

## SERVICING WITH THE BODY HISTORICISING 'PROSTITUTION' IN MEDIEVAL KERALAM

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper tries to interrogate the question of prostitution in medieval Kerala society. This is done against the backdrop of the presence of three categories of women, viz., the tevadaccis or tevaradiyal, the nangas or koothathis who were temple dancers and the women in Manipravalam literature. The argument is that prostitution arises only within the context of well defined and controlled sexual relations and is an institution that involves wealth exchange in lieu for sexual services. Since they are located around temples, they can be imagined only within a system where temples are based on expanded agricultural production/trade and thereby produce considerable surplus.*

**Keywords:** Prostitution, temples, *tevadiccis*, *koothathis*, *manipravalam* women

### Introduction

Prostitution, as a system in which women's bodies and sexuality are made available in return for payment, may be a phenomenon that dates back very early into history. Historically, women's bodies are seen to have been objectified as early as the stages of ancient state formations. This, as Gerda Lerner has remarked decades ago, made women the first slaves in history wherein women's labour as well as sexuality were subject to male control. "The Sumerian word for female prostitute, *kar.kid*, occurs in the earliest lists of professions dating back to ca. 2400 B.C. Since it appears right after *nam. lukur*... one can assume its connection with temple services. On the same list we find the following female occupations: lady doctor, scribe, barber, cook. Obviously, prostitution, while it is a very old profession, is not the oldest" (Lerner, 1986). According to Chinese tradition, commercial brothels were started in the seventh century B.C. by the statesman-philosopher Kuang Chung as a means for increasing the state's income. Though there is some doubt as to whether Kuang Chung actually established the principle of licensing prostitutes, prostitution very early was set apart in special areas of the

town (Bullough, 1978). It was the Greeks who first put the brothel on an official footing. The celebrated Athenian lawmaker and lyric poet Solon founded state brothels and taxed prostitutes on their earnings in the 5th century BC. They were staffed by *hetaerae* (companions) who ranged from slaves and other low class women to those of the upper ranks (Vallely, 2006). An interesting feature in common among all these early societies, where prostitution prevailed, is the prevalence of state formations accompanied by ordered or regulated male female relations or marriages. Therefore, a definition of permissible or prohibited sexual relations was certainly a precondition for sale of sex to develop into a social practice.

Relationship between men and women out of wedlock find reference in the Rg Veda. (Bhattacharji, 2005:198). These relations, however, were not necessarily followed by payment while gifts were sometimes made; such optional gift making indicating an economic system characterized by barter. Prostitution becomes an accepted profession during the later Vedic period. The prostitutes were called *vesya* and with the growth of trade were expected to cater to the traders and merchants who travelled away from their homes. The prostitutes were variously known as *ganika*, *bandhki*, *rupjiva*, *veshya*, *varangana*, *kultani*, *sambhali*, *pumscali* etc. Simultaneously, sexual mores were in the process of being clearly refined and remodeled. The ideology of patriarchy and, within it, the cults of chastity in marriage, virginal purity and ideal of strict monogamous life for women were being gradually established. As was to be expected, disparity in labour and economic complexity in the society become for the first time manifest in this period (Sinha, 2003).

In the early stages of agricultural expansion and state formation, the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal family emerged; pushing women steadily out from production and increasingly relegating them to reproductive roles only. This cut off their access to resources which they could now claim only through their relations with men. Thus women, whether unmarried, married or a widow became the ward of some man; she was his property. So any man approaching any woman other than 'his', did so by trespassing another man's right over her. "Pleasure outside the house, therefore, had to be paid for- hence prostitution had to be institutionalized so that there was a steady supply for ready payment" (Bhattacharji, 2005: 198). Prostitution, it can be argued, arises only out of a context that has framed strict rules for marriage and imposed monoandry as the norm while allowing for

polygamous relationships for men. Inherent in such a system was the insistence on chastity and fidelity for the wife which was to be enforced through coercion or consent. There appear the strict lines of demarcation drawn between the chaste wife and the unchaste prostitute. Prostitution presupposes an economic condition in which surplus was produced/earned either from agriculture or trade. Hence most of the early forms of institutionalised prostitution are found mentioned in the Buddhist and Jaina texts corresponding to the stage of agricultural expansion that accompanied the growth of trade and urban centres. That Buddhism gave space for prostitutes like Amrapali to join the monastic order indicates that the ideological realm catered to the material social transformations of the time. The elaborate descriptions and classifications of prostitutes in keeping with their social and economic status reflect the well established nature of such a profession. The *Arthashastra* mentions the taxes that these women had to pay to the state indicating that prostitution was accepted and even promoted as a legitimate profession. (Chandra1973: 48).

### **Medieval Keralam – Historical Contexts**

Evidence of social stratification based on the evolution of an agrarian system is forthcoming by the sixth century in the extreme south of India. By then, structural temples emerged, along with the expansion of agriculture, in most parts of the Kerala region. The process of evolution from primitive agriculture to an advanced system was matched by corresponding structured land relations and social hierarchies, wherein traditional hereditary occupations were systematically incorporated into an ordering of *jati*. The temples were the new institutions that facilitated this change (Gurukkal, 2012: 292). With *jati* as a system of social ordering and Bhakti as an ideology that facilitated submission and contained dissent, the scene was set for non-kin labour and surplus extraction. The temples, with its functionaries ranging from sweepers to musicians, dancers, accountants, priests and many others who were remunerated with *virutti* or *jivitam*, emerged as independent institutions and gradually established themselves as the focal points of production and distribution as well as of social and spiritual life (Gurukkal, 2012: 298).

As regards the caste ensemble, the period from the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. is largely ascribed to the settlement of Namboodiris into the thirty two *gramas* (Veluthat, 1978). There seems to have been no evidence of land grants from Keralam leaving us to understand that the thirty two *gramas* occupied by Namboodiris (all being along fertile tracts of land)

were acquired through migration and occupation. That the earliest migrants into the land were without much influence or force is sometimes used to explain why the Namboodiris of Payyannur became matrilineal. The Kerala Brahmanas are also different from the Brahmanas elsewhere in that they followed the strictures of *Sankarasmriti* and the regulations therein. They arrived at a scene of matriliney in Keralam and tried to accommodate themselves into it and work out their dominance therein. Later they became a force to be reckoned with (Soman, 2001:11). Whatever the argument about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the successive batches of migrants, by the close of the eighth century, the Brahmana settlements became crucial in reorienting the society through placing themselves in superior positions. There was a systematic consolidation of brahmana power after the decline of the Cheras in Mahodayapuram leading to the breakup of political power into a number of feudal principalities and the rise of the temple centered economies.

During the post-Perumal period from the twelfth century onwards, *swarupams* that resembled the structure of extended joint families had emerged as the political power centres in all *natus*, the members of which were subject to a gradation of rights and privileges within a system of *kuruvalcha* with the *mutta kuru* enjoying overall authority and the *ilamkur* succeeding the *mutta kur* (Ganesh, 1996:98). While the *Swarupams* were held together on the basis of kinship ties, succession was matrilineal requiring the male members to assume *muppu* on the basis of their relation with the female members of the house whether as brothers, uncles or sons. Thus, lineage that was decided through the relationship with the mother's house was a crucial factor in determining seniority and is indicative of the matrilineal locations of male power.

Failing to obtain political centralization, power centres got deployed horizontally with temples emerging as autonomous institutions independent of the kings. Both the *dewaswom* lands (under temples) and *brahmaswom* lands (grants to brahmanas) came under the direct control of brahmanas. This was accompanied by the emergence of *Sanketams* which consisted of the temples and its lands. In the absence of hierarchical power relations, the *Swarupams* were often bent to submission by the *Sanketams* to prevent political intrusions, through the observance of *pattini* (fasting) or refusal to perform the ritual services.

Land, as *brahmaswom* or *devaswom*, was now virtually controlled by the Namboodiri Brahmins. South Malabar and Kochi were their areas of influence; land in south Travancore being almost seventy five percent owned by the state as *pandaram vaka* land limiting the possibilities for

the Namboodiris to extent their rights as *jenmis* in Venad. The alignment of other castes were in correspondence with the hierarchies in production relations and those lower in the caste ranks were lower in the production hierarchy as well. The ideology of Bhakthi celebrated through the *maparatha pataras*, who retold mythology from the Mahabharatha, or through the enactments of the 'nangas' or *chakiars*, who were the temple performers, contributed to the ideological reinforcements of the social order. The performances were designed to attract people and wealth into the temples.

Temples, as from the Perumal period, continued to be the centres for ideological legitimacy of the power of the *Swarupams*. Many of the temples emerged as royal temples under the *melkoima* (overlordship) of particular *Swarupams*, the authority of which were legitimised not only through patronage but through rituals and ceremonies in these temples as well. Along with this, the legitimacy of the *Swarupams* was secured through the transformation of their politico juridical authority into 'kingship' sanctioned by the brahmanic –sanskritic ideology (Ganesh, 1996: 104). However, even as *Swarupams* gained political legitimacy, their powers were limited to the small regions under their control and it became virtually impossible to effect a political centralization. K.N.Ganesh (1996: 105) argues that this form of authority, in the absence of political centralization, could not develop a revenue administration or a bureaucratic network. What then obtained in this medieval polity in terms of production relations was the retention of customary practices while dues from land comprised of the *varam* and *pattam* which were customary shares of the produce.

The temple centred economy, as it has been called, evolved a social formation that centred on paddy cultivation. The important temples were all situated in agriculture areas. However, an agricultural expansion that occurred on a large scale was lacking. Hence, compared to many of the temples in South India, the resources of the Kerala temples were extremely limited (Gurukkal, 1992: 33). The Kerala temples were not grand projects of architecture, compared to those in Tamizhakam. The level of agricultural expansion, surplus production and powerful kingship responsible for such structures were largely absent in Keralam. Consequently, the temple organization and expressions of spirituality were also not elaborate. The Kerala temples were not associated with large religious institutions, chariot festivals or *devadasis* as they were in Tamizhakam. The control and exercise of power present in the Brahmin *Ur* were absent too.

It is believed that the Namboodiris and chieftains enjoyed the produce of the land instead of imposing taxes (Soman, 2001:20) though scholars like Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai has opined that the 13<sup>th</sup> century ‘hundred years war’ changed the order of life in Keralam, ending also the system of taxation (Pillai, 1959: 44). Since agricultural production did not create much surplus, the kind of urban culture that could otherwise have evolved did not emerge in Keralam. So also was the case with large scale circulation of currency signifying trade relation. At best, paddy was used for exchange. This practice of simple exchange continued well into the modern period with the village potter, barber, milkman, etc. being given paddy in return for services. The temple servants were also remunerated thus.

The absence of circulation of money on a large scale, the minimum surplus created and the non development of an urban culture are points of departure for Keralam from a generalized ethos of South Indian history. Scholars have been inclined to project the state of affairs of south Indian temples, mainly those in the Tamil region, and its attendant institutions onto the social life of Keralam. Such attempts may hold true partly for Travancore where the Tamil influence was felt more strongly and *devadasis* were instituted in the temples (Pillay, 1953: 280).

The *devadasis* of the temples in Karnataka and Tamilnad find mention in the works of travelers like Marco Polo (Thanjavur), Abdur Razzak (Vijayanagar), Buchanan (Kanchipuram). Missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century have also mentioned them. The *devadasis* later became castes in themselves, though the need for providing sexual services was no longer imperative. However such mention about *devadasis* in Keralam are virtually absent be it from Sheikh Zainuddin who travelled here in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or in the writings of missionaries who worked here. Duarte Barbosa, however, comments that the Nair women took pride in the number of their ‘husbands’ and tried to seduce as many men as was possible. This allusion surely was not to a prostitute.

### **The *Tevadicci/Devadasi***

Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai has quoted South Indian inscriptions to state that the first known mention of *devadasis* occurs in Kota Ravi’s inscription in the Chokkur temple of Malabar. The inscription dated differently to 932 A.D. (Pillai, 1970:280) and 898 A.D. (Gurukkal, 1992:54) refers to the women as *nanna*, *tevadicci* and *kutacci*. Other evidence for the presence of such women are the terms *tevadiyal*, *tevaradiyal*, *adikal*, etc. mentioned in the inscriptions (Annual

Report of Epigraphy 1901). While referring to Kizhanadikal, daughter of Sthanu Ravi Varma, Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai is not certain whether the term *adikal* referred to being a *tevadikki* in the temple or whether it was a mere sign of respect (Pillai, 1953: 45). Evidence states that the wife of Venad king Vira Kerala Varma was Kandiyur Thevadikki Unnikkalathram (Pillai, 1953: 45). The inscription at Nedumpuram *tali* refers to the remuneration to the *nangaimar* of the temple and the classification accorded to them as *uttama*, *madhyama* and *adhama* (Gurukkal, 1992: 55). The basis of such a classification is yet unknown. A record of Bhaskara Ravi refers to a Ciritara nangacci also referred to as thribhuvanadevi, a title commonly held by the consorts of rulers in South India suggesting that she must have been a royal lady. Both Cirraraiyil Nannaiyar in the Chokkkur and Cirithara nannacci of the Nedumpuram inscriptions are referred to as making grants to the temple (Gurukkal, 1992: 55). Another record from Nedumpuram dated A.D. 972 refers to Mettalippurathu Cankara Nangacci. The four *tevadikkikal* of the Thiruvalla temple in the 11<sup>th</sup> century are recorded to have received special payment for their Onam performance. (Tiruvalla Copper Plates, TAS III: 197). The *tevadikkikal* were considered very trustworthy and one of them named Perumal Rayar was entrusted the safekeeping of the valuables donated by Iravi Varman of Trippappur towards the conduct of the rituals at Sucheendram (Pillai, 1958: 47). Though the status of a *tevadikki* was one that received payment, voluntarily service as *uzhiyam* existed as in the case of Chengodan Poovandi at the Cholapuram temple who made a substantial donation to the temple and so was Komalavalli whose brother Vadukan Kunavan made a grant to the temple for meeting his sister's needs (Pillai, 1958: 47). Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai cites evidence to claim that the *natakasala* (theatre) and some *mandapas* were built by the *tevadikkikal* there (Pillai, 1958: 47). The Thiruvalla inscription mentions the remuneration of '*panthiru nazhi*' paddy granted to four *tevadikkikal* (Pillai, 1958: 50). It is not certain whether this was meant for the dancers or the *ambalavasi* castes who were responsible for the many chores of the temple. The Kilimanur record suggests that the *tevadikkikal* pounded rice and held lamps in the temple (Kilimanur Copper Plates, TAS V. I :63-86). Besides the fact that many of these women belonged to royal households or families of chieftains there is a marked absence of explicit mention of sexual activities. Hence, on the basis of these references alone it is difficult to assume that they had to sexually service those in

power on a regular basis as was the case with the *devadasis* of the Tamil region.

### **The Temple Dancers**

The *nanga* or dancer, was expected to attract the rich to the temple and entertain them. She performed the recreational function of the temple. (Gurukkal, 1992: 55) They were variously known as *koothis*, *koothasthreekal*, *koothaccikal*, *aadum paathrangal*, *kudikkarikal*, *thaliccerippondukul*, etc. (Pillai, 1953: 49). *Sivavilasam*, a Sanskrit poem, mentions that the proficient dancer Cherukara Kuttathi was among the most prominent wives of Odanad ruler Iravi Kerala Varma (Pillai, 1953:45). The practice of systematic performance is attested by the presence, as well, of male dancers or *Chakkiars* who performed the *Kuttu* which involved acting, dancing and storytelling accompanied by the *Nattuvanars* who played music. In the absence of much inscriptional evidence of temple dancing girls forthcoming, the evidence from panels on temples at Thrikkulasekharapuram of the tenth century and the twelfth century Trivikrama Mangalam temple, depicting dancing girl, are pointers to their presence. The Thrissur Inscriptions refer to dancing girls attached to the temples (TAS III: 194). Inscriptions refer to the *jivitam* lands set apart for maintaining the livelihoods of these performers. This evidence should help understand these women as a category of temple servants. M.G.S. Narayanan attributes continuity in the roles of the temple women as he argues that with the full development of feudalism in Keralam, the *tevadiccis* or servants of the Gods became servants to prostitution (Narayanan, 1973: 48).

### **Women in Manipravalam**

*Manipravalam* works, a collection of poems composed in Keralam between the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, with an accent on the erotic, portray women as dancers and seductresses luring men of prestige and status to their midst. The women, it seems, were trained in the art of seduction. Men of high rank and status as well as the *chetti* traders are described as flocking to the homes of these women, described as accomplished in the arts and endowed with rare beauty, waiting for their attention. The notable *Unniaccicharitham* composed by Cirikumar celebrates the beauty of Unniacci who is referred to as an accomplished danseuse attached to the Tirumurudur temple in Wayanad. (Pillai, 1953: 48). Her *koyil* or palace is described to be frequented by physicians, astrologers, merchants, warriors and Vedic scholars (Narayanan, 1973:



49). The *Unniyadicharitham* composed by Damodara Chakyar is about Unniyadi, the daughter of the Odanad ruler. The *Unniccirutevicharitham* is about Unniccirutevi, the daughter of the performer Unniyappilla of Chokiram and the Valluvanad Raja Rajasekhara, whose dwelling is the meeting place of merchants, Brahmanas and chieftains (Pillai, 1958: 55-56). Besides these, there are the numerous poems like *Ceriyacci*, *Mallinilavu*, *Naraninandana*, *Uttaracandrika*, *Kaunothara*, as well as *sandesakavyas* like *Unnuneelisandesam* and *Kokasandesam*, belonging to this genre (Narayanan, 1973: 49). The women described here as placed in contexts of wealth, refinement and social status, were ascribed either royal lineage or status of Nair caste and perceived to have assumed titles like Manavimenaka, Maralekha and Maracemandika, etc. The geographical locations of these women extended from Odanad and Kandyur in South Keralam, Matilakam, Kodungallur, Trichur and Chokiram in Central Keralam and Tirumarudur, Trichambaram, and Pallikkunnu in North Keralam (Pillai, 1958:55-56). These locations, incidentally, are the areas over which the Namboodiri brahmanical order held sway.

*Vaisikatantram*, a work that describes the teaching and learning of the art of the erotic from mother to daughter has been severely condemned as immoral by scholars like Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai and K.K. Raja. The Namboodiris were alleged to have openly publicised this '*para stree*' (prostitute) category in the literature by identifying them with their names and places of habitation (Pillai, 1962:11-12). The literature, it seems, at once reflected the orgiastic season of the Namboodiris as well as exposed the ways in which they reduced women to sexual slavery.

There is an argument that this literature was pure fiction, copying erotic literature from Sanskrit into Manipravalam (Nair, 1971). Perhaps they were inspired by Damodaragupta's *Kuttanimatha*, Kshemendra's *Dasakumaracharitha* or Bhoja's *Sringaramanjari* which were composed on these lines. Poetry, rather than reflecting social reality, could have been employed to earn rewards from men of rank who wanted their beloveds to be aesthetically represented in the details of verse (Nair, 1999: 55).

The *acci* of the Manipravalam works has not been properly located yet. One opinion is that they were all *koothathis* (Nair, 1999: 55) and that they lived in wealth and considerable social status (Nair, 1999: 55) which makes it difficult to believe that they sold their bodies for money. They are not mentioned as members of any low caste. Since

the fish sellers and other lower castes are mentioned in the description of the *angadis*, probably these women belonged to the Nair caste. Some scholars have ascribed the authorship of these verses to Namboodiris or *ambalavasis* in as much as it reflected the social realities of those social groups in those times. Marriage, polygamy, poverty, indebtedness, lack of responsibility of the youngsters are all constant refrain in the verses (Ilayaraja, 1940:84). It has been cited that the canons of beauty and desire, ascribed to these women, reflected the Namboodiri erotic imaginations of their Nair *sambandham* women (Soman, 1995: 77).

A hasty conclusion that this situation was one of prostitution is unwarranted. In a system where women's access to resources and social status were determined by their sexual relationships with those in power, whether through *sambandham* with Namboodiris or through sexual relations with the ruling classes, such seductions and proficiency manifest strategic signification for social living. *Vaisikatantram* acquires meaning in such a context.

### **Problematizing 'Prostitution'**

The material contexts for the rise of prostitution as an institution did not exist in medieval Kerala. In the Mauryan polity, taxes from prostitution had been received into the treasury to support the state machinery. Compared to the Tamil region, surplus production that can sustain such an institution did not emerge in Kerala due to limited agricultural expansion and production. It would be a misstep to generalise for the whole of Kerala from a 'South Indian' experience of temples and temple organisations. There is the need to view Travancore, largely under Tamil influence, as different from Kochi and South Malabar which were regions more or less within the ambit of a Namboodiri (brahmanical) social order. Feudal processes that were characterised by decentralised authority and the presence of autonomous *Sankethams* had prevented systematic and expanded levels of surplus accumulation. More pertinently, the production relations of the region need to be considered seriously before assuming an urban culture and its attendant social institutions for the whole of Kerala. Large scale craft guilds did not develop in this region after *ancuvannam* and *manigramam* receded in importance in the post Chera period. The institution of *nagaram*, a "separately designed area inhabited primarily by men of the trading community and others who earned their living largely by commercial and artisanal activities...and a corporate body of *nagarattar*...constituted only by the merchants of the locality" (Veluthat, 2012:219), that was a

feature of Tamil regions, did not obtain in central Kerala. Nor did major markets emerge except for the Muslim, Jew and Syrian Christian *angadis*. The inscriptions of ninth and tenth centuries from Keralam refer only to *dinaram*, *kasu* and *pazhankasu* which were also in use beyond the region (Varier, 1997: 36). From 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, references to *acchu*, *kambi*, *kasu*, *taram*, *tiramam*, *panam*, *pakam* and *salaka* are present in literary productions like *Ananthapuravarnana*, *Unniaccicaritam*, *Unnicirutevicaritam*, etc. and were in circulation beyond the immediate localities. References cite the use of such coins for horse trade with Arabia and South India. The *Manipravalam* literature describes the merchandise, that were bought and sold in the *angadis*, categorised as food items including fish, vessels, medicines, beauty products, clothes, flowers, etc. (Dileepkumar, 2011: 9-13). The items of trade were everyday objects suggesting the *angadi* to be locales where people shopped for their daily needs. *Manipravalam* poems also attest to the fact that, in addition to employing them for exchange, there was exchange prevalent between the coins too (Varier, 1997: 41) suggesting the absence of flourishing internal trade that necessitated intense circulation of coins. Trade, at its best was not inland and the ports and towns like Kodungallur served as exchange and collection centres in foreign overseas trade. Largely, Chinese and Arab trade links were located in Malabar while Central and Southern Kerala regions did not fare much in the post Chera period except for the Jewish trade (Varier, 2014: 103-19). Interestingly, the poems have allusions to different *paradesi* people- Pandi thattanmar, Ariyar, Kannadar, Malavar, Vangar, Tulingar, Goudar and sometimes even Chinese who mostly were the carriers of merchandise from other places (Dileepkumar, 2011: 9-13). However, they do not find mention as ‘clients’ of the women in the literature.

The caste ensemble and the rules of untouchability were factors of primary concern that determined both production and social life. Patriarchal and patrilineal family structures accompanied by endogamous caste hierarchies that sustained the state formations, evident in the Gangetic plain in ancient India, did not evolve in Keralam. Kerala society had extensive traditions of matriliney before the arrival of the Namboodiris. The Namboodiris worked themselves in, both assimilating and accommodating themselves into the order, to work out a form of dominance. The legend of Parasurama prescribing that the women of Keralam need obey no rule of chastity is perhaps a case in point. An understanding that the sexuality of women (excluding the Namboodiri) was available to men of higher castes is vital in locating the sexual

mores of the time. Unlike in the Gangetic plain, in Keralam, except for the Namboodiri women, women of all other *jatis* including the *antarala jatis* of temple servants viz., the Poduval, Varier etc., were rendered accessible to the Namboodiri males at will. The rules of sexual relationships did not strictly demand monogamous fidelity from women other than the Namboodiri. Duarte Barbosa, alluding to the practice of *sambandham* among Nair women, is shocked to note that they had no qualms in taking many husbands and in seducing them to ensure their own livelihoods.

Prostitution as an institution can survive only within a context where women's sexuality is available only for payment. In Keralam, the strictures on endogamy within the caste ideology were subverted to suit the needs of the specific social contexts. While Manu prescribes severe punishments for Brahmin men having sexual relationships with women of lower castes and is acutely concerned about the crisis of '*varnasankara*', in Keralam it became a common practice for Namboodiri men to seek out women from other castes; the rule of primogeniture among the Namboodiris making this practice necessary. Since there were no Kshatriya or Vaisya castes in the caste ordering in Keralam, the next one down the order, the Sudras were subjected to such sexual arrangements. Castes lower down were insignificant in terms of production relations to demand such arrangements though these women's bodies were nonetheless approachable to the men of superior caste and class. Therefore, more than an impersonal payment of money, the ideology of caste in Keralam ensured that women's bodies were available for men in power.

By what parameters were the *tevadiccis*, who were often women from royal households or chieftains' families, pictured as *koothathis* or temple performers is not known.. The *koothathis*, placed by historians in a linear continuity, have been equated with the women in the *Manipravalam* literature. This is despite the fact that some of the *Manipravalam* women, like the heroine of *Kaunottara Kavya*, have been identified as Kshatriya ladies (Pillai,1970: 281). Though the *devadasis*, as part of an elaborate institution, did not exist in Kerala temples except at Suchindram, the sexuality of the performers would gradually have been available to the priesthood as well as to the ruling class, provided they no longer hailed from aristocratic backgrounds. That the word *koothathi* has evolved into *koothacci*, a standard contemporary slander on the 'unchaste' women, is not a matter of coincidence. However, in those times, the women from the aristocracy

cannot be imagined to be placed at the mercy of the temple lords and be subjected to sexual services at their will. Moreover, this offers no exception from the general rule, within the caste ordering, that already rendered all women's bodies (except the Namboodiri) thus accessible.

Understandings on the sexual past of medieval Kerala turns out to be expressions of contemporary concerns regarding sexuality. Elamkulam P.N.Kunjan Pillai writes within the backdrop of heightened annoyance and resentment at the 'degenerate' ways of the Namboodiris who reigned as 'stud bulls' in that society. That the Nair women were accused of luring Namboodiri men into *sambandhams* invoked his ire. His interventions, within the reform discourse, with Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiripad on this issue is well known. The Malabar Marriage Commission Report (MMCR) states the problem of not finding a term to denote the man-woman relationship involved in the *Sambandham* practice (MMCR: 12). There is an apparent display of shame whereby the customary cohabitation of the sexes was increasingly looked down upon as indecent and unnatural. 'An institution (*Sambandham*) which by debauching the women of one class, condemns the women of another to life long and enforced celibacy is not one which justice need hesitate to condemn' (MMCR : 9). In the debates on Nair marriage reform in the Madras Legislative assembly Sir. C. Sankaran Nair defends the morality of the Nair women asserting that these women too had practiced 'chastity' ( Judicial Branch ,Simla Records).The pressure to make Nair unions, considered as concubinages, respectable is evinced in the marriage reform debates(Arunima, 2003: 128-56).

It is of consequence to note that most historical explorations of the *Kuttacchi*, *tevadiccis* or the women in *Manipravalam* have been undertaken within the colonial standpoint of social reform where a sudden shame is evinced regarding an 'immoral' past. Furthermore, by the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the discourses of modernity and colonial morality had established prostitution as an institution that required to be engaged with. The newspapers reporting on the now historic *smarthavicaram* trial of Kuriyedath Tatri had termed her as "worse than a prostitute" (Malayala Manorama, 31 May 1905).

It is necessary to identify the three categories of women in this picture - viz., the *thevadiyal* or *tevadiccis* who were associated with certain functions of the temple, the *koothathis* or *nangas* who were the performers and the *Manipravalam* women. Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai who pioneered the studies in Kerala's History creates a monolithic equation of *tevadaccis* as *kuttaccis* who later continued as the

*Manipravalam* heroines. This impression regarding medieval Kerala's sexual life was one that was largely accepted and subsequently employed without any serious questioning. One may perhaps find overlaps in the functions of these women but to merge all distinctions into one single narrative of prostitution is to leave unattended the dynamics of caste and production relations that were crucial in determining the sexual lives of women in medieval Kerala. That sexual relations between the *koothathis* and Namboodiris or between the women in *Manipravalam* and those in rank may have been a reality. But instead of emerging as a systematic institution that was state regulated and promoted, they might have remained at the level of either an expression of social dominance as in the former or in lieu for gift making within a context of an open discourse on sexuality as in the latter.

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