

## ***Devadasis' Padams: From Temples to the Concert Stage***

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### **Abstract:**

*Devadasis* were dancing women who served in temples. These women were skilled in singing and dancing and *padams* were an integral part of their repertory. These *padams* seem to have their roots and origin in the South Indian Bhakti poetry. *Devadasis* initially used to perform in the temples but the Indian nationalists and English colonialists began to question their presence in the Indian social and cultural scenario. Consequently, they lost their position as trained artists and were seen as nothing more than prostitutes and with their downfall, their art forms were threatened too. Fortunately, these art forms were revived, transformed and moved from temples to the concert stage.

### **Research Paper:**

*Devadasis* were trained South Indian temple dancing women who served in well-known temples. The rise of the *Devadasi* system cannot be dated precisely but it seems to have originated at the time during which temples in South India were expanding in wealth, significance and rituals. R. Nandi further points out in *Religious Institutions and Cults in the Deccan*:

Large scale transfer of *devadana* lands to temples supplemented by recurring levies in cash and kind, together with the periodic interests charged on fixed sums of money deposited with the temple, added to their wealth and significance ... It has rightly been argued that the growth in the economic resources of the temple led to a corresponding increase in the rituals and festivals of the temples (Nandi24).

The temples therefore were in need of more people and these *devadasis* or dancing girls were also a source of income for the temples. *Padams* were part of a *devadasi's* art treasury and depicted the immense devotion of the poet for the god. The origin of the *padam* genre can be traced back to the South Indian Bhakti poetry. Norman Cutler observes in *Devotee's Experience of the Sacred Tamil Hymns*,

These poems are expressions of *Bhakti*, a personal, devotional approach to the worship of God. Hindu devotionalism took roots in the various regions of India at different points in time, and key figures in what has been called the *bhakti* movement are saint-poets who manifested the devotional ideal in their own lives and who often became leading figures in religious sects, either in life or in legend (Cutler 91).

The Bhakti movement is characterized by the use of colloquial languages in songs and hymns which made possible the inclusion of common man in the movement as well, in contrast to the highly refined rich ancient Tamil literature, known as *Sangam* literature which was a great source of inspiration for the Bhakti poets. Glenn E. Yocum observes in *Shrines, Shamanism and Love Poetry*:

The devotees often experienced their relationship with the deity in deeply personal, sexual terms, and expressed this experience by spiritualizing the relationship between man and woman represented in the earliest Tamil poetry (Yocum 16).

The Telugu *padams* are in the form of a courtesan's love song that is still marked with devotional elements. First of these Telugu *padam* poets was Annamayya. Annamayya's songs were probably sung by *devadasis* who danced before the gods in the temple. The Tamil *Bhakti* poets considered the depiction of the lovemaking of a god and goddess a taboo but Annamayya describes the process of lovemaking in a very explicit manner:

Mother, who speaks so sweetly,  
has gone to sleep:  
she has made love to her husband  
with all her feminine skills  
and is now sleeping  
long into the day,  
her hair scattered on her face (*When God is a Customer* 22).

and  
These marks of black musk  
on her lips  
red as buds,  
what are they  
but letters of love  
sent by our lady to her lord?  
Her eyes the eyes of a cakora bird,  
why are they red in the corners?

Think it over, my friends:

what is it but the blood

still staining the long glances

that pierced her beloved

after she drew them from his body

back to her eyes?

What are they but letters of love?(*When God is a Customer* 49)

He also goes to the extent of portraying the jealousy and anger of the woman at the lover's infidelity:

Why blame me that I'm jealous?

When she's with you,

Shouldn't I be embarrassed?

When you and she talk in private,

Shouldn't I stay outside the gate?...

*When she's with you...*

When you two are covered in a shawl.

Isn't it right for me to go play dice?

*When she's with you...(When God is a Customer47).*

Ksetrayya's *padams* survived among the courtesans and he used to compose for the courtesans and *devadasis* who performed before gods, kings and customers, the three categories having been, in any case, conflated into one. Muvva Gopala, Venugopala are gods of love and the women are the *devadasis* deft in the art of lovemaking:

You are handsome, aren't you,

Adivaraha,

and quite skilled at it, too...

*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.

Stop this trickery at once

Put up the gold you owe me

and then you can talk,

Adivaraha.

*Handsome aren't you? (When God is a Customer 69).*

The woman constantly complains. She is angry and jealous that her lover is involved with other women too. The lover goes after a woman, makes love to her, loses interest in her and then looks elsewhere for pleasure:

Pour gold as high as I stand, I still won't sleep with you.  
Why be stubborn, Muvva Gopala? Why all these tricks?  
You coax women's affections,  
make them amorous and faint,  
do things you shouldn't be doing,  
confuse them, lie in bed with them ,  
and then you leave without a sound,  
shaking your dust all over them.

*Pour gold as high as I stand... (When God is a Customer 98-99).*

The woman who enters the relationship doesn't expect steadfastness and constancy from her lover :

Today is a good day. Let him come like a prince.  
Maybe that woman has been watching Muvva Gopala  
So what? Isn't this body of mine his property?  
In this business I'm in,  
is it right to rant and rave?

*Let him come like a prince... (When God is a Customer 92).*

In these poems, there are undertones of devotional elements, but the sensory element definitely takes an upper hand:

Has he forgotten me or what?  
Go ask him. He knows.....  
He knows where he left tooth marks on my lips.  
He knows how he said, folding me in his arms, he is *Muvva Gopala*.  
He knows the sheets we were wrapped in.  
And he knows how he made room  
and played the love God with me.

*Go ask him, he knows... (When God is a Customer 88).*

Sarangapani, another *padam* composer, served in the court of Makaraju Venkataperumaal Raaju and composed *padams* with the signature of Venugopala in Telugu language. With

Sarangapani, money is the only thing of significance and his *padams* exemplify sheer eroticism:

Grab whatever cash he has,  
that Venugopala,  
and think nothing of the rest...

What is it to you  
if he runs into debt  
or if he has an income?

Quietly, tactfully,  
lie in wait

like a cat on the wall

*and grab the cash(When God is a Customer135).*

And

If my husband becomes my pimp,  
what am I then to him?

Venugopala throws away money,  
and says to my husband,  
" I'll build you a two-storied house;  
look at these ornaments,  
this cartload of vessels,"  
and adds, "You won't have a worry in the world":

*so my husband becomes my pimp...*

He says he can't take poverty,  
that whoring is no sin,  
especially with his permission.

If I don't consent,  
he calls me "Ah, Super-Chaste."

He can't wait  
to see me sell myself

*My husband becomes my pimp (When God is a Customer137).*

And

He pays you in rupees of lead  
Knotted to your sari:  
Couldn't you even check?

You fool?

He makes promises,  
Then works on you till dawn,  
That Muvva Gopala,  
And pays you in rupees of lead.  
Like an honest man, he sends you letters,  
That cheat who turns you on,  
Then eats you out of betel leaves,  
Sticks his tongue out at you,

*and pays you in rupees of lead(When God is a Customer131).*

As already stated, this art form had a historical connection with the community of *devadasi* dancers and formed a major part of their art treasury. But with the turn of the century, rise of urbanization and decline of royal patronage, *devadasis* began to be looked down upon. Avanthi Meduri observes in *Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West*:

The key legal question was whether under colonial law, *devadasis* were to be seen as essentially holy women whose devotion was expressed artistically, and therefore only accidentally public women, or were they to be essentially prostitutes, and therefore only accidentally artists. It was, after all, women's religious status that distinguished the *devadasi* institution from the courtesan tradition of elsewhere (Meduri439).

*Devadasis* were targeted by British colonisers as well as the Indian nationalists and now there was no place left for them even in temples. The reformers were ready to do away with the *devadasi* custom completely even at the cost of losing their art forms too. Fortunately their art was saved and after alteration and transformation and with the *devadasi* tradition falling into disfavour, *padams* moved into the larger cultural milieu. With the abolition of the *devadasi* and courtesan tradition by the British, *padams*, like other art forms which had their roots in the *devadasi* system, made their way to the concert stages and auditoriums. Purnima Shah further observes:

... a redefinition of these multiple identities- political, social, religious- obligated the transference, and hence a decontextualisation of this ancient tradition from the domain of the *devadasis* to that of a social elite, from the sacred, ritualized space of the temple to theatre auditoriums and from its dependence on royal connoisseur patrons to that of the arbitrary bureaucratic authority of the state (Shah127-128).

Thus the art - both music and dance - of *devadasi* and courtesans has moved from the

temples, the king's courts, the *tavayaf's kotha* to the concert stage. Considered stigmatic earlier because of their association with *devadasis*, these art forms have in today's world achieved the status of "classical" and also a great deal of recognition and prestige.

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