

Devadasis on the stage

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From time immemorial the fascinating institution of courtesans has been in existence in India although they were known by different names in various parts of the country in different periods of history. Kautilya, in his Artha Sastra, uses the words ganika, pratiganika, rupa jiva, dasi, devadasi, silpakarika, etc. In Tamil Nadu they were known as devadasis, devar adiyal, talicheri pendugal and by other names. In Andhra Pradesh they had several names like bogum, kalavantulu, sani, nagavasulu and kurmapulu.

Whatever their nomenclature, the community was considered to be the repository of all forms of amusement and also of fine arts. Jain works mention them as experts in all 72 kinds of arts or kalas and this may be an exaggeration. Music and dancing were undoubtedly their special preserve and they also enacted dramatic shows usually inside palace compounds. Contrary to the common belief, they are described as having been decorously dressed and had no occasion to feel embarrassed even when they performed acrobatic dances.

Devadasis may be classified as those who earned their livelihood from temples and those who danced before rulers, nobles and ministers. How music and dancing formed an essential part of temple festivals is described in many inscriptions. Pallava inscriptions mention women dancers as adigalmar, manikattar, kanikaiyur and rudraganikas. Paravaiyar, wife of Sundaramurthi Nayanar, was the daughter of a rudraganika. In the Chola period the institution of devadasis was well organized. Their social standing was such that they made rich endowments to various public benefactions. They were divided into seven classes like datta, vikrita etc.

The story of the Silappadikaram is too well-known in Tamil Nadu. Madavi, one of the

two heroines of this epic was a devadasi, but it would be more appropriate to call her a 'raja dasi'. Her performance before the king of the period is perhaps the first literary record of a 'devadasi on the stage'. Amrapali and Vasavadatta, mentioned in Buddhist literature, were perhaps earlier raja dasis but their performance on the stage has not been described.

Another classification divides Dasis into Rajadasis who performed before royalty, Alankaradasis who danced at social functions like marriages and Devadasis who danced exclusively in temples. The three types represented three differing types of dance. The anti-nautch movement directed at the art killed all the three varieties; and legislation deprived hundreds of teachers and pupils of their only means of livelihood. Yet, the art carried the secrets of its own reanimation and like the phoenix, arose to live again.

Before Sabhas and similar institutions came into existence, nobles, zamindars and wealthy merchants were the patrons of Devadasis and they used to arrange for regular dance recitals in their gardens on important occasions. A Sanskrit work called "Sarva Deva Vilasah" written about 200 years ago, describes in great detail the prominent dancers of the period and the name of their patrons.

In Tamil Nadu, Bharata Natyam recitals used to be arranged by rich landlords during weddings in their houses. The young Vedantin, B. R. Rajam Iyer, in his "Kamalambal Charitram" written about 100 years ago, describes a wedding in a village in the Madurai District at which a "Sadir" by one Tiruvarur Rajalakshmi had been arranged by the mirasdar. Dance recitals at weddings in the Thanjavur District later became a common feature and this was one of the reasons for the concentration of Devadasis in the villages of this District.

The beginning of the 20th century saw several sabhas being organized in Madras, Bangalore, Kakinada and other places but the accent was on music. Dance was considered as something undersirable. Even the Madras Music Academy took a long time to come to the conclusion that Bharata Natyam was after all an art which had some merits. The early dancers who performed in sabhas were, naturally, Devadasis as women from other communities had not started learning the art. In fact, Rukmini Devi and Kalanidhi Narayanan were perhaps the first from the Brahmin community to learn Bharata Natyam. Rukmini Devi's first performance was in 1936 and Kalanidhi had appeared on the platform at the Music Academy in the years, 1938 and 1939. Now the entire field has been captured by dancers from communities other than the Devadasi clan while the number of dancers from North India and artises from abroad is steadily on the increase.

A nostalgic admirer of the art of the Davadasis writes : " The art has now become everybody's business and pupils in alarming numbers have invaded the field in a mad stampede". He feels that Devadasis were the people who gave the revival the initial momentum it badly needed and the art would not have survived if at that time there had been dancers with just the equipment of the present day stars. He is convinced that the tradition imbibed by a community for centuries cannot be absorbed by others in the course of four decades. These girls lacked the hereditary and natural advantages of the Davadasis who brought to bear on the art a hereditary psyche.

The fact remains that it was the Devadasis who were, for historical reasons, the preservers of the tradition for centuries and although they have literally disappered from the scene, their monumental services to the art can never be forgotten. □

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Common Legacy of Humanity

Music is a part of the very weft of civilization that is woven into strands of the primitive and immutable instincts of mankind. Indeed, a combination of words, word images and sounds, which in the ultimate analysis, constitutes the bare skeleton of Music, has had witchery that is very dawn of creation. Put in a different way, Music is something bigger than melody, bigger than harmony, bigger than the Muses themselves. It is the highest expression of the spark of divinity within us which alone distinguishes us from the rest of God's work. The grandest incandescence of this spark is in those who create. I refer to those who make Music - whether in song or in tune, whether in words or on instruments. But all of us - even

the humblest and the least cultured amongst us - throb with inexpressible longings beneath the stimulus of Music. There are chords in our hearts which are more sensitive than those of the instruments; and there is seldom amongst created beings anyone whose heart-strings do not vibrate with joy or suffering when a master's hand plays the note.

Music, therefore, is common legacy of humanity. Different cultural backgrounds have evolved different techniques and various schools. For similar reasons, music has also subdivided itself into denominational and geographical units. But Music in the wider sense is as universal as mankind itself.