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Proceedings of The World Conference on Social Sciences
Vol. 4, Issue. 1, 2025, pp. 124 - 139
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33422/worldcss.v4i1.1214

ISSN: 2783-7785 online

Diamond Scientific Publishing

Reshaping Narratives: Women from Hereditary Performance Traditions in Early Tamil Cinema

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the lives and contributions of women from hereditary performance traditions (popularly erroneously termed as 'devadasis'), whose identities were systematically labelled as 'deviant'- both socially and legally - and whose voices were silenced within dominant historical narratives. Focusing on early Tamil cinema, the study explores how female hereditary performers navigated societal marginalisation to shape a significant yet under-acknowledged cultural legacy. The analysis delves into archival materials, film magazines, and cinematic artefacts, while also interrogating the silences within these records - the omissions and erasures that render their histories incomplete. By addressing not just what is documented but also what is absent, this paper highlights the complexities of reclaiming voices systematically excluded from historical discourse. Amid colonial, nationalist, and modernist pressures that demanded conformity to patriarchal ideals, these women found refuge and agency in the burgeoning Tamil film industry. This study reveals how their performances as actors, dancers, and singers challenged hegemonic narratives, contributing to a vibrant cultural and aesthetic landscape while resisting erasure. It further examines the strategic displacement of their bodies in favour of Brahminised ideals, situating this shift within broader caste and gender hierarchies. By bringing to light these silenced narratives, the paper seeks to disrupt entrenched discourses of morality and deviance, asserting the indispensable role of these women in shaping early Tamil society and cinema and questioning the frameworks that rendered them invisible.

Keywords: 'Devadasis'; Gender; Hereditary performers; Marginalisation; Tamil cinema

1. Introduction

Talkies entered India as part of the wider process of modernisation, transforming how sound, performance, and public presence were produced and consumed. In Tamil Nadu, the talkies arrived around 1931. As a product of this shift, cinema briefly opened up a space for women, particularly female hereditary performers, who had long been marginalised and stigmatised in Tamil society. For a short period, they found visibility within this emerging medium, until they were systemically edged out to make room for women who fit the patriarchal and nationalistic

image of 'chaste' woman. Therefore, to understand the conditional presence of women within Tamil cinema, it is important to trace and understand the complex nature of modernisation and modernity, and the tensions between access and erasure, performance and respectability and the politics of modern space and female identity.

The initiation of modernisation within the Indian subcontinent witnessed the emergence of a new kind of public space which was marked by the presence of women in it. Urban centres such as Bombay, Lahore, Calcutta and Madras were "spaces consciously invested in a (the) process of modernisation" (Niazi, 2012, p.201). Within the Indian subcontinent, this drive towards modernisation was closely knit with the notions of colonial modernity[1] as well as the rising fervour of nationalism which had taken over the nation. Modernisation had managed to destabilise the traditional forms of economic systems to make way for new forms of industries, factories, mills and so on, which allowed women to occupy certain public spaces which were previously not accessible to them (Niazi, 2012). Subsequently, nationalism aimed to not only allocate but forge identities that aligned with the larger politics of formulating a nation state and therefore, the claim of nationalism is that it allows citizenship to its people, therefore legitimising one's identity. Hence, both these categories claim to yield some form of individuality.

However, the creation of space within these categories produces major exclusions. When relegated to the role of gender, these categories exhibit a complex interplay of empowerment and constraint. On the one hand, they afford women a degree of individuality and visibility; however, within the overarching framework of patriarchy, they often manifest as mere tokenism. Consequently, the form and visibility of women's identity within physical spaces are largely determined by the patriarchal structure. The confluence of all these factors further complicated and intensified an already complex and conflicted relationship that women had with the realm of public engagement. Furthermore, the nationalistic movement facilitated citizenship but prioritised certain identities, relegating others that do not conform to the dominant narratives to the margins, even going to the extent of deeming them deviant in some cases (Morcom, 2016; Kaviraj, 1997).

This paper explores one such marginalised identity, deemed "deviant" (Sutherland, 1947; Becker, 1963; Durkheim, 2005; Lombrosso, 2006; Henry, 2018) through a blend of societal forces, judicial mechanisms and social stigmatisation. It briefly examines a critical but often overlooked aspect of Tamil cinema and society: the role and gender politics of female actors from hereditary performance backgrounds during the period 1930–1950. Drawing on archival materials, it interrogates the construction of 'deviance' (Sutherland, 1947; Becker, 1963; Durkheim, 2005; Lombrosso, 2006; Henry, 2018) associated with women from hereditary performance backgrounds in the context of modernity, and how modernity, with its inherent contradictions, treated female hereditary performers. These women, once central to cultural expression despite their often contested and ambiguous social standing, were systematically erased under the influence of colonial morality, nationalist politics, and changing ideas of the "modern" woman (Srinivasan, 1985; Oldenburg, 1990; Nevile, 1996; Sreenivas, 2011; Kaali, 2013; Morcom, 2016; Soneji, 2019; Krishnan, 2019;). The paper draws on certain archival records, film magazines, and cinematic artefacts to analyse how female hereditary performers

[1] Colonial modernity is a major aspect that led to certain kinds of major changes within the nation. According to T. E. Barlow (1997), "'Colonial modernity' can be grasped as a speculative frame for investigating the infinitely pervasive discursive powers that increasingly connect at key points to the globalizing impulses of capitalism... [it] can also suggest that historical context is not a matter of positively defined, elemental, or discrete units - nation states, stages of development, or civilizations, for instance - but rather a complex field of relationships or threads of material that connect and multiply in space-time and can be surveyed from specific sites" (p. 6)

were strategically displaced, from both the societal as well as cinematic space, in favour of the *savarna* woman, whose presence was normalised in the public eye.

It is crucial to undertake this study because the social and legal labelling of female hereditary performers continues to have far-reaching consequences, not just historically but into the present. Their livelihood was not only stripped away through legal reforms, but performing itself was rendered criminal for women from female hereditary communities. The stigma, once codified, has not dissipated; instead, it continues to mark their lives with suspicion and precarity. In a recent incident reported on *The News Minute* (22 May, 2025), the daughter of a woman identified as a 'devadasi' was denied a passport, her right to mobility, identification and education obstructed by the very system that once criminalised her female ancestors. The article, *"Waiting for Passport: How a Broken System Denies Identity and Justice to a Devadasi's Daughter"*, was authored by Nari Kamakshi, a practitioner and scholar, highlights how such structural exclusions continue to shape everyday realities. Therefore, this paper attempts to locate and analyse the historical and discursive foundations, legal, cultural, and social, that enabled and continue to legitimise these exclusions. Specifically, it aims to interrogate the language of legislation surrounding women from hereditary performance communities, examine the gaps and silences in the archival records (social, legal and cinematic), and map the reciprocal relationship between social stigma and cultural representation. By doing so, the paper seeks to critically reflect on how state, society, and cinema together participated in both the marginalisation and erasure of female hereditary performers.

2. Method

This paper uses a mixed media approach and critical discourse analysis to examine archival documents, cinematic artefacts, and theoretical texts. It explores the intersections of caste, gender, and deviance, while remaining attentive to the gaps in the archive, not as absences to be resolved, but as productive sites of meaning. In doing so, it resists what Anjali Arondekar (2009) calls the "seductions of recovery and access" (p. 18) while recognising how archival fragments still allow us to reimagine the public, legal, and social presence of female hereditary performers in early twentieth-century Madras. Further, most available literature on the '*devadasi'* tradition in Tamil Nadu tends to frame the system as a moral aberration, suggesting that it was only through Brahminical intervention that the 'crass' dances of '*devadasis'* were elevated into a classical, morally acceptable form. These accounts largely centre on colonial and nationalist agendas, often reproducing their ideological frameworks. There has been limited effort to interrogate the silences in this narrative or to read against the grain of the criminalisation that followed. This paper, therefore, draws on scholarship that shifts its focus away from colonial morality, nationalist ideals, and the dominant principles of modernity, and instead examines how these forces collectively contributed to the systematic erasure of an entire community's livelihood.

3. Women from Hereditary Background and the Early Tamil Society

Don't believe them, don't believe them, the dasi whores (tacinum taikalai).
Don't ruin yourself by trusting them, those vesya whores (ve c̄imun taikalai).
- Excerpt from *Gan.ika gun.apravartana Taravali* quoted in Davesh Soneji (2019, p. 93)

Before delving into an examination of the various aspects that led to the erasure of female hereditary performers within the arena of popular culture and society, it is important to address the problematic nature of the term '*devadasi'*. In various sources, including popular magazine

articles, news articles, scholarly works by academics, and even major websites on the internet, the term *'devadasi'* is commonly used to encompass a wide range of female communities, often simplified with English phrases such as "sacred prostitute" or "temple dancer". However, this term tends to oversimplify and homogenise[2] diverse regional practices, while the literal translation of the word ("slave of god") is frequently mistaken as a definitive definition of the category. The history of '*devadasis'* therefore, "is always "in process", pervaded by a profound sense of incompleteness. Despite being the subject of a diverse range of political investments and competing agendas, this history remains critically unfinished." (Soneji, 2019, p. 3). Further, the term '*devadasi*, came into existence post-colonial intervention - it was not a part of vernacular Indian history; that is, it was not used as a homogenous umbrella term used to refer to all female hereditary performers within the Indian subcontinent. This word was used as an umbrella term to think about all those women who were not involved in heteronormative conjugal relationships. The first census of India, taken by the Britishers in 1901 refers to female hereditary performers or as is written in the text, '*devadasis'* as "sudras…whose touch pollutes to a slight degree" (Vol XV/XI, Group V). Later in 1909, a book titled *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* by Edgar Thurston (1909) explains:

> The female members of the caste are, besides being known by the ordinary name of *Tevadiyal* and *Dasi*, both meaning servant of God, called *Kudikkar*, meaning those belonging to the house (i.e., given rent free by the Sirkar), and *Pendukal*, or women, the former of these designations being more popular than the latter. Males are called *Tevadiyan,* though many prefer to be known as *Nanchinat Vellalar.* (p. 140)

None of the older texts give the definition and identity of the '*devadasi'* as is understood and explicated in the nineteenth century texts and socio-cultural parlance. This shift started in the seventeenth century, wherein the idea of a single individual being tied to various activities began. Therefore, this phrase 'wives of gods' came from the colonial understanding of identities such as the Catholic nun, Buddhist nuns and so on. In many of the legislative archival documents, there is a deliberate attempt to establish the immoral nature of, and thereby dismiss, the practices of women from hereditary performance backgrounds by forcibly drawing comparisons with institutions that bear no historical or cultural equivalence. One such example can be found in the 'Legislative Assembly Devdasis Bill Correspondence with K. Keluskar, K. Natarajan, Mrs. S. Mathulakshmi Reddi, Mrs. K. Chattopadhyay and others – booklets, press clippings, etc., regarding draft bill to prevent dedication of women to service in Hindu Temples in India' (1929). A section titled *"Comparison of the custom with the institutions of Buddhistic Bhikshunees and Christian Nuns"* concludes with the statement: "Thus it can plainly be seen that there is not the least comparison between this custom and the great and sacred institutions of Bhikshunees and Nuns; and therefore, there is no redeeming feature whatsoever in case of this custom." (p. 12) This kind of forced juxtaposition - between female hereditary performance practices and religious institutions such as those of Catholic and Buddhist nuns - is deeply

2 "Localized practices of dedicating Dalit girls as jogatis to the goddess Renuka Yellamma Mariyamma are found throughout much of South India. The Belgaum district in Karnataka has become extremely well known in the media for these practices, but they are also present in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. Regional variations of these traditions—such as the tradition of dedicating Dalit girls as matammas or matangis to the goddess Gan ̇gamma in Tirupati, or the dedication of girls to local village goddesses in Villupuram and North Arcot districts in Tamil Nadu—also exist. Similarly, traditions of dedicating young Dalit boys as representatives of the goddess's guardian Poturaju, or the dedication of transgendered men as jogappas are found in these regions as well. However, as Dalit practices, their histories are unknown and, to an extent, irretrievable. Hence, the practices of these jogatis are only ever discussed with reference to a transregional idea of "the South Indian devadası," which falsely links them to upper-caste temples, lost art forms, and a sometimes idealized form of sexual difference". (Soneji, 2019, pp. 7-8).

problematic. While the two traditions are entirely unrelated in form, function, and historical trajectory, the correspondence attempts to bring them into a shared discursive space (merely because all these are women and are tied to religious institutions in varied forms) only to establish a moral hierarchy. In doing so, it not only denies the specificity of the '*devadasi'* tradition but also frames it as irredeemable by positioning it as inferior to institutions arbitrarily deemed 'sacred.'

The colonial understanding of the women from hereditary performance backgrounds was therefore limited to understanding them as either 'wives of gods' or 'dancing girls' (Soneji, 2019). Further, the reform movements which will be discussed in detail in the next section, sedimented the language of dedication associated with the women from performance backgrounds. These reform and revival movements are another reason why this community received the name '*devadasi'* and 'temple dancer' as there was a strong tendency to eliminate the courtly origins of their identity and their performances and place them purely within the arena of temple dedication. Therefore, 'courtesan' as a term is much more appropriate as an English equivalent for the women from performance backgrounds, than the phrase 'temple dancer', as it separates itself from the tendencies of the reform movements to limit women from performance backgrounds within the realm of temple dedication.

The revival movements, which coincided with the reform movements, and further, the people who were involved in these movements blame civilisational atrophy for the defamation ('fall from a golden age') of the courtesans. However, this is quite untrue as they always had a socially ambiguous status within the society. During the Tanjore era, numerous court poets composed derogatory verses about courtesans, and historical records indicate the court's participation in the commerce of women (Soneji, 2019). Thus, prior to the era of reforms, these individuals were already always entrenched within complex societal systems. Therefore, the degeneration myth is what enabled the reform and revival movements. Further, through both the nationalist movement as well as the reform movement, the identity of the performing woman was made illegal, bringing a conclusion to the moralising agenda that the colonial government had started. Moreover, with the coming up of popular culture, the term '*tevadiyal*' turned into a slur that directly associated sex work with the identity of female hereditary performers. This marginalisation and demonisation was so overarching that even till this day, women from '*devadasi'* families have internalised these societal perceptions of their identities.

Therefore, it is imperative to explain the choice of terminology used throughout this paper. We will interchangeably use the terms *'female hereditary performers', 'hereditary women performers',* or '*women from hereditary performance backgrounds/communities'* throughout this paper to encompass the category of women erroneously termed as *devadasis*. While using these terms, it must be noted that we are explicitly referring to female hereditary performers of Tamil Nadu. We do however continue to use the term *'devadasi'*, but strictly within single or double quotation marks, in order to signal its layered and problematic history. The term has, over time, acquired the status of a slur - weaponised to stigmatise and marginalise women from hereditary performance communities in Tamil Nadu. It may also be noted that while discussing legislative debates and historical documents, we retain the term *'devadasi'* to reflect the language of the period.

Therefore, in such cases, we retain the term to remain consistent with the archival tone and the language of the legal documents and debates. However, when advancing our own arguments, we have attempted to move away from the term to avoid reproducing its violent and reductive implications. This shift in terminology is not an attempt to erase the community's history, but rather to acknowledge how the label *'devadasi'* was instrumentalised to criminalise, shame, and socially exclude a community - and how this term continues to carry casteist and gendered

connotations. The following section examines the legislative debates and the language of the Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Devadasis, to analyse how specific terms and tropes were introduced in relation to female hereditary performers in Tamil Nadu, and how this language helped sediment and legitimise their criminalisation.

4. Women, Caste and the Legal Reforms

The *Devadasi* Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947, and even the strong movements that had started taking shape in the early 1900s against women from hereditary performance backgrounds, indirectly favoured men, propelling them into prominent roles as women's contributions dwindled around that period. This entry of men from *'devadasi'* backgrounds into non-Brahmin politics not only intertwined cinema and Tamil politics but also reshaped the public image of the '*devadasi'* community (Soneji, 2019). This transformation presented a distinctly male-dominated front, as men redefined themselves by adopting a new caste identity as *icai vēḷāḷars* ("cultivators of music")[3]. As Soneji (2019) notes, this identity aligned them with cultural production, elevating their status to *vēḷāḷars*, a middle-caste agricultural group, while erasing the previous female presence associated with their representation. These outcomes of anti-*devadasi* laws shaping a new cultural framework and empowering men from the community were pivotal in the evolution of Tamil cinema. On one side, women from female hereditary performance background families engaged in early cinema's cultural work. On the other, men partook in a newfound political assertion where cinema played a central role. Figures like C. N. Annadurai, who scripted some of the earliest explicitly political Tamil films and later served as Tamil Nadu's chief minister in the 1960s, cemented a lasting connection between politics and the cinematic world in modern Tamil Nadu. (Baskaran, 1981; Irschick, 1986; Soneji, 2019; Krishnan 2019).

Srinivasan (1985) claims that, by the 1920s, the Anti-Nautch movement had intricately woven itself into the communal politics of the Dravidian movement. Ending the tradition of female dedication became a potent political and legislative goal advocated by the non-Brahmins, forming a crucial aspect of the broader Self-Respect movement initiated by Ramaswami Naicker in 1925. The opposition against '*devadasi'* practices led by Muthulakshmi Reddi[4] and the Self-Respect movement eventually aligned on a single objective: compelling women from '*devadasi'* backgrounds to marry if they aimed to maintain a respected societal standing (Srinivasan, 1983, Soneji, 2019). As previously highlighted, women from courtesan lineages were left with a singular choice - to conform to the nationalistic notion of the ideal Indian woman. This meant not just participating in monogamous marriages as wives but also embodying the archetype of chaste "Mother India". This situation essentially stripped female hereditary performers of viable options, leaving them with almost no choice. Firstly, the

[3] This name could also have been embraced because music, unlike dance, had shed its societal stigma. Unlike the dance associated with women from performing backgrounds, music had managed to distance itself from public scrutiny and disapproval.

[4] "Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy was born to a woman named Chandrammal, who was related tothe family of Sivarama Nattuvanar in Pudukkottai, and a smarta Brahmin, S. Narayanaswami. Ironically, as Sivarama Nattuvanar and his devadasi students were composing and performing compositions in praiseof Martanda Bhairava Tondaiman in Pudukkottai, Reddy was drafting the bill in Madras that would remove them from public life altogether. Reddy's Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to HinduTemples (Madras Act No. 5 of 1929) was passed in 1929. By the late 1920s, associations consisting of men from the devadasi community such as the Mutturaja Mahajana Sangam in nearby Trichy began a public "clean up" campaign in towns such as Viralimalai, owing in large part to Reddy's Bill. Caste associations made up of men from the devadasi community such as the Isai Velalar Sangam in Kudalur (Tanjore district) wrote letters that mocked devadasi resistance to the proposed bill and urged other men from the community to support it" (Soneji 2012).

societal stigma attached to them as labelled "prostitutes" or "immoral" made it exceedingly difficult to find willing suitors. Secondly, conforming to this mandate contradicted their entire belief systems. As a result, the reform process exhibited significant shortcomings, failing to present any tangible solution to the predicament faced by female hereditary performers. Srinivasan (1985) explains,

> The reform movement compelled the *devadasis* to recognize the moral authority of household values (*grhasta*) and, significantly, required them to surrender any entitlements associated with temple duties and its associated privileges. Conversely, the men continued to engage in both temple rituals and domestic performances. Their substantial backing from the DK/DMK regional party organizations provided them with significant financial support, favoring their economic status. The abolition of the *devadasi* system ultimately favored the men within the community, distinctly diverging from the historical precedence where women held more advantageous positions. (p. 1873)

Further, Partha Chatterjee's (1989) analysis suggests that in the trajectory of nineteenth-century Indian nationalism, its initial consolidation was within the privileged realms of the upper-class domestic sphere. Therefore, the vision of the new woman in newly independent India had been in development since the early 1900s. She was expected not only to adhere to strict ideals of purity and comply with societal norms of monogamous marriage but also to find validation and worth in the new nation only if she belonged to the upper caste. This delineation is why figures like Muthulakshmi Reddi embarked on a prolonged endeavour to "rescue" the marginalised '*devadasi'* women from degradation, advocating for multiple bills in the Madras legislative assembly toward this end, culminating in the Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947.

The Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947 was not the first instance in which the legislative language and government attitude towards female hereditary performers became criminalising. The parliamentary communications, various legislative bills and events preceding the Act were heavily biased, seeking to delegitimise the entire community by affixing the label of "prostitution" to the women within it. This strategic narrative aimed not only to stigmatise their bodies as deviant and illegitimate but also to displace the cultural and artistic traditions they had cultivated over generations. In the process, these traditions were transferred to upper-caste women, who were portrayed as the epitome of chastity and the rightful bearers of the nation's cultural heritage (Chatterjee 1989). This reallocation of art and culture reinforced patriarchal and caste hierarchies, positioning the upper-caste woman as the symbolic figure of the newly imagined nation-state, while systematically erasing the '*devadasi'* women's contributions and autonomy

The first time Muthulakshmi Reddi presented her resolution in the Madras Legislative Council, it was framed in such a way as to cast the practice of dedicating girls and women to Hindu temples in a negative and morally charged light. The resolution, which was subsequently amended, read: "This council recommends to the Government to undertake legislation at a very early date to put a stop to the practice of dedicating girls and women to the Hindu temples which has generally resulted in them leading an immoral life"[5] (Madras Legislative Council, 1927). By presenting the issue in such stark terms, Reddi sought to frame the dedication of women as inherently immoral, thereby laying the groundwork for the legal and social delegitimisation of female hereditary performers, further reinforcing the deviance narrative that the reform movement had already begun to propagate. The language of the bill, along with the

[5] MLC, Madras - 5/11/1927.

discussions and communications between members of the Legislative Council and proponents of the reform movement[6], was not only deeply problematic but also unsubstantiated. The bill's language advanced sweeping claims without any grounding in empirical research or formal surveys. Instead, it appeared to be based on the subjective viewpoints, biases, and agenda of the reformers themselves. The opening section of the bill asserts, without any verifiable evidence, "Whereas the practice of dedication of women to Hindu temples serves as an introduction of or initiation to the life of prostitution, and results in perpetually adding to the number of prostitutes who infest society, whereas such dedicated prostitutes ply their nefarious trade under the presumed sanction of Hindu religion and the present law of the country. It is desirable and expedient to put an end to the practice of such dedication" (Madras Legislative Council, 1927). These claims, made out of thin air, reveal the reformers' intent to criminalise the community without engaging in any rigorous or objective examination of the customs and lived realities of women from hereditary backgrounds. In response to the unfounded claims presented by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the Devadasi Association articulated a strong rebuttal. They condemned the sweeping generalisations and lack of evidence used to malign their community and its customs. They asserted:

> This practice is said to affect the morality, health and well-being of the Hindu Society at large. This is too wide a statement to make. Are the two lakhs of people of this community in this Presidency the cause of bad morality, ill-health and misfortune of the Hindu Society? Unless Dr, Muthulakshmi Reddy speaks with statistics in hand, these are serious allegations unworthy of serious men or women to make. The question becomes one of national importance or other inferences of the kind that she draws are platitudes. *(Manifesto to the Madras Government by the members of the Devadasi Association,* 1927)

The association therefore, expressed deep dissatisfaction with the narrative that indiscriminately equated their tradition with prostitution, challenging the very premises on which Dr. Reddi's reform movement rested. This narrative of labelling was therefore a deliberate attempt to criminalise the entire community, ultimately reinforcing a nationalistic and hyper-patriarchal agenda aimed at policing all forms of femininity that did not conform to the state's idealised norms.

Further, in their correspondence with one another, figures such as Muthulakshmi Reddi, Jayakar, and others emphatically claimed that the term "*Dasi*" was synonymous with "prostitute," a conflation made without any supporting evidence. This deliberate merging of terms not only tarnished the identity of women from hereditary backgrounds but also aimed to delegitimise their existence and cultural contributions. The Devadasi Association, in response, strongly refuted these claims, stating that Dr. Reddi "bases her conclusions on the strength of irresponsible talks" *(The Humble Memorial of The Devadasi of Tinnevelly District*, 1928). In the same manifesto, the association further pointed out the fallacy of the argument that the '*devadasi'* tradition introduced girls into prostitution from childhood, stressing that "the Hindu society has taken sufficient precaution in this matter" and arguing that the '*devadasis'* were not the depraved class portrayed by reformers with "vengeance". Moreover, they invoked the Penal Code, which already prohibited such practices, emphasising that the accusations were ungrounded. This narrative of labelling was therefore a deliberate attempt to "other" the entire

[6] In a letter to the Government of Madras, No. 28, J. A. Shillidy references to the observations of Sir Sadasiva Ayyar J. which occurred in the Guddati Reddi Obala vs. Ganapati Kandanna (Indian Cases XVII, 422) and says: "I am also clearly of opinion that it is not only illegal to adopt girls by prostitution but the illegality is, if possible, very much enhanced by a woman of the prostitute class who has followed the practices of a moral family Hindu woman trying to follow the practices of a prostitute herself." (24/1/1928)

community, ultimately reinforcing a nationalistic and hyper-patriarchal agenda aimed at policing all forms of femininity that did not conform to the state's idealised norms. The next section will attempt to discuss how the reform movements and criminalisation led to the loss of livelihood for female hereditary performers.

4.1 Reform and the Criminalisation of Livelihood

Social and legal reform movements worked in tandem to construct women from hereditary performance backgrounds as 'deviant' (Sutherland, 1947; Becker, 1963; Durkheim, 2005; Lombrosso, 2006; Henry, 2018), effectively criminalising their identities and practices. This intersecting process of legal marginalisation and social stigmatisation played a crucial role in dispossessing women from hereditary backgrounds of their traditional means of livelihood (Srinivasan 1985; Oldenburg 1990; Nevile 1996; Sreenivas 2011; Morcom 2016; Soneji 2019; Krishnan 2019). In fact, the clauses of the Dedication bill, which initially restricted women from performing within temple premises, gradually expanded - through a series of communications and revisions - to assert that any woman from a hereditary performance background would be penalised if found performing in any public space. In one such legislative exchange, M.R. Ry. Diwan Bahadur C. V. Viswanatha Sastriyar Avargal, Retired District Judge, wrote to Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi (1930), arguing that prohibiting performances solely within temple premises was insufficient, and that the restrictions must be extended to all public spaces in order to be truly effective. Reddi claims:

> Again, the words "in the precincts of Hindu temples or other places of worship" can easily be evaded. A public street or a bit of land privately owned, which is in front of a temple, and from where a view of the deity can be obtained, is quite good for having the ceremony performed. There are many such roadside temples everywhere. Suppose the ceremony is gone through at such a place without entering the "precincts of the temple or place of worship"? It cannot be said that it will attract the provision of clause II. Moreover, nothing prevents the actual dedication being done at home in the presence of a picture of the temple deity, and the girl being taken to the temple afterwards, by way of ratification. (p. 5)

In a similar vein, many so-called reform advocates, through legislative debates and correspondence, argued that existing provisions to prevent the dedication of female hereditary performers to temples were insufficient. They called for stricter measures and harsher penalties specifically targeting the women of the community. In attempting to enforce such punitive reforms, the legislation effectively stripped the community, especially the women of the community, of their primary means of livelihood. Deprived of their traditional occupations and publicly criminalised, many women from hereditary backgrounds were pushed into acute poverty, sex work, and other marginalised forms of labour (Srinivasan, 1985, Soneji, 2019). Ironically, the bill thus drove the women from the community of hereditary performers into the very conditions it purported to reform.

The legal reforms laid the groundwork for the dance revival movement of the 1930s spearheaded by figures such as Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer. While reform initiatives criminalised female hereditary performers and dispossessed them of their traditional livelihoods, the concurrent revivalist efforts contributed to what Anna Morcom (2016) describes as "cultures of exclusion" (p. 20) in Indian dance. These class-inflected discourses on cultural production - often marked by terms like "cheap" to describe traditional forms - carried implicit ideological undertones that delegitimised both the livelihood and aesthetic sensibilities of hereditary performers. These dynamics make it evident that the reinvention of classical arts was not aimed at democratising access, but rather at redefining legitimacy along

caste and class lines (Krishnan, 2019). As a direct consequence of these shifts, upper-caste women began to employ *nattuvanars* - men from the hereditary performance communities - as instructors, learning the art form from them only to later disassociate from these very practitioners once they had acquired the necessary training (Krishnan, 2019; Soneji, 2019). In this process, the women from the community, who had historically been the primary earners and custodians of the tradition, were rendered entirely dispossessed - stripped of both agency and economic independence. While many were left with no viable means of livelihood, a few women from these communities were able to carve out a space for themselves within early Tamil cinema. This is because, "cinema represented a world of lost opportunities for women who considered themselves "professional performing artists," while at the same time, it too was marked by a profound stigma that many women […] wanted to avoid at all costs" (Soneji, 2019, p. 206). Therefore, to trace this forced shift in livelihood, the following sections will examine the emergence of cinema as a modernist phenomenon, its entry into nationalist India, particularly Tamil Nadu, its reception, and the role of female hereditary performers in early Tamil cinema.

5. Nationalism, Indian Cinema, and Female Performers in Early Tamil Cinema

Tom Gunning has, time and again, taken up the project of charting the historical emergence of cinema and tracing its genealogy. In one such undertaking, he notes the early charge of evil brought against cinema to regulate not only its content but to cast suspicion on the very nature of the medium. Although Gunning situates this in the context of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of 1915, this suspicion cannot be geographically or temporally restricted to a single nation. A similar charge was levied against cinema in India by Mahatma Gandhi, who in 1927 declared cinema to be "the very embodiment of evil" (Rajadhyaksha, 2016, p. 53). Gandhi further expressed his discomfort with any form of 'advertising.' During an interview with Fox Filmtone News in April 1931, he prefaced his participation by saying:

> "I do not like this kind of thing, but I shall reconcile myself to it, if not more than a few minutes have to be given. (...) I do not discount the value of propaganda. (...) It is that of truth which is self-propagating. Truth abhors artificiality" (Hindu, 1 May 1931: 16, as quoted in Jeffrey, 2006, p. 210).

For many members of the Gandhian Congress, the concept of 'entertainment' carried negative cultural connotations, often associated with courtesans, prostitution, and what were perceived as non-Hindu or Muslim influences (Keskar, 1967; Neuman, 1990). Moreover, the colonial government's Indian Cinematograph Act of 1918 reflected similar anxieties. Framed ostensibly to ensure 'safety,' the Act was, in practice, a mechanism for controlling the perceived threat of rebellion and sedition via cinema. This legislative control revealed the imperialist paradox: the colonised subject was both threatening and infantilised—too dangerous to be left unchecked, yet too irrational to be self-governing. Although the Act borrowed principles from the British Cinematograph Act of 1909, its enactment in India became a tool for suppressing nationalist sentiment. The revised Indian Cinematograph Act of 1952, despite minor amendments in 2023, carried forward this colonial legacy. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2016) argues, the postcolonial Indian state developed its own suspicions regarding cinema: concerns over its role in national development, associations with black money post-Partition, and its alignment with socially 'degenerate' spaces such as race courses, drinking booths, and opium dens.

"The arrival of talkies in Tamil during the 1930s was received with much enthusiasm by the lower class film audience. However, such subaltern enthusiasm for this new form of leisure was simultaneously accompanied by enormous anxiety among the upper caste/class elites"

(Pandian, 2014, p. 950). Initially, this concern revolved around the perceived inferior cultural preferences of the marginalised populace, often reduced to the dichotomy of high versus low culture. However, the elite class soon grappled with fresh challenges as they discerned that cinema had the potential to disrupt and redefine the meticulously maintained boundaries between esteemed and less esteemed cultural forms. Initially, cinema struggled to entice participation from the elite strata, both as artists and audience members. However, as cinema progressively gained popularity and established itself as a thriving art form, it captivated the attention of the elite who sought avenues for profit and investment within this burgeoning industry. The evolution of cinema from an artistic medium into a trade and industry became an attractive sphere for the elites to engage in (Pandian, 2014).

The pursuit of profit within this industry critically hinged upon the subaltern consumers of cinema, a group often disparaged by the elite due to perceptions of their supposedly inferior cultural inclinations. The process of film production necessitated the mobilisation of diverse skills, some of which were predominantly accessible to the elite, such as direction, camera work, and editing. Conversely, other crucial skills required for film production, particularly acting, singing, dancing and so on, were historically more prevalent among the lower classes. This historical backdrop underscored the division of skills necessary for filmmaking, revealing a dichotomy where certain expertise was elitist in nature while others were more accessible to the lower classes (Pandian, 2014). Further, the origins of Tamil cinema are deeply intertwined with the folk and theatrical traditions prevalent in Tamil Nadu, which initially led to its tarnished reputation. Theatre and folk arts were often associated with the lower social strata, perceived as crude and disreputable forms of expression. Consequently, cinema inherited this stigma as its initial audience largely overlapped with those who patronised these traditional art forms. This common audience base contributed to cinema being unfairly labelled with the same negative connotations that were attached to theatre and folk arts, despite its unique evolution and distinct storytelling medium. Regarding the situation Baskaran (1981) sums up:

> The stigma that was attached to the popular stage and those working for it was extended to the world of cinema also. The witnesses who deposed before the Cinematography Enquiry Committee repeatedly declared that they were either averse to watching films or that they had never seen one, that only the low class frequented cinema houses, and that cinema was harmful to the community. Typical of this attitude was the statement of the president of the Corporation of Madras, G Nurayanaswamy Chetty who told the committee: "l find the uncultured flock to the cinema. It could be said that 75 percent cinema patrons are of the lower order." (pp. 88-89)

Women in cinema, by their very presence, were subjected to severe stigma (Mulvey, 1975; Rosen, 1973; Haskell, 1974; Hardgrave, 1975). Appearing onscreen challenged social norms and placed them under intense scrutiny. In Tamil Nadu, Hardgrave (1975) notes that actresses, despite popularity, were seen as having 'loose morals', often linked to '*devadasi'* roots or prostitution, and especially condemned if they continued acting after marriage. Even when playing idealised roles like Sita or Kannaki, they were marked as unconventional (Velayutham, 2009). In contrast, male actors were spared this suspicion. Cinema became a space where women's visibility was shaped by entrenched patriarchy, while also being affected by external forces like politics and globalisation (Velayutham, 2009). For women from hereditary performance communities, the stigma was sharper. Reformers repeatedly insisted that the '*devadasi'* tradition was incompatible with modern values. Archival documents such as *Representation of the Hindu Social Reform Association* (1901) framed dedication as an "evil" practice, a moral threat to the nation's future. Yet, paradoxically, early cinema - seen as a modern force - briefly offered female hereditary performers public presence and agency.

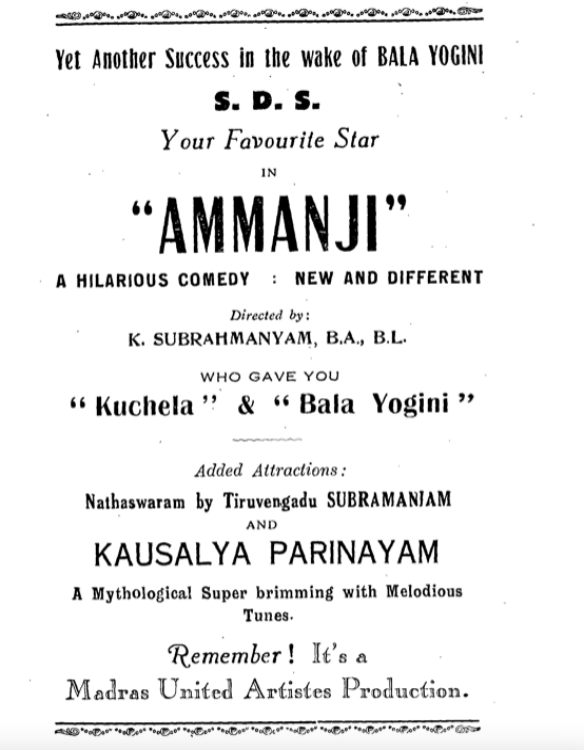
They were part of early Tamil talkies, but as cinema aligned itself with nationalist ideals of respectability, these women were gradually pushed out (Soneji, 2019; Krishnan, 2019).

This pattern reflects a broader dynamic of modernity in India - of inclusion followed by exclusion. Institutions of modernity often absorb marginalised subjects only to later erase them (Spivak, 1988). Reforms that claimed to modernise Indian society criminalised traditional performers and framed their roles as incompatible with modern citizenship. While cinema drew on the talents of female hereditary performers, it never fully accepted them. Modernity, shaped by Eurocentric ideals, created a fractured space where caste, gender, and tradition marked the limits of inclusion (Chakrabarty, 2000; Nandy, 1983). Despite this, female hereditary performers shaped the early aesthetic of Tamil cinema. As Soneji (2019) writes, many early stars - T. R. Rajakumari, Sayi Subbulakshmi, S. P. L. Dhanalakshmi, and others - came from '*devadasi'* families. Their eventual replacement by upper-caste women echoed the shift seen in the dance revival of the 1930s-40s (Pandian, 1996; Krishnan, 2019). Their presence in early talkies thus reveals the unstable ground of visibility, respectability, and erasure that defined Tamil cinema's early years.

5.1 Female Actors in Early Tamil Cinema

Theories of social exclusion and inclusion in India provide a critical framework for understanding the promotional strategies used in early Tamil cinema, particularly the emphasis on female actors from hereditary performance backgrounds. Social exclusion in India is deeply rooted in caste, gender, and class hierarchies, which are perpetuated through cultural and institutional mechanisms that regulate access to resources, visibility, and legitimacy (Dasgupta, 2022). This exclusion is not absolute but operates dialectically with inclusion, where marginalised groups are selectively incorporated into modern institutions and public spheres, often under constrained and conditional terms (Skoda et al., 2021). The Indian state's modernising and reformist agendas, especially during the colonial and postcolonial periods, sought to impose new moral and social orders that criminalised traditional roles such as those of female hereditary performers, framing them as incompatible with "modern" ideals of womanhood and respectability (Thorat, 2008).

This inclusion, however, was fraught with tensions arising from the intersecting caste and gendered norms that continued to mark women from hereditary backgrounds as socially marginal. The promotional strategies in early Tamil cinema, which foregrounded '*devadasi'* actresses as major attractions - mostly eclipsing male stars - reflected their undeniable cultural capital and audience appeal (Selvaraj, 2008) - refer to Figure 1. Such marketing choices challenged dominant patriarchal and casteist notions of stardom by valuing the talents of women from hereditary backgrounds. Nonetheless, as modernity's hegemonic structures consolidated, the cinematic star system shifted to privilege male actors, side lining women from hereditary backgrounds and reinforcing gendered and caste-based exclusions. This shift mirrored broader societal changes where the ideals of modernity and respectability increasingly aligned with patriarchal control and upper-caste norms, relegating women from marginalised communities to secondary or stereotyped roles. Thus, while early cinema offered women from hereditary communities a momentary foothold within a modern public institution, this inclusion was always conditional and contingent. The shifting promotional strategies - from celebrating female artistry to foregrounding male stardom - reflected the broader gendered and caste-based exclusions that structure modernity itself. Even within a space as seemingly 'progressive' as cinema, inclusion was never absolute; it was always already circumscribed by the social hierarchies which modernity purported to overcome. This complex interplay highlights how cultural modernity in India has continually negotiated tradition, caste, and gender, shaping who is visible and valued in public life and space.


Yet Another Success in the wake of BALA YOGINI

S. D. S.

Your Favourite Star

IN

"AMMANJI"

A HILARIOUS COMEDY : NEW AND DIFFERENT

Directed by:

K. SUBRAHMANYAM, B.A., B.L.

WHO GAVE YOU

"Kuchela" & "Bala Yogini"

Added Attractions:

Nathaswaram by Tiruvengadu SUBRAMANIAM

AND

KAUSALYA PARINAYAM

A Mythological Super brimming with Melodious Tunes.

Remember! It's a

Madras United Artistes Production.

Figure 1: Cinema Samachar Vol 1 no. 3 (September 1937)[7]

Figure 1 showcases the poster for the film *Ammanji* (1937), and it highlights how the female actor from hereditary background is the face of the film and that SD Subbulakshmi's (SDS) name is being used to attract the audience. The very first line of the poster reads, "Yet another success in the wake of Bala Yogini, SDS, Your favourite star in *Ammanji*'. Further, not only is the film promoted in the name of the '*devadasi'* actress, but there is also no mention of the male actor of the film in this particular poster. However, when we look up the same film on IMDb today, the cast listing tells a different story. The poster makes no mention of the male actor, but on IMDb - or any other film site for that matter, the actress's name appears third, following two male actors. This is reminiscent of the manner in which the notion of stardom shifted to incorporate, or rather celebrate, male actor's stardom, while female stardom was pushed to the margins. The space once occupied by female hereditary performers in Tamil cinema was gradually erased to make way for *savarna* women and to sanitise the cinematic landscape; it was later completely overtaken by men, as cinema became increasingly intertwined with politics.

6. Conclusion

The intersection of gender, caste, and cinema in early Tamil cultural production reveals how modernity functioned not as a liberatory force, but as a system marked by selective inclusion and systemic erasure. Women from hereditary performance backgrounds occupied a paradoxical space: while their artistic labour was foundational to the development of early Tamil talkies, they were simultaneously criminalised by law, morally condemned by reformist rhetoric, and eventually marginalised by an industry seeking respectability in alignment with nationalist, upper-caste ideals. Promotional strategies that initially celebrated their names and

[7] State Archives of Tamil Nadu, Chennai.

performances soon gave way to narratives that foregrounded male stardom and sanitised femininity, displacing these women from the cinematic centre they once helped shape.

This process mirrored broader patterns of exclusion inherent in the logic of modernity - what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) describes as a 'denial of coevalness', and what Timothy Mitchell (2000) identifies as a regulatory mechanism of visibility and erasure. The eventual substitution of women from hereditary communities with upper-caste actresses in cinema was not merely a casting decision, but a symbolic act of cultural reordering. Recognising this trajectory compels us to critically reflect on how cinema, as a modern institution, has historically reinforced rather than challenged dominant hierarchies. It also urges a re-evaluation of cultural memory and historiography, where the contributions of marginalised women are not only acknowledged but restored with the complexity and dignity they deserve.

Acknowledgment

This paper forms part of the first author's ongoing PhD research. We thank the staff at the National Archives of India, Delhi, and the Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai, for their patient assistance with accessing materials. We are also grateful to Nrithya Pillai, Prof. Davesh Soneji, and Rituparna Pal, whose insights and work, especially through the *Politicising Bharatanatyam* workshop, have shaped this research.

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