Part I: Preliminary Information

Title:

Praise, Pity, and Persecution: The Effects of 20th Century Political Reformists on Modern Conceptions of *Devadasis*

Abstract:

The term “*devadasi*,” commonly translated as “servant of god,” refers to the female temple dancers and courtesans of South India, often ritually married to the goddess Yellamma and heralded for centuries as sophisticated artists and priestesses. They also frequently performed sexual services for priests, patrons, and kings. Over the last eight centuries or so, *devadasis’* societal status has declined significantly, such that many Indians now regard them as little more than crass prostitutes. This research will document the various political groups within India, such as the Nationalists, Dalit Reformers, and Feminists, who engineered the criminalization of the *devadasi* lifestyle and their motivations for doing so, thereby enhancing existing literature on the subject. More importantly, it will examine current conceptions of *devadasis* by non-*devadasi* devotees of Yellamma and explore how fully these understandings have been impacted by the politically minded reformist groups of the 20th century.

Personal Statement:

All my life, I have loved learning—but generally, not the kind of learning I did in school. From elementary to high school, the subjects we studied and the textbooks from which we read felt empty. I realize now that we students were never encouraged to question what we were taught, ultimately leaving me disinterested and incurious. I fully engaged in my assignments and classes, but I simply learned by rote. In eighth grade, however, a teacher introduced me to *Three Cups of Tea*, a memoir by Greg Mortenson recounting his transformation from Himalayan hiker to philanthropist building schools for rural Pakistani children. I was captivated; I yearned to see this place I read about and understand its culture and customs. For years after this, I read books almost exclusively about Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In these books, I discovered for the first time the reality of misogyny. The stories I read truly shocked me. I remember many a sleepless night after reading something too gruesome and knowing that it was not fiction, such as the numerous women arrested each year in Afghanistan for escaping their abusive husbands (Jones 2007). Though I knew little of feminism until college, I recognized the injustice and felt an inherent need for gender equality. Even at age thirteen, I realized that, as a female, I had a vested interest in the empowerment of women everywhere.

Upon entering college, I declared an International Studies major with concentrations in the Middle East and Asia and with minors in Women’s/Gender Studies and Policy Studies. I joined EFFECT, Elon’s feminist organization, in order to meet like-minded individuals working toward a common goal, as well as the Arabic Language Organization to gain a better understanding of the Middle East. Most significantly, however, fall semester of my sophomore year I enrolled in Dr. Amy Allocco’s class, “Hindu Traditions,” and discovered a passion for Indian culture. It resonated with the stories I had read of Pakistan and Afghanistan, yet India’s religious setting rendered it wholly distinct and equally compelling. In Dr. Allocco’s class, I learned of both the agency and the subordination experienced by Hindu women, and grew increasingly interested in knowing how these contrasts are rationalized in everyday life.

I am currently spending my spring semester studying in Varanasi, India where I am beginning to understand what it might mean to be a woman in India. I am volunteering with Guria, an organization based in Varanasi that combats sex trafficking and have become increasingly attracted to possibly working with women’s issues in South Asia as a career. I know that oftentimes, however, the efforts of foreign advocates can either be fruitless or actually harmful (Lupton 2011). This sad irony is generally due to the well-intentioned not properly understanding the cultural and political situation in which they are working, as we see in Haiti, where twenty billion dollars in donations to the 2010 earthquake relief fund had still not reached nearly half a million people remaining in tent camps as of 2013 (Haiti). Many do-gooders in the developed world often view third world residents as those in need of “saving”—an inherently damaging philosophy robbing the developing world of its agency.

The Lumen Prize would afford me the opportunity to build a foundation for future research beyond the undergraduate level by allowing me to interrogate my own good intentions and their origins in western, Christian imperialism. I hope that through the Lumen Prize I can begin to understand women’s subjugation in India to then employ that knowledge for a positive end.

Part II: Project Description

“Renunciants of ordinary family life, [*devadasis*] may command respect, but not respectability” (Ramberg 2014).

Focus:

*Devadasis* are women in South India who are ritually married to a deity and who traditionally served as accomplished performers and courtesans in courts and temples. Oftentimes, they also provided sexual services to patrons for both religious and economic purposes. *Devadasis* are thought to have existed as far back as 550 CE, with their apogee in the twelfth century CE when royal patronage of the arts was highest (Kersenboom 1987). Because their deity-husband never dies, *devadasis* are accorded the status of “ever auspicious women”: those who never experience the polluted state of widowhood and who are therefore exceptionally holy (Kersenboom 1987; Nair 1994; Whitehead 1998). “*Devadasi”* is now a pan-Indian term, though it originally referred to the urban women operating primarily as royal courtesans and temple dancers before the colonial era (Ramberg 2014). These women were literate, owned property, and maintained little attachment to actual religious practice (Soneji 2012). Today, the most common *devadasi* is known as a *jogati* or *jogamma* and is married to the goddess Yellamma (Assayag 1990; Ramberg 2014). These devotees are rural, low caste, more religiously observant, and the primary focus of this study.

From the Victorian perspective of the colonial state, *devadasis*’ blend of religious and sexual identities rendered them outside the norms of modern society—a belief promulgated by British educators and lawmakers and eventually adopted by Indian modernist reformers such as Dalit (i.e. formerly Untouchable) activists and nationalist politicians in Independent India. In the decades leading up to Independence, Indian leaders seeking to project an image of a modern and civilized leadership embraced many Victorian ideals and customs. *Devadasis* served as objects to be manipulated in the campaigns of politically minded groups such as Gandhian as well as Hindu Nationalists, Dalit activists, and Feminists, eventually leading to the criminalization of *devadasis*’ practices and the introduction of a social stigma which continues to plague them even today (Ramberg 2014; Whitehead 1998). Though these liberally minded groups aimed to “liberate” *devadasis* from their sexualized position in the patriarchal system, their efforts largely resulted in the women’s defamation and produced a concept of normative kinship that could not accommodate their marriage to a deity and their non-conjugal sexual relationships.

While substantial research on *devadasis*’ history, personhood, and aesthetics is published, none has been conducted on wider social perceptions of them. It is evident in many cases that the traditional *devadasi* lifestyle is no longer a viable one. Whether the disappearance of the social and political conditions that produced this class of literate, independent women is good or bad is irrelevant; the simple fact is that few *devadasi* women still dedicate their daughters and must now find a way for themselves and their children to become reintegrated into contemporary Indian society in which householder status is normative (Misra, et. al. 2002; Ramberg 2014). This task is a difficult one in a society where those born of *devadasi* parentage face significant discrimination.

Everything currently known about this discrimination, however, is simply anecdotal. I intend to research the ways in which reformist propaganda has contributed to the modern mindset regarding *devadasis*—one that places them firmly within the category of “prostitutes” (Blanchard, et. al. 2005; McClarty 2014; O’Neil 2004; Tarachand 1992; Torri 2013). I seek to know why these women deserve “respect,” but are not “respectable.” I will first complete a comprehensive review of the propaganda and assertions proliferated by twentieth-century reformist organizations in order to recount all the forces at play during this period. I will then conduct in-person interviews with householder devotees of Yellamma to understand how fully reformists’ ideals have been absorbed by other worshippers of the same deity. Finally, I will undertake a cross-examination of the ideas evidenced in the interviews and the reformists’ assertions in order to identify common themes and their mutual correlation. Understanding the connection between reform movements and the degraded status of today’s *devadasis* can contribute to the effort to reintegrate these women and their children into contemporary Indian society by providing a surer understanding of how the lay community feels about the *devadasi* community and why.

Proposed Experiences:

The crux of my project rests upon my being able to interact with the non-*devadasi* Yellamma devotees in Karnataka, India, where *devadasis* comprise approximately one quarter of all female sex workers (Blanchard, et. al. 2005). To enact this component of my project, I will enroll in a one-month summer study abroad program in Bangalore, whose directors have already helped greatly in suggesting independent living arrangements and estimating costs. I will enroll in “Caste, Class, and Gender,” a 400-level Sociology and Women’s Studies course at Christ University, Bangalore to provide me with a clearer understanding of the social categories with which I will be working and their implications. During the mini-mester, I will have the opportunity to familiarize myself with Bangalore so that I may remain there independently for two extra months to continue my research after the program ends.

During my time in India, I will volunteer with EveryChild India, an NGO in Bangalore that frequently works with children of the *devadasi* community. I have also made contact with other organizations working with *devadasis* in order to aid my research, such as Samraksha in Bangalore and Belgaum Integrated Rural Development Society (BIRDS) in Belgaum, Karnataka, where the largest Yellamma temple is located and where I will spend one week of research. Most importantly, I will conduct a qualitative study through personal interviews in both Bangalore and Belgaum. I hope to establish a relationship with these worshippers that will offer insight into their perceptions of *devadasis*. The interviews I record will form the basis for my critique of twentieth century reformist propaganda.

Additionally, I hope to engage in a personal tutorial via Skype facilitated by my mentor, Dr. Brian Pennington, with Dr. Lucinda Ramberg, a preeminent scholar on the study of *devadasis* and the author of the most recent anthropological monograph on the subject. Speaking with her will allow me to ask several questions pertinent to my research, the answers to which I have not yet found in the literature. She will also be of great help in learning the proper etiquette of these temples, which can easily bewilder outsiders. Furthermore, I intend to engage in a literature search during winter 2016 with South Asian Librarian, Edward Proctor of Duke University. In fall semester 2016, I will attend the American Academy of Religion’s and the National Women’s Studies Association’s annual meetings in which I may present my work and receive feedback from accomplished scholars in the field.

To contribute to the creation of one of my proposed products, I will also take one-on-one digital photography lessons during summer 2015 through Vagabond Vistas in Asheville, North Carolina. These lessons will give me the skills necessary to capture candid and telling photographs—a visual representation of the results of my study.

Proposed Products:

The most important outcome of my research will be a thesis in two sections: the first will proceed historically to discuss the specific goals, motivations, and strategies of *devadasi* reform movements of the twentieth century; the second will discuss my field work undertaken in Karnataka and analyze connections between past, reformist ideals and the perceptions expressed by interviewees. I will develop certain sections for submission as scholarly articles to journals such as the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and *Gender & Society*, thereby making available this information to other scholars, social activists, and policymakers working on *devadasi* women’s behalf within India, to whom I hope to distribute the results of my work. Furthermore, the written work will benefit my own intellectual journey as I continue to wrestle with these complex historical and social issues beyond the undergraduate level.

Secondly, I intend to create an artistic product to embody my results. It only seems fitting to incorporate an aesthetic component into my project to represent the aesthetic beings that are *devadasis* (Soneji 2012). I will undertake photojournalism of these women to represent them as they are: people. I want to show the subjects engaged in everyday activities—eating, praying, talking—in order to demonstrate their humanity in light of the negative and abusive reports regarding their personhood. While I do hold some reservations about how fully I will be able to interact with *devadasi* women and capture these moments of their intimate lives, I anticipate that I will be successful in establishing several comfortable relationships through the partnership of local development organizations. I will ensure that my photographs are presented on the local level, perhaps in the offices of relevant organizations or in community centers. My ultimate goal is to work towards the improvement of lay community relations with *devadasis*, and I hope that such photographs as those that I have suggested can contribute to this aim by breaking through the barrier of “otherness” which so often encourages discrimination.

Part III: Feasibility

Feasibility Statement:

There is no doubt that the subject of my research is a contested and controversial figure who is still significantly misunderstood. For this reason, I am entering into the process with the mindset that I will venture where my project directs me. I have already been forced to shift my understanding of *devadasis* several times and I assume I will revise my preconceptions at least once more. Dr. Pennington and I are confident, however, that we have formulated a project plan that is feasible. I have invested substantial forethought and preliminary efforts into my project to ensure that it is a realistic one that may be conducted by an undergraduate student in the beginnings of a scholarly career.

Initially, I intend to consult primary sources regarding the reformist work of the twentieth century—newspaper articles, letters, newsletters, propaganda posters, laws, and the like. I will seek the assistance of librarians in my search for these sources, such as Edward Proctor, the South Asian Librarian for Duke University. Additionally, Dr. Pennington will serve as a great asset to my archival searches as he has vast experience in sifting through colonial Indian literature from his study of the impact of colonialism on Hinduism. I will also enroll in SOC 215: “Qualitative Research Methods” for Spring 2016 in order to gain a foundation in conducting ethnography and analyzing interview responses. Furthermore, I will ensure my qualification to conduct research by acquiring IRB certification.

The *devadasi* community is an exceptionally reticent one due to the discrimination—both social and legal—that it has endured throughout the last century, and it is particularly difficult to penetrate. I do believe, however, that conducting interviews with the lay community of Yellamma temples, i.e. those devotees who are not themselves *devadasis* but worship the deity to whom *devadasis* are ritually married, as I have proposed will be perfectly viable. While the women married to the goddess are controversial figures, her householder worshippers are not, and, if approached with care, should be willing to speak with me without issue. Regardless, I do hope to establish some comfortable communication with the women upon whom my study is based. My contacts in EveryChild India, BIRDS, and Samraksha will help make such relationships possible. Nonetheless, Drs. Pennington and Allocco have already coached me that India is a country where much is possible through chance encounters and connections when one is on the ground and involved in daily life. Living in Varanasi has taught me how true this sentiment really is, and I expect many unforeseen avenues to appear once I am physically situated and working in Bangalore.

I have currently established relations with Guria, a non-profit organization in Varanasi, India, which tackles sex trafficking and slavery. I volunteer with their office and children’s center where I have met activists willing to put me in contact with the necessary people to enable my research in South India. Additionally, I am acquainted with Dr. Anita Singh, a Gender Studies scholar at Banaras Hindu University who has conducted research on the role of *devadasis* in the movement for social purity within India, and who has been more than helpful in aiding my research thus far.

In order to acclimatize myself to Bangalore, I have chosen to ease my transition there by beginning with a study abroad program in which I will be guided through everyday life for one month. In this way, I may become familiar with the city in which I am working and gain more knowledge on some of the social issues which are most pertinent to my research through the course “Caste, Class, and Gender.” I am already becoming accustomed to Indian social and familial life due to my current semester-long study abroad course and home-stay in Varanasi. I will arrive in Bangalore knowing many of the cultural conventions, religious traditions, and tactics in navigating everything from traffic to bargaining. In conducting international research, I must also confront the issue of a language barrier. I will hire a research assistant to work with me four days per week to assist with translation from Kannada to English and vice versa. This individual will likely be a female student at Christ University in Bangalore, through which my study abroad program is based.

Budget:

* Summer in India—$6,700
  + Study Abroad Program Fees—$2,180
  + Student Visa (processed through Travisa)—$120
  + Round Trip Flights—$1,700
  + Research Assistant—$1,000
    - 4 days per week at 2,000 rupees/day for approximately 7 weeks
  + USB Internet Access—$45
  + Cell Phone—$35
  + Guesthouse Rent (2 months)— $700
  + Food—$405
    - During Study Abroad Program—$150
    - During Independent Living Period—$255
  + Ground Transportation—$315
  + Week in Belgaum, Karnataka—$200
    - Hostel (6 nights, 2 people)—$78
    - Roundtrip Train Fare, Bangalore to Belgaum, Karnataka (2 people)—$56
    - Additional Payment for Research Assistant (2 days)—$66
* Nikon DSLR D3200—$527
* Photography Course—$420
* 25 Canvas Prints of Photographs (36”x24”)—$1,416
* Tutorial with Dr. Lucinda Ramberg, Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Program in Feminist, Gender & Sexuality Studies at Cornell University—$500
* Consultation with Edward Proctor, South Asian Librarian for Duke University—$500
* American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting—$1,035
  + Flights (based on this year’s conference in San Antonio, TX)—$500
  + Shared Hotel Room (3 nights)—$450
  + Registration Fees—$85
* National Women’s Studies Association Conference—$955
  + Flights (based on last year’s conference in Milwaukee)—$375
  + Shared Hotel Room (3 nights)—$450
  + Registration Fees—$130
* Tuition—$2,750
* Unforeseen Costs—$197

TOTAL: $15,000

Timeline:

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|  | Proposed Experiences | Proposed Products |
| Summer 2015 | Digital photography course | Competence with digital cameras and photography |
| Fall 2015 | LUM 498—2 credit hours; Elon College Fellow junior seminar | IRB Certification; Extensive annotated bibliography on pre-Independence reforming movements |
| Winter 2016 | Library research with Edward Proctor | Expanded annotated bibliography |
| Spring 2016 | SOC 215; LUM 498—2 credit hours | Development of knowledge in conducting qualitative research; thorough preparations and planning for summer fieldwork |
| Summer 2016 | One month study abroad program in Bangalore, India; Ethnographic fieldwork in Karnataka, India | Completion of data collection; Collection of relevant photographs |
| Fall 2016 | LUM 498—4 Credit Hours; American Academy of Religion Conference; National Women’s Studies Association Conference | Synthesized results; Structure of thesis; Distribution of canvas portraits to relevant organizations and community centers in India for their display |
| Winter 2017 | Completion of thesis; Completion of academic journal articles | Submission of articles to academic journals; Finished thesis |
| Spring 2017 | Present at Student Undergraduate Research Forum | Presentation of work |

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