

The Evolution of Community

- Devdasis of Goa

by

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Some of the **devdasis** of Goa managed to use their traditionally inherited skill as musicians to build illustrious careers. More significantly, the community of former **devdasis** has not been totally decimated - a portion exists as an identifiable and organised community, many of its members, men and women, being high achievers in various fields. How this transformation took place needs to be studied in depth. This article provides a few glimpses of their past and present.

THE *devdasis* of Goa were traditionally connected to the men of the Gowd Saraswat Brahman community. How this connection came about is a matter of dispute. According to Malbarao Sardesai, well known *pkhawaj*, harmonium and flute player, and scion of a leading Gowd Saraswat Brahman family, the Saraswats came to Goa with their artisans, servants, soldiers and *devdasis* (slaves to god) and *updasis* (slaves to men). However, Dr T. Gune former director of Goa Historical Archives, and a member of the Karad Brahman community, which has a longstanding feud with the Saraswats, claims that the *dasis* already existed in Goa when the Saraswats, on the run from Muslim forays in the north, migrated southwards to Goa. It is possible that the *devdasi* structure already existed in Goa and got attached to the Saraswats when they settled there.

There were different kinds of *devdasis* attached to the Saraswats: among them were the *kalavants* (from the root *kala* or *ait*) who were singers and dancers; the *bhavinis*

who sat in the temples close to the deity and had semipriestly duties like fanning the image, carrying the earthen lamps and lighting them for worship; and temple servants like *bhandis*.

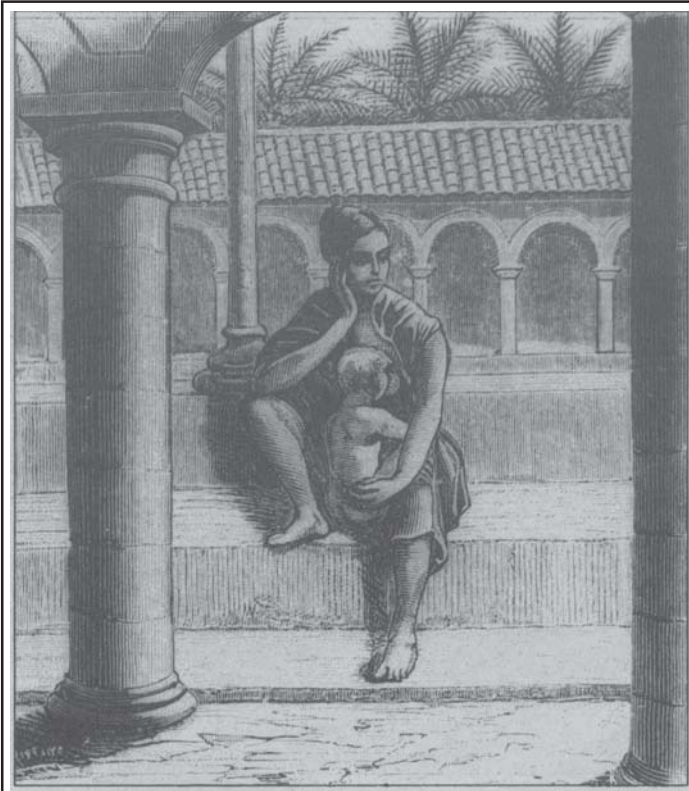
Malbarao Sardesai claims that his ancestors kept the *kalavants* free not enslaved. Saraswat girls were

encouraged by their parents to learn singing and dancing from the *kalavants*. The *updasis*, who were concubines, were at risk of being pushed into prostitution. *Devdasis* too sometimes got involved in nonmarital unions with rich pilgrims, priests, local traders and landlords, and in the colonial period, sometimes with British officers.

The Saraswats had contrived a system known as *sessa* whereby *devdasis* were wedded to the temple or the god, before puberty. The *sessa* consisted of an offering by an original settler of the village, of a betel fruit pierced by a sword and a coconut. Often, the man who made the offering earned the right to enter into a union with the girl, which, however, took place only after she attained puberty, as in any child marriage.

The temple priest also performed a marriage ceremony for the girl, using the usual wedding ritual. A woman, usually an older *devdasi*, officiated as the bridegroom in the ceremony. Her name was entered in the records as the husband. As

Literal translation of original caption: "Gentile woman breastfeeding child." The woman is a devdasi in a temple.



in other systems of child marriage, at puberty there was another ceremony, known as *hath lavni* (touching by the hand) which generally culminated in sexual consummation.

Within the *devdasi* community, the women sang and danced and the men played the *mridang*, the *tabla* and the harmonium. The children of *devdasis* were known as *chheduanle* or offspring of girls. Even when women of the community got married legally, their legitimate children were still labelled *chedduanle* or even *cheddianle*, the offspring of prostitutes.

However, *devdassis* actually had a different legal status from prostitutes. They were exempted from the enrolment and licensing system imposed on prostitutes by the Portuguese rulers of Goa. As long as a *devdasi* lived in the temple precincts, she had the status of a handmaiden of god; only if she fielded in the township as a prostitute did she lose that status.

Exactly when and how some *devdasis* got involved in prostitution is

not clear. Nor is it clear how the occupations and lifestyles of the community changed in the twentieth century.

Me Kon (Who am I?), the autobiography of Rajaram Painginkar, the illegitimate son of a Brahman widow turned *devdasi*, recounts how he started his life as a destitute but ended up a prosperous mine owner. The book unfortunately indicts his own community, especially the women, as immoral, and therefore it annoyed the community. But it does give some glimpses into the trauma suffered by members of the community who were looked down upon by the others.

Painginkar, along with others like him, launched a crusade to abolish the *sess*a system of women's betrothal and surrender to the temple. Supported by a legislator, Prof Narain Bhandodkar, a Bill was introduced in the Goa legislative council in 1930 and the *sess*a was abolished by law.

After its abolition some reformist members renamed the new community the

Gomantak Maratha Samaj, thus creating for it a caste status. The inclusion of the word "Maratha" in their assumed title is a pointer. Most Saraswats dismiss the community's Maratha identity as a fad. They argue that the original *devdasis* were certainly not Marathas. But just as Dr. Ambedkar tried to get the scheduled castes a new status by encouraging them to embrace Buddhism, a casteless religion, the creators of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj opened for the community new possibilities of identity. They could, for instance, migrate to Bombay, adopt Marathi as their language, and seek their fortunes in the world of the performing arts for which many of them had the skills and basic training. There, in a big city, their children could go to school without being haunted by their past.

According to a report from Dr Germano Correia, professor of the Goa Medical School in 1936, an average *devdasi* in those days could earn a substantial amount over five to six years. The women who were kept by big

Literl of Original caption in portuges: Dancing girls, and mridang players playing sarangi"



traders, *nawabs*, *rajas* and highranking British officers, had an economic base to build a new future.

The Gomantak Maratha Samaj formed a ladies' association, wherein women of the community who had taken to other means of earning and were prospering, taught less well-off *devdasis* new skills, conducted literacy classes for them in Marathi, and encouraged them to send their children to school. The former *devdasis* contributed liberally to the Samaj, and the Portugese government also gave the Samaj grants.

According to Malbarao Sardesai, some Goan *kalavants* became prominent in the Jaipur *gharana*. In *Assa Ashe Maaza Gomantak* (Such Was Our Gomantak) by Gopalkrishna Bhohe, the women are said to have been taught by Vithobanna Hadap and Anantbuva of Gwalior. Saraswati Bhandodkar and Hirabai Bhandodkar, both *kalavants*, migrated from Goa and made a name for themselves nationally.

Kesarbai Kerkar, born in Keri, a Goan village in the precincts of the temple, in the area set apart for *devdasis*, developed into an artist who, in the words of Ashok D. Ranade, in *On the Music and Musicians of Hindoostan*, "was one of those artists who exercised an undisputed sway over at least two generations of musicians in this century." Mogubai Kurdikar was another case of a success story in the world of music. She transmitted her heritage to Kishori Amonkar, her daughter, who is today a widely acclaimed singer.

That the rise to the top of their vocation was often more difficult for these women because of their past, is indicated in the life of Anjanibai Malpekar, a very beautiful and talented singer. Trained under Nazir Khan Bhandibazarwale, she was in great demand as a singer, but it depressed her that her beautiful looks often drew more attention from men than did her voice. Once, after a particularly stressful recital, she lost her voice and was unable to sing for years, until a holy man, Narayan Maharaj of Kedgaon, sent her a *prasad* or blessing. She recovered but decided

to give up secular music. Thereafter, she sang only devotional songs.

According to the 1904 census, the community numbed about 20,000. Today, they are about 150,000 to 200,000. Yet, such a relatively small community has produced a disproportionately large number of high achievers who have excelled in their fields. In the performing aits, Murarba Pednekar, said to be the creator of the *sursingar*; Dinanath Mangeshkar, a great singer and father of Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle, living legends of song, and also of their brother, the film director Hridaynath; Labhaskar Parvatkar, described by Dneshwar Nadkarni as a "miracle in rhythemics"; the only woman playwright of her time, Hirabai Pednekar; the incomparable singers Kesarbai Kerkar and Mogubai Kurdikar, both pupils of Alladiya Khan, and Mogubai's daughter, Kishori Amonkar; Sridhar Parsekar the violinist; Mudhukar Pednekar the harmonium player; Jyotsna Bhole and Ashalata Wadgaonkai, Marathi theatre actresses; Ratnaprabha, Jayashree and

Meenakshl, film actresses.

Even more remarkable are the number of achievers outside the world of performing arts - the internationally famous gynaecologist, the late Dr. V. Shirodkar, the late criminal lawyer Sushil Kavlekar, the novelist Chandrakant Kaokadkar, the late air marshal Mulgaokar, editor S. Mulgaokar, hoteher Ajit Kerkar, the late Telco chairman S. Mulgaokar, Goa's first chief minister Dayanand Bhandodkar.

A remarkable feature of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj is the immense pride of many members in themselves. Unlike those from south India, many performing artists and other high achievers do not try to hide their origins or forget their past. Rather, they regard it as worth remembering and acknowledging. Recently, the Samaj celebrated its golden jubilee, and soon after, the birth centenary of the late Dr Mulgaokar, a famous surgeon who belonged to the community.

Illustrations from *India Portuguesa* by A. Lopes Mendes, 1986.

Marriage Market

We
are commodities
furniture on sale.
Some elegant
made of ebony,
intricately carved;
others
plain, bare,
not even polished
standing
awaiting
endlessly
reluctantly
biding our time
for the right bidder.
To be sold
by the very hands
that had carved ^{us},
to our customers
at a bargain
- our future
to decorate
someone else's house.
- Archana Lakhera

