

Devadasis in the History of Odisha: A Journey from Purity to Marginality

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Abstract: *In the religious history of India, women have been portrayed as a valuable part of this institution. Hindu women have an emotional and devotional attachment to the gods and goddesses of Hindu culture. In Puranic texts, women are glorified as powerful and empowered characters. However, during the medieval period, a category of women providing service to the god in the temple became the victim of the political and economic changes that were taking place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Odisha, these female temple servants were called “mahari” or devadasi. They were the living wives of Lord Jagannath. However, the devadasis became the victims of these changes and lost their past glory and position after the Muslim invasions of Odisha. The Temple of Puri, was frequently plundered and closed during the Mughals’ time, which forced devadasis to leave the temple and search for other jobs to survive. Devadasis shifted their services from heavenly gods to earthly gods like kings, zamindars, and priests. The temple’s dancing and singing ritual for Lord Jagannath had been performed by mahanaris, who were asked to arrange their own funds to perform this daily ritual. Due to the frequent Muslim attacks on temples and political changes from Hindu to Muslim rulers, the financial crisis brought a great disaster not only for the temple of Jagannath but also for the devadasis who were wholly dependent on the earnings of the temple. The Devadasis, whose numbers were hundreds during medieval times, came down to two digits in modern times. The way devadasis’ position was declined and marginalized in the medieval and contemporary periods needs debate and analysis.*

Keywords: Devadasi, Marginalized women, Prostitution, Odisha, Jagannath, King, Priest.

“Under the grab of tradition the attempt to keep alive the devadasi system at Jagannath Puri is instance of gender injustice in Orissa” – Biswamaya Pati.¹

Devadasis were consecrated and holy servants of Lord Jagannath of the

medieval Odisha. They were in a socially responsible position because of their relationship with God. Over time, devadasi lost its glory while the Muslims reigned in Odisha. They had no condescending support for performing temple rituals. Kings and Zamindar have lost their political and financial strength. Due to the Islamic invasion on Odisha and the attack on Lord Jagannath of Puri, Temple was closed for a long period like a year and over a year. During this period devadasis who depended on the temple for existence became unemployed and lost their livelihood. Even the priest of the temple of Jagannath provided no assistance for them. In this situation devadasis searched for alternative ways to earn and survive in the society. Though they were not allowed to establish social relations outside of the temple but forced to step out and started working as dancers and singers in the royal and zamindar courts. Once these ritual women of the temple considered as wives of god identified as *dasi* of people, means devadasi turned into *lokadasi*.

The Devadasi system faced challenges in Odisha due to political and economic changes. Some Devadasis are engaged in teaching, nursing while some of them choose dancing and prostitution. The age-old tradition faced critical conditions and economic crisis due to Muslim rule in Odisha. After Gajapati Prataprudra Dev (1497 – 1540 A.D.), Devadasi worked as courtesans in the palace, and they were not treated as god's wives. However, she preferred to earn through her dancing and singing talent, and these professions were related to the palace and the public. As a result, devadasi became Rajadasi as well as lokadasi.²

The Afghan rule in Odisha (1568–1593) was followed by the Mughals. They had issued a number of firmans to destroy Hindu temples. As a result, many temples were destroyed in Odisha. Even Aurangzeb issued an order to destroy Jagannath Temple. Jagannath Temple was invaded and plundered eighteen times in history.³ Before Aurangzeb, in 1340 A.D., Illias Saha, Sultan of Bengal, invaded Odisha during the reign of Narasinghadeva-III. Odisha was attacked by Firoj Saha Tughlaq in 1360 A.D. In 1509, the Sultan of Bengal again invaded. Then Kalapahad attacked Jagannath Temple in 1568 A.D. and this year was marked as the end of Hindu rule in Odisha and the beginning of Muslim rule in Odisha. Then Mirza Ahammad Beg, the nephew of Nurjahan, attacked and plundered it in 1621 A.D. In 1647, Amir Fateh Kahan attacked and plundered the temple. In 1692, Aurangzeb ordered the destruction of Jagganth Temple. In 1731 and 1733 A.D., the governor of Odisha, Taqi Khan, attacked the temple.⁴

Due to the Islamic invasion, Odisha lost many temples, and some famous temples stopped services also. Then devadasis lost their patronizers and jobs and started searching for new works for their livelihood. Due to the designation of God's wife and servant, they could not go back to society and live like ordinary people. Therefore, they preferred to perform dance in the courts and at private functions. Their position and status started to decline. Devadasi, were called public women.⁵

Jagannath Temple was the center of devadasi tradition in medieval Odisha.

During the mid-eighteenth century, Marathas came to power in Odisha by dethroning Mughals. They had restored this devadasi system and other rituals of the Jagannath temple, which were stopped during Muslim rule in Odisha.⁶ But these steps could not save them from declining. The Odisha Gazette of 1956 has listed nine devadasis and eleven temple (Jagannath) musicians. In 1980 only four devadasis were left.⁷

According to Marglin, in 1955, Jagannath Temple had thirty-three Devadasis, which came down to nine in 1975. Then it came down to four, and the last four devadasis were: Amrapali, Brindavati, Radha, and Lalita. In 1986 it had four devadasis - Kokilaprabha, Haripriya, Indumati, and Sasimani.⁸ And after the death of Sasimani (2015), the previous devadasi of Jagannath Temple, this religious music cum dance came to an end in Odisha. The legacy of this devadasi culture can be seen through the Odissi dance.⁹

Mahari or maha nari or great women of Puri were getting special attention from temple administration. For them, special and separate colonies were constructed at Puri. A *Mina Nayak* or vigilance officer was appointed who resided at the end of the colony to look after their moral behavior.¹⁰ According to Pandit Sadashiva Rath Sharma, there were solid royal orders for the Mahari's of the colony, and they had to follow them. Firm orders were given to the Pretty dancers at the time of recruitment who committed to remaining unmarried. It indicates that devadasis or maharis were appointed in the name of god and enjoyed by god's representatives like king and servant priests.

Mayadhara Mansingh states that there were six categories of devadasis, and of them, one category was *raja angila*. These devadasi's bodies were for the king only, because they were patronized by the king. The other category was Gahan mahari. These maharis were only for the inner apartment service and were not sacred servants of the god. Although maharis were motivated and thought that service to king is like service to god because he was the shadow of Jagannath. Priests were the servant of Lord Jagannath, so they were also part of god. However, Lesilie's (2000) view on the devadasi ritual is different. She says that the ritual performed by devadasis can be interpreted as a tantric ceremony where sexual relation or union was a ritual in tantra.¹²

Devadasi colony at Puri was also known as *anga-alas-patana*, or the place where people may enjoy relaxation. It is clear evidence of the sexual exploitation by the authorities in the name god. A sexual institution in the premise of the religious and spiritual place like Puri was established by the people who were sacred and very close to Lord Jagannath. Devadasi was appointed for god's service and directed to serve non-gods who were the special guests of the king and priests. The king and zamindars secretly arranged for sexual pleasure and business through their people and officials, targeting and manipulating temple devadasis, who were the soft prey for them.¹³

'*Wives of the God King*' was written by F. A. Marglin (1985), who visited Puri many times for her research project on Devadasis of Jagannath. At her visit to

Odisha Jagannath Temple, many devadasis were rendering their service to god. Marglin had taken interviews from devadasis, and many devadasis became the friend of Marglin. This friendship provided her opportunities to collect primary information through interviews and companies. According to Marglin, most famous devadasis of the period were Amrapalli, Brundavati, Radha, and Lalita, who shared their life experiences. Thus this work is a reliable one for research on devadasi women of Odisha. Apart from this, Sadashiv Rath Sharma, of the same period, provided many documents related to devadasi tradition to Marglin.

Marglin argues that every temple of India engaged devadasis according to its size and fame. They performed temple rituals such as dancing and singing. During their performance, devadasi used grace and a passionate attitude. Besides two-time rituals for god, they also helped at other events and occasions such as public ceremonies where they could dance and sing. Immediately after the general business was over, devadasi opened their cells of infamy and converted the temple itself into a stew.¹⁴

Devadasi performance was a part of the temple earning tradition. Through this graceful and seductive dance performance, temples attracted devotees from other states like Bengal. This tradition was working as a source of revenue generation institution for authorities and patronizers. Abdul Razzaq, a Persian traveler, who visited the Vijayanagar Kingdom in the fifteenth century, remarks that the prostitution of dancing was a great source of revenue to the kingdom, and out of the dancing girls' income the entire upkeep police was paid.¹⁵

Devadasis were well trained in seductive postures and dancing movements. Even teenaged devadasis were trained to whom they would seduce.¹⁶ Duboise (1906), in his work '*Hindu Custom, Manner Tradition*', also criticized this temple tradition. He says that such is the outline of the religious ceremonies of the Hindu and such the spirit of idolatry which prevails among them. A religion more shameful or indecent has never existed among civilized people.¹⁷

Devadasis were god's slaves, and they dedicated themselves to serving the god. Their chastity and purity was the main feature of this system. However, subsequently due to the political changes in Odisha and the rise of non-Hindu rulers in Jagannath state, kings, zamindars, and rich class people wielded their debasing influence on them and forced the temple girls to embrace prostitution to survive. Rekha Pande's (2006) view on these sacred prostitutes is different. She argues that it is doubtful that all devadasi of the temple practiced prostitution.¹⁸ She also says that 'we don't have evidence that devadasis were prostitutes, but after Britishers came to India, they were all practicing prostitution as the temples had lost their patronage.'¹⁹

Devadasi was engaged in sex work in religious institutions in Odisha. We have many examples regarding this system. Mayadhar Mansingh, a notable literary figure of Odisha in his work '*The Saga of the Land of Jagannath*,' has mentioned devadasis involvement in prostitution. In this work, Mansingh

describes that in 1969 January, he met a god's servant named Radhesyam Patri of Baldevajiu Temple, Kendrapara, and from him, he came to know that the prostitution of young Devadasis continued. Ordinary people, as well as temple servants, were involved in this immoral act of Temple Prostitution.²⁰ Benudhara Patra also argues that the Devadasi system was gradually affected by sinful and unholy ideology. This institution lost its pious character, and rituals became a daily duty rather than a holy convention. He also states that the poverty-ridden devadasis of Odisha forced them to choose other sources of income for their survival. They were only provided food. The gifts and grants by the kings and Zamindars also stopped. In this condition, devadasis enter into immoral acts like prostitution to earn money for their need.²¹

Sukumari Bhattacharji also argues that "Temple prostitutes were bought and given to the temple. It was a practice of the ancient period of India. Donors of prostitutes became rich. The host of prostitutes of sun god went to the region of the sun after death, this was a belief."²² Ancient work *Lalitavistar* provides some information regarding temple girls. It describes that "women who carried full pitchers, garlands, jewellery, and ornaments, the throne, the fan jars full of perfumed water etc. and pretty damsel were giving light personal service to the king are projected to heaven where the earthly prostitutes figure as celestial nymphs serving the gods whether in earth or in heaven monarchs or wealthy potentates used such women to enhance their glory and pleasure."²³

The Devadasi system, which had a noble cause and religious sanctity, changed its ideology to serve priests, patrons, and worshipers. Historical study reveals that sacred prostitution was established and grew in Indian society. Anagabhoga, Rangabhoga, Sayanbhoga all words were developed during medieval times, and these words are related to the devadasi tradition, which indicates that sexual exploitation of devadasis was prevalent.²⁴

During medieval times, mahari dance was considered heavenly art and maharis were the goddesses of the temple. Devadasis were dancing in front of the Jagannath where Chaitanya was sitting near the *Garudastambha* and praying Lord Jagannath with full of tears in eyes every day for eighteenth years.²⁵ This place had special importance where devadasi performed rituals for god. The site where Devadasis danced was considered sacred and auspicious land. After the dance was over, devotees, young, older men, and women rolled over the ground where devadasis had danced.²⁶

Maharis of the temple had only relation with priests and kings. They were not allowed to live a normal life in society due to their relationship with the gods as wives. Devadasi of Lord Jagannath was treated as a state employee and enjoyed the land grant by kings and zamindars. They were granted landed properties for their livelihood and also given money annually.²⁷ According to the temple rules, maharis were forbidden to marry and have sexual relations. But they were allowed to adopt a daughter from a high caste who could be the next devadasi. However, impurity and unethical principles affected this holy

tradition.

During sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, devadasis were not only engaged in the temple service and rituals, they were also diverted to work in the royal court. It was the time of Ramchandra Deva's (1568-1598 AD) reign in Orissa when Orissa was captured by Muslims in 1568 AD. Then Jagannath Temple and some other important temples and Hindu religious places were destroyed due to the Islamic power in the state. Devadasis lost their jobs during these times. Ramachandra Dev ordered that devadasis were needed to entertain the royal court and palaces. Then it extended to Zamindar class and lastly into public sphere.²⁸

In his book on Odissi Dance, Dharendra Nath Patnaik analyses that Muslims established their power over Odisha and Odia kings, and zamindars worked under the Muslim chiefs. The moral degeneration started in Hindu temples as well as in temple rituals. During the Muslim reign, Odisha maharis were only entitled to work for god, and temple rituals were employed in royal courts.²⁹ The devadasis, who were called maha-nari or the god's human wife, came to be associated with concubinage.³⁰

This devadasi practice was stopped in 1993 when the devadasi of Jagannath Kokilaprabha died. But the final curtain of this custom had drowned in 2015 with the death of Sasimani, the last human wife of Lord Jagannath. According to the post independent records of Orissa government on devadasi of Puri temple, thirty devadasis were involved with temple at this time. In 1975 only nine Devadasi were working in temple.³¹ But during those times Devadasi were not enjoying any religious or social status in Orissa. According to Marglin, priests of temple did not fully cooperate with them. Even during the time of chariot and *Nabakalebar* festivals Devadasis were neglected and some rituals were omitted knowingly. Devadasis did not have courage to raise voice against these arbitrary changes of temple rituals. But still devadasi were continuing their duties in the temple. Though, they were famous during these times as concubine and courtesan. Due to their bad reputation, temple priests and authorities were against devadasis working in temple. Previous devadasis had performed widowhood when *nabakalebar* festival occurred and but they were not considered as inauspicious as widows but auspicious because she was the wife of Jagannath. But in post independence era they were not allowed into inner sanctum where they were performing dance in past to entertain lord.³² This kind of discrimination with devadasis establishes their link with prostitution and royal court. It led to the decline of this community and made them a marginalized group in the society.

Marglin provides some evidence regarding devadasi practice in society. She has good relation with temple devadasis. She used to go to their home and take interviews with them. As an Odissi dancer, devadasis also liked her and shared many untold and secret things for common people. Amrapali, one of the devadasis of Jagannath during the later part of the twentieth century. She had

four adopted daughters whom she married by avoiding the tradition of devadasis daughter could not marry. One of her daughters married within the devadasis group and married Pankaj Charan Das,³³ son of devadasi Brundavati. Pankaj became a teacher of a government music school and dance in the capital. But elite class and urban people did not send their daughters for training to the school of Pankaj because he belongs to the devadasis family. Even people were passing comments by calling him a son of prostitute devadasis.³⁴ It is not only the king and temple servants who were involved in making devadasis prostitutes, but society did not allow them to live with them. These gods' wives knew as a prostitute of temple and palace. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, social boycott to this devadasi community confined themselves to reside in a particular area like modern days prostitutes stay. It was the society and politics and religious diplomacy to force these temple dancers into prostitution and made them a marginalized community in the history of Odisha.

We have information regarding the devadasis community's marginalization process. Devadasi Amrapali of Jagannath was expelled from service for one year by the king. Her fault was that she married her daughter off to a man without informing the king. This led to her *deula basanda* or being expelled from the temple services. According to Marglin, she was once called by king Ramchandradeva to the palace, and he asked her to have sex with him. But Amrapali refused, and thus the king removed her from temple service. At the age of twenty, Amrapali retired from temple service. Even she was not interested in continuing in the service after her insult by the king. Other devadasis were also criticized for Amrapali's decision by refusing the king's words. They argued that it was an insult to the king because he was the god, and they could not refuse him.³⁵

Devadasi knew that the king patronized them for the sake of sexual relation and exploitation in the name of religion. Denying the king meant losing their job. This was the accurate picture of the devadasis system prevalent during these times in Odisha. Zamindars and many rich people from Calcutta and other regions of India were frequently visiting Puri for sexual enjoyment with temple dancers. For this, they were paying a heavy amount to the patrons.

Radha was another Devadasi of Jagannath temple of Puri and contemporary of Amrapali. Radha had told Marglin all secrets of devadasi while other devadasi did not. She said that it is the tradition to keep relation with Brahmins of the temple and the king.³⁶ She also explained that her mother dedicated her to the Lord Jagannath as a devadasi. Her mother did not belong to the devadasi community. At the age of eleven, she achieved puberty. According to the tradition, she had exchanged garlands with a panda of Jagannath temple, who provided her shelter to stay. It was custom for devadasis to keep relations with temple servants only and not with outsiders. But other devadasis are not following it and maintaining relationships with outsiders to earn money.³⁷ This

was the condition of devadasis who were facing financial crunch and shelter problems.

Along with financial problems, the decline of social dignity and religious status did not encourage the children of devadasis to adopt this tradition. The entry of sexualism into devadasi tradition brought degradation in the institution. The negligence of temple authorities and the king forced the devadasis to choose work in the public domain. To survive in society, they adopted various ways to earn. Even they made money by welcoming their guest into their house. A holy and sacred woman who was once worshiped as the wife of god was forced to be marginalized in society.

Lalita, the contemporary of Radha, has given some logical reason behind their marginalization. In a conversation with Marglin, she said that nowadays, people are thinking of devadasis as prostitutes. They are no more the wives of god or sacred. That was the reason she had left the temple rituals. Even many of the elder devadasis are not performing rituals due to shame and financial problems. Their children were also facing embarrassment due to their mother's involvement with temple rituals. On the other hand, people were giving gifts and money at the performance, but that gift system also stopped. Patronizers were giving land grants for the maintenance of devadasis. But these days, land given to devadasis has been taken away by the king. They did not have land, home, and money to survive in the society.³⁸

The process of marginalization of devadasis started after the decline of the Hindu dynasty in Odisha. Devadasis were marginalized even during the period ruled by Hindus. However, Frequent Muslim attacks on Jagannath Temple forced them to close the temple many times. Then the Hindu kings and priests of devadasis stopped patronizing due to the financial crisis after losing power to Muslims.³⁹

Though Temple administration and the Odisha government provided financial help, it was not sufficient for them. We can take the example of Sasimani Devi, the last Devadasi of Jagannath temple who died in 2015. She was living in a tiny house of the panda of the temple. She had got only three hundred rupees as monthly pension from Odisha Government as an artist.

However, many scholars and priests believe that the Devadasi System of Odisha did not adopt impurity in the traditions like in south India. Jagannath's devadasi was pure and sacred. They did not indulge in sexual activities and established immoral relations with others. The surprising thing is that a tradition that was influenced by the south Indian devadasi cult was not affected by their sexual rituals of sacred women. In the Jogini and basava cult of South India, devadasis was treated like a prostitute and public women, but in Odisha, devadasis did not follow or practice this culture. But A K Biswas's analysis of the Odia devadasi cult provides different and authentic information. He argues that women dedicated to the temple were temple prostitutes. She pondered too the carnal desires of the priests; guided the wealthy visitors who undertook the

journey to those places under the religious pretext. These women were a source of attraction which enhanced the reputation of many temples. The Jagannath Temple Puri, Somanath Temple Gujarat, and some temples in south India, to mention a few, had these unhappy women to serve the priest and visitors.⁴⁰ A record of Francois Bernier, who visited Puri during his Mughal service on Jagannath Temple, disclosed that every year prior to the Rath Yatra Jagannath took a new young wife. On the first night, she used to be deflowered for consummating the marriage by one of the temple priests intruding inside a room where she was sheltered.⁴¹

In March 1912, Bal Krishna Sahaya, representing the Chotanagpur division of Bengal legislative council, raised the questions on the custom of dedicating female children to the temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri; who, when grown up, lead an immoral life. He demanded government intervention to abolish the immoral custom. The government told the council that it would view with favor and lend its support to any organized attempts made by Hindu society to eradicate the evils that have grown up around the system at Puri. But British authorities refused to initiate reforms on their motion in a matter so closely connected with religious observance.⁴²

Regional records and literature are silent on this point of immorality. Jagannath Temple chronicle '*Madalapanji*' is not giving any information on the immoral act of devadasis. But the medieval architecture and sculptures such as temple walls, pillars, and relics bear many female dancing figures whose dressing style and posture indicate sexualism in the tradition. Their attires, seductive appearance, and art of attraction all show that Mahari dance was not pure and sacred.

Female musicians on the temple walls of Konark, Rajarani, Lingaraj represent the temple girls, and there is no doubt. Apart from that, medieval temple sculpture was dominated by erotic figurines and sexual scenes. Almost all temples of the period have contained this type of nude sex scene and seductive, charming half nude stone girl's images. The smile and glow on the face of these depicted figures have an attraction and a shakti which can drag the devotees and people towards *mohamaya* or her love. This type of quality of *bimohana* or attracting others with her beauty and seductive actions was the characteristics of the devadasis and rajadasis.

The engraved female dancers and musicians of Konark and Rajarani temples are pure examples of dancing culture popular in those periods. Without proper evidence, it will be irrational to say that women dancers engaged in the temple service were prostitutes, but the temple's nude sculpture and erotic scenes indicate that these temple damsels reflect women dancers, musicians, and female servants. It is important to understand why temple walls were selected to depict sexual scenes when it was considered the most sacred and holiest place for the Hindu religion. Secondly, without the king's permission, it would not be possible for artists to portray these sexual figures on the walls of temples

of the medieval period. So there are some connections of the temple's devadasi ritual with erotic and seductive women figures of the temple. These figures reflect the posture, charming face, attractive smile, and seductive attitude of devadasis.

On the other hand, attracting the devotees towards the temple to increase the temple's revenue probably motivated the king and its religious legitimacy by the priest to introduce nude women figures and erotic scenes on the walls of the medieval temples. Just like modern-day advertisement and propaganda for business, probably the king and priests jointly adopted this unethical policy for their temple business as the temples were the epicenters of business of the medieval periods.

The king Ramachandradeva's plan to divert devadasis of the temple to royal court was a reliable example of exploitation of devadasis. Some scholars argue that the devadasis who were attached to the court and wealthy people, finally ended up with anybody and everybody who could pay and at last this system of devadasi turned into the prostitution of this institution.⁴³

Rekha Pande and S. Jeevanadam state that Girls from noble families were coming to serve as devadasis. Even many times, the king appointed devadasis enjoyed more privilege in the society. On the other hand, the king himself was attached to the temple service. Thus devadasis might not have been involved in prostitution work.⁴⁴ Sasimani the last devadasi of Jagannath who passed away in 2015 said that devadasis of other parts of the country were exploited but here we had respect from the people. We are the loving wives of Jagannath.⁴⁵

The devadasis of Lord Jagannath had a unique role in the Rath Yatra or Car Festival and Navakalevara, making a new idol of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and goddess Subhadra. Francis Bernier's record on Puri Jagannath provides us with some facts about the part of devadasis towards Lord Jagannath and the temple. His records describe that "the temple priest had sexual relations with new young pre-puberty wives of god. After the marriage with Jagannath, the young wife of god used to be deflowered on the first night for consummating the marriage by one of the temple priests inside the rooms where she was staying".⁴⁶

The contemporary literary works and records are not giving much information on devadasis rights but duties that were fixed by the temple authorities and priests. Priests were the one class in India who were most privileged in the society and enjoyed immunity from the penal code, and that is why they were free to exploit devadasi girls of the temples.⁴⁷ Sukumari Bhattacharji, through her work on *Prostitution in Ancient India*, argues those priests were enjoying privileged status due to their control over temple prostitutes.⁴⁸

It seems that the devadasi system, which is based on religious rituals and became an integral part of the temple rituals of Odisha. But it could not maintain its purity in it. Because devadasi rules and regulations telling us about this immorality they had been following in secretly. For example, devadasi, after the

purification bath on the seventh day of her puberty, the girls pick up some sand with folded hands and recite the following lines 'may I have as many husband as there are grains of sand in my hand'.⁴⁹ It indicates that devadasis were not staying away from sexual activities. They were involved in sexual relations with temple servants and devotees. Radha, devadasi of Jagannath temple, admitted that this practice was followed and adopted by devadasis. When she first got puberty, she said that she was given a pot with nuts and asked to recite the lines mentioned above. Thus this ritual indicates that devadasis must probably have many husbands. The Devadasi tradition justifies sexual relations with the king and temple servants in the name of ritual. Though Ganga kings, Somavamsi kings then Gajapatis dedicated female servants to the temples of Odisha to perform rituals like singing, dancing, and other services to the temple. But in a later stage, temple authorities probably modified the rules for the female servants and made them *dasis* of kings, priests and devotees for the sake of sexual pleasure and attracting devotees to earn money from wealthy devotees like Zamindars of Bengal.

According to Marglin the king had the first right to have sex with the newly purified devadasi. After her puberty purification, Radha, devadasi of the Jagannath Temple, went to the palace for *anga sparsa* or *angalagi*.⁵⁰ The king invited another king of Talacher State to sleep with Radha or establish sexual relations with her. While Radha was only eleven years old, the king of Talacher was sixty years old with whom Radha had consummation. After this relation, the king gave her gold ornaments as a gift.⁵¹ Temple priests have admitted this ritual of *angasparsa*. Even they argue that the priest has the first right to have sex with devadasis. But if king wants, he can call them. Temple servants who bear all expenditures of the girl's puberty ceremony have the first right to have sexual relations with her, and he will be her first husband. Apart from that, the king can have sexual relations with pre-puberty girls for sexual enjoyment. The king and priest of the temple had a band to run the temple business through the Devadasi System.⁵²

Jagannath Temple devadasis had to follow the rules and regulations fixed by the king and the priest. Devadasi can have sexual relations with *pandas* and kings, not with others. If they had sexual relations with other persons, they should not be from *aspursiya* or non-water giving class. If devadasi had a relation with the lower caste or non-water giving class, an officer looking after the devadasis could inform the king on this matter, and the king will punish them.⁵³

On August 8, 1853, in the *New York Tribune*, in a dispatch, Karl Marx had charged the British Government by saying, "did they not, in order to make money out of pilgrims streaming to the temple; take up the trade in murder and prostitution perpetrated in the temple of Lord Jaggernaut".⁵⁴

In 1927, Mahatma Gandhi precisely said, "there are, I am sorry to say, many temples in our midst in the country, which are no better than brothels." The

Young India, on September 22, 1927, quoted him as saying, "in calling them devadasi we use these sisters of ours to serve our lust...".⁵⁵

Karl Marx and M. K. Gandhi were not wrong in their views. In the Hooghly district of West Bengal, a priest of Tarakaswar Temple was involved in the brothel work which grew up around the temple. The priest or Mahanta Madhav Chandra Giri had the notoriety of kidnapping, seducing, or procuring innocent women for illicit relations with him by deploying his muscle man. According to Tanika Sarkar, "after these women could not return to their families; their only sanctuary lay in the growing brothels of Tarakeswar. Newspapers in 1873 were full of lucid descriptions of the temple pandas of Puri and Tarakeswar..... Tarakeswar has been a place for illicit assignation".⁵⁶

It was not only the temple and priests involved in this immoral act, but rich landlords, wealthy peoples of Bengal Bihar, and Odisha flocked to Puri under the pretext of pilgrimage with the desire not so pious indeed. Some zamindars levied illegal imposts or abwabs for health care, *mahaprasad*,⁵⁷ *barunisnan*⁵⁸ to defray expenses for their prolonged visit to Puri. John Beams, the Hooghly district collector of Baleswar, reported this to the Bengal governor in 1871; many zamindars from Calcutta spent lakhs of rupees on their visit to Puri spanning over two to three months.⁵⁹

Devadasis lived a life of tragedy and sorrow because a devadasi could get patronage until she could attract devotees and zamindars. Dancing was their profession but she could not practice dance in old age. Temple authorities and priests did not patronize them and it would be reduced into a destitute position. Their profession prevented them from having family of their own. They were kept isolated from the society. In old age, devadasi became helpless and faced old age sufferings. Thus at the end of a long career, devadasi faced double exploitation as temple dancers and as priest concubines. She did face complete destitution for neither state nor the temple had showed any obligation for them.⁶⁰ P C Mishra also argues that devadasi tradition was influenced by South Indian devadasi culture.⁶¹ Thus the cultural exchange between Odisha and South Indian kingdoms was there. Biswamaya Pati's point of view indicates that "a Puri devadasi who leads a vegetarian life as a kept woman of Jagannath, symbolises degradation of women as much as a prostitute devadasi of Karnatak".⁶²

From the above information and analysis, it can be concluded that the devadasis or maha naris of the temple were not pure and sacred in nature. Directly and indirectly, they were forced to be a part of this immoral act carried on by the temple authorities and the servants of the temple. Of course, the aim and objective of this ritual are to entertain the god, but over time, the sacred tradition was affected by the impurity of priests and kings who made it a religious business. God's wives became prostitutes. Devadasis were a class of women who were struggling to live on their artistic qualities. They were different from other women, and their life was different than others' life. They

were privileged, but with time they became marginalized.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Rekha Pande, University of Hyderabad for her suggestion and correction in this research paper.

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Visual reference



Brahmeswar temple (11th CE) sculpture - Female dancing and Musical performance showing Devadasi culture in Orissa (source: Photo taken by author)