* dance was mainly associated with the Siva temples. Gradually in all the temples of gods were associated with the female dancers. They were the female participants who took part in the rituals and festivals of the temples daily. The cult existed in the Siva temple till the last medieval period. Besides the Āhom, Kachāri and Koch also worship Lord Siva. From ancient time the most of the dynasties of Assam were the worshipper of Lord Siva. The kings were constructed many Siva temple where the evidence found about the cult. The kings donated the girls to these temples with other properties. Āhom king Pratap Sinha, Rajeswar Singha, Siva Singha donated *natīs* to the temples. Evidences have been found about the system prevalent in the temples of Vishnu in Assam.

There are many temples associated with the cult which indicates the popularity of the practice in Assam. Hayagriva Madhava temple of Hajo is one of the most important temples of ancient Assam. The evidence of the practice of *devadāsī* cult found here. It is recorded in the source that Koch king Naranarayana bring *natīs*, *gāyan*, *bāyan*, priest to the temple in 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. Da- Pavatiya temple (5<sup>th</sup> century -6<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Pingaleswar temple of Kamarupa also have the evident of the practice. The Kedar Madhava temple of Hajo also associated with the cult. It is a Siva temple and worship was associated with dance and music. In the Kāmakhya temple of Guwahati the practice was prevalent. The Negheriting Siva *Deol* also one of the most important Siva temple where the *devadāsī* system was prevalent. Another temple of Viswanath, where the cult was practiced and it is evident that when the Muslim invaded Assam they looted many properties and they also brought with them four *devadāsī*. The evident of the practice of the cult were found among the Bilbeswar Devalaya of Nalbari, Madan Kāmdeva temple of Kāmarūpa, Gopeswar Devalaya of Dhekiajuli, Umānanda Temple of Guwahati etc. The Parihareswar Devālaya of Doobi established by king Siva Singha associated with the cult. It is stated that the king brought *natī* from Dergaon and appointed in the temple.

It is clear that from ancient to medieval Assam the system was prevalent in Assam. Most of the temples of Assam associated with the cult. The popularity of the system has been noticed from above evidences.

### 7. Reasons for popularity of the cult:

The dance was primarily religious in nature and considered that God may be pleased with the service of *devadāsī* through dance and music and it will benefit of the people or the country. In that way dance was become the medium of popularization the religion among the people. From ancient time through singing, dancing, dramatical performances, puppet show etc. the religious ideas spread among the masses. In all these activities temples play important role in the cultural life of the people. The temple authority may have earned money through the performances. The religious superstition is one of the most important causes of the popularity of the custom. Peoples vows on the deity to dedication of their daughter to fulfill their desire or will. It was believed that dedicating dancing girl to solar temples anyone could achieve prosperity and

*suryaloka*. The continuous support of royal class the custom was also another cause of popularity of the custom. It was fully supported by the kings and they themselves dedicated the girl to the temple. Al- Biruni recorded that there were five hundred damsels in the temple of Somnath whose duty was to please the deity by dancing. The number was increases day by day and the custom become more popular in the society. Moreover the dancing girls were provided entertainment not only the god but also the visitors, who enjoyed their performances and the visitors were the source of income for the state. It is stated that the king used to dedicated girls to the temple for the attraction of the cities or may be the financial reason. It also considered that the *devadāsī* will bring pomp and prosperity to the temples.

### 8.The condition of *Devadāsī*:

*Devadāsī* was a part of temple establishment and became the integral part of temple. They were the public women. The girls dedicated to the temple at a very tender age. It was believe that god demanded virginity of the woman. Therefore the girls were dedicated at their childhood. In course of time the virgin were married to the god. It was considered very auspicious for the girl because, they married to the deity and so they could not be widow. In Hindu ideology marriage was considered very sacred an essential. Everybody must passes through the stages of four *āśrama* or four stages of life which the Hindus follows. Therefore the unmarried person considered inauspicious. There was the customs of marrying with swords, trees etc. with unmarried girls. In that way *devadāsī*, who were dedicated to the deity also married to the god and it was considered very honourable.

The *devadāsī* has been divided into three parts or class. The first one is the only temple dancer, who devoted their life only to the deity. The second category was the *veśyās*, who dance in front of the idol. Another class of *devadāsī* was who dance for the entertainment the people in the public places. Whatever their category but, their sole duty was to dance for entertainment and they have to sacrifice their lives to the service of the god and appease the god for the welfare of the people. They were dedicated for the temple and therefore were not allowed to marry another person or common man.

When the girls were leave in the temples by their parents or others after dedicated to the god, they had no other options to getting free from the service at their own will. They had to sacrifice their lives in the service of the temple. When the girl attained proper age she can live in public place. In general the *devadāsī* should reside at the temple complex. Therefore the priest had the full control on them and in that way some of them became the pray of the priest. But it is significant that in Assam the condition of them was better than the other parts of the civilization. It is evident that the king of Assam arranged for the family of a *devadāsī* to reside at the temple premises. Therefore they should live with their family. They have to dance in the temple in some special time. But in later time the *naṭīs* not only performed dance within the temple complex but also in public place and it deteriorated her honour and prestige gradually.

The tradition of donated girl to the temple became more complex. The temple priest or other rich class people have to pay heavy sum to bring the beautiful girls to the temple. Moreover some parents willingly

dedicated their daughters for the shower of the blessings of the gods on them. Even though behind the custom a spiritual ideology was present but due course of time the *devadāsīs* were became the object of entertainment for the priests or the high class people. They were not allowed to marry another man and for that the whole life they have to live in the temple complex and the identification compelled her to leave a normal life.

The *devadāsī* was considered very honest and honourable platform of service the god. But in time some complex and evil hand defile the moral nature of the system. They had to astray her whole life in the service of god for the welfare of the king and his subjects. It was believe that viewing the dance of *devadāsī* one should remove his sin. It was not considered a lower profession but considered very sacred and auspicious duty. The life of the *devadasi* was different from normal people. Though in ancient society they were respected but, due to lose the sanctity of the custom they were neglected in the society.

It is stated that the marriage of a *devadāsī* was possible. But due to the selfish nature of the priest and high class people the marriage of a *devadasi* become very complex. It was defined to them who get married that she should give her first girl child to the temple. It also injected on them that if any married *devadāsī* will die, then her girl child should donate to the temple. In some parts it also mentions that the *naṭīs* should be live unmarried. They were donated some kind of land for their service by the kings. But it stated that in later time some people from higher section of society had to confiscate their land and in that way their condition became more miserable.

In Assam the *devadāsī* dance three times to eight time a day in front of the idol. They should remained unmarried until they remained in the service of the temple. But after leaving the temple service they have to marry and live a householder life. In Assam also the *devadāsī* should performed from her parents home. She could reside her parental home even after joining the temple service also.

### 9. Impact in the society:

The custom was prevalent all over India and it known by different names. In Assam they were known as *naṭī* and were expert in the art of music and dance. The divine service enjoined on the girls dedicated to the temple leads her life in a specific way. They were the slave of god. To give a girl for religious institution was considered very pious and therefore peoples generally offered girls willingly to the temples. In that way the number of dancing girl increases day by day. It is stated that the custom quite common in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The introduction of the dancing girls in the temple lowering the spiritual environment of the temple and side by side the position of the women also deteriorated. Temples were the sacred institution, but allowing these girls to reside at the temple premises gradually harms the environment of the shrines. Even though the idea behind the introduction of the custom was sacred but, it gradually defile the spiritual environment of the temple. The custom generally popularized by the kings and aristocratic members of the society. The Purānas also support the custom and it was considered that the system will bring the pomp and splendor of the temple. It seems that all the people who favoured the institutions were fails to realize the future effect on the divine institutions.

People or the visitors of the temple generally came to worship the god for their welfare. Some people among them were come to the temple to enjoy the beauty and dance of the *devadāsīs* rather than the respect to the deities. The love intrigues with the temple girls was the cause of moral degradation of the society. In the society where the early marriage and *purdāh* system was bind the man but, on the other hand they seek more interest to by visiting the shrine for entertainment. In that way the temple girls indulges in some activities which was responsible for the downfall of the position of women what they earlier achieved. The spiritual environment of the society not only spoiled but it also contributed to the moral degradation of the society. P.C.Chaudhury states that *devadāsīs* were specifically the *veśyās* or prostitutes supported by religion. The Tantric influence is seen in the cult.

### 10. Downfall of the system:

*Devadāsī* system was considered very respectable in the society which falls down due to many reasons. Due to some evil effect the cult began to lose its identity and considered very inauspicious practice. The Muslim invaders who destroyed the temples and because of the demolition of the temples the *natīs* or *naṭas* were became workless. Therefore they began to perform in public places and it may be presumed that due to their livelihood they became prostitutes. In that way the *devadāsī* lost their honourable position in the society. On the other hand the downfall of royal dynasty and lack of royal support to the temple institution compel them to look for another options for their livelihood. In that way they became the possession of enjoyment for some peoples and indulged in lewdness. Moreover the cult has not relation with the mass people of the society of Assam. The culture of a society must have related to the people live in the society. It is real fact that no culture will live long with the support of very small quantity of specific class of people. The common people have no specific interest to the system even they began to hatred the system because of its deteriorated nature. The original form of system was noble in character and was free from sex and promiscuity. But the sacred nature of the custom neglected by some people vested interest. Deceit trickery of time *devadāsī* was exploited in the hand of some people guided by carnal desire. Due to their profession or specific identity they had to dance for their survival. But they began to use in the name of religion and in the cycle of time they were disappear.

The cult was in some extant esoteric. The spiritual intimacy with the god of a *devadāsī* gives the respectable position in the society. They were regarded very auspicious as the princes of god. Their presence in good deeds was desirable. But gradually in reality they were forced into prostitution for the sexual gratification of priestly and noble class. It is seen that the priest and aristocratic class were responsible for the downfall of the system. The poverty of the people and superstition also has responsible for the downfall of the system. Due to the moral degradation of the cult women position also affected in the society.

## 11. Conclusion:

The system of *devadāsī* has a long past of its origin. It was considered a very honest platform to service the god. But due to vested interest by some peoples the purity of the cult lost its identity. The people who support the social purity or morality always opposed it. Most of religious leaders or reformers even though oppose the system but the royal support popularized the custom. Here it is find that behind the system the oppressive patriarchal ideology of Hinduism exist. But it is important to note that the sanctity of the custom have been preserved to a great extent in Assam in comparison to the other parts of the country. The *devadāsī* in Assam were known as *naṭī* who performed dance in the temple at an auspicious juncture to time. They had not live separately from their parents home. The instances of *naṭī* who married to Āhom king indicate that in Assam the system was not very rigid and *devadāsī* could marry. But it cannot say that the all dancing girls were treating to the same way. The system has many impacts on the women in different way. The system deteriorated the position of women from a respectable place to an object of pleasure in the male dominated society. It seems that women are the puppet of male dominated society in different way. The future of the *devadāsī* was uncertain and lack of support compels her to accept whatever in front of her. There was no family support, economic support and in that way the women began to pray of some opportunist who used them for their own benefits. During the later half of nineteenth century CE., the system get a serious setback. The *devadāsī* began to perform in public places. Laxity of moral values contributed a serious blow to the system and in the cycle of time it disappears.

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