

The Devadasi

Devadasi means god servant or slave. They are sometimes seen as the godking's wives, or simply married to their temple, but since the Christian influence has come into South- East Asia, they have been also called prostitutes and have lost most of their high social ranking. The Devadasi are mostly young girls, given to the temple by their parents. There they are taught sacred dances and ceremonies pertaining to the God of the temple. At many of the temples they would perform these cultural acts naked or wearing very little (Sirhandi 44). This is one of the reasons the cult was seen as improper by other cultures. More recently there have been legal ramifications from the treatment of the Devadasi. This introduction into the Devadasi will attempt to explain the complex world in which the Devadasi play a pivotal role.

One of the greatest advantages of the Devadasis was that they could never be widowed (Orchard 2380). This allowed them a higher status than most other women, as being widowed can lead to losing everything. This may be one of the reasons that the Devadasi were seen as ranking higher than most other women in social status. They were sometimes seen as the development of the female Brahmin. Since women were no longer allowed to be priests, it can be said that the Devadasi took over the women's portion of the ritual performances.

The Devadasi tradition can be traced back to the first century BCE (Jeffery 185). Although that date is unclear and some sources dispute that the tradition began between the third and sixth century CE (Orchard 5). At first Devadasis were simply seen as the wives of the god, or married to the temple. They performed sacred dances, sang and played instruments as a part of their relationship with the temple and its rituals. By the Chola Period, 850-1300 CE, (Orchard 6) they had become far more popular and were gaining much attention by their rituals. At this point many believe that their role as sexual beings became exploited. As wives of the temple

they would be expected to perform sexual acts either for the temple to prosper or as part of their lives in the temple. In many cases, despite being married to the god of the temple, the women were still able to have children (Ashton, 798). The pressure for families to keep the temple prosperous may have led to increased pressure on sexual intercourse.

There is now a major problem with the Devadasis and their lives. From all the sources it is very hard to distinguish whether they were empowered wives of the god or victims of prostitution. Some sources say that they were simply dancers and entertainers and were not forced to have sexual intercourse with anyone that they do not approve of. Other sources say that they were sold by their families at very young ages and forced to perform sexual acts on anyone that will bring money to the corrupt Brahmins. Since Christianity came to India, the Devadasis have been under scrutiny. In times of British rule the Devadasis lost their social status.

In 1947 an act was passed for the protection of the Devadasis (Hubel 15). This act had become a very controversial and heated topic. Many felt it was necessary while others believed it infringed on their religious rights. According to Teresa Hubel, “the Madras legislature passed an act into law that would change forever the unique culture of the professional temple female dancers of South India (Hubel 15).” This topic is still controversial and has only passed in South India, although that is where most of the remaining Devadasi are. According to some of the sources this law has significantly reduced the amount of Devadasi that are used in the temples and their rituals. However one ethnographic study by Treena Orchard, notes that “between 1,000 and 10,000 girls are introduced into the *Devadasi* each year (Orchard 6).” It is difficult to tell what the proper figures are from most of the sources available. Either way, the law has had a significant effect on the treatment toward the Devadasi, now they are portrayed as prostitutes that

are being protected. The ethnographic studies done on the Devadasi mostly depict them as sex-trade workers, but most studies ignore the fascinating history behind their rituals and traditions.

The Devadasi is a complex ritual and tradition. It has been a struggle for those still remaining in the ritual dancing to avoid being subject to calls of prostitution and becoming part of the corrupt nature of some of the temples. For most of those who have studied the Devadasi it was difficult to get anyone attached to the temples to openly discuss their roles (Ashton, 1977). They are afraid of being viewed negatively as prostitutes, and the stigma that goes with their position within the temple rituals. Dancers are still used in many ceremonies and are called Devadasi but it is difficult to say what their positions are beyond entertaining at certain ceremonies. The ancient tradition of being married to a god and serving him for one's entire life is no longer found. The Devadasi way has changed along with the colonization and foreign influence in India.

The Devadasi are in a very difficult position in the caste system. They were once in a Brahman sub-caste but now they have been pushed out by outside cultures. They are seen as entertainers to gods and past kings, but modern-day prostitutes. Their position is very hard to place in Hindu society; it is unfortunate that their rituals seem so poorly understood by the sources.

Bibliography

- Aston, Martha Bush (1987) Review of: *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*, by Frederique Apffel-Marglin. *American Ethnologist*, Volume 14; 4, 797-798
Malden:Blackwell Publishing
- Hubel, Teresa (1994) Devadasi Defiance and the Man-Eater of Malgudi. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Volume 29; 15, 15-28 London, Canada.
- Jeffery, Roger (1990) Review of: Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India, By Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 49; 1, 184-185ABI/INFORM Global.
- Orchard, Treena Rae (2007) Girl, Woman, Lover, Mother: Towards a new understanding of child prostitution among young Devadasis in rural Karnataka, India. *Social Science & Medicine*, [Volume 64, Issue 12](#), 2379-2390 Vancouver.
- Orchard, Treena Rae (2007) In This Life: The Impact of Gender and Tradition on Sexuality and Relationships for Devadasi Sex Workers in Rural India. *Sexuality and Culture*, Volume 11; 1, 3-27.
- Sirhandi, Marcella C. (1999) Manipulating Cultural Idioms: In Contemporary Indian Art. *Art Journal*, Volume 58; 3, 40-47.

Related Readings

- Apffel-Marglin, Frederique (1985) *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Priyadarshini, Vijaisri (2004) *Recasting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India*. Delhi: Kanishka Publishers.

Related Topics

Bharatanatyam
Bombay Devadasi Protection Act
Brahmacharis
Chola
Karnataka
Orissa
Puri
Yellamma

Related Websites

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devadasi>

<http://www.ashanet.org/library/articles/devadasis.199812.html>

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9030142/Devadasi>

<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Spring02/Chattaraj/index2.html>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzvFAZ_SfdI

Written by Courtney Rode (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.