



Performing Devotion, Negotiating Livelihood: Devadasis in Telugu Padams

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Abstract : In medieval Andhra, the construct of gender was intricately meshed with the socio-economic structures of the period. The decisive spaces for economic exchanges and manifestation of gender were the temples. The involvement of women within these temples were materialized in multiple forms let it be the queens or the elite women acting as patrons and contributing ample donations. These women also actively involved in the temple centric economies and in the ritualistic and cultural landscapes associated with it, even while they remained compliant to the patriarchal structures. Devadasis, a sect of women related to temples, had a liminal space between the sacred and the profane. This paper is an attempt to critically examine the role of devadasis in temple related culture and economy, their autonomy and subjugation in Andhra as discerned in the select 'padams' of Telugu literature.

Dedicated to temples, the devadasi women were dexterous in art and music and also played a significant role in the economy of temple centred society. Their duty was imbedded in the symbolic idea of serving the deity; aptly represented by the phrase "when God was a Customer" hence implicating the duality of their role as ritualistic intermediaries and economic participants. In the examination of the corollaries of their service, this paper seeks to look at how the associations of Devadasis with the temple deities, patrons, rulers and institutions mirror the dynamics of power, gender and economy in medieval Andhra. Devadasis as composite agents of tradition and transition involved in a paradoxical space where divinity and economy are deeply correlated.

Keywords:

IndexTerms - Devadasies, Temple, Economy, Gender, Telugu Padams

INTRODUCTION

The courtesans in South India possessed significant economic and sexual agency, as evidenced by the collection *When God is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs* by Ksetrayya and Others. These poems reflect courtesans' life in the framework of temples and society, emphasizing their capacity to negotiate power structures and their transactional relationships with patrons. They were central to temple economies, as they performed rituals, sang devotional songs, and maintained temple traditions. They were financially supported by temple revenues and wealthy patrons, forming a system where religious devotion intertwined with economic sustenance.

In many of Kshetraraya's *padams*, the divine is depicted as a **customer**, while the devadasis assumes the role of a courtesan, merchant, or servant. Devadasis serves God as "customer", offering her art, devotion, and service. Their service was rewarded spiritually and materially. The devotee gives their devotion, love, and service, while God bestows grace and liberation. The devadasis' economic agency was derived from their roles as cultural and religious performers. However, this relationship also reflected societal hierarchies, where the devadasis navigated power structures to sustain themselves. The poetry reclaims the courtesan's agency by exploring themes of devotion, sexuality, and economic independence, remarkably fusing the sacred with the profane.

Medieval South Indian Temples were centres of significant cultural, economic and social engagement. The temple played a pivotal role in solidifying the agrarian feudal order, a development further reflected in the rise of the Bhakti movement. Numerous efforts were made to legitimize and authenticate the emerging feudal polity by drawing parallels between the king and the deity. In fact, the deity in the temple was equated with the king in the court, creating a parallel

realm of authority on a spiritual plane. Since temples were considered analogous to royal courts and deities to kings, the Devasthanas adopted a bureaucracy similar to that of the Rajasthanas. Elaborate rituals were devised for temple worship, encompassing both routine services and special ceremonies during festive occasions. The Devadasis, as integral performers, excelled in music and dance. They served as intermediaries, bridging the divine and the royal.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Throughout the Middle Ages, Andhra saw numerous changes in the socio-cultural and political-economic domains. Due to the widespread expansion of socio-religious, charitable, and service tenures that functioned within the framework of taxation, tribute, and plunder, the state progressively changed into a multi-centered power structure that was divided and subdivided at many levels. Ancient dharmic kingship evolved into ritual kingship, which was further validated by the execution of *Dana*, *Dakshina*, *Tirtha*, *Darsana* etc. Deforestation and land reclamation during the period aided in the development of industries and agricultural expansion on the one hand, and the creation of Brahminical institutions, Brahmadeyas, and Devabhogas on the other. As a result, both peasant and non-peasant groups, such as merchants and artisans, were consolidated into guilds; these groupings were formerly caste-cum professional organizations, and the temple was also an institution that governed the people.

Its importance as the primary unifying feature that unites the many components of precolonial society into a single social fabric has been emphasized by the common model of the Hindu temple in South India. The South Indian temple served as a hub for economic redistribution, facilitating the trade of material items into the status and influence symbols known as temple honors. The medieval South Indian ruler's legitimacy was based on his position as the ultimate benefactor, and his sovereignty was rooted in a ritual that was far more powerful than his more commonplace means of governance. The main factor that allowed South Indian temples to fulfill this integrative role was their widespread social appeal.

KSETRAYYA AND HIS PADAMS: AN ANALYSIS

Ksetrayya was one of the prominent *padam* writers of Telugu literature. He was a prolific writer in the genre of *padams*. The Tamil region, ruled by the so-called Nayaka kings, is the primary home of this great *padam* writer. We know nothing substantial about him. Though there are additional Muvvas further south, in North Arcot and in Cittur near Kavetinagaram, his signature line typically refers to his god as Muvvagopala, possibly "Krishna from the village of Muvva" (commonly associated with a settlement near Kuchipudi in Krishna District). However, the name might also mean "Gopala of the jingling bells" and be unrelated to any settlement.

Vijayaraghava Nayaka of Thanjavur, Tirumala Nayaka of Madurai, and the Golconda Padshah are mentioned in one of Ksetrayya's *padams*; this places him firmly in the middle of the seventeenth century. He appears to have journeyed throughout south India, and is hence known by his popular etymology (from *kshetra* "temple site"; in Sanskritized form, he is *Kshetrajna*). However, it is more pertinent to picture him in the courtesans' quarters of the temple cities; he sings, typically in a female voice, about courtesans and their lovers.

Devadasis were the servants of God. As they were married to the immortal God, they were known as '*Nityasumanagali*' they were learned musicians and dancers through their artistic excellence and devotion they held an esteemed position in the society. They played a crucial role in the economic activities of temple. The temple girls were paid both in cash and kind but generally in kind.

A portion of the prasada offered to the deity was frequently given to them. They were occasionally compensated in cash as well. The donors frequently specified how the temple girls would enjoy their portion of the temple lands and contributed a certain sum to the temple treasury to support them. The many endowments given to the temples demonstrate how wealthy the temple dancers became. They paid taxes to the state as well. The remission of taxes paid by the dancing women to the Kommuru, Voruganti, Ravipadu, and Gomgulamudi villages, which belong to the Kommuru God Agastyeswara, is documented in an inscription from 1547 AD. They were entitled to lands, financial perks, and a portion of Prasadam. Details on the devadasis and the salaries they received are provided by a significant inscription from the Srikurmam temple that dates to 1250 AD. The temple girls served both ceremonial and non-ritualistic purposes. The latter were required, whereas the former was customary. It was required of the temple girls to provide dance and song for their guests. They were responsible for managing the temple's assets, overseeing grants or other endowments, mobilizing temple resources by renting out land and animals, and carrying out other duties related to the daily operations of the temple. We find several contributions made by the Devadasis for the temple's upkeep. On occasion, they even performed repairs on the temple while it was in poor restoration. A few of the temple dancers received recognition and special treatment in appreciation of their contributions. During Achute Raya, Tiru Venkata Manikkam, a dancer at the Sri Venkateswara temple, also known as Tirumala, was allowed to utilize a palanquin for her

transportation. Since the temple girls' services were regularly needed, we discover that they were commonly given housing close to the temple.

Since the Nayaka period in the late sixteenth century, devadasis have served as courtesans, secular dancers grouped in guilds known as *melams*, and temple employees, some of whom gave performances in the public areas of specific Hindu temples. But in South Indian society, these groups have long held a shaky position. Devadaiss, on the one hand, had some social agency because they were not constrained by patrifocal kinship conventions. In contrast to the majority of South Indian women, they were literate, lived in quasi-matrilineal societies, and engaged in nonconjugal sexual encounters. They were part of a wider culture of servitude centered on the satisfaction of male desire. These courtesanal culture is reflected in the padams of Ksetrayya. The following *padam* is an example of customer-client relation of the courtesan and the God.

*Woman! He's none other
than Cennudu of Palagiri.
Haven't you heard?
He rules the worlds.
When he wanted you, you took his gold
but couldn't you tell him your address?
Some lover you are!
He's hooked on you.
And he rules the worlds
I found him wandering the alleyways,
too shy to ask anyone.
I had to bring him home with me.
Would it have been such a crime
if you or your girls
had waited for him by the door?
You really think it's enough
to get the money in your hand?
Can't you tell who's big, who's small?
Who do you think he is?
And he rules the worlds.*

(When God is a Customer, pp: 14-15)

The senior courtesan is making fun of her junior coworker. God himself has visited this young woman as a customer, but she has treated him arrogantly, collecting his money without even providing her address. Too ashamed to ask for directions, the madam discovers him aimlessly pacing the courtesan colony's winding streets. Even though his actual Nature and power are sufficiently evident as the refrain informs us (as well as the young courtesan) that the woman in this transaction is the world's dominant force, and the deity acts as an awkward and ultimately less useful plaything in her grasp. He lusts for her and craves her, yet she eludes him with ease.

The advantage is entirely hers, and their relationship is mercenary and transactional. If the bhakti saints of previous era. depicted an unequal relationship between the deity and his lover (who represents the poet-devotee), this asymmetry is blatantly reversed here, but it is still very much there. Here, the woman is an active, independent player in a game of teasing hide-and-seek with God, in which money is one of the stakes.

*A Courtesan in another padam tells her customer:
You are handsome, aren't you, Adivaraha,*
and quite skilled at it, too. Stop these foolish games.
You think there are no other men in these parts?
Asking for me on credit, Adivaraha?*

*I told you even then I won't stand for your lies.
 Handsome, aren't you?
 Prince of playboys you may be,
 but is it fair to ask me to forget the money?
 I earned it, after all, by spending time with you.*

(*When God is a Customer*, pp:69)

Here too money is an important part of the relationships.

In Ksetrayya, we can occasionally hear the male deity-lover speaking instead of the woman. However, the perception of the woman as the transaction's human partner is generally quite stable. She is typically, though not always, a courtesan who practices the arts of love, which she openly discusses in strong, albeit formulaic, language. She has a tendency to be intelligent, cosmopolitan, educated, and maybe a touch sarcastic. She usually has something to complain about in *padams*, which is typically her divine lover's recent obsession with a rival woman. As a result, there is still tension and friction in the relationship.

CONCLUSION:

The *padams* of Ksetrayya provide an insightful perspective on how gender, temples, and money dealings intersected in medieval Andhra. During this time, temples served as both places of worship and commercial sites. As key players in this environment, the devadasis played two roles: they were both active participants in the temple's economic activities and its stewards of its culture. The complex connections between devotion, desire, and material exchange are highlighted in Ksetrayya's *padams* by depicting the deity as both a lover and a patron. These works demonstrate how the medieval temple economy combined the sensuous and the sacred, establishing a setting where gender roles and economic duties were redefined and negotiated.

Beyond their spiritual and artistic roles, the devadasis also participated in temple-centered business, administering land grants, controlling resources, and getting paid for their labor. These actual exchanges are reflected in the imagery of Ksetrayya's *padams*, where the deity is shown as a client interacting with the devadasi. These depictions show how economic activity was intricately woven into devotional practices, challenging the dichotomies of sacred and profane. Due to the fact that their positions overlapped the areas of economics, religion, and sexuality, this dynamic also gave Devadasis a special agency. The financial and spiritual viability of temples, which were important socio-economic institutions, depended heavily on them; they were by no means passive figures.

These works blur the boundaries between divine and human transactions by viewing God as the ultimate consumer, illuminating the commercialization of devotion and the financial aspects of spirituality. As important participants, the devadasis provide insights into the larger socioeconomic and cultural institutions of the era and serve as an example of how gendered labor was valued within this context. Thus, Ksetrayya's poetry offers a critical viewpoint on the gendered dynamics of temple economics in medieval India through its combination of the sacred and the worldly.

Note: The verses in this paper are directly taken from Velcheru, Narayana Rao, Shulman David and Ramanujan A K.

When God is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan songs by Ksetrayya and Others. California: University of California Press, 1994.

The title is also influenced by the same text.

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