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In Perennial Oppression: Internalized Ideologies of the Devadasis

By K.A.Geetha¹

Abstract

The Madras Anti-Devadasi Act was passed in 1947 with the primary objective of liberating women from the oppressive norms of the *Devadasi* system. Sanctioned by religion, the institutionalization of the Devadasi system within the Hindu community legitimated women from certain caste groups to become 'servants of god'. Through ritualistic norms, the Devadasis were wedded to God and the caste Hindu patriarchs were authorized to control the sexuality of the Devadasis. Given their vulnerable status in terms of caste, class, and gender, women from the castes lower in hierarchy were forced into the system. Despite the legislative intervention of the Anti-Devdasi Act seven decades ago, there are newspaper reports, which substantiate the continuation of the Devadasi systems in some villages in Tamil Nadu, reiterating the power of caste and sexist ideologies within Hindu society. In contemporary times, the Devadasis are mainly drawn from the Scheduled castes, otherwise referred to as Dalits. Literatures by historically marginalized communities play a pivotal role in their liberation. On the contrary an analysis of the literatures by (or on) the Devadasis reveal the internalization of societal ideologies which impedes their empowerment and emancipation. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualizations of the gendered body and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "habitus", which underlines the embodied nature of social positions, this paper discusses the physical and psychological conditioning of the Devadasis within the caste Hindu society. Through an analysis of two Tamil novels, Moovalur Ramamirtham's *Dasigalin Mosavalai allathu Mathi Petra Minor* and Imayam's *Sedal*, this paper argues that the Devadasis depicted in the novels are embedded in caste and gender norms that denigrate and oppress them. Hence, as a paradox, their resistance to the system results in perpetuating the oppressive and discriminative social system rather than enabling liberation.

Keywords: Devadasi, Habitus, Tamil literature, Caste and gender, Intersectional oppression, Pierre Bourdieu, Simone de Beauvoir, scheduled castes, Dalit, Tamil Nadu

Introduction

Simone De Beauvoir conceptualizes subjectivity as lived experience of the body. Emphasizing the embodiment of identities, she points out that the relationship between a woman's body and her subjectivity is contingent. According to de Beauvoir, gender norms prevalent in the respective society don't exist in abstraction but are inscribed in the living body. As corporeal representations, female bodies embody the respective socio-cultural structures in a society (de Beauvoir, 2010). Beauvoir's ideas about gender can be broadened to include other categories of

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identity including caste in the Hindu society. The subjectivity of the Devadasis in the Hindu society serves as an ideal example of the embodiment of social positions. Sanctioned by religion, the institutionalization of the Devadasi system within the Hindu community legitimated women from certain caste groups to become 'Servants of God'. Through ritualistic norms, the Devadasis were wedded to God and the caste Hindu patriarchs were authorized to control the sexuality of the Devadasis. The institution of Devadasis or "*Devan Adiyal*" (slaves/servants of God) is inextricably linked to the caste system which regulates caste and gender relations within Hindu society.

The principles of caste involve a clear distinction between the domestic space/home and the 'outside' world and, women play an important role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of the home. Caste impinges on women's lives by regulating their sexuality. (Dube 231-234). In caste Hindu² societies, the prestige and honor of the family are pivoted on female sexuality. Any violation of the norms of sexuality is forbidden and considered a taboo. On the other hand, the aggressive sexual identity of the caste Hindu male is approved and legitimated through sexual access and relations with the women from castes lower in hierarchy. The women from the Shudra and outcaste (presently referred to as Dalits³) communities were the most vulnerable targets. Vijaisri points out that in agrarian societies, the landlords had control over both the sexes of the outcaste or Dalit communities. The control of Dalit women's sexuality enabled in establishing the purity and moral supremacy of the caste Hindu women. It simultaneously led to the denigration of Dalit women as loose and immoral (Vijaisri 15-17) Apart from his hold over the sexuality of Shudra and outcaste women, the caste Hindu patriarch had easy access to a section of women from these communities who became *Devadasis*.

In Tamil regions, the Devadasis were referred to as "*Tevaradiyals*" meaning "Servants of God". Institutionalized through ritualistic norms, religion legitimated the Devadasi system. The Devadasis were generally drawn from the *Isai Vellalar* castes, (categorized as Shudras in the caste order) and the *Koothadi* caste (categorized as Scheduled castes). Devadasis were initiated into the system through a ceremony called "*pottukattu*"⁴ which signifies her marriage to God. Devoid of widowhood, the Devadasis were considered as *Nithyasumangalis*⁵. The ceremony was conducted under the patronage of affluent caste Hindu patriarchs and temple trustees. After the "*Pottukattu*" ceremony, one among the caste Hindu patriarchs enters into a sexual contract with the Devadasi. Though she lives under his patronage, the Devadasi is denied a status of his wife and the offspring from the relationship have no claim over his property. The temple emerged as the controller of the sexuality of the Devadasis and ensured the dominance of the caste Hindu patriarchs. As a *Nityasumangali*, the presence of the Devadasi was considered auspicious in weddings and domestic functions. She was incorporated into temple service and was trained in the fine arts, especially in classical dance referred to as "*Sadhir*"⁶. Devadasis are primarily required to dance and sing in all temple festivals. Apart from this, they are considered as ritual specialists whose

² Castes which were assigned a high position in the caste system were called upper castes. In recent years, the term upper caste is being substituted with the term Caste Hindus.

³ In the 1930's, Baba Saheb Ambedkar spearheaded a revolutionary movement which denounced the norms and ideologies of the caste Hindus. In particular, he emphasized that the untouchable communities should identify themselves as "Dalits" which signified their both their oppressed condition and their rebellion against caste discrimination.

⁴ *Pottukattu* is a ritual in which a sacred thread called *thali* is tied to the Devadasi signifying her marriage with God

⁵ *Nithyasumangali* signifies the Devadasi who is devoid of widowhood, since she is married to God

⁶ *Sadhir* is a classical dance form performed by the Devadasis. In 1910, the British colonial government banned the performance in public places. However, in the late 20th century, the *Sadhir* dance was revived and reintroduced as *Bharathanatyam*

presence was considered auspicious, good luck, and capable of warding off evil (Vijaisri 8). Her “*Sadhir*” performances served as platforms for sexual liaisons with a patron. The identity of a “*pottu kattinaval*” – ‘a woman, who has been tied the *pottu*’, had its own connotations. She is respected for her ability to sing during festivals and cure illness. Nevertheless, she is abused and discriminated against for not being a *Pathivratha*—the superior status of a chaste family woman. Paradoxically, there were two diverse ideas that were disseminated about Devadasis. Though they were sanctified as “sacral women”, as Devadasis they were compelled to be promiscuous and were simultaneously constructed as “loose” and “immoral. These notions enabled the perpetuation of the Devadasi system and justified their sexual oppression. In the later years, the Devadasis were referred to as “*Devadiyal*”, a pejorative term connoting them as prostitutes. Though the rituals and norms were common between the Devadasis from the *Isai Vellalar* and *Koothadi* caste, it is to be pointed out that while the *Sadhir* was performed by the *Isai Vellalars* the Devadasis from the *Koothadi* caste performed folk plays and sang funeral songs (Anandhi, 29).

While economic survival is the main reason for the parents to dedicate their daughters as Devadasis, there are other reasons as well. If the village has suffered a drought, there is a widespread belief that the dedication of the Devadasi will bring prosperity. Given their economically weaker position, girls from the Scheduled castes become the obvious targets. At times, the family dedicates a girl to the temple, to be blessed with a male heir. The remuneration that the family receives in return for the dedication serves as potential bait for poor communities⁷ While Devadasis from the *Isai vellalar* castes received *inam* lands⁸ through the temple for their ritual and artistic services, the Devadasis from the *Koothadi* castes were given a certain measure of grains from each household for their survival. Other than the difference in the economic gains, the Devadasis from both the communities were sexually exploited by the caste Hindu patriarchs and treated in general with derision and contempt.

In the 1920’s, during the colonial period, oppositional voices to the Devadasi system emerged from organizations such as the Women’s Indian Association (WIA), the All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC) and the Self-Respect Movement. In 1930, Muthulakshmi Reddy of the WIA introduced a bill in the Madras legislative assembly for the abolition of the Devadasi system (Anandhi “Representing the Devadasis”, 740). Anandhi points out that a group of “conservative” nationalist believed that the Devadasi system was an indigenous tradition, which is very similar to the dedication of Christian ‘nuns’ to the service of the church. (Anandhi “Representing the Devadasis”, *ibid*). Despite their diverse political ideologies, the Self Respecters movement and the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) believed that heterosexual monogamy was the panacea for the plight of the Devadasis. (Sreenivas “Creating Conjugal Subjects”, 69). Their sustained campaign and protest against the Devadasi system culminated in the passing of the Madras Anti – Devadasi bill in 1947. Despite the legislation that criminalizes the dedication of girls as Devadasis, there are newspaper reports which affirm the continuation of the practice in some parts of Tamil Nadu (<https://www.asianage.com/india/>)

According to Jean Paul Sartre, literatures produces by historically marginalized communities have an important socio-political function within a society. Emphasizing the

⁷ Despite the abolition of the Devadasi system, in the contemporary period there are several reports which reveal the continuance of the practice among poor Dalit families. In most cases, due to penury, the girls are dedicated to the temple and later pushed into prostitution after they are deserted by their caste Hindu patrons. For more details see <https://scroll.in/article/852319/is-the-devadasi-system-still-followed-in-southern-india>

⁸ Lands given as gifts.

potential of marginalized literatures, he points out that that a writer is a liberator and a literary work can be considered as a liberator since it produces ideas for social upheaval (82). Literary movements or seminal literary works disseminate revolutionary ideologies that have been instrumental in destroying social conventions, and social prejudices, enabling social and political change.⁹ In contemporary times, apart from an obvious lack of a strong political movement against the system, there is an absence of oppositional literatures countering the denigration of the Devadasis. While there are a few literary works which focus on the intersectional oppression of the Devadasis, it should be pointed out, that they have failed to disseminate oppositional ideologies that enable liberation.

Internalized Ideologies: Devadasis in literatures

Modern Tamil fiction abounds in the reference to Devadasis, where they are mostly portrayed negatively as materialistic seductress. Among the very few literary works which present an authentic portrayal of the exploitation and discrimination of the Devadasis, the most important are Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar's *Dasiganlin Mosavali allathu Mathi Petra minor* (henceforth referred to as *Dasigalin*) and Iyamam's *Sedal*. Both the novels are considered as representative literary works on Devadasis, which brings to light their intersectional oppression. Apart from a realistic depiction of the Devadasis, the novels offer significant insights on the subjectivity of Devadasis. In both the novels, the Devadasis emerge as thinking subjects, reflective and resistive of their social position and discrimination. Nevertheless, an in-depth analysis would reveal that they are entrenched in normative caste and gender ideologies which prevent their empowerment and liberation.

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of "habitus" offers significant insights on the Devadasi's internalization of the societal norms that denigrate and oppress them. Habitus dispositions are social in origin, imbibed from childhood, is expressed through durable ways of 'standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking (Bourdieu 70). As embodied dispositions, habitus structures a person's mental attitudes and perception of the world. Individual agency is subsumed and subjugated within the structural internalization. In times of crisis, when there is a disjunction between the internal world view and external world, there is room for reflexive agency. Nevertheless, the impact of the Habitus is overpowering. Habitus is thus durable, transposable and reproductive of the social context within which it originated. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory on the embodiment of social position, this paper argues that ironically, despite their opposition to the dominant caste and gender norms, which seem to reveal a disjuncture between their inner mind and external reality, the Devadasis imbibe and perpetuate the oppressive ideologies which denigrates and exploits them.

Published in 1936, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar's novel "*Dasigalin*" can be considered as one of pioneering novels in modern Tamil literature, depicting the intersectional oppression of caste and gender ideologies, which constructs the Devadasi's subjectivity and identity. The novel can be considered semi-fictional and autobiographical, since Ramamirtham Ammaiyar was a Devadasi and had successfully come out of the system by marrying her music teacher. Born in 1883, in the *Isai Vellalar* caste, Moovalur Ramamirtham was initiated into the Devadasi system at a very young age. Influenced by the Self- Respect Movement, she became an active member and vehemently protested against the prevalence and continuance of the Devadasi system. Founded in 1926 by

⁹ For example, the significance of literary works in the liberation of historically marginalized communities like African Americans, Native Americans and Dalits in India.

E.V.Ramasamay Naicker (referred to as Periyar), the Self- Respect movement functioned as an active vehicle of social reformation in the Madras presidency. The abolition of the Devadasi system was pivotal in their reformatory agenda and the Self - Respecters believed that heterosexual monogamy would redeem the Devadasis from the oppressive system. The movement advocated “mortal marriage” to the Devadasis, to counter and negate their wedding to God. (Sreenivas “Creating Conjugal Subjects” 69)

Recounting her sufferings in the Self Respecters Journal (1925), Ramamirtham Ammaiyar writes,

“I was born into a traditional non-devadasi family. My uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution through the devadasi custom. They also advised not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount to the family through the profession – given my talents in music and dance ...so my parents forced me into this custom...It was during this time, I deeply thought about this custom as evil and read those religious texts which advocated it. I felt that men have forced certain women into this degrading profession to pursue their indiscreet pleasures and for selfish reasons” (Cited in Anandhi “Representing the Devadasis”, 741)

Contextualized in a period when the Devadasi abolition movement was gaining ground in the Madras presidency, *Dasigalin* has been acclaimed as a radical text which takes up the women’s cause as part of the Self Respect movement and asserts the Devadasis as subjects (Anandhi “Representing the Devadasis”, 739). Nevertheless, the narrative is embedded in the dominant and oppressive ideologies which malign and vilify the Devadasis. This is exemplified in the title and the plot of the novel which connote the Devadasis as avaricious and materialistic, rather than victims. The title, “*Dasgalin Mosa Valai or Mathi petra minor*” in English translation means “The treacherous net of the Devadasi or the Wisdom gained by the Minor”. In 2003, the novel has been translated into English by Kalapana_Kannabirān_Web of Deceit: Devadasi Reform in Colonial India.

Indicative of the plot which revolves around the retrieval of the rich Zamindar “trapped” in the “treacherous net” of the Dasi household, the novel takes us through the lives of several Devadasis. However, the principal plot revolves around the “Dasi sisters”, initiated into the system by their mother Bogachindamani, depicted as a materialistic Devadasi. Through their beauty and talents, the Dasi sisters succeed in attracting a Zamindar’s son, Tiruchi Minor who loses all his wealth to them. Later, he is reformed by an ex- devadasi, who had escaped the clutches of the Devadasi system by marrying a social reformer. After the Tiruchi Minor’s exit, another rich Zamindar’s son, Somasekaran falls in love with the “Dasi sisters” and deserts his young wife, Gnanasundari, an upper caste woman. Disguised as a rich man, Gnanasundari visits the “Dasi sisters”, who now desert Somasundaram and switch over to her. After ‘retrieving’ her husband Somasundaram from the “Dasi sisters”, Gnanasundari engages herself in reformist activities. The Dasi sisters are driven to penury without the patronage of wealthy minors. The novel ends with the Dasi sisters attending a social reform conference organized by Gnanasundari and Vivekavathy, the granddaughter of Bogachintamani. Though pushed into the Devadasi system by her parents, Vivekavathy marries her music teacher and works towards the abolition of the Devadasi system. The striking similarities in the author’s personal life and Vivekavathy’s story points to the fact that the novel is predominantly autobiographical. Echoing the Self- respecter’s ideologies, the novel

ends with an emphasis on heterosexual monogamy as the only solution for the reformation of the Devadasis.

As a literary voice of the Self-respect movement, *Dasigalin* is considered to be a pioneering text in denouncing the religious ideologies prevalent within the Caste Hindu society. Despite advocating liberation for the Devadasis through heterosexual monogamy, the novel is mired in contradictions and paradoxes which underline the impact of the dominant ideologies. Though the novel denounces the religious ideologies which legitimate the Devadasi system, it advocates heterosexual monogamy as a solution for the abolition of the Devadasi system. Despite propagating the ideologies of the Self-Respect movement by campaigning for Tamil marriage without Brahminical rituals to underline the equality of male and female entering into matrimony, the underlying patriarchal norm of ascribing a dominant and superior status to man as a protector and savior of the woman is apparent. Further, the connotations of the names given to the characters are adequate testimony to the fact that the novel is rooted in the caste ideologies. The name of the mother of the “Dasi sisters” is Bogachinthamani which means “one who enjoys wealth”. On the other hand, the name of the wife of the Zamindar, who ‘retrieves’ her husband from the treacherous trap of the Dasi sisters is Gnansundari, meaning “Intelligent and beautiful woman” Ex- Devadasis who have left the system and entered into matrimony have names like Vivekavathy, meaning “woman with wisdom” and Gunapoosani, well-mannered woman. The names Bogachinthamani (Devadasi) and Gnansundari (Zamindar’s wife) is representative of the caste ideologies which reveal the underlying binaries – the superiority of a virtuous and chaste upper caste woman and the inferiority of a loose, immoral and materialistic women from the lower castes. Though *Dasigal*, forged a literary space in the 1930’s to vehemently oppose the intersectional caste and gender oppression of the Devadasis, its plot and characterization defies its objective and reveals the embodiment of patriarchal values of the caste Hindu society.

Discussions on the Devadasis focus mainly on the *Isai Vellalars* and the prevalence of the Devadasis within the *Koothadi* caste have been mostly neglected. While Ramamirtham Ammaiyar’s “*Dasigalin*” portrays the sufferings of the Devadasis from the *Isai Velallar* community, Imayam’s *Sedal* brings to light the oppression of the Devadasis from the *Koothadi* Caste, an ex-untouchable community. While the Devadasis in the *Isai vellalar* caste are sexually controlled and discriminated, the sufferings of the Devadasis from the *Koothadi* caste are compounded, due to their outcaste status. Published in 2006, Imayam’s novel *Sedal*, depicts the plight of a girl named Sedal from the *Koothadi* caste, pushed into the Devadasi system. Akin to “*Dasigalin*”, *Sedal* is also considered semi-fictional, since the novel is partly based on the real-life story of Sedal. Imayam had conducted extensive ethnographic research on the Devadasis from the untouchable communities and the novel is based on his field research. (Anandhi “Beyond the Coherence”, 29). *Sedal* meaning “merry go round” symbolizes her life in three phases. The first phase in her village, when she is wedded to God as a Devadasi, her life as a dancer in a far-off place in the second phase and her return to her village in the third phase where she emerges with a distinct identity as a dance trainer. The cyclic pattern in the novel emphasizes the collusion of caste and gender structures, which constantly shape her destiny. (Geetha, 122)

The novel begins with the poignant description of the initiation of Sedal into the Devadasi system. At a tender age of seven, in her pre-puberty days, Sedal is chosen by caste Hindu patriarchs in the village to be dedicated to the local goddess, *Selliyamma*. The general belief was that the dedication of a Devadasi would bring rains and prosperity to the drought-hit village. Devoid of any power within the caste society, Sedal’s parents readily accept the decision, in the hope of being relieved with feeding one mouth less of their seven children.

After the *pottu kattu* ceremony, Sedal stays with an old woman, in a hut close to the temple. She cleans the temple and sings devotional songs to the deity during temple festivals. Apart from her temple services, she is expected to sing songs in all the houses during the festival and funeral times. As remuneration for her services, she is given a measure of rice from all the cultivating households in the village. Her parents leave for Kandy in search of jobs without informing her. Sedal is orphaned with the sudden death of the old woman. In the outbreak of a storm, she attains puberty and villagers desert her. Her house is destroyed in the storm and Sedal leaves the village, desolate and hurt. She happens to meet Ponnann, a *Therukoothu*¹⁰ artist in a far-off village. Sedal is forced to perform in Ponnann's Drama troupe and very soon excels as a dance-drama artist. When Ponnann dies, she is unable to continue her performance and returns to her village as a middle-aged woman. After paying the fine levied on her by the *Panchayathu*¹¹ for leaving the village, Sedal settles down in her native place. While in a state of penury, she gets a call from Panchali, a dance artiste of yester years who is now bedridden. Having become a Devadasi at a young age, Panchali was quite reputed for her dance performances. She appreciates Sedal for her talent as a dancer and requests her to train two young girls in her drama troupe. The novel ends with Sedal's realization of her expertise and the need to train dancers in *Theru koothu* to sustain a traditional art form.

Sedal offers significant insights on the subjectivity of the Devadasis from the *Koothadi* community. Devoid of any agency to interrogate or resist, Sedal is subjugated by the oppressive caste and gender norms of the Hindu community. While *Dasigalin* denounces caste Hindu structures, *Sedal* cites religion and Hindu mythology to justify the oppressed condition of the Devadasis. The novel reveals a different facet of the control of the sexuality of the Devadasis where religion emerges as the arbiter and controller of the sexual desires of the Devadasi. Contrary to the sexual exploitation of the Devadasis, *Sedal* reveals the power of caste and gender norms which control the sexual desire of the Devadasis and necessitates her to remain an "unmarried virgin". This is exemplified when Sedal and Panchali recount their strategies and tactics to keep men at bay. The impact and significance of religious ideologies on the Devadasis is illustrated in the novel's ending. After the dissolution of the drama troupe, Sedal is driven to penury in her middle age and returns to her hometown. She is called by Panchali, who is bedridden and entrusts Sedal with the responsibility of training her troupe members. As a reason for the poor status of the Devadasis in their old age, Panchali recounts a mythological story of Shiva and Parvathi, Gods from the Hindu pantheon¹². Drawing on mythology, Panchali provides reasons for the denigration and inferiority of the Devadasis. Thus, the novel ends with Sedal being convinced of her inferiority and resigns herself to her destiny as a Devadasi. Exemplifying the internalization of the dominant norms, while telling the mythological story, Panchali refers to Parvathy, a Hindu Goddess as "*pathivratha*" and uses a pejorative term "*Tevadiyal*" while referring to the Devadasis underlining their self-denigration. Entrenched in the ideologies of the oppressive caste society, *Sedal* perpetuates the dominant, discriminative gender norms rather than denouncing it.

Dasigalin and *Sedal* represent two facets of the Devadasi system, as lived out by the *Isai vellalars* and the *Koothadi* castes. The authentic representation of the Devadasis in both the novels enables the readers to gain insights on the sufferings of the Devadasis. However, an in-depth

¹⁰ Street performances in which a dance-drama is enacted.

¹¹ Village court.

¹² In the mythological story, the Hindu God, Shiva is enamored by a Devadasi and his wife Parvathi (as a *Pathivratha*) endures it. Once, Parvathi offers a feast, and the Devadasi is also invited. The Devadasi becomes jealous of Parvathy's beautiful ornaments and leaves the feast unattended. Shiva pacifies her by giving Parvati's ornaments, but the Devadasi is not satiated. The story ends with an infuriated Parvati cursing the Devadasi community to remain poverty-stricken in their old days.

analysis reveals that the subjectivity of the Devadasi is rooted in the hegemonic norms of the caste Hindu society, which legitimates their oppression. While the novels reveal the ideological processes that perpetuate the intersectional oppression of the Devadasis, it acquiesces with the dominant caste and gender structures. The narrative concedes to the significations of the caste Hindu order which impinges on the control of female sexuality. As a paradox, both the novels prescribe subordination of the Devadasis to the dominant patriarchal norms as the solution to their institutionalized oppression. As a legislative intervention, the Anti-Devadasi Act paved the way for the abolition of the system. However, of dire necessity is the ideological transformation of the Devadasis that would interrogate, dismantle and overthrow the caste and gender structures that continue to oppress them. In the absence of such a consciousness, the empowerment and liberation of the Devadasis is a far-fetched reality.

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