

## Duties of Devadasis in Royal Palaces in Odisha- A Study

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### Abstract

Devadasis was one of the important parts of Hindu society in ancient and medieval India. The system was prevalent in the every part of India particularly in the temple culture. The devadasis were particularly appointed for the purpose of temple service but in some time they had also related with the royal palaces. They were taking a significant role in the various functions and festivals of the palaces. Although they were married to the temple deity, and not married to mortal man in life various literary sources which indicated the relation of devadasis with the royal princes some time and relation with the high class society and the water giving categories. In this paper we will specifically tried to highlight the duties of devadasis in the royal palaces in Odisha. Devadasis were not same as deis or courtesan who are particularly appointed for the royal service. In spite of this the devadasis are invited to the royal palaces during the auspicious day such as and functions and festivals organized by the palaces. They were guarded by the royal priest of the kingdom.

**Key Words:** *Devadasis, deis, royal palaces, courtesan, ceremonies*

### Introduction:

Devadasis are taking important role in the various works of Royal palace. They are participated in most of the palace ceremonies and festivals. The Devadasis are originated from the concept from temple serving which were mostly into seven classes. These devadasis were also engaged in the palace works. How they were involved into the Palace is not known. However these seven categories of ancient period are valuable to identify and explain the practices as well as the various modes through which women were incorporated into the temple. The Devadasis do along with the *deis* who were participated both in royal life cycle ceremonies and in palace

festivals. However, some time the *deis* are participate without the devadasis in the royal life cycle ceremonies. Like devadasis, *deis* presence is auspicious in the occasions. The *deis* are a group that had very similar traditions of devadasis. However the customs differed from those of the devadasis.

It is very much important that the roles of devadasis are auspicious in the palace as well like in the temple. The king is the only person who is considered to be an embodiment of Jagannath himself, and he is called '*calanti visnu*', 'walking visnu'. The term exactly parallels that of devadasi are known as '*calanti devi*'<sup>1</sup>. King was also

treated in a manner which parallels that of worship of Jagannath.

There are some similar ideas that the devadasis and the king have something in common. They are closely linked to kingship, their morning ritual in the temple is called a 'royal offering' (*rajopacara*). The devadasis themselves are categorized by temple priests among a series of royal insignia<sup>2</sup>. The devadasis were married to god, they sometimes married respectable persons including the princes and entered the palace as the kings consort. Such as Sundarmurti, the saiva *nayanar*, who flourished in 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. said to have fallen in love with Sangili, a dancing girl in the temple of god siva at Tiruvorriyur and ultimately married her<sup>2</sup>. Another devadasi, from same place, named Catural Caturi, is described, in an inscription of 1049 as wife of a citizen<sup>3</sup>. A record, mentioning the marriage of a temple dancing girl, comes from Tsandavole in Andhra Pradesh. As per the record stated that Sökkama, daughter of Pota, lord of Duvavada surpassing Rambha, Urvasi and Menaka in beauty' was a *nartaki* dancer in the service of the god Pandisvara. Her daughter Kamidevi became the queen of Kulottunga Coda Gonka II<sup>3</sup>. Her two brother Komma and Sarannayya, were also engaged in service of the king<sup>4</sup>. A devadasi named Unniyacci Kuttathi of the temple of Kandiur in Kerala was being taken for marriage of a king of Kerala Verma in Venad<sup>5</sup>. The Rajatarangini contains an interesting piece of information's. *sahaja*, a temple dancing girls of Kashmir was the sweetheart of prince Harshadeva. Later she married his brother Utkarsa. After 20 years, on being widowed, Harsha tried to win her back, but she refused his offer and became a sati for which she was highly praised. In

*Kathasaritasagara*<sup>6</sup>, Devasena, the king of Sravasti, fell love with Unmadini, the beautiful wife his general. When the general came to know of this, he proposed to offer his wife to the temple as a devadasi, and the king could take her up from there without incurring any stigma. Similarly, in the Rajatarangini, king Durlabhak Pratapaditya of Kashmir fell in love with Narendraprabha, the beautiful wife of his merchant friend from Rohitak. The husband of Narendraprabha, when he came to know of the matter, came forward with a solution, Naredraprabha was an accomplished dancer and the merchant could offer her, in that capacity, to a temple and the king would take her from there. Thus Naredraprabha, the devadasi was married to the king, and in course of time bore many sons to the king<sup>5</sup>. It thus becomes clear that when a king wanted to enjoy a *kulanari* or married women, which he could not do without incurring social disapproval. The husband of the women if he did not mind could offer the wife to the temple as a devadasi. The king could, then easily have her without attracting any social disapproval. One can imagine the degeneration that had set in the devadasi institution. The king had a command over the 'women of god' who theoretically belonged to the temple. Kalhana informs us that king Harsha of Kashmir saw a beautiful dancing girl of the temple and took her as a concubine into the royal seraglio. In Assam too, two cousin sisters Phuleswari and Draupadi, who happened to be devadasis in the temple at Joydal, were taken in marriage by the king. In course of time they became ruling queens of Assam, and had even coins struck in their own names. The eyes of the king Sibsingh fell on Phulesvari while she was giving a dance

performance in the temple of Joydal, and this set the ball rolling<sup>7</sup>. Later another devadasi Chinnadevi was married to the Vijayanagara king Krishnadeva Raya<sup>8</sup>.

The devadasis have affairs leading to their marriage with mortals. One of the stories which gives the evidences of Kuttanimatam, The king of Devarashtra, had visited to the temple at Kasi, where he witnessed the drama, Ratnavali, in which the leading role of the drama played by Manjari, a dancing girl attached to the Gambhireswara temple. He has pleased with the dancing girl and issued a charter containing the grant of a village and enjoyed the company of the devadasi<sup>9</sup>. Another story in Rajatarangini, prince Jayapida of Kashmir once went on a visit to the city of Pundravardhan in the territory of the Gauda king in modern Bengal. He went to witness a dance recital in Kartikeya temple. When the recital was over, the people went home, the Kamala, who was very beautiful whose conversation was refined and wit subtle, taking the king by hand entered the bed chamber<sup>10</sup>. Historically speaking, courtesans were 'devadasis' or women who used to sing and dance for the presiding deity of the temple. These women were married to the residing deity, but the kings and courtiers also had the pleasures to witness their art of poetry, singing and dancing. In plain words though the 'devadasis' were married to the lord, they often quenched the pleasures of the rich. Now comes to surprising facts that all Indian classical dances like Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak are just residuary art forms left behind by these 'devadasis' or 'courtesans'<sup>11</sup>. The devadasis are very rarely engaged in the Royal palace, but the same way of ideas the courtesan were appointed

as like the temples have. We cannot connect same as devadasi and courtesans.

Like in this way the devadasis were related with the palace some times. The devadasis of Odisha also had some tradition to serve various festivals of palaces. Like devadasis, the *deis* are did not marry mortal man since they are dedicated to palace services. It is similar procedure as like devadasis entered into rituals. Despite in the devadasis they are marry to god (Bhagaban) but the *deis* are entered through dedication ceremonies known as 'tying the saris' it is takes place in front of palace gate the piece of cloths which is provided by king. It is necessary that they must have known how to dance and sing. The girls who are posted in the palace were known as *deis* they are the same as like the devadasis in the temples.

Like the devadasis, although they are recruited from all water-giving castes, once they joined that group they were classified in the non-water giving categories. Unlike the devadasis, *deis* were performed wedding ceremony. It takes place on an auspicious day after girl's puberty. During her pubertal seclusion, the girl dreams of someone and it is to that person or god that she is married. After the wedding the *dei* is taken to the king and she goes straight to bedroom and if the king desires it she sings. For the *deis* it is a rule that they must visit the king before they can have relations with anyone else. Like devadasis, they live in their own houses in the town and have relations with men of the water giving castes. They seemed to have lived in the palace for some time when she was young since she delivered her first child there.

Like the devadasis, the *deis* will never became widows and will always remain

'married women whose husbands are alive' (*ahya*). The *deis* were went to the houses of *pandas* and important people to sing the auspicious song at the time of marriage. But they did not go with the *devadasis*. They go to different houses. *Devadasis* and *deis* will not take water from each other but they have close relationships. They went to see each other's ceremonies. Particularly, when someone dies among the *deis* the men of the *devadasis* group will carry the body to the cremation and reciprocally, the men of the *deis* group will do the same for the *devadasi* group. But neither group is polluted by a death or birth in the other group<sup>12</sup>. The *deis* and *devadasis* are equally taking important role in the various auspicious occasions and ceremonies of palaces, it seems sacred the presence of *devadasis* and *deis* as well. Various ceremonies of the palaces i.e., the auspicious life cycle ceremonies, the royal festivals, the coronations, the new regnal year ceremony, *durga puja* and *Dasahara* etc. In these functions the *devadasis* and *deis* are participation was very essential, auspicioucity, without their presence the function may not be conducted.

In the medieval period feudalism was spread such as way that which influence greatly on *devadasi* system. The system which may came out from 8<sup>th</sup> century in south India is increasing consistently throughout India<sup>13</sup>. The period of socio-economic has greatly reflected the conditions of that time. The system was also influenced to Odisha in the Southern parts which is once part of Odisha such as *Simanchalam* region, *East Godavari* district and *Srikurmam*. In these region the custom assumed popularity it is one of the significant role that because of political power of rulers and the priest class. The practices are very popular among the local

*feudatories* or chiefs represented the political fluidity of the period. The temples in the ancient and medieval India being surreptitiously used an instrument of royal control over public life. Gradually the association with the temple deities and kings was developed and the role of king was overtly rose prominent. The temple administration was improved with generated from commercial and agricultural activities<sup>14</sup>. The growth of temples and institutions promoted the growth of *devadasi* system. The priests are emerged as important layers of the society during this age. The priests act as scribes wrote *dharma*, they also performed special services for the kings in order to legitimize their deeds. With the support of royals the priests emerged as the major cultural arbiters of the temple-centered activities of the medieval period. Their ritual influence and legitimizing powers were used for the growth of *devadasi* system.

In India as well as Odisha palace Brahmin is called *pasupalaka* a group of Brahmin in temple also known as *pasupalak* (*simhari*). They are engaged in decorating the images with flower ornaments. Both are *pasupalaka* are different groups. The *devadasis* and musicians are only temple servants who as a group serve both in the temple and in the palace. The *devadasis* are mostly engaged on duties in palaces are singer of inner portion (*bhitara gauni*) and singer of bahara *gauni* (*bahara gauni*) and dancer (*nacuni*). These group are participated in certain rituals in the palace<sup>15</sup>.

#### **The Life Cycle Ceremonies:**

The *deis* and *devadasis* are said that they are *apasaras*. They are the heavenly courtesans who adorn the court of Indra, the king of

gods. Some of devadasis likened themselves to the *apasaras* who are also called as 'heavenly courtesans' (*swargabesya*). The devadasis were participated most important life-cycle rituals that of marriage, Pregnancy, child birth, name giving ceremonies, ear piercing ceremonies, touching the chalk, thread ceremony of palaces.

The devadasis were called to palace on the occasion of auspicious life-cycle ceremonies surrounding pregnancy and childhood. When the queen is seven months pregnant a small celebration was organized in the palaces where the devadasis and deis were called to fed cake to queen. The devadasis and deis had come to palaces, they did not enter into the bedchamber of queen but stand outside and sing the auspicious songs. The deis and devadasis has sing different song, the song is followed by *hula-huli*.

After the birth, there is a ceremony in the palaces in the sixth day of child, twelfth day, and twenty-first day. During these days the devadasis were called to the palace to attend the rituals and they had also performed various duties on the ceremonies. The celebration of one month (*masikia*), first birth day of child (*barsikia*), in these functions devadasis were invited to attend the feast, in the palace and some times in the Panda's houses. Then after this when the child has attained at the age 4 years a ear-piercing ceremony was organized but it was not always celebrated. Another ceremony known as touching chalk (*khadi chua*) at which child is made to touch the chalk which he will use the learning. The next ceremony is that of sacred thread (*brata*) at which the boy receives a sacred thread and becomes twice-born(sudras are not

performed ). The last ceremony of child was celebrated grand way where the auspicious songs were sing towards the end of the ceremony, after oblations to the fire (*homa*) have been done<sup>17</sup>.

In the most important ceremony of life cycle is marriage, in this occasions the devadasis were participated in the palace. During the wedding ceremony they were invited they are officiating with rajagurus. During this occasions devadasis had performed various duties such as during 'the road invitation' (*bata barana*) the married women, the wives of rajagurus and the devadasi did *hula-huli* and *bandapana*. At the wedding platform all the participant around it, where bride sat on the left of the groom. Outside the platform behind the groom were the following persons: trumpet blower (*kahalia*), the two devadasis on either side of him and behind them the temple-palace musicians(*bajantaris*). At the time when the hands of the bride and groom were untied by a married woman(*ahya*). in this time the auspicious song about Rama's wedding , a maiden is mentioned as the one who unties the hands. At this points the devadasis left and returned home.

In the next morning of wedding at an auspicious moment the bride and groom went to the palace. Since no one must see the queen, an awning of cloth was built in front of the main gate so that queen could go directly from the car to the palace, without seen by the public. Waiting for the couple at entrance of the palace were the married women, both relatives of the king and feudatory kings as well as the wives of rajagurus. At that time the devadasis were stood by the two 'full pots' (*purna kumbha*) on either side of the entrance. While the



couple came out of the car the women did hula-huli and accompanied it inside to the palace courtyard. There the wife of the king's father's brother- not his mother, in this case her widowhood was activated-did *bandapana* to the couple. At this situation, when the couple not walking, the devadasis sang the song the Rama wedding song; while walking, they did *hula-huli*<sup>18</sup>. After enter into the rooms the new couple performed *bandapana* by married women twice a day for next seven days, in the morning before the first meal and once in the evening. The devadasis did not perform *bandapana* but they were present, singing the auspicious song. The devadasis thus came to the palace twice a day for next seven days.

After ancestor worship the bride and groom were given a massage with turmeric and oil by the married women followed by *bandapana*. In that evening, the bride and groom all dressed up wearing crown made of wooden sticks (*kati mukuta*) sat on a raised platform. The king's mother, along with the married women, came there and performed *bandapana* to the couple while devadasi sang. The couple played a game of shells (*couries*), and the king's mother fed her son curd and rice. She placed in their folded hands raw rice (*caula anjuli*); the couple went to the worship room and deposited the rice there. The couple had proceeded to the bedchamber known as 'honey-bed-room' (*madhusajya gruha*). In this proceeding the devadasis stood at the door jamb next to the two full pots which had been placed on either side of the door. After the end of the wedding rituals in the 'honey-bed-room' viewing with 'viewing the palace deities. It completes the wedding rituals in the palaces. But three more days the devadasi and wives of the rajagurus

came twice a day to the palace to do *bandapana* and sing the auspicious song. No dei or devadasis will ever go is the funeral ceremony. The life cycle of inauspicious of palaces was not attended by the devadasis. Besides the life-cycle of the ceremonies in the palace, there are many festivals and ceremonies are conducted in which the devadasis are also attended to perform various duties in the royal palaces.

### **The Royal Festivals:**

There many royal festivals are conducted in the palaces, at that time the deis and devadasis presence is required on that occasions, particularly, three royal festivals i.e., the coronation (*gadinasina abhiseka*), its yearly renewal (the *pusyabhiseka*) in the month of *pausa*(Dec-Jan); and Durga puja which is celebrated in the palace for sixteen days.

### **The Coronation:**

The coronation is one of the important function of the palaces, it is regarded as auspicious occasion of the palaces. Generally, when old king dies, the news is broken to his eldest son in a set formula by a palace servant who says: ' a stranger (*bidesi*) lies dead in the palace. The eldest son was ordered that the corps to be removed by the back door. None of the dead man's blood relatives are affected by death pollution. The dead body was cremated by a Brahmin (*pua Brahmana*) who is generally selected from lower class of Brahman not belong to temple servant Brahmins. The dead body was taken out from the back door of the palace, no blood relations were participated in the cremation.

After the death of old kings as a mark widow of king taking off her glass bangles

with the help of wife of barber and his eldest son is bathed before the dead king is taken to the cremation ground. The eldest son was bathed which is known as 'the temporary coronation' (asthayi abhiseka) coronation ceremony was performed. All the relatives were present in the palaces as well as the palaces servants and the devadasis who sing the auspicious songs. The coronation ceremony was performed by the rajaguru. It is only after this ceremony is performed that the news of the old king's death is broadcast and his body taken to the cremation ground.

In the thirteenth day of the death of old king, the coronation ceremony is repeated. This is to be believed that the inauspiciousness (*asubha*) is over which means that the funeral ceremonies are finished on the twelfth day and the inauspicious funeral works are over. Although no one of the palaces was observes death pollution, the period and time is considered inauspicious. In the second coronation, the invitations have been sent to feudatory kings who come to palaces. In the thirteenth day, the king goes to temple where he was tied on the head a saries from Jagannatha by Rajaguru which signifies that the new king has became the servant of lord Jagannath. In the ground the when the kings son is child, then before coronation he will be married and coronate. S.N. Rajaguru<sup>19</sup>, has mentioned such evidence that according to Kenduli inscription of Narasingha Deva, when Codaganga's father was died his son was only four year. His mother sought the help of her brother the Cola king of Kanchi in the South. So Chola king immediately arranged for the wedding of his sisters son with his own daughter who was even younger than Codaganga. By performing this wedding Codaganga was able to be crowned king<sup>20</sup>.

The second coronation is a short ceremony than the full coronation. This ceremony is conducted after the kings wedding only. The pushyabhiseka was conducted after the marriage as per the rajaguru's guideline. The ceremony was celebrated as abhiseka ceremony in every years. It is regarded as important day for the king. The celebration is conducted according to the rajaguru's mantras and guides, where the Devadasis are always presents in the ceremony, that their presence think to sacred, so in every good thing of the palaces is attended by Devadasis. In the ceremony when king was coronated, the wives of the rajaguru's and other married women do a *bandapana*, at the same time the devadasis sings auspicious songs.

#### *The New Regnal Year Ceremony*

The regnal year of a king was celebrated particularly during Gajapati. The regnal year is not the same as the date of coronation but it is fixed date, namely the twelfth day of bright fortnight of the month Bhadraba. Which is known as anka, the first anka is the year that the king has been enthroned. In the functions the deis and Devadasis are required, which is to be an essential according to astrologer. They are sang the auspicious song during the ceremony<sup>21</sup>.

#### *Durga puja and Dusahara*

The Durga puja and Dusahara is also celebrated in the palace. In the festival of sixteen days, the goddess has procession nearby the palace. The goddess was carried by eight men of cowherd caste which is known as 'promenade' (*brahmani*). The procession was accompanied by a representative from each of the three female servants, a dei, a devadasi of the inner

division and one from the outer division. The three women were danced when the procession was stops in front of one monastery not far from the palace, on the main road<sup>22</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

From the above account it is clear that devadasis are regarded one of the significant part of society in the high respectable position. They are intellectual ladies who were permitted to read the religious texts; they are participating in all the important function of the society and taking leading role in them. Because of their auspiciousness always they are invited by the royal palaces for initiation of the function to conclude. In some cases they are often a relation with the

royal princes as their concubine. All the functions of the royal palaces were invited to devadasis to attend with singing and dancing as per the requirement of the situation. Devadasis were not married to mortal man they only married with the chief deity of temple. Besides it they have permitted to have a relation with the mortal man particularly with the water giving categories and legalized to have a family and child birth. But they are not permitted to go with any of the mortal man and not to share of her husband. So devadasis often enjoyed by the high class society. In Odisha the position of devadasis are quite better than other part of India.

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