

Contemporary Devadasis in Northern Karnataka, India



FRAGMENTED BODIES

by Rosemary Candelario

Sacred. Prostitute. Chaste. Dancer. Matriarch. Victim. Sex Worker. Devotee. Daughter. Auspicious. Slave of the God. Nun. Dancing Whore. Female Servant of the Deity.

THese are just some of the words used to define *devadasis* in South India over the last century. Recent scholars (Avanthi Meduri, Amrit Srinivasan, Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, Kay Jordan, to name a few) have attempted to locate historical devadasis (or traces of them) in the contemporary performance of Bharatanatyam, but rarely have they looked to the women who still call themselves by that name, many of whom live in the northern part of the state of Karnataka in south India.

As a Bharatanatyam dancer with a background in sex education and reproductive rights, I am interested in interrogating the disjuncture between the height of the concomitant temple dance reform and revival movements—which culminated on the one hand in devadasis being thrown out of the temples in 1947, and on the other



hand the establishment of the first major Bharatanatyam institute, Kalakshetra, in 1936—and the twenty-first-century devadasi, a figure universally described in public health literature as a sex worker, often in relationship to HIV/AIDS. This paper, which sits on the border between dance studies and public health, is uniquely positioned to ask the questions that other scholars have not. What are the series of displacements that moved the body of the devadasi from the temple to the HIV clinic? How did her sexuality, once creative and auspicious, come to be polluted and even diseased? Is there a throughline to be found between the dance and public health narratives of devadasis, or are the ruptures too great? Rather than reading the devadasi as a collection of texts, is it possible to experience her, in the words of Susan Foster, as corpo-real?

In response to the above questions, I will first outline the dance, legal, and public health discourses about the devadasi, which, when read collectively, demonstrate the displacements she has undergone. I will then describe my research, conducted in August and September 2007 with devadasis in northern Karnataka, which attempted to find a bridge across the rup-

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ture created by these competing discourses. Finally, I will analyze the fragments of the body(ies) of the devadasi in light of the many redemptive moves which have been carried out in her name.

THE DANCING BODY

Devadasis in southern India were dedicated to temples as ritual specialists and performing artists who danced Sadir. Though the devadasis filled an auspicious role in their communities, they were also decried in some circles as prostitutes because they were allowed to have sex outside of marriage. In the late nineteenth century, reformers, comprised of British missionaries and doctors as well as

members of the lower caste “self-respect movement,” began a campaign to abolish temple dancing. At the same time, another movement sought to rescue what they regarded as the sacred dance from its soiled context; this “revived” dance was sanitized, codified, and re-named Bharatanatyam, which has since come to be hailed as the national dance of India. The revival movement, on the other hand, saw internationalists, such as the Theosophists, joining with Brahmins to call for the renewal of the ancient spiritual temple dance which they claimed had degenerated in the bodies of the devadasis. Rukmini Devi Arundale, a Brahmin, was anointed by the Theosophical Society as the person to restore the sacred dance

and make it respectable for middle-class women to practice. The establishment in 1936 of Devi's Kalakshetra Institution codified the rehabilitation of Sadir into Bharatanatyam. In the discourse of Bharatanatyam, devadasis disappeared at exactly the moment the dance was revived.

THE OUTLAWED BODY

As subalterns, devadasis created the foundations of what became Bharatanatyam, but this position also led to them being trampled on by reformers, revivalists, and nationalists alike. In the wake of these movements and as a consequence of a developing legal discourse in the newly independent India, legislation was passed in 1947 that banned the dedication of girls to temples and ordered the expulsion of dancers from the temples. Coupled with the move only a decade earlier to take the dance from under their feet to the (newly) respectable proscenium stage in cities like Madras, the legislation completed the fragmentation of the devadasi. The earlier liminal figure, belonging in multiple worlds, had been split into her component parts: the pure dance placed centrally on the stage in the bodies of

Brahmin women, and the polluted body pushed to the margins.

A 1982 state law, the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act was more far-reaching than any previous laws. It nullifies any and all dedications, whether consensual or not, and provides for stiff punishments of up to five years in jail and/or a penalty of 5000 RP. Anthropologist Treena Orchard (2005) has found that the 1982 law had a major impact on the devadasi system, largely through police intimidation. As a result, dedications have all but disappeared as public ceremonies at temples presided over by priests. Such practices have instead been relegated to private home-based affairs, effectively severing any official ties to the temples. Rather than stopping the dedication of devadasis, the 1982 law instead finalized the fragmentation of the sacred and sexual.

THE DISEASED BODY

Current public health research on devadasis in northern Karnataka is unequivocal in its claims that young women are dedicated into a life of sex work when they are dedicated to the goddess. Long-

term drought and famine in that region of India has left many families with few choices about how to make ends meet, and having a daughter dedicated as a devadasi has come to be a viable economic option for many families. Sources vary widely on the percentage of sex workers in Karnataka who come from the devadasi tradition. Jogan Shankar, in a widely quoted but weakly documented work, estimates 250,000 girls are dedicated to temples in the Maharashtra-Karnataka border region (17). Kay Jordan quotes a 1998 study of one *harijan*^t community where 98 percent of families participated in sacred prostitution (155). Because they have clearly outlined their methodology and data, I favor the statistics of the India-Canada Collaborative HIV/AIDS Project (Blanchard et al.) who found that 26 percent of the 1588 sex workers they interviewed were devadasis.

Karnataka is one of the six states in India with high prevalence rates of HIV. While it is difficult to know exactly how many devadasis are infected with the virus, an article in *The Hindu* at the end of 2006 claimed that 21.6 percent of all female sex workers in the state are HIV positive and a 1995 *Harvard HIV Review*

report found that over 9 percent of devadasis voluntarily tested in one district of Karnataka were infected with HIV.

SENT TO THE SYSTEM

I spent almost four weeks in the Karnataka in August and September 2007. While there, I made connections with devadasi organizations (both community-based and non-governmental) as well as HIV/AIDS organizations who counted devadasis among their members. One organization, the Karnataka Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS (KNP+), took an interest in my project and invited me to travel with one of their staff members to northern Karnataka, a region where the devadasi population is concentrated, to meet and speak with the women there.²

The information I gathered in my short time in northern Karnataka presents a picture of a completely ruptured devadasi tradition. Of the sixteen women I interviewed, only four of them—just 25 percent—came from devadasi families, which means that the vast majority were dedicated by their parents for economic reasons. None of the women counted

dance as part of their devadasi identity, and while three of the women play instruments and sing songs unique to devadasis,³ the music seems to be more of an incidental way for them to earn money rather than an integral part of being a devadasi. Though a small sample, the statistics from my research match with those of a more extensive study recently conducted by Orchard (2005). In essence, the contemporary devadasi is a brand-new construct based solely on the sexual bodies of girls and women in northern Karnataka. It's no wonder then that most of the women I talked to, and most of Orchard's informants as well (2005, 8), want to see the system come to an end. These women are not the biological descendants of temple dancers, do not identify themselves as the bearers of a sacred dance tradition, and likely do not even know that a link between them and Bharatanatyam dancers even exists. In the wake of such an extreme rupture, how then can we make sense of the fragments of the devadasi claimed by the dance, legal, and public health discourses which still actively circulate?

REDEMPTIVE DESIRE

In writing a history of the development of Haitian dance,⁴ Kate Ramsey identifies a “redemptive desire” (356) that drove the mid-twentieth century staging of Vodou ritual as folkloric dance. In India, multiple redemptive desires have been at work on the body of the devadasi over the last 150 years, not the least of which was the revivalist desire, described previously to rescue the pure (sacred) dance from the polluted (sexual) body of the devadasi. The parallel reform and revival movements, while seemingly at odds, worked in tandem to fracture the delicate confluence of purity and pollution in the body of the devadasi, allowing the sanitized aesthetic to be removed and redeemed, leaving all the pollution behind in the body of the low-caste (former) dancer.

While reformers and revivalists stigmatized both the dancing and sexual bodies of the early twentieth-century devadasi, researchers such as Priyadarshini Vijaisri and Jogan Shankar have sought to intentionally place her within what they call a worldwide history of sacred prostitution which Vijaisri defines as “the intrinsic relationship between sexual rites and

religion” (21). This move is an attempt at a redemption of the (idea of) the sex worker. Vijaisri, for example, rejects the positioning of devadasis as sacred prostitutes as representative of some sort of fall from a previously “pure,” non-sexual state (as claimed by writers such as K. Sadasivan, 1993); instead, she insists that “the custom in its very foundation was based on the idea of sex as symbolic of spiritual union and sexual intercourse as a means to salvation” (Vijaisri 2004, 21). Shankar, while agreeing with Vijaisri that there is a larger context for sacred prostitution, sees the devadasi system (which he refers to as a cult) as both a system of religious oppression of women as well as exploitation of the lower class by the upper class (1990). Orchard, on the other hand, presents the devadasi system as a “culturally and economically valued form of sex work” (2381). Though Orchard mentions in passing that devadasis were once artists, she, like the other public health workers, still presents a picture of the women that limits them to their sexual bodies.

The moral redemption of the emptied-out body of the devadasi was attempted repeatedly through legislation. The state government backed up various bills crimi-

nalizing sex work and outlawing temple dedications with funds for the “rehabilitation” of devadasis through strategies such as the purchase of sewing machines or the payment of a stipend of 5000 RP (125 USD) to any man who would marry a devadasi (Jordan, 154). Not surprisingly, these projects, which were never directed at dislodging the material reasons families dedicate their daughters to a life of sex work, have been utterly unsuccessful. Likewise, police harassment and intimidation have only served to make a formerly public system more secretive. Now that the polluted body of the devadasi has (not coincidentally) become a body diseased with HIV, the redemptive efforts continue through interventions by the state, public health researchers, and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations).

Their history ruptured, their bodies displaced, fragmented, and continuously subjected to redemptive desires, devadasis have been subjected to a new textualization of their bodies as infected/contaminated and in need of rehabilitation and education. In some ways it is not such a different text at all: the corruption of old and the contamination of today both come as a result of the decidedly

sexed body of the devadasi. However, the new context also provides for the possibility of seeing devadasis as more than a series of texts. Newspaper articles with headlines reading “Devadasis Come Out to Fight HIV/AIDS,” “Devadasis Empowered,” “Devadasis Demand Government Help,” and “Devadasis Fight Bias” detail the work being done in northern Karnataka by devadasis for devadasis. Through organizations such as Chaitanya AIDS Prevention Mahila Sangha, with whom I met in Bagalkot district, devadasis are organizing themselves into collective self-help groups, learning about HIV prevention through peer education, organizing to stop further temple dedications, and, surpassing the myopic rehabilitation programs of the state government, they are building access to micro-credit loans. Public health research, in turn, has shown that HIV interventions that utilize collective structures such as the Sangha are more effective in promoting preventative measures such as condom usage (Halli et al.). Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin Jairazbhoy, ethnomusicologists at UCLA, have even recorded a song composed by devadasis about why women shouldn’t dedicate their daughters to the temple

anymore, showing that the fragments of the artist, the sex worker, and the activist can all co-exist within the body of the contemporary devadasi.

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NOTES

1. Untouchable.
2. I met with members of the organization MASS (Mahila Abhivrudhi Mattu Samrakshana Samsthe), which loosely translates to Women's Development and Protection Association, in Belgaum district, and members of the Jeevan Jothi Positive Living Center in neighboring

Bagalkot district, home of the Bagalkot Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, which is related to KNP+.

3. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Nazir Jairazbhoy, Visiting Associate Professor and Professor Emeritus, respectively, at UCLA have conducted extensive research on devadasi music, including the *chaundke*, a one-stringed variable-tension "plucked drum" played nowhere else in India. Besides providing a fascinating portrait of contemporary devadasis as "musical ritualists," the Jairazbhoy's research, documented in an in-progress DVD entitled *Music for a Goddess*, gives voice to devadasis, and even to the goddess whom they serve.
4. Ramsey, Kate. "Vodou, Nationalism, and Performance: the Staging of Folklore in Mid-Twentieth Century Haiti." *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Jane Desmond, ed. Durham (NC): Duke U Press, 2003. 345-378.

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