Devadasi System in Mysore

Why in news?

Recently, historian Janaki Nair's talk at the Bangalore International Centre outlined the rise of Devadasi system in Mysore and its abolition by the early 20th century.

How did the Devadasi system originate and evolve over time?

- Devadasis are also called as or **"*dancing girls*".**
- **Origin** – It traces its origins to the *close of 8th century*.
- **Historical reference** – According to an inscription dated 800 AD, a *virgin girl*, 8 mattars of land, 1,000 cows and a swing *was dedicated for the deity*, to a local temple in Mayile village.
- Other records also indicate the presence of devadasis *in Jain, Shaivite and Vaishnavite temples* across the region.

Chola-era Rajarajesvara Temple in Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu records the names of the 400 devadasis of the temple and their remuneration in the form land grants.

- **Royal patronage** – It flourished in Mysore province under the ***patronage of Wadiyars***.
- **Established system** – By end of 10th century, young girls dedicated to temples were made to perform different services like
  - Dancing, singing, drum beating, carrying sacred aaratis and participating in temple processions.
- **Training to dedicated girls** – They underwent rigorous training in *nritya (dance) and geeta (vocal music)*.
  - Krishnaraja Wadiyar III employed Chinnayya Pillai of the Thanjavur Quartet to train the dancers.

Thanjavur Quartet *were 4 brothers Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivananda, and Vadivelu, who lived during the early 19th century and contributed to the development of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.*

- **Maintenance of devadasis** – Portions of land or significant sums of money were set apart for the women and their expenses.
  - One epigraph mentions about a grant of money for various items including '*looking glass of the dancing girls*' and "the grant was to continue as long as sun and moon exist."

What were the social status of devadasis?

- **Wider presence** – During the reign of Wadiyars, Devadasis resided and performed in temples *in cities and towns* including Mysore, Bangalore, Mulbagal, Kadoor, T. Narsipur and so on.
- **Social support** – Upon from royal patronage, they were also supported by merchants, landlords and art connoisseurs.
- **New social class** – They had their *own laws of inheritance, rules* of etiquettes and even panchayats.
    - Girls belonged to *various castes* such as Kurubas, Bedas, Gangadikara Vokkaligas, Telugu Banajigas and Lingayats.
- **Matrilinear tradition** – The Devadasi system allowed the adoption of girls through females.
- They followed ***a matrilineal inheritance system*** (property passed through women).
- **Stature in weddings** – During several weddings, apart from the groom, the devadasis (considered *nitya sumangalis* and hence auspicious) *tied a second tali around the bride's neck*.
- Many of the Devadasis rose in prominence and enjoyed significant wealth and social standing.

Reasons for Social Importance of Devadasis
• **Expertise in fine arts** – Music, dance and literature. • **Learning and catholicity** – They had greater exposure than the ordinary women in society. • **Acceptance of polygamy** – A dancing girl who was not very rigid about having contact with a single man only was not looked down upon. • **Higher economic status** – They owned land and received grants, securing financial independence and influence. • Grants given to Devadasis reached a peak in the 12^{th} century. • **Permanent position** – Their posts were permanent and hereditary and upon the death, all temple activities were halted and ensured dignified burial.

What led to the decline of the Devadasi system?

- The Devadasis started seeing a decline in their social status by *around the 18^{th} century*.
- **Factors for decline –** *Exploitation of women within* the system became more rampant.
- **Influence of Western morality** – It enlightened the larger conscience of the Indian society and equated the system to prostitution thereby protesting against it.
- **Anti-nautch movement** – It became prominent during 19^{th} and 20^{th} century that aimed to abolish the practice of dedicating girls to the system gained significant momentum.
- **Sanitizing the sadir** – A process where women of the dominant castes learn and perform dance in *more secular kinds of locations*.

***Sadir or Dasiyattam**, the dance form performed by Devadasis was erotic in nature.*

- **Administrative changes** – Muzrai Commissioner A. *Srinivasacharlu played a major role* in abolition in Mysuru.

  *The **Muzrai Department** manages matters related to religious and charitable institutions in Mysore province.*

- By 1898, he announced that *no new Devadasis would be appointed* after their predecessors passed away.
- He discontinued the appointment of Devadasis in Muzrai temples across Mysore, Kadur, Tumkur, Kolar, and other regions.

- **Progressive reforms**
  - **Infant Marriage Regulation (1894)** – Banned marriages for girls below 8 years and limited the age gap to 30 years.
  - **Hindu Women's Property Rights (1933)** – Granted Hindu women rights to inherit property.
- **Abolition** – Mysore became one of the 1st regions in India to abolish the Devadasi system in 1908-09 much earlier than Madras Devadasi Abolition Act in 1947.

Reference

The Hindu | The Devadasi System in the Mysore Region

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering