

UNDERSTANDING THE DEVADASI THROUGH HER REPERTOIRE

Lecture with demonstrations

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The "Devadasi," literally translated as "God's servant," eventually came to signify "temple dancer" based on her profession. The Devadasi is an enigmatic figure who evokes a range of emotions, including curiosity, respect, fear, admiration, discomfort, resentment, and empathy. While evidence of her existence dates back to before the Common Era, references to her as an organised dancer within a guild emerge only from the 16th century. The existence of the temple and the court woman served a context and purpose, underscoring a strong case for feminine empowerment and the complex interdependence of society. This powerful woman, who embodies a rich history, continues to face social stigma due to her unmarried marital status and the eroticism in the songs she performs. The law forbade her from dancing on any occasion, stripping her of her economic agency and driving her into a state of apparent invisibility, whether through shaming or deification.

These hereditary women dancers were known by various names across different regions of India before the term 'Devadasi' became established in the 20th century. They are referred to as Kalavantulu in the Telugu-speaking areas of Andhra Pradesh, and I am a descendant of the Kalavantulu families. This presentation highlights the empowered yet marginalised Kalavantulu woman through her repertoire. It explores the Kalavantulu dance traditions and history in relation to both past and present society.



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