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CHAPTER 8

The High Cost of Dancing: When the Indian Women's Movement Went after the *Devadasis*

Teresa Hubel

On the other side of patriarchal histories are women who are irrecoverably elusive, whose convictions and the examples their lives might have left to us—their everyday resistances as well as their capitulations to authority—are at some fundamental level lost. These are the vast majority of women who never wrote the history books that shape the manner in which we, at any particular historical juncture, are trained to remember; they did not give speeches that were recorded and carefully collected for posterity; their ideals, sayings, beliefs, and approaches to issues were not painstakingly preserved and then quoted century after century. And precisely because they so obviously lived and believed on the underside of various structures of power, probably consistently at odds with those structures, we are eager to hear their voices and their views. The problem is that their individual lives and collective ways of living them are impossible to recover in any form that has not already been altered by our own concerns. In making them speak, by whatever means we might use (archives, testimonials, court records, personal letters, government policy), we are invariably fictionalizing them because we are integrating them into narratives that belong to us, that are about us.¹ Given the inevitability of our using them for our own purposes, we cannot justify taking that all-too-easy (and, as this essay will suggest), middle-class stance that posits us as their champions, their rescuers from history. It falls to us to find other motives for doing work that seeks them.

In the case of this essay, the *them* are the *devadasis* or temple dancers of what is now Tamilnadu in southern India (the term *devadasi* literally translates as “female servant of God”), especially those dancers who were alive during the six decades of the nationalist movement. This movement was

meant to grant Indians freedom from colonial oppression and give them a nationalist identity, but if it succeeded, at least to some extent, in accomplishing these things, it did so at the cost of the *devadasis* and their dance traditions. Janet O'Shea (1998) explains the logic through which the newer institution, nationalism, drove out the older one, the profession and culture of the *devadasis*: "Indian nationalism has often required a shift away from cultural diversity in order to construct a unified image of nationhood . . . The *devadasis* were threatening . . . because they represented, for the new nation, an uncomfortable diversity of cultural practices and cultural origins" (p. 55). Most scholars who have written about the modern history of the *devadasis* would agree with this explanation.² To the elite men and women who had the greatest say in what would constitute the new Indian nation, the *devadasis* were an embarrassing remnant of the pre-colonial and pre-nationalist feudal age and, as such, could not be permitted to cross over into the homogeneity that the nationalists hoped would be postcolonial India. The campaign to suppress the *devadasis* and to eliminate their livelihoods culminated in the *Madras Devadasis Prevention of Dedication Act* of 1947, an act brought about largely through the efforts of middle-class Indian nationalists who were also social reformers and, often, feminists—that is, advocates not only of nationalism but of the burgeoning women's movement that was to ensure so many of the legal rights Indian women enjoy today. That feminists who were determined to extend the rights of some women should also work to deny rights to other women is the conundrum that this essay examines.

Its subject generally, then, is the colonial confrontation between the Indian women's movement and the *devadasis* of South India. Initially analyzing the representation of these dancing women in selected historical and literary texts, it next charts the involvement of early twentieth-century feminism in the decades-long persecution of this female profession. I subsequently explore the reasons behind the participation of one female group in the suppression of another, ending finally with an inquiry into the implications, particularly for middle-class feminists, of choosing a course of action that requires the conquest of female collectives outside the mainstream norm. As I indicated above, what I cannot hope to achieve in the course of this essay is the recovery of some kind of authentic *devadasi* voice; it simply isn't possible. But I do plan to use the modern history of these female dancers, matriarchs, and religious devotees to suggest the dangers for feminists and dancers of colluding with forces of homogeneity, even anti-imperialist and liberal ones such as Indian nationalism.

THE HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE DEVADASI

The entrance of the *devadasis* into Western discourse coincides with the advent of European imperialism. Travel memoirs, dating from the earliest

period of European trade expansion into India, often include descriptions of these women. Not surprisingly, they symbolize the wealth, the wonder, and the sexual license that Europeans equated with the East. For writers like Domingos Paes, who accompanied the Portuguese envoy to the court of Krishna Raya at Vijayanagar early in the sixteenth century, the dancers are curiosities, notable for their baffling practices and their tantalizing sexual reputations. Paes (cited in Kersenboom-Story, 1987) composed his narrative for European readers, who were at this time largely unfamiliar with the everyday details of Indian life. Consequently, his images of India, especially of the dancers he saw in the court, are predictably exoticized:

They feed the idol every day, for they say he eats; and when he eats women dance before him who belong to that pagoda, and they give him food and all that is necessary, and all the girls born of these women belong to the temple. These women are of loose character, and live in the best streets that there are in the city; it is the same in all their cities, their streets have the best row of houses. They are very much esteemed, and are classed amongst those honoured ones who are the mistresses of the captains; any respectable man may go to their houses without any blame attaching thereto. (p. 36)

That he bothers to mention that such "women . . . of loose character" live in the "best streets" and the "best . . . houses" and that "respectable" men may visit them without suffering public censure suggests just how bewildering Paes finds the *devadasis* and their position in the elite Hindu society of Vijayanagar. Paes was one of the very first European writers to associate the *devadasis* with the profession of prostitution, but many others followed his example, including the Indian social reformers of the late nineteenth century. What is behind this labeling is the questionable assumption that the *devadasis'* unconventional sexuality—their tendency to participate in sexual relationships outside of the traditional Hindu marriage—was analogous to that of the prostitutes of Europe. However, in his desire to make the unfamiliar knowable by constructing a seamless comparison between it and that with which he was familiar, between the *devadasis* and European prostitutes, Paes and the writers who came after him demonstrate a telling inability to confront the profound difference that these often affluent, and always literate and religiously devout dancing women represented for European conceptions of female sexuality.

Devadasis also appear as figures or characters in imaginative constructions of India: fiction and poetry written by Indians and Europeans alike. Frequently, they are marginal figures whose function in the text is to lend it an exotic and erotic flavor. It might be argued that the second-century Tamil classic *Silappadikaram*, in which a dancing girl, Madhavi, wins the heart of someone else's husband, only to lose it again because of the irrepressible devotion of his wife, constitutes an early exception to this typ-

ical rendition. Still, although rich in its depiction of early dance culture in southern India, *Silappadikaram* is ultimately a story about conventional domestic relationships. Madhavi is a secondary character, a kind of foil for the persistent wife Kanagi. It is Kanagi whom the story celebrates and privileges.

A similar sort of argument could be made about the devadasi character in R. K. Narayan's delightful novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. Like so many of the female characters that Narayan has created, Rangi is an adjunct; the main narrative concerns a gentle male protagonist, Nataraj, and his ferociously male adversary, Vasu. Rangi, who is Vasu's girlfriend, plays out her role on the fringes of the masculine tale that the novel seems most determined to tell. However, as I've argued in another place (Hubel, 1994), interpreting the text through the character of Rangi, though she is undoubtedly secondary, allows a reading that disturbs the main narrative. Her defiance of the role that the Hindu patriarchy insists she fulfill, that of the middle-class wife, threatens Nataraj's world even more so than do the antics of Vasu. So even in a relatively recent piece of writing—Narayan's novel was published in 1961—the *devadasi's* sexuality stands in counterpoint to some female standard erected by an overriding patriarchy.

The nationalist and social reform movements in India tended to focus on their sexual lives as well. The only occasional mention of *devadasis* in books, speeches, and newspaper articles from the nationalist period in Indian history belies their formidable significance to the predominantly middle-class and upper-caste values that formed the bedrock of assumptions that fuelled nationalism. Seeming sympathetic to what they saw as the deplorable plight of the helpless *devadasis*, the nationalists generally portrayed them as women caught in an evil practice, a practice that desperately needed to be abolished. This is how Gandhi (1946) described them in a 1925 article for *Young India*, "Of all the addresses I received in the South, the most touching was one on behalf of the *devadasis*—a euphemism for prostitutes. It was prepared and brought by people who belong to the clan from which these unfortunate sisters are drawn" (p. 166).

Gandhi closes the article with a rousing call to the men of India to root out corruption everywhere, "And let every pure man, wherever he is, do what he can to purify his neighbourhood" (pp. 166–167). The premise underlying his injunction is that the men of the *devadasi* clan are doing just that—purifying their neighborhood by working with Gandhi to put an end to the profession of their "unfortunate sisters." In these nationalist texts, the *devadasis* are merely somewhat contemptible victims because, by this time in Indian history, their status as prostitutes has been taken for granted. That they might be something else—dancers, wives of gods, professional women—is not even considered.

Depictions of the *devadasis* are also common in the history sections of numerous books about the classical dances of India. However, these

glimpses of the temple dancers and their dance are extraordinarily insubstantial and usually filtered through the eyes of some long-dead European—a priest, an amateur anthropologist, or a merchant traveler like Domingo Paes writing his memoirs. Such portraits are invariably shaped by the writers' specific agendas, many of which were imperialist or nationalist as well as powerfully elite-class and androcentric in their allegiances. For instance, Beryl De Zoete, while providing no evidence whatsoever for her assertion, confidently writes in her 1953 book *The Other Mind: A Study of Dance in South India*, "There is no doubt that the Philistinism of their English rulers, like the Puritanism of the Muslims they succeeded, helped to debase the art of the *devadasi*. The professional, secular Nautch girls were too often ignorant of their art, vulgar and degraded" (p. 162). We can trace her confidence in this particular opinion to her unquestioning acceptance of Indian nationalist and middle-class views of the subject. Significantly, this class was one of the groups that benefited from the official suppression of the *devadasi* culture.

All of these constructions of *devadasis* have at least one thing in common: They constitute the *devadasi* as an object of knowledge. In other words, we are permitted to see the *devadasi* only as she is seen by another—a European visitor to India, an Indian nationalist, or an English dance scholar. What little we know about these women is usually mediated through the perspectives of people who are not *devadasis*. In most Indian history, *devadasis* usually do not speak but are only spoken about. The scarcity of published material recording the subjectivity of the *devadasis* themselves represents a considerable gap in our knowledge of this history and these women, a gap we are wise to keep in mind when we write about them. As sympathetic as I am to the historical *devadasis*, I cannot, because of this present gap, recover them as anything more than victims of history, a depiction that is surely too simple to do real justice to these women's lives over the centuries. A community that speaks divergently for itself (that is, through the mouths of more than a tiny minority of its people), though it inevitably speaks through ideological filters over which it may have little control, nevertheless emerges into history in much more complex ways than one that is mostly spoken about. Thus it is crucial to remember that the case I make here—this exploration of the missing connection between the *devadasis* and the Indian women's movement of the first half of the twentieth century—is imbalanced. Because there exists much information about the women's movement from the perspective of the women who helped to create it and few records of the *devadasis*' undoubtedly diverse perceptions about their profession and its suppression, the only point of view this essay can examine in any depth at all is that of some of the upper- and middle-class women who constituted the movement's leadership. How the *devadasis* might have returned their gaze or how their experiences as temple dancers might have undermined or bol-

stered the anti-Nautch campaign that sought to rid India of their traces is a more formidable subject, best left for another essay.

THE NEW PATRIARCHY AND THE SUPPRESSION OF THE DEVADASIS

In her detailed and carefully argued article, "Reform and Revival," Amrit Srinivasan (1985) explores the alternate efforts of various social reform parties and of the Theosophical Society to ensure the repression and eventual extinction of the *devadasi* culture. This event, which began in 1892 with the anti-Nautch campaign and was crowned by the 1947 Act, was successful, according to Srinivasan, in part because a politically astute faction—most of whom were men—of the caste community to which the *devadasis* belonged was determined to stamp out the woman-centered tradition that the *devadasis* had managed to sustain. Srinivasan leaves no doubt that these men were motivated by a desire to usurp the power and authority that their women had built up for themselves over the years. She writes, "The aggressive anti-Brahmanism and anti-ritualism of the Backward Classes Movement of the South provided the men of the *devadasi* group with a powerful ideology with which to overcome the humiliation of the Anti-Nautch campaign and fight for dominance both within the household and wider political society" (p. 1874). Under the guise of rescuing their women from the clutch of Brahminism, the *devadasis'* men managed to secure for themselves the property and inheritance rights that *devadasi* custom had guaranteed mostly to the women in their matrilineal lines. They were also not, as already suggested, alone in their crusade. They had joined forces with social reformers and members of the Dravidian movement—again, most of whom were men—to almost obliterate the female profession of dance and temple service. It is perhaps not so surprising that the men of the *devadasi* community should collaborate with the new Indian patriarchy, which had, in part, been created by the imperatives of a nineteenth-century middle-class social reform movement. After all, both the *devadasis'* menfolk—their sons, uncles, brothers, as well as other men from their castes—and the social reformers were committed to the belief that Indian women *should* be defined only by their domestic relationships with men. As Kumari Jayawardena (1986) has pointed out in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, the "issues tackled by the reform movement . . . were raised by bourgeois, male social reformers from urban areas who tended to idealize women's role as wife and mother in the context of patriarchy" (p. 79). Being the wives of gods and dancers by profession, the *devadasis* hardly fit into this androcentric and uniform conception of Indian womanhood, which the new patriarchy was intent on establishing in India.

THE SUPPORT OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

What is surprising, however, is how much support the men of the *devadasi* community and the social reformers received from the Indian women's movement. The Irish feminist Annie Besant, who went to India in 1893 to contribute to the nationalist struggle for independence and who helped found the Women's Indian Association in 1917, joined the anti-Nautch campaigners in condemning the *devadasis*. She was quoted in the July 14, 1894, issue of the *Madura Mail* as an opponent of a group of Hindu revivalists who were dedicated to the task of preserving the *devadasi* tradition. Besant's attack on the temple dancers was grounded in the premise that, because they were sexually active, they were no longer authentic practitioners of their dance, "It is absurd to speak of dancing-girls as 'accredited ministers'. The ancient religion trained them as chaste virgins, and their ancient religious functions were dependent on their virginity. Losing that, they have lost their ministry" (quoted in Marglin, 1985, p. 10). I have yet to find any evidence to support this representation of the nineteenth-century *devadasis* as degenerate artists-cum-devotees, a representation that has become a truism in certain dance academies and schools in India. Various song lyrics as well as the historical records of the *devadasis* that exist would seem to suggest that sexual abstinence was never a requirement of the profession. Srinivasan's (1985) research has led her to the same conclusion. She writes, "If anything the Tamil Bhakti tradition of which the devadasi was an integral part, rejected Puritanism as a valid religious ethic for its female votaries" (p. 1876).

Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a powerful leader of the women's movement who has been described by two contemporary feminists as "India's greatest woman social reformer" (Basu & Ray, 1990, p. 184), was one of the most outspoken critics of the temple dancing tradition and was at the forefront of the legislative battle to abolish temple dedication, the ritual through which a woman became a *devadasi*. Her name was also associated with another famous social reform crusade of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the struggle to put an end to the Brahmin institution of child marriage. Reddy was fierce in her denunciation of both of these Hindu practices. Indeed, she saw herself as a rescuer of Indian women and girls less fortunate than herself, like child brides and temple dancers. This attitude is evident in much of her writing on these issues. For example, among her papers in the archives of the Nehru Museum and Memorial Library is an undated article, entitled "An appeal to the public" and clearly meant for publication in a newspaper, that castigates those men from the Brahmin community who continue to support and participate in arranged marriages to pre-pubertal girls. The article probably dates from the 1920s, when Reddy was lobbying the Indian government to pass the Sarda Act. This was a bill that had been introduced into the Legislative Assembly in

1927 with the object of preventing child marriages by prescribing a minimum age for marriage and a punishment for those who failed to conform to the new law. In her article Reddy asserts that while the "enlightened womanhood of the land . . . have been pleading so eloquently for the innocent suffering womanhood of the country," various orthodox men of the Brahmin community, particularly the young university students, continue to "come forward with out-of-date and antiquated shastraic quotations [about the religious sanction accorded the practice of marrying girls before they have reached puberty] without any regard to the very deplorable conditions prevailing in . . . society." She ends the article with a threat. If the orthodox persist in quoting "their out-of-date and antiquated authorities," she will publish the names of Brahmin men who have recently married little girls; "many of such are even to-day to be found at Madras in the well-to-do and educated families," she adds.

What this example of Reddy's courageous and forthright politics shows us is the paternalism implicit in her approach to certain Indian females—those whom she feels are unable to defend themselves. This was exactly the stance she along with many other feminists of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) chose to take in regards to the *devadasis*. As the first woman elected to the Madras legislature, she introduced a bill in 1927 that would prohibit the *devadasi* system. In 1929 she put forth another bill, this one designed to force the Madras government to release all the *devadasis* of the province from their temple obligations. By this time, the anti-Nautch campaign had begun to seriously undermine the *devadasi* heritage, making it an increasingly socially unacceptable profession among the middle- and upper-class Hindu communities of the south. However, Reddy's contention that what was needed to alleviate the situation of the *devadasis* was not laws so much as "strong public opinion to back these laws" (Basu & Ray, 1990, p. 63) suggests that even as late as 1929 South Indian communities were not entirely in support of this feminist movement to end the *devadasi* involvement in the religious service of the temples. But Reddy and various other women of the AIWC justified their intervention in the lives and choices of the *devadasis* by constructing them as mostly guileless "girls" rather than women, girls who could be defined solely by their sexual practices, which, in turn, could be understood only as prostitution. From the time she first introduced a bill to outlaw the *devadasi* system until 1947, when a law was enacted, effectively ending the *devadasi* profession, Reddy and her middle-class, upper-caste feminist supporters worked to sway public opinion against the temple dancers, though they were usually careful to depict them as pawns in a system run by men, thereby suggesting that it was not other women or a woman's livelihood they were undermining so much as the immoral men who were living off these women and directing this livelihood. In a 1937 letter to Gandhi, in which she thanked him for his support for her bill, Reddy

made it clear just how important this issue was for her: "I place the honour of an innocent girl, and saving her from a life of shame and immorality, even above Swaraj [Gandhi's word for Indian self-government]. . . . I will value Swaraj in as much as it gives protection to these women by the speedy abolition of unhealthy and pernicious customs" (quoted in Asaf Ali, 1991, p. 220). Clearly, Reddy saw herself as the champion who would save these powerless women and their daughters from the "unhealthy and pernicious customs" that were enslaving them.

Whether or not the *devadasis* saw themselves as enslaved seemed beside the point for Reddy and the other participants in the women's movement. In fact, Reddy made it clear that she was abundantly uninterested in any opinions on the subject from the *devadasis*. When a number of *devadasi* associations protested against the 1927 bill to the then Law Minister C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, insisting on their right to continue their profession, Reddy (quoted in Anandhi, 1991) responded, "As far as the local *devadasis'* protest, they are all set [sic] of prostitutes, who have been set up by their keepers. How can the government take cognisance of such a protest? . . . So I would request you not to pay any heed to such protests from a most objectionable class of people in the society" (p. 741). Obviously, for Reddy, *devadasis* were alternately innocent and helpless girls or degraded and hence untrustworthy women, their condition at any given moment being dependent on what she needed them to be. Rather than existing for her as people as "real" as she was, with personal as well as collective agency and views, they were, as Anandhi maintains in her essay on the subject, a metaphor to be deployed variously in Reddy's self-interested narrative of enlightened womanhood.

Let me emphasize again that the opinion of the *devadasis* on the eradication of their profession is neither easy to establish nor simple to assess. But there is evidence, similar to the *devadasi* protest mentioned above, that points to a considerable amount of resistance on the part of these temple dancers to the anti-Nautch campaign. In her doctoral dissertation entitled "Another Stage in the Life of the Nation: *Sadir, Bharatanatyam, Feminist Theory*," Srividya Natarajan (1997) quotes a series of memorials and testimonials that various groups of *devadasis* submitted to the government of Madras in an attempt to retain control of their profession and the meanings that could be ascribed to it. The following 1927 self-description from the South India Devadasi Association is one such example:

The community which dedicates their women to temple service are known as *DEVADASIS*. It is a compound of two words God and Devotee and means the devotee of God. Dasi is the feminine of the word Dasa occurring in such words as Ramadasa. Popularly our caste is styled by the name of dancing girls probably due to the reason that most of our caste women are experts in dancing and music. Such a hoary name is now unfortunately mingled up and associated with an im-

moral life. It would, we submit, be easily conceded by every one that the institution of dedicating one's life to a temple has nothing to do with prostitution. (p. 124)

The translating of their title, *devadasi*, from the Sanskrit is meant to remind elite Indians not only of their profession's ancient roots but of the religious component in their temple service. These *devadasis* were obviously aware that they and their culture were being unfairly judged by an alien moral order that was antagonistic to them and to the set of values that had sustained their customs. They were forced, however, to make their case within the terms of the very moral framework that had already condemned them as degraded and to call on that system for a fair hearing: "We want that we should be heard. The fundamental maxim of law and justice is that one should be heard before anything affecting him is passed and we therefore pray that we should be heard and full justice rendered to us" (quoted in Natarajan, 1997, p. 127). Far from being heard, the voices of the *devadasis* who objected to the actions of the anti-Nautch campaigners were drowned out in the chorus of nationalist, social reformist, and feminist calls for the extermination of their way of living.³

In their encounter with the *devadasi* system, Reddy and her feminist colleagues adopted the same paternalism that they simultaneously used in their political movement to end the Hindu custom of arranging the marriage of high-caste girls. But while such paternalism might have been considered appropriate when it was wielded on behalf of helpless children from their own caste and class group, girls whose youth prevented them from being able to resist such patriarchal subjugation as child marriage and whose oppression these women could be expected to comprehend either because of their personal experience of it or because they themselves had been able to witness it close up, it could only be seen as presumptuous when it was used in regards to the *devadasis*, most of whom were adults earning independent livings and managing extended family households. Furthermore, with the exception of Reddy herself, who was, interestingly enough, the daughter of a *devadasi*, the elite-class and upper-caste women of the Indian women's movement had little knowledge, personal or otherwise, of the *devadasis* and their everyday lives.

The culture of the elite Hindu castes and classes and the *devadasi* tradition of South India, though they frequently intersected, particularly on special public occasions such as temple festivals and Hindu weddings, were radically dissimilar in their respective value systems and in the practices associated with them. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their disparate marriage customs. Although *devadasi* custom also allowed for the marrying of daughters before puberty, significant differences existed between more conventional upper-caste marriages and those in which the *devadasis* participated, the most obvious one being that these girls were married to gods, not men, an act that conferred on them the status of *nitya sumanguli*. Saskia Kersenboom-Story (1987) explicates the term:

The traditional view holds that all women share, by their very nature, the power of the goddess. A regular progress is imagined in the degrees of auspiciousness of varying status of women: at the top of the scale is the married woman whose husband is alive and who has borne several children; she is called *su-mangali* 'auspicious female'. At the lowest rung of the ladder is the widow who is considered highly inauspicious. As a ritual person, the devadasi exceeds even the *su-mangali* in auspiciousness. Firstly, because her individual female powers are ritually merged with those of the goddess, and secondly, because she is dedicated to a divine husband, i.e., a husband who can *never die*. In consequence, she can never lose her (double) auspiciousness and is therefore called *nitya-su-mangali*, the 'ever-auspicious-female.' (p. 204)

Protected throughout their lives from the possibility of becoming widows, *devadasis* were considered lucky by the Hindu community of the pre-colonial and colonial periods, up until the various campaigns against them of the mid- to late nineteenth century and were therefore accorded a certain respect and admiration denied to most other Hindu women of the time. Furthermore, while the *devadasi's* marriage was generally consummated by a man who would later serve as her patron, often a wealthy Brahmin or member of the landed and commercial elite, and while this man usually became her sexual partner, unlike a conventional wife, she was not required to maintain his household or any other man's household or to surrender her rights to their offspring. The children of the *devadasis* belonged only to the *devadasis* and not to any men at all. The consequence of this practice was that the *devadasi* culture was one of the only matrilineal and matrifocal cultures in India. Moreover, because the female line was given precedence and because the females were the main source of income for the extended families in which they lived (outside the temple they were paid for their dancing, while temple tradition guaranteed them income from inherited temple lands), female children of *devadasis* were favored over male children when it came to inheritance. Obviously, the power and authority available to the *devadasis* far surpassed that of the average Hindu wife and mother. At a time in India when most high-caste women did not work outside their homes and were therefore made dependent on male providers, the *devadasis* were able not only to support themselves through the practice of their artistic profession but to maintain entire households.⁴ Given the *devadasi's*, at one time, unique but still honorable place within the larger Hindu community, Reddy's determination to rescue her from her apparently debased conditions seems at best misguided philanthropy and at worst middle-class arrogance.

THE COMMON GROUND BETWEEN THEM

No solidarity was ever achieved between the women of the women's movement and the female temple dancers. I find this surprising because,

putting aside their contentious sexuality, the *devadasis* had something that the feminists of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s seemed determined to achieve for themselves: economic independence in a profession that at least at one time was considered respectable and was frequently profitable. This desire on the part of middle-class Hindu women for financial autonomy from the men in their households—the fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons whose welfare was deemed by Hindu scripture the primary concern of women—had not always been an issue in the history of the Indian women's movement. In the nineteenth century, for instance, the middle- and upper-class women promoting female emancipation seemed more interested in redefining their roles as wives and mothers in order to accommodate their new literacy and politicization. But by the third decade of the twentieth century, a note of dissension had crept into the rhetoric of the women who took over the movement from the elder generation (Hubel, 1993). These second wave feminists began to talk of their right to an education similar to that permitted to men and to an occupation outside the home should they wish to pursue one. In her 1945 presidential address to the AIWC, Hansa Mehta (1981) was straightforward in staking women's claims to these prerogatives: "It is in the economic sphere that women will have to fight hard to establish their position. We must demand the right for every woman to work. Let no disability be attached to her on the ground of her sex in regard to public employment, office of power or in the exercises of trade or calling and women must receive the same payment as men for the same amount of work" (pp. 8–9). Yet in their attempt to find new categories for womanhood, ones that would accommodate their public lives and professionalism, which they had developed as a result of their participation in the nationalist political arena, the women of the women's movement overlooked one indigenous women's profession that might have served as an ally, maybe even as an example.

THE DEVADASIS' SEXUALITY AND MIDDLE-CLASS WOMANHOOD

Why did they do this? In part, it was the sexual lives of the *devadasis* that prevented the women activists from appreciating this female-dominated culture. Nationalism in India, in both its early and later phases, encouraged an asexuality in women because it placed enormous emphasis on their potential or actual motherhood. Even the role of wife was subordinated to this celebration of Indian motherhood, which reached its apotheosis in the construction of India as the motherland. Within the terms of this representation, the role of woman as the lover of man was elided. Female erotic sexuality is therefore a subject notably absent in nationalist writings and speeches, and, because of the close connections between nationalism and feminism during this period, in feminist works as well. The

consequence of this deliberate erasure, then, was that the sexuality of the *devadasis* inevitably seemed excessive and aberrant. Thus it was because of this fundamental inability to come to terms with a female sexuality that was exercised outside the acceptable borders of middle-class and upper-caste womanhood that the women of the women's movement allowed the *devadasi* culture to be destroyed or, as in the cases of Besant, Reddy, and numerous others, actually assisted in delivering the final blows.

And yet for centuries in India the world of the Hindu temple dancers existed, if not in conjunction, at least alongside that of the upper-caste Hindu woman. Occasionally, these two groups of women even shared the same men, the Hindu husbands who visited the homes of the *devadasis* and sometimes served as their patrons and lovers. Although often depicted in a dichotomous relationship with one another, the wife versus the dancer, these two kinds of women were nevertheless both conspicuous figures within the various historical Hindu patriarchies of South India that preceded the nationalist era. It was only the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that saw the one female group consume the other. The historical shift that enabled this massive alteration to a status quo that had, in various forms, lasted for so very long is the consequence not only of the nationalist ideology that redefined the Indian woman but also of the growing dominance of the middle class in India, a class that understood itself in liberal humanist terms as universally significant, that identified its own values and way of living as the only legitimate moral choices. Hence, while earlier forms of Hindu upper-caste patriarchy tolerated and even encouraged a certain diversity among the subordinate female groups within its reach (a diversity, it is important to remember, that still worked to the primary advantage of the upper-caste men in whose interest these patriarchal structures functioned), the new liberal humanist patriarchy, with its increasingly ascendant middle class, set itself up as the yardstick by which all other caste and gender groups would be measured and in so doing stifled the diversity of those whom it also marginalized.

Owing to the tendency toward universalization at the heart of this class's humanist perspective, Indian feminists from the middle class were fundamentally unable to conceive of a world not made in their own image. With the gradual adoption of a secularist philosophy among the liberal men who were the nationalists and social reformers as well as among the women in these families, middle-classness also came to be seen as the *definitive* characteristic of these elites, a move that, in its substitution of class for caste, made their upper-caste positioning or (in the case of Reddy) identification invisible. Congruently, caste began to be constructed as something possessed only by people lower down on the social and political ladder, people like, for instance, the *devadasis*, who, although they did not constitute a caste on their own but became *devadasi* through ini-

tiation rituals (see Kersenboom-Story, 1987), nonetheless were predominantly associated with the non-elite artisan castes. This public erasure of upper-caste status in its relation to lower-caste identities allowed for the emergence of middle-classness as a norm and an ideal rather than as a distinct and dominant site in a social and political hierarchy, which is what it was and is. The middle-class women of the early women's movement (including Reddy who, although not upper caste by birth was still middle class by marriage, education, and identification) could therefore define themselves and their views as normal, natural, moral, and obviously right and correspondingly paint the *devadasis* as purveyors of an antiquated and morally repugnant caste tradition that was best left in the Indian past. The erasure (but not the extinction) of their own upper-casteness prevented these women from being able to see their involvement in the suppression of this female profession as an exercise of power, through which a high-caste and middle-class community forced its will on a lower-caste group. That this group was also female in its composition made it even more vulnerable to that community's insistences, since the men who held the ultimate authority under this new liberal patriarchy, on behalf of which the middle-class feminists were unwittingly working, could legally and culturally control and define the meaning of femaleness. And they did. To their own women, they assigned the quality of purity, while the *devadasi* was made to play the oppositional role. Forced to inhabit an identity associated with impurity, her reputation as "ever-auspicious" became moot.⁵

THE REVIVAL OF THE DEVADASIS' DANCE

But the *devadasi* tradition did not entirely die out. Some of the attributes and accoutrements of their dance were preserved through the vehicle of what has been called a revival movement, orchestrated principally by another group of women from the upper castes and middle classes: not the freedom fighters and social reformers who worked to outlaw the *devadasi* tradition, but artists and theosophists, whose justification for appropriating the dance of the *devadasis* involved the construction of the dance as a national trophy belonging to all Indians. The *devadasis'* *sadir*, a regionally specific art form performed by a clearly demarcated group of female professionals, became *bharatanatyam*, an emblem of Indianness designed to display modern India's ties to its gloriously ancient past as well as a dance that middle-class, upper-caste girls and women could do without losing their decency. In the process of this transformation, the problematic sexuality of the temple dancers was expunged. As one of the recipients of the reconstructed dance tradition, I have firsthand experience of how this metamorphosis was accomplished.

In 1983 I started studying *bharatanatyam* in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

My first teacher was a Brahmin woman from South India who had the good fortune to learn dance for a time with the most famous of *devadasi* dancers to survive the social reform campaign, Balasaraswati. Drawing an artistic genealogical line between me and that great dancer, my first teacher told me a few small, though somewhat unconnected details about the temple dancers and their difficult history. With her encouragement I went to India to study dance for a year in 1985–1986. I was accepted into the famous performing arts college in Madras, now Chennai, called Kalakshetra. Kalakshetra was founded in the 1930s by a South Indian Brahmin woman named Rukmini Devi, and it is renowned for its teaching of bharatanatyam. Rukmini Devi was one of those middle-class, upper-caste dancers credited with the revival of the dance, which, we were told at the school, would have been lost had it not been for her. By being among the first Brahmin women to do the dance in public, she lent it a respectability it did not have when the *devadasis* alone did it.

There was a great deal of talk at Kalakshetra about *bhakti*, an attitude of pure spiritual devotion thought appropriate for a dancer of bharatanatyam, and little mention made of *sringara*, which my first teacher had taught me to understand as the expression of erotic and sexual love, also intimately connected to spiritual devotion. Kalakshetra, though it was many wonderful things, was one of the least erotic places I have ever been. The rules there were strict, especially concerning the behavior of its young female students. I was a 25-year-old woman at the time, whose Canadian parents had long since ceased to be concerned about the quotidian details of my relationships with young men, and so I found the life at Kalakshetra to be a little bewildering and confining. I was told, for instance, by one of my fellow students, a young Tamil man from Malaysia whose homosexuality was well known even among the teachers, that I should refrain from touching him on the arm, as I tended to do as a gesture of affection, because the teachers wouldn't like it. Off the school grounds was a different story. Here we could demonstrate physical affection toward each other all we wanted. My point is that any gesture between a young man and woman that might be construed as erotic or sexual was not permitted. Similarly, in the realm of dance, *sringara* was not permitted, and young dancers who demonstrated this expression were thought to be vulgar, both by the students and the teachers. I, of course, amended my conduct in this and in other ways because I felt it was a small price to pay for the privilege of attending such an extraordinary school.

I had gone to Kalakshetra expecting that in the course of my education I would find out more about the *devadasis*. I didn't, and it wasn't until years later that I began to recognize that the existence of Kalakshetra—with its *bhakti*-minus-*sringara*-oriented dance—was predicated on the absence of the *devadasis*. Although Rukmini Devi's bharatanatyam was an offshoot of the *devadasis'* *sadir*—indeed she developed the Kalakshetra

style after learning *sadir* from one of the best-known of the *devadasi* gurus in the 1920s and 1930s, Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, and one of its most prominent practitioners, Mylapore Gowri Ammal—these dance forms could not occupy the same space. In fact, the one was working assiduously to annihilate the other by insisting that its own version was more authentic, more true to ancient Indian tradition than the other. What the crafters of *bharatanatyam* did to erase the dance's associations with the *devadasis'* *sringara*-inflected *sadir* was to claim to have gotten their inspiration for the dance *solely* from certain ancient Sanskrit texts on performance, for instance, the *Natyasastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*. Such erasure could not, however, entirely disguise *bharatanatyam's* indebtedness to *sadir*, for, as Natarajan points out, despite the declaration by Rukmini Devi and other Brahmin dancers that they were resurrecting the dance from ancient Sanskrit texts, there was really only *sadir* from which to mount such a resurrection.⁶ She describes this so-called resurrection in comparison to the historical borrowings between various geographically based styles of *sadir* (the Pandanallur style, the Vazhuvoor style, etc.) that had characterized earlier interactions among *devadasi* dance traditions: "The slow rhythms of cross-fertilization and exchange between . . . styles gave way, in the period of the Brahmin takeover, to the abrupt disturbance and acceleration that marked the advent of the universal modern: grossly indiscriminating hands rummaged through finely nuanced regional forms, selecting a theme here and a movement there, to produce the hegemonic version of *bharatanatyam*" (p. 209).

It is the hegemony of *bharatanatyam* with its attendant all-India ideology that should be troubling for dancers today, whether they claim descent from the *devadasis'* *sadir* or from the more recently invented form. For such hegemony freezes the meanings that the dance might generate, in India as well as abroad, limiting those meanings to the narrow confines of a Brahmin-sponsored Sanskritic tradition and to an expression of a distinctly unempowering middle-class femininity. In fact, Natarajan herself, a dancer as well as a scholar, goes so far as to make this assertion about *bharatanatyam* in contemporary India: "The dance in India is so congealed in this alliance with the 'tradition' and the disabling aesthetic (re)invented by Brahmin activists that it is hopelessly incapable of adapting itself to address the ethos of the modern" (p. 236). Innovation, the force that makes art forms relevant and inspiring to successive generations of artists and audiences, is difficult to produce when a dance has been made to reiterate again and again an unchanging and eternal Indian heritage.

Kalakshetra taught me a lot of things, but it could not, in good faith, teach me about the *devadasis* because to do so would be to call into question the fundamental assumption on which the school operated—the assumption that people who had not been initiated into the *devadasi* system

could, nevertheless, in the new independent India, teach and learn the *devadasis'* dance. I might add that it was precisely this assumption that created the reality that enabled *me* to learn this South Indian dance though I was neither a dancer by inheritance nor even an Indian.

I no longer study or practice bharatanatyam, but the position I fill now as a professor of English in a small Canadian university college, a professor whose area of specialization is Indian literature in English and British literature about India is entirely the result of those eight years studying bharatanatyam, including that one incomparable year at Kalakshetra. I am, consequently, in a precarious position: indebted to a disjunction in Indian history that shifted the dance from out of the hands of the temple dancers and into those of the more politically powerful revivalists, I still cannot help but lament the displacement of the *devadasi* from the public arena of dance, and not for nostalgic or romantic reasons. I regret the defeat of the *devadasi* heritage, profession, and tradition by the forces of feminism because, if feminism is indeed, as we all believe and hope, a project of emancipation, the liberation of one female group at the expense of another undercuts the ideals that propel this worldwide project. The field of emancipation isn't expanded to include more women; instead, various freedoms and advantages are simply transferred from one female place to another. And in the "modern" societies of the new millennial globe, it's almost always the working-class or otherwise subaltern women whose concerns are sidestepped and whose authority is subverted by a feminist program that is, inadvertently, or not, pursuing middle-class interests. That this situation is pertinent to Indian feminism today is borne out by an article in one of the more recent Subaltern Studies collections. In "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana (1997) argue that "A wide range of issues rendered critical by feminism are now being invested in and annexed by projects that contain and deflect that initiative. Possibilities of alliance with other subaltern forces (dalits, for example) that are opening up in civil society are often blocked, and feminists find themselves drawn into disturbing configurations within the dominant culture" (p. 233). Avoiding such disturbing configurations must surely be one of the paramount aims of global feminism as it recreates itself in the twenty-first century. Let the history of the *devadasis* be a cautionary tale, then.

NOTES

1. There have been many feminist scholars who have made this point or something like it over the last 20 years or so, among them Rosalind O'Hanlon (1988) in her essay "Recovering the Subject," Gayatri Spivak (1988) in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," and, more recently, Anne Hardgrove (1995) in "South Asian Women's Communal Identities."

2. There are a number of scholarly texts that should be standard reading for anyone interested in the nationalist history of the *devadasis*: Amrit Srinivasan's 1985 essay "Reform and Revival," Frédérique Apfel Marglin's (1985) book *Wives of the God-King*, Anandhi's (1991) essay "Representing Devadasis," Janaki Nair's (1994), "The Devadasi, Dharma, and the State," and an excellent doctoral dissertation by Srividya Natarajan (1997) entitled "Another Stage in the Life of the Nation: *Sadir, Bharatanatyam, Feminist Theory*." For a reading that focuses on the response of the British courts in late colonial India to the changing status of the *devadasis*, see Kunal M. Parker's (1998) "'A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes.'"

3. To maintain a sense of the diversity of this community, I should note that not all *devadasis* sought to preserve their traditions of temple service, music, and dance. Social activist and novelist Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, for instance, who was herself once a *devadasi* as well as being born to one of the castes from which *devadasis* were drawn, saw the profession as the product of the patriarchal and upper-caste insistence on having sexual access to low-caste women. Initially aligning her politics with that of the Indian National Congress and Muthulakshmi Reddy, and subsequently rejecting them both as Brahmin-dominated, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar joined the anti-Brahmin Self Respect Movement and worked to bring an end to the practice of temple dedication. Her novel is analyzed in relation to the anti-Nautch campaign in a very interesting essay by Anandhi (1991) called "Representing Devadasis: 'Dasigal Mosavalai' as a Radical Text."

4. Scholars who write about *devadasis* often address what they see as a tendency among contemporary feminists to romanticize the lives and practices of the *devadasis* of South India. For example, Nair (1994) insists, "We must not exaggerate the power enjoyed by devadasis, who despite their relative autonomy nevertheless remained dependent on that triad of men within the political economy of the temple, the priest, the guru and patron" (p. 3161). Similarly, Anandhi (1991) declares, "it was not a free flow of devadasis' desire which marked out the system, but its almost exclusive control by the landed patrons" (p. 739). These are important reminders of the patriarchal orbit that circled the profession of the *devadasis*, in many ways placing them on something of the same footing as their counterparts, the Hindu wives. Still, it also needs to be conceded that the celebration implicit in much recent scholarship on these temple dancers, including in this essay, can be traced to their significance as markers of female diversity in the larger picture of pre-independent India. That there should be more disparate roles and accepted behavioral patterns for women in the world, rather than fewer, is one of the most fundamental of feminist ideals. The *devadasis*, at one time, represented an alternative to the principal life script allotted to Indian women, that which led only to wifehood and motherhood. Though their economic decisions and sexual choices were also circumscribed by patriarchal dictates, the *devadasis* and their history continue to point the way towards inspiring possibilities for women. At this moment in India, when Hindu fundamentalism works to essentialize women once again, it seems especially crucial to celebrate those who don't or didn't fit comfortably into Hindu patriarchy's coercive narrative.

5. Much recent scholarship on *devadasis* concerns not the historical temple dancers of colonial India but *devadasis* in India today, many of whom are drawn from lower-caste and dalit populations and whose profession does not include dancing. Like the middle-class crusade to end the historical practice of temple dedication

and temple dance, current writing on these contemporary *devadasis*, although clearly driven by such admirable intentions as the desire to draw attention to and hence bring about the end of the sexual exploitation of working-class women by middle-class and upper-caste men, also often contains middle-class, universalist assumptions about appropriate sexual conduct for women and the inherent inferiority of non-middle-class cultures and peoples. See, for instance, Kay K. Jordan's (2002) essay "Devadasi Reform," in which the following statement occurs: "The poverty and ignorance prevalent in these [scheduled] castes cause parents to dedicate daughters to serve deities" (p. 47). Although Jordan earlier acknowledges the complicated reasons why impoverished parents might want their daughters to be *devadasis*, including the fact that such status sometimes confers social auspiciousness and esteem, she seems finally to shrug off these complications to paint the *devadasis* and their parents as simply desperate dupes of an ideology that only benefits the upper castes. The *devadasis* and their families emerge in such depictions as incapable of making their own decisions regarding their own lives, implicitly leaving the field clear for non-impooverished and non-ignorant (meaning educated in acceptably middle-class ways) crusaders to save these people and their daughters. As I've tried to demonstrate in this essay, analysis like this purveys middle-class values in the guise of objective scholarship and runs the risk of becoming complicit with elite-class and upper-caste exercises of power against working-class and dalit persons and communities.

6. A visual example of the Brahmin revivalists' success in erasing the *devadasis'* *sadir* is available in *Dance Magazine* by dance scholar Kimerer L. LaMothe (2001) entitled "Sacred Dance, A Glimpse Around the World." In it, LaMothe outlines the significance of a midday dance performed by *devadasis* at the Jagannatha temple in Puri as a ritual that transforms a meal into nourishment for both gods and pilgrims. The photograph that accompanies the short piece, however, is not of a *devadasi* but of a *bharatanatyam* dancer, and in the text below the photograph, *bharatanatyam* is described as "a classical Indian style danced by the *devadasis*" (p. 64).

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