



# The Dravidian Movement and the Devadasi Abolition Act: Did a ‘Brahimincal conspiracy’ oppose reforms to the practice as alleged?

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The Dravidian movement has long claimed the mantle of progressive politics in Tamil Nadu. Among their claims in support of women’s emancipation was their contribution to the passing of the Devadasi Abolition Act.

This is portrayed as a change brought about by the sustained campaign of the Dravidian movement towards ending this practice. However, as Historian and writer Ma Venkatesan has studied, the truth is quite different.

## Historical Background

All over India, there was the practice of dedicating young women exclusively to the service of the temple. They were symbolically married off to the presiding deity of a temple. Their services were in the form of various work related to the functioning of the temple. The main function was to provide music and dance performances as offerings to the deity. Their duties were not restricted only to this function.

They had a say in the administration of the temple and had roles in managing the flower arrangements, decorations and the conduct of the festivals. Manickavasagar, the Saiva Saint, describes their duties as a composite of

- Singing and performing auspicious songs, primary among them being songs related to ritual and devotion. Artistic compositions were for festive occasions in the temple.
- Offering incense and camphor in ritual
- Adorning the temple for festivals
- Suspending garlands of flowers and precious materials.

There were two categories of such dedications to the temple – one was a higher-status devadasi, who was given a land grant from the temple’s endowment, also known as inam lands. These were similar to craftsmen, priests in socio-economic status due to their minor landholdings.

Another category were those women who had been dedicated to singing and performance of other folk arts. They were supported on a share of the pooled village harvest. In earlier times, the devadasis were relatively well-off, enjoyed a high status and were independent enough to give endowments and gifts of their own.

An inscription of the time of the Chola ruler, Rajaraja III (1226 CE) at Thiruvizhimalai temple describes how the king rectified grain acquisition by transferring the responsibility from two Sivabrahmanas who had misappropriated grain to the devaradiyar (devadasi) of the temple.

Another inscription describes a Devadasi woman as Anukki Pattalinangai, the term anukki denoting her relationship as a partner of the Chola ruler Rajadhiraja I, who contributed gold, jewels and covered the roof of the shrine in gold in her own capacity.

While they were considered wedded to the deity and nitya-sumangalis, or always auspicious, they did not have to be celibate. They took consorts from landed upper castes. Some were even consorts of royal men. The 12<sup>th</sup> Century Kamikagama calls them daughters of Shiva. In Saivaite temples, this Agama describes a ritual of initiation by the Sivacharya or Priest of the Temple by touching them on their head with a staff.

Women thus initiated were called Shirodandini or Talaikkoli in Tamil. This matches with description of the Chief Devadasi as Talaikkoli in inscriptions. The 7<sup>th</sup> Century Shivadharmottara, a Upagama text that codifies practice of Shaiva temple worship, describes their status as servants of Shiva, who, by virtue of their service are assured a place in Rudra's world. This same assurance is given to their offspring also.

There is evidence that this was a widespread practice across the Greater Indosphere, including in Cambodia.

There is no evidence that formal marriage was denied to these dedicated women. The word used is ganika or courtesan, but a nuanced view indicates that they had no obligation to remain unmarried. European travellers' accounts before the colonial period give no evidence of large-scale exploitation of these women.

During Vijayanagara times, the system of two-fold categorization of public women continued – the devadasis who were dedicated to ceremonial functions at temples and courtesans who were entertainers and informal companions of nobles and royalty.

Over time, the system had degenerated to such an extent that many of them, along with artisans and priests, lived in penury. Part of the reason must have been the devastation of the Indian countryside during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the impoverishment of the temple economy. We get a glimpse of the processes at work from the records of Thomas Roe, the English traveller to the court of Jehangir.

By this time, the temple economy had deteriorated to such an extent that he records only dancing girls for entertainment and pleasure purposes. A similar process was carried over the long years of deterioration of the temple economy in Southern India between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. During the colonial administration, their unconventional lifestyle attracted the curiosity of the Christian Europeans. To British eyes, their lifestyle must have been seen as a deviation from Christian norms.

From the mid-century onwards, Indians started getting Western education in larger numbers and those with Western education were at the forefront of public opinion. By this time, the devadasi system was seen as an abhorrent practice and these women considered to be living in sin.

In an era where women were cloistered and restrictions placed upon their movement, public appearance and education, these women who performed in public, had agency in owning and disposing of property and were free in their choice of life partners caused no end of consternation to the English-educated public.

That said, the social practice had also degenerated to such an extent that the women were entirely dependent upon their consorts, now patrons for their livelihood. Their social status was much degraded and many women were now susceptible to exploitation.

Their children did not have acceptability in society and were often subject to social discrimination. Even in Madras, schools would sometimes refuse to admit children from devadasi families.

The way forward to solve this social discrimination seemed to be to outlaw the practice of dedicating women to the devadasi life. Even at that time, there was opposition, mostly from within the community itself and among traditionalists who were loath to let go of a custom from very old times.

The colonial British government which did wish to impose its writ on native customs, was content to let this be resolved within the Hindu community itself. However, by the second and third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, opinion makers and influencers in India were of the unanimous opinion that the custom had to go and that the communities from which the Devadasis came from should be turned towards the same kind of marriage and lifestyle customs as the rest of the Hindu community.

## Land and Devadasis

Among the primary concerns of the colonial British administration was to maximize resource and revenue extraction from their Indian dominions. One aspect of consternation to the British administration was the large bank of inam lands. In 'Castes of Mind' Nicholas Dirks described his study of land ownership patterns in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Pudukkottai. 70% of the cultivable land was inam lands.

Of these, 70% was lands given as inam to artisans, artists, temples, Brahmins, mathams, annadhana chatrams, traveller choultries and shrines for Muslim saints and the remaining 30% for members of the administration, guards, servants and military retainers. He further proposes that even in highly militarized states, only 50% would have been inam lands for military purposes. Thus, 25% of inam lands would have been earmarked for artisans, dancers, musicians and village officials

Form this, we get a picture where in pre-colonial times, native Hindu kingdoms set aside close to 15% of land for the purpose of the native economic system centred around the temple. Given this information, it is no surprise that the devadasis were highly regarded and were able to make endowments by themselves.

Every time a woman was dedicated as a devadasi, it was obligatory to make a settlement upon the family of inam lands. This would be from the common land of the temple or from a patrons' personal property. **It is possible that one of the motivations for the atrocity literature produced and the campaign against the practice was the British administration wanting to keep more lands under the taxable net.**

## Voices of Reform

Some of the most articulate voices for change came from within the community itself. The most articulate voices for preservation of the practice also came from within the community, notably the dance performer and public intellectual Balasaraswati.

Here we present two of the individuals who called for reform.

## Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy

We must spend some time on the life story of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, one of the remarkable personalities of social life in Madras of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She was born to a Brahmin father, a College Principal in the then Pudukkottai State, a minor principality in today's Tamil Nadu, and a mother from the Isai Velalar community.

Contrary to social convention, she was educated in school, then she made her way to Madras to study Medicine and qualified as the first woman House Surgeon in the Madras Maternity and Ophthalmic Hospital. She married a man of her choice, Dr Sundara Reddy from a different caste at the age of 28. She was the force behind such lasting philanthropic endeavours as the Avvai Home for Orphaned Girls, Adyar Cancer Institute and opened the way to provide scholarships for Dalit girls and a hostel for Muslim girls to pursue studies. She worked against trafficking of women for sex work.

Among her major concerns was the state of women in her community. She was particularly forceful in her argument to abolish the devadasi system. In 1927, the Women's India Association nominated her to the Madras Legislative Council as Vice President. It is in the Council that she brought the Bill to abolish the devadasi practice in 1930. We will discuss the events related to this Bill in a later section, where we shall evaluate a key claim of the Dravidian movement.

## Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammal

Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammal had a far harder path in life than Dr Muthulakshmi. She was from an economically backward family and had been dedicated to a devadasi temple by her parents, even though her clan did not have a tradition of women joining temple service. The inam properties and marginal financial security this brought was an attraction in the desperately poor rural India of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century/early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

She gave up her devadasi position and married to lead a regular family life. She joined the Self-Respect Movement at the time that EV Ramasamy broke away from the Congress. In 1936, she wrote a novel – Dasgalin Mosa Valai or Mathi petra minor, which in English translation means The treacherous net of the Devadasis or the Wisdom gained by the Minor. It is an ideological account of scheming devadasi women who snare rich young men for money. It contrasts their behaviour with that of 'reformed' devadasis who have married and begun to lead a respectable life.

She stayed in the Self-Respect movement until 1949, and saw the passing of the Devadasi Abolition Bill in 1947.

## Abolition of Devadasi practice

While we have described some of the key activists that worked towards the abolition of the Devadasi system in Madras Presidency, let us look at the situation in other parts of India.

### Mysore State 1909

The earliest opposition against the devadasi system in Mysore State came from the Maharaja himself. Nalwadi Krishna Raja Wodeyar IV, took over the reigns of administration in 1902. He began to build a reputation as an administrator, patron of the arts and social change agent. His solution for the injustices in the devadasi system

and the poor social position of these women was to outlaw it altogether. In 1909, he signed a Royal decree outlawing the practice of gajja puja – a ritual performed to dedicate a woman as a devadasi and symbolically marry her to the deity.

### **Travancore and Cochin 1930**

Due to the intervention of the Maharani of Travancore Pooradam Thirunal Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, who in 1930 was the Regent of Travancore, ruling on behalf of her nephew the Maharaja Chitra Tirunal, the Travancore Kingdom banned the practice of devadasi dedication.

The Kingdom of Cochin followed suit soon.

### **The First attempt in Madras Presidency 1930**

In 1926, the third elections to the Madras Presidency Legislative Council were held. The Swaraj Party, a breakway faction of the Indian National Congress, despite not having a majority, was asked to form the Government. This election expanded the Legislative Council by 5 nominated seats to include women.

Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy was pressed by her colleagues at the Women's Indian Association, led by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, to accept a nomination to the Legislature. As part of her brief, she decided to move the House to pass a new Bill she had drafted.

She recounts in her memoir – 'My Experience As a Legislator' – the positive response her proposal received from various quarters, including Gandhi writing in Young India, from women of the Devadasi community in Cochin, from members of the Telugu Kalavantulu community and from Erode Municipality, which at the time was led by Balasubburayulu Naidu.

She also mentions the positive reception accorded to it by Sir Krishnan Nair of the Justice Party, the Ministerial Group or the ruling Swaraj Party, Congress Party members. The Law Member Sir CP Ramasamy Iyer was appreciative of the motion but had misgivings about the feasibility of making the motion a practical legislation.

Eventually, the Bill was defeated on technicalities, which included a dilatory motion made by Sir Krishnan Nair himself.

### **Bombay Devadasis Protection Act, 1934**

In 1934, the Bombay Presidency brought about a bill to protect women from the devadasi custom by means of an order from the Bombay High Court. It made it an offence to dedicate women to the custom.

### **Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947**

In 1947, as part of the devolution of powers to Indians, Madras Presidency was placed under a Premiership. Omandur Ramasamy Reddy of the Indian National Congress became the Premier. Under his leadership, progressive legislation – Madras Temple Entry Authorization Act 1947 that gave free and universal access to temples to all Hindus, regardless of caste and Devadasi Dedication Abolition Act of 1947, which finally abolished the Devadasi system were passed.

# Conclusion

The prevailing narrative is that the Devadasi system was nurtured by the Brahminical order and sustained by dominant castes for the purpose of sexual slavery of poor and marginalized women. This narrative fails to take into account historical status of devadasi women, the participation of multiple castes in the system or the gradation in caste within the devadasi community itself.

That this was a popular custom and had no codified sanction in the core Dharma Shastras is ignored in the discourse. The Dharma Shastras cognize the existence of devadasi or public courtesans and temple artistes. Over time, especially with the withering away of the temple economy, the function of courtesan and temple artiste converged. Narratives influenced by Victorian Christian mores further gave a fillip to the worsening social status of these women.

It may be noted that Dr Muthulakshmi was encouraged to pursue an education by her Brahmin father, stayed at PS Krishnaswamy Iyer's Madras home while a young medical student or that the Brahmin leaders of the Congress Party welcomed the removal of this system.

The Dravidian ideologues also claim that Brahmin Diwans influenced the rulers of Princely States to sustain the Brahminical order. The truth of those claims aside, the Diwans of Mysore in 1909 were Madhava Rao Patankar and Ananda Rao Thanjavurkar, both Deshastha Brahmins from Thanjavur and the Diwan of Travancore in 1930 was Subramanya Iyer.

Of note, too, is the fact that the two bills against the devadasi system were both passed when the Justice Party was not in power. Nor was the Self-Respect Movement of any significance in influencing either legislation. The times were in favour of this social change. Any opposition to this came from within the community itself.

Now, we come to the event which is offered up as clinching evidence that it was a Brahminical system that established and sustained the devadasi practice. Satyamurti, the Congress/Swarajya leader is said to have claimed that women dedicated to the devadasi practice were guaranteed to enter heaven by virtue of their position. Dr Muthulakshmi is said to have retorted - 'Then why don't you dedicate women from your community to this devadasi system?'

First, we do not know the provenance of this particular story. It makes no appearance in Dr Muthulakshmi's own memoirs. Another version of this story is of Dr Muthulakshmi remarking to Satyamurthy - 'So far it has been women from our community that have sung in public, now it will be the turn of your women'.

The second is most plausible, given that Satyamurthy and Muthulakshmi had known each other for decades in 1929, having been classmates in the FA class at Maharaja's College, Pudukottai. This might have been no more than a minor discussion, as opposed to being a heated debate. In any case, Dr Muthulakshmi's words would prove prophetic, as a 10-year-old D K Pattamal from a conservative Dikshitar family had begun to perform in just this time period.

D K Pattamal paved the way for a generation of Brahmin women to perform Carnatic music on stage. Brahmin men had begun to perform music publicly a generation earlier. In a few years, a lady called Rukmini Devi from a conservative Brahmin family took up sadir and reformulated the art to Bharatanatyam, a marker of high culture.

It also led to the next Dravidian accusation of Brahmins having cornered the sphere of high culture to themselves. We will examine this claim at a different time.

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