COMPLIANCE AND RESISTANCE: CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE FIGURE OF THE DEVADASI/COURTESAN

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

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Department of English
School of Humanities
University of Hyderabad
Hyderabad

November 2014

For my Mother:

There will never be anyone like you. You are and will always be my 'hero'.

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment of the degree of

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Preface

My interest in this area arises out of two primary preoccupations. One, the fact that I have learnt Bharatanatyam for over twelve years and have always been intrigued by the transformations which the dance form has gone through over centuries, which I probably never questioned when I was learning the dance form but in the past few years have always wanted to probe into, and two, the text *Bedanabala* by Mahasweta Devi (which I discuss in the appendix of the dissertation) the reading of which has left a lasting impression on me with respect to the plight of the courtesan/devadasi/prostitute figure. Pran Neville's *Nautch Girls of the Raj* provided me with a historical and social perspective on the same issue. Apart from this I had read *Umrao Jan Ada* and *Cilappatikaram*, as part of my M.A. syllabus and was intrigued by the texts. All these factors contributed towards the formulation of this project. When I began working on my dissertation, I was considering very few texts and the focus too was very narrow and limited. The three semester course work which included two reading courses with my Supervisors and two other courses, one on "Sociology of Gender" in the Department of Sociology and another on "The Social History of Dance" in the Department of Dance, helped me explore the other possible texts which were available and could be used. This also helped me formulate my arguments and contextualize the questions and issues I was aiming to analyse. This project aims to look at the figure of the devadasi/courtesan with respect to her representation in literary texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While I am aware that there are other texts (both fiction and non-fiction) which address the questions and issues taken up by me in this dissertation, probably taking all of

them up would be impossible in a Ph. D. project. Hence, I limit myself to the texts which I think are representative and available in English translation if not written originally in English. A number of texts used in this dissertation have been adapted as films or stage plays. I have chosen not to look at films or stage plays as that would make the project extremely extensive, something that was not desirable, owing to several constraints.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Discipline and Punish

> The devadasi was the proverbial dancing girl of India. Her name immediately suggests the two worlds she inhabited--those of gods and of slaves. She served the god (*deva*), and men who assumed godly status, as a slave (*dasi*), and considered it an honour in doing so. The persona of the god changed over time. First, he was the all-powerful Supreme Being, worshipped in the temple. Later, he was the 'king', who was attended by elaborate ceremony. Gradually, the king too became god, and demanded divine rights. The devadasi shifted through the vicissitudes of temple, court and social life, unfaltering in her trained steps. She had become an expert in music, dance and a host of other *kalas* (arts), which included the art of love. She passed on her skills to generations of her daughters who left their mark on history as cultured women. The devadasi, the only 'educated' woman of ancient Indian society was a precious gem (*manikkam*) in the royal crown. Her pride lay not merely in her achievements but in her innate sensuality. Her expertise in dance and music matched her skills in the art of erotica. With god and king as her chief patrons, she grew in stature and took great pride in her heritage. (Vishwanathan 1)

Dance historians like Anne Mary Gaston, Pran Neville and Lakshmi Viswanathan have concluded that Urvashi, an apsara, was the first courtesan to have been born on earth. She emerged out of Viswamitra's thigh, and is said to have imparted the divine knowledge of dance and music to human beings. Devadasis have been an integral part of Indian

culture, so much so that the Chinese traveller and pilgrim Hieun Tsang also mentions their existence in his text written in the seventh century. According to Anne Mary Gaston in *Bharat Natyam, From Temple to Theatre*, the earliest mention of dance and dancers can be found in the *Rg Veda* and the early legal texts like the *Arthasastra*. Dancers were given a respectable place in society because of their accomplishments. The famous courtesan Amrapali was considered a treasure of the city, Vaishali. Several other authors too mention the "dancing girl" in their literary texts. Kalidasa mentions dancing girls in both *Meghduta* and *Malavikaagnimitra*. Somadeva in *Kathasaritsagara* mentions Sundari, the devadasi dancing in the temple of Kanchanapura. The dancers had both religious and social powers vested in them. They performed the duties of holding the royal umbrella and fanning the royal couple. Apart from this they were also present at state occasions such as the royal consecrations. However, after the advent of Muslim rule, devadasis disappeared from the scene in North India but the practice continued in the South until the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Neville, under the generous patronage of the Pallava, Chola, Pandya and Nayaka Kings, devadasis were honoured with titles and gifts and their names were even mentioned in temple chronicles and inscriptions. They were trained from childhood in the arts of dance and music and were also taught classical literature in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu. Devadasis commanded respect in society and were treated as symbols of good luck. The exchange of devadasis between the temple and the court was an accepted practice. Though married to the temple deities, some of them who were gifted with rare beauty and accomplishments became royal courtesans and consorts of kings.

Kakolee Chakravarti in her book *Women as Devadasis--Origins and Growth of the Devadasi* mentions that there were seven categories of the devadasis in South India. These were, *datta*--one who gives herself as a gift to the temple, *bikrita*-- one who sells herself, *bhritya*-- one who offers herself for the prosperity of the family, *bhakta*-- one who joins

out of devotion, *hrita*-- one who is enticed away and presented at the temple, *alankara*-- one who is trained in the profession, profusely decked and presented at the temple, and *rudraganika* or *gopika*-- one who receives regular wages from the temple and is employed to sing and dance in the temple at the time of worship. The devadasis would learn music and dance and read scriptures and perform temple duties. Once they had undergone rigorous training, the process of initiation would begin. They would be married to the deity who would either be Shiva or Vishnu and be termed *nityasumangali*. Being a *nityasumangali* meant that they would never experience widowhood. The entire ceremony took place in the temple and in a manner similar to any other wedding ceremony amongst mortal beings. As Saskia Kersenboom mentions there were six prescribed ceremonies of dedication before the devadasis could take part in the temple rituals. These were marriage (*kalyanam*), dedication (*muttirai*), ritual first dance lesson, the presentation of the ankle bells (*gajjaipuja*), the debut recital (*arangetram*) after the completion of dance training and the selection of a patron. The *arangetram* was an announcement of the fact that the devadasi is now ready to be taken by a suitor. At times, the kings who were considered representatives of gods would also lay their claims on the devadasi. In fact only if the king did not lay claim on the devadasi would she be allowed to be with the priests or the patrons. The devadasis offered their services to the patrons and the patrons in turn provided monetary help to the temples. However, it is interesting to note that the suitors who were considered suitable had a considerable standing both in terms of caste and class. In case a devadasi was seen having an alliance with a suitor from a lower caste or class or religion she would be tried in the gram panchayat and eventually be excommunicated. The newly married devadasi was considered very auspicious. She symbolised sanctity and purity. She would perform the duties of a wife, for example cook, and take care of the deity. The performances by the devadasis were entirely meant for a male audience and

many of their songs posited sexuality as one of the major themes. The ideal devadasi had to be proficient in sixty four *kalas* (arts), which included dance with elaborate gestures, expressions, movements, playing of instruments, painting, stringing flower garlands, wearing jewels in an artistic way, making perfumes, weaving, gardening, dyeing fabrics, and reading poetry. Devadasis were also associated with social and political functions, which included the ceremony of *talaikkol*. Here the sacred staff of the king, symbolising power, would be sprinkled with holy water by the devadasi and the staff would be handed over to the musicians for the final public performance of the dancer. The *arati* in the temple was the most important duty of the devadasi. She, being "the auspicious one", conducted the ceremony in order to ward off all the evils and bad omens. Once the devadasi became chronically ill or had reached old age, she retired. It was important for a devadasi to have a daughter to look after her once she reached old age. When the devadasi died, the deity who was the husband would observe pollution and the temple would be shut for a few days. Her body would be covered with a new cloth removed from the idol, and the flowers would also be supplied from the temple to which she belonged. The funeral pyre would be lit with the fire brought from the temple to which she belonged.

Dance historian Mohan Kokar mentions that "[t]he one word, the name, by which Indian dance as we know today was known universally right into the first quarter of this century was *nautch*. 'Nach', the Hindustani word for dancing, became anglicised by the British colonisers as *Nautch*" (Chakravorty 27). The dance style of Northern India was an amalgamation of the folk forms and the court dances from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The greatest influence on this form of dance was the Persian tradition apart from the Sufi tradition and the tradition of the Dervishes. These traditions fused with the Jhumar and Kathavachaks and gave rise to the tradition of Kathak. Keeping dancers in the court was essentially a Mughal phenomenon, but some of the newly rich gentry imitated this

tradition to display their status and wealth. This became the symbol of power and influence. One finds several accounts by the British (both men and women) about their visits to these nautch parties.[1] These were common phenomena during the Durga Puja functions in Calcutta. Though started by Raja Krishnachandra Roy, this was soon appropriated by the new emerging rich class. It is however important to note that the nautch girls did not perform on a proscenium arch stage. Their performances were restricted to the private domain, like the music room of the rich and the famous. Calcutta emerged as a great centre for these performances. The fact that Wajid Ali Shah, a connoisseur of dance, shifted to Calcutta after the siege of Lucknow in 1857, provided a good impetus for the art form to flourish. Calcutta was host to several famous baijis, as they were called during this period. Some baijis worth mentioning are, Nikki Ushuran, Begum Jan, Nanni Jan, Gauhar Jan, Janaki Bai, Barimoti Bai and Rasunlan Bai.

Apart from performing at the courts and private chambers of the well to do, the courtesans also operated from their own quarters. Veena Talwar Oldenburg in her extensive research on the lifestyle of *nawabs* and courtesans in Lucknow observes that young *nawabs* in Lucknow were mandatorily sent to these quarters so that they could have a proper training of etiquette and manners. Apart from this, as Olderberg suggests, they received firsthand knowledge of Urdu literature from the courtesans as they were the only women during that time to get education and impart it as well. Also, most of the courtesans were poets and composed their own songs. These quarters were managed by women. There was one elderly woman (someone who had retired from the profession),

[1] "A large room is lit up, at one end sit the great people who are to be entertained; at the other the dancers and their attendants; one of the girls who are to dance comes forward…their languishing glances, wanton smiles, and attitudes not quite consistent with decency, which are so much admired; and whoever excels most in these is the finest dance" as mentioned by Jemima Kindersley. "A dancing Woman of Bengal, exhibiting before an European family… They all danced barefooted, on a kind of carpet…" as mentioned by Charles Doyley in *The European in Ind*ia. "Their dances require great attention, from the dancer's feet being hung small bells, which act in concert with music. Two girls usually perform at the same time…" as mentioned by James Forbes in *Oriental Memoirs.* "Many people complain of the sameness of nautch, but, to me, the scene was so perfectly new, and so completely Oriental, that I was much delighted" as mentioned by Katherine Elwood in *Narrative of a Journey* (Nayar 161-164).

who would take care of the proceedings of the house. The courtesans were educated and were trained in music and dance. All the regular practitioners were registered in the police records and they were regular tax payers. They also had extensive property holdings. The fact that they were registered under police records made it practically impossible for them to break out of their profession if they ever wanted to. The only way they could move out, was by changing their identity, thereby erasing their entire past. Thus questions of identity and freedom become very crucial to the courtesans. With the death of a courtesan, her property would be confiscated by the Government. Apart from the women, the quarters also had men, who essentially were cooks, accompanists for the programmes and tailors. Oldenberg also mentions that there was no existence of agents and pimps during the early days. The birth of a son in the house of the courtesans was never considered auspicious.

The devadasi system in South India and the nautch in North and East India faced a lot of criticism in the last half of the nineteenth century. By this time the English missionaries and the administrators had changed their stand on the culture of India. The Victorian ideas of morality and integrity came with the British, and the newly English educated Indians were deeply influenced by these ideas and thoughts. These art forms were now being dismissed as erotic and frivolous. Officials were being discouraged from attending nautch parties so as to set a moral example for the other people to follow. All these anti nautch campaigns culminated in the anti-nautch movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The Anti-Nautch Movement

> As the nineteenth century wore on, the spread of English education brought in a new petit bourgeois class which, influenced by Western ideas, and became

> alienated from the art and cultural traditions of the country. This educated group was also swayed by the writings of some foreign observers who, without understanding the origin and nature of Indian dance art mistaking it for a representation of erotic temple sculptures, condemned it as 'repulsive and immoral'. They made no distinction between an accomplished professional nautch girl or a devadasi and a common prostitute, dubbing both as fallen women. The educated Indians, suffering from an inferiority complex, were overcome with a sense of shame about their own traditional arts. (Neville 113-114)

As discussed in the previous section, the devadasi system in South India and the courtesan tradition in North India faced severe criticism in and around the latter half of the nineteenth century. The British rule imposed Victorian morals and principles on the Indian society. The Christian Missionaries took it upon themselves to reform the Indian society, which they felt had no moral principles. As Pran Neville, in his book *The Nautch Girls of the Raj* suggests, the missionaries extended their activities by setting up educational institutions, printing presses, hospitals, etc. And in their effort to propagate the virtues of Christian civilization they denounced Indian religious practices, customs and manners. The practice of the nautch came under serious scrutiny because of the attached moral stigma. The anti-nautch movement began in Madras in 1892. The movement was started by the Madras Christian Literary Association, which was led by Rev. J. Murdoch. He termed the devadasis as “repulsive and immoral” and put both accomplished dancers and common prostitutes on the same platform. They were also accused of impoverishing and ruining their patrons. A nautch performance was held for the welcome of the Prince of Wales in 1875. However, there was a huge outcry on the proposition of organising a nautch performance during the visit of Prince Albert Victor in 1890. This crusade against

the nautch performance was led by Rev. J. Murdoch who later went on to publish extensively on Indian social reforms. In a pamphlet issued by The Christian Society, Madras, titled, "Nautch Women: An Appeal to English Ladies on Behalf of Their Indian Sisters" brought out in 1893, the Christian Society advised the British ladies not to attend these parties and also prevent their men from doing so. Another pamphlet, "Nautch--An Appeal to Educated Hindus" dealt with the evils associated with the nautch such as loss of money, disease, bodily weakness, bad influence on one's character, etc. The only solution provided for the improvement of the society was the abolition of the system. Social Reformers from England took it upon themselves to persuade educated Indians from boycotting these performances. Miss Tennant and Mrs. Marcus Fullers, two of the most influential amongst them, condemned the dedication of girls to temples. Mrs. Fullers, the wife of a missionary in Bombay wrote in her book, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*: "We are convinced that if the highest officials in India were to refuse to attend nautches on moral grounds, their action would be an object lesson in moral education to the whole country. Hindu hosts would soon be ashamed and drop the nautch from the programs of their public entertainments" (Chakravorty 44). Both of them also strongly felt that if the higher authorities stopped attending the nautch programmes, it would be a right lesson for other people to follow. As Neville remarks:

> She [Mrs. Fullers] reminded the reformers to keep knocking at the doors of the Vice Regal Lodge till the Government took a policy decision against the viewing of the nautch. The persistent efforts of the reformers eventually bore fruit in 1905 when a decision was taken not to provide the nautch entertainment at the reception that was to be held in honour of Prince of Wales in Madras. (Neville 121)

The Indian Press, *The Madras Mail*, The Social Purity Association, The Punjab

Purity Association and The National Social Conference were prominent among organisations that condemned the devadasi and the courtesan traditions. The Punjab Purity Association issued a booklet in 1903, titled, *Opinions on the Nautch Question*, which highlighted the denunciation of the nautch by an eminent reformer, Kesub Chandra Sen. Kesub Chandra Sen refers to the nautch girl as hideous. He goes on to say, "Hell is in her eyes. In her breast is a vast ocean of poison. Round her comely waist dwell the furies of hell. Her hands are brandishing unseen daggers ever ready to strike unwary or wilful victims that fall in her way. Her brandishments are India's ruin. Alas! Her smile is India's death" (Neville 116). At that point and time in history, only nautch women and prostitutes acted on the stage. It was considered immoral for a woman of a respectable family to act on the stage. However, it is interesting to note that Kesub Chandra Sen's granddaughter, Sadhana Bose, was highly inspired by Anna Pavlova and Uday Shankar and with her husband's help, acted and danced on the stage. She performed in plays like "Alibaba", "Abhinaya" and "Kumkum".

The Indian Press also sent out a circular asking for educated people's opinions on the nautch question:

> The custom of celebrating festive occasions by nautches prevails in our country. The nautch girls are as a rule, public prostitutes. To encourage them in any way is considered immoral by some people. They hold that the nautches only give opportunities to the fallen women to beguile and tempt young men. There are some, again, who consider dancing girls to be the depositaries of our music and see nothing objectionable in attending nautches. This is a question of vital importance for the moral welfare of young men.
>
> May I, therefore, respectfully solicit your valuable opinion on the subject. If you are of opinion that nautches are really dangerous to the moral well being of

> our youth, I would also invite your suggestions as to how nautches may be done away with, or young men may be restrained from attending them. All opinions collected will be published. (Neville 116-117)

While some of the responses completely denounced the system, a few felt that dance and music were heavenly though prostitution was "hellish". Hence, one should work a way out whereby the blessing (dance and music) and the curse (prostitution) could be separated. Some even felt that women in the house should be taught music and dance so that they can entertain the men of the house, their husbands and brothers.

The Hindu Social Reform Association of Madras appealed to the Governor General of Madras Presidency and the Viceroy of India in 1893 to make efforts to stop the evil practice by not attending these nautch parties, by not accepting any invitation to an entertainment at which the nautch girls may be present and by trying to put an end to the practice altogether. In a letter addressed to the Viceroy they mentioned the following:

> 1. There exists in the Indian community a class of women commonly known as the nautch girls.
> 2. These women are invariably prostitutes.
> 3. The countenance and encouragement given to them, and even a recognised status in society secured to them, by the practice which prevails among Hindus, to a very undesirable extent, of inviting them to take part in marriage and other festivities, and even to entertainments given in honour of guests who are not Hindus.
> 4. That this practice only lowers the moral tone of society, but also tends to destroy that family life on which national soundness depends, and to bring upon individuals ruin in property and character alike.
> 5. That this practice rests only upon fashion, and receives no authority from

antiquity or religion, and accordingly has no claim to be considered a National institution, and is entitled to no respect as such.

6. That a strong feeling is springing up among the educated classes of this country against the prevalence of this practice, as is evidenced, among other things, by the proceedings at a public meeting in Madras, on the 5th of May, 1983.

7. That so keenly do our Memorialists realise the harmful and degrading character of this practice that they have resolved neither to invite nautch girls, nor to accept any invitation to an entertainment at which it is known that nautch girls are to be present.

8. That your Memorialists accordingly appeal to Your Excellency, assured that Your Excellency desires to aid, by every proper means those who labour to remove any form of social evil.

9. That your Memorialists accordingly appeal to Your Excellency, as the official and recognised head of society in the Presidency of Madras, and as the representative of Her Most Gracious Majesty, the Queen Empress, in whose influence and example the cause of purity has ever found support, to discourage this pernicious practice by declining to attend any entertainment at which nautch girls are invited to perform, and thus to strengthen the hands of those who are trying to purify the social life of their community. (Neville 119-120)

However, in reply to this letter the Viceroy mentioned that though he had been to a few such gatherings he had not found anything objectionable in the performances. He mentioned that the "the proceedings were, as far as His Excellency observed them, not characterised by any impropriety and the performers were present in the exercise of their profession as dancers, in accordance with the custom of the country. Under the circumstances, His Excellency does not, on the eve of departure from India, feel called

upon to take any action such as that which you have recommended" (Neville 120). The association was obviously not happy with the response and hence took upon itself the task to eradicate the system. Jyotirao Phule took up the issue of sacred prostitution in 1883, when he pleaded with the commissioner of Bombay to prevent dedication of young girls. He was concerned about the sheer number of young girls called Joginis, Basavis and Muralis. In 1920, Kolhapur passed an order prohibiting the dedication of young girls to temples. It must be noted here that most of these girls dedicated in the Southern Maratha region were from the lower castes and no alternate kinds of rehabilitation was provided to them. The people from the lower castes were not allowed to enter the temple premises and it was a prevalent belief that the Basavis, Muralis and Joginis were dedicated because this was their only way of entering the temples.

Under the able guidance of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the movement gathered momentum and the devadasi institution was finally banned. In her resolution titled, "Why should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples be Abolished?" she talks about the practice of dedicating girls or young women to temples as a slur on Indian womanhood and a great wrong done to the youth of the country. She advocates the abolition of the devadasi system and suggests that they should be given some land so that they could lead a life of respect thereafter. She blames the temple, religion and people for this "immoral practice", for forcing children into the profession in the name of religion. In her *Autobiography* and *My Experiences as a Legislator*, she mentions the need for the abolition of the system which is full of vice and is morally degrading. Emphasising the moral, psychological and medical consequences, she proves the need for the abolition of the system. Muthulakshmi Reddi managed to get the resolution passed in the legislative assembly and the devadasi system was eventually banned in 1947.

The social structure within which the courtesans and prostitutes functioned in

Bengal was complex. The number of Muslim courtesans as found in the records is far less than their Hindu counterparts. The Muslim prostitutes could broadly be categorised into two groups, one who were either courtesans or descendants of courtesans from Northern India, who sang and danced in feudal setups, who had migrated to Bengal after the 1857 uprising, and the second which included poor, indigenous rural families from Bengal, who had been displaced by famine, etc. The courtesans of North Indian origin were better off in terms of financial status, unlike the poor Muslim prostitutes. This earlier group of well to do courtesans was referred to as *baijis*, who had different mannerisms than those of the upper caste Hindu courtesans. Their clientele ranged from upper class Hindu aristocratic families to the newly rich ones. This section did not face any religious taboos. The taboos with regard to religion and caste as expected only prevailed in the lower strata of society. Once one moved up the ladder, the money took care of such taboos. Amongst the Hindu courtesans, the *khemtawalis* were the ones who followed a tradition of Indian classical dance and music. They belonged to rural Bengal. Though both the *baijis* and the *khemtawalis* were "disreputable" women, the *baijis* scored over the *khemtawalis*, because they carried with them a certain aristocratic background. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests[2], the nautch girl/*baiji* represented a cliché of the imagining of British India. Along the same lines, the *bhadralok* as well as their English friends were charmed by these *baijis*, more with their vocal rendition of semi classical songs rather than their dance.

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay titled "How to Read a 'Culturally Different' Book", which centres around R K Narayan's novel *The Guide*, discusses the character of Rosie, who is the daughter of a devadasi and a dancer herself. She talks about the exploitative patriarchal nature of the profession and discusses how Narayan's text is a failure in dealing with the issue. She suggests that, "[t]hus the novel draws on a particular tradition of cultural performance in order to satisfy the needs of a casual unmoored international audience" (130). Spivak is of the opinion that it is this mood, that has led to the marginalisation of the character of Rosie. She sees the dancer as the subaltern and therefore has no agency here. According to Spivak, "If the subaltern--and the contemporary devadasi is an example- is listened to as agent and not simply as victim, we might not be obliged to rehearse decolonization interminably from above, as agendas for new schools of post-colonial criticism. But the subaltern is not heard. And one of the most interesting philosophical questions about decolonizing remains: who decolonizes, and how?" (138). I use this essay further in my analysis of *Devdas, Natir Puja* and other fiction written in Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in my third chapter.

As Sumanta Banerjee mentions, the Bengali journal *Banga Darshan* "denounced *khemta* dance as originating from barbarian Bengali tantric practices and marked by abominable contortions of the middle part of the body while praising the dancing of the *baijis* as inspired by the North Indian Hindu scriptures and discovering in them a seriousness that is similar to that of the Hindu *puranas*" (Banerjee *Raj*14). Compared to these middle and upper class courtesans, who performed at private garden houses, at get-togethers organised by upper class *bhadralok*, the prostitutes belonging to the lower classes, who functioned from the red light areas, were extremely aggressive and hurled abuses at the male crowd who came looking for them in their quarters. Much of it also had to do with the fact that this was the only way in which they could negotiate their price and choose or reject a customer.

The Government introduced the Cantonment Act, (Act XXII) in 1864, whereby the houses of ill repute had to be "controlled" to prevent the spread of venereal diseases. The Act divided the prostitutes into two classes. 1. Those frequented by European soldiers. 2. Those outside that category. Only the ones belonging to the first section were under the purview of the Act. The Army authorities in order to save the British soldiers from venereal diseases set up brothels in appointed places within the Cantonments.[3] These brothels were called *chaklas*. As Banerjee mentions, these *chaklas* were further divided into three sections, *gora chakla*, which catered to the white army officers, *lal kurti chakla*, for the white infantry ranks, who wore red coats and *kala chakla* for the Indian soldiers. This segregation was done so as to avoid inter racial quarrels. The women who served the

[3] According to an official report, "the officer commanding a regiment, used...to arrange for the provision of women for the use of his men. A hereditary pimp or a prostitute would offer to bring the women from among her acquaintances and became responsible for their management and good conduct. From them, she received fees, generally in the form of levy on their earnings; while in some cases, but apparently rarely, she also received an allowance from regimental funds. She lived with her women in the regimental chakla; and her duties were to attend genrally to the comfort and welfare of women, to fill up vacancies in their ranks, to take them to the periodical examinations by the doctor, and personally make periodical examinations, to settle disputes." (Banerjee *Outcast* 59)

white soldiers had to get their names registered with the Cantonment Magistrate, and were issued tickets. The soldiers were trained to only "consort" with these registered practitioners. Apart from this the Army also set up institutions to monitor the health of the prostitutes and the soldiers. These institutions were later called the "Lock Hospitals". These hospitals were set up in all Cantonment towns to monitor health situations. Sumanta Banerjee also provides us with information regarding the kind of treatment in these hospitals: "The records...reveal interesting dimensions, like fluctuations in the number of prostitutes taking admissions, racist overtones in the treatment of Indian and European prostitutes, resistance of the prostitutes themselves to the medical treatment, persecution of the prostitutes by the military authorities and last but not the least the failure of the lock hospitals to stem the spread of the diseases"(Banerjee *Outcast* 62). However, innovative and farfetched this Act was, the Act did not succeed in what it set out to do. The frequent movement of the British troops from one place to another, the paucity of prostitutes, the desire to move out of the confined Cantonment areas caused its failure. But the Act had paved the way for another more comprehensive Act, by way of identifying the courtesan quarters, the red light areas, the setting up of Lock hospitals, which had been tried and tested in England, the Contagious Diseases Act.

The Contagious Diseases Act in Great Britain was passed in the year 1864. It was amended again in 1866 and 1869. The British Government tried implementing the law in a similar fashion in India in 1868-69. However, the law was not amended in the case of India. The law was introduced as a legislation to control the spread of venereal diseases among enlisted men in garrison towns and ports. Also the cases of venereal diseases had increased by leaps and bounds after the war of 1857. Under this Act a woman could be identified as a "common prostitute" by a special plain clothes policeman and then subjected to fortnightly internal examination. The prostitute, if suffering, from venereal

diseases was to be interned in a certified Lock hospital for a period of nine months: "Under the Act, the prostitutes were required to: 1. Compulsorily register themselves; 2. Subject themselves to periodical medical examination; and 3. Compulsory treatment; and were 4. Forbidden to live in specified areas."[4] The Victorian society was obsessed with health and hygiene, and hence wanted to impose norms on the soldiers to control their ways. This Act also made sure that men exercised control over the sexual relations they encountered. Hence, the Act in a sense reinforced the concepts of gender discrimination and domination. Though the Act allowed the prostitutes to carry on with their profession, it curbed their smooth functioning, by periodically examining them, and by confining them to certain areas in towns. The women were subjected to humiliating medical examinations, as the police enjoyed the power to harass any individual, under the catch all provision of the Act. The poorer section of prostitutes who occupied the red light areas and the high class courtesans, along with the *baijis*, who in some cases were maintained by rich upper class *bhadraloks*, all came under the purview of this Act. However, the Act failed to achieve what it had set out to do, which was the prevention of venereal diseases. After having faced severe criticism, both in England as well as in India, the Act was finally repealed in 1888, on grounds of inability to serve the purpose.[5] The Act was implemented in Bombay and Madras as well. In the case of Bombay however, initially it

[4] "C. Fabre-Tonnerre, the brain behind the Act, insisted that every woman registered under the Act must be provided with 'a ticket bearing her name, caste and residence' and must be 'compelled to exhibit such tickets on being required to do so by a superintendent of police.' Violation of provisions of the Act by the offender invited imprisonment 'with or without hard labour for any term exceeding three months.' Fabre-Tonnerre spread quite a wide net by his catch all provision: 'Public prostitution or women of ill fame or reputed as such shall be liable to those rules and regulations'" (Banerjee *Outcast* 67).

[5] In a memorial published in *The British Medical Journal*, in the year 1898, it was mentioned that the Government and the lock hospitals failed in what they were actually supposed to achieve as the medical treatment given out was insufficient. Syphilis required continuous treatment for some months and the soldiers were sent back to the cantonments the moment the symptoms vanished, without proper medication. The memorial also mentioned that the only way in which venereal diseases could be removed, was by asserting the importance of moral character in a soldier. Any soldier joining the army should be made aware of the importance of morality and the fact that immorality would not be excused and people with a record of venereal diseases would not be considered for promotions. Apart from this they also felt that there should be no provision for a brothel house in the Cantonment altogether (*The British Medical Journal*, 585).

was noticed that the cost of examination was very high in comparison to the other two cities. Also, with the introduction of the Act here in 1870, there was a general panic which led to most of the prostitutes migrating to the suburbs. Putting these things together, the Act was suspended only in the Bombay presidency in 1873. However, the cases of venereal diseases were on the rise and after an inspection by a special committee, the Act was reintroduced in 1880. The town council and the corporation were supposed to invest more money to make this Act a success after this. But even after the Act was repealed, the prostitutes who were registered were expected to go in for periodic medical examinations. After the Act was passed, several courtesans and prostitutes migrated to the suburbs of the three presidencies. In the case of Calcutta, the French colony, Chandannagore became one of the hot spots as the Contagious Diseases Act was not applicable there.

The Act had faced severe criticism in England, by the likes of Josephine Butler, who termed the law anti-women and sexist:

> Women considered infective at the time of examination were required on penalty of imprisonment, to undergo inpatient treatment from which they could be released only on the fiat of the reigning Medical Officer. No parallel measures were applied to infective men. In colonial settings the legislation was both civil and military in application, though guarding the health of Europeans was always its primary function. In island Britain by contrast such legislation was confined to military garrisons and naval ports. Almost everywhere the legislation was enacted, activists sought its repeal. (Levine 588)

There were eight main charges brought against the Act. The charges being: 1. The Acts were passed in secrecy. 2. The legislation fundamentally changed the legal protection formerly accorded to women and men. 3. The offence was not clearly defined. 4. The laws

punished only one sex for vice. 5. The path of evil was made ‘easy for our sons’. 6. The implementation of the laws was cruel and degrading. Subsequently this claim was generally expressed as ‘the Act brutalizes and violates women who retain some sense of shame’ and 7. The Acts would not remove disease, but would increase it. 8. The cure was ‘moral’ and not ‘physical’. The memorandum was signed by the likes of Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler, and Mary Carpenter among others. The prostitutes sent to the Lock hospital were ill treated by the policemen who arrested them and also by the doctors who treated them. Though these prostitutes were supposed to be examined by midwives, as it had been done in England after the amendments, it did not happen in India. They were molested and raped by men. Also the very fact that they were sent to the Lock hospitals meant that they were registered under the police records which made it easier for the police to confiscate their properties when they died. Throughout the 1870s and early 1880s, the debate against the repeal of the Act continued in the British Parliament, on the streets and in the newspapers. The movement was spearheaded by Josephine Butler, who along with the Ladies National Association, protested against the inhumanity of the law. She also used the morality card to get the Act repealed, whereby she insisted on the need of a strong moral character. The Act was suspended in 1883 and repealed in 1888. Josephine Butler was aware of the existence of these laws in India as well, but waited for the protest within the country to be a success before she ventured out. In 1887, she urged people from across the British colonies to join her so that they could start the second chapter of their struggle. Her second phase of the struggle also found a lot of supporters. There was an inquiry in the House of Lords with regard to the supply of prostitutes for the British soldiers. After this the social purity activist Alfred Dyer was sent to India to observe and monitor the situation. The Act had been a failure and after observing the reports issued the Act was repealed in 1888. A new Cantonment Act (Act XIII of 1889)

came into effect at the start of the new decade. It did not mention venereal diseases specifically, but "provided for the enactment of rules for the 'prevention of the spread of infectious or contagious disorders within a cantonment and the appointment and regulation of hospitals or other places within or without a cantonment for the reception and treatment of persons suffering from any disease'" (Banerjee 167). New rules were further added in 1895, where, "no person known to be a prostitute shall under any circumstances be permitted to reside within the limits of any regimental bazaar" (Banerjee 167). Yet another Act was passed in 1897, which repealed the old one and provided the Commanding Officer the power to issue a notice to any person suspected of suffering from venereal disease to go in for examination and in case the person refused, she would be expelled from the cantonment.[6]

The Cantonment Act and the Contagious Diseases Act were initially introduced to protect the British soldiers. But later on the administrators were trapped to provide a moralistic approach to the situation. The social reformers in England, who were fighting to repeal the Act, insisted that only a strict moral code for the soldiers and the prostitutes would solve the problem of venereal diseases. The Company was caught in a double bind, one, of allowing controlled form of prostitution to meet the needs of its soldiers, and two, of living up to this moral code, which defined Victorian England. The colonial administrators, however, never thought of penalizing the men who were the main patrons. The prostitute hence became doubly marginalised. She was socially ostracized and she also operated in a male dominated society where she was always victimised.[7] They were

[6] Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*. 167.

[7] The British distinguished between the courtesans and prostitutes in India and in England: "Their [the courtesan's] life in the eyes of their countrymen has not much of the deep degradation attached to the European prostitute. This may be accounted for from the fact that the principal cause which induce the European woman to become a prostitute are so very different that there is not the slightest similitude between them. Whilst in our countries the primitive causes of prostitution are mainly due to the want of religious and moral feeling, defective education, vanity, laziness and in very few instances of extreme

accused of three major faults, of their immoral habits and often of attempts to break down the family structure, that they stayed in respectable parts of the cities and entertained guests at any point in the day, and that they were the hosts to venereal diseases. The Acts passed against these did not succeed in their agendas and by the first decade of the twentieth century as well, several cases of contagious diseases were reported. But these Acts did mark a shift in profession for the courtesans and prostitutes. Not only did they relocate to other places, but they also established themselves as the first women theatre artists, especially in Bengal. I will examine this aspect in a later chapter in greater detail.

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1933 made a provision for the suppression of brothels and traffic in women and prescribed punishment "for importing women for prostitution, for detention of women in brothels, for procurement of prostitutes and for encouraging seduction" (Bengal Act VI of 1933, 7). This Act drew from the Mumbai Act. The punishment included imprisonment up to three years with a fine of Rs. 1000, and in the case of men they would also be subject to whipping. Not only this but people who rented out houses to be converted into brothels knowingly or unknowingly were subject to severe punishment. These laws essentially curbed the practice of the nautch and under such circumstances any association with a courtesan was considered uncalled for and socially unacceptable. The reformist movements of the late 1930s condemned the profession as unacceptable in a civilized society. The late 1930s saw an attempt at reviving the lost dance and music forms. But the All India Radio which had till then given these people opportunities to earn a living now closed its doors for any performer who was a courtesan or a devadasi. It was difficult for them to get rid of their past, and their past in turn prevented them from being accepted in society. The Devadasi Protection Act in Bombay was passed in 1934 and in Madras in 1947. The Prohibition of

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misery, in India the principal causes of prostitution are religious and social prejudices of caste and utter destitution" (Banerjee 179).

Dedication of Devadasis in Karnataka was passed in 1982 and in Andhra Pradesh in 1988. These acts categorically mentioned that the dedication of women to temples was strictly prohibited. The Karnataka Act for instance says that "any person who, after the commencement of this Act, performs, permits, takes part in, or abets the performance of, any ceremony or act for dedicating a woman as a devadasi or any ceremony or act connected therewith shall on conviction be punishable with imprisonment..." (Karnataka Act No. 1 of 1984, 4)

Before the British came to India, the Hindu kings were the protectors and endowers of the temples. During the early phases the British tried not to make any changes within the set up, for it would help them in better governance. Priyadarshini Vijaisri in *Recasting the Devadasi* mentions that the colonial power intervened in the religious issues with extreme caution in the early phase, and later intervened systematically by way of endowing protection and supervision. From 1833-63, the Company was alleged to have patronised local religious institutions by the missionaries. The Act of 1925 centralised all the powers of supervision and control in a centrally constituted board and established local committees to supervise religious institutions under their jurisdiction. In the process the trustees of the religious institutions were brought under the control of the colonial power. In the changed political scenario, the services of the dancing girl were extended beyond the religious context and were now being utilized to entertain the colonial officials.

The Cantonment Act of 1864 and the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868-69, tried to curb this "immoral" practice. While the acts were quite successful in the Northern and Eastern regions, the claim that devadasis were affected by the venereal diseases was not acceptable to the temple authorities. They wanted to keep the devadasis outside the purview of this act owing to their religious affiliations. Also, by virtue of the Cantonment Act, these rules were only applicable in Cantonments:

In order to design effective laws, the central Government sent inquiries to the local Governments about the moral and religious status of the devadasis on two occasions. After reviewing the responses to these queries, the central Government recommended better enforcement of existing laws, thus avoiding direct legislation that might have offended Hindus in those areas where devadasi dedication was regarded as a significant religious custom.

Much of the Government discussion regarding the customs of the devadasis centred on the assumption that they were prostitutes. In this context, central Government officials increasingly thought the custom of adopting young girls would be immoral if they were raised to become prostitutes. Yet the 1861 Penal Code outlawed neither adoption by a devadasi nor prostitution. The code simply attempted to protect minors under the age of sixteen from being prostituted by others. The relevant sections of the code specified:

372. Whoever sells, lets to hire, or otherwise disposes of any minor under the age of sixteen years, with intent that such minor shall be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or for any unlawful and immoral purpose, or knowing it to be likely that such minor will be employed or used for any such purpose shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

373. Whoever buys, hires, or otherwise obtains possession of any minor under the age of sixteen years, with intent that such minor shall be employed or used for any such purpose, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

The issue underlying renewed Government concern centered on the

> effectiveness of this section of the code. Between 1872 and 1905, the central Government circulated various proposals regarding the advisability of strengthening the legislation protecting minors. (Jordan 59-60)

The missionaries and the Society for Protection of Children in India wanted an account of the nautch girls and devadasis from across the country. They also requested that the child protection laws should be amended to allow the courts to "remove girls from the custody of prostitutes unless it could be proved that such custody was not for immoral purposes...Conviction required evidence that a prostitute or procurer intended to use minor girls for an immoral purpose" (Jordan 65). The Commissioner of Coorg wrote back saying there were no dancing girls attached to temples in Coorg. The Madras and the Bombay Governments replied saying that the eradication of dancing girls will be seen as an attack on religion. Across Bijapur, Belagaum and Dharwar, the district magistrates felt that the system should be eradicated, but posed a question as to what would happen to the devadasis who are already employed in the temples as the Act only prohibited further adoption and dedication of girls to the temples. In 1907, the International Convention on Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls was organised, where the concerned state Governments agreed to take stock of the situation in their respective states.

The states of Pudukkottah and Mysore issued orders prohibiting nautches in houses and driving out all the dancing girls attached to temples. The public was jubilant and thought that the others too would follow suit. The Mysore Government Order of 1909 pronounced the abolition of the employment of devadasis in Muzrai temples. There was some confusion regarding the land that was allotted to these devadasis in lieu of their services. The Government decided that the land would now be allotted to the family and not to the devadasi alone. The devadasis after this declaration got into a legal struggle with the temple authorities but were forced to succumb.

However, the colonial Government was again extremely conscious of passing any law or legislation against the devadasis as they had a religious affiliation. But the social reform movements in both England and India were in favour of the eradication of this system. As both Priyadarshini Vijaishri and Kay K. Jordan suggest, Irish Born Evangelical missionary Amy Carmichael--Wilson's *Things as They Are: Missionary Work in South India* (1903) and *Lotus Buds* (1909) renewed the interest in social reform of the temple dancers and their children all over again. She suggested in her book that India was entangled with a "perverted religious sense" (Jordan 73) and that she was shocked that devadasi dedication continued "in a land of Christian power" (Jordan 73). She set up Christian residential schools, many of these also in remote locations, to help these children whom she had rescued from being dedicated to temples. The Christian missionaries felt that the realities of Hindu life had been portrayed very vividly in her books. It is surprising though that she rescued the children from the families who might or might not have dedicated them to the temples. She did not rescue children from the temples, where they had already been dedicated. She advocated the "nullification of adoption by temple women and modification of laws restricting guardianship to members of the same religion" (Jordan 73). She also advocated strongly for a legislation to be passed to curb the practice. In 1911, the colonial Government received an inquiry from Lord Crew, the Secretary of State of India in London, regarding the extent of child prostitution and the position of devadasis. He mentioned:

> My attention in Council has lately been called to the various methods by which female children in India are condemned to a life of prostitution, whether by enrollment in a body of dancing girls attached to a Hindu temple; by symbolical marriage to an idol, a flower, a sword, or some other material object; or by adoption by a prostitute whose profession the child is brought up to follow. (Jordan

74)

What puzzled the British administration and the Indian reformers both at this point was that there was a society for protection of children in Bombay and still dedication of children was a common practice. The inquiry led to a series of discussions between 1911 and 1914, regarding legislation on the protection of children and the status of devadasis. In 1912, Indian legislator, Maneckji Dadabhoy, requested the introduction of a bill for the "protection of women and girls." Three sections in his bill touched upon the issue of devadasis. The first with the "dedication of girls to temples," the second "against the offences against girls under sixteen years of age" and the third "against the immoral transfer of a woman or girl under sixteen years of age" (Jordan 76). The bill was debated over, with example drawn upon from across the country to substantiate the argument. He also presented a petition from forty members of the same community from some districts of the Madras presidency to strengthen his argument, suggesting that these people were themselves ready for a social change. The petition mentioned:

> For a long time leading Social Reformers, as also some persons of our own caste, have been making attempts to improve and reform us, but it is extremely difficult for anything appreciable being done without the help of the Government. Now, to our great good fortune, we understand that the Government intend making a law that there should be no adoption by dancing girls. We request you to support the action of Government by holding meetings in various parts of the country. By having the law passed we believe that our girls will be greatly benefited and that the custom of adopting girls from other castes for purposes of prostitution will also be put an end to. (Jordan 80)

Dadabhoy thought that this petition asserted the fact that women from within the community were ready to accept a "change" now. What he therefore proposed was a

legislation to protect “minor females by outlawing and invalidating the adoption of daughters by prostitutes including devadasis and making devadasi dedication a criminal offence” (Jordan 81). The Government instead of passing a new law, amended sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Penal Code, by suggesting eight changes in the law. These were:

> 1. A single act of intercourse would constitute evidence of prostitution; 2. No exemption would be granted for claims that a girl could not be prostituted till after her sixteenth birthday; 3. The age at which abducted or unlawfully detained girls must be returned to their guardians would be raised from fourteen to sixteen; 4. The age of consent for sexual relations outside of marital relationship would be raised from twelve to thirteen; 5. It would be misdemeanour for a man to have intercourse with a girl between the ages of thirteen and fifteen outside of the marital relationship; 6. Encouraging the seduction or prostitution of a minor in one’s custody would be considered a crime; 7. Permitting seduction of a minor on the premises one occupied would be a crime; 8. Girls would be removed from the custody of strangers, guardians, and parents who were bringing them up to a life of prostitution. (Jordan 82)

It was believed that the changes in the legislation would lead to a change in public opinion which would make the drawing up of the Bill easier. Reginald Craddock, who was involved in the whole process of collecting public opinion and juxtaposing them with the views of the legislature, suggested that the Bill would be circulated for review by both the local Government and the legislature. R. N. Mudholkar, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, and Sir G. M. Chitnavis, spoke in favour of the protection of minor females at the legislature. Mudholkar argued that prostitution was never recognised in Hinduism and that chastity and purity are the only basis of religious life. He also mentioned that one should

stick to Hindu religious values rather than Western values, which allows one to choose one's own vocation. He proposed that the age of consent should be raised from sixteen to eighteen and that declaration should be made to the district magistrate stating the age and the desire of the girl before she is dedicated. Malaviya too supported the resolutions, thereby stating that no one had the right to dedicate anybody to any creature or God. Chitnavis mentioned that the devadasis were initially dedicated to perform the temple chores and to lead a holy and virtuous life, but over time had been corrupted, and several people in the Hindu community would want some reformation to happen to "restrict such indecencies."

All these arguments clearly defended Hinduism against immoral charges. The Hindu intelligentsia was not ready to accept the fact that something was wrong with the religion and its practices, and was definitely not ready for interference from another religion, in this case Christianity, to reform and reorganise them. What began as an imposition of Victorian and Christian morals and principles, had now become a movement spearheaded by Western educated Hindu elite.

After a lot of deliberations on all the aspects pointed out, the Government identified the areas where devadasi dedication was practised. The areas where it was not practised were the United Provinces, Punjab, The North West Frontier Province, Sind, Gujrat, Coorg and Burma. On the other hand, the Governments of Bombay, Madras and Bengal, unanimously agreed that it was necessary to implement stronger laws to curb the system. The Government submitted a Bill titled "The Indian Criminal Law and Procedure Amendment Bill" in 1913 to the Governor General's Legislative Council. The Bill was discussed at length in 1914, where Craddock suggested that, "... [He] did not desire to put in the law, that any religious practice itself was immoral. If it was immoral, it would have come under the law; but we did not want to define it as immoral itself, because we were

warned that, although as a rule, such dedication did involve a life of immorality, it had not done so originally, and there might be exceptions, and therefore that to brand dedication as such as immoral was undesirable, and likely to wound feelings of Hindus" (Jordan 87).

The new Bill also included provisions for the rescued girls. This too gave rise to a lot of debate. While the likes of Chakravarthi Vijayaraghavachariar and Madan Mohan Malaviya insisted that the rescued girls should be under the care of someone following the same religion, because placing them under the care of Christian missionaries would result in serious violation of the Hindu law, Rama Rayaninger disagreed with this view and argued that the ancient Hindu scriptures like Manu Smriti equated prostitutes with converts and people practising non-Vedic religions, and that their re-inclusion in the Hindu fold would not get them salvation. Rama Rayaninger was deeply criticised, for the others felt that the Hindu religion gave everyone a chance for salvation, irrespective of their class and profession. Surendra Nath Banerjee vehemently opposed the usage of religious scriptures for reference and counter reference. He mentioned that the legislation had to be drawn up on the basis of public opinion and a greater social cause, that of saving a certain section of society. So, though the initial debates centred on religion and religious scriptures, the focus now was moving towards gathering a consensus regarding the position of the devadasi and the prostitute in the Indian society in the early twentieth century. The British Government was very cautious in passing any law which bordered on religion at this stage. It opposed the passing of a bill banning devadasis by saying that: 1. It did not want to label any religious practice as immoral, 2. Public opinion must be respected even when it was less enlightened than the opinions of the legislators, 3. In cases where devadasi customs led to immoral actions, they would be covered by the existing law, 4. It was appropriate to require the prosecution to prove a criminal intention on the part of the accused (Jordan 91).

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 made sure that there was enough representation of Indian legislators at the State and other legislative councils. India was moving closer to the idea of self governance by now. Most of these legislators were Western educated and were very conscious of the representation of India as a country in the West. They favoured social reforms at several levels and their positions as legislators now only facilitated these reforms. The matter concerning devadasis was again put forward in the year 1922, where Dr. H. S. Gour, spoke against the system vehemently, terming these women "notorious" and as being used for the "purpose of prostitution." He mentioned that almost all Hindu temples had devadasis and most of them practised prostitution. He objected to the dedication of prepubescent girls as young as six, eight or ten. He mentioned that parents generally dedicated these girls when they were too young to decide for themselves. His observations were deeply criticised by the likes of Rao Bahadur T. Rangachariar and B. S. Kamat of the Bombay Presidency, who claimed that his was a case of misrepresentation. In 1924, the Government introduced a bill to amend the existing laws.[8] This amendment strengthened the law by raising the age of the girls concerned. The Bill was finally passed in the Assembly on September 15, 1924 and in the state council on September 19, 1924.

Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, Periyar and Muvalur Ramamirthammal

The publication of the American journalist, Katherine Mayo's book *Mother India*,

[8] Prior to the amendment, the Indian Penal Code stated: "Whoever sells, lets to hire, or otherwise disposes of any minor under the age of sixteen years with the intent that such minor shall be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or for unlawful and immoral purpose, or knowing it to be likely that such minor will be employed or used for any such purpose shall be punished…" This was now amended to penalize any person who, "disposes of a minor under the age of *eighteen* years with intent that such person shall at *any age* be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or illicit intercourse with any person or for any unlawful and immoral purpose, or knowing it likely that such person will at any age be [prostituted]" (Jordan 103).

deeply offended the sentiments of the Indian nationalists. It was a "sensational book that titillated the American and European readers" (Jordan 104). Mayo believed that the physical and mental weaknesses of the Indian people were caused by child marriage and that physically immature women gave birth to sickly children. She mentions that young girls were dedicated to temples and were taught to sing and dance by their predecessors there. They became concubines of the priest by the age of five and if they survived later, they were taken up by male visitors to the temple. She also adds that people from every rank, class and caste in society dedicated their daughters to this system. She was also deeply critical of the colonial Government in the country as they did not have the power to deal with matters concerning religion. The Indian nationalists were very concerned about the representation of India across the world. The book was deeply criticised and her representation of India was critiqued. This book made the legislators take another look at the matter and pass an even stronger resolution. V. Ramdas Pantulu moved a resolution which took into consideration, for the first time, the economics related to the devadasi institution. The devadasi system according to him continued because the devadasis were dependant on the income from inams and land endowments which were given to them for the service they provided to the temple. He proposed that the Government should purchase these lands and deed it out to the devadasis, so that they did not feel the need to continue with the profession. He also proposed to establish rescue homes to support the devadasis. Legislators from across religious affiliations spoke in favour of Pantulu. This led to the establishment of vigilance associations in Madras to observe the violations against the existing laws.

E. V. Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar) is associated with the Self Respect Movement in South India. As Kalpana Kannabiran mentions in her article, "Judiciary, Social Reform and Debate on 'Religious Prostitution' in Colonial India", this movement along with the

social reform movement and the nationalist movement was concerned with achieving political independence, asserting national/cultural identity and purging the society of all its evils, thus paving the way for a free, equal and modern society. Periyar in his text *Why Were Women Enslaved*? dedicates an entire section to Prostitution. Periyar started the Self Respect Movement in 1925, to fight against discrimination of girl child at birth and women's enslavement. He mentions that words like chastity and prostitution are not necessary for a life filled with freedom and equality. For him, these words do not have relevance to natural behaviour. He believed that prostitution was only a way of enslaving women and should not be encouraged. He goes on to talk about how merchants and lawyers make a career out of lying and how they are accepted in society because they are rich, but at the same time devadasis are considered lowly. He felt that any profession which harmed others should be eradicated. It is important to note here that he uses the words devadasis and prostitutes synonymously. But what is more striking is that he talks of destroying masculinity. He believes that the word masculinity causes disrespect to the word femininity. Muvalur Ramamirthammal, a 'reformed' devadasi, supported the Self Respect Movement. She blamed Brahminical Hinduism as one of the major reasons behind the devadasi system: "She used the devadasi practice as a pivotal point in her critique of brahminical Hinduism. In this view, religion and god created caste differences, untouchability, enforced widowhood and prostitution that was practised under the garb of euphemism. The devadasis she said were mere instruments of brahmin treachery" (Ramamirthammal 23). Her book translated as *Web of Deceit* puts forth her views on the system. She was born into a non devadasi family, but was forced to join the profession by her uncle who had told her parents that she would fetch a handsome amount. This life altering incident made her sure that the custom was evil and needed to be eradicated. The novel is autobiographical, placed within the Self Respect Movement, written "with the

express purpose of reforming society and cleansing it of the evils of the dasi trade rooted, as it was, in the superstition and orthodoxy of brahminism" (Ramamirthammal back cover). I will discuss the novel in greater detail in a later chapter.

In 1928, the Government sent out a circular across the country for advice on the devadasi legislation that had been passed in 1924. The Government of Madras, Government of Bihar and Orissa, and the Government of the United Provinces had some reservations.[9] After having gathered the opinions of the state Governments, the Government of India passed a resolution for an additional explanation of the sections 372 and 373. The explanations are as follows:

> Explanation 1—Any person who dedicates any female under the age of eighteen years to the service of any deity or temple, with the effect of precluding the marriage of such female with any other person, or any person who sells or lets for hire or otherwise disposes of any such female to any other female who has been so dedicated shall, until the contrary is proved, be presumed to have disposed of such female with the intent that she shall be used for the purposes of prostitution.
>
> Explanation II—Any person who has been dedicated to the service of any deity or temple with the effect of precluding the marriage of such female with any other person and who thereafter buys, hires or otherwise obtains possession of a female under the age of eighteen years, shall until the contrary is proved be presumed to have obtained possession of such female with the intent that she shall be used for the purpose of prostitution. (Jordan 113)

Almost all the state Governments reacted favourably to the proposed amendments. However, owing to the fact that the struggle for freedom was at its peak and the Indian

[9] The Government of Madras opposed the legislation because the public opinion was against it and was scared that the Hindu community would react strongly to the Bill. The Government of Bihar and Orissa commented that the law did not prevent a girl under eighteen from joining a temple of her own accord, while the Government of the United Provinces too felt that the law would face a lot of opposition from the orthodox sections of the Hindu community.

National Congress had declared January 26, 1930 as the Independence Day, seeking resignations from all the legislators, the Government postponed the all India introduction of the Bill.

The Role of Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddi[10]

> I have been feeling all along and feeling most acutely too that it (the devadasi system) was a great piece of injustice, a great wrong, a violation of human rights, a practice highly revolting to our higher nature to countenance, and to tolerate young innocent girls to be trained in the name of religion to lead an immoral life, to lead a life of promiscuity, a life leading to the disease of the mind and the body. (Reddi, *Autobiography* 64)

> Throughout the anti-nautch campaign, and especially in the speeches of Muthulakshmi Reddi, we have the recurrent motif of 'rescue': upper caste, enlightened people saving the devadasis from priests, from patrons, from older women in their community, from disease, from sin, from themselves. (Natarajan 116-117)

Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddi was a well-known doctor, social worker and activist who was elected to the Madras Legislative Council in 1926. She described the act of dedicating young girls to Hindu temples as immoral. She proposed a resolution on this in

[10] "Muthulakshmi Reddi was [also] an active campaigner for the Bill on the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic (passed in 1928). Like Josephine Butler in England, she fought against the forced examination of prostitutes by male officers enforcing state control over prostitution" (Natarajan 66).

the year 1927.[11] In her *Autobiography* she says:

> … I was adamant and I almost took a vow that I would never rest till I get the pernicious custom eradicated from this land….My medical and educational wok in the Council was very much applauded but not my social reform work. The people that had not the courage to oppose me openly in public began to work underhand and set up one or two bogus associations to write petitions to Government and distribute unworthy literature to the public to prevent my bill becoming law. Therefore, I had to bring all the resources at my command to counteract such evil propaganda….To the credit of the Indian public it must be said that very soon the vocal public became converted to my creed….The vernacular and the English press took up my side and above all owing to the wonderful awakening that had come upon all communities, particularly those castes that had been victims of this Devadasi evil, I very soon came in touch with the reformed sections of those communities who have since done much to further my work in that direction and who are even now carrying on intensive propaganda to uproot this evil. (Reddi *Autobiography* 64-66)

Muthulakshmi Reddi used her expertise as a doctor to further the cause. As Srividya Natarajan notes, "When the devadasi was designated a 'prostitute,' her lifestyle came within the purview of the updated medical science of Victorian Britain as applied in India, and of its concrete offshoot, the public health system" (118). Reddi was of the opinion that the Bill should be passed for the sake of public health. She mentioned that venereal diseases were the cause of blindness, hearing disability, heart ailments, liver and kidney

[11] The resolution read, "This council recommends to the Government to undertake legislation or I [sic] that is for any reason impracticable to recommend to the Government of India to undertake a legislation at a very early date to put a stop to the practice of dedication of young girls and young women to Hindu temples for immoral purposes under the pretext of caste, custom and religion" (Reddi *Autobiography* 65).

disorders in most children born of the devadasis, apart from their facing miscarriages and sterility. She also quoted the British Social Hygiene Council which reported that venereal diseases were four times more prevalent in India than in England or in Wales. It is within "the discourse of public danger, irrevocable moral degeneration, venereal disease and racial decrepitude as a result of unregulated prostitution" (Natarajan 119) that Reddi wanted the resolution against the devadasis to be passed. She was of the opinion that the amendments of the clauses 372 and 373 did not serve any purpose as parents would just wait for the girls to be eighteen years of age and then dedicate them to the temples. The fact that the age for dedication was raised in the amendments did not deter them from dedicating girls. She was also convinced of the fact that at times parents got false certificates for the age of their daughters. Hence, her object was to abolish the system completely. Her resolution was deeply appreciated by all quarters. The press lauded her for her achievements and the quarters closely associated with devadasis praised her for finally awakening them "from the sleep of ages." Mahatma Gandhi in an article published in *Young India*, wrote in her support:

> I heartily endorse the writer's proposal. Indeed I do not think that the proposed legislation will be in advance of public opinion that is vocal and is against the retention of the system in any shape or form. The opinion of the parties concerned in immoral traffic cannot count, just as the opinion of the keepers of opium dens will not count in favour of their retention, if public opinion is otherwise against them. The Devadasi system is a blot upon those who countenance it. It would have died long ago but for the supineness of the public. Public conscience in this country some or the other lies dormant. It often feels the awfulness of many a wrong, but is too often indifferent or too lazy to move. But if some active spirit like Dr. Reddi moves, that conscience is prepared to lend such support as

> indifferences can summon. I am therefore of opinion that Dr. Reddi's proposal is in no way premature. Such legislation might have been brought earlier. In any case I hope that she will receive the hearty support of all lovers of purity in religious and general social life. (Reddi *Autobiography* 68-69)

But Muthulakshmi Reddi also faced a lot of protest from the anti-abolitionists. The Devadasi Association of South India and the Madras Devadasi Association protested against such a move. Muthulakshmi Reddi was highly critical of all the counter activities by these anti abolitionists. They made their stand clear by mentioning that devadasi

> …was a band of pure virgin devotees attached to the ancient Hindu temples. They used to preach religion like the other religious teachers to the common people that resort to the temples for their daily worship. In those days they were held in high esteem and were very well looked after. They would spend their time in doing religious service to the Gods and devotees of the temples as the word dasi signifies. They would follow the procession of Gods dressed in the simplest sanyasi garbs and singing pious hymns suitable to the occasion. This is the history and origin of devadasi.[12] (Soneji *Unfinished* 122)

As Davesh Soneji in his book *Bharatanatyam- A Reader* mentions, the Madras Devadasis Association had put down twenty points which would strengthen their argument about why this resolution should not be passed. Some of them stipulated that devadasis were not prostitutes, that the real purpose of their caste was religion and service, that the fundamental principle of their lives was service to God, that the entire community should not be punished for the fault of a few, that it was their right to live, etc. They were also of the opinion that what they needed more than the resolution was education and justice.

[12] Dr. Annie Besant mentioned this about the devadasis by in one of her speeches which was later used by the Madras Devadasi Association to support their demands.

They demanded religious, literary and artistic education which would help them regain the same position as in the ancient times. It was difficult for them to imagine that at the time when the nation was stepping towards "an advanced stage of civilization" these devadasis had to fight for their right to live. The devadasis believed that the interest of the country was greater than the interest of individuals and only education could help them attain this greater good. Hence, there was an appeal for education for these women rather than a resolution to abolish the system. They were also scared of the fact that their property rights would be affected as a result of this resolution. Devadasis had large grants of land which were given to them in return for the services they provided to the temples. This had been with them through generations. They were scared that once the resolution was passed these lands would be taken away from them. Their claim was that this land was a fruit of their honest services to the temple and hence the generations after them should have a right over it.

The Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act which was passed in 1926, which termed the institution of dancing girls as objectionable, was amended to alter the relationship between the devadasis and the temple in 1929. One of the objectives of the Act was " to discourage the dedication of girls as Devadasis for the service of Hindu temples by freeing lands, if any held by them for such service from the condition of service and making them owners thereof and thereby removing an important inducement for the perpetuation of a system of dedication"(Vijaisri 246). The amendment proposed that "[t]he bill required that lands controlled by devadasis contingent upon their temple services be deeded over to them and detached from the service requirements. In cases where a devadasi was entitled to a portion of the revenue from land, she would continue to receive this income without being obligated to perform any service" (Jordan 132). The amendment proposed by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi stated that "none of the devadasis

currently controlling land or receiving income from land shall be allowed to perform such service in such temple on and from the date on which the land in question shall have been enfranchised or freed from the condition of service in the manner herein before provided" (Reddi, *Autobiography* 72). She felt that this system was immoral and vicious and the profession was carried out under the cloak of religion which gave it a legitimate standing in society. She was a strong believer of the fact that this system could not be done away with "unless the educated section of the Hindu community enforces its will upon these backward people" (Reddi, *Autobiography* 72). Law member Bahadur M. Krishnan Nayar and Mr. Satyamutrhy criticized the amendment as it had a sweeping statement about the property of a large number of people. Also, the devadasi was always left with the option of performing in any other temple but the one where she was assigned. Reddi took these and many other loopholes into consideration and redrafted the Act with the clause that the devadasi would receive revenue from land only till the time she is alive and after her death the revenue would revert to the temple. The amendment was passed and became Act V of 1929[13]. In January 1930, she presented "A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to Hindu Temples."[14] The Bill was circulated for public opinion by the Government. The Government was concerned that the Bill might cause public disturbances. The clause that was added in the Bill was pretty stern which mentioned that strict penalty and rigorous

[13] The Act stated, "Provided that where a grant of land has been made to dancing girls or Devadasis for the performance of any service whatever in any temple, such inam land shall be enfranchised to the present holder thereof and she shall not be required to perform any service in the temple" (Reddi *My Experience* 237).

[14] By virtue of this Bill, dedication of Hindu women to temples was declared illegal; the dedicated women were encouraged to get married and there was a penalty assigned for people engaged in dedication of women to temples: "My object in bringing in this Bill is twofold; firstly to have a law declaring that dedication of girls to Hindu temples is illegal and to prohibit such dedication; and secondly, to punish the persons taking part in the ceremony of dedication....If the British Government in India have yet undertaken legislation on the point, it is probably out of a tender regard to alleged religious susceptibilities of Hindus. To show that public opinion is in favour of the abolition of the system, and in response to the appeal of several men and women associations and hundreds of members of the community of Devadasis themselves I have brought forward the Bill"(Reddi, *My Experience* 243-246).

imprisonment would be granted to a person participating in the dedication of girls to temples. The inability of the Government to take a firm decision quickly irked Muthulakshmi Reddi who protested by saying, "it is beyond my comprehension how European officials coming from cultured and civilised country could make up their minds to side with those who are for continuing the evil practice" (Vijaisri 249). She felt that this Bill was necessary to strengthen the amendments which had been introduced earlier by her. Once the voting was done on the legislation, thirty three people voted for the Bill and nine against it. However, as mentioned by Priyadarshini Vijaisri, once the comments were received, the Bill was not reconsidered in the Council as Muthulakshmi Reddi had resigned from her post as a protest against the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi on May 8, 1930. The Maharani of Travancore had abolished the devadasi system after having followed the extensive debates around it and so did the state of Cochin, as mentioned in the *Indian Social Reformer* of October, 1930.

What I try to argue here is that the Indian Westernized elite were as much against the system as the colonial rulers, probably more. The anti nautch movement began with the Christian missionaries opposing the "immorality" of the profession but by the second decade of the twentieth century it became a movement spearheaded by the educated elite of the Indian society. I will discuss this point further with respect to the Bombay Devadasi Act of 1934 and the Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947.

In 1933, "A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to Service in Hindu Temples in the Bombay Presidency" was introduced. The Bill prohibited dedication, set penalties for people engaged in doing so, provided "enfranchisement of the *inams* and their release to devadasis after payment of quit rent"(Mukherjea ccxii) and also legalised marriages of devadasis to men. The Bombay Devadasi Act of 1934 proposed the termination of the practice and encouraged the girls to get married and start a family of their own. It is

interesting to note here that two conflicting models of sacred prostitution were presented here. Priyadarshini Vijaisri elaborates on these two models: "One was the temple model, whose distinct law regulating property and ritual identity within the temple, all within the purview of the Hindu Law. While the alternative model was of an outcaste woman, with no ritual service within the temple and who simply lead an immoral life of prostitution" (Vijaisri 239). The rationale for abolition was simply stated as follows: "[H]owever ancient and pure its origin, it now leads such women to a life of prostitution" (Vijaisri 239). The act also mentioned that land would be provided to the devadasis in lieu of their services and also to rehabilitate them. However, once the Bill was discussed in the Legislative Council, it was observed that men were not ready to marry devadasis as they had already undergone a marriage ceremony with the deity of the temple. Rao Bahadur S. K. Bole believed that devadasis were immoral and though their positions might have been sanctioned in the Vedic times, in the recent times all of them led lives of immorality and were mere prostitutes. Hence, he came to the conclusion that probably this was the reason why men did not want to marry devadasis. He was also of the opinion that once the system was abolished, more people would be interested in the art forms of dance and music as these would not be associated with immoral practitioners any more. He said all this while the Government was not very supportive of passing the Bill, the reason being that they were scared of religious public disturbances and hurting the sentiments of the masses. The Government was vehemently criticised for its lack of support for social reform legislation.[15] After some more deliberations on the topic the meaning of the word devadasi in the document was changed so as to include any woman dedicated to Hindu temples. This thus included *joginis, sulis*, *muralis* and *basavis*, who belonged to lower castes

[15] According to P. G. Solanki, "As it is an alien Government ruling this country on the line of least resistance, they do not want to undertake any sort of legislation however beneficial it may be for the betterment of the people of India. They always fight shy." He quoted Gandhi as saying that the depressed and oppressed classes were a part of the society and it was the duty of learned men to fight for their rights (Jordan 140-141).

among devadasis. When the Bill was referred to the Select Committee for revision, the definition of the devadasi was changed to "unmarried women dedicated to Hindu deities, idols, objects of worship, temples or other religious institutions" (Jordan 142). The women, who wished to continue serving the temple, would retain the land during their life time:

> By enfranchising the inams given to temples to provide for devadasi service, the Government was able to make it possible for those devadasis who wanted to discontinue their temple service right to retain their lands and rights to income from those properties during their lifetimes. The Bill specified how in some cases, a devadasi might pay a quit-rent to the temple o r the deity and take permanent possession of the land she occupied" (Jordan 142). The Bill was finally passed on August 17, 1934. The Bill went a step beyond the Madras Act by "legislating criminal penalties for devadasi dedication of a woman of any age and by legalising marriages to men by women who were previously dedicated as devadasis. (Jordan 143)

Following the passing of the Act in the Bombay Presidency, the Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 was reintroduced by the Home minister Dr. P. Subbarayan. He stated that prostitution in civilized nations was a crime, and whatever the system might have stood for earlier, it had turned out to be a "very pernicious system" now. The Bill

> forbade the performance of any ceremony by which a woman of any age is dedicated to the service of a Hindu deity, idol, object of worship, temple or other religious institution, and includes 'pottukattu', 'gajjepuja', 'mudri', and dancing by 'kumbharathy'...All dedications made before or after the enactment of the bill were declared null and void...It claimed to nullify the customs of all the devadasi

communities that made dedicated women ineligible to marry men. (Jordan 145) The Bill outlawed dancing by women in temples, religious institutions and religious processions. Persons over the age of sixteen who participated in or facilitated a dedication ceremony could be punished by six months imprisonment or a fine of five hundred rupees or both. Enormous time had passed between the introduction of the Bill and the final passing of the Act. The community of devadasis had reduced in number by now and there was hardly any monetary incentive attached to the profession. But what came out as a striking feature was the renewed interest of the high caste elite in the forms of art like music and dance. As Amrit Srinivasan in the article, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance" rightly points out the real aim of the Prevention of the Dedication Act was to purge Indian dance of its association with immorality. This led to the revival of dance, again supported and spearheaded by the Western educated Indian elite.

The Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, (Act XXXI of 1947) was passed on December 5, 1947 and was applicable to the whole of the Southern Province. With the linguistic reorganisation of states in 1953, two Acts which were applicable to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, were passed in 1982 and 1988 respectively. The rationale was the same as the Bombay Devadasi Act of 1934. The penalty for dedication or participating in any ceremony varied from two years of imprisonment to a fine of Rs. 2000 or both. Under the Act, " 'Devadasi' means any woman so dedicated by whatever name called and includes Basavi, Jogini, Parvathi, Mathamma and Thyamma"(Soneji *Unfinished* 235) and

> [a]ny custom or usage, prevailing in any Hindu community such as the Bogum, Kalavanthulu, Sani, Nagavasulu, Devadasi, Kurmapulu, Basavi, Jogini and Parvathi and the like, that a woman of that community who gives or takes part in any melam (nautch) dancing or music performance in the course of any procession

> or otherwise is thereby regarded as having adopted a life of prostitution and becomes incapable of any entering into a valid marriage, and the performance of any ceremony of act in accordance with any such custom or usage, whether before or after the commencement of this Act and whether the woman concerned has consented to such performance or not, are hereby declared unlawful and void. (Soneji *Unfinished* 236)

This Act made sure that the religious institutions were now dominated by men, and devadasis were barred from public life and were stopped from exhibiting their talents. The Act confirmed male domination in all the religious institutions and the temple now emerged as a male bastion.

Philippa Levine in her essay titled "Rereading the 1890s--Venereal Diseases as 'Constitutional Crisis' in Britain and British India" mentions that in 1892, at the eighth Indian National Congress meeting, a resolution was passed protesting against the regulation of prostitution. Josephine Butler had asked for a representation of indigenous people in the second chapter of her protest against the Acts. Her mission was very 'Christian' in the fact that she wanted moral values to be an important part of imperialism. And for this she needed the nationalists on her side. Though the nationalists were protesting against foreign rule, etc., the point on which she wanted to focus was the "sexualisation and commodification" of women and the need for this to be spoken about and protested. Prostitution had never been as issue that the nationalists spoke about much in India, for it somehow interfered with the idea of the "home", which represented "one's true identity, one's spiritual self" (Levine 604). The home was not supposed to be affected by the profane activities of the outside world and the woman represented this. The social reformers showed more interest in the movement. Though Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar feel that in spite of a common belief that the social reform movements, their intentions and

impact, were the stepping stones towards acceptability of modernity in India, they indeed were not so simple. They opine that the social reform movements were mainly started by the upper caste, well educated men, so as to emancipate only upper caste women, and hence, it was merely another way of "recasting" male domination. The ideas of social reform and nationalism therefore worked hand in hand. The claim that "the ideology of nationalism is arguably one of the most masculine expressions of patriarchal politics" (Nandy 73-74) hence cannot be completely ruled out. As Partha Chatterjee suggests nationalists felt that we should learn modern sciences and arts from the Western world as it would help us remove them from our country but at the same time this should not affect the inner sanctum of the "home". It was here that our superior and distinctive culture lay. Within this home/world dichotomy, the nationalists assigned roles for genders. It was within this ideological framework that the nationalists worked out the woman's question. As Partha Chatterjee says:

> Nationalism as I have said before located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the West and hence undominated and sovereign. It could permit an encroachment by the colonial power in that domain. This determined the characteristically nationalist response to proposals for effecting social reform through legislative enactments of the colonial states. Unlike the early reformers from Rammohun to Vidyasagar, nationalists of the late 19th century were in general opposed to such proposals, for such a method of reform seemed to deny the ability of the nation to act for itself even in a domain where it was sovereign. In the specific case of reforming the lives of women, consequently, the nationalist position was firmly based on the premise that this was an area where the nation was acting on its own outside the purview of the guidance and intervention of the colonial state. (Chatterjee "Colonialism" 11)

He also mentions that our concept of modernity has been intertwined with a history of colonialism and we have forgotten to accept the fact that there also exists a domain of free discourse. It is argued that the foreign rule was necessary for us, as India needed to be enlightened, and it is this enlightenment that has taught us to reject the modernity that was given to us and to create one of our own, which looks at the present and does not construct the past as a glorious one. In his account, non domestic women like courtesans, actresses and dancing girls always constituted the part of the "public" as opposed to the "private" which was represented by the wives and daughters, and non-domestic workers could never be integrated into the mainstream as they would disturb the "social cohesion". This had already started happening, as the courtesans and the prostitutes were performing on stage in Bengal, alongside *Babus.* But this was still acceptable, as they occupied the public domain and did not enter the inner sanctorum of the household. They claimed that nationalism was not just about political freedom but also about the return to spiritual life. The nationalists also differentiated between the "new" woman and the "common" woman, who was loud, unsophisticated, sexually promiscuous, etc., and the prostitutes definitely fell in the second category. The nationalist discourse is a discourse about women, where women do not speak, they are just spoken of. They are assigned a place, a sign and objectified values, with no will or consciousness. They did sometimes voice their sense of injury, and some nationalists did consider them as victims of injustice, but these cases were a rarity.

Nineteenth century nationalist and reform movements were neither unanimous nor homogenous in their objectives. They were preoccupied with a certain class, essentially the elite. Most of them asserted a certain cultural identity, different from the rulers. The woman question was central to the nationalist movement. The reformers wanted to save their "pristine" culture through/via women, who were seen as the protectors of "culture".

This was the spiritual domain--the one which was important--as opposed to the material one--which influenced and conditioned them. They would eventually return to this spiritual domain. The prostitute, the courtesan and the devadasi were women, but belonged to the material world, occupied the public domain, had lost their spiritual virtues, and were "common women" as opposed to the idea of the "new woman" as projected and constructed by the nationalists. This in turn rendered them unimportant and hence, they could never be incorporated into the mainstream nationalist struggle.

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The dissertation has two chapters other than the introduction followed by a conclusion and two appendices. The first chapter concentrates on South India, and has two sections. While section one analyses representative texts which have the courtesan as a protagonist, and texts which were instrumental in getting the anti devadasi bill passed, section two looks at four representative lives of devadasis, who negotiated their identities and contributed immensely to art and culture. The texts taken up for discussion and analysis are, *Radhika Santwanam* by Muddupalani translated as *Appeasement of Radhika*, *Dasigal Mosavalai* by Muvalur Ramamirthammal translated as *Web of Deceit*, *Kanyasulkam* by Gurajada Appa Rao, and two autobiographies by Muthulakshmi Reddi, titled, *Autobiography* and *My Experience as a Legislator*. In the second section, I look at the lives of Veena Dhanammal, Bangalore Nagarathnamma, M. S. Subbulakshmi and T. Balasaraswati. These texts are studied keeping the anti-nautch and the reform movements in mind. The second chapter concentrates on North and East India, and is divided into four sections. The chapter analyses texts which have courtesan as protagonists and the lives of courtesans, with reference to the nationalist struggle of which the woman's question was an integral part. In the first section I analyse *Nashtar* by Hasan Shah translated as *The*

Dancing Girl, *Umrao Jan Ada* and *Junun e Intezaar* by Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa, the second translated as *The Madness of Waiting* and *Sevasadan* by Premchand. In the second section, I analyse the life of Gauhar Jan and look at texts like *Devdas* by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, *Natir Puja* by Rabindranath Tagore translated as *The Dancing Girl's Worship*, and *Shyama* by Rabindranath Tagore. The third section looks at two autobiographies by Binodini Dasi, *Amar Katha* translated as *My Story* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* as *My Life as an Actress*. I read these in relation to the lives of other theatre actresses like Sukumari Devi and *nautanki* artist Gulab Bai. The fourth section looks at the changing cityscape of the towns with a large courtesan base. In the concluding chapter, I summarise the main arguments and observations put forth in the chapters and also discuss further possible areas of interest and research. The first appendix is on the revival of dance (both Kathak and Bharatnatyam) after the anti-nautch and the anti-devadasi Bill. The second appendix concentrates on a text by Mahasweta Devi, titled *Bedanabala*, which I read as a twentieth century take on a thriving profession of the nineteenth century.

I have tried to analyse available texts irrespective of their genres. This dissertation hence, has novels, drama, autobiographies, biographies, long poems and short stories as points of focus and reference. I use various genres to highlight the fact that the question of the devadasi/courtesan/prostitute was essential to the social and literary discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. I also use texts written by both women and men to understand and compare and contrast their responses to the issue. The dissertation tries to look at the anti-nautch movement and other social reform movements with respect to the figure of the devadasi/courtesan/prostitute essentially as products of the nationalist movement which was spearheaded by the western educated Indian intelligentsia. It attempts to analyse the representations and responses to the nautch question through select literary texts written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. It also attempts to trace the rise and fall of a class of professionals within the discourse of the formation of a new nation. In addition to this, it also tries to examine the reasons which led to the eventual revival of the art forms, whereby the "original" artists are pushed to the margins, though the art they practised is considered essential to the cultural ethos of the new nation which has emerged.

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Chapter 2

"Re-form"ulating the Devadasi Question

> The issue of devadasi reform was embedded in larger public debates about sexuality in colonial India....National imaginaries and identities, inflected by class and caste anxieties, undoubtedly hinged upon constructions of gender, and specifically on the control and regulation of female sexuality. Reform projects around the devadasis also represented a persistent, middle class altruism that was justified through the discourse of moral recuperation. Nonconjugal female sexuality represented a near-irrevocable moral degeneration, and it was in large part responsibility of middle-class women to reform and neutralize its dangers by way of example. (Soneji 112-113)

The question of the devadasi was integral to the reformist movements in South India. The institution was seen as sanctioned prostitution under the garb of religion. Amidst the debates that went on with regard to the Anti Devadasi Bill which was passed in 1947, and which has been mentioned in the "Introduction", there were several literary texts which directly addressed the issue. This chapter concentrates on South India. The chapter is divided into two sections, the first of which analyses three representative texts, which have the devadasi as the central figure and two autobiographies which address the problem. Through this analysis I will try and provide two parallel narratives, wherein in one case the devadasi speaks for herself and in the other the devadasi is spoken for. I will look at these texts in the context of the Self Respect Movement as well. The second section will look at the lives of Veena Dhanammal, T. Balasaraswati, M.S. Subbulakshmi and

Bangalore Nagarathnamma, again four representative figures, all of whom hail from the community and their negotiations with their identities.[1]

[1] This chapter takes into account the work done by Srividya Natarajan in a similar field. Her Ph. D. thesis titled, "Another Stage in the life of the Nation: *Sadir, Bharatnatyam*, Feminist Theory" concentrates on the development of *sadir* into Bharatnatyam as we know it now, a phenomenon which took place in the 1920s and the 1930s. [By *sadir,* Natarajan refers to the dance of and by the devadasis, performed both in sacred and secular spaces. She mentions that "by the 1920s *sadir* had fallen into disrepute, most of its traditional performers either preferring or driven to marry 'respectably' or to use their talents in other professions" (ix). By Bharatnatyam she refers to the dance learnt and performed by Rukmini Devi Arundale along with a number of Brahmin women in the early 1930s in an "attempt to restore dignity and acceptability to the dying dance form"(ix).]

Natarajan's dissertation focuses on the dance form itself and how it evolved into the form as we know it now, amidst the anti-nautch and the self-respect movements. She analyses the seminal role of Muthulakshmi Reddi in passing the anti-devadasi resolution and the eventual reconstruction of the dance form. She argues that the advent of English education in the Madras presidency spelt the doom of *sadir*, for it was this newly English educated elite who, though had a desire to preserve the 'Indian culture and heritage', did not want to have anything to do with its practitioners, who were now the "most objectionable class of people"(74). *Sadir* performances "figured prominently in the establishment of good will between wealthy Indians and British officials or visitors, until they eventually became a mandatory aspect of aristocratic Indian Hospitality…[however] [t]he missionary involvement with education gave them both an additional reason (apart from moral revulsion) and an opportunity to intervene in the lifestyle of devadasis.... British women, some of them missionaries, also emerged as energetic anti-nautch spokespersons....These philanthropic efforts made by women were, however, often visited by their own tendency to moralize and to interfere in the lives of those they sought to help,...the campaigns were inevitably conducted in such a way as to moralize middle class, usually evangelical values" (Natarajan 82-93). These missionary ventures against *sadir*, gave way to the anti-nautch movements in the early twentieth century: "[T]he colonial Government did not, until the early twentieth century, directly interfere with the lives of devadasis" (98). Natarajan looks at the home and the world debate within the nationalist discourse briefly to move on to the debates around the passing of the anti devadasi Bill. Her second chapter focuses on the reconstruction of dance (*sadir*) into Bharatnatyam as we know it now, with the help of Rukmini Devi and the Madras Music Academy. She analyses the role of E. Krishna Iyer, and examines the change in the composition of dance altogether, whereby for the dance to be representative of the cultural heritage of the country, the memory of it being originally practised by devadasis had to be erased. The dance now was a national phenomenon, without its original practitioners and teachers. My dissertation takes this into account and is a step forward as it analyses representative texts (fiction and non-fiction) produced during the time period mentioned above and specifically looks at the figure of the devadasi/courtesan critically, her representation and her agency, apart from analysing how the lives of practising devadasis in and around the same time period were affected by the resolutions passed and how they negotiated with their identities in an era where the devadasis were criminalised. Apart from this I also analyse representative texts from North and East India (fiction and non-fiction) to trace the rise and fall of the courtesan tradition and discuss the North and East Indian dance forms and lives of the performers.

Section I – Writing Self, Writing for Others

Radhika Santwanam[2], a *sringara prabhandam* in Telugu, is considered to have been written in the latter half of the eighteenth century, by the accomplished courtesan, Muddupalani. Muddupalani was a *ganika* in the court of Pratapasimha, who ruled Tanjavur from 1730 to 1763. An accomplished dancer, she was also well versed in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit and had translated Andal's *Tiruppavai.* She wrote under the tutelage of Pratapasimha and all her works were dedicated to lord Krishna. *Radhika Santwanam* is written in four sections and has 584 verses. The love between Radha and Krishna is itself unconventional, for it was not sanctioned and was also "adulterous". The text traces the love between the two and the period of jealousy and the pain that Radha suffers, once Krishna is married to Ila, Radha's niece. Radha and Krishna indulge is making love, Radha is displeased when Krishna pays attention to the other *gopis,* and is unable to reconcile herself to the loss of Krishna to Ila, and hence curses as well as pleads with Kamadeva to bring Krishna back into her life. Krishna, though married to Ila now, cannot forget his sexual escapades with Radha, and feels that she is more passionate than any other woman:

> '... Did you kiss her Krishna?'
>
> 'Oh no, her lips tasted bitter, Radha!'
>
> 'Did you clutch her breasts tight?'
>
> 'No, they were too small!'

[2] Though *Radhika Santwanam,* was written in the late eighteenth century, almost a century earlier than the other texts that I am analysing through the course of my dissertation, I use it as a point of reference for raising concerns and questions which are similar to the ones being discussed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It provides us with a perspective of the courtesan herself. Sexuality and desire are integral parts of this text and Muddupalani at no point is afraid of foregrounding them. Another reason to use this text is the fact that there was a lot of debate around the republication of this text in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with respect to Bangalore Nagarathnamma and Kandukuri Viresalingam The text was dismissed as objectionable as it contained "obscene" verses and was eventually removed from circulation amidst notions of morality and social conduct. I discuss this in greater detail in the chapter.

‘Did you relish her thighs?’

‘Too slim, Radhika!’

‘Did you embrace her beautiful body?’

‘She clung like a creeper!’

‘Oh, how you must have enjoyed sex with her...’

‘But a new union is never happy!

How can one enjoy one so inexperienced?’ (Muddupalani 43)

Radha’s anguish on the loss of the lover to a younger woman and the discovery of the duplicity of Krishna forms an integral part of the narrative. Radha is aware of the fact that Krishna has several wives and tries very hard to keep her jealousy under control:

Lying on her bed, she thought,

One can give away precious jewels,

One can give up most relationships too,

Even the most precious thing,

Her own life,

Can a woman give up.

But giving away one’s own lover to another?

Which woman would do that? (Muddupalani 34)

Radha curses Kamadeva once she is unable to bear this separation. She sends her pet parrot to Krishna, only to find out that he is passionately in love with his new wife:

From early childhood, Ila had been jealous of the proximity and hold Radha exercised over Krishna but, very cleverly, had never revealed her feelings. Overhearing a conversation between Radha and Madhava [Krishna], where

> Krishna dismisses her as being "a novice", Ila bides her time. After the wedding, she uses every trick in the book to make her new husband happy, to the extent that Krishna acknowledges her ad his Queen of Love, agreeing in a moment of weakness to even leave Radha. (Muddupalani 82)

Her jealousy, anger and sadness know no bounds now. She curses herself for causing their union and teaching Ila the art of seduction. The fact that Krishna is happy with Ila makes her even more "pathetic":

> Flowers fly as she shook her hair open
> Tying and untying
> Removing her jewellery
> Taking off her girdle
> Rubbing off her kumkum, kajal, sandalwood paste
> Discarding her clothes
> Settling for a crumpled, old sari
> Overwhelmed with frustration
> Tired of life and cursing her fate,
> Radha wove her way to her room,
> Throwing herself on her neglected bed...
> Restless, lonely, overwhelmed with sadness
> Dejected, betrayed, listless
> She fainted over and again
> Cursing Ila and Hari [Krishna]! (Muddupalani 93-94)

However, Krishna spots the pet parrot, is immediately reminded of Radha, and comes to Vrindavan seeking her on his chariot. Krishna is filled with remorse for having

ignored and forgotten her. He remembers all the wonderful moments that they had spent together, all the promises that he had made to her, of never forsaking her: “Many have I seen, Many have I talked to, Many have I made love to, But she, her style, her beauty, her talent are exceptional. The ecstasy of our union, I have felt with no other, She, the only deserving one” (Muddupalani 109-110). *Radhika Santwanam* has several verses describing what Krishna feels as he waits for Radha to arrive in Vrindavan, his dichotomy, the intense love and longing that he has for Radha, the sadness of having left her and thereby losing out on several precious moments of love. He is also convinced of the fact that the moment his arrival is announced, she would come rushing to him. But the reconciliation does not happen this soon. She refuses to meet him and he is kept out of bounds by the maidens who guard Radha. He pleads: “Pity me. Forgive me. Take me into your arms. Make me feel good. Befriend me. Respect my feelings. Show me love. Fill me with happiness. Forget your anger. I can’t bear it! I beg of you Radhika!” (Muddupalani 133). Krishna reminds Radha about how they had agreed that losing a loved one was something they would not even wish for their enemies, how they criticised couples who lived apart and how they made love endlessly. With the above quoted words, as he is about to take leave, Radha finally appears in front of him, curses him, and tells him that she has suffered alone, while he was passionately making love to Ila and hence, he should just leave, as it is too late and that both she and Krishna and their relationship have undergone a change. Hearing all this, Krishna falls at the feet of Radha asking for forgiveness and Radha in return kicks him. He rises up calm and composed and refuses to leave. Radha finally gives in and they embrace each other; they make love until they are exhausted.

In *Radhika Santwanam*, Muddupalani traces her poetic lineage through her grandmother and her aunt who were both well-known poets. The main *rasa* evoked in the text is that of *sringara*. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha in their essay, "Empire, Nation and the Literary Text" suggest,

> There is little evidence to suggest that Muddupalani's work was attacked or dismissed in her own times. The autobiographical prologue conventional in poetic works of this kind indicates that she was a well-known poet and scholar, also accomplished in music and dance, and that her work was admired in the courtly circles of her times. Muddupalani records with pride that though it was not customary for male poets to dedicate their works to a female mentor, several works had been dedicated to her. She writes of her beauty and her learning with the directness and self-confidence of one who has never been required to be apologetic or coy and records instances when she expressed her appreciation of the work of other artists with substantial gifts. (204)

The text problematizes the concept of love and love making. So far seen as a domain of the male, where men take the lead, and the male desires need to be gratified, Muddupalani proposes an alternative, whereby an "adulterous" woman seeks sexual gratification in a non sanctioned relationship. Tharu and Lalitha observe,

> But what must have drawn Nagaratnamma to her work, and what continues to strike us today, is Muddupalani's subversion of the received form. Conventionally in such literature the man is the lover, the woman the loved one. Krishna woos and makes love to Radha. Sushil Kumar De in his history of the Vaishnava faith points out that the *gopis* are always represented as women without desire. Radha is depicted as waiting for Krishna and even longing for him, but the narrative has as

> its focus his pleasure. Not so in *Radhika Santwanam* where the woman's sensuality is central. She takes the initiative and it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution. With warmth unmatched in the later poetry Muddupalani celebrates a young girl's coming of age and describes her first experience of sex. In another section Radha, who is represented as a woman in her prime, instructs her niece Iladevi in the art and joy of love. She encourages the younger woman to express her desire and recognize and place value on her pleasure. (206)

The "legitimisation" of desire and a woman's right to her body and mode of expression is what sets *Radhika Santwanam* apart from other texts written by women. These are also the reasons why this text was banned, both from publication and circulation till 1952. I look at Muddupalani's text *Radhika Santwanam*, as a product of what Elaine Showalter calls the "female" phase of writing in *The New Feminist Criticism*, where women reject both imitation and protest–two forms of dependency–and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature (Showalter 139). Muddupalani uses the male tradition of love making and subverts it, thereby making Radha take the lead in satisfying her bodily desires. Radha is aware of her body and her sexual needs. She does not shy away from taking the first step towards sexual gratification, thereby bending gender roles which had so long been posited. Radha is portrayed as having desires in the text unlike the others which show her waiting in anticipation for Krishna to arrive. Muddupalani provides Radha with the agency to her contentment, thereby refiguring female sexuality in the classic Radha-Krishna relationship. As Showalter suggests in "Towards a Feminist Poetics", Muddupalani rejects the heliocentric language and calls for women's access to language so that women can develop a cultural model of their own

writing to express and interpret women's experiences distinctly and authentically (128). Muddupalani's text can be closely read keeping in mind the model suggested by Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* as well, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies…Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (347). Cixous posits that women have been forced away from writing in the same way and by the same persons who have forced them away from their own bodies and sexual desires. *Radhika Santwanam* has autobiographical elements as well: "Apparently, her [Muddupalani's] grandmother Tanjanayaki too had been a consort of the king, displaced by Muddupalani. After a few years, when the king renewed his attentions towards the older woman, the young and petulant Muddupalani is said to have progressively been jealous and taciturn, leaving the king no option but to appease her"(Muddupalani xii-xiii). Hence, Radha, and by extension Muddupalani, puts herself into the text and uses her body and sexuality to create an authentic experience.

The text, though considered a masterpiece in terms of literary value, and the author, who was credited to have used novel forms like the *saptapadam*, or the seven line verse form, have been effectively relegated to the margins of cultural history and conveniently excluded from the literary canon. When Bangalore Nagarathnamma wanted to republish *Radhika Santwanam* in 1911, she faced a lot of opposition. She was clearly dissatisfied with the versions in circulation, which were, as she claimed, a diluted version and had done away with "objectionable" verses. Kandukuri Viresalingam, the father of social reform in South India, criticised this move, calling Muddupalani an adulteress. He was also of the opinion that the sringara rasa was used as a trope to fill the poem with "crude description of sex". Nagarathnamma opposed this vehemently, but the consequence was not to her liking. As Tharu and Lalitha mention, Goteti Kanakaraju Pantulu, the

Government translator, translated the sections he considered objectionable, and the British Government was convinced that the book was obscene and not morally upright. The Police Commissioner Cunningham seized all the copies of the book and charged Nagarathnamma's publishers. The press and the bookshop selling the book were raided and almost all copies were removed from circulation by 1927. In spite of all the petitions filed, the book was republished only in 1952. And this happened clearly as a response to the fact that the British had left India and the books which had been banned by them, owing to the fact that they were immoral, had to be brought back into circulation, and not because this piece of Telugu literature was worth pursuing. The text was still dismissed as being obscene and it was difficult to fit the text within the discourse of the new nation that had been formed.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century India was grappling with the notions of morality and conduct as was taught to them by the British. W. Fraser in a letter to the Chief Secretary wrote, "The greatest difficulty the Government suffers in its endeavours to govern well, springs from the immorality and ignorance of the mass of the people . . . particularly their ignorance of the spirit, principles and system of the British Government" (Tharu and Lalitha *Women's Writing* 9). Another administrator, J. Farish, observed, "The natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are wiser, more just, more humane and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could have" (Viswanathan 229). Tharu and Lalitha their essay, "Empire, Nation and the Literary Text" also observe,

> Educators and administrators were both convinced that Indian literature contained neither the moral nor mental cultivation that was so essential if good Government was to be desired and appreciated....Having declared that no vernacular literature existed which would be adequate to this task, or worthy therefore of the name of

> literature, the Government also took the responsibility of promoting the development of suitable literatures in the regional languages. (209)

Srividya Natarajan in "Another Stage in the life of the Nation: *Sadir*, *Bharatnatyam*, Feminist Theory" argues that the advent of English education in the Madras Presidency was instrumental in shifting *sadir* to the margins: "In a sense, *sadir* was driven out of the public sphere by the increasing availability of English as a medium in which subjects were schooled into modernity" (21). She mentions that it is this interaction between the Indian upper caste and the European missionary that caused a change in the way fiction was being written in the country: "The fiction was set in the local familiar landscape, but embodied new moral values… One of the features of the modernity package that immediately struck a chord among the Brahmin social reformers was the separation of the public sphere from the private one" (22).

Amidst such notions of morality and social conduct, the Western educated Indian elite took it upon themselves to reform the nation and the people of the nation. The early and the mid nineteenth century had concerns for the social position for women who were seen as the centre of the ideological matrix of nationalism. However, as the nationalist movement gained force, the importance of the "woman's question" began to diminish. Partha Chatterjee, in his essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question", mentions that Sumit Sarkar observes that the western educated male had to allow certain emancipation to the wife, to avoid being socially ostracised, but it was in no way an ideological preference. Chatterjee however differs from Sarkar in pointing out that nationalism imagined women who "must not lose their essential spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues; they must not become essentially westernized" (243) and "the domain where the new idea of womanhood was sought to be actualized was the home" (250). As Sumanta Banerjee in his review of *Rethinking English* opines, "The role of woman--like literature

and past history-- in colonial society was also defined by drawing selectively from the indigenous tradition (the image of the devoted wife) as well as from the contemporary conservative British attempts to reconstruct woman as a refined domestic housewife upholding the moral worth of the family--an effort in which Kumkum Sangari discovers 'a broad dialect between reform and preservation'"(1473-1475). Janaki Nair in her essay "The Devadasi, Dharma and the State", also echoes similar observations: "What was put in its place, both in the nationalist imagination and in bureaucratic practice, in the name of a new abstract legality, was a more thoroughly patriarchal family order which maintained the illusion of mutual respect and companionship"(3165). Female sexuality was never to be explored or talked about beyond the conjugal relationship. Women like Bangalore Nagarathnamma and Muddupalani did not fit into this paradigm of the "new woman" that was being constructed, and hence in their writings and struggle what comes forth is the subversion of this concept of the new modern woman. Borrowing Tharu and Lalitha's argument in "Empire, Nation and the Literary Text"(217), where they mentions that Gurajada Appa Rao, in creating the character of Madhuravani, presents an alternate view of the nation with Madhuravani at the centre and thereby challenged the hegemonies of class and societal norms, I suggest that the world of Muddupalani, Bangalore Nagarathnamma and Madhuravani is an alternate and parallel world to that of Muvalur Ramamirthammal and Muthulakshmi Reddi, where the point of reference is the same, but the concerns are essentially different. I will elaborate on this point further when I analyse the texts written by them.

Kanyasulkam by Gurajada Appa Rao was first performed in 1892 and first published in 1897. T. Vijay Kumar in his essay, "Splitting the West--Gurajada's *Kanyasulkam*" says, "The play displays a healthy scepticism towards idealistic reform movements, and their well meaning naive leaders. For instance, the play which is

ostensibly against child marriage, for widow remarriage and seeks an answer to the 'nautch question' ends by offering no solution to any of these social problems"(97). The character that I intend to discuss is Madhuravani, a prostitute who emerges as the main character of the play. Madhuravani raises some very pertinent questions through the course of the play, such as, "How will prostitutes who want to marry find an eligible groom?" (252) and "If prostitutes are not invited to perform, what about their livelihood?" (252). Most of these questions are addressed to Saujanya Rao, who is a part of the Self Respect Movement and in whom Gurajada Appa Rao creates one of the most positive characters of the play. *Kanyasulkam* is a social play which addresses and critiques the questions of bride price, child marriage and the nautch. Madhuravani is the love interest of Girisam, a young, handsome but superficial character. He preaches social and moral reform but has a secret affair with a widow Buchamma and also with Madhuravani. Maduravani soon figures out that her relationship with Girisam means nothing to him. She is a wise woman, who supports the abolition of bride price. She uses her charm and makes Karataka Shastri's plan of disguising a young boy as a bride and getting him married to Lubdhavadhanalu a success. In the last act of the play, Madhuravani disguises herself as a man and visits Saujanya Rao, the reformer and poses several questions, for which he does not have answers. Saujanya Rao, at certain points in the play, is unsure of what he is advocating. He is uncomfortable answering certain questions that are posed to him. So, though he thinks that prostitutes should marry to redeem themselves and be part of the respectable society, he himself would never like to marry a prostitute, and that, he would cut off that part of his body which touches a prostitute, even by accident. He mentions that he is anti-nautch and tells Madhuravani that though in Japan respectable men marry geishas, and though it is a great country, Indians ought not to adopt bad practices of a great country. Saujanya Rao is dumbstruck when he finds out that the stranger is Madhuravani.

He wants her to leave immediately, but she tells him the truth regarding Girisam, who is about to marry Buchamma. Saujanya Rao is impressed and calls off the wedding and indicates that he would send Buchamma to a widow home in Poona, where she could study and live her life as she pleases. The truth about Girisam is out, both Buchamma and her sister are saved. But Madhuravani stays where she was in the beginning of the play. Madhuravani's presence of mind, sense of duty, wit and conduct win her a lot of praise. She is seen as someone who was probably born into nobility but had been taken to this 'lowly' profession, for they feel that the qualities she displays can only be present in noble blood. But in spite of being appreciated, her position in society does not change. She can only be redeemed through the institution of marriage; whether the bridegroom is worthy of her is not a question that is pertinent. Marriage was seen as the easiest way of being accepted into society for dancing girls by the social reformers, but their worth and value was never a consideration. So, though Madhuravani is an extremely vocal person in the play, her character is unable to get out of the vicious circle of social acceptance. Other than manipulating the men, probably the only other agency she has in the play is to deny a kiss, when Saujanya Rao asks for one, even if that is what her profession demands.

Girisam represents the new emergent class of English educated young men, that is essentially rootless and is looking for ways and means to survive. A stark contrast to this is Saujanya Rao, who is an English educated advocate, who derives his sense of duty and morality from the Bhagavad-Gita. However, he is one of the most vulnerable characters, as is understood by his conversation with Maduravani in the end, where he acknowledges that though he is a proponent of the anti-nautch movement, he had not really thought about the livelihood of the nautch girls if they gave up their profession, and though he claims that the youth should come forward and marry the reformed nautch women, he himself

would never marry one, thus leaving Madhuravani with no answers. Madhuravani however, holds Saujanya Rao in the highest regard: “Saujanya Rao is anti nautch in thought, word and deed. If you just utter the word 'prostitute' in his presence, he would warn you to mind your language. Gentlemen like him are rare. The others are anti-nautch when it is convenient....Some of them are anti-nautch in the morning, pro-nautch in the night. Some are anti-nautch in hometown, and pro-nautch outside it” (Rao 208). The other half of the statement of course hints at Girisam.

It is however, essential to make a difference between Madhuravani, the character created by Gurajada Appa Rao and the writer himself. It is Gurajada who provides Madhuravani with the agency of refusing the kiss. In the Preface to the first edition Gurajada writes that he wrote the play to put forth the ills of bride price which was a “disgrace to society” and because he believed that: “literature cannot have a higher function than to show up such practices and give currency to a high standard of moral ideas”(Rao v). Providing Madhuravani with more agency probably would have qualified this statement better, for, in not doing so, Gurajada too, falls into the same trap of taking up a crucial problem, but failing to provide a concrete resolution.

While this fact was well known that Gurajada was an admirer of Viresalingam and his social reform movements, he had his reservations towards the excesses that he employed. As Vijay Kumar points out:

> Through Madhuravani’s simple but probing questions, Gurajada articulates his scepticism about contemporary social reformers and their idealistic zeal. Saujanya Rao is often seen as a caricature of the social reformer Viresalingam. Gurajada admired Viresalingam and his indisputable contribution to both language and social reform movements. But Gurajada was also keenly conscious of the inherent

> pitfalls and excesses of mass campaigns...Soujanya Rao who appears to be Gurajada's spokesperson turns out to be the author's means to express his dissatisfaction with contemporary reform movements for their lack of clarity and empathy. (105)

Madhuravani is not part of the discourse of the "new woman" constructed by the nationalists and social reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Her position, however, at the same time is central to the reform movement, in terms of the fact that the ills of nautch and prostitution had to be done away with, thereby creating a new nation minus such social immoralities. The devadasis and the nautch girls were always spoken for and this claim will be substantiated in the three other texts that I will deal with. These two earlier texts in that sense provide a voice to the otherwise marginalised, by placing them at the centre of the discourse concerning women and social reform. The understanding of and the access to their own bodies and needs, the need for desire and the possibility of sexual satisfaction outside conjugality, hence, puts Muddupalani, Nagarathnamma and Madhuravani, in a parallel universe--a universe, in which they can access a language of their own and construct an alternate perception of the "outside" woman. All these women are economically independent, have had access to education and have been aware of their distinct social space. As Priyadarshini Vijaisri in *Recasting the Devadasi* suggests:

> The sacred prostitutes who through centuries had carved out distinct modes of gendered identity liberated from stereotyped roles and evolved community life dominated by feminine identity (though under certain constrains) did not always remain as 'objects of patriarchal benevolence'. They did evolve periodically at crucial phases as alternatives with the potential to develop eventually 'an imagery

> which would have helped them express their full aspirations towards transformation of patriarchal institutions'. (Vijaisri 268)

They, thus provide an alternate critique of the society, where they become the voice of the ones who have so long been spoken for and acted upon. The marginalisation and the criminalisation of their cultural and traditional identity, in post colonial India, in a sense then becomes equivalent to their being denied a sense of the past, a history. And this is a continuous trend, where even now, through what is called the process of reviving and reconstructing dance, the history of Bharata Natyam is rewritten and in the process the memory of the dance form as it had begun is being erased and reconstructed. By sanitizing it, the history of the form has already been altered and by performing it in the way it is being done, the content has been altered as well. Through the fact that a certain *javali* or *padam* is chosen over another and taught, as it does not involve as much *sringara* as *bhakti*, the dance form has moved away from its beginnings and from those who practised it.

The other part of the matrix, which had the "nautch-question" and the abolition of the devadasi system central to its agenda, consisted the likes of Muthulakshmi Reddi and Muvalur Ramamirthammal, among several others.

Muthulakshmi Reddi graduated from the Madras Medical College in 1912. At a time when education was denied to women, she was one of the first women doctors in India She had a brilliant academic record throughout her career. Reddi went on to become the first woman legislator of India, when she was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927. Deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Annie Besant, she worked towards the upliftment of women and children throughout her life. Reddi was the President of the All-India Women's Conference, the first Chairperson of the State Social

Welfare Board and the founder President of Women's Indian Association. She also founded a Cancer Relief Fund and Hospital, the Adyar Cancer Institute and the Avvai Home, a home for destitute women and children. She wrote extensively on issues concerning women, health and children during her lifetime in several periodicals. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan for her service to the nation in 1956.

Muthulakshmi Reddi wrote two autobiographies in her lifetime. One titled *My Experience as a Legislator* (1930) and the other *Autobiography* (1964). While the first book recounts the major bills and resolutions passed during her time, the second gives a detailed account of her personal and professional life. Both the books are written in English. At a time when education was denied to women, Reddi not only speaks and writes English fluently, but in doing so, sets an example for several women to follow.

My Experience as a Legislator begins with a dedication, "to the loving memory of my late revered mother who was an example of piety, purity and truth" (v). In her opening chapter, "How I became a Legislator", she says that she did not wish to take up the role of a legislator, owing to three main reasons; first, as she was a medical practitioner, she thought that the council work would interfere with her medical profession; second, she had just come back from England with a specialisation in diseases concerning women and children and wanted to concentrate on her profession rather than on politics; and third, she felt she did not have enough experience of public life, and that this would make her political career weak. But as the Women's Association pleaded with her, she finally took up this responsibility. Muthulakshmi Reddi was instrumental in getting several legislations passed when she held office, and the rest of the book analyses these bills. She was interested in issues concerning women and moved resolutions concerning social hygiene, towards the building of children's hospital, exemption of fees for poor girls in schools,

prevention of child marriage, reservation of seats for women in municipalities and local boards, etc. However, it was the devadasi problem that caught her attention the most. Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, which had created a sensation in the West by 'exposing' the ills of the Indian society, wherein prostitution was portrayed as a huge problem, in a sense also encouraged Reddi to take up the cause of the devadasis. While Reddi vehemently dismissed the picture of India painted by Mayo, she agreed that what Mayo portrayed was a part of reality though not the complete one. Reddi was instrumental in introducing the Bill against brothels and for the suppression of immoral trafficking: "...much ignorance prevailed here in regard to that [prostitution, brothels, etc.] question. Prostitution was thought to be a necessary evil and even some among the educated believed it to be a necessity for the health and well being of men" (Reddi *Experience* 194). Her training as a medical practitioner came into good use here, where she used the discourse of medicine to further her cause against the heinous activity. She was of the opinion that girls of 16 are too young to decide what is good or bad for them, and hence the age of consent/protection should be made 18. The Bill also encompassed the fact that minor girls would be removed from brothels, would be separated from their prostitute mothers, and the third party who lived on the earnings of the prostitutes would be punished. After a lot of opposition and several amendments, the Bill was finally passed and became a law. She records in writing that she received immense support from the public in getting this Bill passed, which was unlike what had happened with Josephine Butler when she tried to fight this tabooed subject in 1869 in England:

> The sympathetic utterances of the Indian Press, both vernacular and English, the helpful attitude of the public as revealed by the innumerable meetings convened in support of my efforts and the resolutions passed by men and women associations

> and above all the unanimous support given by the local council to such motions and the safe passage of the bills into acts is a true testimony to the popularity of such a reform in this country. (Reddi *Experience* 220-221)

In the conclusion to her book, she records her gratitude "for those of my Western sisters who having made our cause their own, have devoted themselves whole heartedly to the regeneration of Indian people" (Reddi *Experience* 232). She is very appreciative of Dr. Annie Besant, and her philosophy, wherein she was "able to arouse and awaken the women of all creeds, castes and nationalities in this country not only to theirs but also to their country's needs" (Reddi *Experience* 232-233).

S. Anandhi in an essay titled "Representing Devadasis" quotes from a letter that Reddi had written to Mahatma Gandhi, regarding the devadasi issue:

> Having had the personal knowledge of this unfortunate community and having in the capacity of a medical woman come in contact with all the horrors of a prostitute's life...who would otherwise turn out to be legal and chaste wives and loving mothers and useful citizens...being forced by their dependants to sell their flesh to make out a living...I consider that the saving of even one girls honour and purity is more than equivalent to the feeding of millions of our people. (239)

Gandhi proclaimed that the temple women were victims of men's immoral indulgence, and criticised the system as a "double crime" as he felt that "we use our sisters for our lust and in the name of god" (Anandhi 241). He had proposed a dual approach towards their reform, firstly to work "amongst those who employ 'devadasis for their base ends' and secondly to work 'within the devadasi community itself'" (Anandhi 241). Priyadarshini Vijaisri observes, "Though Gandhi sympathised with the 'fallen sisters' as victims of male

sexuality, he held them to be ‘dangerous’ with the potential to weaken the moral fibre of society. Accordingly, they could not be allowed to contribute to the national movement until they had been ‘purified’” (398). As Anandhi puts it:

> It was indeed the self image of the essentialised, patriarchal version of Hindu Indian womanhood that would be restored and asserted by abolishing the devadasi system. It was thus, not devadasis but the self image of the Hindu womanhood which was at stake because of the devadasi system. As part of her programme of domesticating and containing devadasis within monogamous familial norms, Muthulakshmi Reddi argued that they should be compulsorily married and those men who were willing to marry them should be encouraged with employment, etc. (239)

Muthulakshmi Reddi was also of the opinion that since devadasis were unchaste and immoral, their opinion on the issue was of no consequence as they did not know what was correct or incorrect for them. In response to protests from the devadasi quarters Reddi mentions, “As far as the local devadasis' protest, they are all set of prostitutes, who have been set up by their keepers. How can the Government take cognisance of such a protest? So I would request you not to pay heed to such protests from the most objectionable class of people in society” (Anandhi 239). Those who would fall under the purview of the law complained about the impact of this legislation on their earnings, property rights, and cultural rights. They claimed to be the custodians of music, dance and culture and such legislation would incapacitate them.

A significant opposition that Muthulakshmi Reddi faced was from Bangalore Nagarathnamma, who with several others moved the court opposing her, saying that there was no relation between performing religious services and prostitution. She felt that the

devadasi system was being evaluated by the abolitionists from a standpoint of Western religion and social practice and it was necessary to locate it within its own parameters and then try and reform it. While she did not disagree that some devadasis took to prostitution, and that prostitution was a problem that needed to be dealt with, with utmost priority, she concurred with the opinion of the Devadasi Association of South India, that the entire community should not be reprimanded for it. She was also of the opinion that the Bill to abolish prostitution should punish the men responsible for it as well.

It may be of interest to us at this point to note that Reddi's mother was a devadasi who had married an upper caste Brahmin scholar. Hence, at some point Reddi was fighting for and against her identity. In the light of this fact then the dedication for the earlier book becomes very important as also the fact that nowhere in the two autobiographies does she mention that she was born to a devadasi. Epithets of purity, piety and truth are used for her mother while she is extremely dismissive of the devadasi community, and calls devadasis immodest and unchaste. Apart from this the name of her father is also interestingly missing from both the books. Does it then indicate that Reddi was extremely caste and class conscious? That she is negating a certain past to create a new identity, an identity which is crafted only by her? She speaks very highly of her father, who is an educationist and is instrumental in getting her educated. At a time when women were denied education, it was with her father's efforts that she managed to study that far. Apart from this, it was her father who gave her lessons in English, something that she mentions in her *Autobiography*, which won her several laurels. Throughout the text a lot of emphasis is paid on her English education, and how it helped her progress in life and create an impression on her teachers in college, who all spoke highly of her. But at the same time, she speaks of her mother as severely orthodox, who was only concerned about

her wedding. She uses terms like ‘hysterical’ for her mother, apart from complaining that she was always crying, imagining that Muthulakshmi would never get married. Amidst all this, Reddi’s *Autobiography* comes across as a text of self pity. She emphasises a lot on the hurdles and challenges faced by her, whether it was in terms of her health, education, or even at a personal level. There are several instances when she talks about the problems she had to face because she had moved from one city to another, because she had to take care of ailing family members, because of the lack of money, because of her ill health, etc. Also there is constant insistence on several occasions that, what she did and thought as right were opposed to what others felt. The text hence can be concluded to have been cleverly written, where only what was necessary to be published was published. The text brings out her identity as a medical practitioner first and then as a social worker. She was aware that she had made her mark as a medical practitioner and now wanted some recognition in the field of social work. In the book, hence, towards the latter part she only talks about her achievements, thereby completely moving the focus away from her personal life, which was the main component of the first half of the book. Hence, through this text she projects a certain persona, which might have helped her ideas and ideologies at a later stage. Reddi is extremely conscious of her identity, which is not Muslim or Christian, but essentially Hindu. There is a lot of nostalgia surrounding this Hindu identity, where she harks back on how things were done in her household in Puddukotah and how they were different in Madras, etc. But while constructing this identity nowhere does she mention that she had a devadasi lineage. It is hence not surprising to note that it was this issue that caught her attention the most and she swore not to rest in peace till she had done away with this “immoral and heinous” system. As Anandhi very rightly points out, Reddi's efforts to abolish the system through legislative intervention was premised on the perception that the devadasis were the "other"-- the unacceptable "other"-- of the ideal

Hindu womanhood with its familial ideology. Devadasi abolition thus stood for the restoration of the idealised womanhood. The fact that she was a 'politically responsible social activist' made her take upon herself the task of retrieving the 'glory' attached to Indian womanhood. In her *Autobiography* she writes, "I may draw your attention to the ancient civilization of India which I am proud to say had assigned to women, equal rights and status in society. Our ancients seem to have had a high conception of women's power or Shakti (our symbolic deity *Arthanariswara* is nothing but a recognition of women's influence in life and society)" (Reddi *Autobiography* 44). She insisted that it was essential for the Government to redeem these fallen women and educate them to become "loyal wives, loving mothers and useful citizens" (Ramamirthammal 15). Reddy was not proposing a new idea of womanhood here. The "woman" that she was talking about here, essentially, was a part of the spiritual domain that the nationalists were talking about. She had a problem with such immorality being linked to religion and wanted to free the Hindu temples of being accused of such heinous activities. She strongly believed in the fact that the devadasi system was another euphemism for sanctioned prostitution under the garb of religion.

Around the same time, Muvalur Ramamirthammal, a former devadasi, social reformer and activist, also took up the case of abolition of the devadasi system. Her activism was located within the Self Respect Movement, headed by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar). The Self Respect Movement activists viewed the devadasi system as an institution of the upper caste Brahminical patriarchal order of society and a form of sexual slavery in which non Brahmin women were condemned to prostitution. In her text on the evils of the devadasi system, *Web of Deceit* (1936), she mentions that she was born into a traditional non devadasi family and that her uncle and aunt persuaded her parents to force

her into prostitution: “It was during this time that I deeply thought about this custom as evil and read those texts that advocated it. I felt that men have forced certain women into this degrading profession to pursue their indiscreet pleasures and for selfish reasons” (Ramamirthammal 3). But rather than stereotyping the devadasi as a degraded prostitute, Ramamirthammal makes space for a multiplicity of devadasi voices in her text: the old and the young, the traditional and the reformed, the bad and the sincere. Ramamirthammal broke a tradition and got married to her music teacher, when her foster mother wanted her to have a liaison with a sixty five year old man. Ramamirthammal never became active in the Women's India Association, though she was in touch with Reddi, and actively supported what she advocated. Apart from supporting the cause of the devadasis, she constantly motivated the devadasis to come out and speak about their lives and break away from the system.

Davesh Soneji has this to say about the abolition of the system:

> One of the most interesting defences of the devadasi lifestyle however came from Brahmin men. Upper caste men provided some of the strongest antiabolitionist voices in the Madras Legislative Assembly debates from 1927 to 1930. On the one hand, devadasis were by and large the mistresses of the upper caste elites, including Brahmins, and thus it is not at all surprising that the Brahmin men would defend their own rights to this institutionalized form of concubinage by adopting an antiabolitionist stance. On the other hand, some Brahmins (such as Viresalingam, for example) were instrumental in pointing out the immorality of concubinage. Both positions deployed nationalist rhetoric, but in radically different ways. For the antiabolitionists, concubinage is seen as one aspect of culture under threat of extinction; they are concerned about the state intervening in the private

> sphere and the loss of a national heritage that results from such interventions. The proabolitionists, on the other hand, see Brahminical values of purity and conjugality as the vehicle for female citizenship in the nation. Neither position can be described as liberal; rather, each represents a strain of conservatism with its own priorities. (Soneji 129-130)

Web of Deceit was also written at a time when women did not express their opinions freely in public, and when getting their work published was not as easy. Also, in the early twentieth century, the nationalist struggle propounded the concept of an ideal womanhood, where women were supposed to represent the "inner, pure" self and propagate the ideas of chastity and obedience, as opposed to the outer world which was crude. Under such paradigm, it was utterly unacceptable to find a text written by a devadasi, talking about the ills of the system. As suggested by Maithreyi Krishnaraj:

> Ramamirthammal veered away from the representation of the devadasi as signifier of caste and culture. The novelist saw the devadasi neither as a repository of indigenous art and culture and therefore to be saved from western denigration nor as an unchaste prostitute and hence a blot on the caste she was recruited from. Instead she made the devadasis stand as themselves as women trapped within a pernicious system and transforming it out of their own free will. (26)

The novel begins with Kantha and Gnanavathy, two devadasis from Kamalapuram, under the guidance of their mother, Boga Chintamani, trying to lure young and wealthy zamindars. Somasekharan, the heir to the Dharmapuri Zamindar is head over heels in love with these dasis, and leaves his wife on the night of their wedding to be with them. Gyanansundari, the wife of Somasekharan and the daughter of the Swarnapuri Zamindar, feels that unless the social evil is completely eradicated, family structures will continue to

crumble. She also feels the Zamindari system itself is partly responsible for this evil. Hence, she takes it upon herself to reform the devadasis. She is the perfect example of the enlightened woman, who advocates purity, chastity and loyalty, thereby perfectly fitting into the nationalist iconography of the “new” woman. She is duly supported by another reformed devadasi, Gunabhushini, and a Minor, who was charmed by the devadasis and saved from falling into the snare by Gunabhushini. The Minor disguises himself as the Mama, someone who works as an agent for the dasis and makes Somasekharan see reason. The plot of the dasis is exposed and the novel ends with a Social Reform Conference. The novel also puts forth the character of Vivekvathi, someone who is initiated into the profession but runs away with her music teacher, as she does not want to succumb to the system, thus adding a semi autobiographical touch to the text. Vivekvathi also tries to help the devadasis through the various associations. A lot of detail about the characters has been provided through the names that they are given in the novel, Boga Chintamani translates as "one who enjoys wealth", Gunabhushini as “one who is talented and well mannered”, Gyanasundari as “one who is intelligent and beautiful” and Vivekvathi as “one who has a clear conscience.” The characters are named according to the traits they are expected to portray.

Gunabhushini in her presidential address at the Social Reform Conference critiques the system and the society that upholds this system. She is against the institution being given a divine status and against the fact that sacred texts advocated the existence of such a system. She insists on the compulsory education of all men and women belonging to this community, as she felt only education would bring in reason, whereby these people would realise that they are being marginalised and exploited by upper castes for their benefit. She too talks about the reformation of zamindars and wealthy men, as she believes

the community will cease to exist once the men are reformed. The five point resolution adopted by the committee, is as follows:

1. The custom of dedicating girls in the name of god...should stop and this meaningless and shameful devadasi system should be abolished completely.

2. Hereinafter all the devadasis should be married, and the youth desirous of reforming the society should come forward and marry these girls.

3. All girls who have tied a pottu already should enter intercaste marriages. All men who are ready for second marriages should marry such girls.

4. All men and women in the devadasi community should be provided access to primary and higher education.

5. One should not encourage sexually arousing sensual songs and Bharatnatyam performances during marriages, festivals and feasts. (Ramamirthammal 207)

K. Srilata in her essay titled "Lobbying for Devadasi Abolition" notes:

> *Dasigal Mosavalai [Web of Deceit]* is located at the intersection between the old and the new. It is a chronicle of a way of life that has been forced to the brink of extinction by the new wave of Self Respect and middle class reformist initiatives. This is perhaps why we are able to read so many layers in the text. It would appear as though the *other* narrative, the narrative that deals with the structures of feeling that characterise a devadasi's life, often run contrary to the "public face" of the novel- that of straight-forward Self Respect reformist text. This despite the fact that both Kantha and Ganavathi have clearly been recast as "prostitutes", despite that fact that their public announcement at the Self Respect conference that they will

give up practising their profession is meant to represent the narrative closure. (Srilata 105)

Web of Deceit is a significant work because it is placed within the anti caste movement, where the exploitations by upper caste men is not only critiqued by the oppressed but also by people from within the upper caste, for example the Minor, who is a Brahmin. It is about a twentieth century enlightened wife, the protector of the inner domain, and how she takes on the burden of reform to alter the social order. It is a critique of the devadasi system from within the system, apart from being one of the few texts where the question of reform is in the forefront. The text is placed at a time when the Anti Devadasi Bill was being debated in the Legislative Council and hence becomes a chronicle of that time. It places the debate regarding the abolition of the system within the discourse of family and conjugality. Such contextualisation becomes necessary for the understanding of the complexity of the problem. To quote Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran, "On the surface, it is a very straight and univocal demand--for abolition of the practice of dedicating girls to temples (a euphemism for prostitution) that the novel propagates. And yet in the very process of articulating the demand, the author also uncovers different layers of resistance to this demand" (Ramamirthammal 4). Muthulakshmi Reddi and Muvalur Ramamirthammal were contemporaries, who interacted and fought for the same cause, the abolition of the devadasi system. Their affiliations and approaches were different, but they strove for the same agenda. The Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act was finally passed in 1947, thereby creating a space only for "chaste wives and loving mothers" as intended by the nationalists. The devadasis, who had earlier enjoyed a cultural status as artists and public performers, were marginalised and suffered a loss of status through criminalisation by the colonial state. As Saskia Kersenboom suggests, "With the loss of

royal patronage an entire universe was lost and never recaptured. The aristocratic values of art, devotion and learning and their deeply cultured support by the court that continued an age old tradition were exchanged for mercenary values, search for patronage of individuals and aggressive publicity" (48).

Muddupalani, Madhuravani and Nagarathnamma occupy a space parallel to that of Muthulakshmi Reddi and Muvalur Ramamirthammal. Both the worlds have the nautch girl and the devadasi institution at their centre. While the earlier ones speak for themselves, in the latter case, they are spoken for. Nagarathnamma and Muddupalani are aware of the social standing they come from and follow a certain lineage. It is this sense of history and cultural tradition that gives rise to a conflict of ideas with respect to the social reformists. The social reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, were responding to a certain model of morality that had been introduced by the British. This model was influenced by the Victorian code of conduct. This response consisted of doing away with all that was termed objectionable and immoral. The question of the devadasis was deeply linked with religion and Hinduism had to be freed from such taboos. This formed a strong base for most of the opposition that came its way. Ramamirthammal and Reddi were both voices from within the community who wanted to do away with the practice systematically. They both belonged to the devadasi community in a certain sense and were trying to erase the memory of a certain past/history which they did not want to be associated with. But in the process, they were also trying to deny other rightful practitioners of the profession their history as well, without allowing them a voice and by essentially dismissing them and their profession as promiscuous. What I try to do in this chapter then, is to provide the other side of the paradigm, where the section concerned has a voice and articulates its opinions with regard to their own bodies, their profession and

the reform movement itself, which does talk of redeeming them, but does not give a substantial alternative in life. While Reddi and Ramamirthammal write about the success of the Anti Devadasi Bill and the reform movement, and the necessity for such a thing, Madhuravani and Nagarathnamma, put forth ways in which the reform movement has failed to give the devadasis an alternate life and identity, after having erased their existing identity. K. N. Panikkar in "Socio-Religious Reform and the National Awakening" observes: "The South Indian social reform movement was essentially a manifestation of the Indian dilemma of subject-hood—resenting colonial intrusion and oppression, Indians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lacked the power to directly rid themselves of British rule or effectively contest political hegemonies of the Raj" (89). The social reform movement failed to look critically at religion and the exploitative social structure and ideology that it perpetrated. The devadasis were always at the receiving end and were portrayed as representing all that was bad and unsanctioned in the society. The image of the devadasi was an antithesis to the image of the "new emerging woman", who was morally upright and spiritually inclined. In the name of revoking tradition, they were denying a certain section their identity, history and livelihood.

Section II—Narrating Lives

The second section of this chapter discusses the lives of four women, all belonging to the devadasi community, and how they negotiated their identities, amidst the changing attitude of the society towards dance and music. The section deals with the lives of Veena Dhanammal (1869-1938), Bangalore Nagarathnamma (1878-1952), M.S Subbulakshmi (1916-2004) and T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984).

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> Her singing is straightforward and mind capturing. There is scholarship and a sparkling quality in her swarakalpana but they do not wipe away the sweetness. Graceful and pleasant playing of the veena is complementary to her sweet voice.—Gurajada Appa Rao. (Subramanian 45)

Dhanammal was born in Georgetown, a suburb of Madras, which was known as the housing place of the devadasi community. Her family was attached to the court of Tanjore. According to Lakshmi Subramanian: "Proximity to the city's [Madras'] cultural elite helped in her interactions with some remarkable composers and poets through whom she was able to develop a set of distinct ideas about the genre of padams, love songs which were traditionally associated with ritual music" (Subramanian *Tanjore Court* xxviii). Dhanammal was one artist who performed mainly in the private sphere. She performed every Friday at her house, on Ramakrishna Street, which could accommodate a maximum of fifteen people. Most of the people who came for her Friday night soirees were her patrons and admirers, generally the elite. It was a very select audience that she played for. She enjoyed enormous prestige among the royalty of South India, which included Mysore, Tanjore, Travancore and Madras among others. She kept alive the salon culture in Madras which was in contrast to the emerging trend of public performances by upcoming artists.

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of the Trinity of composers, Tyagaraja, Muthusvami Dikhsitar and Syama Sastri:

> The emergence of these composers has to be understood in the context of devotional and musical activity in the temple city where, for more than two

> centuries, a substantial corpus of music scholarship and performance had been consolidated under the patronage of the ruling court... as some scholars have suggested, this (the court taking interest in music and the issue of patronage) was part of the growing Brahminisation of musical culture in the region (Subramanian *Tanjore Court* 5).

There was sudden interest in pursuing music which came about after the emergence of this Trinity, whose compositions were immensely popular: "...there was a growing interest in pursuing music, not as a profession or traditional occupation but as a personal passion that lay outside one's professional pursuits"(Subramanian *Tanjore* 10). However, there was the tendency to distance the devadasis, the community which had so long performed both the music and the dance forms, owing to a newly developed moral sensibility. In spite of all this, Dhanammal still had immense popularity between 1900 and1920.

Dhanammal played the veena as she sang, and hence was better known as Veena Dhanammal. As Lakshmi Subramanian mentions in her biography of the artist, Dhanammal had a lot of contempt for certain mannerisms that she identified as male and coarse and for the inability of the male singers to sing *padams* and *javalis*. She was dismissive of the display of complex rhythmic control. It is this simplicity that made her different from the others and added to the fact that her popularity hardly diminished during her performing years. Dhanammal also believed in lineage. She believed that art should be passed on from one generation to another. Her ancestors were performers at the court of Tanjore; she herself was trained in *abhinaya*, and as a result she made sure that she personally trained her next generation. She is even believed to have taken a fee for the training imparted, to bring in professionalism. This has stark resemblance to the *guru shishya parampara* in North India, except for the fact that it was strictly patriarchal, while

Dhanammal's tutelage took place in a matrilineal set up. It is from this tradition that we see the emergence of T. Balasaraswati, Dhanammal's granddaughter, who in her address at the Madras Music Academy says: "[I]t was Veena Dhanam who outlined to me the repertoire of padas and presented their scope...My interpretation of the padam then depends on Dhanammal's interpretation of all her music and not just the padas. She set an ideal of richness and subtlety of emotions, expression that shines like a lamp before those who have heard and appreciated her music" (Subramanian *Veena* 103).

Dhanammal, however, spent her last few days in penury, and stayed reclusive, performing only for a select few. She hardly ever performed at bigger concerts. She refused to be part of the "classical" mission of the new emerging society, which projected the 'ideal' performer as one who performed compositions of the Trinity and within the public space, for behind this project was the desire to gain respectability for the art form in the public domain. Recognition for Dhanammal also came in after her death: "Was there something in her music that made it accessible only to an intimate and interiorised circle of admirers who shared a personal bond with the artist and the music she embodied and conveyed which was not possible in a larger concert space?"(Subramanian *Veena* 91). Dhanammal believed in possessing a distinct style and the concept of a lineage, something that Bangalore Nagarathnamma strongly believed in as well. In and around 1927, Dhanammal and Nagarathnamma collaborated a lot with regard to the emerging anti-nautch movement that was being spearheaded by Muthulakshmi Reddy.

Bangalore Nagarathnamma's mother, a devadasi, was attached to the temple of Nanjangud. Few years after the birth of Nagarathnamma, her mother had fallen off from her patron. She and her daughter were then taken by Giribhatta Thimayya, a Sanskrit scholar, musician and an instructor at the Shakuntala Nataka Sabha. It was under his

tutelage that Nagarathnamma began her training. Nagarathnamma's mother, Putta Lakshmi, realised that getting her daughter to be a court dancer was not going to be an easy task. After a fall out with Thimayya, she moved to Bangalore, and started preparing Nagarathnamma to be a court dancer. She was taught music, dance, the violin and was also made to study languages like Telugu, Kannada and English. Though her mother passed away soon, after 1893, Nagarathnamma acquired the stature and recognition that her mother had desired for her.

There are three high points of Nagarathnamma's life, which are of relevance and which I will focus on in this section. First, the *Radhika Santwanam* episode, second, the campaign against the anti nautch and third, the shrine that she helped build in Tiruvayyaru. I have discussed the *Radhika Santwanam* episode in some detail in the previous section. *Radhika Santwanam* written by Muddupalani, a courtesan in the court of Pratapasimha, deals with the jealousy of Radha when she in unable to accept the union between Krishna and Ila, her niece. It culminates in Krishna coming to Radha to please her. As Sriram. V mentions:

> The work had probably been first noticed in the modern times by Charles Philip Brown, the renowned Orientalist scholar and lexicographer. Who had while leaving India in 1855 left behind a collection of manuscripts ready for printing at the Madras Manuscripts Library.... the work was published in 1887 and later in 1907 by ...an associate of Brown. It had also received attention of sorts from Viresalingam... the Andhra reformer... a staunch supporter of the Anti-Nautch movement.... on the work itself, while commending the style and the ideal admixture of Sanskrit and Telugu in it, Viresalingam claimed to be shocked by its content. Having denounced Muddupalani as an adultress, he declared that the

> shamelessness of the work was not surprising as it was written by a prostitute. (Sriram 38)

Nagarathnamma decided to republish the text, with a prologue indicating the reasons behind doing so, as some errors had crept in the circulating edition and some of the passages had been deleted. Being a devadasi herself, she felt the need to bring the literary work into limelight and also do away with the claims that Viresalingam had made about Muddupalani.

After the republication of the work, Viresalingam and Nagarathnamma condemned each other. While Viresalingam accused the book of being bereft of any modesty and being filled with graphic, crude descriptions of lovemaking, Nagarathnamma claimed that accusing Muddupalani of adultery was uncalled for, as she should be evaluated on her work and not on her personal life. The book was released in March 1910, and after furious deliberations, where it was accused of obscenity by the purists, called "injurious to public morals", and that everyone who possessed a copy of it was liable under Section 293 of the Indian Penal code, the Government issued a memorandum in September, 1911 mentioning, "that all copies of the book Radhika Santwanam should be destroyed as objectionable passages are found on nearly every page of that work" (Sriram 51). The two major reasons why this text was targeted was, one, that it dealt with the erotic, where gender roles had been inverted, that it was written by a courtesan and hence dismissed as being frivolous, and two, that another devadasi had taken up the cause to stand against a renowned figure in the anti-nautch campaign, which was seen as unacceptable. The idea was to distance the courtesan/prostitute from the public domain and publishing a book written by one, which carried a foreword by another, justifying the reason for its republication, would jeopardise the project.

It was in 1921 that Nagarathnamma had a vision about Tyagaraja, followed by a letter from her guru, Bidaram Krishnappa, who lamented to her about the dilapidated state of Tyagaraja's Samadhi. She was pained by the description and thought of the vision as a sign to "begin a life of dedication to his cause" (Sriram 97). When she visited the Samadhi later, she found the neglect towards the Samadhi unacceptable: "She had found her Lord and Master, a deity and a patron rolled into one. She was to refer to herself as a Tyagaraja Dasi from then on" (Sriram 98). She acquired the land by exchanging it with her own land worth the same value and the construction began in 1921 itself. So long, no women were allowed to worship during the *Aradhana,* an event which was held in commemoration of the composer's passing away in Tiruvayyaru. Nagarathnamma was also refused this honour. Considering she had rebuilt the Samadhi, bearing all the expenses and the fact that she was such an ardent follower of Tyagaraja, this came as an insult. She had made up her mind to begin an *Aradhana* which would be only conducted by women. Hence, she got around 40 devadasis from around the area and they conducted the *Aradhana* together, which was a huge success, thereby ending the male monopoly of the celebrations. This group of women also included all the daughters of Dhanammal, who herself had earlier been denied a performance during *Aradhana*. Nagarathnamma in her own way broke down a system which denied women equal rights and in getting devadasis to perform, she provided them with a platform to showcase their talent and also to give them "an opportunity to offer their tribute to Tyagaraja by means of the music they knew"(Sriram 110).

The anti-nautch movement was in full swing through the career of Bangalore Nagarathnamma. Unlike Dhanammal, who faced only bits of it, also because of the fact that she performed essentially in the private space, though she protested against the

abolition of the devadasi system, Nagarathnamma was at the forefront of the struggle against this. The anti-nautch movement led by Muthulakshmi Reddi thought of the practice of dedicating girls or young women to temples as a slur on Indian womanhood and a great wrong done to the youth of the country. It believed in the need for the abolition of the system which was full of vice and was morally degrading. The Devadasi Association argued in nine individual sections as to why this law should not be passed. I have discussed this in some detail in the Introduction.[3] "...[T]he Association unanimously and emphatically protests against the introduction of the Bill of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi regarding Devadasis as it affects the ancient customs and usages of the community and specially religion"(Soneji 128) was the response of the Devadasi Association, Madras, when Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced the Bill in the Legislative Council. While in the Legislative Council, members spoke for and against the proposed Bill, the devadasis, led by Nagarathnamma worked on the memorandum, which separated devadasis from common prostitutes, and projected service to God as the main aim of the profession. They agreed that a certain section of them had gone astray, but believed that the entire community should not be held responsible and reprimanded for the same. Such memorandums were passed across the Madras presidency and though the Government acknowledged the receipt of these memorandums, they served no purpose eventually. The Government took time over passing the resolution, more so because it was tampering with religion and the temple. The Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926, curbed the economic rights of the community, whereby the devadasis had to give away all the land that they had acquired by virtue of the duties at the temples. Once the Act was passed,

[3] The memorandum mentioned points to issues like, devadasis are not prostitutes, real purpose of the devadasi caste is religion and service, that their fundamental principle is 'Service to God', the whole community cannot be condemned for the sins of a few, that their right to property would be affected, that they have enough support for their cause in the public opinion, that what they need at this juncture is education, etc. ('Madras Devadasi Association' in *Bharatnatyam, A Reader* edited by Davesh Soneji 128)

most of the payments in lieu of the land that was being taken away were not made and many devadasis led their final days in penury, including the likes of Mylapore Gowri Ammal, the renowned dancer, who even taught Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati. The Bill was passed as Act V in 1929, and devadasis would soon sink into oblivion in a couple of years. There were very few options available to the devadasis after the abolition of the system, as has been suggested earlier in the section on *Web of Deceit*. The most common among them was to get married and thereby gain social acceptability. Perhaps the greatest example of such a shift of accepted identity was M. S. Subbulakshmi. Born into a devadasi family, Subbulakshmi, grew up to be one of the greatest practitioners of Carnatic music, gaining both social mobility and acceptability.

M. S. was born in Madurai in 1916. Her mother was one of the earliest professional veena players. She belonged to the devadasi community. There are no early records of her life. M. S. showed keen interest in music as a child and though her mother did not get her any formal training at an early age, the intrinsic quality of her voice made her mother take her to veena concerts and eventually get her a guru, first, in Madurai, Srinivasa Iyenger and later in Seithur, Sundaresa Bhattar. She showed immense potential and did her first gramophone recording at the age of 10. Her mother found an appropriate match for her in the family of the rajah of Ramanathapura. But Subbulakshmi refused to get married, and eventually moved to Madras, a move that was not approved by her mother:

> The Tamil tradition, which had attached value to the arts of the devadasis, seemed to provide a social foundation, however tenuous, on which the women could now rely. By the end of the nineteenth century it had become socially acceptable for a well-to-do Brahmin to take a devadasi “wife” in addition to his legal Brahmin

> wife. The second wife was allotted a slot in society, grudgingly perhaps, but a slot nonetheless. The man would support the woman with a reasonable degree of fidelity and she would recognize him as her "husband" to the exclusion of other men. Such a state of affairs would enable her to claim a particular Iyer or Iyenger (the two main South Indian Brahmin sects) as her husband and as father of her child. The man would graciously let her make the claim. Such an acknowledgement undoubtedly reflected a male dominated society's arrangement of convenience, but it did provide the women a measure of dignity in addition to a patina of security. (George 83)

For M. S.'s mother, not having a man in the house did not raise any issues. She had seen a similar situation with her mother and grandmother. She was well reputed as a veena player and earned enough to take care of her children. But after the anti nautch movement, there was a general perception that devadasi women should be married off to help them gain social acceptability. The youth were encouraged to marry them, even if she were to become the second wife. M. S. married T. Sadasivam in 1940. They stayed together till Sadasivam's death in 1997. At first Subbulakshmi's mother did not approve of the match, for she found a better match for her in a businessman. This proposition prompted Subbulakshmi to leave home and go away to Madras. She landed at Sadasivam's place, who was always ready to help someone in need. He was already married and had two daughters: "He understood the dilemma in which MS was caught... He knew that MS was too inexperienced in the ways of the world to get ahead on her own. The obvious course open to both was for Sadasivam to substitute for her mother. He took up the role with relish, while MS drew comfort from having such a worldly-wise man to turn to" (George 114-115). The fact that M. S. had moved to Madras, with a man who her mother did not

approve of, broke her mother down. Later in her life, she was accused of not having taken care of her mother in her good times, of not having reconciled with her. But part of it had to do with the fact that after her marriage not only did she turn completely submissive to her husband, he almost erected a fortress around her with regard to the information that went out to the public arena. He took every decision in her life, whether it was about working in films, or which concert to sing for.

Their marriage was not well received. It was unacceptable for a man to either marry above or below his caste, and Sadasivam had married a devadasi, a non Brahmin. Even after a decade of their wedding, the Kanchi Swamigal objected to M. S. wearing the nine yard saree, as she was not a Brahmin. But soon enough, Sadasivam made sure that the ascetic changed his opinion. He went on to call her "Brindavan tulasi". Sadasivan was determined to wipe away the wife's past: "Orthodox as he was in his Brahmanical ways, he set out to ensure that his wife fitted into his socio-religious hierarchy as an equal and that the Brahmin establishment accepted her as such. He would pursue that goal restlessly; using music and cinema, religion and charity, political connections and social contacts, journalism and every other avenue open to him for the purpose"(152). The personal qualities that Subbulakshmi possessed made her an ideal candidate for this social elevation: "She was self-effacingly devoted to her husband and family, a primary quality in a Brahmin wife....She was unassertive, unobtrusive, orthodox and diffident in a graceful sort of way" (153). Her Sanskrit was impeccable, which made her a part of the Sanskritization process, where, mastery over the language and devotional rituals, could bring you upward mobility. She almost became representative of a class of women who yearned social acceptance through marriage and transformed themselves in the process. Girish Karnad observes that "Subbulakshmi's spectacular career had much to do with the

way she managed to shed all traces of her devadasi past and transform herself into the perfect image of a Tamil Brahmin housewife" (91). Perhaps, Subbulakshmi had realised that this change of status would suit her career and her ambition. She adapted herself very well into this changed status and went on to mesmerize the world with her music for the next few decades.

In contrast to the life of Subbulakshmi is that of Balasaraswati:

> By the time of her [Balasaraswati's] dedication, more and more of the traditional community was being absorbed into a new social order that excluded and marginalised matrilineal families to such extremes that the families and their way of life became invisible and seemed to have disappeared. Balasaraswati's choice to live in a manner consistent with the family culture and social order that preceded her, and to remain in the public view at that, was an act of extraordinary courage. She was exemplary of the code of ethics that had for centuries given strength to the devadasi community. (Knight 30)

Following the lineage of Veena Dhanammal, Balasaraswati was one of the finest exponents of Bharatnatyam of her generation. Born in a devadasi community, she had a rich family name to live up to: "Balasaraswati was the last nationally significant performer of Bharatnatyam who was trained and raised in a manner consistent with her antecedents from the devadasi community" (Knight 7). Balasaraswati's ancestors were performers in the court of Tanjore. Her family moved to Madras in the 1860s. The house in which Dhanammal held her Friday night soirees was Balasaraswati's first home.

Bharatnatyam was in the middle of a lot of debate by the turn of the century. The anti-nautch movement had given rise to two streams of thought, one, to abolish the dance

and the practitioners, and second, to reform and preserve the dance. Balasaraswati's earliest teacher was Mylapore Gowri Ammal. Of her she mentions, "The initial inspiration for me to take up dancing came from seeing performances of Gauri Ammal when I was very young. If this lady had not brought the dance to such a stage of development, the combination of music and dance that I have attempted to realize would not have been possible" (Knight 26). Though dedicating girls to a temple was being advocated against in the 1920s, Balasaraswati's family dedicated her to their family temple in Tanjore, for her mother believed that "it was not the service to a particular temple that was important, but rather the dedication to a life of art" (Knight 28). As I have mentioned earlier, Dhanammal, Balasaraswati's grandmother, strongly believed in the lineage of art being passed on from one generation to another. Balasaraswati's second teacher was Kandappa Pillai, whom she acknowledged as her only guru. A nattuvunar himself, he played the mridangam and sang the padams, till he found a better singer in Jayammal, Balasaraswati's mother.

Balasaraswati's arengetram happened in 1925, and her first public performance in 1927. The Theosophical Society had long been present in the country. Their effort was to "redefine and glorify a 'national' Indian history and culture, and they eventually found a source for this rediscovered history in the notion of a classical age that was declared a pan Indian heritage" (Knight 63). Annie Besant and George Arundale, two theosophists, influenced two very significant people with regard to the anti-nautch movement and the revival of art forms. These people were Muthulakshmi Reddi and Rukmini Devi, the earlier credited with singly spearheading a movement and eventually abolishing the devadasi system, and the latter for 'reviving' dance and providing it with respectability. I have discussed the role of Muthulakshmi Reddi in greater detail in the earlier section.

While she advocated the abolition of the practice and the practitioners, she was opposed by E. Krishna Iyer, who advocated that the dance form itself should be preserved. The Madras Music Academy was set up precisely with this idea in mind, to bring back the art forms from oblivion. Though initially set up with the idea to salvage music, the Academy incorporated dance in 1931. After the first sponsored concert, the review mentioned that Bharatnatyam, which was being condemned for so long, was thought of as unworthy of all the criticism levelled against it. The performances of Balasaraswati received mixed reviews around the 1930s. She was praised for her pure dance and criticised for her abhinaya. She is said to have worked really hard at this, by even performing just abhinaya concerts. At a later stage she commented that "dignified restraint is the hallmark of abhinaya... the dancer has no use for movements of the torso, but gestures only through the face and hands" (Knight 101). It should be noted here that eventually, it was abhinaya that was seen as her forte.

The arrival of Rukmini Devi posed some threat to the dancing community. Her project of re-visioning and reorganising dance came at a juncture where one of the concerns in society was to preserve the dance form. Her idea was also within the revisionary view of the Theosophical Society which was trying to create a classical past for the Nation. Rukmini Devi learnt from nattuvunar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. She became the first woman to perform the traditional dance form from outside the community. Her performance gained social acceptability. And it was this that she banked on and reconstructed dance/Bharatnatyam as we know it now. She was always appreciative of Balasaraswati, and felt she had the right knowledge of both music and dance for she had a strong lineage behind her. The Anti-nautch movement had left most of the nattuvunars impoverished. Many of them now started associating themselves with

institutions which catered to teaching dance outside the community. A lot of them had already moved to Almora to assist the dancing group of Uday Shankar. Rukmini Devi, also, took stock of this situation and employed a great many of them at Kalakshetra. Thus, not only did she provide employment to these artists, she made the students learn from the traditional masters and also moved the dance form beyond the monopolised family structure, where it was now imparted to people outside the community. Thus, the earlier attempt to distance the art form from the practitioners was actually becoming a reality through these new institutions:

> As a reconstructed style of Bharatnatyam emerged, one area of experimentation was the use of musical compositions that were not from the repertoire composed for dance....Most of the practitioners and teachers from the traditional professional community agreed that pieces not composed for dance could not be suitably substituted for those that were....The great nattuvunar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, in a speech... remarked, "Departure from tradition, the inclusion of totally unsuitable pieces in the name of innovation only lowers the standard of this art. I am not against change. There is bound to be change and new ideas. But these can be called by a different name and not brought under the name of Bharatnatyam. Such innovations make a sublime art ridiculous... Bizzare costumes and inappropriate themes will only lead to the destruction of this art". (Knight 118-119)

Thus, Rukmini Devi in her attempt to revive the dance form, at some point was deviating from its original structure. I discuss this in greater detail in the Appendix on Revival of Dance.

The most talked about controversy between Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi was on the issue of *sringara*. Rukmini Devi emphasised non *sringara* songs, while Balasaraswati believed *sringara* as the essence of dance.

> *Sringara* is an ancient concept that permeates the aesthetics of the Indian consciousness, and it is this generative theme and the rules that govern its treatment that may be described as classical....The poetry composed for Bharatnatyam was predominantly in Sringara Rasa... Balasaraswati was fully aware of a bawdy, irreverent quality to the repertoire of traditional Bharatnatyam... She avoided them in concerts. (Knight 102)

The arena where this controversy reached its climax was the All India Dance Festival in Bombay in 1945. The festival opened with Rukmini Devi's performance. Clearly she was the predominant star, as it also included performances choreographed by her and by other performers/artists who hailed form Kalakshetra. She included a *sringara* piece in her performance, only to prove the point that "if you are respectable, then *sringara* would itself become respectable, and that if you were not, then the performance of *sringara* was not" (Knight 131). Apart from this, a part of her profile read as follows, "She has succeeded in dramatizing it with appropriate music and costumes, and has rescued it from all monopolies, specially as regards to teaching and conducting" (Knight 130). This was in contrast to the non existence of a profile for Balasaraswati. These troubled the sensibilities of Balasaraswati. Her performance was slotted just after a presentation by the students of Kalakshetra, who had used props and done up the stage. Balasaraswati performed on an empty stage in contrast to this, without any additional lighting or props, to her mother singing for her. She had proved a point through this that it was not just about props and stage effects and her performance was remarkable.

Balasaraswati, too, like Subbulakshmi, performed across the globe. She also taught extensively at Universities in the USA. At home, she was awarded with all the honours one could think of. But both of them represent two ends of a paradigm. While Balasaraswati chose to live in a manner consistent with the family culture and social order that preceded her, that of the devadasi system and believed in the lineage, like her grandmother, Subbulakshmi gained social acceptability, was accepted as the 'ideal' Hindu Brahmin wife, by virtue of her marriage to Sadasivam, and his project of presenting her as one.

Of the four texts that I analyse above, three (M.S., Balasaraswati and Bangalore Nagarathnamma) have been written by male biographers. Veena Dhanammal's biography is written by Lakshmi Subramanian. I observe that Subramanian has a far nuanced and critical approach towards the life and events in the life of Dhanammal: "It locates her (Dhanammal's) art within the cultural, social and intellectual milieu she inhabited, allowing readers to track the changing musical landscape of southern India, as a process of urbanisation — beginning in the late nineteenth century…"(Subramanian Front Cover). The two texts, the biographies of M.S. and of Bangalore Nagarathnamma do provide biographical details about the lives of the mentioned artists, but fail to look at them critically. Douglas M. Knight's biography of Balasaraswati is different from these two in terms of the fact that he is related to Balasaraswati and hence, a lot of information which is otherwise unavailable elsewhere can be accessed in this text. Some of them are incidents and stories which have been passed on from one generation to another. In that sense, this book acts as a parallel text to that of Lakshmi Subramanian, where certain events overlap. While Subramanian's text closely interlinks the art forms and the politics of performance

and analyses one's effects on the other, the other texts merely provide biographical details of the artists.

Through the four lives analysed above, I trace the effects of the anti nautch movement, the revival of dance and the abolition of the devadasi system on the life of the practitioners from the community. Veena Dhanammal, being more of a private salon performer, was not affected by the ongoing debates around the anti nautch movement. Though she voiced her views against it, she did have a select set of connoisseurs who would come listen to her at her home. Bangalore Nagarathnamma fought fiercely against the reform movements, whether it was bringing back *Radhika Santwanam*, or the memorandum advocating why the devadasi system should not be abolished. She was very vocal about her position. Neither Dhanammal nor Nagarathnamma felt the necessity of a male member in the house. M. S. Subbulakshmi, for me, represents the other end of the paradigm as I have mentioned above, for whom the security of a family, a husband, and social acceptability could do wonders. She therefore fitted into the paradigm of the nautch abolitionists who advocated marriages of devadasis, even if they were second wives to the youth. She became the chosen 'ideal' for an entire community's aspiration-- that of social acceptance. Balasaraswati, till her last day, fought against the restructuring of dance. She was against the stage set up, the changes in music and lights, the costume, etc. She believed that the art form should not have been distorted in the name of reviving. She never gave up on her style, never incorporated the costume changes, etc. But the fact that she had very few students made her form of dance fade away. Also, the fact that she was, at the end of the day, a devadasi as opposed to the new emerging upper caste women who were learning and teaching Bharatnatyam, made their brand of dance more acceptable. The revivalists reconstructed and restructured dance, giving it a new look and perhaps life.

The reform movements in South India had the question of the devadasi quite centrally located within its discourse. The devadasi was seen as all evil and hence had to be removed from the society. At the same time, the art itself had to be saved. Hence, the most feasible option was to distance the art form from the practitioners, thereby rendering them impoverished. This would also move the art form out of the "monopoly" of the hereditary families. Being criminalised by the law, many practitioners were engaged in the teaching of the art forms to people from outside the community. This in a sense made art more acceptable, whereby children of "respectable" communities would not only learn dance but also take it up as their profession; at the same time, it took the art form away from the original practitioners. And eventually it was this brand of dance, taught by the traditional people (belonging to the community) but under the control of people from outside the community that was more acceptable and more dominant in the mid twentieth century and thereafter.

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Chapter 3

"Devadasi", Deshdasi: Re-alignment and Re-configuration

> Not only was there a major reshuffling of social hierarchies, space itself was differently allocated and distributed. At the centre of most cities of any splendour, was situated the Chauk or the town square, and somewhere near it if not located right there, were the courtesans of the city, the *tawaifs* or *bais.* In the cleansing operations which followed in cities such as Lucknow and Delhi, whole *mohallas* were uprooted... (Premchand xxii)

After the uprising of 1857, the cities in the northern part of the country underwent major structural transformations. Several acts were passed with regard to cleanliness and sanitation and several directives were passed to look after water and electricity supply. The Cantonment Act and the Contagious Diseases Acts, which have been discussed, were also products of this time period. The Government introduced the Cantonment Act (Act XXII) in 1864, whereby the houses of ill repute had to be "controlled" to prevent the spread of venereal diseases. The British Government in India tried implementing the Contagious Diseases Act 1868-69. The law was introduced as a legislation to control the spread of venereal diseases among enlisted men in garrison towns and ports. Both these acts also altered the ways in which the cities functioned. After the 1857 Uprising, there was also a lot of physical displacements of troupes from one place to another. As Wajid Ali Shah, the Nawab of Awadh, and one of the greatest connoisseurs of Indian art forms was compelled to shift base from Lucknow to Metiyaburj near Calcutta, many musicians shifted their base too. The fall of Delhi had already displaced some musicians and dancers who now travelled across Northern India attaching themselves to Cantonments, etc. It is amidst these spatial relocations that most of the texts used in this chapter are placed.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section I try and analyse three representative texts, located primarily in the cities of the Northern part of the country. *Nashtar* by Hasan Shah, translated as *The Dancing Girl*, is located in the city of Kanpur, *Umrao Jan Ada*, by Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa, in the city of Lucknow, and *Sevasadan* , by Munshi Premchand, in the city of Benares. As a reference I will also use the text, *She wasn't Ashamed, Autobiography of an Unknown Prostitute*, written by an anonymous prostitute from Lahore, *Junun e Intezar* by Ruswa translated as *The Madness of Waiting* and a short story "Shatranj ke Khiladi" by Premchand translated as "The Chess Players". I wish to look at these texts as a product of their times and analyse their response to the nautch question which was a part of the major debates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the second section I shift my focus to the Bengal Presidency, where I study Gauhar Jan, the first woman to get her voice recorded on an LP and examine the character of Chandramukhi in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Devdas*. I will try and analyse the different approaches to the character of the dancing girl/courtesan/prostitute in this section. In the third section I will look at the phenomenon of the courtesans as the first theatre artists on stage and their agency in the whole business. I will analyse two autobiographies by Binodini Dasi, and read them alongside the lives of Sukumari Devi, the first female artist on stage. I will also try and draw a parallel to Binodini's life, with that of Gulab Bai, a much later *nautanki* artist whose predicament was more or less the same. I will also discuss the character of Srimati in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Dancing Girl's Worship* with respect to Binodini Dasi. The fourth section will deal with the changing cityscape of the major cities which have been mentioned in the earlier sections in terms of "manifesting the visible signs of decadence and destruction... and [their] obsessive anxiety about questions of female sexuality" (Bhattacharya "Nautee" 232).

Section I – From the *Chowk* to the Margins

Through this section I intend to build a narrative, whereby I trace the rise and fall of the courtesan tradition through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While I look at Khanum Jan, the protagonist of *Nashtar* as a product of the initial shift of practitioners from Delhi to the rest of Northern India, after the fall of Delhi, I look at Umrao Jan of *Umrao Jan Ada*, as someone who is at the helm, who is one of the greatest practitioners of the art form, and who writes her own poetry and *ghazals*, and at Suman, the protagonist of *Sevasadan* as a product of the reflected glory of the courtesan tradition. The three of them together help us trace the growth and downfall of the tradition; in "Shatranj ke Khiladi", where there is again an actual displacement of troupes from Lucknow to Calcutta, the tradition is more or less forgotten. I first analyse the texts individually and then read them each alongside the other.

Nashtar translated into English as *The Dancing Girl*, was written by Hasan Shah, as way back as in 1790 in Persian. It was translated from Persian into Urdu in 1893 by Sajjad Hussain Kasmandavi. *Nashtar* which translates as "Surgeon's Knife", stands for "the excruciating pain of love and separation from one's beloved- in this case, Khanum Jan, the remarkable heroine of the novel" (Shah vii). In his foreword to the novel, Hasan Shah, introduces himself as a clerk (munshi) employed under an English Oficer called Ming. He was stationed in Kanpur, which was an English Cantonment. After the Fall of Delhi in 1757, the dancing girls travelled across the Northern part of the country to look for employment. The British had caused considerable damage to the Indian economy and social order. They had amassed great wealth and had taken to the ways of the nawabs and zamindars, wherein regular nautch performances were held to entertain guests and even harems were maintained. Percival Spear observes, "Engaging troops of dancing girls had

become common practice for the English in India. It was their chief amusement, along with riding, hunting, shooting" (Shah xi). He also states that, though after the arrival of the British ladies, the scene altered a bit, the British soldiers continued to "retain their taste for nautch...The European taste for nautch is further shown by the fact that it became the recognized form of entertainment for an Indian merchant to provide for his English guests" (Shah xi). It is against this backdrop that the novel of Hasan Shah is set; it explores the love story between Hasan Shah and a nautch girl employed in the Kanpur Cantonment.

"She had a magnolia face and narcissus eyes. She must have ruined the piety of a thousand men. Dressed in finery, she ambled in, and struck a pose which was utterly devastating. Our eyes met and I was struck by the arrow of love... Then I felt a surge of blood in my veins and my heart fluttered helplessly... the dazzling nymph threw a mischievous glance at me" (Shah 11)--this was Hasan Shah's first encounter with Khanum Jan. It took him a couple of days to figure out her name. Khanum Jan was part of a group of dancing girls and singers who toured the country. The owner of the group was Azamji, who had set the group up with Chameli Jan, his mistress after he had incurred heavy loss in his business. That Hasan Shah was in love with Khanum Jan was out in the open soon. Aware of his feelings for her, Khanum Jan using her tricks of coquetry (*nakhra*) flirted and started playing games with him. Playing hard to get was one of the chief tricks employed by courtesans, a feature which recurs in *Umrao Jan Ada*. Khanum Jan was an employee of Ming and the troupe stayed in Kanpur for more than a year. During this time, the love between the two grew stronger. Most of their communication happened through letters. Hasan Shah was desperate to marry her, and was looking for the right opportunity to do so. She had replied in the affirmative as well. They got married secretly one fine

night and kept their relationship under cover, though now and then Hasan Shah would go in to the courtesan quarters and meet her. But the real jolt came, once Ming's troupe decided to shift base to Calcutta, owing to huge debts that Ming had incurred in Kanpur. He wanted to leave the place and decided to do so at the first available opportunity. The time had finally arrived for Hasan Shah and Khanum Jan to part. As Vinay Lal observes, "Such a transgression (the marriage between a clerk and a courtesan) would have been unthinkable, but for the fact that the entire atmosphere of the camp was already conducive to flaunting social norms; even then, Hasan Shah is unable to inform Ming of the union he has contacted with Khanum Jan, and eventually the terms of his employment lead to their separation" (166). Both were deeply heartbroken and Hasan Shah tried to get to the troupe where she was stationed. His efforts were not successful and though he managed to undertake a boat journey to meet her, he eventually did not get to meet her. She was unable to take the separation for long and succumbed to her sickness. As Vinay Lal mentions,

> The boat journey which Hasan Shah takes to join his wife is the flight of one soul in search of a like soul, the journey of the lover in search of the beloved, and as we know from the use of such imagery in bhakti poetry, a journey of this kind is fraught with hazards: the sea can be stormy, the navigator may be unskilled, the boat may sink from a leak; and when at all the boat appears to have reached the shore safely, at the very last moment it hits a rock. (166)

The days before the passing away of Khanum Jan were narrated to Hasan Shah and made up for a poignant scene. She also left one last letter for him, telling him how she waited for him and how much she wanted to live:

> You must bear the loss with fortitude, and not make a spectacle of yourself with lamentation, etc. I think for an honourable woman to die early is a boon from On High. It means that just as she remained aloof in her dignity while alive, she was taken away from the world early so that she could go behind the Veil of Eternity for evermore...And in case you regret that you were unable to come to Lucknow, take it as the Will of God. You should not feel sorry and I must not complain. (Shah 90)

Qurratulain Hyder claims that *Nashtar* can easily be termed the first novel to have been written in India. Probably Hasan Shah did not realise at the point when he was writing this episodic, confessional work that it was a novel, but the text clearly displays all elements present to call it a novel. She goes on to claim that she doubts Hasan Shah's knowledge of English, which clearly meant that he did not have access to the likes of Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson. Hence, the text is written in a form primarily devised by him.

It is quite remarkable that the first novel then from India should have a dancing girl/courtesan as its protagonist. She is placed within the patriarchal framework, but is offered agency in terms of the partner that she chooses in life. Vinay Lal notes, "Of course Hasan Shah places her squarely within the framework of patriarchy: thus Khanum Jan appears as the exponent of the view that men cannot be held to promises of fidelity, 'because it is almost impossible for a man (and only a man) to remain monogamous all his life'. However, Hasan Shah did not intend to depict her as a feminist; rather, she evokes certain possibilities and limits, and 'appears as the embodiment of a love that is freely chosen'" (167). But that a courtesan should be the first protagonist of a novel to have been written in an Indian language indicates that the novel represented the society as it was and in a form expected at that time. Both Ruswa and Premchand do the same in *Umrao Jan*

Ada and *Sevasadan*. This is evident from the two quotes given below:

> The influence of his (Ruswa's) novel has exerted on the popular imagination is enormous; it is the single most important source of information on courtesans of Lucknow, and by extension, the entire profession as it was practiced in the nineteenth century, in northern India. (Oldenburg 32)
>
> The courtesan began her training in her childhood with a thorough grounding in classical Persian and Arabic, reading the standard works under the tutelage of a maulvi. The books mentioned in the novel, such as Gulistan and Bustan of the 13th century poet, Saadi remained on the traditional syllabus well into the 20th century... Besides Indian classical music and dance, the courtesan would also be encouraged to develop a taste for Persian and Urdu poetry. Umrao Jan Ada not only learnt the verses of the acknowledged masters by heart, she also composed poetry herself, for which connoisseurs held high regard. (Ruswa *Umrao* x)

Umrao Jan Ada was written in the year 1897 by Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa and is often considered the first Urdu novel. The book is a transcribed autobiography of a courtesan by the same name. The incidents of the novel are narrated to the author through a series of interactions between the author who is the active listener and Umrao Jan. The author claims that the entire transcribed text was given to Umrao Jan for approval before being published as a book to be read by a larger audience, thereby attaching a notion of authenticity to the otherwise probably fictionalised story.

In *Umrao Jan Ada* Ruswa uses fictional and metafictional devices to establish the truth of Umrao Jan's life story. When he works out complex narrative ways to write her story as she had narrated it to him, "[he] secretly [takes] down everything, and when [he] finishe[s] writing it up, [he] show[s] her the draft" (Ruswa *Umrao* 3), and he indirectly

projects the complexity of both Umrao Jan's personality as well as her situation in a social context. As Kumar remarks:

> Ruswa's text is a narrative performance, gradually giving shape to Umrao Jan through a double narrative voice: Umrao's first person narration is rendered by Ruswa who is himself an actor in the performance. Right at the outset the novel addresses the spectators, who are going to see a spectacle framed within the narrative voice of Ruswa, the author himself. In *Umrao Jan Ada*, Ruswa tells the story of Umrao as told to him, retaining the first person voice of Umrao. And then the first person narrative is frequently interrupted by comments made by the fictive listener who stretches the scope of the personal narration into becoming impersonal, critical and objective. Thus, the novel becomes as much the chronicler's tale as the autobiography of Umrao Jan. (Kumar 228-229)

Junun-e-Intezar translated as *The Madness of Waiting* was published in 1899, and serves as a paratext to *Umrao Jan Ada*. It is written under the premise that Umrao avenges herself on her creator by narrating his life. The text therefore becomes interesting in the sense that it blurs the lines between fiction and truth. So, while in Umrao Jan, Ruswa claims that he is writing down a life story which has been narrated to him by Umrao herself, in the *Madness of Waiting*, Umrao claims to have gained access to his life via his help at home and publishes his life more as an act of vengeance than anything else: "Be not too contented, having defamed me just so, what would you do, if my tongue becomes a bit looser like yours?" (Ruswa *Madness* 33). In the introductory note to the text, Umrao goes on to mention that though Ruswa thinks he is doing her a favour by making her story public, she thinks otherwise: "If indeed this is a 'favour' then I know well how it must be returned… The day that Mirza Ruswa published my biography and sent a copy for my

perusal, on that very day I sent him a copy of this short piece of prose. I am sure Mirza Ruswa is not happy about this, but what else could I have done?"(41- 42)

Through the complex narrative structure of *The Madness of Waiting*, as through *Umrao Jan Ada*, Ruswa blurs the lines between fiction and truth, and the narrator and the creator/writer. Both the texts become documents of lives of Ruswa and Umrao respectively as perceived by the other. However, in the case of *The Madness of Waiting*, the text actually is a diary maintained by Ruswa, which is narrated to us by Umrao with occasional interjections. It is through these interjections that Ruswa the writer, insists on the authenticity of the diary and the narrative voice. But on the other hand, he also controls the voice of Umaro: "Once again, the voice of the speaking subject Umrao Jan, is modulated by Mirza Ruswa, the narrator of *Umrao Jan Ada*, who is also a character in this story" (Ruswa *Madness* 34). And probably through this control of her voice, we as readers can gather Ruswa's attitude towards courtesans who in spite of occupying the public sphere, are

> [r]elegated to the margins of the narrative... [T]he text (*Umrao Jan Ada*)... becomes a site for the feminist archive both materially and politically. The text is a material that 'houses' the desires of a courtesan who cannot be accommodated within dominant narratives of respectability that are part of the political context of her time. (Ruswa *Madness* 35)

In *Umrao Jan Ada*, Ruswa does not use a didactic tone, though he mentions the predicament of the courtesans in general. The incidents in the novel are placed in and around the years of the Sepoy Mutiny, that is around the year 1857. The incidents occur in the towns of Lucknow, Kanpur and Faizabad. There is a constant detailing of the social and historical contexts. The fact that the fall of Awadh, after the 1857 Uprising deeply

affected the courtesans and the Nawabs of Lucknow is reflected in the text through the life of Umrao Jan herself: “Mutiny broke like a grand catastrophe. Our city like the rest of the country was in a state of turmoil” (Ruswa *Umrao* 196). In the beginning we see courtesans in their full glory. The luxuries of the courtesan quarters, the noble clientele which comes to attend the performances, and the recitation of poetry are described in the beginning of the text. All these last until Wajid Ali Shah is defeated and exiled in 1857. Thus, Ruswa's narration of Umrao Jan’s story provides a bildungsroman of a courtesan’s life set against the macrocosm of Lucknow’s socio-cultural background. As M. Asaduddin argues, “By the end of the novel, Lucknow has been ravaged, and the centre of power and excellence gradually shifts to Hyderabad....Though it is Umrao’s life which is the pivot around which most of the incidents in the novel revolve, Ruswa has woven into its texture the entire socio cultural ethos of Lucknow and, to a lesser extent vignettes of the life in smaller towns such as Kanpur and Faizabad” (136-137).

The novel *Umrao Jan Ada* has been translated by both Khushwant Singh and David Mathhews. I use the David Mathhews’ translation published in the year 1996. Umrao Jan was a famous courtesan in Lucknow. Born as Ameeran, she was abducted and sold to Khanum Jan, the owner of a courtesan house in Lucknow. She was trained to dance and sing with a group of other girls, who too have faced the same dire situations in life. The other courtesans in Khanum Jan’s quarters were, Khurshid, who danced beautifully, Begam Jan, an excellent singer, Bismillah Jan, who was exquisitely beautiful. But it was Umrao Jan who stood apart from all of them, for not only did she excel in music and dance, she also composed her own songs and poetry. The important point that comes across through this is that the courtesans were probably the only women who had access to education during that period, apart from economic independence. The courtesans were tax

payers and more often than not they did redeem several rich people out of their debts. Khanum Jan, like many other matriarchs of the courtesan quarters of the time, not only amassed great wealth, but also wielded enormous power. In her hands was the fate not only of her girls but also of many respectable men and their families (Safadi 22). As Veena Talwar Oldenburg mentions, though the British set high moral standards for these courtesans, "[y]et…when it came to matters such as using these women as prostitutes for the European garrison, or collecting income tax, the eminently pragmatic British set aside their high moral dudgeon" (Ruswa *Umrao* 265). To colonial observers, these girls were educated and also received Government protection. They were free from stigma, recognized as a distinct professional class, and taxed according to their income. The space they occupied in society was outside the domestic sphere and yet close to the power centres of the aristocracy. The courtesan household was a matriarchal one, and in this case was headed and managed by Khanum Jan. She also possesses the right to admit certain visitors and dismiss the rest:

> In Lucknow, the world of the tawa'if was as complex and hierarchical as the society of which it was part. Courtesans were and still are usually a part of a larger establishment run by a chaudharayan, or chief courtesan, an older woman who has retired to the position of manager after a successful career as a tawa'if. Having acquired wealth and fame, such women were able to recruit and train women who came to them, along with the more talented daughters of the household. Typically a wealthy courtier, often the king himself, began his direct association with a kotha by bidding for a virgin whose patron he became with the full privileges and obligations of that position. He was obliged to make regular contributions in cash

> and jewellery and privileged to invite his friends to soirees and enjoy an exclusive sexual relationship with a tawa'if. (Oldenburg 263)

The two important male characters of the novel are Nawab Sultan and Faiz Ali, the earlier belonging to the rich aristocracy and the latter a social outcaste, a bandit, who is later, captured. Umrao is in love with the Nawab Sultan but obviously they cannot marry as she is a "fallen" woman. She acknowledges: "There is no doubt that I loved Nawab Sultan and he loved me. Our tastes were so similar that if we had had to spend the rest of our lives together, neither would have had any cause for regret" (82). She contradicts this, however, later in her story when she tells Ruswa that she has never loved any man nor has any man loved her, and the basic requirement for her profession was not be emotionally attached:

> I am but a courtesan in whose profession love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him. No one knows how to love more than we do: to heave deep sighs; to burst into tears at the slightest pretext; to go without food for days on end; to sit dangling our legs on the parapets of wells ready to jump into them; to threaten to take arsenic. All these are parts of our game of love. But I tell you truthfully, no man ever really loved me nor did I love any man. (Ruswa *Umrao* 101)

Though this aspect in the larger scheme of things fits into the paradigm of a *nakhra* (feigned passion), which was a common attribute of love making, this can also be seen as a subversion of patriarchal values, where through the *nakhra*, the courtesan treats people with courtesy and compassion while retaining a necessary emotional detachment from her various lovers. This can be read as parallel to Studs Terkel's interview with Roberta Victor, in his text *Working*. Roberta is a hooker who also follows the same ethic of never

getting emotionally attached to her customer: "The ethic was... You always fake it. You are putting something over him and he is paying for something he really didn't get. That's the only way you keep any sense of self-respect. The call girl ethic is very strong. You were the lowest of the low if you allowed yourself to feel anything" (Terkel 41). She looks at her profession as merely a means to sustain her living without any emotional bindings. She thinks of herself on par with the other American women working to support themselves. She goes on to say, "Here I was doing absolutely nothing, feeling absolutely nothing, and in twenty minutes I was going to walk out with fifty dollars in my pocket....The overt hustling society is the microcosm of the rest of the society. The power relations are the same and the games are the same" (Terkel 91). As Oldenburg argues, "These women had taken control of their lives by reversing the social rules" (283).

Umrao Jan's love affair with Faiz Ali, though, is more an act of rebellion. The Nawab Sultan goes on to marry someone else and Umrao Jan is heartbroken. At this point, she is also looking for an escape route to get rid of her identity and the "sin" that she has accumulated all this time: "Now I thought that if I did not join him, my own faithlessness and ingratitude would be proven. I made up my mind to accompany him, When he came to see me that night, I informed him of my decision to elope....I would not go back on my word. But when he left, and I had time to reflect, I wondered whether I would keep my promise or not. All the time...my heart told me to go; but from somewhere a voice kept saying: 'Umrao, do not leave!'"(102). Umrao feels that being "obliged" to him was much better than living at Khanum Jan's place and having to answer for every deed of hers. Umrao runs away with Faiz Ali thinking that he can provide her with a "respectable" life, but that too does not happen, as he is a bandit and is captured by the police in the

beginning. He manages to flee the first time, and they meet again. Trying to run away again, he steps out of home never to return.

Having been deserted by Faiz Ali, Umrao starts living in Kanpur and then in Faizabad for a while, showing no inclination of coming back to Khanum's place. Though the memory of Lucknow continues to haunt her time and again, she finally does return to Lucknow, only to find that certain clients had shifted to Calcutta, and there were new rules: "It was not the same Lucknow at all" (149). Obviously her return has been preceded by the 1857 Uprising. It is interesting to note here that with the fall of Lucknow, after the Sepoy Mutiny, comes the fall of Umrao Jan. She begins to fade and hardly preforms, until she decides to reveal herself in a mushaira, after which the novel get written down: "The cold indifferent tone of the narration of all those dramatic incidents in her life, even those which involve her emotional relationships is also indicative of how alienated Umrao has become even from her own self. Her story is told in retrospect, she recollects everything in tranquillity of reflective maturity and detachment, as a witness of her own life--performance" (Kumar 238). Umrao realises the fact that she will never be accepted again by the "respectable" society and laments this, often cursing her fate. But she also makes a point when she says that she has been a victim of circumstances. She is a strong believer in the innate goodness of human nature: "Personally, I think that no one is wholly bad, and that there is some good to be found in everyone....Without some element of goodness, life would be impossible"(Ruswa *Umrao* 151).

In conversation with Umaro, Ruswa mentions, "Wise men have divided sinners into two categories those whose deeds are limited to themselves and those whose acts affect other people as well. In my humble opinion, those in the first category are lesser and those in the second category are the greater sinners" (176). He talks about two kinds of

sins, one which is minor and the other which is major. The minor sin is one which only affects oneself and the major is one which affects the lives of others, because the sins that have adverse effect on others can only be forgiven by the people who are affected by them. Umrao is someone who has been affected by someone else's sin, the person who abducted her and sold her. She has never consciously tried to hurt or harm her fellow human beings: "Drink wine and burn the prayer-mat; set fire to the mosque; Go say your prayers to idols, but a man thou must not harm.... I am a sinner to my finger-tips but even I tremble at the thought of harming my fellow-men!" (152). It is impossible for her to get back to a normal life and even though she wants to meet her mother, she cannot because society does not allow her to do so: “She is pushed forever into the female sub-culture of the isolated, marginalised world of the *tawaifs* commodified and trained to entertain the decadent and affluent males...” (Kumar 237).

Ruswa at no point critiques the social system that allows the buying and selling of girls, though he is sympathetic towards the "plight of individual victim[s]" (Mukherjee 95). This clearly come across in the incident where Umrao herself buys another girl Abadi for 1 rupee during the famine, several years after she had been bought by Khanum Jan for Rupees 125. In fact, Khanum Jan is seen as a saviour for she had saved a girl from her "worst fate". Umrao operates within a code of honour which Ruswa understands and respects. In the essay titled “The ‘Fallen’ Woman in Two Colonial Novels” by Alison Safadi, she points out that Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that, Ruswa’s sympathies are very much with the individual who has suffered misfortune and risen above it rather than with efforts to reform the ills of society in general (Safadi, 37).

Commenting on different kinds of women, Ruswa says:

> The thing is that there are three kinds of women: the virtuous, the depraved and the whores! The second category can be further subdivided: one, women who sin in secret; two, those who do it openly. Among those who are virtuous you find those who would never sully their reputation; they are women who live their whole lives within four walls and put up with all kinds of affliction....In the case of our homely wife, no matter how beautiful, virtuous or efficient she might be, we often see that their stupid husbands get infatuated with prostitutes, even though the whore may be much less attractive than their own wife. They often abandon their wives for a while, or even permanently. For this reason the simple wife gets an idea, or rather is certain, that the prostitute is using some supernatural force, like the charms and leeches you mentioned, that can affect her husband's mind. That is also a kind of virtue, whereby the husband is regarded as innocent, and the prostitute is given all the blame. (Ruswa *Umrao* 162)

Such an analogy clearly points to that fact that respectable women did not step out into the public domain and did not share a social space with men. The courtesan on the other hand was a public figure:

> The courtesan has a function in the sphere of public life—she can sing, dance, recite and compose poetry, in short she is able to participate in the social life of men, whom she has the job of entertaining as she shares that space—and she has a precise social position, blamable on the theoretical plane, but recognized and esteemed on the practical one, constituting as it does the means that permits this type of social structure to remain intact. (Bredi 112)

This brings us back to the clear division between the "home" and the "world" that Partha Chatterjee had talked about, where women were supposed to take care of the spiritual well

being and maintain the sanctity of the "inner world". Ruswa, therefore, in his didacticism, tries to provide Umrao Jan with a voice. Also, he clearly puts forth the view that having access to such a public life means exclusion from the world of respectable women with almost no chance of reconciliation with one's own identity. It also means that no value would be given to their emotional life, though these women will be economically independent.

Umrao Jan Ada has been written by a man, even though he claims that the story has been narrated to him by Umrao herself. One cannot overlook the fact that the transcriber is a man and therefore a certain appropriation goes into it. Umrao claims, after having read the draft, that Ruswa has definitely written about the experiences but that he will never be able to feel them as she did for she alone has lived all the experiences. The truth of this statement also depends on speculation, as to whether this statement has been inserted only to add to the effect of a "created" reality, or whether such a character Umrao actually existed and the entire incident which is narrated is true. Ruswa's text narrates the life of a rich and famous courtesan and her trauma in life. There is no option available for Umrao Jan, except to suffer, even though she has been sinned against and has landed into the profession completely against her will. She accepts her "fate" and though she is sad about the fact that she can never have a family of her own, there is not much that she can do. She exists in the periphery of society with its shortcomings. The novel too does not provide her with an escape route.

What is also fascinating is that on the one hand, it is considered fashionable to visit the courtesan, for these places are repositories of music, dance and fine poetry, but on the other, there is no acceptance of the people performing these arts in the day to day lives. The time period in which the novel is set is very important in various senses. The kingdom

of Awadh is annexed just after 1857. The fall of Lucknow is held responsible for the falling standards of Kathak as a dance form. Kathak is derived from Persian forms of dance. Kathak loses its aura after the fall of Awadh. Wajid Ali Shah, the last nawab of Awadh was a great lover of art and culture. He was a trained musician, and had composed several *thumris* and *ghazals*. Lucknow had become a cultural hub, with reputed musicians, dancers and poets under his rule. We see an example of this fact, when Umrao is in Kanpur and Faizabad, and she becomes famous by virtue of the fact that she is a courtesan from Lucknow. Wajid Ali Shah set up several *parikhanas,* which were the abodes of famous courtesans. Not only this, he himself took part in several dance performances. The British Government did not approve of such behaviour. However, it is interesting to note that once Wajid Ali Shah was deported from Lucknow, he settled down in Metiabruz, in suburban Calcutta and this led to a considerable flourish of art forms like Hindustani music and dance in Calcutta. It is this movement that has been mentioned by Premchand in "Shatraj ke Khiladi", where in the beginning, he talks about the entire city of Lucknow absorbed in *vilasita* and later mentions the actual spatial relocatoion of Wajid Ali Shah and his troops:

> It was the time of Vajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was absorbed in *vilasita* [enjoyment, pleasure, luxuriousness, sensuality]. Great and small, rich and poor, all were absorbed in *vilasita*. If one person arranged music and dance performances, then the next took pleasure only in the intoxication of opium. In every department of life, enjoyment and merry-making prevailed. In Government, in literature, in social conditions, in arts and crafts, in industry, in cuisine, everywhere *vilasita* was becoming pervasive. (Pritchett 1)

However, the shifting of Wajid Ali Shah to Metiyabruj, near Calcutta caused a displacement of musicians and this obviously caused damage to the profession and the professionals, as getting a clientele was now a problem:

> As Khanum Jan in Hasan Shah's novel was to find that her livelihood was largely dependent upon the British, so Umrao comes to the recognition, as Lucknow became the imaginative and symbolic centre of the Rebellion of 1857, that the patronage of her clients had a considerable relationship to the rise or decline of British fortunes. Umrao was to become a victim of the 'grand catastrophe' and though the establishment which had been her home was to be looted and become rather dilapidated over the next few years, the anarchy of the times could not dull Umrao's spirits or diminish her zest for life. (Lal 169-170)

Suman, the protagonist of Premachand's *Sevasadan* is on the other side of the spectrum and I see her as the product of the reflected glory of this dying profession.

Sevasadan, the Hindi version of Munshi Premchand's Urdu novel *Bazaar e Husn*, was published in the year 1918. The Urdu version however, was published only in 1924. The title translates into "house of service". Though the "house of service" refers to an institution set up to provide shelter to the daughters of former courtesans, it also carries the meaning of "service" provided by courtesans to the male clientele in the city. The novel is based in the city of Benares and narrates the life story of an upper caste woman, Suman, who goes astray from the virtuous life she is expected to lead, is taken in by a courtesan, Bholi Bai, but eventually attains redemption through *"prayaschitta"*, thereby managing the orphanage which looks after daughters of courtesans. The novel has at its centre a plot which revolves around Suman's fall and probable final redemption, and as a sub-plot has

the theme of removal of courtesans from the centre of the city to its periphery, thereby indicating the redundant status of women involved in the profession:

> The rhetoric of social reform..., is beginning to gain ground and provide unexpected twists to matters long considered settled. But even social reform is a double-edged sword, which can be used to further various ends, especially when it is directed at women. For, at the centre of the novel, as also of Benares[1], is yet another crucial transition: the courtesans of the city are no longer to be allowed to practice their art publicly. The social reformers have taken up the cause of the fallen women. (Premchand ix)

The city of Benares, according to the 1827 census had around 900 professional nautch girls.[2] Though a godly town, the city had several other things to boast of as well:

> There were wealthy merchants, there were scholars... There were people from all parts of the country... There was wealth, trade, textiles and handicrafts. The city blossomed and glowed... Kashi was the pinnacle of all cities in the subcontinent, wherein all regions and crafts were represented, and atop this pinnacle were perched the courtesans of the city. This exalted reputation of the women of the city was to continue unabated into the first half of the twentieth century. The best

[1] I use the spelling "Benares" as is used/mentioned in the translation of *Sevasadan* by Snehal Shingavi (2005 edition). However, while I discuss the life of Gauhar Jaan in a later section I use "Banaras" as is mentioned in her biography, *My Name is Gauhar Jaan.*

[2] According to James Prinsep, the first British Census taker of the city, "[T]here were 24 Hindooee and 500 Mosulmanee professional *Nach* girls in the town… There were, however four times the number of *khanehgee-kusbee*, who do not profess the accomplishments of singing and dancing" (*Sevasadan*, x). It should be noted here that these women who were not all that proficient in music and dance; were employed at cantonments, and catered to the soldiers, and in that sense, it might have been easier for them to look for employment opportunities rather than the proficient ones, once they were relocated from the heart of the city to the periphery.

> known courtesans exercised great social power; they played a central role on most public occasions.... (Premchand xii)

It is amidst this backdrop that Premchand places his first novel. Suman and her sister Shanta have been brought up to "expect the best in life". Their father was a sub-inspector of police. He had even arranged for them to receive some education from a Christian lady. However, he had not saved up enough to pay their dowry and problems arise after he is convicted with charges of bribery. It then falls upon Suman's uncle Umanath to get her married. With little expenditure, he is able to find an elderly bridegroom, Gajadhar, who is also a Brahmin, for he is not ready to compromise at that level, and gets Suman married: "That was one requirement he would not give up on" (13). Her husband takes good care of her initially and Suman lives up to her expectation of a dutiful wife for the first couple of years. However, she starts getting extremely frustrated after that, due to lack of money and resources. Across the street lives Bholi Bai, a courtesan. Of Bholi, Suman feels, "Not only did wealth bow at Bholi's feet, even religion sought her favour" (xv). And she had seen enough reasons to believe so, for on the occasion of Ramnavami, she discovered that Bholi was at the centre of all arrangements and whatever she uttered was observed by the prominent people of the city. Suman finally gives in to temptation and visits Bholi one day and Gajadhar is extremely dismissive of this act of hers. She visits the house of the lawyer Padamsingh, and his wife Subhadra, whom she had met at a park, to attend a *mujra* recital by Bholi Bai. As Alison Safadi suggests in her essay, even before Suman actually "transgresses", she shows signs of her transgression the moment she sees Bholi Bai performing, for at that moment she thinks to herself that she is prettier than Bholi and it would not take her more than a month to train and sing like her. She gets back home very late on the day of the performance, well past midnight and Gajadhar does not let her inside

the house. This hurts her self esteem and she leaves with bag and baggage to seek shelter at Padamsingh's house. Her stay there is very brief and soon there are speculations regarding the purpose of her stay at his place. It is at this moment that she is taken in by Bholi Bai and trained to sing *thumris* and *ghazals*. The news of her beauty and talent spreads fast across Dalmandi, the area where the courtesans reside. Among her admirers is Sadansingh, the nephew of Padamsingh, who sweeps Suman off her feet and both of them fall madly in love with each other.

It is here that the character of Vitthaldas is introduced to us. He is a social reformer: "...in his obsession to serve the nation, Vitthaldas had forgotten to look for his own happiness and self esteem... his patriotism was his virtue; this won him the respect of all and sundry in the city" (69). Though he is one of the earliest to spread rumours and speculate about Suman's stay at Padamsingh's place, he takes it upon himself to rescue Suman. In a conversation with Suman he mentions, "Now that our much revered Brahman ladies are treading this disgraceful path, there will be no stopping our decline. Suman, you are causing the head of the Hindu jati to be lowered" (70). Though Suman believes that she has earned a lot of respct by coming to Dalmandi and by being financially independent, the fact that Vitthaldas makes her feel that the *maryada* of the Hindu *jati* also rests with her, makes her reconsider her choice at some level. She promises him that though she would continue to sing, she will not have any sexual contact with her admirers. Suman at the same time is also convinced that there is not a single person of the Hindu *jati* who will not spend fifty rupees on her upkeep if asked for. Vitthaldas intends to remove prostitution completely from the city and do away with *mujras*, and Suman becomes his first target for this reformation. Amidst all this, the love between Sadan and Suman is lost, as Suman withdraws herself and Sadan's marriage is fixed with Shanta, the sister of Suman. However, the marriage does not go through, as on the day of the wedding, Sadan's

father finds out that Shanta is the sister of Suman Bai of Dalmandi. Gajadhar also realises that to an extent he is the reason for the "downfall" of Suman, that he did not take proper care of her, and hence gives up all worldly pleasures to become a *sadhu,* Baba Gajanand. Shanta in her heart believes that she is already married to Sadan and writes to Padamsingh to come and fetch her. Suman, in the meanwhile, has been shifted to a widow's home where she works ardently day and night for their upkeep. She has given up her profession, and works here in anticipation of a possible redemption. Padamsingh devices a plan to get Shanta to Benares and put her up at the widow's home along with Suman. He is able to do so as well. But before long, the inmates find out that Suman is actually Suman Bai of Dalmandi and they leave the home before people can hurl insults at them. Sadan meanwhile has been interacting with people from the new emerging intelligentsia, and realises that he needs to be financially independent and take care of his responsibilities, namely Shanta, whom he has deserted and Suman. He buys a boat and starts ferrying it across Ganges. He works day in and day out and in a few months is able to build a hut for himself on the banks of the river. Coincidentally, Suman and Shanta land at his doorstep once they decide to move out of the widow's home. They are both taken in by him; his marriage with Shanta is ritualised and the three of them stay in the same house, where Suman takes care of all the household chores without any acknowledgement or help from the other two, which leaves her completely broken. Sadan refuses to even look at her, for in a certain way it reminds him of the harm that he had caused her, and Shanta, though she claims she is concerned, actually does not care. On one such night, Suman leaves the house and starts walking towards the ghats, where she encounters Gajanand, who asks her to seek redemption, which for her comes in the form of looking after a home meant for the children born to courtesans, predictably called "Sevasadan". The home houses girls born to courtesans and prostitutes, and trains them vocationally. The novel ends with Subhadra,

the wife of Padamsingh visiting the home and praising Suman's efforts, and the shift of Suman from being a vivacious woman to a demure person. As Vasudha Dalmia in her Introduction to Sevasadan opines:

> On the one hand, beautiful, passionate, and headstrong Suman had been tamed and this could be seen as the triumph of virtue. But on the other hand, she was also a tragic figure, a victim of social system that first failed to accord her the respect she claimed as a virtuous wife, then made much of her as a beautiful courtesan. But the moment she stepped out of that role, the same social system proceeded to regard her little more than a social outcaste who could only be accommodated as one who looked after others of her kind. In the final run, very few were left to support her in the virtuous role allotted to her. (xxxv)

By the first two decades of the twentieth century, the attitude towards the courtesans had changed completely. The way the emerging middle class looked at them was very different from the elites. A sense of morality was attached to the mindset of the middle class while the elite saw this as luxury: "The new voices in the city were seeking to create an image of Kashi which was far removed from the one which was socially and ritually centred around the courtesans. In the public disputes about the location of the courtesans, the city's ill reputation was seen as reflected in the sad fate of the nation, of its music, and also that of the Hindu woman"(Premchand xiv). Alison Safadi in her essay "The 'Fallen' Woman in Two Colonial Novels: *Umrao Jan Ada* and *Bazaar-e-Husn/Sevasadan*" says:

> The emphasis was on the ideal of the Hindu woman propagated by the Arya Samaj and the nationalists. The prostitute began to be viewed as a source of disease and corruption rather than refinement and artistic skill. The presence of prostitutes in

> the most frequented and populous quarters of cities was seen as among the principal causes for the ruin and demoralization among innocent, affluent young men; and contact with prostitutes was regarded as the reason for a decline in the virtues of respectable, homely women. In *Bazaar-e-Husn/Sevasadan* Premchand depicts both of these problems in his portrayal of Suman and Sadan. (25)

The shift of the courtesan from the centre of the city to the periphery comes out of this moralistic concern. Vitthaldas, one of the champions of the cause, is able to get this order executed.[3] Vitthaldas was ably helped by Padamsingh, who in his resolution mentions three parts: "1. The courtesans would be removed from the centre of the city and moved to a place away from the population, 2. They would be prevented from going into the city's main thoroughfares and parks, 3. There would be high tax on those who hired courtesans to dance, and such performances would under no circumstances be open to public" (Premchand 206). There was an amendment suggested to this resolution whereby "those, who, within nine months, either get married or learn skill by which they can properly provide for themselves" (Premchand 206). The resolution was passed without much debate. But this entire idea of social reform is flawed at a certain level. The reformers are more concerned about the projection of an image for their selves, which matches with the new sense of morality that has been transmitted to them through the Western education system, and less concerned about the state of the individuals whose fates they are about to amend. The fate of several women engaged in the profession remains undecided. While some of them might find opportunities to perform at the houses of the elites of the city, most of them were rendered unemployed. Premchand in his attempt to portray the ills of a society has a very ambivalent attitude towards the social reformists. So though

[3] In 1898 restrictions were imposed on courtesans in Benares and Lucknow, and subsequently in Agra in 1917 there were proposals to remove courtesans from the city center (Safadi 25).

Vitthaldas's character is shown championing the cause of the prostitutes, Premchand views his character with a certain amount of scepticism. Though he is shown trying to eradicate evils, he has little idea of the predicament of the people he is trying to help. However, Premchand does not deter from being didactic in his novel. Premchand strongly believed that Literature needed to serve a political and social purpose. Amrit Rai, mentions that in a letter to Imtiaz Ali Taj, Premchand told him, "In this story I have launched an attack on the social disgrace of prostitution" (Rai 37). Francesca Orsini observes that, "the values of 'Indian womanhood'-- modesty, sexual chastity, and moral purity; steadfast self-sacrifice and nurturing (whether in *seva* or maternity)--were conspicuously present in the work of male and female writers"(Orsini 306). Premchand's female protagonists, even if they go astray in the beginning of the novel, redeem themselves, thereby not disturbing the image of the ideal Hindu woman, a trait which can be seen in *Vardaan* and *Premashram* among several others. However, the solutions that he provides for the redemption of these fallen women, (in this case Suman), are very mild. Suman starts looking after a home that shelters daughters of courtesans, and in a certain way, is removed from the boundaries of the "respectable" society. At one point Suman does mention that though these girls are being trained, she does not have an idea about their future: "Subhadra-- And how will they get married? Suman-- That will be difficult. it is our duty to ensure that these girls learn to be good housewives. Whether or not society will respect them, I cannot say" (Premchand 270). Orsini mentions that, "[o]nce a woman lost her purity there was literally no place for her in Hindu society" (293). *Sevasadan* tries to provide that place to a fallen woman, but unfortunately that too is outside the boundaries of the society.

In one or two instances, Premchand does mention his views about treating women as equal and about women's independence. But he is careful enough to make sure that

these are uttered by women who do not belong to the mainstream Hindu *jati*. The opinions are uttered by Bholi Bai in one instance and by the Christian Missionary nuns in another. And since none of them is at the centre of the Hindu *jati*, it is evident that their opinions are not to be taken seriously. The social reform movement that Premchand mentions in the novel essentially caters to the Hindu *jati* and its refinement, a fact that comes up repeatedly, in the nationalist struggle of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Premchand is deeply aware and conscious of the society around him and probably realises that a possible solution to the problem of prostitution can be achieved by spatially relocating the people involved so as to limit access for both the practitioners as well as the customers. And this is what he does in the novel. Premchand throws light on the underlying hypocrisy of a society which may provide courtesans and prostitutes with status and dignity, but never incorporates them into what is called a "respectable society". This is irrespective of the community and caste that one belongs to: "For, provocatively enough, Premchand had chosen to cast Suman as a Brahmin woman who had deserted her husband, rather than as Muslim, and at least nominally single" (Premchand xiv). That virtue is closely linked to Indian womanhood is something that comes across in the novel. It is the safeguarding of this virtue that the nationalist discourse deals with, with respect to the woman's question. Orsini mentions, "Debates on the woman question... were also profoundly affected with the symbolic identification of womanhood with Indianness, i.e., with India's peculiar spiritual essence, that which made it superior to and essentially different from the West" (Orsini 244). The woman's question was central to the nationalist struggle in India as has been mentioned earlier. Women were expected to represent the inner, purer aspects of life and were supposed to be the keepers of virtue and morals. The ideal Hindu woman was supposed to preserve the dignity of the Hindu *jati*. Premchand echoes similar nationalist discourse in his novel, "His [Premchand] views on women, as

we have seen, are firmly rooted in the nationalist ideal of the Hindu woman of the time, and Suman must be judged against that ideal" (Safadi 52).

Nashtar, Umrao Jan Ada and Sevasadan, have more in common than the fact that their protagonists are fallen women, courtesans. Both Ruswa and Premchand feel that their works should be seen as chronicles of the times they lived in. That novel should reflect what went on in the society is what both believed in. Though both the novels are episodic in nature, *Umrao Jan Ada* is a far more complicated novel in terms of the narrative structure and *Sevasadan* is didactic. *Nashtar* on the other hand uses the epistolary form to a great extent. The time period covered by the three novels is about a hundred and twenty years. During these years, the stature of the courtesan has risen and fallen to that of a common prostitute in the 1920s. There has been a lot of change in the social attitude towards them as well. At their helm, these girls/women were educated and received Government Protection: "They were free from stigma, recognized as a distinct professional class, and taxed according to their income. The space they occupied in society was 'outside the domestic sphere and yet close to the power centres of aristocracy.'" (Singh 105) Though the British themselves patronized the nautch, the attitude remarkably changed after the Mutiny of 1857. The amicable relation that we see between Khanum and Ming is not visible in either *Umrao Jan Ada* or *Sevasadan*. Much of it also had to do with several laws being implemented, which restricted free movement of the British soldiers as well as the courtesans to each other's quarters. Courtesans were now seen as repositories of diseases. The greatest marker probably of the fact that the profession was going downhill, was in the fact that Bholi Bai tells Suman that she does not need to learn the *raags* and that popular *ghazals* were fashionable there. It has been observed earlier that Umrao had spent years perfecting her musical repertoire, and would write her own

ghazals. The distinction between high art and low art was beginning to get blurred by the second decade of the twentieth century.

The demographics of the city had changed completely by the beginning of the twentieth century. While it was unthinkable that the courtesan quarters and the "respectable" would coexist in the same space in *Umrao Jan Ada*, Bholi Bai and Suman's houses are just across the street fom each other. In *Umrao Jan Ada*, the courtesan quarters are strictly located in and around the Chowk. Also towards the end of *Sevasadan*, there is talk of relocation of the courtesans to the peripheries of the city, as opposed to the fact that they were centrally located in *Umrao Jan Ada*. The quarters which were centrally located to provide easy access, were now being shifted to the margins to limit accessibility.

Both Umrao and Suman curse their fate and life for what they face in their lives. Umrao was kidnapped and sold to Khanum and hence does not have much agency in the profession that she is made to choose, while Suman readily chooses this life. Though she considers herself superior to Bholi Bai, as she is chaste, she cannot overlook the luxuries that Bholi enjoys. She is envious of people who are better off than her, as she is unhappy with what her marriage has to offer. Also, as has been mentioned earlier, Suman thinks of herself as more beautiful than Bholi and feels she will take less than a month to train and sing like her, within moments of seeing her perform for the first time. So, in a sense, she had "transgressed" even before she actually did. There is a certain growth one notices in the character of Umrao. She matures from a young girl into a sought after courtesan, into someone who now lives in oblivion. Suman's character, however, changes completely as observed by Safadi in her essay. The vivacious Suman turns into a meek and demure person, trying to redeem herself. Premchand and Ruswa treat their protagonists very differently in the novels. While Umrao accepts her fate, and tries to accomplish all that she

can and tries to be happy in the end, in spite of the fact that true love and marriage elude her, Suman is never happy with her situation. Umrao, when she first appears, has retired from her profession, and still continues to write poetry; she had not given up on her profession in expectation of redemption. Suman, on the other hand, by the end of the novel, is spatially located in another arena which is outside the 'respectable' realm, trying to redeem herself, to gain acceptability, by serving children of courtesans, training them to become 'housewives'. That marriage brings respectability is a theme that both the novels explore, but the two protagonists differ in the sense that Umrao can never be married due to the social stigma attached to courtesans, and Suman has been a part of an unhappy marriage and cannot go back to her husband, because one, she has 'transgressed', and two, her husband is now an ascetic.

While the final chapters of *Sevasadan* indicate that the courtesans were being relocated to the margins of the society, the text also indicates a probable final closure to the profession, which had been deemed immoral. There are indications of this decay in the profession even in *Umrao Jan Ada*, where when Umrao comes back from Kanpur, she realises that many of her admirers have shifted to Calcutta, owing to the fact that the Nawab of Lucknow was now there. Khanum Jan and Suman are at two ends of a matrix, and through their characters and through these works one can trace the rise and fall of a profession, as it emerged, gained respectability and then faded into oblivion.

Section II- "Is literature obliged to be historically or politically correct?"[4]

This section is further divided into two sub sections, one where I look at lives based in the city of Calcutta after Wajid Ali Shah's moving to Metiyaburj, and the other where I analyse the character of Chandramukhi in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Devdas* with respect to other courtesan/prostitute characters in the fiction of late nineteenth to mid twentieth century Bengal. Gauhar Jaan is a direct product of this movement, as Malka Jaan, Gauhar's mother felt that shifting to Calcutta from Lucknow would give Gauhar ample choice of trainers for both dance and music. They shifted to Calcutta in 1883.Very soon Gauhar received an invitation from Wajid Ali Shah himself, asking her to perform at his court.

Devdas was one of the most popular texts of the early twentieth century. The character of Chandramukhi emerges as an "ideal" courtesan. She transforms into a *jogini* from a *baiji.* Her movement away from her profession into a life of restraint makes her different from other courtesans. I aim to analyse her character with respect to a few others written around the same time period, which include Rohini from *Krishnakant's Will* (1875) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Srimati from *Natir Puja* translated as *The Dancing Girl's Worship* and Shyama from *Shyama* (1939), both by Rabindranath Tagore and Kusum from Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's "Hinger Kochuri"(1956).

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In the loneliness of my grave, I opened my eyes and looked around
The mourners had come, cried, given me my ceremonial burial and left.

[4] The title is borrowed from an essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak titled "How to Read a 'Culturally Different' Text", published in *Colonial Discourse/postcolonial theory*. Eds. Francis Barker, et al. New York: Manchester UP, 1994.

> It was when I was left all by myself, far removed from the colours of life
> That the real thrust of my miserable existence hit me hard,
> I mourned my life, while my near and dear ones mourned my death.
> In the loneliness of my grave, my mourning continued
> But wasn't it too late? (Sampath 232)

Born as Eileen Angelina Yeoward, an Armenian Christian, in 1873, who later converted into Islam, Gauhar Jaan was one of the most prominent musicians during her life and times. Her mother, Adeline Victoria Hemmings was an Indian by birth, born to a British soldier and an Indian mistress. Her father, Robert William Yeoward was Armenian. Suspecting Victoria of infidelity, her parents separated and Eileen moved with her mother to Banaras, along with her mother's benefactor, Khurshid and converted into Islam, to find themselves a new identity. Her mother was now called Malka, and she, Gauhar. Khurshid took full responsibility of their upkeep. The *tawaifs* in Banaras were held in high regard and there was a clear demarcation between *tawaifs* and *vaishyas*, where the former were well accomplished in music and dance and the latter were merely prostitutes. Malka had no intention of becoming a *tawaif*, but due to the recognition that she had been getting ever since she had arrived in Banaras, with respect to her accomplishments in the arts, this seemed to be the most lucrative profession. She christened herself Malka Jan, and started performing for wealthy patrons in Banaras. As mentioned earlier, once Wajid Ali Shah shifted to Calcutta, a large number of musicians, dancers, painters, poets and other artists migrated from Lucknow to Calcutta. Keeping in mind Malka Jan's talent, it was best that Khurshid and Malka Jan along with her daughter Gauhar shift to Calcutta, as it would also give Gauhar ample choice of trainers of both dance and music at a later stage. Finally in 1883, they shifted to Calcutta. Malka Jan took Gauhar along with her when she went to

perform at the patron's houses. Very soon Gauhar received an invitation from Wajid Ali Shah himself, asking her to perform at his court. The performance is said to have moved Wajid Ali Shah, and the resident dancer of his court, Bindadin Maharaj was so impressed with Gauhar's performance, that he immediately took her under his tutelage. At the same time, she started taking lessons in Bengali songs from Bamacharan Bhattacharya, learnt *kirtans* from Ramesh Chandra Das Babaji and *dhrupad* from Srijanbai. Malka Jaan also made sure that she learnt English, and in a few years time Gauhar had mastered languages like Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Hindustani, Urdu, English and French.

Gauhar Jaan's initiation ceremony happened in 1886. Malka Jaan would take her along for all her performances. However, it was a concert at Darbhanga where she performed all by herself, which signalled the birth of a new star. Once her talent was discovered, there was no dearth of benefactors for her. She fell in love with a man named Chaggan and moved with him to Banaras. However, she had to return to Calcutta in 1891, owning to the fact that Chaggan's family had found a suitable match for him in a Punjabi girl, and did not want him to have any liaison with a *tawaif*. Once back in Calcutta, Gauhar Jaan started performing at soirees of well known patrons of music and arts. She along with Malka Jan of Agra, Zohra Bai of Agra, and Janaki Bai of Allahabad, were the most sought after performers of that time and age in Calcutta. In a matter of a few years, the popularity of Gauhar Jaan had not only reached the Northern part of India but also Southern India, to the kingdom of Mysore.

The year 1902 is significant in the history of Indian Music. The first gramophone recording happened in this year and it was none other than Gauhar Jaan who lent her voice to the earliest records. Mr. Gaisberg, who did her first recording states, "When she came to record, her suite of musicians and attendants appeared even more imposing than those who

used to accompany Melba and Calve. As the proud heiress of immemorial folk-music traditions she bore herself with becoming dignity. She knew her own market value, as we found to our cost when we negotiated with her" (Sampath 85). Gauhar Jaan had charged a handsome Rs.3000 for the recording. And at the end of the recording, she announced, "My name is Gauhar Jaan" (Sampath Front Cover). Her records were immensely popular and made her a celebrity overnight: "Her photograph started appearing on match boxes, which were manufactured in Austria...She was supposedly the protagonist of many puppet show performances in distant Punjab and Rajasthan. Her photographs started appearing on picture post cards of the times. The coloured ones were priced at 2 annas and the black and white at 1 anna. In some of those pictures she looks quite imposing in traditional Bengali attire" (Sampath 116). With the rise in her popularity, she acquired a lot of property and thereafter had an "extravagant lifestyle and a habit of lavish spending on inconsequential things" (Sampath 117). She was invited to perform all over the country--Bombay, Mysore, Delhi, Bangalore, Madras among several others. It was during her trip to Bombay that she fell in love with Amrit Keshav Nayak, a renowned theatre personality. In him, she found her true intellectual companion. They spent days together and after a while Gauhar shifted her base to Bombay. However, the death of her mother Malka Jan, and the sudden demise of Amrit Keshav Nayak in 1907 left her in shock. The year 1911 was again a significant one for Gauhar Jaan. In 1911, the capital of India was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi. Gauhar Jaan was invited to perform at the great Imperial Durbar that was to be held at Delhi for the coronation of Emperor George V. This move, however, did not go well with the moral policing of the country:

> As the news of her inclusion trickled out, wide spread protests in the form of letters to the editors of various newspapers were made for weeks on end. The

> objection was against the Government's decision to invite a tawaif to perform at a public function; thereby in a way legitimizing their status in the society. It was argued that the inclusion of a tawaif would be a bad influence on society and would corrupt the youth....the Editor (of *Saddharma Pracharak*) deplored the fact that the conveners of the exhibition had included the performance of the 'dancing girl' Gauhar Jaan merely as a crowd pulling stunt and to make up for the loss they had incurred due to their mismanagement....The Fitna of Gorakhpur...protested the inclusion of a tawaif's performance in a public event of this magnitude and remarked that if entertainment and money making was the only aim of the exhibition the Committee should have allowed twenty prostitutes instead of one.... In the Hindustani of Lucknow...a writer protested against Gauhar Jaan's singing and dancing at the event and remarked that its 'effects on the social and moral progress of the people of the Provinces will be very injurious.' Continuing the tirade the writer remarked that European offices should discourage nautch parties which are given in their honour and they should assist the people in introducing social reforms.
>
> However, despite this orchestrated campaign, the concert of Gauhar Jaan was held as scheduled. The protests could do nothing to undermine her popularity. Her concert was a huge success. It drew one of the largest crowds and proved to be the most profitable investment of the whole exhibition. (Sampath 142-144)

Amidst all this success, Gauhar Jaan went through a lot of personal crisis--her adopted brother and his family trying to usurp her property by calling themselves the rightful descendants of Malka Jaan, her meeting with her legitimate father, in order to prove her right over her mother's property, a failed love affair with her agent, etc. Many of

these involved court cases as well. She did manage to win the court cases but these incidents had left her emotionally drained and financially bankrupt. She continued to perform and in the South collaborated with Veena Dhanammal as well. She sang a huge range of songs, *thumris*, Tagore's songs, *khayals, dadras,* etc.

The 1920s was not particularly a good decade for her. The anti nautch movement had begun to gain momentum in the Northern parts of the country by then and the *tawaifs*, courtesans, prostitutes, devadasis were all looked at with disdainful eyes: "[T]he word 'Bai' acquired derogatory connotations in the North, and many tawaifs gave up the title in favour of 'Devi' or 'Begum' which signified their 'respectable' background" (Sampath 187). Even though there was a strong movement to abolish such systems which in turn jeopardised the status of performing arts in the future, there was also a strong art-revivalist movement which agreed to the establishment of alternatives to nautch culture. In one such response, Lala Harikrishan Lall mentions, "According to our ancient beliefs and ideas, music and dance are heavenly, while prostitution is hellish. With you (Gauhar) the question ought to be how to divorce blessing from curse and separate one from the other, in this way you may increase purity of life in India and lessen the chances that the devil has to ensure the youths of the country" (Sampath 188). Gauhar however, through her gramophone recordings could move out of the *kothas* and in that sense her work was available to a larger section of society. Sampath elaborates on this alternate mode:

> Intertwined closely with the concepts of cultural nationalism, swadeshi and freedom struggle, was the discourse on the glory of the performing arts in terms of their antiquity and history, their degeneration at the hands of women who exploited them for their own debased ends and how the arts should be liberated from such misuse....The arts were easily the most important component in defining this

> national identity and they had be sanitized....The North too was witnessing major upheavals in this field of modernization of music....Bhatkhande's 'Tawaif School' was an attempt to bring the tawaifs into the mainstream. It was ironic that the custodians and practitioners of the art form for generations needed a modern school of this kind to hone their skills! And surprisingly, tawaifs...wrote letters to Bhatkhande requesting him to appoint them as teachers in this new school, so that they could earn an honest living. Their appeals fell on Bhatkhande's deaf ears. (Sampath 188-189)

In 1921, the *tawaif* community suggested to Mahatma Gandhi that they would partake in the non cooperation movement. Gandhi had univocally rejected this proposal. But much to our surprise, Gandhi in an interaction with Gauhar Jaan had asked her to help the cause of the Congress party by singing at a fund raiser concert. Such stark disparate opinions puzzle us. Gauhar Jaan had agreed to perform on the condition that Gandhi would attend the concert, and when he failed to do so, she only paid them half the money that she had managed to raise. By 1928, Gauhar Jaan had lost her motivation to perform and the several court cases had left her bankrupt. Hence, she wanted to move away from Calcutta. She stayed for a while at Darjeeling, Bombay and finally moved to the court of Mysore as their court musician. The monetary troubles still continued to bother her here as well, and after going through a lot of mental and emotional trauma, Gauhar Jaan finally passed away in 1930. Her earlier lovers, thinking they could inherit her property, sent several petitions arguing that they were the rightful owners of her property but all such petitions were annulled and whatever she had left behind stayed with the kingdom of Mysore.

While the life of Gauhar Jaan puts forth negotiations with identity, both at personal and professional levels and the struggles of an artist and the art forms amidst nationalist social reform movements, the courtesan/prostitute characters of the realist fiction written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries posit a different picture. I now aim to analyse some of these characters written by popular writers of the era.

Devdas written by Saratchandra Chatterjee was published in Bengali in 1917. Saratchandra was India's first professional writer--a person who earned his livelihood from writing. Though his early writings show a clear influence of Tagore, his later novels were revolutionary in terms of approach towards literature. These were books about the common man, about their lives, their sorrows, their joys and about their thoughts: "Saratchandra was at the forefront of a movement of realistic fiction that would find many followers in the course of the twentieth century" (*Devdas* vii). *Devdas,* the text, essentially revolves around four significant characters--Devdas Mukherjee, the son of a rich landlord, the zamindar; Paro, Devdas's childhood playmate; Chunilal, Devadas's friend; and Chandramukhi, the courtesan in Calcutta.

The story of Devadas is fairly simple. Devadas was the son of a rich zamindar. His playmate in the village is Paro. Paro's family lives next door to Devdas's. They are not wealthy as the Zamindars, but lead a comfortable life. Devdas and Paro would play together, go to school together. Being the son of a family of that stature, Devdas needed to get an education that is on par with their class. So, Devdas is sent to Calcutta to continue with his education much to his displeasure. Paro is heartbroken. She writes to him frequently and he replies. But in a couple of months the frequency of letters grows less. He visits during holidays, but things are not the same. Devdas has taken to the manners of the city, and he can not relate himself to the village. With Paro, meanwhile,

this friendship grows into love and she dreams of its eventual culmination in marriage. Eventually, when Devdas comes back with a degree, Paro proposes marriage to him. The proposition is immediately rejected because her family's lower social status makes her ineligible for the match with Devdas. Paro's marriage is fixed elsewhere, with an elderly man. When her marriage is fixed, she visits Devdas at night. Though she is aware of the scandal this might give rise to, she confronts Devdas about his decision, wherein he replies that he has certain duties towards his parents and hence is not in a position to marry her. He runs away to Calcutta, as he is unable to face Paro, and writes to her saying that he had never desired her or thought of marrying her. Deeply hurt by this rejection, she accepts the bridegroom chosen for her by her parents. Devdas is now heartbroken and drives himself to drinking. His interactions with Chunilal increase and it is through him that he meets Chandramukhi and enters the courtesan quarters for the first time. Devdas detests her at first, for he is unable to accept the immoral life that she leads: "Chandramukhi, you don't know--only I know how much I hate your kind. I'll always hate you..." (70). She however, is in love with him from the very first day. Chandramukhi gives up her profession with the hope that this attempt to reform her lifestyle might make her acceptable to Devdas:

> ...Devdas saw that she was dressed in a black bordered plain white saree which looked quite worn. There were two bangles on her wrist and no other jewellery besides that.... "I will never be tempted again. I do accept that women can be tempted by very little. But since I have given up all the temptations of my own free will, I am not afraid. If it had been a momentary whim, I may have been in danger of going back to it all. But in all these days, there hasn't been a moment when I have regretted my decision. I am really quite happy." (84-89)

Devdas is under the care of Chandramukhi, but at the same time is unable to forget Paro. Chandramukhi's love for Devdas is more than desire: "...whoever is truly in love simply bears his pain. If one can feel the satisfaction of just loving someone, deep in his heart, then he wouldn't want to disrupt the rhythm of society and its rules" (Chatterjee 91). After having given up her profession, Chandramukhi sells all her jewels and settles down in Ashathjhuri. She has managed to earn a lot of respect from the villagers there, who rush to her when she needs help. She has also written to Devdas a couple of times. But soon after, registered mails to him come back undelivered. Chandramukhi goes looking for him, first to Talshonarpur, the village of Devdas, and then to Calcutta on not finding him there and after knowing that he is mortally ill. She manages to track him down in about a month's time and starts taking care of him, gets him a doctor and medicines. Devdas shows signs of recovery and realises how much Chandramukhi cares for him, and insists on calling her "bou" which translates into wife without offering a reason for doing so. He confesses that he and Paro had loved each other equally and still it had brought him so much pain. Due to this, he had decided never to fall in love again. He is on his way to recovery and needs a change of place. He decides to travel westward, and though Chandramukhi is essential to and for his healing process, she cannot accompany him, for it would bring him disrespect. Devdas lives in Allahabad for a while after he leaves Calcutta. He then travels to Lahore, where he meets Chunilal and drinks in his company. This does not go very well with his already ailing body and they return to Allahabad to leave for Bombay in a few days. Devdas's health is deteriorating and Dharmadas who had so long accompanied him suggests that they should go back home. On his way back in the train, he realises that he is unwell and might not live, and hence gets off from the train at Pandua to fulfil his promise to meet Paro once before he dies. But unfortunately this promise is never fulfilled and he dies at her doorstep, without her knowing it until he actually dies.

The novel ends here with a note from the author suggesting that no one should meet such a death, for everyone deserves one loving touch before one dies.

Sreejata Guha in her introduction to the text mentions that the reason why the plot and the characters of the text are so convincing is that, to an extent, they are drawn from real life:

> This has to do with the fact that all of them are drawn to some extent from real life, and finds parallel in Saratchandra's autobiographical masterpiece *Srikanta*, the first and second parts of which were written at around the same time as *Devdas*. During his childhood, Saratchandra's playmate was a girl called Paru, who appears as Rajlakshmi in *Srikanta* and as the young Paru/Paro in *Devdas*. Rajlakshmi reappears later in *Srikanta* as the courtesan Peari Bai, who is quite similar to Chandramukhi in *Devdas*. The development of Rajlakshmi's character also hints at a parallel between Parvati and Chandramukhi, a parallel that is quickly outlined in *Devdas* through their similar Mother-images, and finally made obvious in the last chapter when Devdas visualizes them side by side. (Chatterjee viii)

Just as the love story of Devdas and Parvati is regarded as an eternal one, the character of Chandramukhi is seen as an ideal courtesan. Her transformation from a *baiji* to a *jogini* is hailed and seen as exemplary. The fact that Chandramukhi feels that giving up her profession and leading a life of restraint and devotion might make her acceptable to Devdas, is something that has been hailed. She ardently feels that Devadas hates her because of the profession she is involved in and not because of the person she is. Paro and Chandramukhi are mirror images of each other. The notion of celibacy and sexual chastity are upheld in the novel; while Paro's marriage remains unconsummated, Devdas too, remains celibate, denying Chandramukhi any physical contact. He hates her for being

sexually promiscuous and it is this hatred that makes her give up her profession to adopt a life of chastity and devotion. The Age of Consent Act which was passed in 1891 termed sexual intercourse with a girl less than twelve years of age as rape. This was met with a lot of uproar, for at some level it challenged the masculinity of Indian men. This insistence on sexual chastity probably comes as a response to that uproar.

Chandramukhi is portrayed as a care giver. Devdas who detests her at their first meeting, allows her to take care of him, after she has given up her profession and has accepted the life of a *jogini,* where she not only leads a life of restraint, but has also shifted base from Calcutta to a remote village and has gained their respect. This in a way gives her social acceptability which her erstwhile profession had denied. That a woman's identity is defined by the home was a recurrent idea in the social realist fiction written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A woman found respect and social acceptability within the domain of the 'home' and her identity was defined by qualities like nurture, care and compassion.

Kusum in the short story "Hinger Kochuri" by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, too is defined by her maternal qualities. The narrator of the story is a young child who regularly visits Kusum, a prostitute who stays across the road. Kusum is very fond of the child and treats him like her son, feeds him *hinger kochuri* (fried snacks) and takes him on strolls around the town. The narrator claims that Kusum was even stricter with him than his mother, taking care of the fact that he does not over eat. The child too is immensely fond of her. Though his mother warns him from visiting her, he still does. Circumstances cause the child's family to leave Calcutta and he comes back looking for her, thirty years later, only to find her working as a maid. The story ends with her offering him *hinger kochuri* again. That such an issue is dealt with, so superficially in a story is quite striking.

The issue of the prostitute/courtesan was an essential part of the emerging concept of the Bengali babu. Hence, they were recurrent characters in novels and short stories written during the time period. The casual nature with which the character of Kusum is treated and her predicament in the story perhaps throw light on the fact that the new emerging middle class was still unable to negotiate with the identity and the existence of the prostitute in society and therefore social acceptability for them was still unthinkable. The writers of that generation were, for certain, aware of the plight of the prostitute, but to deal with the issue at such a superficial level leaves the readers probing for more. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee too, through the character of Rohini in *Krishnakant's Will* avoids dealing with the issue altogether. Rohini is a young widow, who becomes a prostitute due to certain circumstances, is ill-treated by a zamindar's son Govindalal, who convinces her to steal a will because he needs it and eventually kills her doubting her of adultery. That most zamindars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries got *baijis* to entertain other guests in their *bagan bari* (garden houses) was a well-known fact. This was an essential part of the *babu* culture. But the fact that writers avoided dealing with the issue is quite striking.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote a couple of stories with the courtesan/prostitute as a central figure. His treatment of them is however, different. The two characters that I analyse with respect to that of Chandramukhi, are Shyama from *Shyama* and Srimati from *Natir Puja*, translated as *The Dancing Girl's Worship*. Both the characters are located in the past.

Shyama, a dance drama by Rabindranath Tagore was expanded into its complete lyrical form, from a poem titled *Parishodh* in the year 1939. The poem was written in the year 1936. It is said to have been inspired by the book, *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of*

Nepal. Shyama is essentially a romantic tragedy. The plot has two intertwined love stories. Shyama is a courtesan, and falls in love with the merchant, Bajra Sen the moment she sees him. On the other hand, Uttiyo has been an admirer of Shyama for long but has never had the courage to tell her so. This was Tagore's last major work for the stage. Tagore's *Natir Puja* or *The Dancing Girl's Worship* was written in 1927. Natir Puja is a dramatised version of his long poem "Poojarini". This was an all-woman play that he had written on the request of his daughter in law. The play was first performed at Shantiniketan, and then at Tagore's Jorasanko residence. It is the story of a dancing girl, Srimati, who becomes a Buddhist nun.

In *Shyama*, Bajra Sen carries with him a necklace which he does not intend to sell. He claims that this is for the woman of his dreams. The queen is aware of this and sends spies to find him to acquire this necklace. The royal guards find him mid way and want him to show them what he is carrying. It is at this point that Shyama spots him and falls in love with him at the very first sight. The royal guards capture him, accusing him of theft. Shyama visits Bajra Sen in prison only to realise that he has been accused falsely. She uses her authority to persuade the royal guards to spare him for two days, hoping she can device some plan. When Bajra Sen hears that Shyama is trying her level best to save him, he realises that this is the woman of his dreams. Uttiyo, who has so long admired Shyama secretly, rises up to the occasion, to take the blame on himself, so that she remembers him. Both of them are aware of the risk that it entails, but Shyama is sure that she can save him. Uttiyo surrenders himself to the royal guards, shows them the ring that Shyama had given him as proof and is finally executed. Bajra Sen is released, though Shyama's conscience troubles her constantly. They run away. Displeased with Shyama's disappearance from the palace, the King sends his guards to look for her. Meanwhile, Bajra Sen is curious to know

how Shyama managed to free him and she tells him the story of Uttiyo's sacrifice. He is shocked, and although he knows she had done this to save him, he is unable to forgive her. The play ends in the rejection of Shyama by Bajra Sen.

Shyama sacrifices Uttiyo for the love of Bajra Sen, but he rejects her for being a sinful woman. He mistreats her, abuses her and uses violence against her as well. Shyama comes out as a radical character in the sense that she prioritises her own desires and acts as per her choice. She exercises power and agency in her choice in life. She is conscious of her selfhood and female desire and takes full responsibility for her deeds. The consciousness of this selfhood also rises from a deep pain and anguish. As Sutapa Chaudhuri in "The Dialectics of Selfhood and Female Desire in the Dance Dramas of Rabindranath Tagore" mentions:

> The portrayal of Shyama goes beyond the stereotype of the silent submissive selfless women who were considered the epitome of virtue, the idyll of the eternal feminine, the perfect woman that was inculcated in women in contemporary India. Significantly, Shyama retains her dignity and the audience's sympathy till the end; while it is Bajra Sen who comes out as a heartless brute: one who is unable to appreciate what Shyama has done for him, unable to show pity and yet more unable to recognize Shyama's all-consuming love for him – a love that makes her forget the norms of ethics and morality imposed by society. (Chaudhuri 1)

However, the problem with such an observation remains that in spite of Shyama prioritising her choice and her selfhood, she eventually gets a harmless person killed. She takes advantage of the fact that Uttiyo loved her unconditionally to further her motive. That Bajra Sen does not accept her in the end is because of his heartlessness, and though it is he who comes across as heartless, unable to appreciate what has been done for him, the

death of Uttiyo is unacceptable as well. Shyama has the power to exercise her choice in terms of choosing her partner, thus indicating that she is a powerful member of the court. She is also aware of the fact that Uttiyo rises up to the situation to help her only because he admires her, and this will eventually lead to his death. However, she sacrifices his life thinking she would be able to find love, which does not happen as she is rejected in the end. The character of Srimati is a contrast to that of Shyama, who sacrifices herself in order to further an idea that she believed in.

King Ajatshatru who has not only sent his father Bimbisara into exile for taking to Buddhism, also forbids the worship of Lord Buddha in his kingdom. He commands the Srimati, the Nati to dance at the *stupa*. Bhikshu Upali asks Srimati to offer her "best gift" as alms, in the name of the Lord Buddha and also mentions that her day has come and that she is truly blessed. Much against her will, she dresses up and dances at the court, but as she dances she only thinks of the Buddha: “In the play Tagore achieves a superb feat by transforming Srimati into a real artist whose profession is dancing at the court, and the best gift she has to offer to her Lord is through art....When the order comes from the King that she must dance at the stupa, Srimati in a superb gesture of devotion makes her dance her best offering. The dance does not defile the shrine, nor does it embarrass the dancer” (Ray 233). As the dance progresses, she sheds off her jewels and finally her costume as well; she is finally seen in a yellow robe of a Buddhist nun. She goes on to worship Lord Buddha, where she is killed for having defied the orders of the state: “Thus, the final dance marks not only the climax of the drama, but also symbolically sums up the beauty and strength of renunciation through martyrdom” (Ray 233). The princess of the state who had so long been watching all this is moved by the sacrifice of Srimati, and becomes a follower of Buddha's teachings.

Tagore in Srimati creates a character very different from Shyama. Srimati uses her profession and art to achieve the eternal. Her reward comes in the form of conversion of the princess to Buddhism. Her shedding off of the jewels and her appearance in the costume of a *pujarini* (worshipper) brings back the image of Chandramukhi in *Devdas,* who too is looking for a possible redemption and acceptance in society. The image of the *jogini* and *pujarini* are recurrent with respect to the figure of the courtesan/prostitute. The idea of redemption is essential for social acceptance and this can be achieved either within the framework of the family or through union with the divine. In both cases, the traces of the past have to be removed. Tagore too, does not deal with the question at a social realist level. Both the characters are located far removed from reality and inhabit a place which one cannot identify with. Though, through the character of Srimati, he invests immense power in the artist and the art form and both being one, he does not deal with the issue in its real sense. While the nationalists did not include these public women within the discourse of the woman's question, it is also striking to note that the writers of that era, in spite of being aware of the issue, too, do not deal with it at length. The figure of the courtesan/prostitute is a recurrent one, but one does not find an eventual resolution of the questions that the figure raises within the framework of the new emerging society. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, "How to read a 'culturally different' book", is of the opinion that the foregrounding of the character of Raju in R. K Narayan's *The Guide* has led to the marginalisation of the character of Rosie/Nalini. She sees the dancer as the subaltern here. Spivak states that: "Critical evaluation is dismissed as 'pedantic; by the real consumers of popular culture'" (Spivak 133). And it is this that probably results is the irresolution of the nautch question in the literary texts written during that time. The authors show awareness of the existing issue, but provide no agency to the characters. They are treated more as victims than as characters with agency. Speaking of Rosie, she

observes: “The dancing in her blood strictly suppressed, firstly by a personal ambition that prompts her to take a master's degree in political science, and secondly by an archeologist/art historian husband” (129). In the second half of the novel, the character of Rosie/Nalini vanishes completely and Narayan in spite of his awareness of the gravity of the issue refuses to address it and in the process provides Rosie with no agency. Her position is undermined: “These are subaltern women, unorganised pre-capitalist labour, and it is not yet possible to think of them as Indian collectives of resistance, although the Indian constitution appropriately thinks of them collectively as victims and thus offers a redress that has never been fully implemented in the individual states” (Spivak 133). Albeit the text that Spivak refers to is written after independence, once the Anti-devadasi law has been passed, the issue of accepting and rehabilitating this section of society is still a question that late nineteenth century and early twentieth century India was grappling with.

Quite contrary to the literary representations, are the lives of courtesans/prostitutes in the city of Calcutta. I have analysed the life of Gauhar Jan earlier and the next section focuses on Binodini Dasi, one of the first prostitute theatre actresses, and her contemporaries, through her autobiographies.

Section III- “The Prostitute-Actress and the Actress-Prostitute”

After the relocation of courtesans across the Northern and Eastern parts of the country, it became increasingly difficult for them to look for employment opportunities. While the prolific performers catered to the elite, by entertaining them and residing in their *bagan baris* (garden houses), some others associated themselves with the Cantonments as

has been mentioned in the "Introduction"[5]. A select few were now being employed as theatre artists in Bengal, as it was still disrespectful for the "chaste" women of the household to perform in the public arena. In this section I trace the growth of theatre in Bengal and read the autobiographies of Binodini Dasi, alongside Golap/Sukumari Devi and Teenkori. I look at the religious iconography on stage and analyse the woman's question in terms of the Nationalist discourse, of which these "public" women never formed a part.

The origins of the public theatre in Calcutta[6] can be traced back to the eighteenth century as an impact of the theatrical activities of the British in Calcutta. Mrs. Emma Bristow, the wife of a wealthy British merchant, opened a theatre in her own house and appeared in her own production in 1789. By the nineteenth century there was a sizeable number of theatre houses in Calcutta. In 1795, Garasim Lebdeff, a Russian entrepreneur, made an attempt to produce a play in Bengali, with women playing the female roles, for an Indian audience. Though this was a brave start, his enterprise was cut short, when the Dharmatala Theatre, where he had staged the play, was burnt down. Further accounts of theatre activities by Indians can be found only in the 1850s, that too under the patronage of the landed gentry, the Tagores and the Paikpara Rajas.

The Bengal Theatre was established 1873 by Saratchandra Ghosh and Biharilal Chatterjee. The inclusion of women actresses on stage was discussed by the advisory

[5] In comparison to the middle and upper class courtesans who performed at private garden houses and at get togethers organised by upper class bhadralok, the prostitutes belonging to the lower classes, functioned in the red light areas and the brothels set up by the British Government to attend to their soldiers. These brothels were called *chaklas*. These *chaklas* were further divided into three sections, *gora chakla*, which catered to the white army officers, *lal kurti chakla*, for the white infantry ranks, who wore red coats and *kala chakla* for the Indian soldiers.

[6] The information on the origins of theatre in Bengal and its gradual development have been sourced from Hemendranath Dasgupta's *The Indian Stage*, 2 Volumes, Sushil Kumar Mukherjee's *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres(1753-1980)*, Lata Singh's *Play-house of Power: Theatre in Colonial India*, Sudipto Chatterjee's *The Colonial Staged* and Utpal. K. Banerjee's *Bengali Theatre- 200 years.*

committee of Bengal Theatre, which included the likes of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. While Dutt supported the idea of allowing courtesans and prostitutes to act on stage, Vidyasagar, who had spearheaded a movement against child marriage and sati, resigned from his post at this prospect. Four women, Golapsundari, Jagatarini, Elokeshi and Shyama, were brought from the red light areas to act in Dutt's play *Sharmishtha*. There were mixed reactions from the public and press. Women often took part in *jatras* and theatre was considered superior to *jatra*. With the inclusion of women who were "social outcastes and immoral", the press accused the theatre of stooping down to the level of the *jatrawallahs*. The play though turned out to be a huge success. The British newspaper, *The Englishman*, too, like the *Hindu Patriot* and the *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, disapproved of the inclusion of these women in the theatre circuit.

People like Girish Ghosh criticised this stand and attitude of disapproval about the inclusion of women into the theatre arena. Ghosh drew parallels with the European theatres where women performed ballet on stage. He criticised the babus, who kept mistresses and were regularly entertained by them, but pointed a finger at these very courtesans when they performed on stage. Sudipto Chatterjee in his book *The Colonial Staged* mentions: "Casting women in female roles served another important function, it nullified the homophobic anxiety of having boys pass for women, thereby heterosexualising the stage and escaping the unspeakable horrors of homoerotic desires" (182). The issue of courtesans performing on stage was even more complex than this. Most of the actors on stage were "bhadraloks" or respectable men, and the very fact that the courtesans now acted on stage made it very clear that these respectable people would have to share physical space with them, which was quite unacceptable. The theatre, which till then was seen as a means of spreading social message and moral instruction was now

getting "tarnished" with the inclusion of social outcastes who shared space with noble men. For the prostitutes, this served as a means to attain social acceptability. They moved out of close quarters to public domain. This domain did make them "available" women but in some cases like that of Golap, who was married to a well-born, educated actor, and called herself Sukumari Dutta after that, gave them a social standing, recognition and family.

Golap acted in Michael Madhusudan Dutt's play *Sharmistha*. She played the lead role on 23rd August, 1873, which was the second time the play was being staged. The fact that women were acting on stage alongside respectable men did not go down very well with the Indian Press. *The Hindoo Patriot* of 16th August, 1873 reported that "Mr. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's classical drama of Sharmistha was selected for the first performance. The actors performed their parts very creditably with two actresses. It is true that professional women join the yatras and nautches but we had hoped that the managers of the Bengal theatre would not bring themselves down to the level of the yatrawallahs" (Banerjee *Bengali Theatre* 30). *The Amrit Bazar Patrika* of 23rd August, 1873 reported, "The Bengal Theatre is something new for the Bengali elite. Women acting women's roles gives completeness to the theatre, no doubt about that, but it has to be seen how it affects the community and whether it increases sin and depravity if women's roles are acted by women who are social outcastes and have forsaken the path of morality" (Banerjee *Bengali Theatre* 30). But in spite of the criticism Golap faced from the press, she was an immensely successful actor. Abanindranath Tagore in his praise of Golap writes,

> The curtain went up. The fat Vizier with his floating beard--the prince--the dues--the flashing sabres--tears and laughter--I got immersed in it. As the performance went on, the words sank in and were recorded in my memory. Golapsundari

> appears as Molina. How beautifully she sang. I heard her sing when she was old. She could still sing so well. She had a sweet voice; you don't have a voice like that easily. And what acting! The picture of her sheltering the lamp with the end of her sari just like a picture is still fresh in my memory. (Banerjee *Bengali Theatre* 31)

She also played the role of Sukumari in the play *Surendra Binodon* written by Upendranath Das. Upendranath Das got Golap married to a well-born educated actor, under the Special Marriage Act. She called herself Srimati Sukumari Dutta now. She vowed never to revert to prostitution after this. However, Sukumari's marriage did not last as her husband deserted her and their daughter, and left for London, and Sukumari was left destitute. She returned to the stage to earn her living. Probably this compelled her to write *Apurba Sati,* The Wonderfully Chaste Woman, which was staged. This thus became the first and the only play in those times to be authored by a woman. Tanika Sarkar in *Rebels, Wives, Saints* gives a gist of the play. The play is about love and prostitution. An ageing prostitute waits for young customers, so that her educated beautiful and young daughter can seduce them. Debdutta, a rich student falls into the trap. However, Nalini, who wants a "pure" life, falls in love with him. The couple runs away. Debdutta's father comes to know of this scandalous affair and sends out people to find him. He is kidnapped with the help of police. The play ends with both Nalini and Debdutta committing suicide and Nalini's mother going mad in grief. The themes used in the play were very common--a young boy enticed by a prostitute, the disparity between the powerless prostitute and the nobility, the insecurities of the prostitutes with regard to age, finance, etc. Golap's own life in a sense comes out through this play. She joined the National Theatre and trained under Ardhendushekhar Mustafi. She opened her own theatre company and named it Woman's Company: Hindu Female Theatre in 1883. The company staged a play titled *Sumbha*

Samhar on 1st October, 1883 with an all woman's cast at the National Theatre. However, as she had opened the company on her own and was supporting it entirely out of her own money, she incurred heavy loss. Though she had sworn never to take up prostitution and singing at *mujras* again, she spent the last years of her life singing in the *andarmahals* (inner quarters) of the rich.

However, Upendranath Vidyabhushan, a famous biographer of that age brings in an interesting parallel narrative to that of these actresses, whereby he claims that theatre would be beneficial to this "condemned" section. As mentioned by Lata Singh in her essays titled, "Modern theatre as epitome of middle class civilization" and "Theatre and Gender in Colonial India", Upendranath Vidyabhushan in his biography of Teenkori writes,

> How lakhs and lakhs of unfortunate women in the country lead animal-like life every day. If these women are given proper education and initiation then from them would emerge many Tinkori, Binodini or Tara Sundari, who developed acting skills. They would get *sudhisamak'*s (listeners) regards and *sadhuwad*s (acclaim) benefits. So that they could lead *ujjwal prabhamay* (bright and enlightened) life. This would reduce the 'sins' of the world." (Singh "Modern theatre" 326)

The argument was that it was *karma* or action and not birth that made a human being. These theatre actresses went through rigorous training, and through *tyaag* (sacrifice) and *sadhana* (dedication) attained *siddhi* (achievement). Vidyabhushan mentions that the reason Teenkori was such a great actress was that she never gave in to temptations: "But not all actresses could forego such temptations. If such temptations could have been avoided then there would not have been dearth of actresses. Apart from

Teenkori we would have seen many talented actresses" (201). Several other incidents from her life have been highlighted, her unwillingness to give up theatre even when she was being offered Rs.100 more than her salary in the theatres, her standing up to physical and verbal abuse, etc. Though she was born into a low and condemned society, through her art she received respectability. This narrative of Vidyabhushan becomes interesting because it is this stigma of unacceptability from the middle class, of being looked down upon as fallen women, and of the negation of their economic aspect[7], that many of them took up the profession, thereby leading to the establishment of new theatre houses. This is something that Binodini Dasi mentions in great detail in her autobiographies.

Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha (My Story*) was published in 1910 and *My Life as an Actress* in 1924/25. Her first act on stage was in 1874, where she played the role of the handmaid of Draupadi. In the very next play she was offered the main role of the heroine. Her life and acting career were both exemplary. She was born into a family of prostitutes and took to theatre to sustain her family. She began her training under Ganga Baiji, a renowned courtesan, who lived as a tenant in their house. Her earliest stint was with the Bengal Theatre, after which she moved to the National Theatre and then to the Star Theatre. She played the lead role in almost all the plays staged during that time. Much of the advice that she received during her career was from her mentor Girish Chandra Ghosh. He made her watch a lot of European Theatre to train her, apart from making her understand the fact that one has to live the character to master portraying it. Most of Ghosh's plays were successful because she acted in them.

[7] "The whole middle class debate overlooks the economic aspect, that is, the poverty and the poor background of this section of women. Unfortunately, the jobs of the actresses in theatre did not offer much wages which could provide them financial security. There was a constant pressure… to become *ashritas* of a rich upper class male for financial security. Teenkori's mother, who pressurized her to accept offer of babus, echoed such concerns…. Binodini in her autobiography also says how under difficult financial circumstances she became an *ashrita* (kept woman)*."* (Singh "Modern theatre"333)

Binodini Dasi was born into a house of prostitutes. Her identity always haunted her, even in the public sphere, though she was immensely successful. She performed at a time when respectable women did not act on stage. But she could never reconcile herself to her identity. Her colleagues asked her to have a relationship with a wealthy non Bengali merchant so that they could get enough money to build a new theatre. She agreed to this, and asked her benefactor to build her a theatre, which he did. This new theatre was supposed to be named after Binodini. That of course did not happen. The theatre was instead called The Star. Much of it had to do with her identity as a prostitute, as people thought that naming a theatre after a prostitute would bring in ill repute. Since then, she became extremely cautious about her personal life, so much so that she does not even mention the name of her husband in her autobiographies. Her autobiographies have an overarching tone of self pity, whereby she constantly judges herself against a prevalent value system. She fails miserably and then this self pity becomes her only redemptive tool. By justifying her actions she falls into the trap whereby she accepts the societal norms as correct and 'proper'. Binodini is a fallen woman and needs redemption. This redemption comes in the form of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, who visits her during the performance of Chaitanya Lila, and blesses her, thereby sanitizing her and the theatre. He redeems her of all her sins, and she ceases to be a 'patita', or the fallen one. This in a certain fashion co-opts her into the societal system. She has the blessings from a mahapurush and after this incident she starts distancing herself from the stage and finally retires after the death of Ramakrishna in 1886. It is interesting to note here that there have been several plays staged on just this incident from the life of Binodini, thereby insisting on the need for redemption.

Binodini writes her autobiography because she is famous. The foreknowledge of the fact that her autobiography will be accepted went hand in hand with her popularity. Hence, she had internalised the power of her popularity, but at the same time used the tone of self pity to negotiate her identity and position in a society which was strict. She faced a lot of betrayals, both at the personal and professional level. Her mentor, Girish Ghosh, for whom she had the highest regard was dismissive of her writing her autobiography. However, in a note titled "Srimati Binodini and the Bengali Stage", he mentions in a positive note:

> Reading this autobiography will destroy the pride of the zealous devotee, the righteous will embrace humility and the sinner will be given new hope. Those who are unfortunate as Binodini and having no option take up a disgusting path for livelihood, those who have been seduced by the honeyed words of the licentious, they too, will be hopeful that if like Binodini they too can commit themselves to the theatre with body and soul, they can expend their despicable birth into the service of society. (Bhattacharya "Benediction"28)

Binodini Dasi praises her mentor Girish Ghosh by giving him the full credit for training her, as she was "semi- or uneducated" (Chatterjee 190). However, he is often accused of not writing or creating powerful roles for actresses. Chatterjee observed that this happened because Ghosh at some level felt that "[t]he uneducated actresses of the period were simply not capable of rendering subtle impersonations" (189). Most of his women characters were historical heroines or mythic goddesses. The ones whom he placed in today's day and age were martyred daughters/mothers, vamps or temptresses. His women characters lacked shades of grey and were generally flat. Much of this had to do with the fact that the actresses were prostitutes and the audience consisted of babus and

bhadraloks. And the identification of the actresses to the roles that they played on stage would be potentially dangerous. The audience would not accept the actresses playing characters that they identified with. The prostitute was the home breaker and hence no identification with the character portrayed was possible as far as the domestic women were concerned. But at the same time the fact that domestic women were jealous of these actresses cannot be denied. The actresses represented the most public form of life, they were also people who lured their husbands away, and hence served as an enigma for every wife. Sudipto Chatterjee in his book *The Colonial Staged* mentions, "...the prostitute could even represent Mother Nation (as in the case of the nationalist pantomimes commonplace in the public theatres) but not the mother or mother to be, at home. It was unspeakably dangerous to allow the 'home breaker' prostitute actress, whose social role was to entertain the babus and lure them out of their homes, to portray the 'home maker' on stage" (Chatterjee 198).

A stark difference from this can be found in Nautanki, a brand of theatre that emerged around the last half of the nineteenth century in Uttar Pradesh. It began primarily as a domain of the male, but by the 1930s was completely dominated by women. The nautanki artists were very well versed in poetry, music and dance. Most of the plays they staged had very powerful female characters. Nautanki is often considered the precursor of Bollywood cinema. They had songs, dances and a good amount of melodrama. It was a world of fantasy and served as an escape route for the masses from their regular daily lives, under the British rule. Zamindars provided patronage for Nautanki. The dramas worked at several levels--some encouraged a sense of morality, some of duty, love and loyalty. It was an extremely popular form of art, to which an entire village turned. There weren't female actresses who took part in Nautanki before Gulab Bai. Gulab Bai was one

of the most successful artists of Nautanki and almost single handily converted this male domain into one which could not function without women. Deepti Priya Mehrotra in the biography of Gulab Bai mentions that Gulab Bai belonged to the Bediya community--a sub sect of the Banjara community. She was a dalit. The Bediya community moved from one place to another, performing dance at village fairs, singing etc. At times they performed through the night. The entire onus of earning a living was on women; the men just sat around and spent the money. Hence, the birth of a girl child was always welcomed. Some of the Bediya women were also "kept" by the landed gentry and hence most of the children had mixed parentage. Gulab Bai belonged to such a family of performers. She was forced to join the Nautanki to support her family. But she was exceptionally talented, both in music and dance. Her brilliant performance overshadowed everyone else's and compelled the owners and the directors to write scripts with her playing the major roles. She also got some of her sisters and cousins into the troupe and performed across Northern and Eastern India. She was extremely successful and even after she retired from stage, she continued to direct plays. By the end of her career, as Katherine Hansen says, she had given more than twenty thousand performances. There is a stark difference between her and Binodini Dasi's life. Though Gulab Bai had not left any written record of her life apart from a few letters and diary entries, she faced a similar crisis in her personal and professional life. She had a long relationship, with a rich merchant, had married him and left the stage to stay with him. But soon he lost interest in her and went back to his earlier wife. This left Gulab Bai devastated and she ran away from his house with her daughter. Ever since she never believed in the institution of marriage. She later had a long standing relationship with her co-actor Raja, till he passed away, but she never married. However, these never hampered her status in the company. But it is worthwhile to note that her identity both as a dalit and as someone who was single but had sexual relationships with

several men was carefully obliterated when she received national recognition, in terms of a Sangeet Natak Award and a Padmasree. The citation mentioned her as "Mrs. Gulab Bai."

Gulab Bai unlike Binodini Dasi, did have her own theatre company, The Great Gulab Theatre Company. Gulab was at the peak of her career when her sister fell down from a balcony and injured herself. She asked for leave to go to visit her sister from Trimohan Lal, the owner of the Company, she used to work for. She was denied leave. She immediately quit and never returned to the company. Since she had both the means and the man power, she started her own company, with most of the performers from her own family. The company was very successful and continued to stage Nautankis even in the 1970s. Nautanki was hugely popular among the masses. Its larger than life appeal helped the script writers garb highly nationalist sentiments. As I have mentioned earlier, Nautanki became a completely female dominated arena by the first half of the twentieth century. The Registration Act of 1867, the Dramatics Performance Act of 1876, the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 and the Press Act of 1910, formalised censorship of printed literature and public performances. The concept of nationalism and political iconography with respect to nationalism was at a high point in the latter half of the nineteenth century and earlier half of the twentieth century. The concept of the mother goddess and Mother India acquired significance, so did the image of Rani Lakshmibai--who was considered a *Virangana* (woman warrior). The script writers extended the idea of the *Virangana* and scripted plays on the lives of Devi Ahalyabai, Chand Bibi, Taramati, etc. Gulab Bai played almost all these characters. They furthered this concept in portraying women dacoits who carried out loots to help the poor and the impoverished. These plays generally had a deep allegorical meaning and because the scripts were not overtly nationalist, escaped censorship. However, the iconography was essentially Hindu, thus reiterating the fact that

the Nation and Nationalism were essentially Hindu constructs. This can be better understood in terms of the theatre in Bengal.

As Sudipto Chatterjee observes, the idea of the nation as mother was part of the nationalist discourse--both in the literary and the political rhetoric. It drew heavily from Hindu mythology. The prostitute actress on stage brought the scope of actually, physically locating a space where the discourse could be deliberated upon. There could now be a physical representation of "Mother Nation". The prostitutes who were marginalised outcastes were now put in an exalted position. Someone who absolutely had no agency could represent the entire nation. As Chatterjee puts it,

> These actresses were the ones who paraded on the exalted female figures for the audience to gaze at. After all, to see Mother India was to believe in her. As a logical corollary, then it was the very same staged Motherhood that was denying them the motherhood they were biologically capable of; that had in the manner of speaking rendered difficult, nay impossible. So much so that the best playwrights, all of them male, would not dare write roles for them in which they replicate their real life counterparts. These women could be gazed upon but not identified with. (206)

It can be safely concluded that these marginalised women playing the roles of Mother Nation, goddesses and saints was accepted, only because of a historical and mythological "romance" that surrounded these roles, whereby one could watch them, but never identify with them. So though prostitutes and courtesans were employed on stage to provide them with social acceptance, the roles that were given or written for them, denigrated them and put them back in the vicious circle of unacceptability, rendering them as "available women" , none of whom could have a "normal and pure life" after and during theatre.

They did win accolades but their status in society in terms of acceptability did not improve much. As Chatterjee goes on to say:

> The perfunctory service implicit in the false exaltation of the female figure in nationalist discourse, especially in Bengali Theatre, is harshly contested by the life stories of the numerous actresses who appeared on the Bengali stage, especially Binodini Dasi, the distinguished actress. Ostensibly raised from the depths of fate's severity to social recognition, from prostitute to performer, a number of these actresses were rewarded with the same ignominy, exploitation and neglect that their former profession offered them. This points out, once again, the failure of the nationalist agenda to reconcile itself with the reality of the social condition of the "nation". (265-266)

Partha Chatterjee talks about a binary between the 'home' and the 'world', and further creates a binary for women in terms of the "private" and the "public"--the wife and the mistress. They could co-exist at the extreme end of a babu's life but there was no interface between the two. Prostitutes, if allowed to enter the mainstream socio cultural activity from the margins of the bourgeois society, could damage the social cohesion. This had already happened as the courtesans and prostitutes were performing on stage alongside babus. But they could not be allowed to enter the inner sanctorum of a household and neither could they be allowed to perform the roles which the babus could identify with. The prostitute playing the role of a wife on stage mimetically gave rise to another possibility, that of the wife becoming the prostitute. The public and the private had to be kept separately. In his essay titled "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonised Women: The Contest in India", Partha Chatterjee elucidates on the relevance of the woman's question within the nationalist framework:

> The nationalist response was to construct a reformed tradition and defend it on the grounds of modernity. In the process, it created the image of a new woman who was superior to the Western women, traditional Indian women and low class women. This new patriarchy invested women with the dubious honour of representing a distinctively modern national culture... An analogous set of distinctions would mark out the "low class" or "common" woman from the "normal". They would be brazen, irreligious, sexually promiscuous, etc. The nationalist male thinks of his own wife/sister/daughter as "normal" precisely because she is not a "sex object" while those could be seen as "sex objects" are not "normal". (622-630)

The nationalist movement essentially catered to a certain section of society, which did not include the old traditional strata or the low class people. It essentially was a middle class phenomenon: “Nationalism located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the West and hence undominated and sovereign” (Chatterjee 631). Since, we were far superior in terms of spirituality, and colonisation so far had not been able to destroy the superior, inner sanctity, the agenda of the nationalists was to imbibe what the West was superior in, that is ‘modern sciences and arts of the material world’ and overthrow the power. The figure of the nautch girl, or the prostitute essentially would not fit into this paradigm and hence, was conveniently left out: “The nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and consciousness” (Chatterjee 632).

The third decade of the twentieth century saw the theatres having a separate viewing space for respectable women. This encouraged female viewership. This

respectable female gaze now looked at its other. As mentioned earlier the private women were envious of these actresses because they occupied the most successful public roles allowed to women. Tanika Sarkar in her essay titled “Performing Power and Troublesome Plays” observes that in the theatre, prostitutes played parts of the prostitutes as well as the precarious respectable woman fallen low: “The figure of the well born woman was, by this means, polluted by its enactment... the prostitute actress also flaunted herself as the object manipulator of male desires in a double sense, receiving the male spectator’s desire as an actress while also attracting his attention as a prospective or actual client or consumer of her body as prostitute” (Sarkar 172).

The Bengali male was seen as effeminate and the fact that they enacted roles of women on stage only strengthened this idea. Hence, though at one level, the arrival of women on stage was critiqued, at another level, it did redefine notions of masculinity for the Bengali male. The female body was a necessary presence on stage, while her individuality had absolutely no space through representation on stage. The theatre companies received a corps of full time workers, and these workers had to be extremely versatile in performance. They also needed to be marketable at the same time. This was required of women with almost no formal education and social status. As Rimli Bhattacharya suggests, “She comes to represent in her initial attraction and ultimate destruction (of all values sacred to home and hearth) the quintessence of the colonial metropolis. She becomes the symbol of a society incapable of addressing love" (Bhattacharya “Nautee” 235).

Section IV- The Changing Cityscape

The fourth section of this chapter deals with how the demographics of the cities altered with change in the status of the courtesan/prostitute. I begin this chapter mentioning that whole *mohallas* (colonies) were uprooted in the scheme of cleansing the cities with courtesan quarters. These "public women" who had so long occupied public spaces in cities, were now being shifted to the periphery. This sort of a phenomenon can be noticed in all the major cities of the United Provinces, which include Calcutta, Kanpur, Banaras and Lucknow. Rimli Bhattacharya in her essay titled, "The Nautee in the Second City of the Empire" mentions:

> It is because of these great men (*mahapurush*) that the city of Calcutta has turned into a city of whores (*beshya shahar*); there's not a locality where there is not at least ten houses full of whores... Here, the number of whores goes up every year. It has come to such a stage that the householder (*grihasta*) cannot live with his beautiful wife or sister next to the home of a rich man; if he does, within ten days the beauty is bound to cast aside her caste and clan (*jat, kula*) and give herself up to money or pleasure. (Bhattacharya "Nautee" 233)

She observes that the image of Calcutta, "increasingly came to be seen by its inhabitants as manifesting the visible signs of decadence and destruction even during the peak of babu-bilas has been enshrined, as has been frequently discussed in the trope of Kaliyuga, and its obsessive anxiety about questions of female sexuality" (Bhattacharya "Nautee" 232). As I have mentioned earlier, with the arrival of the prostitute in the public domain, that is the theatre, there was a potential threat of a breakdown of the family structure, as it encouraged female viewership. By the beginnings of the twentieth century, women were addicted to watching theatre and these spaces which were essentially for a male

viewership did not remain so. Several progressive journals carried editorials asking the 'noble' ladies not to watch the plays. This emerging image of the modern woman did not coincide with the projected nationalist image and hence, they were asked to concentrate on domestic duties, thereby trying to help the national cause. The Contagious Diseases Act mainly emphasised two points, one compulsory registration of all practising prostitutes, and two, mandatory medical checkups of these registered prostitutes at the Lock Hospitals which had been set up across the Bengal Province. However, the provisions under the Act could hardly be extended to the suburban towns around, and unless the provisions were extended, the spread of venereal diseases, curbing of which was the main intention of this Act, could not be controlled. The city needed to be cleaned up, and to aid this, a "ring fence" was carved out and certain Western, Southern and Central parts of the city were marked off, where the Contagious Diseases Act would be enforced.[8] The prostitutes residing within this ring fence could not go elsewhere to pursue their profession. Apart from these areas, Sonagachi, located in the northern outskirts of the city, functioned as the traditional red light area in Calcutta. It is interesting to note here that several houses on the main streets of Calcutta owned by respectable people, were rented out to these prostitutes, and they earned more money by renting their houses out to these prostitutes as brothels. Kaliprasanna Sinha in his satire *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, translated as *The Sketches of Hutom the Owl,* keeps moving back and forth from the prostitute quarters, only to indicate the moral standards of the self acclaimed great men of the society in Calcutta.

[8] The ring fence was carved out in this fashion across the city of Calcutta: "A line commencing at Import Jetty No.2 [in the dock area in the South] and following Canning Street, Colootollah and Mirzapore Street, as far as Circular Road [in the east]; thence along Circular Road to the South corner of Chowringee; thence along [in the south] Russapugla Road to its junction with Peepulputti Road, along which the line runs back to Circular Road; thence along Circular Road as far as Kidderpore Bridge, whence the line runs southwards along the Diamond Harbour Road, Komedan Bagan Road, and Circular Garden Reach Road to Kootree Road, and along that road west to the River Hoogly, the bank of which it follows upto Import Jetty No. 2" (Banerjee 159).

The attitude towards prostitutes and theatre actresses in the United Provinces was similar. Lata Singh observes that writers like Bharatendu Harishcrandra of Banaras declared that most of the popular theatre lacked theatricality and insisted that the purpose of theatre should be the moral regeneration of the Nation as opposed to how it affected the middle class women (302). Besides attempts to curb men and women from attending these theatre performances, by terming them as experiences which corrupt the minds of the youth of the country, attempts were also made to regulate the workings of prostitutes located within the towns. The prostitute quarters were also seen as posing a threat to public health and cleanliness. They were seen as the hot spots for the spreading of venereal diseases and were also blamed for the rise in crime as they provided shelter to "bad characters". Hence, they were seen as transgressive and there was a particular need to get rid of all the "filth" from the space that the morally upright emerging middle class inhabited. Considerable attempts were made by the Municipal Council to move these practitioners to the periphery of the towns. While a large number of them operated in the Cantonment areas, catering to the soldiers, they were also designated special areas, termed as the Lal Bazaars, or the Red Light Areas. Charu Gupta indicates that Municipal Laws "shifted prostitutes to remote area and prohibited the establishment of brothels in any place not set apart for such purposes. The middle classes of UP, too, continually appealed for special laws to expel prostitutes from thoroughfares and compel them to live in the settlements set apart, away from municipal centres" (Gupta 117). There was an attempt to restructure the towns spatially whereby they would resemble either Bombay or Lahore, where the prostitutes were already relegated to the margins of society and were subjected to constant police surveillance. In most cases these areas where the prostitutes were being relocated, had no amenities. The prostitutes functioning from within the city possessed a lot of property, which was immovable and hence, such a bylaw indicating the spatial

relocation met with a lot of opposition. But irrespective of the opposition they were relocated. It is significant that though the prostitutes were being termed as vice and evil, and there was a sudden urgency to relocate them to purify and sanctify the social spaces, the institution of prostitution was hardly under scrutiny as the prostitute was "also viewed as a means of purifying towns, maintaining the moral order, and as outlets for men's sexual drive" (Gupta 109).

The debates that revolved around the regulation of prostitutes, concentrated on their being immoral and that one ran a risk of contracting venereal diseases from them. In spite of several attempts which were made to curb them and their functioning, the institution survived, because of a steady demand in the society. The late nineteenth century also saw the prostitutes take on the role of theatre actresses, thus becoming the first women to act on public stage. They were thought of as agents who would destroy the cohesion in society, as they began dwelling both in the public and the private spheres of the lives of the Bengali babus. This Chapter has begun with the arrival of the courtesan tradition in India, analysed its rise to fame and traced the reason for its eventual eradication. It has also looked at how, after a certain point of time, the courtesan and the common prostitute were perceived as one and the same by society, by making them function within the same spatial framework. The chapter has analysed how the figure of the courtesan/prostitute was a subaltern one even in the literary fiction produced during that period, where her existence was acknowledged but her problems were never foregrounded. She was given no agency. It has shown how courtesans/prostitutes tried to look out for alternate professions (by becoming the first actresses of the public stage), thereby looking forward to social acceptability, which all of them desired. But as theatre actresses as well, they were stigmatised:

> The sympathetic liberal--minded bhadralok (like 19th century Bengali theatre directors and actors, and few Brahmo social reformers) did, indeed, acknowledge the talents of the actresses who came from the red light areas. But while trying to appreciate their art, or attempting their 'rehabilitation' (either by giving them away in marriage, or by taking them under their protection as mistresses), they tended to fix their female identity as that of submissive domestic creatures, to be trained under benevolent and civilized male patronage. They failed to recognize the strivings for an independent status that some among these women might have been fighting for. (Banerjee, S. 187)

The prostitute was seen as the "other" who was not supposed to be emulated. She was flippant and ignorant as opposed to the image of the "new" woman that was being created. She represented the world outside, which the new emerging women was not expected to represent. The prostitute was abhorred and attempts were made to regulate her functioning in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries, but the profession survived, because of "the sheer tenacity of self-preservation" (Banerjee, S. 182).

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Conclusion

This dissertation has undertaken to study the representation of courtesans and devadasis in select literature of nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India, in terms of the nationalist and reform movements. This has been an attempt to read the anti-Nautch movement in South India more as a product of the ideologies of the Western educated Indian elite and not so much as an effect of Victorian Puritanism. I have discussed the devadasis in South India and courtesans in North India within the purview of law, where I have looked at the debates around the Anti Devadasi Bill, Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, the Cantonment Act and the Contagious Diseases Act. I have also attempted to show that the question of the devadasi/courtesan/prostitute was never a part of the nationalist discourse, though the woman's question was central to it. This issue was, however, central to the reform movements in both the southern and the northern parts of the country. The devadasi/courtesan/prostitute was necessarily seen as all evil and there was an attempt to shift her to the periphery of the new emerging society.

The dissertation has attempted to look at the institution of devadasis and courtesans as one of the most thriving professions, which was shifted to the margins, and its practitioners were criminalised. While one acknowledges the need for some restructuring within the purview of health, the fact that the art was distanced from its traditional practitioners cannot be reconciled with. Most of these people had to spend their last days in penury and were never given the social recognition they deserved as they belonged to a certain community. The stigma that was attached to the community by virtue of the reform movements did not change in the years to come. The reformers at some point realised that

the art form needs to be salvaged. This brought about the revival of dance, whereby dance was reconstructed and restructured.

The Introduction looked at the debates around the Anti Devadasi Bill. The anti-nautch movement began in Madras in 1892 and culminated in The Anti Devadasi Act of 1947. In between, there were a series of amendments in the Act and serious debates on the issue. The person in the forefront of the movement was Muthulakshmi Reddi, a doctor and a legislator, who also hailed from within the devadasi community. The second chapter concentrated on South India. I analysed texts written as a response to the anti-nautch movement or texts which have the character of a devadasi/courtesan central to its plot. I, however, only looked at texts which I considered representative and which were available in English translation. In the chapter I also analysed the real lives of practitioners who belonged to the community and the way they juxtaposed their identities with their professions. The third chapter concentrated on North and East India, where I traced the rise and fall of a profession through the texts. I also considered how the death of the profession of courtesans coincided or aided the advent of women artists on the public stage, that is the theatre. Thus, courtesans became the first women artists on stage. The chapter also discussed the changing image of the cities manifesting decadence. Through the two appendices I analyse the revival of dance from its earlier form to the form we see it today, and I question a twentieth century response to the issue of the courtesans.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw the emergence of a parallel streak of literature, which was written by British women, who came and settled in India with their families who served the East India Company. As expected, these women were burdened doubly. While they were expected to carry with them Victorian morals and Puritanism which had so far been instilled in them in India as well, thereby making them representative of a certain culture, they were also governed by the patriarchal norms of

their community. This made them look for escape routes in one form or the other. Several of them had witnessed nautch performances. For some of them, this was the ultimate image of freedom. When I began the project, I had intended to include some of the fiction written by these women who saw nautch as liberating, thereby providing an authentic colonial response to nautch. This would have made the project extremely vast and it would have taken the focus away from the nationalist and reform movement paradigms I was engaged with. Some of these texts are *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* (1900) and *On the Face of the Waters* (1897) by Flora Annie Steele, *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914) by Alice Perrin and *The Company's Servant* (1907) by B.M. Croker. As very little work has been done in this area it could be a project for future research. Another interesting area to analyse and explore would be the position of a male in the courtesan household. Most of these boys were merely accompanists during performances. Veena Talwar Oldenburg in an interview with one such person, notes him say: "[M]y misfortune is that I was born a son and not a daughter in their house. When a boy is born in the *kotha* [salon], the day is without moment, even one of quiet sadness. When my sister was born there was a joyous celebration that was unforgettable" (262). The main duties that these men executed were, as Oldenburg mentions, of "[d]oormen, watchmen, errand boys, tailors, palanquin carriers…" (264). One such character is of Gauhar Mirza in *Umrao Jan Ada*. It might be noteworthy to look at available material and build a parallel narrative to that of the courtesans.

Chitralekha written by Bhagwati Charan Verma, in Hindi was published in the 1930s and was an instant bestseller. I have very recently acquired a copy of the same and a primary reading of the text makes me think of an interesting parallel which can be drawn between the characters of Madhuravani from *Kanyasulkam* and Chitralekha from the novel. The novel primarily deals with the concept of love and of what constitutes sin and

who the sinner is. The novel revolves around the life of a common dancer Chitralekha residing in erstwhile Patliputra, the capital city of the Mauryas and her tryst with love. Her life is torn between two individuals, Beejgupta, a royal, who indulges in sensual pleasure and Kumargiri, a *yogi*, who, though unaffected by her beauty in the beginning, is very soon overcome by temptation. Kumargiri dismisses her as a lowly person, given to carnal pleasures, and Chitralekha returns back to Beejgupta: "Her return to Beejgupta, whose earthly attachments contain a more profound truth about human existence than the hypocritical spirituality of the ascetic, is an ample proof of her maturity in love" (Kumar 79). The character of Chitralekha is very similar to that of Madhuravani, in terms of the fact that every experience in her life allows her to arrive at a more mature conclusion: "Her conception of love as an embodiment of devotion, dedication, self-oblivion, and desire signifies great maturity in the greatest form of expression known to human beings" (Kumar 79). This parallel between the characters and further exploration of the novel could be another possible area of interest. I have been unable to do so due to paucity of time as I came across the text much later.

The dissertation has other limitations in terms of the texts chosen. I chose to analyse and use only those texts which have English translations available. Non familiarity with Indian languages other than Bangla and Hindi has, to some extent, restricted the scope of my work.

The time period that I examined was late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the regions I concentrated on were South India (with special reference to only Bharata Natyam), and North and East India. There is a lot of literature in the area produced across the country in the same time period and later. A possible area for research could be the restructuring that other forms of classical dance went through. The conclusions for such an extended study, I feel, may not be very different from my own. Forms of folk art too went

through a lot of restructuring and reorganisation. *Lavani*, for example, "a kind of rural erotic song in the folk genre of Maharashtra" (Rege 23) poses similar concerns. To draw upon the work of Sharmila Rege, who in her essay titled, "The hegemonic appropriation of sexuality: The case of the *lavani* performers of Maharashtra," states that major changes took place in the 1850s in the Deccan as a result of Colonialism. There was now a clear divide between "the classical drama...[that] was portrayed as 'moral' whereas the *tamasha* (folk theatre) and its *lavani* were condemned as licentious and immoral" (Rege 30). *Lavani* was essentially performed by the lower castes and the women performers were seen as no better than prostitutes. Though the rise of Marathi theatre too saw the entry of women from these communities, like in Bengal, this was not appreciated by the new emerging middle class. The Bombay state imposed a ban on *lavani tamasha* in the 1940s on the ground that, "it was simply a veil for prostitution and therefore a danger to public morality" (Vasudevan 27). Thus, it might be interesting to compare and contrast other art forms which faced similar reorganisation.

Srividya Natarajan in her Ph. D. thesis, "Another Stage in the life of the Nation: *Sadir, Bharatnatyam*, Feminist Theory" claims:

> Since the nationalist struggle was the moment at which many kinds of modernity were defined, arts like bharatnatyam also became fossilized in narratives that were exclusively about "our great tradition," about "eternal India," about "ancient Indian heritage." The dance of India is so congealed in this alliance with the 'tradition' and the disabling aesthetic (re)invented by brahmin activists that it is hopelessly incapable of adapting itself to address the ethos of the modern. (236)

It might be of interest to contrast this statement with the dance of Chandralekha (1928-2006), who was probably the first one to break the dance form of Bharatnatyam from being the art of the solo performer to becoming a group or ensemble work. Of course there

had been group productions before her, but she used several performers to perform the same piece. She was influenced by both Balasaraswathi and Rukmini Devi. Her choreography, productions and the understanding of dance, challenged traditional notions of what constituted the classical dance of India. She used the dance form for activism, advocating women's rights and the need to save the environment. Her production "Devadasi" attempted at historicizing Bharatanatyam with the devadasi at the focal point. It might be of interest to look at other such instances where dance is used as a site of resistance and where an attempt is being made to break down the traditional pattern.

In the dissertation I have looked at different genres to substantiate my arguments. This dissertation, hence, has novels, drama, autobiographies, biographies, long poems and short stories as points of focus and reference. The reason for doing so is to bring forth responses to the nautch question across literature produced in a particular time period. The autobiography of Binodini Dasi, hence, works as a sharp contrast to the fiction produced in Bengal during the same period, which acknowledges the issue but provides no resolution. Similarly, the autobiographies of Muthulakshmi Reddi and the petitions put forth by the devadasis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide a counter and parallel narrative to one another. Reddi almost singlehandedly gets the resolutions which criminalise devadasis passed in the Legislative Council. Being the daughter of a devadasi, Reddi's autobiographies then, give an insider's perspective, which is contrary to that of the other practising devadasis. I also use texts written by both men and women in order to understand the gender perspectives on the issue. The dissertation is an attempt to read the lives and position of courtesans/devadasis/prostitutes with respect to the construction of the emerging new nation. The woman's question was central to the nationalist discourse, but these 'public women' who occupied 'public spaces' were essentially never a part of this woman's question. The nation acknowledged the existence

of such a woman in society only as a victim, but not as a survivor, thereby denying her any agency.

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Appendix I

The Revival of Dance

> The relationship between Bharatnatyam and Indian national identity... did not evolve automatically from its form, structure or aesthetic values. Rather it was produced and debated as the dance practice underwent a series of transformations in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The events of the 1920s to the 1940s, known as Bharatnatyam revival, took place in a context in which colonial and anti colonial agitations had politicized the populace. (O'Shea 166)

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by reform movements across the country and the anti-nautch campaign in South India was one of the major ones among them. Closely related to the anti-nautch campaign was the idea of reviving the art forms which were at stake in the campaign. There was a sudden necessity to reclaim the rich tradition, and to project it as a national aesthetic[1]. The reformers showed little interest in either the artistic endowments of the devadasi community or their material pressures--their focus was squarely on cleaning up the moral tone of public life, and in a small way, on reclaiming the field of performance for respectable middle class women: "What remained now was to divest the devadasi of her artistic heritage and reclaim her repertoire for the nation as a part of its cultural heritage. The campaign against the devadasis, therefore, naturally entered the new cultural project undertaken by the Madras elite who were in the process of recasting the tradition of music and dance, secularize it, and make it accessible to middle class" (Subramanian 132). The devadasis were progressively being

[1] "The vectors that converged to shape the aesthetic of bharatnatyam, and to create a discourse about it, included, then: 1) the vindication of 'national' culture, figured in Rukmini Devi's discourse as high art devoted to spiritual uplift; 2) the transformation of a sacred temple-based pre-modern art into secular, modern one, at home on the proscenium stage; 3) and, of immediate import, the justification of the use of *sadir* for education of upper-caste girls from respectable families" (Natarajan 203).

marginalised where even their property rights were being taken away[2]. The Madras Music Academy was very careful about what was to be incorporated into the classical repertoire--those lineages whose artistic inheritance was identified as exceptional. Veena Dhanammal, Dhanakoti Ammal and Madurai Shanmukavadivu were the first ones to be identified by the Madras elite. However, it is interesting to note here that there is a gradual "eclipse of the devadasis" with the "overriding compulsion to relocate the practice of music within the middle class" (Peterson 18). The next step now was to deliberately delete the explicit erotic aspects from dance and reconstitute it. As Indira Peterson and Davesh Soneji agrue,

> Nineteenth century nationalists considered the erotic elements of dance texts and gestures to be obscene, and they were deeply embarrassed by the non-conjugal sexuality of devadasi women, because it frustrated their construction of the morally 'pure' Indian woman, the good wife, as custodian and sign of a modern India, as well as their conceptualization of the conjugal, patriarchal Indian family as the pure, inner, 'spiritual' realm of self and culture, impervious to colonial encroachment. (Peterson 18).

I extend this argument with respect to the case of Kathak in the northern part of the country as well. The figure of the courtesan posed similar threats to the social cohesion of the new emerging nation. To counter this All India Radio had banned programmes by reputed singers of that generation. In the case of Kathak, as Pallabi Chakravorty suggests, it took Ruth St. Denis and Madam Menaka to revive the system and the art form. Ruth St. Denis was an American who learnt the Indian dance forms after coming to India. She was

[2] Srividya Natarajan in her thesis mentions, "The adaptation of *sadir* to serve Beauty and Nation exacted a price: its dissociation from the memory of its most recent performers and its teachers, the devadasis and the nattuvanars. Before *sadir* could enter upper-caste consciousness as a form for well-brought-up young women to practise, before it could be claimed as national heritage, it had to be washed clean of the stain of its association with devadasis, a delicate operation" (210).

accompanied by her husband, Ted Shawn and their troupe was called the Denishawn. The audience was awestruck by their performance which was termed as pure. There was a remarkable change in the opinion regarding the nautch after Ruth St. Denis. She was also invited by Tagore, who was looking for a new idiom of dance, to teach dance at Shantiniketan. Madam Menaka contributed greatly towards the revival of Kathak dance. Madam Menaka was the daughter of an English mother and a Bengali barrister. Coming from a well to do family she was exposed to the *baijis* and the nautch performances. She was trained in the dance form of Kathak. She had performed in London before she began the revival of Kathak in India, which made her bring in her western sensibilities on the stage as is mentioned by Pallabi Chakraborty. She did away with the *Thumri* and the *Ghazal* style and also with the traditional instruments like *esraj* and *sarangi*. Being trained by Anna Pavlova and Ruth St Denis, she "introduced Western sensibilities of choreography, musical compositions and stage techniques in her productions" (Chakravorty 51). But what was most striking about this revival was the conscious use of narratives from Sanskrit plays, to keep up with the nationalist ideology of art. Thus, a dance form which had its roots in a Persian tradition was performed primarily using Hindu motifs, like Raslila, Krishnalila, etc. Secularism and spirituality, which were supposed to be integral parts of the Indian identity, were woven into the dance style. The traditional dancing girls were no more seen as the keepers of the tradition and educated women belonging to the upper caste took up dancing as a profession to "recontextualize Indian dance." Tapati Guha-Thakurta argues,

> The yawning gap between the past and the present was sought to be bridged by the indigenous initiatives in 'superior' forms of art practice, and in the production of new 'authentic' forms of knowledge on Indian art. The past, as a symbol of the

> nation's autonomous history and civilized lineage, had to prepare the way for a present in which tradition and modernized knowledge would together frame a new national self. (Guha- Thakurta 63)

After the restructuring, in the late nineteenth century, there emerged a strict notion of the *guru-sishya parampara*,[3] where the identity of the guru was integral to the life of the student. The relationship was extremely hierarchical, wherein the student had to surrender "emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and physically" to the guru. There also emerged the *gharana*, which essentially followed a male lineage as opposed to the existing courtesan tradition, where the art form was passed on from one to another in a matrilineal process. Pallavi Chakravorty points out, "...the gharana emerged to dissociate traditional art practices such as music and dance from the courtesan culture... The male practitioners claimed purity of lineage through a core bloodline comprising a founder and two or more successive generations of direct descendants. This meant that knowledge was inherited through a bloodline or long time association that fostered a particular style" (140). Thus, what historically was an art form passed on among the women of the household, made men its custodians after its revival.

Another important name to be mentioned here is that of Anna Pavlova, who deeply influenced several dancers in the 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps the two most important people to have been influenced by her were Rukmini Devi Arundale and Rabindranath Tagore. Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra was a pioneer in the revival of Bharat Natyam. Born into an upper caste Brahmin family, Rukmini Devi learnt dance from an erstwhile *devadasi*,

[3] "The model was developed following a family structure where the guru was the father figure who passed on his esoteric knowledge to his sons or to his most talented students/shishyas… we have come to know it is an essentially patriarchal system where women were never given status of gurus even when they trained students. This helped to preserve and perpetuate the tradition within a patriarchal, caste-based lineage" (Chakravorty 139).

Mylapore Gowri Ammal, and *nattuvanars,* Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and Chokkalingam Pillai. It was unacceptable till then for a lady from the upper caste to learn a dance form. She faced a lot of opposition, but eventually went on to establish Kalakshetra, one of the most renowned centres for learning dance.

As Srividya Natarajan notes:

> For a brahmin woman to perform *sadir i*n the 1930s was, of course, extravagantly daring. Before she could harness the prestige of her own caste position to the dance form, Rukmini and her supporters had to fight off the opinion that she was stooping, that she had lost caste... The fact that most obviously helped create support for Rukmini Devi's project was her position and her husband's in the Theosophical Sociery. (198)

Rukmini Devi "sanitised" the entire dance and followed the Natya Shastra implicitly. Avanti Meduri mentions that E. Krishna Iyer, a pioneer figure involved in the national dance revival, "urged urban women like Rukmini Devi to learn the dance and give back to the art the dignity and status that it had lost because of misguided civilizing efforts of colonial government" (137). Meduri further mentions,

> Two revivals were articulated synchronously in the 1930s: the Indian national dance revival sponsored by the scholars in the Madras Music Academy, featuring traditional devadasi dancers, and dance gurus known as nattuvunars, and another inter-national revival, sponsored by the Theosophical Society, featuring Rukmini Devi Arundale, the first upper class Brahmin woman, to perform the stigmatized dance of devadasis....Both were desirous of reviving Bharatnatyam as a spiritual

> dance, freed from the taint of temple prostitution with which it had become associated. (138)

V. Raghavan, an officer at the Madras Music Academy, renamed *Sadir* as Bharatnatyam.[4] Raghavan's scholarship on the dance made Rukmini Devi want to learn the dance form ethno-historically, and she collaborated with both Tamil and Sanskrit scholars: "To establish visual similarities between devadasis and herself, Rukmini Devi transformed herself from an intercultural dancer...into a proxy devadasi, and adorned her intercultural/Brahmin body with all the jewellery and ornaments associated with the temple dancer, including bangles, hair and ear ornaments, pendants, waist belts and ankle bells" (138).[5]

A significant debate that ran during this period was the *sringara/bhakti* debate which became synonymous with the names of Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi respectively. Leela Samson in her book, *Rukmini Devi* mentions that both had mutual respect for each other and both were equally gifted artists. She says that Rukmini Devi did not have anything against Balasaraswati personally, but she could never accept the *padams* and *javalis* which depicted the *sringara bhava* overtly. Rukmini Devi mentions that everything that came in the name of tradition should not be accepted. Both were asked to define *sringara* in their own terms. Both spoke about *bhakti*. For Rukmini Devi, *bhakti* essentially meant "formal devotional gestures of supplication offered to the deity" (Gatson

[4] "Because Raghavan was a Sanskrit scholar, he inscribed Bharatnatyam within an indigenous marga and desi system of classification. Indira Peterson explains that 'marga' is usually described as that which is governed by countrywide common rules, i.e., that which is universal, whereas 'desi' is that which varies from place to place, i.e., local or regional. Raghavan in other words located Bharatanatyam within double-reed-pan Indian (Sanskrit/marga) and also regional (Tamil/desi) history" (Meduri 137).

[5] "Rukmini's caste position was undoubtedly a recommendation of her art. Reviews of and articles on her performances sometimes mentioned her caste and at other times made oblique or metonymic references to her 'culture and education'; but clearly the cultural capital she possessed, by birth, was being invested in the transformation of the dance" (Natarajan 200).

90). For Balasaraswati, *sringara* was a form of *bhakti*. As Gatson says: "Rukmini Devi challenged the accepted practice of showing equal deference when addressing a deity or patron. She limited the expression of *bhakti* in the dance to hymns addressed to an explicitly named deity expressed in non sexual metaphors. It was partly her omission of songs that included sexual metaphors, or her interpretations of them using hand signs and facial gestures devoid of eroticism, that created and defined the Kalakshetra style of dance" (Gaston 90). She went on to say that a spiritual art could not be erotic, and that though she had learnt dance in the traditional way she understood the need for certain things to be reformed as they were "improper". She believed that "s*ringara* in Bharat Natyam was best expressed when sublimated to the expression of her perception of *bhakti*" (Gaston 91). She was often said to express the *sringara* rasa in the most refined form without any "vulgarity". Balasaraswati has fewer written records of what she felt about this entire debate. But she does mention that the *sringara* she advocates is never carnal. She says: "*Sringara* stands supreme in the range of emotions. No other emotion is better capable of reflecting the mystic union of the human with the divine; I say this with deep personal experience of dancing to many great devotional songs which have had no element of *sringara* in them. Devotional songs are of course necessary. However *sringara* is the cardinal emotion" (Gatson 93). Rukmini Devi does mention the fact that the devadasi tradition has been helpful in saving the rich heritage of dance but at the same time she is dismissive of the reputation of the devadasis which she does not see as respectable. Balasaraswati was against the fact that several people thought the art form was being tainted by being in the hands of the devadasis who did not have very respectable and noble associations. However, what is significant is that though Balasaraswati never compromised in her presentation of the devadasi style she was rarely emulated though universally honoured. Much of this had to do with the fact that she taught

fewer students and hence the impact was less. On the other hand, Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra had several students and hence her form of Bharat Natyam has a higher profile. In addition to this, she was an upper caste Brahmin and one of the earliest higher caste people to take up the profession of a dancer. This made parents of young girls more sympathetic to the idea of making their children learn dance from her. The class divide was removed to a great extent by the opening of Kalakshetra.

Avanthi Meduri in her article titled, "Bharatha Natyam-- Who Are You?" mentions an intriguing incident. When she was young and learning Bharat Natyam in Madras, she was told about the origins of the dance form and how the devadasis were the practitioners of this dance form in the temples. However, later, the devadasis became "corrupt" and "profaned the art form." On asking how they had profaned the art form, her dance teachers had replied, "Dancing became associated with nautch girls because of the corrupt ways of the devadasi" (Meduri, 1). She later talks about how respectable women were encouraged to take up dance, to lend respectability to the dance form. Many of us who have learnt and continue to learn dance today, are told the same story-- the story of the "fall" of the devadasis and the final redemption happening with the likes of Rukmini Devi, an upper caste Brahmin, who "sanitized" the dance form:

> While the "re-vival" of South Indian dance certainly involved a re-vivification or bringing back to life, it was equally a re-population (one social community appropriating a practice from another), a re-construction (altering and replacing elements of repertoire and choreography), a re-naming (from nautch and other terms to Bharata Natyam), a re-situation (from temple, court, and salon to the public stage), and a re-storation (as used in Schechner 1985:69, a splicing together

> of selected "strips" of performative behaviour in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents an historical one). (Harp Allen 63-64)

Rukmini Devi's claim, "I'm happy...I was able to prove we could do without them" (in *Sarada*, 1943) reiterates the fact that modern practitioners wanted to dissociate the dance form from its erstwhile custodians, but that it began with them, and survived with them for generations is a fact that cannot be denied. By dispensing with and replacing the traditional practitioners with a new bunch of upper caste performers, Rukmini Devi altered the modalities of modern day Bharat Natyam performance. Though this move made it easier for women from respectable families to learn dance and moved the dance form from the temples to a far more secular area of performance, thereby increasing its acceptability, it relegated the devadasis to the margins, almost denying them their livelihood. Rukmini Devi is credited for making Bharata Natyam universally acceptable, and the form propounded by her definitely has more takers. Balasaraswati, on the other hand, had never compromised in her presentation of the devadasi style. The fact that Kalakshetra has had so many students and that Balasaraswati had a select few, contributes to the fact that the Rukmini Devi brand of Bharata Natyam is more prevalent than the one which traces its lineage to the actual practitioners.

Rukmini Devi altered the dance in terms of its visual and performative component as well. She paid great attention to on stage devices, whether it was lighting or general stage decoration. She explains:

> The musicians would follow the dancer with their music and drumming as she moved about the stage...I wanted to change all that. I made the musicians sit on the side of the stage, I also stopped having the Harmonium and the Clarinet as accompaniments, choosing instead the softer musical instruments Mukhaveenai,

> Flute, etc. I designed my own costumes. Madame Cazan who was good at tailoring and Mary Elmore helped me put my ideas into proper shape. Conrad Worldring, a remarkable young musician, who was a wonderful technician on stage, Alex Elmore who was a lighting expert, all of them did a marvellous job even with the limited equipment we had. All these made a profound impact and presented the despised Sadir in an entirely new way. (Meduri 142)

Balasaraswati in response to why in the past the musicians walked behind the performer remarks:

> You must understand why in the earlier old days the nattuvunar and the musician used to walk behind the dancer in a performance. The audience used to be positioned on all sides of the performer. There was no power amplification and the dancer could not hear the musicians properly. Since the song and the rhythm must be heard by the dancer, the supporting cast used to move back and forth along with the dancer. It may present an amusing picture to you today, but we shouldn't laugh at it. Our elders didn't do anything foolishly. (Meduri 158)

Apart from the change of stage apparatus, Raukmini Devi made sure that an idol of Shiva/Nataraja, the presiding deity of the Natyashastra, was placed on a pedestal in one corner of the stage. The guru sat on the other side and the proscenium stage was designed as a temple, using temple backdrop. Thus, she made sure that the three historical symbols of the God, Guru and the temple coexisted even though the dance form had been relocated onto a stage from the temple arena where it was originally performed. Balasaraswati, questioned this desire of Rukmini Devi to spiritualize dance. Janet O'Shea notes, "Bala argued for an untainted erotic-aesthetic-sacred continuum as the heritage of the devadasi dance, and one not to be confused with vulgar eroticism. In effect, although she was an

individual artist in a unique situation, Bala became a prominent spokesperson for devadasi perspectives on the art of dance, well after the marginalization of traditions" (21). It should also be noted that Balasaraswati taught at the Madras Music Academy's College for the Arts, thus becoming an important person of the Academy's efforts to revive the dance form.

As Matthew Allen Harp observes, in the 1930s, several non Brahmin traditional dancers performed at the Madras Music Academy. It was these concerts that had created an opportunity for the likes of Rukmini Devi to observe dance from such close quarters. However, by the late 1940s, several of them, with the exception of Balasaraswati, had stopped performing publicly. Once Rukmini Devi had entered the scene of the "revival" of dance and reconstituting it without the immoralities attached to it, she also tried to alter other modalities and was successful in doing so as well. She was taught by Chokkalingam Pillai, a nattuvanar, who is said to have left on the eve of a very important event/concert. This was a result of a long standing clash of ideas that had happened between the two. She decided the date of her *arangetram* all by herself, something that was unthinkable in a student teacher relationship; she also did away with the fact that the teacher received handsome gifts on the day of the *arangetram.* In a statement made in 1943, she talks of the appropriation of the dance from the actual practitioners. The hereditary community was now replaced by the upper and middle class practitioners:

> One great new thing that has come as a result of these difficulties is the complete separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers. It is a well-known fact that they are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody else to conduct a dance performance. I have always had a determination that this must go. They used to think that, except the usual class of people, no one

> else would be able to dance. Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers. The second aspect is to train Nattuvanars [dance teachers] from good families. I am happy that on Vijayadasami day I was able to prove that we could do without them. (Harp Allen 64-65)

She was aware of the fact that the absence of a nattuvanar on stage posed serious problems, as they also took care of stage direction, etc. Hence, it was imperative that she find a replacement for the same and nothing could be better than employing people from "good families" to conduct the proceedings: "By dispensing with traditional teachers and using her own students as nattuvanars, Rukmini Devi dramatically altered the modalities of communication in performance" (66).

In *At Home In the World*, Janet O' Shea observes that, "[by] shifting the dance's location into the trans-historical space of the temple, Balasaraswati also framed devadasis dance within themes of spirituality and transcendence...Balasaraswati's voice, unlike that of upper-caste dance revivalists, did challenge the narrative of the 'fall' of devadasis and clearly spoke with an agenda to restore respectability to traditional courtly dance repertoire, including some of its erotic dimensions" (97). As Janet O'Shea notes:

> [Like Rukmini Arundale], she deployed an idea of spirituality, in addition to religiosity, abstracting Bharata Natyam from a relationship only to its immediate context. For Balasaraswati, however, this higher function came through emotionality and interiority, aspects that provided Bharata Natyam with regional, national, and global affiliations. Through this reference to universalism, Balasaraswati could bridge the gap between her valorisation of the devadasi community and the realities of her instructional and patronage situation. This manoeuvre partially defused the tensions between her celebration of the devadasi

> legacy and her performing for and teaching Brahmans, non-Tamils, and non-Indians. (91)

O' Shea argues that

> [t]he historical fact of chamber or salon-style dance in South India was excluded from nationalist histories of the dance precisely because of these generalized, trans-local tellings of the dance's past. On the other hand, devadasis saw the instrumental potential of such discourses. Temple-based representations of devadasi pasts might have enabled a form of citizenship for devadasis on the eve of heritage building for the nation.... So while both upper-caste dance revivalists and devadasis composed religious pasts for the dance, devadasis instrumentalized these pasts for the sake of performing public identities. (O' Shea 97)

Though Rukmini Devi is accused of "reforming and sanitising" the entire system, it is largely because of her that several social stigmas related to dance were broken down and children from "respectable" families learnt dance and took it up as a profession. Meduri argues, "To rescue a temple dance, under the threat of disappearance in the 1930s, Rukmini Devi projected a modern...alternative allegorical structure to rescue the dance" (152). She further argues that it was because of this that the dance was rescued from oblivion and from its alleged associations with temple prostitution. While I agree with the part that such an effort by Rukmini Devi made Bharata Natyam more acceptable and did away with its stigma of being associated with temple prostitution, the dance had not sunk into oblivion. With the likes of Balasaraswati still performing, the dance form could not have gone into oblivion. The revival of dance forms, thus, throws up several questions that deserve serious attention. The basic premise on which it was based, that is of recovering long lost art forms then becomes problematic. What exactly qualifies as art and who are

the actual custodians of it? And what provides respectability to art? Do the social stature and standing of an artist have anything to do with the acceptability of the art form? And why is there a need for art forms to be sanitised and appropriated for their acceptability, and who decides the need for this?

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Appendix II

Bedanabala- Mahsaweta Devi

To this blade of iron I now marry you
All trouble and strife I cross out for you
Everybody's woman. Alone no more.
Till now, a girl. From now, a whore. (Devi 21)

Bedanabala by Mahasweta Devi was written in the year 1996. *Bedanabala* narrates the story of a courtesan household, its customs, etc., and the story of her mother Kamalini, who is abducted and brought to the courtesan household though never put into the profession, but married to a rich Vaishnav zamindar. The story runs parallel to the official narrative of India's modernity and nationalism. The voice of Bedanabala bears witness to the experiences of various women who find themselves in the public domain. Their struggle for social acceptance and search for an identity run parallel to the struggle for independence.

Though the novel is written in 1996 it is placed in and around the year 1905, the time of the partition of Bengal. Devi makes a conscious effort of drawing a parallel between the courtesan's struggle for acceptance and the Indian freedom struggle. There are various issues that Devi tackles in this book. Written in the first person, the novel recollects the life of Kamalini, Bedanabala's mother. The daughter of a rich zamindar, Kamalini is abducted and sold to a courtesan household. The looks and talents of Kamalini are beyond compare. The owner of the household grows immensely fond of her and hence does not put her into the profession. Kamalini is eventually married to a rich Vaishnav

zamindar, Balaram Babu, and goes on to have her own family. Devi earlier in the novel stresses the fact that social acceptability is the biggest challenge faced by courtesans. Her name is registered as a practitioner in the police records and hence this leaves her with no way of getting back into the mainstream society. Devi gives an example of a possible acceptance, only if one is ready to give up one's identity, which is by means of converting one's religion and acquiring a new name which is different from the name in the police registers.

The fact that Kamalini manages to move away from the courtesan quarters and is accepted in the society is because her husband is a rich zamindar, who has broken all ties with his paternal family and hence, probably is answerable to no one for this act of his. She is loved and taken care of no doubt, though her mobility outside the house is restricted. But nonetheless this act is seen as a sort of "social acceptance" which de-stigmatizes her. Kamalini promises to build a home for the courtesans who have no place to go after they retire and does so: "Whores die when their bodies break. If they are careful, they live. And the ones who aren't, they go begging at Kalighat. Die on the streets. I have seen Bhubani parading about in Parsi saree jackets. And I have also seen her begging, tin bowl in hand" (6). Much of the plot of the novel is narrated to Bedanabala by Mani, another courtesan in the same household to which Kamalini belonged.

The novel portrays the national movement in relation to the courtesan's struggle:

> Starting from the 1900s the voice of Bedanabala bears witness to the experiences of many women who find themselves outside the safety of the domestic walls and thereafter make their lives in the only ways open to them in a society where women did not work except as domestic servants entertaining men, developing

> liaisons, intertwining their dreams and passions with destiny of a country struggling for independence and questioning time worn social customs. (Devi 1)

The courtesan's houses were the safest places to hide for the nationalists because they would hardly be raided by the police. There are several examples of young nationalists asking for refuge in the courtesan quarters. An important part of the courtesan household portrayed here is the attending of religious meetings. Much of the information on who would come asking for refuge is passed on in these meetings and many of the people who gathered in these meetings were individuals involved in the freedom struggle: “Swadeshi is the way things are, the storm that's threatening to break” (22). In the period 1900-1905, Bengal was swept across by Swadeshi uprisings, where the youth of the nation spearheaded a movement whereby they rejected all that was foreign, in this case British. They tried establishing a counter culture which was self sufficient. This included setting up of medical clinics, charitable trusts, religious institutions, etc., which took care of people around. Many of these were funded by the courtesans. The courtesans were regular visitors at the gatherings that the trusts and religious institutions organised, and heard and participated in the reading sessions. In the text Swami Sadanand, a trustee of the Nabya Hindu Mission mentions, “They come to knock upon the door of God. Is there any law forbidding that. They feed the poor here, give money for the free medical centre. You will have to get a law against all this first before I can stop their coming. We may not be disciples of the Ramakrishna Mission but we abide by the Swami's words. We too believe that the Lord may be best served through the care of each and every one of his creations" (25). Later in the text we also find out that the people involved in the Mission supported and financed several practitioners of Swadeshi. They also provided these people with places they could hide in, to run away from the police.

All the women in the prostitute quarters “knew only one thing: to be a married woman, a householder, that was the ultimate in life. A position of unquestioned respect” (47). Several women in the courtesan quarters seemed to echo this sentiment. This was precisely the reason, the owner Kamini, wanted Kamalini to be married. She too was done with the profession and knew once she got Kamalini married she would retire and set up a home for destitute women. Bedanabala has fond memories of her childhood and her parents together. She narrates the incident where just before her birth, her father had hoped that the child would be a girl and that she would look after his estate just as his old grandmother. Devi raises several issues in the novel and gives us a woman's perspective on the issue. It is that side of the story that has been untold to us for long and finally Devi does that in this novel. Not only this, in the last few paragraphs, she advocates the idea that every courtesan, every prostitute should write her own story for she has the power and the authority to do so, and that if she does not, no one will write about her and all that we will be left with are male perspectives on the issue, which in my opinion tend to romanticise the entire concept of the courtesan: "If the sky were a sheet of paper/ If every blade of grass on earth were pen/ If the seven seas were awash with ink/ If all of that were used up even then/ I would not be enough for their history to be written"(Devi 72-73). The novel ends with the lines, “So, I tell you today, each prostitute, each sex worker, has the right to light, to break free of darkness. They must know this. They must earn this for themselves” (Devi 73).

Bedanabala is a work written by a woman, who uses the technique of a framed narrator. Devi's novel ends on a note of trying to empower these women to claim an identity for themselves, and with a critique that though the woman’s question was closely linked to the question of the Nation, the status of the performing women was still in

jeopardy. They continued to remain in the margins and the peripheries of society. Their histories were written separately from the history of the nation. The new emerging nation and its ideal did not have a space where these public women could be “accommodated”.

Kamalini, in the text is provided with an option, an escape route. Not only this, the owner of the courtesan household too is portrayed in very unconventional terms. Kamalini was her best bet. She could have had her name registered and made a fortune out of her, but she refuses to do so. Her concerns are shown to be humanitarian. She is the biggest supporter of the wedding of Kamalini which she conducts herself without informing others about it. Devi therefore, in a sense, breaks conventions and portrays the courtesan life in a different light. She talks about the woes of being in the profession and the constant threat and danger they face. She also mentions the woes of a courtesan once she retires, for her property is confiscated by the state and she is left with no other option but to either shift to the ghats of Varanasi or live at other people's mercy. Devi creates a character that pays attention to this fact and builds a house for these distressed women to come and stay once they have retired from the profession.

Bedanabala was published in 1996, much after the time period I looked at in this dissertation. The reason I chose to read *Bedanabala* alongside the other texts written in and around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that one, it gives a woman’s perspective on the issue and two, it is placed in the same time period. However, I read *Bedanabala*, also as a text which in the process of rehabilitating the prostitute/courtesan, by giving them away in marriage, fixes their identity within the sphere of domesticity. Kamalini, at the end of the day, is a home maker, and is portrayed as submissive. Her movement outside the house is restricted and her husband probably is able to marry her, because he has broken ties with his family and his past. Thus, Devi in creating the

character of Kamalini and in an attempt to provide her with social acceptability and a "home" actually succumbs to the set notions of the nationalist patriarchy, which found redemption for such women only in the sphere of domesticity. While most of these women would have wanted social acceptability, the easiest of which came in the form of marriage, Devi could have provided Kamalini with more agency. Kamalini's life can be read parallel to the life of the extremely talented theatre actress Golap/Sukumari Devi, who came from the red light areas of Calcutta, was married to a respectable man, who deserted her and her daughter and went to London, and who had to spend her last few years in penury.[1] Golap was denied social status and was not accepted into the family after her husband left. Hence, the picture that Devi paints of Kamalini is quite in contrast to what happened in real life situations. Devi treats the issue of courtesans in a much nuanced fashion, intertwining the fate of the courtesans with the fate of the Nation, but fails to provide a concrete solution or resolution to the issue that she has dealt with.

[1] Theatre personality Upendranath Das married Golap off to a well born educated actor, under the Special Marriage Act and called herself Sukumari Dutta. However, she spent the last years of her life singing in the *andarmahals* of the rich. (This has been discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation in detail.)

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