



## The Devadasi (Devaradiyar) system in Kanyakumari district: A historical and socio – cultural study

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### Abstract

The Devadasi system, also known as the Thevaradiyar system, which prevailed in Kanyakumari district in the southern part of Tamil Nadu, was a traditional social institution centred around temples. This system, which flourished within the administrative context of the Travancore state, integrated religious rituals and cultural activities such as music, singing, and dance into the lives of women. While initially providing social respect and economic security, this system gradually deteriorated due to administrative changes, the moral perspectives of colonial rule, and social reform movements. This article examines the origin, functioning, social role, decline, and legal abolition of the Devadasi system in Kanyakumari district within its historical context.

**Keywords:** Thevaradiyar, Devadasi system, Kanyakumari district, travancore, women's history

### Introduction

In Indian social history, temples have served not only as centers of spiritual worship but also as crucial structures for economic, administrative, and cultural development. Particularly in South India, various social systems developed centered around temples. These systems preserved social order and cultural traditions, and guided many dimensions of social life. Among them, the Devadasi or Devaradiyar system was particularly significant.

The Devaradiyar system was a traditional socio-religious system in which women were dedicated to temples to serve the deity. These women participated in temple rituals such as daily pujas, festivals, and processions, and showcased arts such as music and dance. In this way, they contributed to the smooth functioning of temple worship and played a vital role in the continuity of artistic and cultural traditions. In earlier times, Devadasis were considered to be respected and esteemed members of society.

Since Kanyakumari district was under the rule of the Travancore kingdom for a long period, the Devadasi system that prevailed in this region had some unique features compared to the systems found in other parts of Tamil Nadu. The temple administration policies, land revenue system, and administrative practices related to religious activities of the Travancore government shaped the functioning of the Devadasi system. As many temples possessed lands and economic resources, the Devadasis were sometimes provided with livelihood security. These women, known as Devadasis, played a significant role in temple worship traditions and also influenced social and cultural life. Their life history is an important area of study that helps in understanding the social status of women, the power of religious institutions, and the nature of social changes. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to examine how gender identity, social conditions, and traditional systems have transformed over time.

### Research Objectives

This article is based on the following objectives:

- To explain the historical origins of the Devadasi system in Kanyakumari district.

- To examine the functions of the Devadasis and their social status.
- To analyze the impact of the Travancore administration and colonial ideologies on this system.
- To evaluate the reasons for the decline and legal abolition of the Devadasi system.

### Methodology

This study is based on the historical method.

**The primary sources include:** Temple inscriptions, Administrative documents of the Travancore state, Legal documents and government orders

**The secondary sources include:** Research works on the Devadasi system, Research articles on women's history and social reform, all of these have been used with a critical perspective.

### The Origin of the Devadasi System in Kanyakumari District

The Devadasi or Devaradiyar system, prevalent in the Kanyakumari district, served as a significant social institution within the temple-centric administrative system of the Travancore state. While other parts of Tamil Nadu were dominated by the Chola and Pandya dynasties, the Kanyakumari region remained under the political, religious, and cultural influence of the Travancore state for a considerable period. Inscriptions and temple records found in major temples such as Suchindram, Thiruvattar, Agastheeswaram, and Thovalai reveal that women were officially recognized as temple servants. The dedication of women to the temple was not only a religious ritual but also a system that provided social and economic security.

Families, mostly from service communities, considered the Devadasi dedication as a means to gain social respect and economic security. After the dedication rituals, the woman was considered to be formally married to the deity. Through this, she acquired a unique religious identity that distinguished her from ordinary women. Over time, this system became hereditary. The service continued through successive generations within Devadasi families. While this

ensured the continuity of the system, it severely restricted the personal freedom of the women involved.

### The Services and Lifestyles of Devadasis

In Kanyakumari district, the services of the Devadasis were not limited to artistic performances but were an essential part of the temple worship system. Their daily lives were directly linked to the temple's puja timings, festivals, and ritual schedules.

From a young age, they were trained in music, singing, rhythm, dance, and temple worship traditions. In the early days, the Devadasis served as important cultural custodians, preserving religious songs, worship practices, and temple culture. However, due to their complete dependence on the temple administration, their lives lacked complete independence. Although some Devadasis owned land and property, most lived in a state of economic insecurity. Social customs and religious norms also controlled their personal lives.

### Social Changes and Criticisms

Towards the end of the 19th century, social criticisms against the Devadasi system intensified. Christian missionaries operating in Travancore severely criticized the temple-centric institutions and portrayed the Devadasi system as an immoral social practice.

Concurrently, the English-educated Indian upper class, having adopted Victorian family values, put forward the idea that women's lives should be centered around marriage and family. In this context, the Devadasi system was viewed not as a sacred tradition, but as a system that controlled and exploited women. The impact of these criticisms was reflected in the policies of the Travancore government. Administrative orders were issued to prevent new Devadasi dedications. This marked the beginning of the gradual decline of the Devadasi system.

### The decline of the Devadasi system

In Kanyakumari district, the decline of the Devadasi system did not happen suddenly. Economic changes in temple administration gradually undermined the foundations of this system. Due to land reforms and the transfer of temple revenues to government control, the traditional economic support for Devadasis diminished.

As a result, many Devadasis were forced to move away from their temple-centric lives. Due to the lack of adequate rehabilitation programs, they faced problems such as poverty, social exclusion, and loss of identity. With the declining importance of temple festivals, the traditional artistic skills of the Devadasis also lost institutional recognition. This further intensified their social marginalization.

### Legal Abolition

The legal abolition of the Devadasi system demonstrated the government's firm stance on women's rights and social reform. The Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, enacted in 1947, declared the dedication of women to temples a legally punishable offense.

After Kanyakumari district was merged with Tamil Nadu in 1956, this law was fully implemented. However, although the law abolished the system, rehabilitation measures such as education, employment, and social integration for former Devadasis were not adequately implemented. Therefore, it is

clear that the legal victory did not translate into a complete social victory.

### Discussion

The Devadasi system in Kanyakumari district cannot be evaluated solely from a simplistic moral perspective. It functioned simultaneously as a cultural institution, an economic system, and a social structure that controlled the lives of women.

A historical perspective that understands both the cultural contributions of the Devadasis and the inequalities they experienced is essential. This system serves as a crucial source for historical studies that examine gender, religious authority, and state intervention.

### Conclusion

In Kanyakumari district, the Devadasi (temple dancer) system holds a significant place in the social history of South India. This system, rooted in temple culture, underwent significant transformations due to royal patronage, colonial influence, and the impact of social reform movements.

While the abolition of this system was a crucial step towards women's liberation, its historical memories and social consequences continue to be part of contemporary social discourse. Further studies based on local documents and oral histories will shed more light on this aspect of social history.

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