

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

Shyama Sadasivan, Dr. Archana Patnaik

*Humanities and Social Sciences Department, IIT Kharagpur, India*

### Abstract

This paper critically examines the lives and contributions of women from hereditary performance traditions (popularly erroneously termed as ‘*devadasis*’), whose identities were systematically labeled as ‘deviant’—both socially and legally—and whose voices were silenced within dominant historical narratives. Focusing on early Tamil cinema, the study explores how these women 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 research 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*’; Deviance; Gender; Hereditary performers; Marginalisation; Tamil cinema.