

Deity's Servants and Maids: On the Priests and Devadasis in the Hindu Temple

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Abstract: In the Hindu temple culture, the priests and the Devadasis are two castes with very special identities. The thinking and behavior modes of both of them are out of the ordinary. In religious practice and sacrificial rituals, the priests and Devadasis act as media for communication between believers and deities. Thus it constitutes an indispensable part of the Hindu temple culture.

1. Introduction

The Hindu temple is the art for building sacred spaces and is one of the main places where believers practice religious activities. In the sacred space built by the architects, various sacrificial ceremonies have been performed day after day and year after year. The religious practice activities of the believers, the Hindu temples, and the deities have formed a kind of organic interaction relation between the subject, the intermediary and the object. This makes the unique Hindu temple culture continue to now and constitutes the most key part of the Indian religious culture circle. This paper focuses on the human other than the objects, namely the group of priests and Devadasis dedicated to the deities in the Hindu temple, and treats the Hindu temple culture from the perspective of the subject (human) of the Hindu sacrificial ritual activities.

2. Deity's Servants: Priests

The priestly caste is professional clerics of the Hindu temple. They hold cumbersome and varied sacrificial ritual ceremonies as a hereditary occupation in exchange for the source of life of them and their families. They are regarded as having omnipotence as the worldly embodiment of the "Arahitogami" identity and become the most valuable caste in the Hindu temple. Under the giant framework of the Hindu caste system, defining caste identity of the priests is a very interesting academic issue and some difficulties that have puzzled Chinese scholars long time.

The first issue to be explained is that the priests in the Hindu temple are usually held by males of the Brahmin caste. Under the Hindu caste system, the Brahmin caste is given the right to learn Veda and Vedanga and other holy scriptures. They are the intellectual and cultural elite caste of society. These are what the sacrificial rituals need. In the Hindu temple culture where ritualism prevails, Brahman, as the main constituent members of the priesthood, is only qualified to appear as the host of various sacrificial rituals held in Hindu temples after long-term study and training. The procedure of the sacrificial rituals is complicated, and involves many holy Hindu scriptures. Only after long-term hard and excellent special training, they can't master them as simple as the outsiders. In addition to the Brahmin caste, in some small Hindu temples, the persons that are not belong to Brahman caste act as a priest occasionally, but they are only limited to the Kshatriya and Vaisya of the twice-born castes.

The second issue to be clarified is the marital status of the priests. In the Hindu temple culture, there is a rule that is customary and cannot be broken, i.e., the priest must be a person who is married and whose wife is alive. If the priest's wife died unfortunately, he must select either remarriage or retirement. In reality, there is almost no widowed priest who continuously engages in the sacrificial rituals. [1]The Hindus believe that the deities can only produce a divine power when they are married with their spouse (Sakti). Getting rid of their Sakti, the deities will reduce the divine power greatly and even they can't do anything in the face of the evil forces of the universe.

This is the underlying reason why the deities in the Hindu temple have spouses. In the Hindu temples, the statues of deities and spouses often appear in pairs, and for the sake of it, the engravers made them for the intentional motivation. As the “Arahitogami”, i.e., the priests who are incarnated worldly need their spouses to effectively exert the divine power of the deities. Therefore, those who have not yet married can't act as the priests of the Hindu temples. .

The third issue to be discussed is that a hierarchical social caste within the priests is formed. In the Hindu temple, the priests have mastered the expertise and serve as a bridge and media for the communication between the believers and the deities. They enjoy a high reputation and many privileges within the range of the temples they serve for. Just as the hierarchical rank formed under the caste system in the Hindu society, the status of priests is not equal in the Hindu temples. On the contrary, there are many artificially established and insurmountable gaps between them. In the Hindu temples, the group of the priests is both an identity hierarchy and a hereditary occupational system. The priests perform different specific tasks. There are priests who sing, read the Veda, take responsibilities for moving statues of deities during the festivals, specially engage in caring for the living of the statues of deities and so forth. The priests of all kinds of work mustn't be capable of acting beyond their powers, but only work within the functions of their own competence, or otherwise, they will offend the deities and reduce the effect of the rituals, they will even anger the Deities and incur a big disaster, and cause endless disasters to communities in the range of divine power of the temple. The lord priest is at the very top of the pyramid of the priesthood, and has many privileges and awesome prestige as the head of the priest. In general, only the Lord's priest is qualified to enter inside the core structure of the Hindu temple, Galba Griha. The lord priest is only qualified to serve the symbol or idol of the holy place Garba Ghari, and even own a privilege to swing the oil lamp in front of the statue of the lord deity. The priests of other levels can't overstep to execute this right.

3. Deity's Maids: Devadasis

The Devadasi is a very special female group in the Hindu temple. Especially, it was a group of particularly active professional clerics in the medieval temple of South India. Its special identity and distinctive behavior patterns have aroused a lot of controversies and suspicions. Till today, this group of old special women in the Hindu society is a topic to chat about at leisure time. The cross-cultural misunderstanding is still widely spread. All kinds of false statements still mislead the public's opinion tendency and value judgment.

On market, there has always been a lot of malicious misinformation, which equates Devadasi with the female group who prostitute for the source of living materials, and thinks that Devadasi is identical to the prostitutes, and regards Devadasi is a group of temple or holy prostitutes for prurience of priests and elders in Hindu temples and believes it is an obvious signs of moral degeneration and corruption. In fact, why there is a kind of such argument is that there is a lack of deep understanding of the Hindu temple culture. It is the result of the colonists who criticized the morale in a conceited attitude, who totally didn't know the history and doctrine of Hinduism, arbitrarily weighed and judged from the respective of the cultural background and value ethics of Christianity, and who must inevitably drew a conclusions that run counter to the facts in 19th century.

In medieval Hindu temples, Devadasi, who served the Deities for the rest of her life, was not the temple or the holy prostitutes as viewed today. Their sexual relations followed the usual ethics, and there was no sign of prurience and corruption. Since the 6th century, there has been a unique phenomenon of religious culture in the Hindu temple. Many girls who were young and beautiful have voluntarily abandoned the joys of secular life and resolutely entered the vast temple by marrying the Deities. They contributed the youthful years to the Deities in the dark, and they wouldn't marry for life. However, un-marrying for a lifetime didn't mean that Devadasi was adhering to the core spirit of celibacy and asceticism. They still had the same fair and reasonable sexual relationship as ordinary humans, and they still gave birth to the baby as ordinary women. When Devadasi entered adolescence, a special sacrificial ritual will be held after the menarche, and

she would seek a fixed life partner openly. Generally, a man of rich family and higher caste could win this honor. Once this gender relationship was established, the man enjoyed the right to live with the woman while he had to shoulder the responsibility of providing the woman's daily expenses. The children of both of them couldn't enjoy any rights of the children of the man and his wife. The children of Devadasi and his life partner would still serve as professional clerics in the temple, and her daughter would inherit the mother's legacy and become a Devadasi, and her son would become a musician to appease the deities in the form of music in the temple during the sacrificial ritual ceremony. This custom, like the concubinage in old China, is a long-term fixed relationship, subject to the traditional Hindu ethics and morality, and has nothing in common with the temple or holy prostitutes condemned both in speech and writing by later generations.

In a sense, the vicissitude history of the rise and fall of the Devadasi system is also the vicissitude history of Hindu temples. An Indian scholar once commented that the rise and decline of Devadasi (system) shows the identical feature to the rise and decline of Hindu temples. [2] After the 10th century, along with the invasion of foreign armed forces, a movement of devastating Hindu temple gradually emerged from the north to the south tragically in the Indian subcontinent, and the temple building movement started from the 6th century inevitably fell from the pinnacle of the power after 400 years of glory. With the demise of many Hindu dynasties, many Hindu temples also lost royal support and inevitably showed signs of decline and downfall and were no longer able to carry the economic burden of supporting a large number of professional clerics. Many people including priests and Devadasi had also lost their sources of life. In order to cope with the pressures and challenges brought about by the pressure of survival. Some Devadasis prostituted in order to exchange the daily life materials. These cases were especially common after the Muslim forces entered India, and the internal reasons were partly thanks to the destruction and plunder of the Hindu temple by the Islamic armed forces and the fact that Devadasis prostituted often during the colonial era. Ever since, in the writings of Western scholars in the colonial era, Devadasi had become a synonymous of the so-called temple and holy prostitutes. This assertion that separated the historic connection is remarkably neither scientific nor reasonable. An irrefutable fact is that during the long development and evolution period of Hindu temples, there was such a business that Devadasis prostituted for survival. Some prostituting Devadasis were only found in a short historical period. The judgment made by scholars of the colonial era based on Christian ethics and some conditions in their time are not a scientific and fair viewpoint. Such scholars inadvertently committed a fatal mistake by taking a part for the whole. It was the fatal mistakes that have led to academic brutality, as well as the misunderstandings of Devadasis and discrimination that shouldn't have occurred on Devadasis.

In the Hindu temple, the Devadasi is second only to the priests in the status and was an indispensable group of clerics in the sacrificial activities historically. As a woman who was nominally married to the deities, the Devadasi is also known as the spouse or maid of the deities. There were once numerous Devadasis in the Hindu society. In his book, the scholar David Smith recorded that there were as high as 400 Devadasis in the Brihadiswara Temple built by Rajaraja Chola I in Thanjavur. [3] This group of female professional clerics appeases the deities in the form of songs and dances in the prevailing Hindu rituals, lives with their companions in sexual life in a unique way and constitutes one of the most unique landscapes of Hindu temple culture. They have contributed to the construction of the splendid traditional art of India. Some Indian scholars highly praised the group of Devadasis and believed that such a group of special women were artists, scholars and performers of sacrificial dances. [4] Judging from the entire evolving history of the Hindu temple, the Indian scholar evaluated the Devadasis appropriately and overthrew the unfair evaluation of Western scholars in the colonial era.

4. Conclusion

The priests and the devadasis were the servants and maidservants of deity, and in the course of history they made many great contributions to the Hindu community in the South Asian Subcontinent. The priests, however, no longer play important parts in today's society with the

deepening of the secularization of Hinduism. As a cultural phenomenon and a Hindu temple system, the devadasis was abolished by the Indian government years ago. In short, the priests and devadasis were an integral part of Hindu temples and in a way they were the living fossils of traditional Hindu temple culture. Understanding their thinking and behavior patterns is essential to understand the tradition of Indian society, art, culture as well as history.

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References

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