

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu

Review Number:

169

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 February, 2001

Author:

Leslie Orr

Date of Publication:

2000

Pages:

305pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Daud Ali

The figure of the *devadasi*, or 'temple-woman', who entertained Hindu gods at festivals, hardly needs an introduction. Because of her supposed sexual availability, the *devadasi* became a potent and notorious symbol of the corruption of Hindu society. Together, colonial officials and Indian reformers legislated the *devadasi* out of existence and sanitized her dance traditions. More recently, scholars have reacted to this legacy by stressing the importance of the *devadasi*'s ritual dance and sexuality in royal and temple ritual. What unites both of these interpretations is their assumption that the *devadasi* institution as 'discovered' during the colonial period reflects an India-wide tradition that stretches back to the early reaches of Indian history.

This book, through an exhaustive and detailed study of medieval inscriptions, effectively challenges the image of the *devadasi* inherited from modern reform and recent scholarship. Orr maintains that inscriptions, unlike literary texts and normative representations, reveal the actuality of temple women's lives, as they record specific events involving real people. Orr has examined the entirety of the Chola (c. 950-1250) inscriptional corpus (and a good deal more). The choice justified by the evidence itself, since the Chola records give a more complete profile on 'temple women' than north Indian inscriptions, (though other south Indian languages have rich stores of evidence which remain to be tapped).

Orr begins with the problem of terminology, noting that the term *devadasi*, apparently a Sanskritization of the Tamil word *tevara-iy*? Â (*tevaratiyal*) (, was neither ubiquitous nor even widespread in medieval inscriptions, but only gained currency in the last century. In pre-colonial times, the historian encounters a

plethora of terms which vary across region, language and period. In the second chapter, Orr concludes on the basis of her survey of the Chola materials that rather than the modern figure of the devadasi, the inscriptions suggest a more general category of 'temple women'. The overlapping of terms like *tevara-iy* (tevaratiyal), *teva- r maka* (tevanar makal), *patiyil- r* (patiyilar), and *ta- iyil- r* (taliyilar), along with the mention of functions, privileges and specific associations with temples, indicate, according to Orr, the category of 'temple woman' as a coherent social identity. The author compares temple women to other types of women found in inscriptions, most notably palace women. Orr argues, against the conclusions of other scholars, that during the Chola period there was no close relationship between court and temple. An enquiry into the Tamil terms for temple woman, is equally corrective, according to Orr. The term *a- iy- r* (atiyar), often translated as 'slave' or 'servant', probably instead indicated the idea of a 'retainer' for a king. It also carried with it honorific connotations rooted in the south Indian religious ethos of devotion. In comparison with terms from other parts of India referring to temple women, which often meant slave or prostitute, Orr finds that the Tamil terms are more honorific and devotional in meaning.

Temple women appear most frequently in inscriptions as 'donors', making gifts of various kinds to the temples themselves, and the third chapter of the book analyses this aspect of the evidence. Compared to other women and men associated with temples, temple women appear as donors in increasing numbers throughout the course of the Chola period, and as time passed, were increasingly implicated in the life of numerous temples throughout Tamilnadu as a consequence of their donations. Their appearance as donors leads to the question of their possession of property and wealth. According to the *dharmas- tras* (*dharm a sastras*), Orr points out, a woman's access to wealth was generally mediated through her husband. But as Chola temple women remained unmarried, it seems, the question of where these women accumulated the wealth to make gifts to temples is both relevant, and given the author's wish to avoid the sacred prostitution theory, a crucial one. Orr speculates that their wealth came from gifts by natal families or inheritances from their mother as well as worship service performed on behalf of other temple patrons. Whatever their source of wealth, the conclusion is that in relation to married women, temple women seemed to enjoy increasing economic power and prosperity through the Chola period due to their relationships with temples.

The fourth and fifth chapters focus, respectively, on the work of temple women and their identity with respect to geography, religion and kinship. In contrast to their male counterparts, the role of women in temple ritual, it would seem, was often incidental and optional. They were neither ritual 'specialists' nor a ritual 'necessity' for the temple as some scholarship has recently maintained. They were most certainly not associated primarily with dance. Of the 304 Chola inscriptions that mention temple women, only four, according to Orr, use terms that refer to 'dancer'. More important was their role in menial work (cleaning pots and pans, washing floors), and performance of attendance functions like flywhisk bearing and dancing. Women's role in both of these occupations, one debased and the other exalted, increased throughout the Chola period. Women in many cases received honoured status in temple ritual as a result of their donations, but in some (about half of the references that mention temple service) they seemed to receive minimal living 'stipends', which may have indicated that they entered temple service under conditions not of their own making. For most women, concludes Orr, temple service was not a source of livelihood, (excepting 'slaves' acquired by the temple to perform menial services), but was a way 'to enhance status that was already theirs' (134). Temple women, geographically spread throughout the Chola realm, show strong identification in the early Chola periods with deities of particular places, but as time wore on, are increasingly referred to in relation to particular temples, reflecting a general trend to a more temple-based authority structure in the post-Chola period. Women's temple service, according to Orr, was not in most cases hereditary, reflecting what she claims to be a general social fluidity during Chola times.

The book places the history of temple women within the context of temples emerging as the dominant centres of economic and political power as the Chola state declined. While such arguments are tantalising, they remain somewhat fragmentary, and the chief thrust of the book remains its engagement with the image of the *devadasi* inherited by the debates, reforms and studies of the last century. By its end, this image of the *devadasi* 'as sexually exploited temple dancer/prostitute or the embodiment of sacred feminine power' can hardly be sustained in any simple or unqualified way. In the final section of the conclusion, the author

attempts to trace briefly how the institution encountered in the 19th century by colonial officials had evolved from the Chola period. She sees the post-Chola, Vijayanagar, and Nayak periods as bringing a steady decline in the power of women. An increase in feminine symbolism and goddess imagery was accompanied by a decline in the 'public' representation of women and decreasing agency in political economic and religious spheres. Hence the modern *devadasi*.

The alternative image of the temple woman that Orr draws for the Chola period, however, raises many questions. That the turn to inscriptions can illuminate the lives of women in medieval India is surely proved beyond doubt by this book. The book also demonstrates, however, the limitations of an over-reliance on inscriptions to the detriment of other sorts of evidence, and perhaps more importantly, a coherent social/theoretical framework. Inscriptions, as the author points out, record only certain types of events, revealing fragments rather than an entire picture. Their interpretation is not so straightforward. If the copious inscriptions recovered from the Chola period have supported at least three models of the south Indian state, they are certainly capable of revealing several different images of the *devadasi*.

At a general level, Orr claims that in the Chola period there was no intimate sharing of ritual forms, dance, music, and personnel between the domains of the temple and court. She substantiates this on the paucity of inscriptions which refer to women as both *tevar* - *iya* (tevararatiyal) and 'palace woman'. To my mind, this sort of evidence does nothing to establish the argument that courtly and temple ritual were unrelated. It is not at all surprising that temple women would not be affiliated to the palace, since direct service to two masters in a patriarchal system could hardly be the norm. Because the servants of one household do not name themselves as the servants of another can hardly serve as evidence that these households are run differently. Moreover, much other evidence cited by the book would seem to suggest the contrary, that there was in fact considerable parity between the practices of the palace and temple - that the baths, meals, speech and buildings of both kings and gods are spoken of with the same vocabulary. The Chola period textual evidence is significant in this regard, as both architectural texts like *Mayamata*, as well as the early *pirapantam* literature in Tamil, some of which refer to specific ritual events (like the *ul* (*ula*) or processional description), clearly envision human and divine lords similarly.

Equally vexing is the 'legal' status of temple women. Orr maintains on the basis of the 'honorific' character of the term *a-iyar* (*atiyar*) in Tamil *bhakti* traditions and its use to denote royal 'attendants', that *tevara-iyar* (tevaratiyal) were not in fact 'subalterns' or slaves. She distinguishes these, who formed the demographic majority of temple women, from those who in the later Chola period clearly entered into temple service as slaves. While such a distinction may be plausible, it is vitiated by the lack of any discussion of the legal/theoretical boundaries of slavery, service, bondage and attendance. The inscriptions which record women's donations, often in exchange for privileges in temple ritual, are for their part ambiguous: they do not clearly spell out the nature of the relationship which constituted them as *tevara-iyar* (*tevaratiyar*) in the first place. Orr seems to believe that such women had no obligation to temples, since none are mentioned in the inscriptions.

The fact that temple women were able to make donations raises related issues as to the relative freedom to accumulate wealth and what the sources of such wealth may have been. It is not necessary to assume, as Orr apparently does, that the accumulation of limited amounts of wealth precluded relations of obligation or servitude. How such wealth would have been obtained, of course, is unclear, as the inscriptions are relatively silent on the matter. Orr suggests, borrowing from the contemporary studies she is otherwise keen to distance herself from, that it was gained by performing acts of worship for patrons. Very plausible, but why should we reject the same accounts which suggest that sexual favours also formed a source of income? If the inscriptional record is silent on this matter, what is the justification for borrowing from the ethnographic evidence in such a selective manner?

The 'gender' perspective claimed by the book seems to amount to little more than comparing demographic profiles of men and women in inscriptions, rather than seeing gender as a set of ideologies and practices that form subjectivities and agencies. Orr's indifference to the more 'symbolic' or 'discursive' elements of gender and dismissal of textual evidence has sadly handicapped a study which otherwise may have added

something to what most accounts of women in medieval India are vitally missing. It is healthy to use inscriptions as a corrective to the idealising and unrooted nature of textual analysis, but it is hardly adequate to ignore such sources altogether. What the inscriptions can tell us is in many ways as fragmentary as the literary sources. Even more fundamental is Orr's seeming understanding of 'agency' and disempowerment as mutually exclusive categories, in a sort of statistical zero-sum game. The overarching theoretical framework of the book, to demonstrate that women exercised agency, is pursued at the cost of theorising their oppression. Agency is hardly so simple, as most forms of oppression sustain themselves by actually bestowing certain types of agency to their victims. This is precisely how ideas of servitude and *bhakti* in medieval India functioned at once to 'empower' subaltern classes and compromise their autonomous agency 'making *bhakti* perennially available for both elitist and subaltern agendas. The complexity of the temple woman's position, one feels, is missing from this book.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/169>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1131>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>