

## Devadasi System in Mysore

### Why in news?

Recently, historian Janaki Nair's talk at the Bangalore International Centre outlined the rise of Devadasi system in Mysore and its abolition by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### How did the Devadasi system originate and evolve over time?

- Devadasis are also called as or “**dancing girls**”.
- **Origin** - It traces its origins to the close of 8<sup>th</sup> century.
- **Historical reference** - According to an inscription dated 800 AD, a virgin girl, 8 mattars of land, 1,000 cows and a swing was dedicated for the deity, to a local temple in Mayile village.
- Other records also indicate the presence of devadasis in Jain, Shaivite and Vaishnavite temples across the region.

*Chola-era Rajarajesvara Temple in Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu records the names of the 400 devadasis of the temple and their remuneration in the form land grants.*

- **Royal patronage** - It flourished in Mysore province under the **patronage of Wadiyars**.
- **Established system** - By end of 10<sup>th</sup> century, young girls dedicated to temples were made to perform different services like
  - Dancing, singing, drum beating, carrying sacred aaratis and participating in temple processions.
- **Training to dedicated girls** - They underwent rigorous training in nritya (dance) and geeta (vocal music).
  - Krishnaraja Wadiyar III employed Chinnayya Pillai of the Thanjavur Quartet to train the dancers.

***Thanjavur Quartet** were 4 brothers Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivananda, and Vadivelu, who lived during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and contributed to the development of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.*

- **Maintenance of devadasis** - Portions of land or significant sums of money were set apart for the women and their expenses.
  - One epigraph mentions about a grant of money for various items including ‘looking glass of the dancing girls’ and “the grant was to continue as long as sun and moon exist.”

## What were the social status of devadasis?

- **Wider presence** - During the reign of Wadiyars, Devadasis resided and performed in temples in cities and towns including Mysore, Bangalore, Mulbagal, Kadoor, T. Narsipur and so on.
- **Social support** - Upon from royal patronage, they were also supported by merchants, landlords and art connoisseurs.
- **New social class** - They had their own laws of inheritance, rules of etiquettes and even panchayats.
  - Girls belonged to various castes such as Kurubas, Bedas, Gangadikara Vokkaligas, Telugu Banajigas and Lingayats.
- **Matrilinear tradition** - The Devadasi system allowed the adoption of girls through females.
- They followed **a matrilineal inheritance system** (property passed through women).
- **Stature in weddings** - During several weddings, apart from the groom, the devadasis (considered *nitya sumangalis* and hence auspicious) tied a second tali around the bride's neck.
- Many of the Devadasis rose in prominence and enjoyed significant wealth and social standing.

### Reasons for Social Importance of Devadasis

- **Expertise in fine arts** - Music, dance and literature.
- **Learning and catholicity** - They had greater exposure than the ordinary women in society.
- **Acceptance of polygamy** - A dancing girl who was not very rigid about having contact with a single man only was not looked down upon.
- **Higher economic status** - They owned land and received grants, securing financial independence and influence.
- Grants given to Devadasis reached a peak in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.
- **Permanent position** - Their posts were permanent and hereditary and upon the death, all temple activities were halted and ensured dignified burial.

## What led to the decline of the Devadasi system?

- The Devadasis started seeing a decline in their social status by around the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- **Factors for decline** - Exploitation of women within the system became more rampant.
- **Influence of Western morality** - It enlightened the larger conscience of the Indian society and equated the system to prostitution thereby protesting against it.
- **Anti-naught movement** - It became prominent during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century that aimed to abolish the practice of dedicating girls to the system gained significant momentum.
- **Sanitizing the sadir** - A process where women of the dominant castes learn and perform dance in more secular kinds of locations.

**Sadir or Dasiyattam**, the dance form performed by Devadasis was erotic in nature.

- **Administrative changes** – Muzrai Commissioner A. Srinivasacharlu played a major role in abolition in Mysuru.

*The **Muzrai Department** manages matters related to religious and charitable institutions in Mysore province.*

- By 1898, he announced that no new Devadasis would be appointed after their predecessors passed away.
- He discontinued the appointment of Devadasis in Muzrai temples across Mysore, Kadur, Tumkur, Kolar, and other regions.
- **Progressive reforms**
  - **Infant Marriage Regulation (1894)** – Banned marriages for girls below 8 years and limited the age gap to 30 years.
  - **Hindu Women's Property Rights (1933)** – Granted Hindu women rights to inherit property.
- **Abolition** – Mysore became one of the 1st regions in India to abolish the Devadasi system in 1908-09 much earlier than Madras Devadasi Abolition Act in 1947.

## Reference

[The Hindu | The Devadasi System in the Mysore Region](#)

