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The Question of Agency and Conjugal Norms for the Devadasi
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The Question of Agency and Conjugal Norms for the Devadasi

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Loriliai Biernacki

The devadasis have been a subject of inquiry in the history, gender studies, and postcolonial studies for South Asia. In India's colonial past, Europeans have called them 'temple prostitutes.' Apologist accounts in the present have equated them to 'nuns.' Recent postcolonial works, however, have conflated these categories and suggested many of these women were courtesans with a respectable standing in both temple and secular settings. Debates in the past have focused on the question of agency amongst the devadasis when investigating the factors leading to the Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, which effectively outlawed their system. However, this thesis examines an even more pervasive element surrounding the abolition of the devadasi system: the construction and reconstruction of conjugal norms. This shift in societal ideas regarding conjugal norms presents itself in the history of India beginning with British rule after the Indian Revolution of 1857, which extends well after Independence in 1947.

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Arya R. Hackney

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I became interested in the subject of *bhāratānatyam*¹ and *devadāsīs*² when I began taking lessons in *bharatanatyam*, one of the recognized forms of Indian Classical Dance.³ This was what many people familiar with Indian dances called this dance form. The Srīmātī of my dance school preferred calling this dance, “*devadasi sadir*.” My teacher, one of the senior instructors of the lineage, suggested this was what the dance was called before 20th century reforms led to the abolition – and revival – of the dance. We discussed how this dance was practiced by a group of women called *devadasis*, or what were commonly called “temple dancers” during British rule.⁴ A few years ago, when taking a course on Indian literature, I recalled hearing about these dancers from the professor. He said how the *devadasis* were originally meant to be “like nuns,” but were eventually accused of prostitution. In a class lecture, the professor said there were cases of sexual exploitation and this fact, combined with the idea that the British thought the *bharatanatyam* was “sexually suggestive,” led to the ban of the *devadasi* system. With my interest in the subject growing, I inquired as to what led to this change in the *devadasis*’ status.

My dance instructor said the dance became associated with prostitution because of cultural reforms in India. According to her, Indian reformers who were part of India’s British

¹ Henceforth the term *bhāratānatyam* will appear without diacritic marks.

² From here on, the diacritics will be removed.

³ “Bhārata,” is Sanskrit for “India.” “Natyam” translates to “dance” in Sanskrit. Also see Srinivasan, Amrit, “The Hindu Temple Dancer: Prostitute or Nun?” *Cambridge Anthropology* 8, no. 1 (1983): 73-99.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

elite pushed for the abolition of the *devadasi* system. I believed her and had no reason to question the legitimacy of her claims. However, as a graduate student, I knew I had to research the matter myself and juxtapose these claims with my research. Thus, I began my own inquiry on the subject of the *devadasi*, what she was, and whether she was meant to be chaste, or to engage in prostitution.

Defining “Devadasi,” and Devadasis of Orissa and Tamil Nadu

The term *devadasi* is Sanskritic in origin and has been translated as the following: servant of the god; slave of the god; or maid servant of the god.⁵ Its very first use appears in a Jogimara cave in the Ramgarh hills of Madhya Pradesh, within a Magadhi inscription variously dating back to 300 B.C. or 100 C.E.⁶ Today, people know *devadasis* as women who danced in temples.⁷ British have often dismissively called these women “temple dancers” or “temple prostitutes.”⁸ Modern scholarship define the *devadasi* as a woman who married a temple deity, provided artistic services for temples she served, and gained income for her services.⁹ Nonetheless, neither of these terms nor concepts sufficiently describe the *devadasi* and her role in Indian society – or Indian history, for that matter.

⁵ Please see J.A. Dubois, *A description of the character, manners and customs of the people of India, and of their institutions, religious and civil* (Madras: J. Higginbotham, 1862), 294-5; Daves Soneji; *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6-7; Kay K. Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute: A History of the Changing Legal Status of the Devadasis in India, 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), 1.

⁶ Leslie C. Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: temple women in medieval Tamilnadu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

⁸ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 6-7.

⁹ Please see Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute* and Saskia Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987).

As Leslie Orr suggests, the word “devadasi” had only been commonly used to describe women who danced in the temple in the 20th century.¹⁰ It is a Sanskritized form of the Tamil term *tevaratiyāl*, which was the common word used for temple women in Tamil Nadu.¹¹ Frédérique Marglin, consistent with what Orr states, posits that “devadasi” became a popular term in the 1920’s during the dance revival movement.¹² With this said, there is mention of the *devadasi* in passages of the Āgamas prior to the 10th century.¹³ In these passages, the term “devadasi” had been applied to women associated with various temple rituals. However, the very first reference of the *devadasi* as a “temple woman,” a woman whose lifestyle or identity is completely tied with her association with a temple, appears in a 12th century Kannada record.¹⁴ And even back then, as already insinuated, it was not universally applied to all women who served a temple until recent times. Other terms were used to describe women who served temples, depending on the respective region in India.¹⁵

Despite the issues with the term *devadasi*, I will define the devadasi as the following in my research: (a) I will define her as someone who would be considered a "temple woman" in her respective tradition, who may or may not have been involved in courtesanship; (b) she will be a woman who actively participates as specialized in the arts dedicated to her temple or deity, especially in singing and dancing; (c) furthermore, she will also be a woman who is an active

¹⁰ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 6-7.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Frédérique Marglin, *Wives of the God-King The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 313.

¹³ Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God*, 5, 193-4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5-6. The term used is *dēvadāsigal*. According to Orr, it referred to a group of women who received support from a Jain temple.

¹⁵ Ibid.

agent in rituals. For the purpose of this research, I am defining her in a way similar to how Leslie Orr defines a "temple woman" in her work.¹⁶

Now that I have established how I will define *devadasis* in my work, I will discuss two ethnographic works on *devadasis* in India. One of these places is in North India: Puri, Orissa. In Orissa during the mid 1970s, Frédérique Marglin conducted extensive fieldwork among the remaining *devadasis*, who were referred to as *māhārī* by the locals.¹⁷ Because it was believed to be derived from the term, *māhārānī* (queen), the term *mahari* placed the *devadasis* on a similar status as the queen. In Puri, these women serve the deity Lord Jagganath, and have done so for centuries through their song and dance.¹⁸ These women served the temples and royal patrons as female ritual specialists. When the *mahari* was with the king, courts referred to her status as *calanti devī* (walking goddess) while the king was *calanti vishnu* (*walking Vishnu*), titles associated with their symbolic functions in rituals – when they served as, respectively, Lakshmi and Vishnu.¹⁹ According to Marglin, these women were considered sexually impure because they were courtesans, but auspicious because they were never widowed. Furthermore, their sexual impurity was seen as a necessary component in some rituals. For instance, the *devadasi* during one ritual acts as a courtesan who seduces the ascetic, a ritual that brings in the rain for farmers' crops. Thus, despite being considered sexually impure, her role still serves the betterment of society.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, xv. From here on, I will not use diacritics for the term, "*māhārī*." This term was described by Marglin to come from the word, "*māhārānī*" – the word for the "Queen" in Sanskrit.

¹⁸ Ibid., 84, Backcover.

¹⁹ Ibid., 117.

²⁰ Ibid., 117, 108.

Scholars have debated whether these women's concubinage always included sexual intercourse with temple patrons or if these were later establishments. Accounts by non-Indians, such as those in the 19th century like that of Baptist missionary W. Ward, suggest that these women were "of infamous character" and pilgrims engaged in "criminal actions" with these women.²¹ Clearly, these implications suggested the *mahari* were sexually active in their duties. According to Dharendra Nath Patnaik, secretary of the Orissa Academy of Music and Dance, *maharis* were chaste prior to the Mughal Empire,²² and it was only after this time that they engaged in concubinage with patrons.²³

Reading this, I began wondering why he blamed the Muslims for this advancement. Even though Mughal rulers systematically destroyed Hindu temples,²⁴ something that might have affected the over all status of the devadasis associated with these temples, I believe the implications of this claim are more complex. In part, I suspect Patnaik might have placed sole responsibility on the Muslims because of the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims that escalated after the Partition. However, when using Partha Chatterjee's work in his article, *Subaltern and Bhadrakok Studies*, Ramachandra Guha wrote that the reconstructed upper class Hindus have their own accepted history based on several elements. One of these elements include the view that Muslims were "warlike, predatory and expansionist" and that Islamic rule

²¹ Penzer, N. M., "Appendix IV Sacred Prostitution. Charles Henry Tawney Junior and NM Penzer Ed," *The Ocean of Story* 1 (1968), 241.

²² Dharendra Nath Patnaik suggested the Muslim invasions, but I changed this to "Mughal Empire" for the sake of specificity.

²³ Dharendra Nath Patnaik, *Odissi Dance* (Cuttack: Goswami Press, 1971), 56.

²⁴ Geetanjali Misra, Ajay Mahal, and Rima Shah, "Protecting the rights of sex workers: the Indian experience," *Health and human rights* (2000): 99.

was “a time of decline and degeneration (from the classical Hindu past).”²⁵ It may be true that Indian culture had transformed as the result of Islamic rule, but this perspective is worthy of consideration when evaluating Patnaik’s claim. In Patnaik’s proposed conclusion, there still exists the assumption that Islamic rule was fully responsible for the decline of a “classical Hindu past.”

Nonetheless, Marglin exposes this claim as an apologist account in her fieldwork. Marglin suggests *devadasis* were meant to have sexual relations, but with only the king and the temple priests. However, they also engaged in intercourse with other patrons, namely patrons of Puri and the water-giving castes.²⁶ They served not only as temple ritual specialists in Puri, but also as concubines for the king in the colonial period.

Now that I have briefly touched upon the *devadasi* system and the *devadasis* in Orissa, we can move on to where the *devadasi* system possesses deep roots: South India. Namely, this information will touch upon the *devadasis* of Tamil Nadu, sometimes known as *nityasumangali* – or the ever-auspicious female.²⁷ Saskia Kersenboom-Story conducted extensive research on the *devadasis* of this region. In addition to being patrons of song and dance, she found the *devadasis* also possessed significant ritual functions in their role as *nityasumangalī*.²⁸ While for centuries, there were bards who were believed to possess auspicious powers in a similar manner to the *devadasis* in Tamil Nadu, the first documented case of a *devadasi* in Tamil Nadu was in the 9th century. According to Kersenboom-Story’s findings, notable cases of temple dancers appear in the Chola period (850-1279 C.E.). In this period, we also find the first official

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 90.

²⁷ Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, ix.

²⁸ From here on, I will not use diacritics for this term.

reference to a *devadasi*.²⁹ Devadasis in the Chola period were held in high esteem and often considered very wealthy. They sang, danced, and conducted rituals in the temples during this time. During the Chola period, we also find an elaborate hierarchy for the *devadasis*, which determined their status. Some temple traditions had the highest ranking *devadasis* perform at very specific locations.³⁰

The rituals the *nityasumangali* specialized in were tied to the fortune they could bring in addition to their dances and songs. Some of the important rituals the *nityasumangali* conducted involved the warding off the evil eye in both temple and secular-related settings. Furthermore, in the temples in Tamil Nadu, these women had the status in temples to present offerings before the gods, something that only Brahmins typically did.³¹ Accounts documented by Abbe Dubois, a European from the 19th century, suggested that association with these women brought not only auspiciousness, but ‘the destruction of sin.’³² This was what Dubois said regarding the *devadasis* in relationship to Hindu customs:

To have any connexion with a courtesan, or with an unmarried person, is not considered a form of wickedness in the eyes of the Brahmins. These men who look upon the violation of any trivial custom as a heinous sin, see no harm in the most outrageous and licentious excesses. It was principally for their use that the dancers and prostitutes who are attached to the services of the temples were originally entertained, and they may often be heard to intone the following scandalous line : -
/Veshya darisanam punyam papa nasanam!/ which means, ‘To have intercourse with a prostitute is a virtue which takes away sin.’³³

²⁹ Ibid., 15-16, 23-8. I find one suggestion interesting to note: Leslie Orr mentions that the *devadasis* in Tamil Nadu developed independently from the other regions in India. Therefore, not all *devadasis*, or ‘temple women,’ functioned the same way. Please see Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God*, 50.

³⁰ Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 23-8.

³¹ Ibid., 36.

³² J.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*, 310-11.

³³ Ibid. ‘Veshya’ actually translates to ‘courtesan.’ It became more associated with prostitution later in the colonial era. The transformation of this term will be alluded to in this thesis. In addition, ‘darshan’ in Sanskrit

Here, we see what Marglin describes as the *devadasis* becoming a “target for an exotic one-sided imaginative reconstruction.”³⁴ There is an underlying, unambiguous disdain in Dubois’ tone that betrays his disapproval of *devadasis*.³⁵ Even while acknowledging their role in Hindu customs, he still possesses a pervasive view of them as prostitutes and associates them with ‘outrageous and licentious,’ excesses.³⁶ The Sanskrit phrase he uses in his work actually translates to the phrase, “To see a courtesan is a virtue which takes away sin.” However, Dubois interprets this phrase as a reference to having intercourse with a courtesan. Again, this ties into the phenomenon Marglin describes in her work.

In addition, this serves as an example for the Orientalistic tendency of Europeans to construct the notion of an “Other”³⁷ that defines non-European countries as having ‘barbaric traditions.’ As Philipa Levine articulates in *Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities*, the Europeans, namely the British, applied a ‘selective definition of Indian culture.’³⁸ When faced with British officials in India, courtesans stressed that they were not commercial prostitutes, but the British saw no difference between them and common prostitutes.³⁹ Dubois and other Europeans held a similar attitude toward the *devadasis*. This attitude assumed the idea

translates to ‘seeing,’ and not literally ‘intercourse.’

³⁴ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 5.

³⁵ Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*, 311.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Please see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

³⁸ Philipa Levine, “Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities,” *Feminist Review*, 65 (2000): 10-11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

of Indian ‘reality’ as one of degradation, and that acceptance of temple ‘prostitutes’ betrayed India’s cultural and moral inferiority.⁴⁰

With this said, Kersenboom-Story suggests the works by Dubois was generous when compared to other works by Europeans, in part because of him capitalizing the auspiciousness of the *devadasis*. She describes him as broad-minded when compared to the ordinary Christian missionary in his time.⁴¹ The fact he caught the auspiciousness of the *devadasis* in spite of their profession’s relationship to courtesanship supports this conjecture.⁴² According to Kersenboom-Story, this auspiciousness for *devadasis* entails the ability to bring prosperity and happiness to people.⁴³ Hence, the *devadasi* is important for warding off of the evil-eye, which is believed to bring misfortune to people’s lives. Usually, an unmarried person – especially an unmarried woman – is considered dangerous to Indians if not controlled. As Kersenboom-Story observes, even mated pairs between gods is preferred to independent deities.⁴⁴ Because *devadasis* are married to temple deities, however, they are considered controlled by these entities.

The same accounts further emphasized the auspiciousness of the *devadasi* in noting how after her dismissal from service to the temple, people would call her *Kali-yuga-Lākshmis* – goddesses of fortune in the Kali Yuga. When these women appeared, people had their wishes

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 46-47, 81.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8, 70.

granted.⁴⁵ *Devadasis* in South India were most commonly associated with temples dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu, but some were also dedicated to village goddesses.⁴⁶

Here, we see an interesting interface regarding the *devadasis*' sexual practices. Even though precolonial Indians did not perceive the *devadasi* as a common prostitute,⁴⁷ there still exists a danger in Brahmanical Hinduism when it comes to unmarried individuals. This extends to courtesans – even though the *devadasis*' power is believed as controlled by her patron deity. Nonetheless, there is a striking similarity between the conjugal values of Europeans and Brahmanical Hindus at the time.⁴⁸ It is these similarities in values that contribute to the gradual decline in the *devadasis*' social status in the twentieth century, which we will examine later.

Orissa and Tamil Nadu are not by far the only places that had *devadasis*. There are a number of classes of women who were considered *devadasis* or similar to the *devadasis*. For instance, we have the *natis* from Assam and the *jogadis* from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.⁴⁹ Others have done research on these women, research that I can only briefly acknowledge in my work. Because of the purpose of my research, I will be focusing mainly on the *devadasis* in South India, with mention of the ones from Puri for comparative purposes.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 602. Lākshmi is the goddess of prosperity while the Kali Yuga is the present age in Hinduism, often described as the most corrupt age of the four ages. The name of the age is not to be considered associated with the goddess, Kālī.

⁴⁶ M. D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal, *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts), 108.

⁴⁷ Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 1. Kay K. Jordan also suggests the Shāstras did not claim the *devadasi* was considered a prostitute.

⁴⁸ Judith Whitehead, "Measuring Women's Value: Continuity and Change in the Regulation of Prostitution in Madras Presidency, 1860-1947," *Of property and propriety: The role of gender and class in imperialism and nationalism*, 21 (2001): 153-181.

⁴⁹ Kali Prasad Goswami, *Devadāsī: dancing damsel* (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2000), mentions the *natis*, which are considered the category of *devadasis* in Assam. Please also see H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam Vol. II Medieval Period: Political From Thirteenth Century A.D. To the Treaty of Yandabo 1826* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992); Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 8.

On Indian Courtesans and Courtesans in Literature

Before continuing on with the subject of the *devadasis*, I believe I should briefly address the courtesan tradition in India. First, it is quite evident that *devadasis*, whether they are the *mahari* or the *nityasumangali*, are considered a category of courtesans. These women were trained in the arts, literate, and were capable of accumulating wealth without being married. And of course, they were also sponsored by local rulers. Moreover, despite their public lives as unmarried women, they retained their self-respect.⁵⁰

However, with this in consideration, *devadasis* were not the only group of courtesans in India. They functioned as courtesans in both religious and secular settings, especially in Southern India,⁵¹ but there is also the figure described in Veena Oldenburg's work *Lifestyle as Resistance: the tawaif*. The *tawaif* served the same functions as the *devadasi* bar in a nonreligious context. Prior to the establishment of British India, these women possessed an active role in the political scene.⁵² However, because they funded the rebellion of 1857 and drew assistance to it, the *tawaifs*' economic and social status dwindled and they were pushed into prostitution.⁵³

In addition, there also exists a tradition of literature involving the courtesan. Two literary works worthy of note that revolve around the courtesan is King Shudraka's play, *The Little Clay*

⁵⁰ Arthur William Ryder (translator), Shudraka (author), *The Little Clay Cart: A Hindu Drama Attributed to King Shudraka 1905* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), xxi. When I say "public life" in this section, I also imply engaging in non-conjugal sexual practices. Traditionally, upper class women who have a public life are considered sexually available in a number of places. The ending of *The Little Clay Cart* shows this when Vasantasenā marries. She becomes veiled after the marriage and being declared a legal wife. This is evidence the *pardah* system might have spread to portions of India before the Islamic invasions.

⁵¹ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 3.

⁵² Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," *Feminist Studies*, 16, no. 2 (1990): 259-260.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Cart, and Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*. Both works were composed in the 5th to 6th century.⁵⁴ With the former piece, we have a heroine named Vasantasenā who, despite her respectable status, wants to escape the dangers of her inherited way of life.⁵⁵ With the latter, we see a work describing the 'art of love' in its whole, but also one that describes the courtesan and how one lives as a courtesan.⁵⁶ Both works show a courtesan who, not too unlike the historical *tawaif*, is a woman with a public life who is of high social standing, engaged in the arts, wealthy, and educated.

The Abolition of the Devadasi System and Conjugal Norms: An Overview

By 1947, Indian reformists amongst the legislation in the Madras Presidency passed a bill that prevented the continuation of the *devadasi* system. This legislation was known as the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947⁵⁷, which was later called the State of Tamil Nadu Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947⁵⁸ to reflect the state's modern name. This bill stated the following:

An Act to prevent the dedication of women as devadasis in the [State of Tamil Nadu] / WHEREAS the practice still prevails in certain parts of the [State of Tamil Nadu] of dedicating women as "devadasis" to Hindu deities, idols, objects of worship, temples and other religious institutions;/ AND WHEREAS such

⁵⁴ Please see Ryder (translator), Shudraka (author), *The Little Clay Cart: A Hindu Drama Attributed to King Shudraka 1905* and Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, eds, *Kamasutra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ Ryder (translator), Shudraka (author), *The Little Clay Cart: A Hindu Drama Attributed to King Shudraka 1905*. Interesting to note, Vasantasenā wishes to become a legal wife in this play, which implicates a valued monogamous, conjugal narrative for the courtesan character. She wants to marry a man in this play as a means to escape the life of a courtesan. This is a case synonymous with the courtesan heroine in a more contemporary work, *Umrao Jān*. However, as Veena Oldenberg's work suggests, a significant number of courtesans found more intimate relationships with other courtesans. Please see "Lifestyle as Resistance," 275-6.

⁵⁶ Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, eds, *Kamasutra*, xi-xxix.

⁵⁷ Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947, later called Tamil Nadu Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947. Please see Tamil Nadu Act XXXI, 1947, 1009-11.

⁵⁸ Please see Tamil Nadu Act XXXI, 1947, 1009.

practice, however ancient and pure in its origin, leads many of the women so dedicated to a life of prostitution;/ AND WHEREAS it is necessary to put an end to the practice...

Reformists who pushed for the bill suggested that *devadasis* practiced prostitution, led amoral lives, and that their status as women would improve if this measure was passed.

Amongst these reformers was social worker and activist, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who said the following regarding the *devadasis*:

It is beyond my comprehension how in a country which can boast of innumerable saints...irresponsibility in vice has been ignored and even encouraged [through the *devadasi* system] to the detriment of the health of the individual and of the future race...Modern science has proved that continence is conducive to the health and well-being of the individual, family, and the future race, and that sexual immorality harms both the individual and the community (Reddy 1926: 146-7).⁵⁹

An interesting component of Dr. Reddy's quote is that she uses similar language to Dubois in his writings on Hindu customs. In Dubois' writings on the *devadasi*, he suggested these women were 'strumpets,' 'shameful,' 'indecent,' and that 'virtuous women would consider the mention of them affront.'⁶⁰ Dr. Reddy, even while describing the medical reasons for opposing the *devadasi* system, emphasizes the aspect of their 'sexual immorality' and how it 'harms both the individual and the community.' We have a case where an English educated Indian adopts the language of the Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century when describing Indian customs.

Another noteworthy component of the quote by Dr. Reddy is the use of medical science combined with moral language. Judith Whitehead discusses this at length in her work, *Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries*. After the British passed the Contagious Diseases Act

⁵⁹ Muthulakshmi Reddy, as quoted in Whitehead. "Measuring Women's Value," 168.

⁶⁰ Please see Dubois, *A description of the character, manners and customs of the people of India, and of their institutions, religious and civil*, and Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*.

(1868-1888) in the late 19th century, they met considerable opposition from Indian nationalists. In the view of the nationalists, this act exemplified exploitation of Indian women by British troops and served as evidence for India's national shame.⁶¹ However, Whitehead also posits the following: "nationalists criticized many aspects of British and European culture and society, the basic terms through which the human body and the body politic were to be understood, regulated, and controlled were unconsciously set by nationalist acceptance of the superiority of Western medicine."⁶² I agree with this observation and believe it is the crux of what occurs with Dr. Reddy's use of medical science. Over time, the English educated in India adopted Western medical models, but also the values that came with it.

Despite being nonreligious in appearance, these values still support a conjugal norm in Indian society. Janaki Nair eloquently states the following regarding the abolition of the *devadasi* system: "Maintenance of the family order through delineating the boundaries between licit and illicit sexuality was legally sanctioned [...] in a parodic echo of earlier military discourse, though framed as a concern for the sexual health of the Indian population."⁶³ Nair insists the events surrounding the *devadasi* system's abolition had less to do with public health concerns. Instead, it had more to do with enforcing a binary that values a patriarchal, monogamous and heterosexual conjugal sexuality while devaluing other modes of sexuality, placing these modes in the category of prostitution.⁶⁴ Mytheli Sreenivas states a similar argument in her article, *Creating Conjugal Subjects*. Sreenivas postulates that the discourse and

⁶¹ Judy Whitehead, "Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries: A Discursive Analysis of Devadasi Criminalization in Madras, India, 1920–1947," *Prostitution: On Whores, Hustlers, and Johns* (1998): 92-3.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Janaki Nair, "'Imperial Reason', National Honour and New Patriarchal Compacts in early twentieth-century India." In *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 208-226, (Oxford University Press, 2008), 208-9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

debate surrounding the *devadasi* was a product of an overarching, “wider discourse about the centrality of heterosexual, monogamous marriage to household organization, feminist politics, and national citizenship.”⁶⁵ The bill abolishing the *devadasi* system does not address the issue of prostitution whatsoever, but classifies *devadasis* as prostitutes and bans their practices regardless of the conjugal practices it entailed.⁶⁶ Agreeing with Nair and Sreenivas, I will argue that the abolition of the *devadasi* system had little to do with the *devadasis*’ lack of agency or her status, but the construction – and reconstruction – of conjugal norms.

Operational Definitions, Methodology, and Chapter Summaries

I have already defined how I will use the word *devadasi* in this research when I discussed the history and etymology of the term. However, there is an important term I wish to address in this section before I talk about methodology and the chapter summaries. This term is *purity*.⁶⁷

In Hinduism and Indian society, there are several forms of purity. These forms include caste and sexual purity. This thesis will be focused on sexual purity unless it states otherwise. I operationally define sexual purity as the freedom from sexual practices that are seen as polluting, contaminating, or debasing. Because of the focus of this thesis, I will look at purity in its relation to conjugal norms. For Brahmanical Hinduism, a woman who is sexually pure is mainly defined by the sexual norms from Manu’s Dhārmashāstras.⁶⁸ As such, she will not have sex with anyone but her husband if she wishes to retain her sexual purity. Even though Victorian women are not part of Brahmanical Hinduism, their ideas regarding sexual purity are on par with the

⁶⁵ Mytheli Sreenivas, “Creating Conjugal Subjects: Devadasis and the Politics of Marriage in Colonial Madras Presidency,” *Feminist Studies* (2011), 65.

⁶⁶ Please see Tamil Nadu Act XXXI, 1947.

⁶⁷ From here on, I will not italicize this term.

⁶⁸ G. Buhler, “Manusmriti. Canada” (1969).

conceptualization of Indian women's sexuality.⁶⁹ Indian courtesans, however, do not subscribe to these purity rules. Within this thesis, I will use sexual purity and the word purity interchangeably.

Now I wish to briefly discuss the methodology of this work. This work by its nature is interdisciplinary, so the methodology used in it will reflect as much. It is without question a postcolonial project, a critique of colonial narratives while also scrutinizing counter-narratives. I will use mainly historical, political science, and anthropological information to support my argument, but I will also supplement the information with journal articles from a variety of disciplines. Theoretical orientations will come from various fields, including and especially history, gender studies, and postcolonial studies.

Chapter two will use primarily historical information to support its argument. I will look at the legal definition of prostitution in the 19th century and the penal codes addressing it. In addition, I will address how courtesans were not legally defined as prostitutes until the enactment of the penal codes. Then after doing this, I will look at some of the legal cases involving *devadasis* during the 19th century, leading to the 20th century. My main goal in this chapter is to use Kunal Parker's argument as support for the over all argument of my thesis. He argues that "judicial intervention" played a crucial role in legal actions pertaining to the *devadasis*.⁷⁰ Within this chapter, we will see the relationship between the redefining of prostitution, judicial intervention, and the construction of conjugal norms in the colonial era that later appear in the reform movements in the later part of the 19th century.

⁶⁹ Levine, "Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities"; Whitehead, "Measuring Women's Value."

⁷⁰ Kunal Parker, "A Corporation of 'Superior Prostitutes': Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800-1914," *Modern Asian Studies*, 32, no. 3, (1998): 559-633.

In chapter three, I will simultaneously address two important discourses surrounding the abolition of the *devadasi* system: the question of her agency and the enforcement of conjugal norms. Then upon addressing how problematic the former discourse is, I will show how the abolition of the *devadasi* system had more to do with the enforcement of reconstructed conjugal norms. I will look at statements by 18th and 19th century Europeans, Indian reformists, *devadasis*, and Indian revivalists. I will analyze these quotes and show the significance of sexual purity in them, which will inexorably tie into the argument of the thesis.

I will close this thesis in chapter four by reiterating the over all argument. Then I will provide a brief reflection on it and its relationship to modern day events regarding the *devadasis*. These reflections are meant to offer other considerations to the topic of the thesis, the argument itself, and theoretical implications.

CHAPTER II

DEFINING PROSTITUTION, AND LEGAL ACTIONS PERTAINING TO THE DEVADASIS

Before the abolition of the *devadasi* system, there were myriad of legal actions and a process of cultural colonization that affected their legal status and in kind, their social respectability. These actions focused on the redefining of prostitution after the Indian Revolution of 1857, actions that placed various classes of women under the definition of prostitution.⁷¹ Worthy of noting, not all of these women were legally or socially classified as prostitutes prior to these movements – the *devadasis* included.⁷²

Once more, as Philipa Levine suggested in her article on *Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities*, the British were selective in the definitions they defined and applied when studying Indian society.⁷³ When defining prostitution in India, the British acted on what Michel Foucault described as an ‘archaeology of knowledge.’⁷⁴ Ever since the beginning of the 19th century, the British focused on collecting data and detailing all of their accounts as their way of studying India.⁷⁵ As David Ludden postulated, they disseminated this information as “empirical data and factualized statements” in Parliamentary debates.⁷⁶ They presented this information through the Parliamentary debates, but also selectively distributed the information in

⁷¹ Erica Wald, “Defining Prostitution and Redefining Women’s Roles: The Colonial State and Society in Early 19th Century India,” *History Compass*, 7, no. 6 (2009): 1470-1483.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Levine, "Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities," 10-11.

⁷⁴ Foucault, Michel, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

⁷⁵ Levine, “Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities,” 5-6.

⁷⁶ David Ludden, “Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge,” *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: perspectives on South Asia* (1993): 264-5.

the guise of “objective knowledge.”⁷⁷ Despite the allegations of the knowledge being “objective,” the British used this knowledge to confirm – and construct – their own ideas of Indian society. After 1850, this knowledge became well established in both European ideas of India as well as in the ideas of English educated Indians.⁷⁸

An important component of these ideas created through this knowledge base is differentiation between various binaries. When it came to how the British defined prostitution, they defined classes of women based on what they perceived as respectable and unrespectable women. Prostitutes in British India became a category to describe any woman not considered respectable by British administration, even when the group of women may not have been legally defined as prostitutes.⁷⁹

Relevant to this discussion, defining prostitution became a problem in the British administration of India. Kunal Parker problematizes this issue in his article, *A Corporation of ‘Superior Prostitutes.’*⁸⁰ In this article, Kunal Parker examines the cases pertaining to the *devadasis* after the Revolution of 1857 and how sections in the Penal Code of 1861 were used against the *devadasis*. These penal codes were not originally designed with the *devadasis* in mind, but then became applied to them under what Parker insisted was primarily “judicial intervention.”⁸¹ I agree with his argument because this judicial intervention exhibits the nuances of how British administration both legally and socially defined prostitution. Importantly, it is also an ostensible example of how the English educated elite eventually adopted the attitude of

⁷⁷ Ibid., 265-7.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 265-276.

⁷⁹ Please see Levine, “Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities,” and Wald, “Defining Prostitution and Redefining Women’s Roles.”

⁸⁰ Parker, “A Corporation of ‘Superior Prostitutes.’”

⁸¹ Ibid.

the colonizers. This becomes an important component in showing how conjugal norms were constructed – and reconstructed when the Madras Presidency abolishes the *devadasi* system.

After evaluating some important court cases that involve judicial intervention, I will examine the social reform movements that follow. These movements will show traces of the same attitudes the reformists and justices in the courts express when handling legal cases involving the *devadasis*. Upon doing this, I will show a case where an apologist voice participates in the discourse regarding the *devadasi* system. Then I will show where the reformist and apologist assume the same normatives pertaining to the value of sexual purity, as well as the assumption that *devadasi* system “became corrupt” in the colonial period.

Before I look at some of the important court cases and social movements pertaining to the *devadasis*, though, I will contextualize the interactions between the British officials and the reformists. I will do this by explaining the attitudes the British held before the Indian Revolution of 1857, and then how these attitudes shift after the revolt. Then we will see how this dynamic affects the application of sections in the 1861 Penal Code.

Setting the Scene: British Administration Before and After the Revolution of 1857

Prior to the Indian Revolution of 1857, the British administration acted more directly when passing legislation in India. The movement to abolish *sati* is an example of this direct intervention.⁸² Here, we have a case of the British outlawing a custom, suggesting it would improve the status of Indian women.⁸³ Backed by missionaries and Hindu reformists alike, the

⁸² Lata Mani, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), “Contentious Traditions,” 88-9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 88-90.

British successfully outlawed the practice in 1829.⁸⁴ However, just as Mani shows, not all Indians supported this measure. Furthermore, the debates surrounding *sati* exemplified how “women become emblematic of tradition, and the reworking of tradition is largely conducted through debating the rights and status of women in society.”⁸⁵ I believe this theory applies equally to the debates surrounding the abolition of the *devadasi* system. In the second chapter, I will discuss this in length when addressing the question of agency in the discourse surrounding the *devadasis*. For now, I wish to contextualize the scene leading up to the series of judicial interventions of the courts.

When the British introduced new cartridges, these cartridges were rumored to have been greased with animal fat. In these claims, it was said the animal fat included pig and cow fat, both of which were considered impure substances to Muslims and Hindus, respectively. This sparked a fear of British rule in India as well as fear that the British were trying to force Hindus and Muslims to convert to Christianity. Regardless of whether these rumors were factual, it was enough to make Indians believe that the British attempted to blatantly disrespect their customs and defile them by forcing sepoys to take in these impure substances. As a result, Indians all over the subcontinent began to revolt against British rule, leading to the Indian Revolution of 1857 – sometimes called the ‘1857 Mutiny.’⁸⁶

The sepoys lost the revolution.⁸⁷ However, despite this, the British learned about the stakes that came with their former attitudes on Indian customs. They saw how these attitudes

⁸⁴ Ibid., “Contentious Traditions.” Also see Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1997), 7-14.

⁸⁵ Mani, *Recasting Women*, “Contentious Traditions,” 90.

⁸⁶ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 233.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

perpetuated the situation leading to the Mutiny. We can see this in the speech made by prominent leaders in the Empire. On November 1, 1858, Queen Victoria stated the following:

...We disclaim alike the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects. We declare it to be our royal will and pleasure that none be in anywise favoured, none molested or disquieted, by reason of their religious faith or observances, but that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law; and we do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure.⁸⁸

The aforementioned statement by the Crown assures the Indian people that the British administration would protect the people's rights to practice their religion. They would not interfere with the local customs of the people when it came to their religion like they did during the abolition of *sati*, or the events prior to the Revolution. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, this lack of direct interference on part of the British themselves initially served in favor of the *devadasis*. Over time, though, we will see how this changed as a result of a negotiation between laws passed in India and the interpretation of these laws by the courts.

During the time of the East Indian Trading Company, any territory the British ruled recognized the traditional Hindu and Muslim customs in their laws. Governor-General Warren Hastings in 1772 stated the religious laws of Indians determined marriage, inheritance, and adoption. However, while the religious laws of Hindus and Muslims applied to these realms, their application did not extend to criminal law.⁸⁹ After 1860, women who engaged in sexual intercourse outside of marriage were defined as prostitutes by British standards and the standards of the newly constructed English educated elite. This happened regardless of whether or not

⁸⁸ Cyril Henry Philips, and Harischandra Lal Singh, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan, 1858 to 1947: select documents*, Vol. 4., (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 11.

⁸⁹ Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 37.

devadasis were considered prostitutes in the laws prior to 1860.⁹⁰ In the court cases introduced in the following passages, we will see how the *devadasis*' profession was considered prostitution by the reformists in the courts and British justices overseeing the cases. Again, the laws that were meant for prostitutes, such as the 1861 Penal Code addressing the adoption of minors, did not have the *devadasis* in mind when they were made. With this said, it did not stop the reformists involved in these courts from using these laws on them over time.

The Transition from Kunal Parker's Judicial Intervention to Social Reformist Movements: 1857-1914

Initially, the drafts for the 1861 Penal Code did not address the adoption of minors for prostitution. Pressure on lawmakers to rectify this increased before the final draft of this code. Before 1860, there was a case that gained attention in both India and England called the "Monghyr Case." In this case, the Officiating Magistrate of Monghyr attempted to punish a brothel keeper for keeping two infant girls with intention to lease them for almost an entire lifetime. Because there were no set laws against this practice, it was considered out of the Magistrate's power to convict the brothel keeper.⁹¹ The British press reported this and public pressure for legislative changes increased. Lord Stanley, the Secretary of State for India, and Charles Wood, his successor, told the public that the new penal code would give magistrates the power to prosecute people who adopt minors with the intention to use them as prostitutes.⁹² Based on this context, one can find that the sections of the Penal Code prohibiting the adoption

⁹⁰ Wald, "Defining Prostitution and Redefining Women's Roles," 1473-4.

⁹¹ Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 49.

⁹² Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 586-588.

of minors for the use of prostitution did not have the *devadasis* in mind at the time. This code stated the following:

“372. Whoever sells, lets to hire or otherwise disposes of any minor under the age of sixteen years with intent that such minor shall be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or for any unlawful and immoral purpose, or knowing it is likely that such a minor will be employed or used for any such purpose, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall be liable to fine.

373. Whoever buys, hires, or otherwise obtains possession of any minor under the age of sixteen years, with intent that such minor shall be employed or used for any such purpose, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.”⁹³

In 1861, this code, considerably shaped by a combination of French and English legal systems, passed in British India.⁹⁴ The following paragraphs will show Parker’s argument about the application of these laws on the *devadasis* being a matter of ‘judicial intervention.’⁹⁵ This meant the application of this code to the *devadasis* had little to do with whether the 1861 Penal Code was created for them and more to do with whether the courts interpreted their adoption of minor girls as adoption with the purpose of making the girls prostitutes. This can be seen in some of the court cases following the establishment of the 1861 Penal Code, such as the cases from the Madras High Courts and the Bombay High Court in two 1864 cases. These cases recognized the customary laws of the *devadasis* that allowed for them to continue adopting girls.⁹⁶ Sections 372 and 373, the sections in which explicitly outlaw the adoption or use of minors for prostitution,⁹⁷

⁹³ Sections 372 and 373, found in R.W. Hamilton (commentator), *Indian Penal Code* (Cambridge: Harvard Law Library, 1895), 390-391.

⁹⁴ Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 37.

⁹⁵ Parker, “A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes” 562, 580-88, 613-36.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-4.

⁹⁷ Section 372 and Section 373, found in Hamilton (commentator), *Indian Penal Code*, 390-391.

were not yet applied to the *devadasis*. The British justice overseeing the court case in the Bombay High Court case of 1864 stated plainly:

Although I fully concur with the Court in its opinion against any extension of the principle and its regret that the Court should ever have given a legal status to the immoral profession of prostitution by having recognized a separate code of law for dancing girls and courtesans, I cannot but think that the adoption is recognized by the law and the right of the adopted daughter to inherit must follow from it as in other cases.⁹⁸

Here, we see the court attempt to apply sections 372 and 373 of the 1861 Penal Code to the *devadasis*. This penal code prohibits prostitutes from adopting minors. In the opinion of the justice, of course, the *devadasi* profession was a form of prostitution. However, at this point, the courts recognized the customary laws of the *devadasis* in the same way they recognized the customary laws of Indian castes.

We also see a clash between the newly constructed, sociological idea of prostitution in British India and the legal definition of prostitution. Reformists and the justice overseeing the case may have believed the *devadasis* were prostitutes because of the influences of British sociological ideas pertaining to what made a prostitute. Victorian ideas of conjugal normalcy for women, working within the norms for women from a dominantly Brahmanical elite,⁹⁹ prized sexual purity. They used this as an indicator to what constituted a respectable woman. Consequently, neither the British nor the reformists amongst the English educated elite held the *devadasis* to the respectable status they occupied in the courts of local rulers. With this said,

⁹⁸ Nanee Tara Naikin v. Allarkhia Soomar (1864) quoted in Mathura Naikin v. Esu Naikin, *Indian Law Reports*, 4 Bom., 1880, 575.

⁹⁹ I use the term Brahmanical elite interchangeably with English educated elite because many members of the English educated adhered to norms subscribed in Brahmanical Hinduism. Please see Whitehead, "Measuring Women's Value."

devadasis were not legally defined as prostitutes at this stage. Therefore, the case defaulted to their customary laws.

This quote from the court case remains important for another reason, however, and not just to exhibit an example of the court rulings regarding the *devadasis*' adoption of underaged girls. The quote exemplifies one of the important strategies the British colonial government exercised in their cultural colonialism of India. Kunal Parker illuminated in his work how British administration brought about change "through 'silent' judicial reformist activity what it was unwilling to undertake openly."¹⁰⁰ I believe this case shows the beginning of this process. As already noted in the previous case, the British officials themselves believed the practice of the *devadasis* fell under their ideas of prostitution, but were not quite willing to enforce such views. So, the British brought attention to cases involving the *devadasis*' customary laws. Instead of interfering directly, though, they operated through reformists in the courts. This will become more evident in the following cases.

At times, the courts decided to overlook cases when siding with the *devadasis* in the case might make them appear as condoning an "immoral custom." Take the case in *Chinna Ummayi v. Tegarai Chetti (1876)*. This case involved a chief priest who dedicated dancing girls without the advisory of the affiliated *devadasi* guild.¹⁰¹ The guild of dancers suggested that by their customs, they selected the new dancing girls. Because the case did not specifically deal with the

¹⁰⁰ Parker, "Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 562, 580-88, 613-36.

¹⁰¹ *Chinna Ummayi v. Tegarai Chetti. Indian Law Reports. 1 Mad., 1876.*

devadasi custom of inheritance and adoption, the courts chose to decline hearing this case.¹⁰²

They stated their rationale as the following:

The court in making the declaration prayed for would be recognizing an immoral custom...The court would also be indirectly lending its countenance to the traffic in minors for the purposes of prostitution, which the Penal Law regards as a serious offense.¹⁰³

Once more, sees what Parker considers a case of ‘judicial intervention.’ Because this case, again, did not directly address the *devadasis*’ right to inheritance and adoption, judicial intervention permitted the court to overlook the case on the grounds of not condoning prostitution. Over time, more and more cases began to apply the Sections 372 and 373 of the 1861 Indian Penal Code to the *devadasis*. The case of *Queen-Empress vs. Basava* exemplifies this shift. R.W. Hamilton makes the following commentary on his compilation of the 1861 Indian Penal Code:

The accused dedicated his minor daughter as a Basivi [devadasi] by a form of marriage with an idol. A Basivi is incapable of contracting a lawful marriage and ordinarily practises promiscuous intercourse with men. – *Held* that the accused had committed an offence under this action. – *Emp. V. Basava* (I.L.R., 15 Mad.).¹⁰⁴

As we can see from this case, the courts began to regularly apply the 372 and 373 sections of the 1861 Indian Penal Code on *devadasis*. Not only do we see the judicial intervention postulated by Parker, but we also see further betrayal of an accepted, conjugal norm for Indian women. Nonetheless, even after this gradual shift in the courts’ treatment of the *devadasis*, the system itself remained legal until 1947. After cases such as *Queen-Empress vs.*

¹⁰² R. Nandivada, Narasimha Aiyar, and P. Sama Rao, *The Principles of Hindu Law* (Cambridge: Harvard Law Library, 1910), 160-161.

¹⁰³ *Chinna Ummayi v. Tegarai Chetti*, *Indian Law Reports*, 1 Mad., 1876, 170-71.

¹⁰⁴ *Queen-Empress v. Basava*, I.L.R., 15 Mad., 1891, as referenced by Hamilton, *Indian Penal Code*, 390.

Basava, we will see how Indian reformists increasingly push for the abolition of the *devadasi* system. Reformists in the courts had implicated their own judicial interventions, but reformists had yet to significantly transform how the public sphere handles the *devadasis*.

First, we need to understand the social and political context leading to the push for reform in the public sphere. We can already see that the larger concerns for the British Raj were the social pressures between their British and Indian subjects. One side as a whole strongly desired reform, something already implied by the justices overseeing the cases, as well as the new Secretary of State's assurance after the Monghyr case of 1859. The other side includes Indian conservatives who felt social changes that abolished the *devadasi* system was an attack on Hindu customs. As Davesh Soneji observes in his own historical work on the *devadasis*, some of the anti-abolitionists were Brahman men who did not like governmental interference in local practices.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, cases involving the treatment of women had been brought to public attention. One case included the 1890 case of Phulmoni Das, a ten year old girl who died from forced intercourse with her husband Hari Mohan Maity. Because of the legal definition of rape during the time period, Maity could not face rape charges because Phulmoni was at the existing age of consent.¹⁰⁶

After this case, Parsi Social reformer Behramji Malabari brought public attention to the 'mistreatment' of Indian women, namely on the topics of child marriage and enforced

¹⁰⁵ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 129-132.

¹⁰⁶ Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), 73. Also see Charles Herman Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 170-1. *Devadasi* customs and child marriage was related insofar that one of the important customs they held was the tying of the pottu, which symbolizes marriage to the deity. Because *devadasis* acted as courtesans, they were also indirectly targeted by this reform movement. Please see Muthulakshmi Reddy Papers, subject file II (part II), 72, which has been translated by Davesh Soneji in Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 230-1.

widowhood. He advocated for the increase of the age of consent from ten to twelve, which was the consenting age in England. Even though the British administration remained cautious about imposing reform legislation, they encouraged the Indian English educated elite to actively pursue reform movements.¹⁰⁷ However, due to the continued policy of noninterference on part of the British administration, the age of consent remained the same until 1929.¹⁰⁸

Again, as seen in the previously presented court cases, the British administration did not directly interfere with the reform movements or the court cases. However, they encouraged the Indian reformists' attempts at social reform by bringing attention to events that spurred concern for the treatment of women. This was done on the issue of *sati* before its abolition in 1829 by British officials. Ram Mohan Roy, a known Hindu reformist who supported the abolition of *sati*, suggested that *sati* was not required by Hindu texts. He capitalized on the treatment of women in the movement, believing the abolition of *sati* improved the status of women in India.¹⁰⁹ Just as Mani suggests in her writings, we see how the treatment of women becomes the center of discourse when making changes to local traditions.¹¹⁰

Happening simultaneously with the movement to change the age of consent for women was the 1892 Anti-Nautch Movement in Tamil Nadu.¹¹¹ "Nautch" is a colloquialism adopted by

¹⁰⁷ Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, 155.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 155-171.

¹⁰⁹ Kumar, *History of Doing*, 7-14. The debate regarding the abolition of *sati* is interesting for several reasons. First, it is one of the first cases we see discourse surrounding Indian women's agency during British rule. Paradoxically, though, Indian women themselves are not involved in the debate. In addition, Bengali widows used to be able to inherit their deceased husband's property. After the establishment of British rule in Bengal, these widows lost this privilege.

¹¹⁰ Mani, *Recasting Women*, "Contentious Traditions," 90.

¹¹¹ Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival," 1873. Because educated professionals in this time generally had an English education and, as Srinivasan points out, were heavily influenced by these influences, I believe it safe to

the English to refer to the act of dance, or dancing. It comes from the Hindi word, “naachna,” or “to dance.” Therefore, the Anti-Nautch Movement refers to a movement to abolish dances. Amrit Srinivasan said that this movement was made of “largely educated professionals and Hindus.”¹¹² This movement specifically targeted the *devadasis*. These English educated elite attempted character assassination on the *devadasis* by defaming them and discouraging people from employing them.

Traditionally, *devadasis* have been employed for the purpose of dancing at social functions. These social functions included weddings. As already noted in the introduction pages of this thesis, *devadasis* have been associated with auspiciousness – with good luck and prosperity – in Tamil Nadu. Because of this, they traditionally conducted a variety of dances and rituals that brought these traits to local establishments. However, because of the increased reformist involvement in ostracizing their dances in public, less *devadasis* became involved in public events.¹¹³ By 1897, almost all social reformist organizations were said to begin boycotting nautches from social functions where they traditionally performed.¹¹⁴

This movement betrays the internalization of Victorian ideas of morality combined with the privileging of Brahmanical Hindu societal norms. Victorian ideas discouraged the public

assume Srinivasan implied that these people were the same English educated elite that pushed for the Age of Consent Bill. Kay K. Jordan refers these elite as “Westernized” elite, but for the sake of specificity, I use the term “English educated elite.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Kumar, *History of Doing*, 56.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

display of emotion, something that was crucial to dances.¹¹⁵ Indian reformers even adopted the Victorian distaste of public expressiveness as a whole, something that made them even campaign against the practice of *siapa*: a Punjabi practice where women mourn at funerals by crying outloud and beating on their own breasts.¹¹⁶

Nonetheless, reformists opposed nautches in public spaces through the usage of public mediums and collectively protesting at the homes of the elite who did not boycott their dances. Reformists believed the *devadasis*' songs, dances, and customs to be lewd.¹¹⁷ For instance, some dances tell stories of characters expressing lust for each other, even when sexual intercourse does not explicitly take place in the story.¹¹⁸ Reformists pushed for legislation abolishing performances like these at social functions. When proposing legislation to ban the *devadasis*' dance, the reformers said to the Government of Madras and the Viceroy that the performances by *devadasis* were: "...of women who as everybody knows are prostitutes and their Excellencies hereafter at least must know to be such..."¹¹⁹ Eventually, the government vocally took a stance in 1911, urging the Indian public to take a stance against these performances.¹²⁰

The aforementioned cases exemplify the transition of the way Indian reformists addressed the *devadasi* system. Initially, it was through judicial intervention on a number of

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 70; Kumar, *History of Doing*, 56; Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival," 1873.

¹¹⁸ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 65-66. Davesh Soneji cites lyrics from Tanjore preserved by a woman named Kola Subrahmanyam. According to Soneji, these songs thrived in salon performances during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

¹¹⁹ Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival," 1873.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

court cases by reformists in the courts, as postulated by Parker. Over time, the general public began taking interest in reform. The Anti-Nautch Movement was a direct attack on the *devadasis'* customs, something that the British administration initially allowed to continue. However, as with the push by Malabari to increase the age of consent, the British administration, while not directly interfering with the local customs, encouraged the English educated elite to pursue reform movements against the *devadasis*. Both of these movements call into question the accepted norms surrounding an Indian woman's sexuality. They represent a complex discourse surrounding what constituted the respectable Indian woman and what was considered unrespectable – what was considered prostitution.

In 1912, Indian legislator Maneckji Dadabhoy, a Parsi banker from the Central Provinces, asked to introduce a bill that would “make further provision for the protection of women and girls.”¹²¹ This bill included punishment for the following: dedication of a girl who is under sixteen years of age to a deity; obtaining a girl with intention for making her into a prostitute; inducting a girl into concubinage or giving a girl to the custody of a brothel keeper or prostitute (or dancing girl); giving away one's wife to another individual; permitting or assisting in any of the aforementioned crimes.¹²²

Much debate followed this proposal from the local governments, the central governments, and the reformists. Central government leaned toward its policy of noninterference, but there became an increasing amount of demand for these laws to pass. The

¹²¹ Government of India, Home Department (Judicial), *Proceedings*, April 1912, No. 27, as quoted by Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 75.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Government eventually agreed on this bill, but did not directly ban *devadasi* dedication.¹²³ By May, 1914, Sir Reinald Craddock of the Home Department stated the Government's premises as the following:

...[We] did not desire to put in the law that any religious practice was in itself immoral. If it was immoral, it would come under the law, but we did not want to define it as immoral itself, because we were warned that, although as a rule, such dedication did involve a life of immorality, it had not done so originally, and there might be exceptions.¹²⁴

Thus, even though there was an increase in the pressure by the reformers and eventually, officials of the local governments, the central government remained ever cautious about instating any laws that infringed on what were perceived as religious customs. For this reason, once more, there was no direct law addressing the *devadasis* and the application of the established laws remained solely up to judicial intervention. With this said, the central government did endorse a bill that makes it easier for these judicial interventions to prosecute *devadasis* in cases where they feel their practices are 'immoral' and will lead adopted girls to become 'immoral.'

Perhaps an even more interesting observation is that Sir Craddock insisted the practice of the *devadasis* became immoral over time, but that it was not always so. We see the influence of previous court cases on Sir Craddock's decision. However, there also appears an echo of apologist accounts of the *devadasi* in the court case. When making his decision, Sir Craddock took into consideration a perspective endorsed by Hindu defenders of the *devadasi* system. These defenders suggested the system became "corrupt" over time, but was traditionally a

¹²³ Ibid., 75-86.

¹²⁴ Government of India, Legislative Department, *Proceedings*, May 1914, Nos. 100-07, No, 100, as quoted by Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 87.

respectable tradition from an idealized Golden age for Hinduism.¹²⁵ Here, we see a glimpse of another narrative that was a product of the entwining of ideas regarding Victorian morality and Brahmanical Hindu notions of sexual purity. Both of these ideas are part of the values that, incidentally, motivate Indian reformists to abolish the *devadasi* system. Before, we had only the reformists playing an active role in the discourse pertaining to the *devadasi* system. Now we see the involvement of apologists who defend the *devadasi* system, but still inevitably support the same normatives as the reformists.

Both groups are concerned with the enforcement of common conjugal norms regarding the woman's sexuality. They are both products of the historical construction – and reconstruction – of conjugal norms. Through the discourse, regardless of whether they defend or oppose the *devadasi* system, they adopt the attitude and education of the colonizers.

After 1914, we can see a shift in the power given to the local governments. It is in this context where we see more reforms directly targeting *devadasis*, leaving less to judicial intervention and more to legislation and the growing reform movements. This change in the political situation, plus the debates and the events leading to the Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) act of 1947, will be discussed in the following chapter. Importantly, I will address the question of agency that had commonly risen in the debates as well as the scholarship done on the topic. Afterward, I will address the issues with this aspect of the discourse as a way to supplement the main argument of my thesis.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 84-7.

CHAPTER III

THE QUESTION OF AGENCY AND CONJUGAL NORMS IN THE DISCOURSE REGARDING THE DEVADASIS

This chapter has several purposes. First, it will address the remaining legislation that eventually leads up to the Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) act of 1947, which in its entirety ends the *devadasi* system in Tamil Nadu. In the process, I will address and analyze perspectives of Indian reformists and *devadasis* who opposed reform legislation. I will also simultaneously address the question of agency (or lack thereof) pertaining to the *devadasi* as well as the conjugal norms that are asserted in the debates. Through doing this, I will problematize the discourse regarding the *devadasis*' agency and further show how the debate surrounding the abolition of the *devadasi* system had more to do with the enforcement of reconstructed conjugal norms.

Throughout this chapter, we will also see what Lata Mani asserts as the reconstitution of tradition under colonial rule.¹²⁶ Consequently, this reconstruction happens on par with the privileging of Brahmanical Hindu norms regarding the woman's sexuality. We will see how the reconstruction of conjugal norms surrounding women are often coinciding with debates surrounding "the rights and status of women in society."¹²⁷ I believe Mani's argument reinforces the idea that despite the numerous suggestions by reformists that the *devadasis*' status would change as a result of reform, the *devadasis*' legal status had nothing to do with their lack of agency.

¹²⁶ Mani, *Recasting Women*, "Contentious Traditions," 90.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

Contextualizing Legislative Actions Surrounding the Devadasis: World War I and the Aftermath, 1914-1927

In order for us to understand the events and debates leading to the abolition of the *devadasi* system, we must understand the political scene in India after World War I. In this particular scene in Indian history, we will see the events that lead to increased agency amongst the Indians. During this time, Indians gained more political power and representation in the government. As a result of this, reformers amongst the English educated elite obtained more influence. This chain of events led to the debates occurring between 1927 and 1947, the very debates that preceded the Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947.

By default, India entered war in August 4, 1914 because the state was a member of the British Empire. India contributed to the war efforts.¹²⁸ Mohandas K. Gandhi even supported the British war efforts.¹²⁹ Consequently, India's support of World War I not only led to the exhaustion of resources, but its active involvement in the war efforts exposed them to new ideas that would impact their sense of identity. One of the important ideas entering Indian people's mind was the notion that the West no longer held any moral or technical superiority over them. As a result of the cultural colonization of India on the part of the British and the reconstructed elite, Indians once viewed themselves morally and technologically inferior compared to the British.¹³⁰ Because of their exposure to World War I, Indians began to question these ideas.

Spear further elaborates how additional factors contributed to this transition in Indian consciousness. One of the significant factors includes the impact of American patriotism on

¹²⁸ Thomas George Percival Spear, *India: A Modern History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 338.

¹²⁹ Stanley Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 82.

¹³⁰ Spear, *India: A Modern History*, 338.

Indians. The Fourteen Points presented by Woodrow Wilson, a concept that emphasized self-determination and freedom for all, inspired a sense of nationalism amongst Indians.¹³¹ Another major contributor to this development was Indians being privy to the events of the Russian Revolution in 1917, something that convinced Indians that despotism could be overcome.¹³² Then the forced surrender of Sultan Mehmed VI, someone regarded as an influential religious leader and a figure worthy of respect to Indian Muslims, led to increased resentment of British Rule on the part of Muslims.¹³³ In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how this relates to the *devadasis* and the process by which their system became abolished.

Indians increasingly saw themselves entitled to the same status as their colonizers. Because of this, social reformers gained more political influence in India. It was believed by Indians amongst the English educated elite that social reform movements showed the British as well as the world itself that India was a modern, civilized nation worthy of rights to self-govern. Initially, the British initially did not plan for Indians to have more representation in their own government. World War I changed this. Edwin Samuel Montague, Secretary of State for India, declared the following on August 20, 1917:

“The policy of His Majesty’s Government, with which the Government of India are in complete accord, is that of the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administrations with a view in the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of ‘the British Empire.’”¹³⁴

This set the precedent for reformists amongst the English educated elite to gain more political influence. Because of the changes that followed, reformists possessed more direct

¹³¹ Ibid., 342.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Quoted in Norman Dunbar Palmer, *The Indian Political System* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 48.

influence over the legislation process in the Indian government. As a result, this set the stage for more reform legislation targeting the *devadasis* to pass.

Two years later, policies were integrated into the Government of India Act of 1919 and Indian representation amongst legislation increased drastically.¹³⁵ This came as a result of pressure from mass movements all over India seeking home rule.¹³⁶ Again, this gave more power to reformists amongst the English educated elite. However, because the British still dominated the central government and foreign affairs, further demands to increase Indians' role in government came. Nonetheless, Indians began to have more government representation. Because of their increased representation in the Legislative Councils, this gave them more ground to work on social reform related legislation. An important advancement in the laws during this time was the increase of the majority age for women from sixteen to eighteen. Then the government amended the Indian Penal Code of 1861, making it punishable by law to adopt or employ a girl for the intention and purpose of prostitution, regardless of whether she begins the profession after reaching the majority age.¹³⁷

Despite this, there existed no laws that directly dealt with the *devadasis*. However, because of the changed in representation within the Indian government, all reform laws pertaining to prostitution, the adoption of minors, and the age of consent became more readily applicable to *devadasis* should there be any reason to believe them adopting or employing girls for prostitution. Therefore, even after World War I, much of the legislative decisions against *devadasis* remained up to judicial interpretation.¹³⁸ In 1927, this changes.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 44-50.

¹³⁶ Whitehead, "Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries," 92.

¹³⁷ Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 97-103.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Debates and Legislative Measures Toward the Devadasis: 1927-1947

Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a prestigious social worker, doctor, and Hindu activist was the first woman represented in Indian legislation.¹³⁹ Her time being educated in London convinced her that venereal diseases amongst women in India was one of the major social issues in the country, which only further drives her to support movements against any lifestyle that promotes sexual practices outside of marriage.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, she believed girls dedicated to Hindu temples were victims of exploitation.¹⁴¹ She also represented a significant voice amongst the English educated elite. When representing the Madras Legislative Council, she proposed the following on November 4, 1927:

This Council recommends to the Government to undertake legislation or if that is for any reason impracticable to recommend to the Government of India to undertake legislation at a very early date to put a stop to the practice of dedication of young girls and young women to Hindu temples for immoral purposes under the pretext of caste, custom, or religion.¹⁴²

The statement above is evidence of Reddy's ambitions as a Hindu reformer. She expresses clearly that she wants to put an end to the dedication of girls to Hindu temples. This is a reference to the *devadasi* system and it is in this statement where we see evidence of legislation beginning to directly address the *devadasis*. Reddy insisted that by outlawing the *devadasi* system, thousands of girls would be rescued from the effects of venereal disease as a result of

¹³⁹ Avabai B. Wadia, "Synopsis," in S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, *Autobiography of Dr. (Mrs.) S. Muthulakshmi Reddy*, ix-xii.

¹⁴⁰ Whitehead, "Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries," 93-99.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Government of Madras, *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council*, vol. XXXVIII, 415, as quoted by Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 120.

living “immoral” lives.¹⁴³ An interesting point to note is the fact Reddy readily uses Western medical science in her justification of outlawing the *devadasi* system. Venereal diseases were an alleged concern noted by the British when they passed the Contagious Diseases Act (1868-1888) and Cantonment Regulations.¹⁴⁴ British officials used these laws for regulating brothels, even moving courtesans into regimented brothels for use by British soldiers.¹⁴⁵ Veena Oldenburg in her article, *Lifestyle as Resistance*, postulated how the motivations of the British might have been less benign than they suggested. She showed in her research on the case of the courtesans in Lucknow that these women were some of the richest people in the city. *Kothas* – the equivalent of a saloon or brothel – were plundered, their riches taken as ‘spoils of war.’¹⁴⁶ Indian nationalists during this time were outraged at the potential exploitation of Indian women during this time, but in the 20th century, the constructed English educated elite had embraced Western medicine.¹⁴⁷ Dr. Reddy exemplifies this shift in nationalist discourse.

As a result, Reddy begins her career on the Legislative Council of Madras by proposing bills and solutions toward ending the *devadasi* system. In *Stri-Dharma*, India’s first magazine for women, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy states the following:

I would advise my country people to shut the stable before the horse is stolen. Who does not realise that “prevention is better than cure?” Why then this nervousness on the part of our people to put an end once and for all to a practice that disfigures and defiles our sacred temples, that contaminates the youth of the country, a practice that brings ill-health, disruption, discontent into happy families and is thus a menace to family life and finally poisons the future race through venereal diseases. If we want to come up as a

¹⁴³ Government of Madras, *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council*, vol. XXXVIII, 415-17, as quoted by Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 120. Also see Whitehead, “Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries,” 96-100.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 93-99.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance.”

¹⁴⁷ Whitehead, “Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries,” 92-93.

nation to command the self-respect of the world, I feel very strongly that all the social diseases must be cured, because to my knowledge India is the only country in the world that condemns a particular class of girls into prostitution.... What is still more deplorable is the prevalence of the popular belief that this iniquitous custom has the sanction of our holy religion – hence should not be interfered with...Hindu Society...is neglecting a most dangerous disease and so deserves the serious attention of all healthy-minded citizens, of all earnest reformers, patriots, and statesmen. Only...an amendment of the Hindu Religious Endowments Act¹⁴⁸ will save the future race from further mental, moral, and physical decay.¹⁴⁹

Once more, we see a passage that shows Reddy employing Western medicine in her premises in her argument for the abolition of the *devadasi* system. It also shows an attempt to equate progress to living a 'moral' life. As one can tell already from the comments by those such as Dr. Reddy and by evaluating the previous court cases concerning prostitution, a number of individuals saw the *devadasi* system as an affront to this progress.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, the system at this point had been considered immoral on numerous cases in previous court cases, a stance that reformers adopted over time.

There also is another point worthy of noting in regards to the discourse surrounding Indian women's sexuality, which has been addressed in the beginning pages of this thesis. As I have reiterated already, Indian nationalists protested the Contagious Diseases Act and Cantonment Regulations when these laws were initially instated. They did not approve of the potential exploitation of Indian women under these laws. However, over time, between 1880 and 1910, leaders of specific groups of elites, such as the Indian National Congress, constructed a model of the ideal Indian woman "whose role was primarily that of an educated mother and

¹⁴⁸ This act at this time allows for myriad of customary laws, one of which permits the *devadasis* to be given land grants called *inaams*. These grants permit them to own land because of their temple service. Please see Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 124-25; Sreenivas, "Creating Conjugal Subjects," 64-5; Whitehead, "Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries," 99-100.

¹⁴⁹ *Stri-Dharma* 1927, 103, as quoted by *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

wife.”¹⁵¹ This characterizes the important elements in the newly constructed conjugal norms marking a respectable woman in Indian society. In the passage from *Stri-Dharma*, people can see the connection between Muthulakshmi Reddy’s ideas and that of the Indian nationalists, especially those of the English educated elite represented in the INC and in previously mentioned reform movements.

During Dr. Reddy’s time of campaigning against the *devadasi* system, *devadasis* began organizing protests against what they perceived as an assault on their tradition. According to a newspaper report from Muthulakshmi Reddy’s files called *Cutēcamittiran*,¹⁵² *devadasis* who opposed the reform legislation met in the Chinglepet district of Cheyyur. They are mentioned in the report titled, “The Question of Devadasis: A Meeting of the Devadasis, Cheyyur.” These *devadasis* stated the following:¹⁵³

1. This meeting [of the devadasis] severely opposes the resolution brought by Smt. Muthulakshmi Ammal in Chennai Legislative Assembly./ [...] 3. This meeting vehemently condemns speaking and writing in a base manner about a respectable community, comparing them with dishonorable prostitutes, in the context of forging a bill to eradicate prostitution.

The obvious point of interest is how the *devadasis* themselves choose to become an active part of the debates surrounding the abolition of the *devadasi* system. Despite allegations of these women being prostitutes by reformists, the *devadasis* opposing the reform legislation is adamant about not being considered a class of prostitutes. In fact, they insist they belong to a respectable community and condemn claims suggesting otherwise. Thus, here we find the core strategy employed by the *devadasis* who protest the reform legislation: marking themselves

¹⁵¹ Whitehead, "Community Honor/Sexual Boundaries," 96.

¹⁵² *Cutēcamittiran*, n.d. Davesh Soneji provides a translation of this newspaper report in Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 229-30.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

different from prostitutes. *Devadasis* opposing reform legislation find themselves facing the challenge of maintaining both legal and social status as respectable women. Reform movements prior to the earlier 20th century already pushed them out of the public sphere, stigmatizing their nautch performances in a number of cases. Any legislation that abolished their practices would inevitably push them to the margins of Indian society.

These women also suggested that their primary role were artists of religion. Furthermore, because the *devadasis* obtained income from their respective properties in the form of a matrilineal inheritance, they feared losing this privilege and their property if the government banned dedication.¹⁵⁴ They also postulated that passing any legislation abolishing the dedication of girls meant “in trying to remedy an evil existing in a caste, the caste itself is condemned to death and hence it is argued that the evil cannot therefore exist.”¹⁵⁵ *Devadasis* opposing legislation against the dedication of girls to temples suggested the very act might condemn *devadasis* to prostitution because of the loss in wealth and property, strongly urging for alternatives to handling “prostitution” amongst their ranks.¹⁵⁶

Here, we see a direction in the discourse similar to the one the Brahmans defending the *devadasi* system in the earlier part of the century took. In the previous chapter, Sir Reginald Craddock of the Home Department noted how despite the allegations suggesting the dedication of girls to the *devadasi* system often led “to a life of immorality,” he suggested it had not done so in the past, and “there might be exceptions.”¹⁵⁷ *Devadasis* protesting the reform legislation

¹⁵⁴ Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 129-32.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Government of India, Legislative Department, *Proceedings*, May 1914, Nos. 100-07, No, 100, as quoted by Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 87.

appealed to these sentiments. They did not refute the claim that their profession was originally “pure” and that they were expected to be chaste servants of the deities to whom they were dedicated. In fact, these women encouraged this idea regarding sexual purity.

Again, contemporary anthropologists have criticized this apologist claim regarding the *devadasis*. They stated how these women were not chaste and not expected to be chaste. Instead, these scholars have suggested how this appeal toward apologist sentiment involved the changing attitude of society toward these women who engaged in concubinage and sexual practice outside of marriage. Prior to the colonial period, the *devadasis*' sexual practices did not keep them from earning respect from the temple and society they served.¹⁵⁸ Because of the stakes entailed in the contemporary period, the *devadasis* opposing the reform legislation likely attempted to disassociate themselves from anything deviating from the valued, reconstructed conjugal norms. Even though the *devadasis* opposed the reform legislation, they inevitably supported the same assumptions made by reformist legislation regarding the contemporary practice of the *devadasi* system. This includes them assuming there existing prostitution in some temples as well as the same attitudes on sexual purity.

Perhaps another interesting component of the debate is not only the discourse surrounding it, but the other actors involved in it. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy stated how there were members of the community she represented. This particular statement entailed a specific population in the *devadasi* community: the men. A number of these men supported the reform

¹⁵⁸ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, 9; Srinivasan, “Reform and Revival,” 1869-1875.

legislation. We can see an example of this in a handbill made by the men members of the community:¹⁵⁹

...Unable to tolerate the atrocities committed by women of this community, the merciful Lord bade the goddess Mahālākshmi herself to incarnate herself as Dr. Muthulakshmi to redeem these women and ensure they live a respectable life [...] It is pathetic to know that their [devadasi protestors] intention is to wear the *pottu* under the pretext of serving the god only to satisfy the sexual lust of the so-called aristocratic devotees of the temple. This great “religious” secret is now exposed.¹⁶⁰

Just like the reformists outside of the *devadasi* community, the male members appeal to the sentiments of what constituted a respectable woman. They evoke language that portrays the *devadasis* as sexual deviants who satisfied the needs of inauthentic devotees. Some of the description, in fact, is similar to the descriptions of *devadasis* made by Abbe Dubois in his works on Hindu customs.¹⁶¹ It depicts an image of a Hindu temple where privileged Hindu men enjoy sexual relations with ‘dancing girls.’ Moreover, it appeals to the reconstructed conjugal norms in India where respectable women were defined by their sexual purity.

However, there exist several other considerations when analyzing the role of the men in the debate. A number of the men in the *devadasi* community wanted the abolition of the system. According to Amrit Srinivasan, only a few men in the community were able to acquire the same financial independence and household authority as the *devadasis* themselves did. When they did, it was often from outstanding dance instruction.¹⁶² Scholars have suggested these men resented the fact they lacked the same autonomy in households the women possessed and

¹⁵⁹ Muthulakshmi Reddy Papers, subject file II (part III), 442-3, translated by Davesh Soneji in Soneji, Davesh, *Unfinished Gestures*, 228.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Please see Dubois, *A description of the character, manners and customs of the people of India, and of their institutions, religious and civil*, and Dubois, *Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies*.

¹⁶² Srinivasan, “Reform and Revival,” 1869-1876.

coveted their land and property.¹⁶³ Other information worthy of note is that these men were forbidden to engage in sexual intercourse with the *devadasis* or marry a *devadasi*. The *devadasis* could only partake in intercourse with patrons determined by the temple authorities and their mothers and grandmothers (the latter to whom held vetoing rights).¹⁶⁴ This left men in the community lacking the companionship men otherwise enjoyed in other communities.

After ceaseless campaigning and despite the protests amongst the opposition existing in the *devadasi* community, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy proposed a bill for drafting meant for amending the existing laws regarding *devadasis* and the land grants bestowed to them as a consequent of temple service. This act, known as the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1926, an amendment to the previous Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act, demanded lands owned by the *devadasis* be deeded to them and no longer requiring the *devadasis* to perform temple services.¹⁶⁵ This bill was known as the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1926. They continued receiving income without being required to conduct temple duties.¹⁶⁶ The Legislative Council deliberated immensely on the specifics of this bill, debating on the standards for assessing the value of these lands, whether to purchase the lands and reimburse the *devadasis*, and so forth. Debates became heated as Dr. Reddy suggested the government should not permit the *devadasis* to continue their temple performances upon the time their land became disenfranchised. She without question desired to instantly abolish the dedication of girls to

¹⁶³ Sreenivas, "Creating Conjugal Subjects," 63-92, and Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival," 1869-1876.

¹⁶⁴ Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India, Vol. 2*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 182.

¹⁶⁵ Govt. of Madras, *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council*, 1928, vol. XLIII, 273, as quoted by Jordan, Kay K., *From Sacred Servant to Profane*, 132-3.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

temples. According to her, they were: "not the victims of their own inclinations as ordinary prostitutes are, but rather the victims of custom, which teaches them to practice vice as their caste dharma."¹⁶⁷ She insinuates the following about society's role in contributing to the *devadasi* system, but posits her statement as a rhetorical question:

Don't you think that society, while condemning [these] poor women and treating them as outcastes, but at the same time receiving those male culprits who resort to those women into their fold, as honourable members of the society, undermine the very fundamental principles of morality and justice?¹⁶⁸

What I find interesting is not merely the continuous mention of the *devadasis* living an 'immoral' life. This passage interests me because of the language Reddy uses in this quotation. It bears a striking resemblance to Christian missionaries of the earlier 20th century. Sherwood Eddy, when commenting on Amy Wilson Carmichael's work in South Asia, stated the following:

Our hearts go out to these poor defenceless girls in India. Miss Carmichael has begun rescuing little girls who are being sold to the temples for lives of shame. She has over a hundred beautiful, bright-faced children, who had been, or were about to be, sold to the temple and "married to the god" for a life of immorality. For some she paid ten cents, others had been promised to the temple for as high as thirty dollars, while some she got free.¹⁶⁹

In the words of Jo-Ann Wallace, she "deliberately evoked the language of commerce and property to shock [her] readers into an appreciation of what they understood to be the sexual and commercial exploitation of girls in a corrupt temple system."¹⁷⁰ Essentially, this passage capitalizes on the oppression and exploitation of women that missionaries perceived when

¹⁶⁷ Muthulakshmi Reddi to unknown recipient, 8 Oct. 1927, MRP subject file 11, as quoted by Mytheli Sreenivas in Sreenivas, "Creating Conjugal Subjects," 70.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. I made a few minor modifications to this quotation from the original presented in Mytheli's quotation. I replaced the original "those" with a bracketed "these" for the purpose of fluidity.

¹⁶⁹ Eddy, Sherwood, *India Awakening* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1911), 152.

¹⁷⁰ Jo-Ann Wallace, "Lotus-Buds: Amy Wilson Carmichael and the Nautch-Girls of South India," *Victorian Review*, 24, no. 2 (1998): 176.

observing Indian traditions. This justified not only colonial rule, but the continued work of the missionaries in the country. Just like Sherwood Eddy, Dr. Reddy appeals to the notion that the status of *devadasis* would improve once the system was abolished. She evokes a sense that these women were being misguided and exploited for prostitution and capitalizes on the idea that *devadasis* were raised under an ‘unhealthy notion’ of tradition. Dr. Reddy portrays the *devadasis* as victims of an oppressive system, an oppressive society. This is exactly what colonists have done with a number of cases regarding Indian women in Indian society (*sati*, child marriage, etc).¹⁷¹ Once more, the discourse surrounding the rights of women conceal a dynamic regarding the reconstruction of tradition, just as Lata Mani postulates in her article regarding *sati*.¹⁷² Through this passage, we can see how Muthulakshmi Reddy exemplifies the changes in the attitudes of the Indian English educated elite, who inevitably adopt the attitude and societal values of their British colonizers.

After considerable debate, including criticisms involving how the bill was being rushed and not sufficiently analyzed by a select committee, the President of the Council supported the bill. Amendments on the bill were discussed, such as temples being given “quit-rent” on *devadasi*-owned lands. When the *devadasi* obtained revenue from her land, the bill required her to continue receiving this revenue under the condition the revenue returned to the temple upon her death. Eventually, the Act V of 1929, otherwise known as the Religious Endowments Act of 1929, passed.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Kumar, *History of Doing*.

¹⁷² Mani, *Recasting Women*, "Contentious Traditions."

¹⁷³ Govt. of Madras, Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council, 1929, vol. XLVI, 620-3, as quoted by Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 134.

Over time, fewer *devadasis* remained to oppose reform legislation against their profession. The Religious Endowments Act of 1929 provided less incentive for *devadasis* to continue their profession, drawing them into the conjugal norms that became enforced through the reform legislation. With less adoption and dedication of girls occurring, less *devadasis* can continue the lineage. This means less opposition for any legislation that was to come and impact the *devadasi* system.¹⁷⁴

Immediately after the passing of the Religious Endowments Act of 1929, Reddy proposed the following bill in 1930: “A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to Hindu Temples.”¹⁷⁵ Changes in the structure of the government as proposed by the Government of India Act of 1935 aided in reviving interest in *devadasi* reform in Madras. The new government in Madras consisted of a Legislative Assembly and a Provincial Legislative Council, creating a bicameral legislature branch. More representatives were elected versus appointed in legislation.¹⁷⁶

Occurring around the same time as these changes and revived interest in reform legislation regarding the *devadasis*, a *devadasi* in support of reform, Muvalur A. Ramamirthammal published her book ‘Dasigal Mosavalai.’ This work had been translated as *Web of Deceit*. In this book, we find a historical fiction regarding the *devadasi* profession and the an unpleasant narrative of it involved. In the introductory section of Kalpana Kannabirān’s and Vasanth Kannabirān’s version of the book, they quote Ramamirthammal’s testimony:

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 134-5.

¹⁷⁵ Govt. of Madras, *Proceedings of the M.L.C.*, 1930, vol. LI, 498, as quoted from Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 135.

¹⁷⁶ V.D. Mahajan, “Constitutional Changes from 1919-1969,” Chapter XXXIV, in *The Cambridge History of India, The Indian Empire, 1858-1918, with Additional Chapters 1919-1969*, vol. VI, edited by H.H. Dodwell (Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1968), 648-49.

I was born in a traditional non-devadasi family...My uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution through the devadasi custom. They also advised him not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount to my 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.¹⁷⁷

Ramamirthammal, like Reddy, presents the *devadasi* system as oppressive and exploitative. Furthermore, she represents something else important in the debate: the *devadasis* who opposed the *devadasi* system and pushed for reform. This layer adds a complexity to the discourse surrounding the *devadasis* and their agency. However, as Geraldine Forbes states in her book, *Women in Modern India*, *devadasis* were never by any stretch “free agents.”¹⁷⁸ In this way, Rammamirthammal’s testimony supports this notion and the allegations made by Christian missionaries and reformers. Because she herself was a *devadasi*, her testimony served as justification for social reformers to further push for the abolition of the system.

Rammamirthammal’s testimony has other interesting elements to it, though. As already mentioned, it addresses the question of agency. She claims that the *devadasi* system was exploitative in her work. Her testimony implies the status of *devadasis* would improve with the removal of the system. However, in her story, we find a narrative not too unlike that found in King Shudraka’s play, *The Little Clay Cart*.¹⁷⁹ Even though *Web of Deceit* does not show *devadasis* as simply deviant seductresses, or as victims of an oppressive system, it supports an

¹⁷⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, December 13, 1925, as quoted by S. Anandhi, "Representing devadasis: 'Dasigal Mosavalai' as a radical text," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 11/12 (1991): 741. Also see Muvalur A. Ramamirthammal, Kalpana Kannabirān (commentator), and Vasanth Kannabirān (commentator), "Framing the Web of Deceit," *Muvalur Ramamirthammal's Web of Deceit: Devadasi Reform in Colonial India*, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 182.

¹⁷⁹ Please see Ramamirthammal, Kalpana Kannabirān (commentator), and Vasanth Kannabirān (commentator), *Muvalur Ramamirthammal's Web of Deceit*, and Ryder (translator), Shudraka (author), *The Little Clay Cart*.

overarching framework on what constitutes a respectable or unrespectable woman.¹⁸⁰ The hero and heroine in the book idealize conjugal norms that place value on a monogamous, heterosexual marriage.¹⁸¹ As Sreenivas observes, however, this novel also evokes the question of whether subscribing to conjugal normalcy is sufficient for obtaining the status of a respectable woman.¹⁸² We will address this question in the conclusion of this thesis.

On August 15, 1947, India became independent. Because of the British Empire's dependency on India's support, resources, and personnel, it was simply too much for the British to maintain rule over it. A central government replaced the British colonial government. Home Minister Dr. P. Subbarayan, who was also part of the Select Committee that looked over the *devadasi* reform legislation in previous years, introduced "The Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill, 1947." As a consequence of *devadasis* who supported reform and other members of the community who wanted this reform, Subbarayan suggested the community in its entirety long wanted this measure. Others suggested this bill would enhance the prestige of the house. V.I. Muniswami Pillai, another member of legislation, stated the following: "prostitution in civilised nations is a crime." While he recognized the idea that *devadasis* may have been pure in the past, he said the custom of dedicating girls to temple service was malicious.¹⁸³ After

¹⁸⁰ Please see Ramamirthammal, Kalpana Kannabirān (commentator), and Vasanth Kannabiran (commentator), *Muvalur Ramamirthammal's Web of Deceit*, 22 and Anandhi, "Representing Devadasis," 744-5.

¹⁸¹ Sreenivas, "Creating Conjugal Subjects," 76-77.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Govt. of Madras, *Madras Legislative Council Debates*, vol. VI, 1947, 629-30, as quoted from Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 144.

considerable debate, the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947 was passed on December 5, 1947.¹⁸⁴

Because the *devadasis*' numbers have considerably diminished after the passing of the Religious Endowments Act of 1929, there was far less opposition to the new legislation. Daughters of the *devadasis* after this bill have mostly moved onto marrying into the mainstream Hindu community. This left resistance toward pushing for these measures weakened when compared to the opposition that existed prior to the Religious Endowments Act of 1929. From here on, it became a penal offense for dedication ceremonies. Furthermore, the new bill went as far as outlawing dance in any religious or temple proceeding.¹⁸⁵

Additional Comments

I have discussed the history of 1927-1947 and the legislation affecting the *devadasis*, and the debates surrounding it. Furthermore, I have emphasized the Indian reformists' subscription to assumptions regarding established conjugal norms, the value of Indian women's sexual purity, and how the discussion of the *devadasis*' agency mask these important elements. My analyses support Lata Mani's theory on the reconstituting – the reconstructing – of traditions. I also show elements where Brahmanical norms pertaining to the Indian woman's sexuality are asserted as part of the reconstruction of these conjugal norms.

Importantly, I also show how *devadasis* inevitably support the same conjugal norms and notions of sexual purity that the reformists do once their system becomes threatened with being abolished. Even though they argued for the continuation of the *devadasi* system, they could only strengthen their position in the debates by supporting the same ideas the reformists do. In this

¹⁸⁴ Govt. of Madras, *Madras Legislative Council Debates*, vol. XV, 1947, 94-102, as quoted from Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 146.

¹⁸⁵ Please see Tamil Nadu Act XXXI, 1947.

respect, they have become subjects of the English educated elite's view of conjugality. As a result, this nuances their ideas during the debate. The combination of events in this chapter, along with the events of the previous chapter, contributed to the reduction of the legal as well as social status of the *devadasis*.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF CULTURAL COLONIZATION

In this work, we have seen the complexities surrounding the conceptualization of the *devadasi*. I do argue the significance of the construction – and reconstruction – of conjugal norms as the underlying factor leading to the abolition of the *devadasi* system. However, the discourse surrounding the *devadasi* represents a microcosm of a larger discourse surrounding India. As already insinuated in this paper, Lata Mani postulates in *Contentious Traditions* that “Women become emblematic of tradition, and the reworking of tradition is largely conducted through debating the rights and status of women in society.”¹⁸⁶ All of the discourse surrounding status, rights, and other aspects of agency cover a subtler discourse regarding cultural tradition.¹⁸⁷

By extension, the debates leading to the abolition of the *devadasi* system also serves as a microcosm for the reconstruction of an idealized, Indian past. It represents a larger dynamic regarding the long term effects of Orientalistic sociology¹⁸⁸ being assimilated into the privileged India intelligentsia. Multiple times through the debate, we encounter rhetoric regarding what was the ‘authentic’ role of the *devadasi* in Indian society. Was she a profane prostitute or a sacred nun? Whatever happened to the idea of a courtesan who still held a respectable status on par with the idealized Indian wife and someone who potentially conflates the aforementioned binary? Was the respectable status of the Indian courtesan overplayed, or downplayed? There are many questions and for every answer found in research, more questions come to mind.

¹⁸⁶ Mani, *Recasting Women*, “Contentious Traditions,” 90.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Term derived from Levine, “Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities.”

Because of the legal history surrounding the definition of prostitution in India, I have chosen to make the distinction between courtesans and common prostitutes. However, other scholars might problematize this categorization later.

As I have already stated numerous times in this thesis: my research supports the theory that the abolition of the *devadasi* system had more to do with the construction and reconstruction of conjugal norms. I find this argument more substantial than the notion that suggests it was about the agency, or lack of agency, of the *devadasi*. In that respect, I wish to leave some thoughts regarding the discourse surrounding the agency of the *devadasi*. Forbes postulates in her work that these women were not free agents by any stretch.¹⁸⁹ Once a *devadasi* became dedicated, the temple authorities dictated acceptable sexual partners. Again, only the *devadasis'* mother or grandmother could veto arrangements the temple made between the *devadasi* and a patron.¹⁹⁰ Kersenboom-Story suggests in her fieldwork that the *devadasis* she studied had more free choice in the matter,¹⁹¹ saying that one of her informants stated the following:

“After we got our status as a *devadasi*, we could decide for ourselves. If some were deserted by men, they still had their profession which afforded them a living. We had our own discipline.”¹⁹²

We see that Kersenboom-Story's ethnographic information contradicts the statements made by Forbes. According to her data, *devadasis* had a choice in whether they became a *devadasi* or became a legal wife. This implies some agency on the part of the *devadasi*. With this in consideration, we must also take into account that Kersenboom-Story's ethnography had been conducted during the late 1980's. Furthermore, even if some temples might have given

¹⁸⁹ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 182.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali*, 189.

¹⁹² Ibid.

devadasis this option, it may not be the case for all temples. Nonetheless, like Amrit Srinivasan comments regarding the topic of agency pertaining to the *devadasis*: "The economic and professional benefits were considerable and most importantly, not lacking in social honour."¹⁹³ Like the traditional courtesan during pre-colonial India, the *devadasi* possessed wealth, an education, and self-respect regardless of the fact she did not marry a mortal, and had a public life.

However, there is another aspect of the debates surrounding the abolition of the *devadasi* system that is striking. As already emphasized in this thesis, a number of the allegations by Indian reformists insinuate that these women would live a better life if their system was abolished. We have seen in the previous chapter. Regardless of the reformists' claims, we also see that some of these women protested the attempts to outlaw the *devadasi* practices. When faced with this opposition, though, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy made the following statement: "As for the local *devadasis*' protest, they are all a set of prostitutes who have been set up by their keepers. How can the Government take cognisance of such a protest?"¹⁹⁴ In the previous chapter, we see how Dr. Reddy claims the *devadasis* were victims of an oppressive, patriarchal system. Despite being faced with opposition by the people she claims to advocate for, she dismisses these protestors as prostitutes who act on the behalf of their 'keepers' and disregards their stance in the debates. This further betrays that Muthulakshmi Reddy operates under the binary model of what constitutes a respectable and unrespectable woman. She acts on normatives that implicate what makes an idealized woman or what makes a prostitute.

¹⁹³ Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival," 1869-70.

¹⁹⁴ Muthulakshmi Reddi to Kaleswara Rao, 21 Oct. 1938, MRP subject file 11, as quoted by Mytheli Sreenivas in Sreenivas, "Creating Conjugal Subjects," 71.

With this in consideration, I acknowledge there being several limitations with my analyses on the history surrounding the *devadasis*. Because of the requirements of my thesis, I could not include other quotes that might be interesting or relevant to the discourse surrounding the reconstruction of conjugal norms. During the debates surrounding the abolition of the *devadasi* system was the movement to revive interest in their dances.¹⁹⁵ I could not include the research on this. In addition, members of the Theosophical Society, such as Annie Besant, have provided their own conjectures and influences in the debates, and I have not touched upon these important characters.¹⁹⁶ However, again, I could not address this as thoroughly as I would like. Perhaps in later works I can give these factors more consideration.

Having said that, there is another aspect of the abolition of the *devadasi* system that deserves attention. Even though the Indian reformists insisted they were fighting an 'immoral' practice and more specifically, opposing the practice of prostitution, nothing in the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947 explicitly outlaws the practice of prostitution. It outlaws the practices of the *devadasi* system, but never does it pass any legislation against the practice of prostitution itself. Again, this further confirms the idea that the *devadasi* system's abolition was an act asserting reconstructed conjugal norms in Indian society. Despite that reformists had been adamant about the bill improving the status of women, but scholars have suggested the realities following the bill were – and are – less than ideal.

Davesh Soneji in his work, *Unfinished Gestures*, addresses whether *devadasis* have been able to move on from their former profession. Some notable figures, such as Smt. T.

¹⁹⁵ Srinivasen, "Reform and Revival," 1869-1876.

¹⁹⁶ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 122.

Balasaraswati have been able to make a career outside of the *devadasi* profession.¹⁹⁷

Unfortunately, as Soneji concludes, the exceptions do not represent the community as a whole.

In his fieldwork, Davesh interviewed several *devadasis*, one who he calls ‘Saraswati’ for the sake of anonymity.¹⁹⁸ Saraswati stopped dancing in public in 1953, and had struggled to find opportunities outside of her former profession. She attempted to teach *non-devadasi* women in Chennai, but Indian urban elites remained reluctant on the idea of bringing their daughters to a *devadasi* for dance instruction.¹⁹⁹

We also have a similar story told by one of Marglin's key consultants in her fieldwork. In her ethnographic work on the *devadasis* of Puri, Marglin had a key consultant she called 'Lalita.' Marglin describes Lalita as not continuing her *devadasi* ritual.²⁰⁰ She recorded the following about Lalita:

When I asked her why she did not continue the ritual she said, ‘I feel shame. All my friends either got married or took up jobs. My closest friend Bhanumati left temple service and I do not feel like continuing.’ As Lalita is not married and does not have a job, she feels isolated since she has no contemporaries who continue the ritual.²⁰¹

One interesting component of Lalita’s answer to Marglin is she said she felt shame. This raises questions as to the reasons a *devadasi* may feel shame about her duties or in this case, former duties. Marglin continues providing the following regarding her conversation with Lalita:

¹⁹⁷ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 22-3. Also see Knight, Douglas M., *Balasaraswati: Her Art and Life* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

¹⁹⁸ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 225-6.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 40.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 41.

Lalita says that nowadays people just think of the devadasis as prostitutes and not as the wives of Jagannatha, and she adds, ‘formerly the pilgrims used to give gifts such as money, ornaments, and saris while we were dancing but nowadays they don’t give anything. We also used to have lands given by the king, but these lands were taken away so now we don’t have any land.’

Two elements in the quote above can be indicative of reasons for Lalita to feel shame. The stigma of being associated with prostitution can be considered shameful in itself for her. Again, Brahmanical Hinduism judges the value of a woman based on her sexuality being regulated and contained within a conjugal family unit; Indian women were expected to live as part of patrilineal, monogamous households.²⁰² This value set, in addition to the Victorian moral and medical values that became prevalent in India’s educational system, marginalized women whose sexuality did not fall into this conjugal norm.²⁰³ The complex dynamic between these set of values led to the *devadasi*, a matrilineal and non-monogamous figure, becoming “reconceived as a commercialized sex worker” in contemporary Indian society.²⁰⁴

So then, this presents an interesting question in regards to the reconstruction of conjugal norms that inevitably affected the legal and social status of the *devadasis*: what are the stakes with the assertion of these norms? In the case of Lalita and Saraswati, we find women who have become marginalized and isolated from the public sphere that dominates contemporary India. Even though reformists insisted the abolition of the system would have improved the status of these women, the reality is far graver. Not all of these women were able to become respectable women in Indian society, nor could all of them successfully assimilate. The stigma of their previous profession continues to affect their ability to live in the present. As Mytheli Sreenivas suggested in her conclusions regarding Muvalur A. Ramamirthammal’s *Web of Deceit*, “conjugal

²⁰² Whitehead, "Measuring Women's Value," 154.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 155.

reform alone does not determine the conditions of female citizenship.” I would rephrase this to suggest that conjugal reform is not sufficient for providing social respectability and status to former *devadasis*. Again, as already stated before, the social shame attributed to Saraswati and Lalita’s former life limits their opportunities in Indian society. Instead of providing more avenues for *devadasis* to become a functioning member of society, the abolition of the *devadasi* system might have done more to further marginalize these women.

With this in consideration, Saraswati and Lalita’s lives may be argued as more dignified than other cases of former *devadasis* in the modern world. Because *devadasis* had lost their main source of sustainable income from temples and local patrons, plus lived in a society that no longer valued their artistic skills, some former *devadasis* entered the very sex work that served as the basis for reform legislation against their system. According to Geetanjali Misra, a survey completed by authors among 300 brothel-based sex workers in Sangli found that more than one-half of the sex workers reported identified themselves as *devadasis*.²⁰⁵ Misra concluded that “the abolition of the *devadasi* system led to the further exploitation and stigmatization of the very women the new legislation hoped to protect.”²⁰⁶ I find this an interesting observation because it coincides with my previous comments regarding the effectiveness of the aforementioned legislation when it came to fighting prostitution. As we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, the legislation focuses more on not only abolishing the *devadasi* system, but also legally classifying *devadasis* as prostitutes. Criminalizing a practice possesses its own consequences on the targeted population. The process began with British rule and their assertion of an Orientalistic sociology in both their education system and the courts, a sociology that classified respectable women as subjects of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage and patriarchal household. Any

²⁰⁵ Misra, Ajay Mahal, and Rima Shah. "Protecting the rights of sex workers," 101.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

other class of women were deemed unrespectable "prostitutes." Then this process ended with Indian reformists who took the place of their former colonizers and pushed for the legislation that finally criminalized the *devadasi* system, socially constructing *devadasis* as prostitutes. Thus, the notion that the abolition of the *devadasi* system had proliferated the exploitation and stigmatization of *devadasis* possesses its own theoretical implications on the long-term effects of cultural colonization.

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