

# The Devadasi System in Mysore

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## The Devadasi System in Mysore: Patronage, Prestige, and Prohibition

### Context

- The **Devadasi system** was a long-standing institution in South India, where young girls were dedicated to temples to serve as dancers and musicians.
- Over time, it evolved into a **social and economic system** with both religious significance and deep-rooted gender inequalities.
- By the **18th century**, the status of Devadasis declined, leading to **reform movements and legal abolition**.
- Recently, historian **Janaki Nair** discussed the **rise and fall of the Devadasi system in Mysore** at the **Bangalore International Centre**.

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### Origin and Evolution of the Devadasi System

#### Historical Beginnings

- The system traces its origins to the **8th century**.
- An **inscription from 800 AD** in **Mayile village** records the dedication of:
  - A **virgin girl** to the temple.
  - **8 mattars of land, 1,000 cows, and a swing** for the deity.
- **Devadasis existed in Jain, Shaivite, and Vaishnavite temples** across South India.

#### Royal Patronage and Cultural Growth

- **Mysore Wadiyars** played a key role in patronizing and institutionalizing the system.
- By the **10th century**, dedicated young girls performed various **religious and cultural services**, such as:
  - **Dancing and singing** during temple rituals.
  - **Carrying sacred aaratis** and participating in **processions**.

#### Training and Contributions

- Devadasis received rigorous training in:
  - **Nritya (dance) and Geeta (vocal music)**.
- **Krishnaraja Wadiyar III** hired **Chinnayya Pillai of the Thanjavur Quartet** to train dancers.
- The **Thanjavur Quartet—Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivananda, and Vadivelu—contributed**

to the development of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.

### Economic Support and Sustenance

- Devadasis were financially supported through:
    - Land grants and money from temples.
    - Donations from merchants, landlords, and art patrons.
  - An epigraph mentions a grant to maintain "the looking glass of the dancing girls", with an assurance that "it would continue as long as the sun and moon exist."
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### Social Status of Devadasis

#### Wider Presence

- Devadasis were present in temples across Mysore, Bangalore, Mulbagal, Kadoor, T. Narsipur, and other towns.

#### Independent Social Class

- Devadasis had their own:
  - Laws of inheritance and panchayats.
  - Rules of etiquette and governance.
- They hailed from diverse castes, including:
  - Kurubas, Bedas, Gangadikara Vokkaligas, Telugu Banajigas, and Lingayats.

#### Matrilineal System and Role in Weddings

- Women inherited property through a matrilineal system.
- Devadasis were considered nitya sumangalis (eternally auspicious women).
- In many weddings, apart from the groom, Devadasis tied a second tali (sacred thread) around the bride's neck.

#### Reasons for Social Importance

1. Expertise in Fine Arts - Mastery over music, dance, and literature.
  2. Higher Learning - Exposure to multiple languages, scriptures, and royal circles.
  3. Acceptance of Polygamy - Their relationships did not face societal stigma.
  4. Economic Independence - They received grants, owned land, and had financial stability.
  5. Permanent and Hereditary Posts - Devadasis had lifelong temple employment, and their death led to temporary halting of temple activities.
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### Decline of the Devadasi System

#### Factors Leading to Decline

1. 18th Century Onwards - Exploitation of Devadasis became widespread.
2. Western Morality & Colonial Influence - British rule led to:

- A **negative perception**, equating the system with **prostitution**.
  - Increased **protests against the practice**.
  - 3. **Anti-Nautch Movement (19th-20th Century)** - Aimed to:
    - **Abolish the dedication of girls** to temples.
    - End **public performances** by Devadasis.
  - 4. **Sanitization of Sadir Dance** -
    - **Sadir (Dasiyattam)**, performed by Devadasis, was seen as **erotic**.
    - **Dominant caste women** adapted and transformed it into **Bharatanatyam**.
  - 5. **Administrative Reforms** -
    - **Muzrai Commissioner A. Srinivasacharlu** played a pivotal role in abolition.
    - **1898** - Announced **no new Devadasis** would be appointed after their predecessors passed away.
    - Discontinued **appointments in Muzrai temples across Mysore, Kadur, Tumkur, Kolar, etc.**
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## Legal and Social Reforms

### Progressive Reforms in Mysore

- **Infant Marriage Regulation (1894)** -
  - Banned **marriages for girls below 8 years**.
  - Restricted **age gap to 30 years**.
- **Hindu Women's Property Rights Act (1933)** -
  - Gave **Hindu women inheritance rights**, increasing their financial security.

### Abolition of the Devadasi System

- **Mysore became one of the first regions in India to abolish the Devadasi system in 1908-09.**
  - **This was much earlier than the Madras Devadasi Abolition Act (1947).**
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### Conclusion

- **The Devadasi system evolved from a respected temple tradition to an institution plagued by exploitation.**
- **While it flourished under royal patronage, it later faced criticism due to colonial influence and social reform movements.**
- **Mysore played a pioneering role in abolishing the system, setting the stage for wider legislative reforms in India.**
- **Despite its decline, the artistic and cultural contributions of Devadasis continue to thrive in Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.**