THE DEVADASI SYSTEM IN ASSAM: ORIGINS, PRACTICES AND HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

Rooted in religious and cultural traditions, Devadasis, locally known as *Nati* were young virgin girls dedicated to deities through a formal ceremony held within temple premises symbolically "married" to the deity. They were forbidden from marrying human beings and were considered auspicious presences in rituals, never to experience the perceived misfortune of widowhood. Held in high regard, they played a central role in temple life through music, dance, and ritual service. The Devadasi system in Assam, once a sacred institution, underwent a long and complex process of decline, ultimately transforming these temple-dedicated women into objects of amusement and exploitation. The advent of British rule marked a major turning point for the Devadasi system in Assam. With the decline of royal patronage and growing criticism from Christian missionaries and the emerging educated Assamese middle class, the system began to deteriorate and gradually disappeared.

Keywords: Devadasi system, Servitude, *Natinach*, Temple dancer, Precolonial Assam, Ahom rule

Introduction

The Devadasi system, once in practice in Indian society, represents a complex and often contradictory historical institution. Initially, it bestowed recognition and respect upon women dedicated to temple

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service, granting them a unique space in the public sphere—an exception in a society that largely confined women to the domestic domain. For over a century and a half, the Devadasi tradition has been shaped by contrasting discourses. During the colonial period, it was widely condemned for its perceived immorality, particularly due to the non-monogamous relationships associated with Devadasis. British authorities equated them with prostitutes, criminalized customary practices such as the adoption of minor girls, and sought to transition the tradition from its religious roots to a secular framework under colonial law. In contrast, post-colonial feminist scholarship has highlighted the artistic contributions, autonomy, and cultural significance of many Devadasis, reframing them as empowered performers and custodians of temple arts (Kannabiran, 1995).

This paper seeks to move beyond colonial narratives to examine the nature and evolution of the Devadasi system in Assam—a region where the institution has received far less scholarly attention as compared to South India. It traces the origins, institutionalization, transformation, and decline of the tradition in Assam. The research methodology combines library-based historical analysis with ethnographic field visits to understand the lived experiences and institutional roles of Devadasis in major temples across Assam.

The first part of this paper explores the development of Shaivism in Assam which laid the foundation for the growth of the Devadasi system. The second part examines how the Devadasi tradition evolved across various Shiva temples in the region. The third section discusses the decline of the Devadasi system and examines how colonial interpretations contributed to the shift in perception, from viewing Devadasis as "servants of the deity" to labelling them as women of loose character. The fourth part serves as the conclusion.

I

In Assam, the three major streams of Hinduism—Shaivism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism—have coexisted harmoniously. The state is a melting pot of several ethnicities, tribes, and sub-tribes, and their customs, traditions, and rituals are thoroughly intertwined. The tradition of the worship of Shiva is not merely a later import but has roots intertwined with the region's indigenous cultures from prehistoric times. This cultural affinity likely contributed to the exceptional popularity of Shiva in the region (Goswami, 2000, p.33). One of the original inhabitants of Assam, the Kiratas, were mostly

followers of Shiva (Sarma, 1988, pp.144-148). According to *Kalika Purana*, even before the legendary King Naraka or Narakasura of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, who probably introduced the cult of the mother goddess into Kamarupa, Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa was a site of ardent Shiva worship and Shiva was regarded as the guardian deity of the region. (Barua, 1951, pp. 143-144).

The development of Shaivism in Assam was deeply influenced by tribal traditions and early rulers. The Bodo community, for example, identifies Shiva as 'Brathou Bra'. Tribal practices such as sacrifices and ritual dancing were central to early Shaiva worship. During the Koch king Naranarayana's expedition, his Kachari soldiers insisted on worshipping Shiva through tribal rites, which the king officially sanctioned. The *Deodhai*, originally tribal priests, at times became temple dancers—indicating that the Devadasi system may have roots in both Tantric and tribal Shaiva traditions. Archaeological findings from Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, including phallic symbols, further suggest the pre-Vedic antiquity of Shiva worship (Goswami, 2000, pp. xxvii, xxix, 23, 27, 33; Padmapati, 2021).

From the 7th to the 12th century AD, Shiva was widely revered as the tutelary deity by Assam's ruling dynasties, leading to the construction of numerous Shiva temples (Sarma, 1966, p.3; Sarma, 1988, pp.144–148). Dynasties such as the Varman, the Salastambha, the Harjaravarman, and the Pala were devoted to Shiva. King Bhaskarvarman (7th century), of the Varman dynasty, was described as a devotee of Shiva in the *Harsha Charita* and he invoked the deity in the opening verse of his Nidhanpur Copper Plate Grant (Goswami, 2000, p.60). The Guwahati Grant of Indrapala (11th century) also references Shiva and records temple construction (Padmapati, 2021). The *Yogini Tantra* claims that Kamrup contained over a million Shiva Lingas. Temples like the Hatakasulin Siva temple at Tezpur were restored by King Vanamala in the 9th century (Gogoi Nath, 2006, p.308).

Following the decline of earlier dynasties, Shaivism in Assam faced a period of disruption between the 11th and the 17th centuries CE due to invasions and natural calamities. However, it witnessed a revival under the Ahom kings who offered generous patronage. Kings like Pratap Singha (1603-1641 CE), Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 CE) Rudra Singha (1696-1714 CE), Siva Singha (1714-1744 CE) Rajeswar Singha (1751-69 CE) and Lakshmi Singha (1769-80 CE) granted revenue-free land to temples and Brahmins, strengthening Shaiva institutions. Several major Shiva temples were built or restored during this time. The Biswanath and Negheriting temples witnessed

continued patronage from successive Ahom rulers (Gogoi, 1994, p.207; Goswami, 2000. p.62; Borthakur, 1989). The Parihareswar Temple, originally of the 6th–the 7th century CE, was revived and reconstructed during the reigns of Siva Singha and Lakshmi Singha (Sarma, Sarma, and Choudhury, 1976; Kalita, 2008, p.3). Similarly, the Umananda Temple was built by Gadadhar Singha in 1695, and the Badyanath Temple at Jaysagar was constructed by Rudra Singha in 1697. The Gupteswara temple ruins on Singari Hill also point to an earlier Shaiva presence dating back to the 9th century. Even the Kamakhya temple, primarily a *Sakta Pitha*, has a strong connection to Shiva through the mythology of Daksha's Yajna and Sati's yoni falling on the Nilachal Hill where the temple is located (Goswami, 2000, pp. 17, 67).

The development of Shaivism in Assam is marked by deep historical roots, strong ties to indigenous tribal traditions, and consistent royal patronage across various dynasties. This enduring support cemented the status of Lord Shiva as a central deity in the spiritual life of the region. Shiva temples functioned not only as religious centres but also as hubs of social and economic activity, often associated with the Devadasi tradition, wherein female dancers were dedicated to temple service. As discussed, these temples received substantial royal donations, including land, wealth, and even people, which sustained ritual practices and institutional conservation. The integration of devotional dance within temple worship reflects the confluence of religion and performing arts. This broad-based support and cultural integration fostered the emergence and growth of the Devadasi system in Assam.

II

The origin of Devadasi dance, whether as ritual, pastime, or aesthetic expression, is difficult to determine, but it is clear that it was often performed to appease the Gods. Vedic hymns were sung in specific tunes resembling classical ragas, indicating a deep connection between music, dance, and devotion. Evidence of temple dancing and the Devadasi tradition can also be found outside India, in ancient civilizations like Babylon, Syria, and Phoenicia. In India, traces of the Devadasi tradition date back to the Pre-Vedic period, as seen in the Harappan figurines. The bronze "dancing girl" from Mohenjo-Daro, adorned with bangles and a necklace, standing in a provocative pose, is often interpreted as an early representation of a temple dancer or Devadasi. About this figurine A.L. Basham remarks: "…this 'dancing

girl' is a representative of a class of temple dancers and prostitutes, such as existed in contemporary Middle Eastern civilizations and were an important feature of later Hindu culture, but this cannot be proved…" (Basham,1986, p.21).

One of the earliest references to the Devadasi tradition is found in an inscription from the Jogīmārā Caves in the Ramgarh Hills. Written in the Prakrit, Magadhi dialect using the Brahmi script, this inscription dates back to the time of Emperor Ashoka. It mentions a skilled sculptor named Devadinna who loved a woman named Sutanukā, described as a 'slave girl of the god'—a strong indication of her role as a Devadasi (Lama & Mahanta, 2022, pp.57-59). Kalidasa, in his *Meghaduta*, also refers to dancing girls performing at the Mahakala temple in Ujjain during evening worship. References to Devadasis can also be found in Puranic texts from the 6th century CE (Goswami, 2001, pp.47-48).

Devadasi dances were popular across India, with different names in various regions, such as *Natīs* in Assam; *Bogam*s, *Jagati*s and *Sani*s in Andhra Pradesh; *Basavi*s in Telangana and Karnataka; *Davaradiar/ Tēvarāṭiyār/Tēvarādiyār* in Tamil Nadu; *Kalavantin* in Goa and Damaon; *Jogati*s/*Jogtine*s and *Basavi* in Maharashtra; and *Mahari*s in Odisha.

In Assam, the Devadasi system can be traced back to at least the medieval period. Although the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang, who visited the region and mentioned numerous temples, did not refer to this practice, epigraphic evidence points to its presence. The system appears to have flourished under the patronage of various dynasties like the Varmans, Salastambhas, and Palas, who were often devotees of Lord Shiva. The earliest clear reference appears in the Tezpur Copper Plate inscription of King Vanamala (c. 835–865 CE) of the Salastambha dynasty. It records that the king, while building the temple of Hātaka-Sulin in the city of Haruppeswar (present day Tezpur), donated villages, people, elephants, and courtesans. The same inscription notes that he had previously gifted 'Daluhangana' (women associated with the temple or Devadasis) to temples on several occasions (Sharma, 1978, p. 103, line 29). These temple women are described as beautiful and holding *Chowrie*s (*cāmara*s/ fly-whisks), a symbol of honour and temple service (Sharma, 1978, p. 104, line 14-20). Another inscription of King Vanamala also mentions his donation of villages, elephants, and prostitutes—likely temple dancers or Devadasis—highlighting the continued presence and importance of temple women during his rule (Sharma, 1978, p. 122, v.24). It was initially linked strongly to Shaivism, prevalent in Siva

temples, but also extended to Vaishnavism (e.g., Hayagriva Madhava temple) and Shaktism (e.g., Kamakhya temple). The Borgaon Copper Plate of King Ratna Pala (920–960 CE), the earliest Pala inscription, describes dancing Devadasis portraying Shiva through graceful hand gestures, along with vivid imagery of beautiful, playful women in royal settings. Similarly, the Gachtal Copper Plate of King Gopaladeva (990–1015 CE) mentions the construction of Shiva temples and the presence of Devadasis or female performers, whose anklets echoed through the temple town of Hadapyak, portrayed as filled with women as enchanting as celestial nymphs (Sarma,1981, pp. 261-62, 272-73).

The Devadasi system continued and gained renewed prominence under the Ahom kings, especially after their adoption of Hinduism. Rulers such as Pratap Singha, Gadadhar Singha, Rudra Singha, and Siva Singha made generous contributions to temples, including the provision of *Natīs* (temple dancers). Alongside land grants, the Ahom rulers appointed servitors to perform both daily and occasional rituals. These servitors undertook a range of temple duties, both ritualistic such as dance and music and non-ritualistic like cleaning, fetching water, and fanning. To sustain the Devadasi system, a new class of servitors known as *Sabait Khel* was formed by recruiting members from the Kalitā community. They were granted tax-free land for settlement, which came to be known as *Natar Khel* or *Natar Gaon*. Devadasis and Gayan-Bayans were recruited from these *khel*s. Prominent temples such as the Siva temple at Biswanath, the Negheriting Siva temple, the Parihareswara temple at Dubi, and the Hayagriva Madhava temple became important centres of this tradition. Unlike in many other parts of India, Devadasis in Assam often lived with their families outside the temple premises and came to perform during scheduled services. The following section explores how this practice evolved in these temples.

Biswanath, often referred to as 'Ditiya Kashi' or 'Gupta Kashi', was a prominent Shaiva pilgrimage site where the tradition of temple dancing was deeply rooted. *Devadasis*, were required to perform before the deity during the morning and evening prayers (*Arati*), as a form of ritual offering. This tradition is believed to have begun during the rule of the Salastambha Dynasty, when Harupeswar (present day Tezpur) was made the capital and *Devadasi* dance was introduced at the temple. The presence of these temple dancers was first officially recorded during the reign of Swargadeo Pratap Singha. In 1615, the Mughal general Satrajit invaded Assam. During a three-day halt at Biswanath, he looted the temple's wealth—

including gold and silver ornaments—and abducted three dancers (Bhuyan, 2024, p.46). After the death of Pratap Singha, Gadadhar Singha made significant donations to the temple, as recorded in a copper-plate inscription. His offerings included gold, silver, copper, two *Thakur*s, four Brahmins, forty *Sudra Paik*s (commoner soldiers), and eight dancers. He also appointed a pair of *Gayan-Bayan* (vocalist and drummer) and a percussionist to maintain the temple rituals (Gogoi, 2023, pp.176-77). Though the Biswanath temple was destroyed twice after Gadadhar Singha's reign, the religious rituals and dance performances he instituted continued intermittently until the British period. During the Ahom era, Devadasi dance followed the *Ojapali* (a ritualistic performance combining storytelling, dance, and music) every morning and evening as part of the *Arati* (Dulal Borthakur; Debeswar Bhagawati, personal communication, 26.10.24). In addition to the Devadasis, the temple also featured male dancers known as *Nat-Natua*s. While the exact origin of this practice is unclear, it is believed that the *Nati* dance (performed by women) predates the Ahoms, and the *Nat-Natua* tradition was likely introduced by Gadadhar Singha. These male dancers became a permanent part of the ritualistic life of the temple and continued to perform even after the end of Ahom rule. One tragic incident stands out; a female dancer was killed by Burmese soldiers while fetching water from the Brahmaputra. Yet, even such a tragedy did not halt the practice of ritual dancing at the temple (Bordoloi, 2004, p.96). Since the Devadasis in Assam did not reside within the temple premises, nearby villages like Natar Chuk and Natar Ati near Biswanath still bear names that reflect their association with these temple dancers.

The Negheriting temple, a significant Shiva temple located on a hillock near Dergaon in Golaghat district of Assam, played a crucial role in the development and perpetuation of the Devadasi system in the region. The name 'Negheriting' may derive from the bird 'Negheri', once common in the area, with 'Ting' meaning hilltop. Alternatively, it could refer to the distinctive 'Negheri Khopa'—a hair knot worn by Devadasis—either due to its resemblance to the hill's shape or its cultural association (Goswami, 2000, p.62). Its establishment and sustenance were closely linked to royal patronage, particularly of the Ahom kings. The earliest documented association began during the reign of Ahom king Pratap Singha, who, after discovering a Shiva Linga, ordered the construction of a temple in 1549 Saka (1627 CE) and made specific arrangements for daily seva puja, including the appointment of Devadasis (Borbaruah,2003, p.79; Goswami, 2011, p.56). Later, Gadadhar Singha further supported the temple, and

Rajeswar Singha reconstructed the present temple, which Lakshmi Singha dedicated in 1777 CE, also granting land and properties for its smooth operation, including the provision for Devadasi dancers and instrumentalists (Neog, 1974, pp.33-34; Sarma, 2003; Phukan, 2011; Neog, 2008, pp.135-137; Bhattacharya, 2013).

In the Negheriting Shiva Doul, graceful and beautiful young girls were selected from *Natar Khel* or *Natar Gaon* to serve as Devadasis. These girls remained unmarried—considered perpetual virgins—and lived with their parents or guardians, visiting the temple to perform as required. Near Baruwa-Bamun Gaon in the Dergaon area, settlements known as *Nat Gaon*s once existed; although they are no longer called *Natar Gaon* today. To organize dance and music performances in the temple, the Ahom rulers created a special position called *Mela Gayonar Nat*, which came with grants of tax-free land. A custom developed where beautiful girls born into this *Mela Natar Khel* were dedicated to the deity from a young age and raised to become Devadasis (Goswami,2006, pp.76-77).

The *Mela Gayon Nat* and Devadasis were required to be ready at dawn each day to perform dance and music. Before each of the eightfold daily worship rituals at the Doul, the *Nat-Nati* had to perform eight times. Their performance would begin with the start of the worship and continue until it ended. Those who performed at the Doul were served *bhoga* (consecrated food offerings) of *Dui Pura* rice. Behind the Negheriting Shiva Doul, there is a brick-paved area known as *Bhoga Khua Khola* (the place where the offerings were consumed). In recognition of their ritual performances, the king granted the *Mela Gayon Nat* large tracts of tax-free land and property. According to the temple priest and others, there is a mound in the northwest corner of the present-day temple compound where the Devadasis once performed their dances. (Phukan, 2011, p.20; Ashwini Borthakur, Abhijit Borthakur &Ashwini Kumar Borthakur, personal communication, 08.10.24). Notably, Phuleswari, the queen of King Siva Singha, was originally a dancer at the Negheriting Siva temple. Her real name was Phulmati, and she came from Chinatali in Dergaon. Captivated by her graceful dance, the king first appointed her as a maid in the royal palace and later elevated her to the position of queen consort (Goswami,2011, p.56).

The Devadasi system at the Parihareswar Devalaya in Dubi, Kamrup, was a significant and long-standing tradition that lasted until the late 19th century (Gogoi, 2023, p. 310). The temple's idol is believed to have been restored during the reign of Ahom King Siva Singha around 1730 CE. Later, during the reign of King Lakshmi Singha, the temple was completely reconstructed around 1770

CE (Kalita, 2008, p.2). The establishment and functioning of the temple received notable patronage from the Ahom kings, especially Swargadeo Siva Singha. According to an inscription dated 1738 CE from Siva Singha, several grants were made to the Parihareswar temple. This included land grant, *Bardeori*, *Doloi*, *Paik*s, as well as singers (*Gayana*) and musicians (*Bayana*). Although the inscription does not directly mention Devadasis, it is believed that the *Gayana* and *Bayana* groups may have included *Natīs*. It is possible that girls from these families were offered as Devadasis to serve the temple. It is also said that Siva Singha brought Devadasis from Devgaon and introduced Devadasi dance in this temple. (Saikia,1986, pp.307-308; Sarma, Sarma& Choudhury, 1976, p.37).Kharnaka Bayan was the first *Bayan*, and Bhuipriya was the first *Nati/ Natini* of the Parihareswar temple.

The Parihareswar temple celebrated both Rongali and Bhogali Bihu as public festivals. Queen Phuleswari (Bar Raja) also donated a Durga idol to the temple, after which Durga Puja became an important internal temple ritual. It is believed that from this time onward, Devadasis not only performed dances inside the temple but also began dancing outside during Bihu and Durga Puja celebrations. The Devadasis performed their ritual dances three times a day (Tini Prahar) in front of the deity—during morning worship (*Pratah*), midday worship (*Madhyanah*), and evening prayer (*Sandhya Arati*). On performance days, they had to fast from morning until all the dances were completed. Before dancing, the Devadasis would bathe in the temple pond and then get ready in their dance attire (Dharma Das Bayan, Personal Communication, 15.10.24).The ritual began with the beating of drums. At the first beat, the bathing of the deity would start. At the second beat, the worship began, and the Devadasis had to kneel and bow. At the third beat, they started their dance performance. Their dance was accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of the *khol* (traditional drums) and *bhortal* (traditional cymbals). The performance traditionally opened with a musical segment called *Gurughata*, played on two or more *khol*s. This rhythm was played for an extended period and was always accompanied by a pair of *bhortal*s (Sarma, Sarma& Choudhury, 1976, p.37).

It is noteworthy that the Devadasi system in Assam was practiced in both Shiva and Vishnu temples—a distinctive feature not commonly observed elsewhere in India. One prominent example is the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo, a significant Vaishnava shrine situated on Manikuta Hill, where the Devadasi tradition was firmly established. This temple, constructed in 1583 CE, shares architectural and ritual similarities with the Jagannath temple of

Puri, Orissa where also there was the Devadasi dance tradition. According to the 16th-century text *Yogini Tantra*, the Hayagriva Madhava temple was built by the water god Varuna using the same material that was used to create the image of Lord Jagannath, further reinforcing the connection between the two sacred sites (Gowami, 2000, p.68; Deka, 2022, p.2194). The temple continues to uphold certain rituals associated with the Devadasi tradition. A group known as the *Bajaniya* still plays traditional instruments like the conch, bells, and drums during temple prayers, following the age-old custom (Kalita, 2011, p.46). Devadasis were known to perform dances and musical acts during *Sandhya-aarati* (evening worship) in the temple courtyard. Notably, in 1852 CE, an Assamese Christian named Nidhi Levi Farewell documented his personal observation of this practice in Hayagriva Madhava temple (Farwell, 1965).

The Kamakhya temple, a vital Shakta Pitha and a historic centre of Tantricism, played a significant role in the Devadasi system. The *Kalika Purana* (9th/10th century CE), a Sanskrit Tantric text associated with Kamakhya worship, mentions male and female dancers performing in the temple while venerating the goddess in her various forms. Jean Baptiste Chevalier, a French traveller, recorded in 1755 that the temple was "served by more than two hundred priests and a large number of young girls who were the most beautiful of the kingdom." According to him, these women were consecrated to dance before the temple's idol. Chevalier's mid-18th-century account, based on firsthand observation, suggests that the tradition of temple dancers in Kamakhya had been a long-standing practice, dating back at least to the period of the *Kalika Purana* (Gogoi,2006, pp.308-309). A Baptist missionary, William Robinson, recorded that there were not less than 500 dancing girls at the Kamakhya temple (Robinson, 1841, p.258). Further evidence comes from the *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, a genealogical chronicle of the Koch kings, which notes that King Naranarayan (ruling from 1540 to 1587) offered *nati*s (dancing girls) to the temple when he inaugurated its reconstructed building in 1565. This reconstruction was commissioned by his brother, Sukladhvaj, also known as Chilarai (Gogoi,2006, pp.308-309).

Additionally, the *Mohacina-cara-krama Tantra* implies that the sage Vasistha brought Tantric practices from Kamakhya to Mohacina (Tibet). This indirect reference suggests that the Devadasi institution may have originated in Mohacina, influenced by Tibetan Buddhist traditions, before being introduced to Kamakhya and surrounding regions (Goswami, 2000, p.56).

Apart from the major temples already described, the Devadasi system was also practised in many other temples in Assam, reflecting its deep cultural and religious importance. Evidence of this tradition can be found at the Singari Siva Temple (9th century CE) in Sonitpur, the Bilbeswar Devalaya in Nalbari, and the Madan Kamadeva Temple in Kamrup, known for its sculptural depictions of Devadasis. Other examples include the Gopeswar Devalaya in Dhekiajuli, the Umananda Temple in Guwahati (built in 1695 CE), and the ancient Da-Parvatiya Temple (5th–6th century CE), which features stone carvings of female dancers. The Tezpur Siva Temple (5th–6th century CE) is among the oldest, and the Tezpur Copper Plate Grant (9th century CE) specifically mentions Devadasis. Additional notable sites are the Pingaleswara Temple in Kamrup, the Kedar Temple in Hajo, and the Vaidya Nath Siva Temple in Jaysagar, built by Ahom king Rudra Singha in 1697 CE. The presence of sculptures of dancers in temple ruins across Assam suggests that nearly every major temple—from ancient to medieval times, including the Koch, Ahom, and Vaishnava periods—embraced the Devadasi tradition.

The advent of British rule marked a major turning point for the system in Assam. With the decline of royal patronage and growing criticism from Christian missionaries and the emerging educated Assamese middle class, the Devadasi system began to deteriorate—a process that will be discussed in the next section. Eventually, legal measures were introduced to prohibit the practice, and by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Devadasi system had largely disappeared from most temples. In the mid-20th century, however, efforts were made to revive the Devadasi dance tradition as a form of art. Scholars and cultural activists collaborated with the few surviving Devadasis, such as Kausalya Bala and Raiya Bala from the Parihareswara Temple at Dubi, to reconstruct and preserve the dance. Even today, various organizations continue to promote and popularize this revived art form (Dharma Das Bayan, Rohini Kumar Sharma Doloi, Personal Communication, 15.10.24).

III

The Devadasi system in Assam, once a sacred institution rooted in religious and cultural traditions, underwent a long and complex process of decline, ultimately transforming these temple-dedicated women into objects of amusement and exploitation. Held in high regard, they played a central role in temple life through music, dance, and ritual service.

However, by the 11th century CE, this sacred role began to erode. The situation deteriorated further during the later medieval period and sharply under British colonial rule. The Devadasi's position in society became increasingly vulnerable due to the loss of royal patronage, socio-economic pressures, and shifting moral landscapes. While kings once provided land grants and resources for their upkeep, the decline of such support led many Devadasis into destitution, pushing them to perform publicly and, in some cases, engage in transactional relationships for survival. Tax-free lands once granted to them were often appropriated by powerful sections of society, worsening their condition.

During the colonial period, the Nat community, known for their association with Devadasi traditions, was officially recorded in the British Census. In the 1901 Census, the Nat population in the Brahmaputra Valley districts (Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur) was 2,200 males and 2,309 females. By 1911, this number slightly declined to 2,073 males and 2,176 females (Allen, 1901, p.120; McSwiney, 1912, p.95). Today, it seems that no one openly identifies as part of this community. Our fieldwork in places like Dubi, Dergaon, and Biswanath show that people feel uneasy being associated with the *Nat* identity. This shift in perception was largely influenced by Christian missionaries and the newly educated Assamese middle class, who portrayed the Devadasi system as primitive and immoral. They stigmatized the entire tradition. However, as discussed in the previous paragraph, the actual decline of the system occurred much later, due to multiple factors. Despite the complex reality, these groups succeeded in shaping public opinion against the Devadasi tradition. The terms once denoting a performer or ritual dancer, *Nati* or *Natini* became synonymous with prostitution in a derogatory sense.

This biased perception is clearly reflected in missionary accounts and reformist writings. For instance, William Robinson, writing in 1841 (pp. 258–59), described midnight performances at the Kamakhya temple as “orgies” with “filthy songs” and “obscene dances.” Such remarks do not reflect an objective understanding of ritual practices but rather an effort to impose Christian moral standards on indigenous traditions. Instead of engaging with the symbolic, devotional, or cultural meanings behind these performances, Robinson’s account reduces them to spectacles of immorality, ignoring both the sacred context and the agency of the women involved. This reveals more about the missionary’s prejudice than about the true nature of the Devadasi institution.

Now turning briefly to literature, several sources vividly portray the decline of the Devadasi system in Assam. Rajanikanta Bordoloi's novel *Rohdoi Ligiri* offers a striking depiction of this downfall. In his narrative, the dance performances at Dergaon's Shiva Doul are no longer acts of devotion but spectacles aimed at pleasing male spectators. Even Brahmin boys are shown cheering the *Nati*s with crude yet playful remarks, while the dancers perform not for the deity, but to entertain the crowd. Bordoloi laments that sacred spaces had turned into sites of revelry and lust (Neog, 2018, p. 183). Similarly, Hem Barua's novel *Devadasi* (2010) portrays the decline at the Parihareswar Devalaya, where there was sexual exploitation under the pretext of consecrating girls to the deity. In this fictional account, Devadasis are commodified, eventually losing their sacred status and being seen instead as promiscuous. An earlier article by Nidhi Levi Farwell (1965, pp. 61–71), published in *Orunodoi*, echoes this degeneration. She describes how the Devadasi tradition at Hajo's Hayagriva Madhava Temple had deteriorated into a form of prostitution. Assamese poets such as Debakanta Baruah (2000) and Atul Chandra Hazarika (2000) have also reflected on the Devadasi experience in their poetry. Their works symbolically depict both the devotion and sacrifice of the Devadasis, as well as the pain, exploitation, and emotional struggles they endured. Through such fiction and poetry, writers offer a nuanced view of the Devadasi system's decline—highlighting not only the suffering and loss of dignity experienced by the women, but also how changing social values reinterpreted and reshaped their roles without completely dismissing the original sacred intent.

Thus, what began as a sacred tradition rooted in devotion and temple culture was ultimately dismantled through a combination of social, economic, religious, and moral forces—leaving behind a complex legacy. Indigenous resistance to the practice also grew in the early 20th century. The chief priest of the Parihareswar Devalaya is known to have worked to dismantle the institution, citing its loss of sanctity. (Rohini Kumar Sharma Doloi, personal communication, 24.10.24). The emerging Assamese middle class, influenced by reformist and nationalist ideas, joined this condemnation, further accelerating the decline of the Devadasi institution.

IV

This discussion, drawing from both literary sources and field studies, makes evident that the Devadasi's identity as a "slave of god" was

not merely metaphorical. The Sanskrit term Devadasi—literally "female servant/slave of the deity"— was initially a sacred ideal, a respected place within temple culture and society and religious devotion which slowly changed and showed a loss of agency, and socio-economic marginalization. Over time, structural corruption, patriarchal control, and the economic vulnerability of unmarried, dedicated women paved the way for abuse. It also reflected their lack of personal autonomy. Many were dedicated at a young age, without choice, and lived lives dictated by the authorities.

As mentioned earlier, Christian missionaries often made derogatory remarks about Indian socio-cultural practices like the Devadasi system. However, our research shows that such views are overly simplistic. It would be unfair to label all Devadasis as prostitutes, as many colonial writers did. The decline of the system in later periods was largely due to corruption within the broader society, not the fault of the Devadasis themselves. Therefore, while the Devadasi system was framed as a sacred and honourable duty, its historical trajectory reveals a complex interplay of religious service, gender oppression, and caste-class hierarchies. To understand it fully, we must look beyond colonial narratives and acknowledge both its spiritual origins and the structural injustices it later came to embody.

Notes

1. The traditional measurement of food grain.
   1 *Pura* = 3/4 *Dun*
   1 *Dun* = 4 *Ser* (or *Xer*)
   1 *Ser/Xer* = 4 *Paua*
   Approximately, 1 *Ser* equals 1 kilogram. (Baruah, 1900, pp.591,481, 926)
2. This copper plate grant is preserved by the family of the temple's chief priest, the late Narendra Nath Sharma Doloi. (Rohini Kumar Sharma Doloi, personal communication, 24.10.24)

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Abhijit Borthakur, Junior Priest,Negheriting Shiva Doul, Dergaon

Ashwini Kumar Borthakur, Dergaon, Descendant of priest family, Negheriting Shiva Doul.

Rohini Kumar Sharma Doloi, Chief Priest, Secretary, Managing Committee,Parihareswar Devalaya, Barpeta.

Sunil Dev Sharma, Priest, Parihareswar Devalaya, Barpeta.

Dharma Das Bayan, Member, Managing Committee,Parihareswar Devalaya, Barpeta, His ancestors were associated with the Devadasi tradition as dancers and musical instrument players in Parihareswar Devalaya.