# South Indian Culture and Devadasis

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**Abstract:** *Medieval South Indian agrarian society was shaped by the coexistence of Brahmins and the indigenous agrarian population. Land grants and temple constructions by the Pallava, Chola, and Pandya kings strengthened the feudal system. Agricultural surplus expanded Brahmin-royal authority, with temples and villages (Oor and Sabha) maintaining an interdependent relationship. Ancient rural places of worship evolved into massive temples. Temple towns like Tirupati developed by the 12th and 13th centuries, with kings, Brahmins, and merchants serving as the primary economic forces behind this growth. The medieval era was characterized by an indulgence in sensual pleasures, reflected in erotic sculptures. With the growth of temples, Tantric Shaivism gained prominence, as its philosophy suited the feudal class's lifestyle. The Devadasi system gained currency through dance and performance dedicated to Shiva as Nataraja. Royal patronage, such as Raja Raja Chola I donating 400 Devadasis to the Thanjavur temple, solidified their role. Devadasis became an integral part of the upper-class sexual life. The 'servitude' (Dasatva) ideology within the Bhakti movement reinforced the feudal structure, equating royal devotion with divine devotion. By the 11th and 12th centuries, temples became large landowners, making the priestly class a dominant social force. South Indian Shaivism aggressively confronted and gained dominance over Buddhism and Jainism. The Chola period was the golden age of temple building and Brahmin migration, where the temple symbolized the pillar of royal authority. Historical records document the lives and social status of Devadasis in Karnataka, Andhra, and Tamil Nadu. The Devadasi class, including the male accompanists (Nattuvanmars), was instrumental in cultivating the Indian classical music and dance traditions. K.K. Pillai detailed the duties of Devadasis, such as the* Thevaradiyar *and* Kudikaris, *at the Suchindram temple. The Devadasi system stimulated the production and trade of expensive clothing and ornaments. This urban lifestyle and temple culture influenced Tamil poetry, fostering genres related to love and detailed descriptions of women.'*

**Keywords:** Culture – Devadasis - Indian Society – Rituals- Temple

## 1. Introduction

South Indian culture is one of the oldest continuous cultural traditions in the Indian subcontinent, shaped by Dravidian heritage, classical arts, temple architecture, regional literature, and deeply rooted religious practices. The region—comprising Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana—developed a distinctive cultural identity expressed through Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music, temple-centered festivals, and elaborate social customs. Temples have historically served not only as places of worship but also as centres of education, art patronage, and community life. Within this rich cultural landscape, the *Devadasi* institution emerged as a significant component of South India's artistic and religious history. Devadasis literally "servants of God"—were women dedicated to the service of a deity or temple. Traditionally, they were trained in music, dance, poetry, and various fine arts. Their performances in temples formed an important part of rituals and festivals, and they played a key role in preserving classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi. Over time, however, socio-political changes, colonial interpretations, and shifts in moral attitudes transformed the status and perception of Devadasis. What was once a respected artistic and religious institution gradually became marginalized, leading to debates about reform, heritage preservation, and women's agency.

Thus, the study of South Indian culture and the Devadasi tradition offers critical insight into the intersection of religion, art, gender, and society—revealing how cultural practices evolve and how historical narratives are shaped over time.

### Foundation of South Indian Society
The medieval social structure and agrarian community of South India were shaped by the intermingled lives of Brahmins and the indigenous **agrarian population**. Brahmins established dominance over the agricultural sector through **land ownership** and over temple properties through their **priesthood**. The village grants and temple constructions by the **Pallava, Chola, and Pandya kings** firmly established the **feudal system** in South India. The surplus production from the agricultural sector expanded and strengthened the Brahmin-royal rule. Villages (**Oor**) and temples functioned as mutually complementary entities. The needs of the temples were fulfilled by the non-Brahmin villagers. In Tamil Nadu, the Brahmins' **'Sabha'** (assembly) and the farmers' **'Oor'** (village) were bound by mutual obligations. The Oors were responsible for cultivating and protecting the temple lands and meeting the daily expenses of the temples. Similarly, the **'Agraharams'** (Brahmin settlements) were sustained by agricultural surplus.

### Social and Economic Divisions
In addition to the landowning Brahmins, non-Brahmin landowners and other economic classes were also prominent in South India. There are differences of opinion regarding the **'Valangai' (Right Hand) and 'Idangai' (Left Hand)** divisions that existed in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra during the medieval period—whether they were primarily economic powers or dominant caste hierarchies. Nevertheless, **non-Brahmin agrarian groups** gained power and influenced the temples.

### Temple Urbanism and the Rise of Temples
Ancient Tamilakam did not have large temples. Village deities were traditionally placed under trees near **paddy fields and irrigation sources**. Later Aryanized festivals like Pongal, Indra Vizha, Kumbha Nritham, and Ratholsavam were originally agrarian rituals of the ancient rural people. The ancient agricultural and village deities are still worshipped throughout South India as powerful **'Amma Daivams'** (Mother Goddesses). However, the economic

powers behind the construction of massive temples were the **kings, Brahmins, and wealthy merchants**. The historical circumstances that led to the rise of large temples were the supremacy and war-generated wealth of the Pallava, Chola, and Pandya kingdoms, alongside the agricultural surplus. **Temple towns** developed prominently during the 12th and 13th centuries CE. Places like Tirupati, Tirumalai, and Mahabalipuram gained fame for their temples. Temple vicinities became 'towns' densely populated by **pilgrims, merchants, priests, devotees, artisans, and courtesans**. The **Devadasis, musicians, and Nattuvanmars** (dance masters) were the inheritors of the temple arts.

### Tantrism and the Devadasi System

The medieval period, both in North and South India, was the golden age of **erotic sculptures and luxurious indulgence**. With the growth of temples, the influence of **Tantrism** also spread widely. After Kashmir and Orissa, **Mysore** was a major center for Tantrism. In Tamil Nadu, the Shaiva branch of Tantrism gained prominence. They established **Shaiva** *Mathams* (monasteries) and promoted Shaiva devotion through Shiva temples. It was during this time that the **Devadasi system in temples** and the worship through dance and performance for **Shiva as Nataraja** gained currency. Tantrism and Shiva were the specific philosophy and deity suited for the indulgent life of the feudal class. The Pandya and Chola kings were adherents of Tantrism and were followers of the **Kalamukha-Pashupata** sects. The Chalukya kings of Mysore appointed Tantric religious leaders as their advisors.

- In the 10th century CE, the Chola king **Raja Raja Chola** donated 400 Devadasis to the Thanjavur temple.
- In 1112 CE, the Chalukya king built Devadasi houses at the Ittagiyati temple.

This illustrates the strong relationship between Shaiva *Mathams*, temples, Tantric proponents, Devadasis, and the king. Shaiva Brahmins were key officials in the royal court.

The **Bhakti movement** that spread during this time incorporated the **ideology of feudalism**. The 'servitude' ideology in Bhakti not only fostered a superior-subordinate mindset among devotees but also facilitated forced labor from artisans and sculptors for the *Mathams* and temples. **Royal devotion** (the king as a direct deity) and **devotion to God** became inseparable attitudes. The land tax and agricultural income from the villages donated to the *Mathams* and temples turned the Shaiva priests into local chieftains. Gradually, the *Mathams* became **political powers**. Kings had to rely on the *Mathams* to maintain their influence over the people. By the 11th and 12th centuries, temples became immense landowners, and the priestly class emerged as a powerful social force.

### Conflict with Buddhism and Jainism

South Indian Shaivism established dominance by confronting the Buddhist and Jain religions physically. In Karnataka, **Basavanna** founded the **Virashaiva** movement to eradicate Jainism. Brahmins in Karnataka and Telugu-land were generally Shaivites. **Thirugnana Sambandhar** is credited with converting Mahendravarman and Sundara Pandya from Jainism to Shaivism and subsequently massacring 8,000 Jain monks with his emotionally stirring devotional songs. The Virashaiva Cholas attacked Jain centers and caused damage to **Shravanabelagola**. The Chola reign was the **golden age of temple construction and Brahmin migration**. It was during this period that the methods of temple worship and the daily routines of the royal courts became similar. The deity and the king would wake up to hymns, bathe, wear sacred ornaments, and appear before devotees and servants. The word **'Koyil' (Kovil)** came to mean both 'temple' and 'royal palace.' Medieval temples, both in South and North India, were the **pillars of royal authority**.

### Expansion of Shaivism and Temple Devotion

Shaivism rapidly spread among non-Brahmins by incorporating the agrarian deities, the **'Amma Daivams,'** prevalent throughout South India, as manifestations of **'Shakti.'** From the 13th century CE, the 'Amman Daivams' were reformed and installed as **'Nachchiyar's**—the consorts of the main deity. Non-Brahmin Shaiva sects, with the support of agricultural elites and artisans, gained strength and, by the 13th century, grew powerful enough to compete with Brahmin *Mathams* and temples. There were non-Brahmin Shaiva *Mathams* in Thanjavur, Chidambaram, Ramnad, Govindaputhur, and Arcot. **Srirangam and Tirupati** were temples of the non-Brahmin Vellalars. Non-Brahmin scholars can be found among the gurus of the Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu. Non-Brahmins in South India studied Sanskrit and made valuable contributions to the religious and cultural spheres. Singing and dancing evolved into integral parts of devotion. The main goal was to liberate the agrarian and common folk from the influence of Buddhism and Jainism. The duty of the devotee was to eliminate the rivals. It is said that Thirugnana Sambandhar instigated the Pandya king to kill 8,000 Jain ascetics. **Tantrism**, in all its horrors, spread in Tamil Nadu. **Kapalikas** (who ate from human skulls and smeared their bodies with cremation ashes) and **Kalamukhas** created fear through their devotion. Most Shiva temples in Tamil Nadu are built near **cremation grounds**.

### Devadasi System in South India

With the spread of temple urbanism, the **Devadasi system** became an integral part of the upper-class sexual life in South India, just as it had in North India. Historical facts about the Devadasis of South India are available today.

- **Marco Polo** (13th century) on Thanjavur's Devadasis.
- **Abdul Razzaq** (15th century), the Turkish Ambassador, on the Devadasis of Vijayanagara.
- **Buchanan** and Christian missionaries like **Dubois** (1792-1799) in Madras, **Francois**, and **Hamilton** provide valuable accounts.

Literary works like **'Somanatha Charitram'** by Raghavanka (12th century), **'Manassollasam'** by the Chalukya king Someshvara III (1126-1130), **'Samayapariksha'** by the Jain poet Shivanka, and **'Dharmamrutam'** by Nayasena contain descriptions of Devadasi life. In Karnataka, courtesans were called *Varangana, Ganika, Sule, and Punyangana*, and dancers were called *Patra*. They were also referred to as *Adiyal* (servants). Although dancers were called *Patra* and *Sule*, not all Devadasis were dancers. **'Raya Patras'** were dancers in the royal court. The musicians and instrumentalists who

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provided accompaniment for the *Dasinattam* (Devadasi dance) in the temples were the male counterparts of the Devadasi class, called **'Nattuvanmars'** (dance masters).

The **Devadasi class cultivated the Indian Natya system** and the **Hindustani-Carnatic music traditions**. Thurston records that it was the dancers and musicians who created the storehouse of Indian music.

## Transformation and Rituals

The Devadasis and courtesans of Karnataka later evolved into **castes**. The **'Boyis'** and **'Boddar'** of Canara are Devadasi classes. A girl child, after being taken to the temple, having a *thali* (sacred thread) tied, and wearing an earring, became a **public woman**. She could also become a Devadasi by **marrying the temple sword or idol**. She could accept any man except one from a lower caste. Since a Devadasi was not subject to **widowhood**, she was accorded a respectable place at wedding ceremonies and was invited to prepare the bride's *thali*. **Yellamma Puram** in Karnataka is still famous for the Devadasi system. **Yellamma**, the Dravidian form of Renuka, is worshipped not only by Devadasis but also by high-caste women as a family deity. In Telugu-land, Devadasis were known as **'Bogammas' and 'Sanis'**. The **'Nagavasulus', 'Pallis', 'Balijas', and 'Yerukalas'** of Visakhapatnam are also Devadasi groups. The **Kaikkolam** caste in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, belongs to Devadasi families.

## Devadasi System in Suchindram

K.K. Pillai's research paper on the Suchindram temple discusses the general nature of the Devadasi system in Tamil Nadu. Suchindram, an ancient **'Brahmadeya'** village, was under the Pandya kings, but the village and its people were within the temple's jurisdiction. The Devadasis were recruited from the **'Thevaradiyar'** group (those who pounded paddy for the temple) mentioned in the Suchindram temple records. They were called **'Kudikaris'** (householders). Temple attendants were also known as **Thalicheri Pendukal, Manikkathar, Kanikkaiyar, Adikalmar, and Rudraganikas**.

Devadasi references are found in:
- The Guhanathaswamy Temple record in Kanyakumari district (1040 CE).
- The Cholapuram inscription (1253 CE).
- The Muktesvara Temple records in Kanchi (8th century CE).
- Raja Raja Chola's Thanjavur inscription (1004 CE).

Sangam texts like **Silappathikaram and Manimekalai** are related to the *Dasi* system, but K.K. Pillai argues that there is no proof that the *Dasis* mentioned in them were Devadasis. Devadasi references in Suchindram begin only around **1257 CE**. The Suchindram temple and its surroundings were part of Tamil Nadu from the Chola-Pandya periods. The sculpture, structure, and Devadasi system all followed the **Tamil style**. However, there were some differences:
- Wearing white clothes.
- Wearing ear rings (*thodas*).
- Not dancing or singing in private houses.

These specifics may have come into Devadasi life due to the subsequent domination of **Travancore**. Except for these aspects, K.K. Pillai opines that the Suchindram *Dasis* were purely **Tamil** in language and customs.

A girl child donated to the temple at the age of six or nine would be provided a 'Kudi' (house) and a 'Padi' (allowance) by the **Yogakars** (temple trustees). According to Hindu customs, the priest who tied the *thali* for the Lord was the first to have sexual relations with her. In 1867, Suchindram had 32 *Kudis*.

## K.K. Pillai summarizes the duties of the Suchindram Devadasis:
- Sweeping and cleaning the *Sribali Pura* and the dining area.
- Sprinkling cow-dung water and washing with water on Tuesdays and Fridays.
- The 'Aadum Patras' (dancing performers) would dance in the northern hall during the *Deeparadhana* (worship with lamps), while others would perform *Kuravai* (a form of ululation).
- Holding lamps in the northern and southern halls during the evening *Deeparadhana*.
- Holding lamps during the *Sribali* procession.
- Dancing in the Chembakaraman Mandapam until the night *Sribali* concluded.
- The *Thaikkilavis* (pensioned Devadasis) would hold the *Pana Vilakku* (a type of lamp) behind the *Sribali* procession.
- Singing in the northern and southern halls after the *Sribali* concluded.
- Standing in the northern and southern halls at 4 AM for the *Palli Unarthal* (waking the Lord).
- Cleaning the precincts after the Namboodiris' meal.
- Cleaning the temple after the *Sribali*.
- Cleaning the ritual vessels and bringing them to the temple entrance.
- Eight Devadasis each would dance daily in the northern and southern halls.
- Escorting the processions and dancing during festivals and chariot festivals.
- Greeting the King or royal personages during their processions was also a duty.

The *Dasis* were categorized into grades. Those retiring from Devadasihood were called **'Thodavechavar'** (those who kept the earring). The 'Thoda' (earring) was a symbol of youth and the Devadasi sign; taking it off before the Yogakars due to old age or chronic illness was called **'Thodavaykkat'**. Those who retired on a pension were **'Thaikkilavis'**. Devadasis were granted **tax-free land** and paid **paddy as wages** for their temple work. They had the right to the leftover rice offered to the deity (*Padachoru*)— in the sense of the husband's leftovers.

## Art and Culture

The early Devadasis were **skilled dancers, musicians, and scholars**. Kings accepted them as consorts and honored them with the title **'Rayer Padam'** (Royal Title). K.K. Pillai wonders how the Telugu word ***"Patra"*** reached this end of South India. One opinion is that the term indicates the **prevalence and general nature of the Devadasi system**.

The court dancers of Vijayanagara were **'Raya Patras.'** Nanchinad had political ties with Vijayanagara. Skilled dancers from Suchindram may have performed dance recitals in the Vijayanagara Empire as well.

In 1811 CE, the control of the Suchindram temple passed to the **Venad King**. The **'Padamangalam Nair Dasis'** may have arrived in Suchindram after this. Since the geographical and cultural context of Suchindram was that of Tamil Nadu, they might have adopted Tamil customs. When Malayalam Brahmins came to Suchindram for Tantric rituals, they brought **Nair Dasis** as their attendants.

The caste structure of Suchindram is not that of Kerala. The castes included Nambiyans, Shaivas or Pandya Vellalars, Nanchinadu Vellalars, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters (*Kammalars*), washermen (*Veluthedanmars*), flute players, instrumentalists, traditional doctors, and shepherds. The **Nambidis** were the early priests of Suchindram, who were pure Shaiva Brahmins. They lost their priestly status with the arrival of Kerala Brahmins later. Shaiva Vellalars were the garland makers and *Bhajan* (devotional singers) of the Suchindram temple. They were purely Tamil in language, rituals, dress, and lifestyle. However, in terms of inheritance, they followed the **matrilineal system (*Marumakkal Vazhi*)**.

The **Nanchinadu Vellalars**, who were the economic powerhouses of the Suchindram temple, were known as 'Marumakkal Vazhi Vellalars.' The **Nattuvanmars** belonged to the 'Thevaradiyal' group. Their main jobs included teaching dance and music, conducting *Arangettams* (debut performances), and providing musical accompaniment. Flute players and instrumentalists were called **Parashavanmars and Ochchanmars**. K.K. Pillai notes that these groups are also found in other South Indian temples.

**Dress, Ornaments, and Social Context**
Just like in North India, the Devadasi system in South India encouraged the production and use of **clothing and ornaments**. Scientific descriptions of adornment developed in all regions where temple urbanism and Devadasis existed.

Works like **'Gandhashastram' and 'Lokopakaram'** from Karnataka describe aesthetics. **'Saugandhikars'** (perfume merchants) were widespread in Karnataka. Expensive silk clothes were not only produced locally but also imported from places like Potalapuram, Chirapally, Nagapattinam, Sri Lanka, Anhilwad (Gujarat), Multan, Thondairajyam, Vanchipattanam, Vangam, Kosalam, and Kalingam.

The Italian traveler **Niccolo Conti** recorded that women in Karnataka wore **saris.** Devadasis in Andhra also wore saris and were elaborately adorned. **'Bandhavapurana'** mention women wearing upper garments like **Ravukka, Kanchulika, and Kuppasa**. The **ornament trade** also flourished in South India.

Consequently, **depictions of life and descriptions of women suitable for urban culture** are seen in Tamil poetry. Although women in ancient Tamilakam were generally semi-naked, Devadasis, Ganikas, and urban women wore clothes and ornaments. While adultery was punishable, **visiting courtesans was socially acceptable**.

Since there were no social restrictions on women, the **love-song genre** flourished in Tamil literature. Lovers wore beautiful clothes and ornaments to entice their sweethearts. Thus, **royal lifestyle and temple urbanism influenced the depictions of life in Tamil poetry**.

## 2. Conclusion

The history of Devadasis in South Indian culture is a powerful narrative of **cultural brilliance marred by social injustice**. It began as a unique religious and artistic institution that celebrated female accomplishment and autonomy within the temple structure. However, historical, political, and socio-economic shifts ultimately twisted the practice, transforming it into a system of ritualized abuse and exploitation for vulnerable women. The final chapter of this history is still being written, characterized by the continued struggle to **eradicate the illegal practice** while simultaneously working to **rehabilitate the survivors** and honor the profound, if complicated, **cultural legacy** they left behind in the form of classical South Indian arts.

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