

## From *Devāṅganā* to *Devadāsī*

### The Role of the Auspicious Female in Hindu Traditional Matrix

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#### Background

Here I am trying to connect two continuous and related but not obviously identifiable practices in Hindu temple tradition – a sculptural representation of celestial female figures variously known as *apsarā*, *surasundarī* and *devāṅganā* to the ritualistic tradition of *devadāsī*, which thrived from very early times till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The representation of *devāṅganā* on all southern and northern Indian temples related with Śiva, Viṣṇu and Durgā including Jinālaya suggests its ubiquitous role – auspicious, bestowing good luck and draping the temple like an ornamental *alaṅkāra gaṇikā* does in a temple. My research so far has focused on these female representations, which are not attributed absolute power as the major Hindu goddesses, but they undoubtedly form a significant category of feminine imagery on religious architecture of the medieval period. Here, I would like to extend my exploration of the *devadāsī* institution and pursue the endless ideas this association would generate. Various categories of *devadāsīs* come to mind – *rudraṅganikā* or *devaṅganikā* performed in a Śiva temple while Amman Koyil *dāsī* and *naṭana dāsī* performed *dīpārādhana* in Śrī Tyāgarājasvāmī temple before the Brahmin priests took over the ritual at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Tamilnadu.<sup>1</sup> The *devāṅganā* sculptures often represent one carrying a *kumbhadīpa*, pot shaped lamp as well as dancing in the garb of *yoginī* hinting at the similarity of their ritual roles in the context of the temple's macrocosmic symbolism as well as ritual worship. It may have taken few centuries for a living tradition of *devadāsī* – integral to temple ritual to metamorphose (not in its entirety but some aspects of it) into a sculptural representation, a potent symbol of auspiciousness. Its widespread representation on various cultic<sup>2</sup> temples goes to suggest that these figures were generic in form but played a

specific 'magical' role and were widely recognised by religious personages, sculptors and *sthapati*, priests and lay worshippers alike. There is some aspect of *devadāsī* tradition, which has inspired the 'imagery' of the celestial female so widely and consistently represented on medieval temples. It is also a medieval phenomenon, historically, philosophically and socially which needs a contextual rendering.

## Ritual, Drama and Visual Culture

For the purpose of this paper, I am not focusing on the art form of the *devadāsī*, but her ritualistic role in a temple and how the institution of *devadāsī* may have inspired artists some 1000 years ago to sculpt variegated forms of *apsarās* and *devāṅganās* on the temples. *Devāṅganā* is as integral to the temple's ritual as is *devadāsī* and a closer look at the sources – oral, epigraphical, folk and classical would yield more concrete results.

My research on *devāṅganā* has been amply augmented by the concepts and methodology of a more recent work on 'Nityasumaṅgalī'.<sup>3</sup> It offers us a new vantage to conjure the relevance of *devadāsī* in relation to the generic representation of the *devāṅganā* figures on Hindu and Jaina temples. It also puts ritual coeval with drama and leads us in a direction where we begin to perceive dramatic content in the imagery of both the *devāṅganā* as well as the *devadāsī*.

Elaborating upon the role of a *devadāsī* within the structure of a temple ritual, Saskia Kersenboom states:

"We will see that the 'plot' of the ritual drama is basically the balancing of two opposite forces: life-enhancing, fertile or 'auspicious' versus life-destroying, deadly or 'inauspicious'. These two forces must be combined in harmony; they are ever present, active, and cannot be destroyed, therefore they must be balanced. This message is transmitted through all channels available: through 'magical ritual', through mythology, staging mythological dramatis personae that represent these basic forces, and through careful composition of the ritual personnel. In this context the *devadasi-nityasumangali* was extremely important as a person who is guaranteed 'danger proof': she should be present in those critical moments of balancing the auspicious and the inauspicious. She was to remove the accumulated destructive force of evil eye (*drsti-dosa*) which the god might have contracted during a procession, by waving the pot-lamp in front of him."<sup>4</sup>

The ritual versus drama leads us to a further conceptual dichotomy – that of divinity-royalty in making and defining the role of these two groups of female imageries – one living and playing a metaphoric role (*devadāsī*), while the other mythical but assuming life-like characteristics (*devāṅganā*). One takes the pride of place within the sanctum, the courtyard and *maṇḍapam* while the other drapes the temple *maṇḍovara*, *toraṇa* and *stambha*. The efficacy of their roles is always seen in relation to a god, king or an artistic patron. Their art, their personality and potentiality of their personage is kept in high esteem. Thus, they are no ordinary beings but pieces of a jigsaw within the larger structure of temple ritual and its symbolic iconography. The concept of *vyāla* and *apsarā*, the *rājasic* and the *tāmasic*, male and female, active and passive explored by Stella Kramrisch<sup>5</sup> offers metaphoric conceptualization-invoking mystical as well as earthly associations.

### Who are *Devāṅganās*?

The original association of *devāṅganā* stems from the Vedic and even earlier prehistoric 'goddesses' personified as nature. I see antecedents of *devāṅganā* in not only *yakṣī-śālabhañjikā*, *apsarā-surasundarī* concepts but even Vedic goddesses such as Puramdhī (plenty and activity), Dhiṣaṇā (abundance), Ilā (nourishment), Bṛhaddivā (mother) and Vāk (spoken word). References to these goddesses are found in the *R̥gveda*.<sup>6</sup> It also mentions Rākā, a rich and bountiful goddess along with Sarasvatī and Ilā. The broad-hipped anthropomorphic figures of fertility goddesses identified by certain scholars as Aditi are closer to the identification of Sinīvālī who in *Atharvaveda* is referred to as broad hipped, fair armed, sister of the gods, a mistress of the family who is implored to grant off-spring.<sup>7</sup> She is also addressed as the wife of Viṣṇu – a proto-Lakṣmī referring to bounty and prosperity. Then there is the imagery of the *apsarā-gandharva* pair, *yakṣa-yakṣī* pair, a *mithuna* group, which reminds one of the religious association of a couple and their symbolic meaning of 'auspiciousness'. Many concepts of *yakṣī* and *apsarā* developed in the Vedic literature but they were not represented visually nor do we find an iconographic description in the literary sources. But the case of Buddhist art is different. The first conception of the *yakṣī* was visually represented in their monuments such as Barhut, Sanchi and Amaravati. One could identify the iconological association of some Vedic goddesses in some *Yakṣī* sculptures – Puramdhī in Bharat Kala Bhavan *yakṣī*, Ilā in Mathura and Sanghol *yakṣī*

sculptures in National Museum and Br̥haddivā in the *Putravallabhā* sculptures found at Jagat, Ambikā temple (Rajasthan) and Rānī kī Vāv, step well (Gujarat).

Closer links can be seen between *apsarās* and *devāṅganās*, the latter being more widespread in the context of temple architecture while the former is still a symbolic form that can be conjured to have attributes that can be visualized. *Apsarās* denoted a kind of nymph (*apya yoṣā*), the wives of the *gandharvas* in the waters.<sup>8</sup> Their abode is in the waters from where they come and go in a trice.<sup>9</sup> In the post-Vedic literature, they are spoken of as frequenting forest lakes, rivers and they are found in Varuṇa's palace in the ocean. Etymologically, *apsarā* means 'moving in the waters' (*ap-sāriṇī*).<sup>10</sup> In the later Saṁhitās, they are associated with the banyan (*nyagrodha*) and the sacred fig (*asvattha*) trees in which their cymbals and lutes resound.<sup>11</sup> In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* they are described as engaged in dance, song and play.<sup>12</sup>

Individually, *apsarās* came to be known by names such as Urvaśī, Rambhā and Menakā from the Purāṇic period; even *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions several *apsarās*.<sup>13</sup> They are created by Brahmā and they embellish the drama. They allured ṛṣis, *devas* and men alike and their myths became more elaborate with an intriguing content. Their origin is detailed in many Purāṇas, some prominent ones such as Urvaśī was created by Nārāyaṇa from the sap of a mango twig. He drew on his thigh (with mango sap) an image of a nymph and immediately Urvaśī sallied forth.<sup>14</sup> Rambhā was created by Brahmā, Alambuṣā and Tilottamā by sage Kaśyapa and his wife Pradhā. Thus their parentage is either human or extra-terrestrial. They may be water or earth born but live in the celestial zone and descend on the earth for a short duration. They are associated with Brahmā, Varuṇa, Sūrya, Indra and Kubera. In *Matsya Purāṇa*, many of them originated from the churning of the ocean (*samudramanthana*), along with ṛṣis, *gandharvas* and *kinnaras* and their common parents are sage Kaśyapa and Aristā.<sup>15</sup> *Vāyu Purāṇa* mentions them as *mānasa-kanyā* of Brahmā, who emerged from his mental creativity or imagination. They are endowed with the nature of energy, as they are created from Agni and Aristā.<sup>16</sup> *Vāyu Purāṇa* further outlines the nature and characteristics of the *apsarās*, who are not all heavenly, benevolent and boon bestowing. The *yajña* born are called Śubhā, they resemble the sound of *Ṛk* and *Sāma* recited before Agni. The water and nectar born are called Amṛtā, the wind born are called Śuddhā, lightning born are called Ṛcā and death born are called Bhairavā. This verse throws ample

light on diverse origins, names and attributes of the *apsarās* from the source that created them. First instance of association with destruction can be noted here.

These celestial beings were conceived of as personifications of nature and drew from them auspicious, fructifying and destructive elements. The artists of the post-Gupta and the medieval periods, gave these abstract ideas visualized in feminine form an iconography and a personality. Elsewhere, I have amply highlighted the individual iconographic *devāṅganā* forms and discussed their iconological ramifications and evolution.<sup>17</sup> Thus, I have attempted to expand the notion of *apsarās* beyond the 'bold and bewitching beauty' to a wider cultural construct of an auspicious female with ambivalent personality, who are invoked in various religious and cultural contexts that are less rigid. The female sculptures that drape the Hindu temple exteriors are therefore not *apsarās* but *devāṅganās*, celestial females who emerge and coalesce features from many different cultural contexts – Vedic, Purāṇic, Āgamic and Prākṛta. Thus, semiotically *devāṅganā* emerge from folk, classical, oral and written contexts.

### **Why are *devāṅganās* found on temples?**

*Devāṅganā* began to be depicted on temples from as early as the post-Gupta period (approximately 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE). The *śālabhañjikā*, a form of *yakṣī* depicted holding a branch of a tree while striking a dancing pose on the Buddhist *stūpa* architecture is seen by me and many other scholars as antecedent of the *apsarā*- *devāṅganā* sculptures on later day Hindu temples.<sup>18</sup> Both their iconography and form coordinate with the later day *devāṅganās*, except that there are many more forms and designated positions for their placement on the temple. The *vitāna*, *stambha*, *maṇḍovara*, *toraṇa* and *śikhara* are some of the main components of a temple on which these figures are depicted. According to *Samarāṅgaṇa Sūtradhāra* (11<sup>th</sup> century CE) of Paramāra Bhoja, detailing *meruprāsāda*, *toraṇa* should be adorned with *makara*, heads or elephants, leaves as well as groups of *apsarās*. It appears that the figures of *apsarā*, *nāgakanyā*, *kinnara* should be placed in the *vitāna* as well as on the *bhūmis* of the *jaṅghā* and the *stambha*.<sup>19</sup> But Bhoja is not explicit about their iconography and its significance. *Śilpaprakāśa*, an architectural text from Orissa, contemporaneous to *Samarāṅgaṇa* and the great temple building activity of the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, mentions *āvaraṇa devatā* that includes *dikpāla*, *mahāvidyā*, etc.<sup>20</sup> It is followed by a section on *alasa*, which is locally known as *nārībandha* or

*kanyābandha*. An interesting verse highlights the purpose behind the representation of the *nārībandha* : a house without a wife, as frolic without a woman, so a monument without (figure of) a woman will be inferior and bear no fruit.<sup>21</sup> A few centuries later, more detailed texts were written such as the *Kṣīrārṇava*, *Vṛkṣārṇava* and *Dīpārṇava*. *Kṣīrārṇava* belongs to the beginning of 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Vṛkṣārṇava* belongs to the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century while *Dīpārṇava* to 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> It is here that the term *devāṅganā* is made explicit while describing the *caturmukha mahāprāsāda*. In *Kṣīrārṇava*, besides enlisting their names and describing their postures, their placement in clockwise direction is also highlighted. Many of the *devāṅganās* described in this text can be seen depicted on the temples of the Solaṅkī period in Gujarat. Urvaśī is seen killing an *asura* with a *khadga* and pulling him by his *śikhā* while Gaurī is killing a lion, Karpūramañjarī is dancing nude while bathing, Padminī is holding a stalk of lotus. The list goes on. Even though the text is posterior to the sculptures, it shows standardization of the iconography, interest taken by *sthapatis* for generations to record these *devāṅganā* figures, draw out their identity by recording their attributes and ascribing them with a name.

In my research on the evidence of *devāṅganā* sculptures on *nāgara* temple architecture, I have examined Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh temples between 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is needless to say, *devāṅganā* sculptures are found throughout India as late as 16<sup>th</sup> century on Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina temples. The present paper refers to the above mentioned areas and delves into observing a pattern or a recurrent schema to underscore the importance of their imagery, their placement on the wall in conjunction with the main deities of the temple and their symbolic relevance to the temple's original iconographic ideological agenda. It is not a matter of coincidence that temples are designed the way they are, one is the prescribed injunction from tradition, the other is the chief priest overseeing the project, donor or the sponsor's wish based on which certain deities and certain *devāṅganās* are sculpted on a certain wall of the temple. Most identifiable examples of *devāṅganā* sculptures emerged on *nāgara* temple during the post Gupta period. Hence it is clearly a medieval phenomenon. Although it can't be conclusively said that there were no *devāṅganā* sculptures prior to this phase because *yakṣīs-śālabhañjikās* are predecessors of *devāṅganās* and they were found on Buddhist monuments from the beginning of the current era. Flanking the *bhadra* niche are *devāṅganā*

sculptures and they are widely represented on Pratihāra period temples in Rajasthan and spread widely all over the Solāṅkī, Chandella and Paramāra ruled areas. As the *maṇḍovara* began to get more and more articulated, the number of niches and pilasters increased, creating more room for the *devāṅganā* figures to be placed in them adding newer iconography and interpretation. Besides *maṇḍovara*, on temples where much of the exterior is not decorated with sculptures, such as the Jaina temples at Mt. Abu and Kumbhāriā, the interior is exquisitely carved. In such cases, *devāṅganās* are placed on pillars, capitals and interior of the ceiling domes as supporting brackets. In such cases they are usually represented as dancers and musicians. These were found even as late as 18<sup>th</sup> century on vernacular architecture of Gujarat and Rajasthan, a feature that never ceased to fascinate the decorative psyche of the western Indians. *Devāṅganā* sculptures are also placed on the *kakṣāsana* balconies as well as *udgamas* of the temple doors and niches making them almost indispensable. These observations support the theory that *devāṅganās* are not just decorative drapes but also supportive constructs that lend physical and philosophical meaning and bearing to the monument.

### **Why are *devadāsīs* dedicated to temples?**

The age old tradition of dedicating *devadāsīs* to temples is very ancient and wide spread, more so in south India but also in the north. There are many references from epigraphs, architectural manuals, classical and vernacular literature and actual sculptural evidence to support this institution, which existed and played a vital role in the spiritual-divine and mundane-royal spheres. They were sponsored by kings in the royal courts and by rich patrons of temples to participate in rituals. They were well endowed and cultured, highly proficient in their art and successful.

The Harṣanātha temple at Sīkar was presented many maidens, mentions the Harṣanātha temple inscription of Vigharāja II's time during the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Sudi inscription of the reign of Someśvara I dated 1054 CE refers to dancing girls as members of the organizing staff of the temple.<sup>24</sup> Kalhaṇa refers to the presence of *devadāsī* in the temples of Kashmir and Merutuṅga in the Kumāra Vihāra in Somanath Pattana.<sup>25</sup> A 10<sup>th</sup> century inscription from Rajasthan records instructions given by a chieftain to his descendants that if the arrangement that he had made about the services of the dancing girls at

different temples was interfered with by ascetics and Brahmins, they should at once be stopped.<sup>26</sup> *Kādambarī* of Bāṇa and *Priyadarśikā* of Harṣa mention that courtesans bathed the King, even accompanied him to the temple and danced in front of his favourite deity.<sup>27</sup>

Based on many references from north India, it is learned that *devadāsīs* performed in the courts and temples alike, while in south India, the two spheres rarely combine. The temple *devadāsīs* remained dedicated to the temple forever and they are referred to as *nityasumaṅgalī*, ever auspicious who remained ever married. It can also be noted that it is generally the royalty that favoured this custom in service of their favourite divinity. Here, King and god are partaking of the same sport, offered by the courtesans.

Saskia Kersenboom explores the antiquity of the term *devadāsī* and its analogous names and their functions in the south Indian Hindu temple context. Compared to the earlier periods, the Coḷa period inscriptions mention a real hierarchy of temple dancers. It is said that about 400 dancers were transferred from various other temples to the Bṛhadīśvara temple when it was newly constructed and that employment of servants, dancers and other menial and administrative positions were on hereditary basis.<sup>28</sup>

“The term *devadasi* (*tevaratiyar*) is not found earlier than the Chola period. Other general terms for *devadasis* are: *teliccerippentukal* (women belonging to the street of the temple), *nakkan*, *patiyilar*, *rudra ganika* (courtesan of Rudra-Śiva), *maṇikkam* ('ruby' or 'dancing girl' as a short form of *maṇikkattal*) and *talaikkoli* (female holding the *talaikkoli* rod). *Rudra ganika* is a term of respect that can be found mostly in Sanskrit Āgamas and their commentaries. *Maṇikkam* is a old term indicating the female officiant who should wave the *tirualatti* (sacred light of camphor) before the god during festivals. *Talakkoli* is a term given to dancing women in the Tyagarajaswami temple of Tiruvarur; it connects the *devadasis* of Tiruvarur with the legendary dancer Matavi of the Cilappatikaram whose initiation ceremony was performed by worship of the *talaikol*.”<sup>29</sup>

The south Indian Āgamic traditions contain specific references to the role of *devadāsī* in the worship of the deity in the Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Kaumāra and other indigenous temples. Besides the Sanskrit Āgamas, there are the local devotional poems and Purāṇas in Tamil in which localized practice is mirrored. One of the main functions of the *devadāsīs* was to sing songs before the deity at

different designated times (*kāla*) of the 24 hour cycle, which were in Tamil and Telugu. *Devadāsīs* participated in both daily (*nitya*) and festival (*naimittika*) *pūjās*, which were most often for general good of the people. They did not participate in them for any personal gain. From Āgamas and from oral information in the context of *nityārcana*, it is found that *devadāsīs* sang appropriate songs at the *Tiruppalliyelucci* (rising up from the sacred couch), *Vilapūjā* (unfolding *pūjā*) and *Cayaratcai* (dusk *pūjā*).<sup>30</sup> They did not clean the precincts of the temple or assist in any way, thus leading to their ritual position as officiants at appropriate moments of the ritual with appropriate utterances. In the case of *Cayaratcai pūjā*, one *devadāsī* performed *kumbhāratī* (waving of pot lamp before the deity) and another performed *puṣpāñjali*.<sup>31</sup> Terms like *śuddhanṛttam* (pure dance) and *kaikkattum murai* (display of hands) are associated with this ritual. In Śaiva temples, according to another informant, during the daily *Cayaratcai pūjā*, a *devadāsī* belonging to the *periyamurai*, stands in front of the shrine of Śrī Tyāgarājasvāmī and imitates the ritual actions that are performed by the priest during the offering of *dīpārādhanā*. She should stand between the Sundaramurtī sannidhī and the sacred bull Nandi, in front of Śrī Tyāgarājasvāmī. She is clad in a white *pyjāmā* over which she wears a long upper-cloth. Her hair is tied in a knot like Śiva's hairdo and she wears a *rudrākṣa* (Śaivite rosary).<sup>32</sup> Even at the last two rituals of the day, putting the deities to bed, *Palliyarai cevai*, *Devadāsīs* sang lullabies (*lali*) and swing songs (*unjal*).

With regards to *utsava* (festival), the role of *Rudra gaṇikās* and *Rudradāsīs* is quite elaborately detailed in most Āgamas. Citing an example from Sadyojātaśivācārya's commentary on *Kāmikāgama*, the *devadāsī* should present herself in a ritually pure state. To perform *misra nṛttam*, the *Rudra gaṇikās* should wear silver ankle bells. If these are not available, they should wear bronze ankle bells. Their hair should be tied up. They should wear a blouse, a white cloth arranged in the ritually pure way, all ornaments, jewels, sacred ash and the *rudrākṣa*. In the *prākāra* of the temples of Mahāmārī *Rudradāsīs* should perform *kevala nṛttam*, while *Grāmadāsīs* and *Rudradāsīs* perform *nāṭakam* (dance-drama) in the temples of the goddesses Kālī and Durgā.<sup>33</sup>

Śrīraṅgam Koyil Oluku mentions *devadāsīs* who had the right to *kutamurai* (carrying pots of water in the divine presence) and of *Viṣṇudāsīs* and *Rājadāsīs* who danced in front of the divine image during a temple procession, while others performed mime to vocal music (*abhinaya*).<sup>34</sup> *Kumāra Tantra* related

to Murukan worship mentions the *nityārcanavidhi* advising the priest to perform daily fire ritual, offering of holy ashes, the mirror, parasol and fan, to arrange a daily procession and to show lord Śaṅmukha dance, song and instrumental music.<sup>35</sup>

### Where do *Devāṅganā-Devadāsī* meet?

Is it a tradition of convergence or divergence? The parallelism drawn above amply supports the role of *devadāsīs* as a live record of a tradition of an auspicious female with a defined contribution in society, a responsible member who is afforded a religious, ritual as well as social position where she transcends the mundane plane easily to be accommodated into the spiritual. By waving the lamps, singing auspicious songs and performing different kinds of dances – she presided over a designated role and carried it forth with devotion and commitment to none other than the deity of the temple. According to the 20<sup>th</sup> regnal year inscription of Rājendra I (1012-1044 CE), a court dancer named Anukiyar Paravai Nankaiyar was a favourite of the king and she attended the temple ceremony at Vitivitankar along with the king. A village was named after her as Paravaipuram and a temple as Paravai-Īśvaram. During the reign of Rājādhirāja I (1018-1054 CE), provision was made for offerings to the images of Rājendra and Paravai Nankaiyar in the Tiruvarur temple.<sup>36</sup> The above inscription highlights the position enjoyed by a dancer in the service of a king in his favourite temple of his *iṣṭadevatā*, who was not a temple officiant or *devadāsī* and still enjoyed a certain respect. She made donations to the temple as well.

Both *devāṅganā* and *devadāsī* are auspicious, bringers of good luck and supported a system of Hindu tradition where instead of the deities' help, their services were employed, thus supporting the notion that the *alaṅkāra gaṇikā* or the *āvaraṇa devatā* would offer protection to the monument and its resider within, the deity. The actions of the *devadāsī* would form the imagery for the *devāṅganā*, which is not an imaginary woman but a concrete archetype taken from real life around the temple, the *devadāsī*. It is this inter-relationship between the myth, the institution and the imagery that I urge my readers to focus on.

There are some differences – *devadāsīs* were human while *devāṅganās* were celestial, though some of the latter had human parentage. Their personalities were fictional and their actions fantasized. In terms of an

organized institution, *devāṅganā* through *apsarā* and *yakṣī* have their origin in pre-Vedic indigenous tradition, which was more formalized during the Vedic period. Their numerous associations with ṛṣis and mortal kings speak for their mythic role in the overall Hindu cosmology, a piece of a jigsaw that can accommodate many principles of creation within it. *Apsarā* is seen as single and in association with *Gandharva*, thus affording her single as well as conjugal roles. *Devadāsī*, on the other hand, had deity of the temple as her paramount object of devotion and commitment, offering a monogamous role extending it to the concept of *nityasumaṅgalī* (ever auspicious). But this title of *nityasumaṅgalī* has different connotations in both the cases. *Devadāsī* went through a proper marriage ritual attaining the title of *nityasumaṅgalī*, whereas *devāṅganās* were married only in certain contexts to kings and mortal men, but more often than not, they bore love children of their 'lovers', Menakā's daughter 'Śakuntalā' is a case in point. Many *apsarā-gandharva* pairs have been noted in myths throughout Purāṇas extolling hetero-sexual, auspicious *mithuna* concept so frequently depicted on Hindu temple walls, doorways, ceilings and plinths. Presence of *mithuna* couples on Buddhist architecture, Gupta temple doorways and on early medieval temples was slowly replaced by *devāṅganā* alone, which goes to support the notion that the image of the auspicious woman was sufficient to drape the monument. This afforded a more prestigious position to *devāṅganā* imagery some of whom were even identified with their names inscribed under their pedestals. *Devāṅganā* sculptures are ambivalent; sometimes they are depicted fighting with soldiers or animals and holding skull clubs and dancing in nude. *Devadāsīs* are never associated with embodying anything wrathful themselves, thus they are not perceived as evil, but they seem to balance the effects of evil and combat with the evil. Both, *devāṅganās* and *devadāsīs* were proficient in dance, music and ritual, which contextualized them in an emotive play throughout myths and temple buildings. Their imagery evokes a sense of dramatic mystery, mysticism and devotion beyond question. Never has a *devadāsī* or *devāṅganā* seen as subverting an institution, whereas the institution itself is seen as being radical and non-orthodox. Conventionally, most 'religiously disposed' *devadāsī* lived an orthodox life, which placed them within the fabric of Hindu society but by caste and class they always remained on the fringe and strictly speaking socially 'outcaste'. This ambivalent situation continued even till 1950s when learning the art of

classical dance from a *devadāsī* was considered 'going against the grain' for a girl from a higher caste like Brahmins. Thus, even though both are considered auspicious, their social acceptance as women of high moral values is contentious. Going by the literary sources, it can be noted that there is more to *devāṅganā-devadāsī* pair than what meets the eye. For the purpose of this paper, we have focused on the sources and their interpretation by earlier scholars and now explore new meanings wherever possible.

There are many possible 'readings' into the analogous imageries of *devāṅganā* and *devadāsī*, the sources collected here in favour of seeing a mutual parallelism in their ritual and iconographic representations bear 'social meanings' that could easily be ascertained. It also poses the gendered polemic of artist/model, artist/patron, work of art/onlooker whereby the relation of class, caste, social, economic and intellectual hierarchies is implied. In each of these relationships, there is an embedded male/female scenario that implies power and authority. This comes into dynamic play not just at the level of making ritual art, but also at the level of ritual interaction with the art especially in the case of *devāṅganā* and *devadāsī*. The temple's arts and institutions are not first and foremost perceived as art but we look at it from our 20<sup>th</sup> century notion of art, iconography and philosophy based on theology. Both *devāṅganā* and *devadāsī* have been narrowly interpreted thus far as debased social institutions with myths and stories cited to support the position. The attempt here is to break away from the conventional interpretation and explore other possibilities, to identify them from the woman's perspective in the larger traditional matrix of Hindu society, which offers many cross references. This 'against the grain' approach lends a presence to the *devāṅganā* imagery / *devadāsī* institution, which has always remained in the forefront, created to support the mainstream Brahmanical deities (male as well as female) whose litany they generally support. The fact that *devāṅganā* or *devadāsī* were never singled out as representations of women in the context of Hindu tradition, it has been variously studied under erotic art or performing arts but never seen as an institution of Hindu, social, cultural, religious and even economic ethos. This female is not a mother but a virgin, 'boon bestowing fairy' who could perform all those tasks that mere mortals could not fathom. But they never could claim the stature of the supreme goddess, the mother of all mankind who is enriched with beauty, valour and fertility. Thus, the concept of Durgā is mutually

exclusive compared with *devāṅganā* but some threads of connection could still be established. The fact that *devadāsīs* were supposed to bear the lamp and wave it before the deity to remove the evil eye, conferred a privileged position that even the high caste priests could not avail. This of course changed in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries when the institution was abolished and Brahmin priests were allowed to perform services formerly done by *devadāsīs*.

From the feminist perspective of 'gaze', 'relation between representation and sexuality', 'questioning the Litany'<sup>37</sup> are some of the more obvious principles that can be applied to the institution of *devāṅganā* and *devadāsī*. The male gaze, seeing the representation of a woman has been dissected by the feminist art historians reading it from psychoanalytical perspective made a paradigm shift in the way art history was thus far interpreted. In attempting to single out the female imagery other than the great goddesses, I have attempted to examine this body of sculpture which were generally considered decorative and inferior and non critical in the religious and philosophical sense. I have used a later term from architectural text to define their imagery, drawing on sources in literature, philosophy and epigraphy.

In the case of history of Indian art, one of the foremost interpreters has been a woman (Stella Kramrisch) and her explanation of the images of *devāṅganā* (she does not use this term) as '*apsaras*', '*surasundarī*', '*Vāk*' from the Vedic, later Vedic and Purāṇic sources is revealing. Although she tackles the subject of these figures at the fag end of her magnum opus on Hindu temple, she does justice to their significance by interpreting them philosophically as aids or visual constructs that lead a devotee to the experience of Brahman. It is in the schema of a temple and its meaning that she traces the hierarchy of these celestial figures, as angels of Śakti or maids and subservient to the Great Śakti. *Surasundarī* is the celestial beauty, *apsarā* is the immanent breath and *Vāk* or *Śārdūla* is the lion or lioness of the 'uttered word', it comes into manifestation from its undifferentiated wholeness, her nature is ambiguous, winning and also destructive.<sup>38</sup> Stella Kramrisch variously describes the Śakti, Primordial Power and substance of the world as *Māyā*, the visible world which belongs to Brahman.

"She is herself the 'ability to act', her image is placed next to that of any of the gods. By her activity she attracts and helps the devotee; she is his guide

and appeals to all. While every man is not equipped for riding the *śārdūla*, he may be led by Śakti and grasp the meaning of her hand gestures, postures and actions. While the *śārdūla* is the 'angel' of active man, the various images of Śakti are collateral; they alternate on the walls of the temples of Khajuraho and on the capitals of the pillars. The rearing body of the animal and the shape of the woman are seen to sway in similar curves; they are one in nature and form though different in functions and appearance, for Śakti is Vāk, the 'active power of Brahman proceeding from him'<sup>39</sup> and the *śārdūla* is Vāk."<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Kramrisch does highlight the importance of female power but it is always seen in a binary, hetero-sexual context of a *mithuna* or a pair, active/passive, man/woman, human/beast and mundane/spiritual, Vāk/Śārdūla. Here again, when looking at the celestial female sculptures on a temple wall, one could be male or a female devotee but the metaphors of creative energy are seen in feminine form. Thus, the whole concept of the Śaktis or *devāṅganā* is metaphorical as well as allegorical and should certainly be perceived thus. The female power is never undermined, albeit celebrated.

Stella Kramrisch further expounds on the Śakti or Yoginī in relation with the Great Goddess:

"The Śaktis or Yoginīs are working energies subservient to the Great Śakti. On the walls of the temples they are figured in all directions as Celestial Beauties. They perform this work by the side of the gods whose activity their presence releases. Indian astrology knows the *Yoginī* as a cosmic power. It moves from day to day, from place to place, in all directions.

By the side of the eight Regents of the directions of space, by the side of each of the several groups of gods, the Celestial Beauties are placed embodied in their archetypal forms. They display them in rhythms and gestures and by their attributes which they have in common with the Yoginīs.

In the macrocosm they operate as branches and part aspects of the Transcendental Power, conjointly with the Supreme Principle as Yoga-Māyā, the manifestation of the universe. In the microcosm, with reference to man, Yoga-Māyā is the power of reintegration; the Yoginīs are maids and messengers, the 'angels' of the Transcendental Power. The Attractions in the outer circle of the *yantra*, the Celestial Beauties on the walls of the temple, serve man, the devotee; they satisfy his response to them so that, increased in power,

released from their attractions and transformed, he proceeds in his devotion towards God in the innermost sanctuary of his heart and in the temple. They help man towards reintegration, akin to those celestial damsels (*apsarās*) who appear at the time when he, a knower of Brahman departs from this world: Him approach 500 celestial damsels, 100 carrying fruits, 100 carrying various ornaments and 100 carrying garlands. They adorn him with ornaments befitting Brahma himself. Thus adorned with Brahma ornaments and knowing Brahman he goes to Brahman.”<sup>41</sup>

From the above quote, we have noted the hierarchy of representational images of the *devāṅganā* or Śaktis as Kramrisch calls them within a given monument, period or geographical area. With feminist intervention, we notice that the inclusion of popular culture into high art lends a special meaning to the representation of *devāṅganā* and the changing stereotype of female sexuality. Kramrisch refers to these celestial beauties in generic sense, in multitudes and as *paricārikās*, she has not identified their names or iconography in detail. It is this idea of 'subservience' to the supreme goddess that I would like to replace with the idea of the 'power of the female' – a relationship that is constantly negotiated. They are not mere *paricārikās* but cognitive constructs, conundrum of eroticism, asceticism, valour and motherhood combined, enigmatic and yet instructive, definitely free of patriarchal male domination but supporting the litany of the main deity (male or female) it evolves from.

In my attempt to identify individual *devāṅganā*, I have arrived at some conclusions that need to be further elaborated in another paper. For example, the representation of *devāṅganā* in action of *karpūramañjarī* (woman bathing), *svastanasparśa* (woman touching her breast) and *markataceṣṭā* (monkey pulling at a woman's garment), represent imagery of women obsessed with themselves, a truly radical representation in Hindu temple sculpture of the medieval period. Looking closely at the recurrence of *devāṅganā* iconographic types and analyzing them intrinsically, it offers a meaning which I have tried to uncover using classical and popular literature. Here philosophic 'reading' of the 'text' of *devāṅganā* or Śakti sculptures should be seen as an obsession with female sexuality where artist, *sthapati* and patron may have played a key role in deciding on their iconography. In a monument such as Rānī Kī Vāv step-well, *devāṅganā* with scant garments, surrounded by snakes are frequently carved, which otherwise do not appear in other monuments. Does the fact that the

patron of this monument was a female (queen Udayāmatī of Bhīmadeva II of the Solānkī dynasty of Gurjaradeśa) help to interpret the presence of *devāṅganā* on this monument or being associated with fertility be the 'macrocosmic' purpose guiding the overall iconography of the subterranean monument? Since a step-well is associated with fertility and according to Gujarati folk tradition newly-weds are taken to a step well for performing ritual prayer negotiates the appearance and interpretation (based on sexuality and fertility) of the presence of certain types of *devāṅganā* on a monument.

Note : Absence of diacritical marks for Sanskrit words at the end of the authoress is likely to lead to incorrect pronunciations, though we have tried to be accurate as far as possible.

- Editors

## References

1. According to Saskia C. Kersenboom, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1987, p.184, and f.n.20.
2. It has been noticed that the iconography of the *devāṅganā* on Śaiva, Śākta and Vaiṣṇava temples including some Jaina temples is the same. Text such as *Samarāṅgaṇa Sūtradhāra* and *Aparājita Pṛcchā* also mention their iconography and as late as 15<sup>th</sup> century texts on architecture, such as *Vṛkṣārṇava* and *Kṣīrārṇava* list them in details. These iconographic types were also recorded in oral form as well as in family documents of *sthapati* families.
3. Taking the research pioneered by Saskia C. Kersenboom on '*nityasumaṅgalī*' and the southern Indian *devadāsī* tradition, I would like to acknowledge the lead her research offered me and the scope opened up by the semiotic analysis and interpretation of the word '*nityasumaṅgalī*'.
4. Saskia C. Kersenboom, 1998, p.19.
5. Stella Kramrisch, *Hindu Temple*, Motilal Banarasidass, New Delhi, reprint 1986.
6. A.A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, Strassburg, 188, pp.124-125.
7. I recently came across references to these goddesses in Madhu Khanna's article on "Nature as Feminine: Ancient Vision of Geopietty and Goddess Ecology" where she rightly points out that "Almost all the geographical features of the natural environment are personified as goddesses". But my interpretation goes beyond nature personification to dynamic iconological evolution of a powerful female generative energy which is invoked through these various goddesses, a phenomena which continues for generations and fructifies into collective *devāṅganā* imagery.
8. *Rgveda*, 10, 10.4.
9. *Atharvaveda*, 2, 2.3.

10. Yāska's *Nirukta*, 5, 13.
11. *Atharvaveda*, 4, 37.4.
12. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, II, 6.1.
13. *Nāṭyaśāstra* – Bharata, trans. Manmohan Ghosh, Calcutta, 1950.
14. C. Sivaramamurti, *Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara*, New Delhi, 1978.
15. *Matsya Purāṇa*, Anandashram Series, No.54, Poona, 1907. (According to this Purāṇa, Muni was mother of *Apsarās*, while *Gandharvas* and *Kinnaras* were issues of Ariṣṭa; *Matsya.*, 6.45, Mor Edition, Calcutta, p.15 – Editors).
16. *Vāyu Purāṇa*, 69.54, Anandashram Series, No.49, Poona, 1893. (Only eight names of *Apsarās* have been recorded as produced by Kaśyapa and Ariṣṭa. From Kaśyapa and his wife Muni another group of about thirty-four *Apsarās* had come into existence; *Vāyu.*, 69.48-50, p.340; *Ibid.*, 69.4-8, p.338, Mor Edition, Calcutta – Editors).
17. My Ph.D. Thesis on 'The Power of the Female: Devāṅganā Sculptures on Indian Temple Architecture' will be published soon.
18. Vishakha Desai and Darielle Mason, *Gods, Guardians, and Lovers: Temple Sculptures from North India A.D. 700-1200*, The Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1993, pp.207-213.
19. *Samarāṅgaṇa Sūtradhāra*, 57, 46-47, edition 7, Gaekwad Oriental Series, No.25, Baroda, 1966.
20. *Śilpa Prakāśa* of Ramachandra Kaulacharya, (ed.) Alice Boner and S.R. Sharma, Leiden, 1966, 1.256, p.35.
21. *Śilpa Prakāśa*, 1.392, p.46.
22. (ed.) P.O. Sompura, *Kṣīrārṇava*, Palitana, 1967.
23. D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, New Delhi, 1959, p.260.
24. *Epigraphia Indica*, XV, p.85.
25. *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, VII, p.858 and P.C.C. Singhi Jain Mālā, p.108.
26. *Epigraphia Indica*, X, I, p.28.
27. *Kumārapāla Carita*, VI, 32, I 6b-b7.
28. Saskia Kersenboom, 1998, p.26.
29. *Ibid.*, p.28 from various other sources.
30. *Ibid.*, p.112.
31. According to the informants of Saskia Kersenboom, p.113.
32. *Ibid.*, pp.113-114.
33. *Ibid.*, p.124.
34. *Koil Oluku, The Chronicle of Srirangam Temple with historical notes*, V.N. Hari Rao, Madras, Rochouse & Sons, 1961, chap.II, p.122-4 from Saskia Kersenboom, 1998.
35. *Kumāratantra*, chap.II, *patala* 5, 108-9 from Saskia Kersenboom, , *Op.Cit.*, p.116.

36. From Saskia Kersenboom, 1998, p.27, original reference S. Ponnusamy, *Sri Tyagaraja Temple*, Thiruvavur, State Department of Archaeology, Govt. of Tamilnadu, 1972, pp.33-34. The dancer could either be a temple dancer or a court dancer, she is said to have endowed the temple with lots of precious gifts.
37. (ed.) Rosemary Betterton, *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, Pandora, London, 1987; (ed.) Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock, *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, Pandora, London, 1991; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, Routledge, London, 1988.
38. Stella Kramrisch, *Hindu Temple*, Vol.II, Motilal Banarasidass, New Delhi, reprint 1986, p.332.
39. *R̥gveda*, X.125 quoted by Stella Kramrisch, *ibid.*, p.338.
40. Stella Kramrisch, *ibid.*, p.338.
41. Passage from Kauṣītakī Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad, I.4 quoted from Stella Kramrisch, *ibid.*, p.339.



Fig.1. *Stambhayosita* with food basket  
2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh  
Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi



Fig.2. *Stambhayosita* touching her breast  
2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh  
National Museum, New Delhi



Fig.3. *Putravallabhā*, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 11<sup>th</sup> century, Sun temple, Modhera, Gujarat

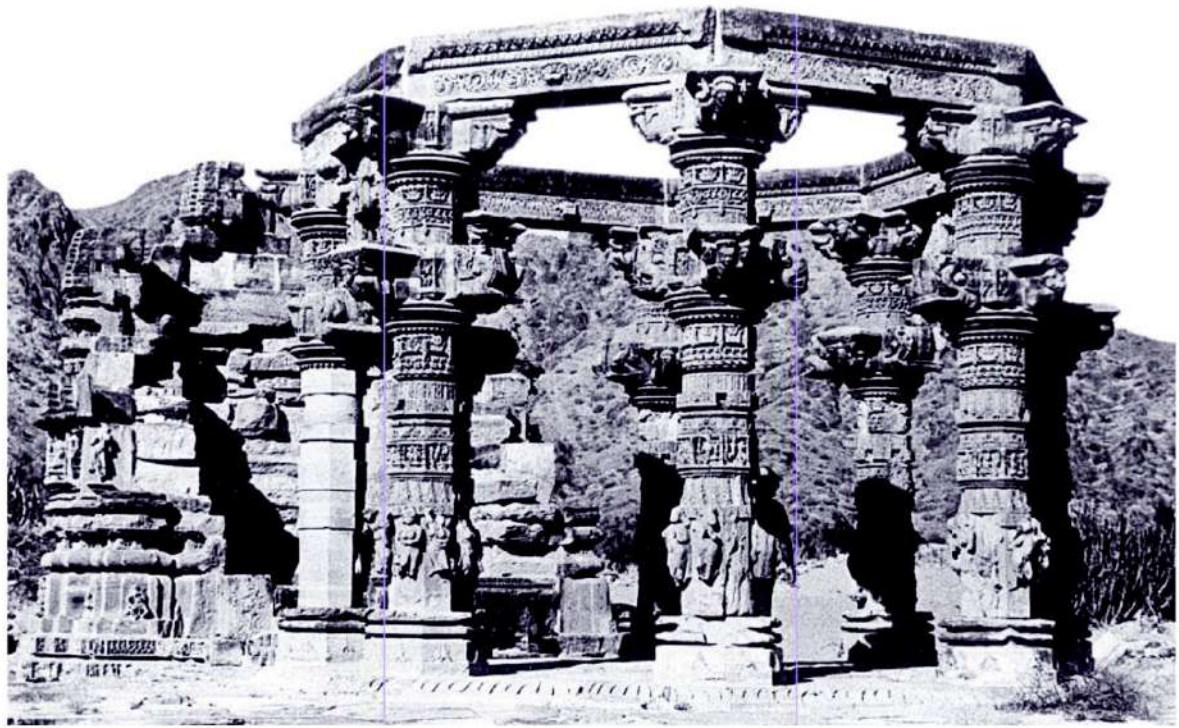


Fig.4. *Svastanasparśa*, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Sanghol, Punjab



Fig.5. *Śālabhañjikā*s flanking a *toraṇa*, 10<sup>th</sup> century, Jain stupa *āyāga paṭṭa*, Kankali Tila, Uttar Pradesh



Fig.6. *Toraṇa Śālabhañjikā*, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Eastern gate, Stūpa 1, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh



Fig.7. *Kanduka Kṛidā* on Mandovara, early 10<sup>th</sup> century, Sun temple, Tusa, Rajasthan



Fig.8. *Nāṭa maṇḍapa*, 10<sup>th</sup> century, Kiradu, Rajasthan



Fig.9. Urvashī *apsarā* pointing an arrow at a lion, 12<sup>th</sup> century, Śaraṇeśvara temple, Abhapur, Gujarat