

# **The Devadasi System in Medieval Assam: A Historical Study**

A Dissertation Submitted

To

**Sikkim University**



In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the  
**Degree of Master of Philosophy**

By

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October 2021

Date: 13. Oct. 2021

**DECLARATION**

I, **Faridul Islam**, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled "**The Devadasi System in Medieval Assam: A Historical Study**" submitted to **Sikkim University** for the award of the **Degree of Master of Philosophy**, is my original work. This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

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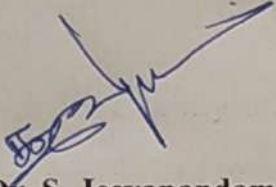
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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**The Devadasi System in Medieval Assam: A Historical Study**” submitted to the **Sikkim University** for partial fulfillment of the requirement of the **Degree of Master of Philosophy** in the Department of History, embodied the result of bona-fide research work carried out by **Mr. Faridul Islam** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any Degree, Diploma, Association and Fellowship.

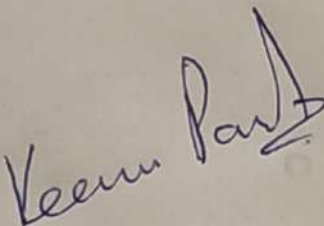
All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by him.

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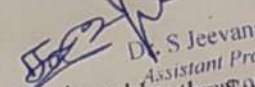
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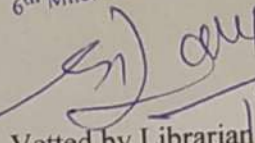
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### **“The Devadasi System in Medieval Assam: A Historical Study”**

Submitted by **Faridul Islam** under the supervision of **Dr. S. Jeevanandam**, Assistant Professor, Department of History, School of Social Sciences, Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim, 737102, India.

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**Dedicated To**  
**Maa (Hasina Begum)**  
**and Abba (Late Nowshad Ali)**



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## CHAPTER-I

### INTRODUCTION

The custom of devoting women to the holy or religious service was an old and eminent practice. The customs of each region differed depending on the period and way of life. Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Greece, Egypt and Cyprus were the few nations, where the act of dedicating women to religious service thrived a few thousand years ago.<sup>1</sup> In the temples of Osiris, Isis, Aphrodite<sup>2</sup>, Anu and Ishtar were aggregated as the women for holy assistance separately. Generally, the act of committing women for the sake of religion is known as theogony. The act of utilizing beautiful women for religious purposes in the numerous temples of India was famous from ancient times onwards. Curiously, this group of women had the option of participating in an extensive emancipation, which other women could not imagine, shaped a community and later turned into an interesting feature of Indian history. The name of the community is commonly known as *devadasi* or temple women. The historical backdrop of India is inadequate without the incorporation of the institution of *devadasi*. Saskia C Kersenboom-Story expressed that *devadasi* were an object of romantic reminiscence of the past.<sup>3</sup> In Assam, *devadasis* were significant functionaries in the 'Hindu' societies, who were extraordinarily connected with temple institutions. In the long history of temple institutions, the tradition of ritual dancing by *devadasis* was a part of sacred service. A.K. Singh the historian said that in India, the practice started and developed during the early medieval period onwards.<sup>4</sup> Archeological evidence like inscriptions gave a great deal of information about the *devadasi* institution. The *devadasi* tradition was more popular in the Siva and the Vishnu temples. In Kamarupa and later Assam, the

custom was widely prevalent, which can be proved by the mention of the employment of *devadasis* in various plates issued after the reconstruction of temples.<sup>5</sup>

### **The term, *devadasi***

*Devadasi* is a woman who was dedicated and attached to a specific temple.<sup>6</sup> It was a pan-Indian occurrence. The term *devadasi* implies a maidservant of God<sup>7</sup>, who was oppressed for the assistance of some God or holy item in the temple. The *devadasis* were unmarried temple employees who had devoted themselves to the temple Gods as youthful through the rituals that followed the 'Hindu' wedding process.<sup>8</sup> The 'divine marriage' of the young girls made them forever unconventional because of the alleged unpropitious widowhood. In this unique circumstance, Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story alluded to *devadasi* as *nityasumangali* (forever auspicious).<sup>9</sup> The word *devadasi* is said to be a Sanskritized type of the Tamil word *devaradiyar*, which implies a woman who was oppressed for the assistance of some particular God or holy object.<sup>10</sup> Generally, the word is the feminine type of *deva-dasa*, meaning a man who was subjugated for the service of a deity.<sup>11</sup>

Scholar Leslie Orr expressed that the *devadasi* or temple girls, one who might possibly be a whore or artist and one who is related to the temple, either by having some sort of customary regular work in a temple or on the grounds that her essential social identity is characterized concerning to a temple.<sup>12</sup> Pioneer ethnographer Edgar Thurston portrayed that *devadasis* as *dasis* or *deva-dasis* are moving young women appended to the Tamil temples, which remain alive through dancing and music, and the act of 'the oldest profession in the world'.<sup>13</sup> The anthropologist Frederique Apffel Marglin considered

*devadasis* as an exceptionally specific and unusual group of women, and one who went about as the harbinger of auspiciousness to a state and society.<sup>14</sup> Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story called attention to the fact that *devadasi* were an extremely expressive semiotic unit, implying the mythical-ascetic-cum-ritual objects living in the shared awareness of ‘Hindu’ customs.<sup>15</sup> Monier Williams depicted *devadasis* in his manuscript *Religious Thought and Life in India*, in such a way that they were held to be hitched to the God, and had no other obligation except to dance before the holy object and have a place with the God; thus, they were known as the God’s slaves (*deva-dasi*), and were generally considered to follow examples of devotion and appropriateness.<sup>16</sup>

Researcher Venkatramaiah said that a few women were engaged in temples as laborers and those knowledgeable in dance and music and would dance and sing in the temples on certain particular events. They were not whores or prostitutes. They were unmarried women who could have left the temple assistance and entered married life if they so desired.<sup>17</sup> J. N. Farquhar expressed that each grounded ‘Hindu’ temple targets being a natural proliferation of the heaven of the God in whose honor it was constructed... the *Gandharvas* (celestial men) were addressed by the temple band, the *Apsarasas* (heavenly women) by the courtesans who sing and dance in the service.<sup>18</sup> These were committed to the service of God, yet they gave their helping hands to their worshippers. They are generally called *devadasis*, handmaidens of God... they do their dancing and singing presentations in temples and festivities. Subsequently, the common name for them anywhere was *nautch* girls, dancing girls...<sup>19</sup>

The starting points of the *devadasi* institution in India are unsettled. Though the temple-based *devadasi* system grew nearly everywhere in India, even before medieval times. It is generally accepted that the practice of ritual dancing to appease God has existed since the early Vedic period.<sup>20</sup> The practice was very famous and was even thought to be promising in ancient India.<sup>21</sup> Kalidasa mentioned dancing girls in his *Meghadutam*. He explains that dancing girls were supposed to be available in the Mahakala temple in Ujjain during the evening prayer.<sup>22</sup> Kalahana's *Rajatarangini* likewise gives some data about the system in India. Lalitaditya, the ruler of Kashmir during the eighth century C.E., got married with a dancing girl. Her name was Kamala; she was a *devadasi* in a specific temple at Pundrabardhana.<sup>23</sup>

The *devadasi* system had its development and progress from the early medieval age onwards. The early medieval period alluded to a social change, where the temple establishment assumed a significant part in controlling the state economy. Many land grants were made towards the temples, which showed the importance of temple institutions in India. The *devadasi* institution was an inseparable element of sacred service in medieval temple institutions. Meanwhile, the *devadasi* system has affected a portion of the circles of public activity during the hours of its prevalence. The *devadasi* system shows an exceptionally far-reaching dispersion in the Indian subcontinent. Numerous inscriptions with respect to the *devadasi* institution have been discovered, which give us a lot of information about the system. Which was generally common in modern states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Odisha, Maharashtra and Assam. The *devadasi* system of Assam was an essential part of an ancient socio-religious and cultural practice. The *devadasi* institution in Assam has existed since a

remote past. It is accepted that the system was in progress in the many temples of Assam around the sixth century C.E., because of different social and cultural impacts. The ninth century C.E., copper plate of king Vanamala referenced the *devadasi* of Hatakasulin Siva temple<sup>24</sup>, which confirmed that the institution was predominant in Assam state.

### **Some other names of the *devadasi***

The *devadasi* system was an old and notable practice in the culture of the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the name of the practice likewise fluctuated from one place to another. Because of etymological and social varieties, *devadasis* of the temples have several names in various locales all over India. In Tamil Nadu, *devadasis* were known as *Devaradiyar*, *Patiyilar*<sup>25</sup>, *Adigalmar*, *Kuttigal*, *Rudra-Ganikayar*, *Manikkattar*, *Vellattikal*, *Devanar Magalar*, *Teliccherip-Pendugal*, *Talikoli*, *Nakkan*<sup>26</sup>, etc. The *devadasis* of Kerala was renowned as *Kuttiyar*<sup>27</sup>, *Kudikari*, *Marampavaiyar*, *Devidicchi*, *Nangaimar*<sup>28</sup>, *Muraikkari*, *Kootachi*, *Koothichi* and *Attakkari*.<sup>29</sup> In Andhra Pradesh, *devadasis* were called as *Bhogam-Vandhi*, *Sanis* and *Jogin*.<sup>30</sup> In the Karnataka region, they were known as *Suleyar*<sup>31</sup>, *Sule*, *Poti*, *Basavi* and *Jogtis*.<sup>32</sup> In the southern division of Karnataka, they were called as *Nayaka Sani*, *Ranga Sani*, *Muttukatti Kondavlu*, *Devarasuli*, *Nityasumangali*, *Kasabi*, *Patradevalu*<sup>33</sup>, and so on. In Assam, *devadasis* were known as *Nati*, *Natis*<sup>34</sup>, *Daluhangana*<sup>35</sup>, *Natinis*<sup>36</sup>, *Nartaki*, *Barangana*<sup>37</sup>, *Kurmapus*, *Kudipus*<sup>38</sup> and *Darikas*<sup>39</sup>. The terms *Patras*, *Maharis*<sup>40</sup> and *Nachuni*<sup>41</sup> related to the *devadasis* in Odisha. In Konkani belt, *devadasi* were indicated by *Bhavanis*, *Bhavin*, *Kudikar* and *Kalavant*.<sup>42</sup> In the Marathi talking area, *devadasi* institution was mentioned in wording like *Murali*, *Jogateen* and *Aradhini*.<sup>43</sup> K. Sadasivan referenced that

in the Bombay presidency, each shrine had its own name for its *devadasis*. As indicated by their temple alliance, they have been known as *Muralis*, *Bhavins*, *Jogavins*, *Naikinies*, *Kalavantis*, *Devalis*, *Matangis*, *Jogtis*, *Matangis* and *Sharnis*.<sup>44</sup>

### **Medieval Assam**

The historical backdrop of Assam has passed a few phases of progress and advancement to arrive at its current circumstance. With the assistance of the epic *Mahabharata* and writings like *Yogini Tantra* and *Kalika Purana*, the old history of Assam was interpreted. The chronicled record of Assam started with the foundation of Pushya Varman's line in the fourth century C.E., in the Kamarupa Kingdom (ancient name of Assam), which denoted the beginning of the early history of Assam. However, the incredible realm of Kamarupa crumbled after the fall of the standard of Palas during the twelfth century C.E., and there had been a rise in the number of autonomous or semi-autonomous realms.<sup>45</sup>

The region, which is located in India's extreme northeast, has been called by various names over the years. In the old time, this locale was known as Pragjyotishpur. Both the epic *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* contain references to this name.<sup>46</sup> The word 'Pragjyotishpur' denotes the 'centre of the study of astrology in the east'.<sup>47</sup> However, as time went on, it started to be known as Kamarupa. The name Kamarupa is first mentioned in the Allahabad *Prasasti* of king Samudra Gupta, ruler of the Gupta dynasty in the fourth century C.E.<sup>48</sup> Concerning the beginning of the name Kamarupa, there is a legend in the *Puranas*, though these legends have no historical significance. However, it is believed that the term is derived from the names of the ancestral Gods like Kambru or Kamru<sup>49</sup>, regardless of whether; there is any actual history about the beginning of the

term. The term 'Kamarupa' is additionally thought as a Sankritised expression of some prior composition. The Buddhist *Charyas* and early medieval Persian works of the Sultanate period like *Riyaz-us-Salatin* and *Tabakat-I-Nasiri*, unexpectedly the Assamese manuscripts like *Hara-Gauri Sambada*, allude to this region as Kamru or Kamrud.<sup>50</sup> Further, the Chinese traveler, Hiuen Chang, who extensively visited many parts of India during the seventh century C.E., and was welcomed by the then ruler of Kamarupa, Bhaskar Varman (600 - 650 C.E.), called this area Kamopo, T'ang-Shu, Komelu and Kamolupo.<sup>51</sup>

There are two significant speculations about the origin of the present name Assam. Initially, the name Assam is mostly connected with the Ahoms, who arrived in the Brahmaputra valley in the first half of the thirteenth century C.E. As indicated by the Ahom custom, it is accepted that the current term evolved from the word 'Asama', which signifies 'unequaled' or 'peerless'.<sup>52</sup> The Ahom custom stated that this word was useful to them during the hour of their intrusion of the valley by the neighborhood ancestral individuals, in admiration of the manner by which the Ahom ruler originally vanquished and afterward mollified them. Another theory suggests that the present name Assam is derived from a blend of the Aryan prefix 'A' and the *Tai* word 'Cham' meaning vanquished. 'Acham' signifies undefeated, for example unbeatable. The Ahoms viewed themselves as unconquerable, so they named their land *Acham* from which has originated the name of *Asom*. *Asom* progressively changed into the present Assam.<sup>53</sup>

Geographical borders are not an everlasting fact. It could change as indicated by time. Consequently, defining the specific topographical boundary of medieval Assam is also a



tough job. Geographically, the whole Brahmaputra valley and the Koch Kingdom alongside the present districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar in West Bengal came under the border areas of medieval Assam.<sup>54</sup> Medieval Assam is said to have started with the arrival of the Ahoms, a *Shan* clan, in the third decade of the thirteenth century C.E.<sup>55</sup> During this period, there were numerous self-regulating clans like *Chutiyas*, *Kacharis*, *Jaintias*, *Morans* and *Barahis*, and they administered the eastern portion of the Brahmaputra. In the western segment of Assam, another significant ruling tribe, the Koch set up their own monarchy and began to control it with their capital at Kamatapur. Additionally, there was a class of individuals called *Bhuyans*, who participated in their own independent force on both sides of the Brahmaputra valley. With the treaty of Yandaboo (1826 C.E.), control of Assam passed into the hands of the British, which denotes the end of the medieval period of Assam and the beginning of the modern era of Assam history. Therefore, in light of the geographical essence, this research will incorporate the whole Brahmaputra valley.

### **Statement of the problem**

The *devadasi* institution is an integral part of the socio-cultural history of India. The system has its own social and historical meaning. With regards to Indian history, religious institutions, for example, temples played a pivotal role in medieval society. The dominions of these institutions have appropriately influenced the socio-economic and political formation of Assam. The *devadasi* institution remains one of the most significant sub-institutions of temples. It is a socio-cultural practice that is identified with women. The *devadasi* system flourished in many parts of India. Many historians have

comprehensively studied and provided a detailed analysis of the *devadasi* system in India. However, apart from Indian discourse, the *devadasi* system duly existed in regions like Assam. However, unlike Indian discourse or historical studies, the *devadasi* system of the Assam region is not studied extensively. The well-recorded history of Assam has not much concentrated on the *devadasi* system. There are very few researches that discuss the presence of the *devadasi* system in Assam. A few references like *devadasi* dance (*Natinach*) could give little information about the *devadasi* and their fine arts. There is no serious attempt made hitherto to study the *devadasi* system in the Assam region. In this context, this particular research is an attempt to do a systematic study to find out the history of *devadasi* system and its development during medieval Assam.

### **Review of literature**

There are two sorts of secondary sources that will be utilized for this investigation. The first depends on the issues identified with the socio- religious and cultural history of India as well as Assam. The subsequent one is for those that have only discussed the *devadasi* and its system. There are a number of secondary sources accessible for studying the *devadasi* system. The sources are somewhat or entirely discussed *devadasis* and its institution. A. K. Singh, Frederique Apffel Marglin, Tarachand, Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, K. Sadasivan, Leslie C. Orr, Amrit Srinivasan, Nagendra Kr. Singh, Rekha Pande, S. Jeevanandam, P.C. Choudhury, Kali Prasad Goswami, Banikanta Kakati, Hem Chandra Sarma, Satish Chandra Choudhury, Paban Bordoli, Munindra Nath Sarma, and Tikendranath Kalita are the few well-known noticeable researchers who did extensive research on the *devadasi* institution in India as well as Assam.

A.K. Singh's *Devadasi System in Ancient India* examined the development of the *devadasi* institution from a chronicled perspective. Archeological evidence like inscriptions was the essential source for the study. The book examined the foundation of the system and further analyzed the functions and exercises of the system, their regional allocation, and also their admirers.<sup>56</sup> Academician Rekha Pande, in her article *Devadasis*, investigated the *devadasi* system of medieval South India. She examined the association between temple institutions and *devadasis*, the different obligations and functions accomplished by the *devadasis*, and the land grant, which is traditionally known as *devadana*.<sup>57</sup>

Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story's *Nityasumangali* is one of the progressive works related to the *devadasi* institution. This work thought about the *devadasi* custom as a semiotic unit. She did not investigate the system from a historical standpoint. She comprehended the system and its capacities inside the 'Hindu' practice. She follows the idea of the *devadasi* from the Sangam Age starting in 100 B.C.E., and going on until the breakdown of the Thanjavur court in 1947 C.E. She gives us a definite investigation of the different works of the *devadasi*.<sup>58</sup> Researcher Leslie C. Orr's work, *Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*, is a significant expansion in the investigation of the *devadasi* institution. This book is an extensive investigation of temple inscriptions and professes to uncover the truth about temple women's matters from those inscriptional records from the Chola line (850 - 1300 C.E.) in Tamilnadu. Above all, she depicted *devadasis* in three sections, like donors, devotees and daughters of god.<sup>59</sup> *Devadasi System in Medieval Tamilnadu* of K. Sadasivan talked about the *devadasi* institution of medieval Tamil Nadu. It is one of the broad studies on the *devadasi* system

of Tamil state. His examination depends on archaeological sources like inscriptions and epigraphical records. The work gives us data like the general state of *devadasis*, particularly during the times of Chola, later Pandya and Nayaka.<sup>60</sup>

F. A. Marglin's book *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*, he examined the *devadasi* system in the eastern part of India. The work paid attention to the *devadasis*, who were connected with the temple of Jagannath at Puri, Odisha. The manuscript gave ethnographic information. It was joined with the illumination of the *devadasis* and their interest in palace and temple ceremonies, their sexual impelling, position and geographical structure on their sexual accessibility and their social dominion outline. It further talked about the auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of the *devadasis*.<sup>61</sup> Anthropological work of Tarachand's namely *Devadasi Custom: Rural and Social Structure and Flesh Markets*, concentrated on the perception of religious practice, marriage association, ancestry legacy, family management, status, authority, etc. The book conjectured different ideas about the beginning of the system.<sup>62</sup> Academician S. Jeevanandam and Rekha Pandey's work *Devadasis in South India: A Journey from Sacred to a Profane Spaces* focused on the chronological development and progress of the *devadasi* institution from the early medieval to the modern times, with extraordinary attention paid to the Tamilakam region. They concentrated on the gradual change of the *devadasi* institution from one period to another. They further discussed how it went through different vicissitudes and, furthermore, it explores how the political economy ascertained the condition of *devadasis*.<sup>63</sup>

Banikanta Kakati's monumental work *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya* concentrated on the mother cult. He investigated the beginning and growth of the conception of the goddess Kamakhya and the temple's uniqueness. He also talked about the *devadasi* tradition in the *Sakti* temples like the Kamakhya temple and numerous other *Sakti* temples of Assam. He additionally referenced the distinctive worshipping examples of 'Hindu' religion, for example, the spouse Goddess Parvati, the virgin Goddess Tripura, the fear Goddess Tamresvari and Siva and Vishnu.<sup>64</sup> Kali Prasad Goswami, in his work *Devadasi: Dancing Damsel*, concentrated on the beginning and spread of *devadasi* dance in the temples of Assam state. He further comprehensively studied how the dance was viewed as a method by which Gods and Goddesses might be conciliated. He expressed that dance is a mechanism for advocating religion among the populace. He also stated that the dance exhibitions were intended to entertain people while also raising funds for the temple authorities.<sup>65</sup>

Edward Gait, the colonial historian in his book *A History of Assam*, focused on the history of Assam from the prehistoric period to British rule in Assam. It referenced the different clans of Assam, like *Koches, Ahoms, Jaintias, Kacharis*, and so on. Who practiced the act of human sacrifice. He gives some temporary references to the women attached to the temple. Despite the fact that he does not mention any points of interest on *devadasis*. Overall, this book can give significant data on Assam's history and the employment of women in religious activities, particularly during the rule of the Ahom kings.<sup>66</sup> Historian S.L. Baruah's book entitled *A Comprehensive History of Assam* covered the historical backdrop of Assam. She expressed that the number of inhabitants in the domain was made mainly out of two expansive divisions, like the 'Hindus' and the

'non-Hindu' sects. She further focused on the socio-political, religious and monetary existence of individuals in Assam. She briefly referenced the *devadasi*. She mostly talked about the political history of Assam from the earliest times to its modern era, along with the British rule in the Assam region.<sup>67</sup>

H.K. Barpujari's manuscript, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, talked about ancient Assam or Pragjyotishpur or Kamarupa from the pre-historic era to the twelfth century C.E. It comprehensively discussed art and religion, administration, and the social and economic conditions of the age. This is one of the most significant works in Assam's history, which provides us with data on almost all fields related to Assam's history. This work also gives us some precious information on the *devadasi* institution in Assam state.<sup>68</sup> *Dubi Parihareswar Devalayar Itibritta*, a concise record of Parihareswar *devalaya* along with *devadasi* or temple girls, composed by Hem Chandra Sarma et al. It examined the historical backdrop of the Bajali area (Barpeta district of Assam) and the *devalaya's* history. It further talked about the *devadasi* custom in Assam with special reference to the Parihareswar *devalaya* at Dubi, where the *devadasi* existed in history and furthermore, it talked about the administration of the mentioned *devalaya*.<sup>69</sup>

*The Devadasi Art Form of Assam* was written by Paban Bardoloi, paying attention mostly to various dance types of the *devadasis*. He focused more on the different provincial dance types of *devadasis*, like *Dasi Aattam* to *Bharatnatyam*, *Natinach* to *Devadasi* dance, *Satriya* and *Ojapali* dance. It focused mostly on song and dance activities by *devadasis*, and furthermore on dresses and ornaments worn by *devadasis* in different temples in Assam.<sup>70</sup> In Tikendranath Kalita's work entitled *Sri Sri Parihareswar*

*Devalaya Atit Aru Bartaman*, he talked about the chronological history and geographical basis of the Parihareswar *devalaya* at Dubi, Barpeta of Assam, where *Natis* (*devadasis*) was available in the ancient time. He examined the *devadasi's* dance performances, customs, melodies, *devalaya* history, and the present administration structure of the *devalaya*.<sup>71</sup>

All the above-mentioned research manuscripts concentrated on various issues identified with *devadasis*. However, they are not focused on the historical connectivity of the evolution of the *devadasi* system and are not investigating how the system was there in medieval Assam. Therefore, this specific research is going to trace out the historical origin and evolution of the *devadasi* system and how the system was operational in medieval Assam.

### **Objectives**

The following are the key objectives of the research

- (i) To study the emergence of temple institutions in medieval Assam with especial reference to the *devadasi* system.
- (ii) To trace out the evolution of the *devadasi* system in medieval Assam.
- (iii) To understand the various functions of the *devadasis* in medieval Assam.

### **Methodology**

This particular research uses historical methodology. The work is dependent on archival sources like *Buranjis* (Assamese chronicles), manuscripts, inscriptions, private letters, census reports, diaries, and so on. The available records like inscriptions (mostly copper



plates) will also be used to reconstruct the course of events accountable for the spread of the *devadasi* system throughout medieval Assam. The folklore narratives will also be used to comprehend the condition and actions of the *devadasis*. However, secondary source materials like books, journals, research articles, novels, souvenirs of the temples, and so on will also be utilized for a comprehensive understanding. The pertinent research sources for the study were gathered from the libraries of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam (DHAS), Guwahati; Indian Council of Historical Research (North-East Regional Center, Guwahati), Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti (Assam Research Society), Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan Library of Cotton University and Krishna Kanta Handiqui Library of Gauhati University. Some of the locally published rare manuscripts, which are not available in those libraries, are collected from the personal libraries of different individuals.

### **Chapterization**

The dissertation is divided mainly into five chapters.

The first chapter is titled **Introduction**. It details the concept of *devadasi*, the meaning and features of the *devadasi* institution. It investigates the source materials and historiography of the study. It further discusses the statement of the problem, literature review, research objectives and methodology and concludes with the details of the chapterization of this research.

The second chapter is entitled **“Emergence of Temple Institutions in Medieval Assam”**. This chapter will focus on the emergence of temple institutions with particular reference to *Saiva*, *Sakta* and *Vaishnava* temples in Medieval Assam. Further, it talks

about the sort of support a temple used to get and how *devadasis* were connected with those temples.

The third chapter is “**Historical Evolution of the *Devadasi* System in Medieval Assam**”, will study antiquity and investigate the origin of the *devadasi* system in the Indian subcontinent, and it will particularly focus on the Assam region. It will discuss the different inscriptional sources, which reference *devadasi* and their tradition in Assam.

The fourth chapter, “**The Functions of *Devadasis* in Medieval Assam: A Historical Study**”. This chapter will focus on the various functions of *devadasis* and their contributions. It will focus on the social condition of *devadasi* in Assamese society and their active participation in state politics during the rule of Ahom.

The last chapter, **Conclusion** will summarize the arguments of this particular research.

## **Endnotes**

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## CHAPTER-II

### EMERGENCE OF TEMPLE INSTITUTIONS IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM

In general, the word temple refers to a place where Gods and Goddesses as well as other objects of worship reside. The word temple comes from the Latin word 'Templum' which means a deity's sacred place.<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit word *Devagrha* including its equivalents, such as *Dol*, *Devalaya* and *Devayatana*, have a similar type of connotation.<sup>2</sup> Scholar Banikanta Kakati identified its Austric genesis, which means the same kind of thing.<sup>3</sup> In the books of 'The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent', more than one hundred one names refer to a 'Hindu' temple or religious place.<sup>4</sup> Among these, *Mandira*, *Grha*, *Matha*, *Saudha*, *Pitha*, *Prasada*, etc are some of the most frequently used terms. The term temple is often used in this research to refer to a house of worship for the 'Hindu' or Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses, where daily and regular prayer was conducted and still in practiced.

#### **Temple in Medieval Assam**

From ancient times onwards, the concept of temple construction work made its way into affairs of state. The king bestowed his patronage on temple construction and in return, he received comfortable cooperation from the different tribes. Under the tenure of the different rulers of Assam, the temple integrated many more 'non-Aryan' aspects into 'Hindu' traditions and assisted in the progressive assimilation of a variety of indigenous Gods and Goddesses of the *Kirata* religious people into 'Brahmanical Hinduism'.<sup>5</sup>

By reviewing Hiuen Tsang's description of India in general and Assam in particular, historian Chatterjee concluded that there were hundreds of *deva* temples.<sup>6</sup> He went on to

say that when Varman dynasty ruler Bhaskar Varman was on the crown, the temple construction activity moved quickly. Along with the temples, some almshouses have also been erected.<sup>7</sup> The Barganga Rock Inscription (fifth century C.E.) at Davaka in Nagaon district contains the first mention of an almshouse in Assam, which states that Maharajadhiraja Bhutivarman's *Visyamatyā* (minister), Avaguna constructed an almshouse for the king's longevity.<sup>8</sup> This may be the first inscription of its kind in the Davaka region, and it provides the very first mention of a constructed temple. The almshouses were most likely intended for visitors, royal officials and spiritual monastics. They were fed and aegis in the almshouses. By doing so, the king was able to keep an eye on the individuals who resided there, which assisted him in winning over the people and allowing him to proceed with his 'Brahmanical' hierarchies. According to a record found in a Mahadeva temple beside Guwahati, king Vallabhadeva allocated seven villages in the contemporary Cangsari region of Kamarup district for the management of an almshouse.<sup>9</sup>

With the steady progress of 'Hinduism' and the institutional formation of the kingdom, the early society's socio-political and economic system was transformed. Despite the changing situations, the temples continued to enjoy generous patronage from the successive kings. According to some documents, the temples received continuous and sumptuous patronage from the kings of Assam, who donated the temples with huge amounts of land, men, elephants, *devadasi* and some other goods. It went on until the end of the Ahom kingdom. For example, in 1757 C.E., more than two thousand priests as well as a huge number of attractive *devadasis* were present in the Kamakhya temple for religious duties and administration.<sup>10</sup>

Particularly on the donated land, agricultural activities were conducted. As a result, a temple was built that functioned as a 'nuclear area' for the state's economic equalization. As evidenced by numerous copper plate grants, the ancient society was predominantly a riverine agrarian society. This means that the state's economy had a significant quantity of surplus production. Large marketplaces have developed near the big temples, such as Mahagauri and Kamesvara, where the customer's goods were sold out in various places and the precious goods reached the stores in the towns of Hadapesvar, Durjaya and many other places where the temples are situated.<sup>11</sup>

As a possible consequence, it seems to be simple to see that Assam's large markets developed to center near temples. In so many situations, a temple served as a contemporary bank, where worshippers might deposit their gold and silver coins. With its earnings, a sufficient amount of oil was bought to refill the donated everlasting lamps and many times the money was used for agricultural activities. In Assam, *Bhandarkayastha* and *Doloi* or *Barthakur* loaned that money to help the poor people and then used the interest (*Byaj*) to light the lamps.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the kings of the region frequently expanded their loyalty and attachment to a number of deities such as the Negheriting Siva Temple, Hayagriva Madhava Temple and Kamakhya Temple of Assam in order to earn the cooperation of devotees from many religious communities.

### **Temple, Rites and Rituals**

The kings of Assam not only began the construction of a temple, but also contributed the required money and servants to ensure the sustainability of important ceremonies, rituals and festivals held within the temple premises. For a proper understanding of the nature

and form of donations as well as the temple's history, traditions, rites and rituals, stories and mythologies. Therefore, taking into account the rich rites and rituals, age-old legacy and continuation of daily and regular temple worship, this study covers three prominent temples of Assam. The Negheriting Siva Temple at Golaghat, the Kamakhya Temple at Guwahati and the Hayagriva Madhava Temple at Hajo are practically related to the *Saiva*, *Sakta* and *Vaishnava* sects of 'Hinduism' correspondingly. However, if it is essential, the remaining other sects of temples will also be considered in this discussion.

### **Negheriting Temple**

Negheriting is a Siva temple. It is popularly known as Negheriting *Sivadoul* and it is located on a hillock named Negheriting in a secluded location with a beautiful background. On the southern bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra, the Negheriting Siva temple is just three kilometers from the heart of Devargrama, currently known as Dergaon town in the Golaghat district of Assam state. On the temple's northern side, a tributary of the river Kakadanga, usually known as Gelabil runs. It may be possible to demonstrate the meaning of the phrase 'Negheriting'. There is a wee bird named 'Negheri'. A group of Negheri birds being available in the region may be called Negheriting and 'Ting' denotes the pinnacle of a hill.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, *devadasi* women during dance performances wore an unusual headgear. They knotted the hair in a head *palit* with a thin cover; this *palit* is known as 'Negheri Khopa'. It is possible that this is where the word came from. Finally, the top of the hill resembled like 'Negheri Khopa', hence the site could be called as Negheriting.<sup>14</sup>

This is said to be one of Assam's most famous temples from the pre-colonial era. The temple's presiding deity popularly known as Bana Linga, which is actually a form of Siva Linga with a height of 0.9144 meters and a perimeter of 0.9144 meters. The Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603 - 1641 C.E.) was notified of the presence of a Siva Linga hidden beneath an impenetrable jungle during an encounter with the Kacharis.<sup>15</sup> In Saka Era 1549 (1627 C.E.), the *Swargadeo* (lord of the heaven) ordered the jungles to be cleared and a temple built on the same site. He also made special arrangements for daily *seva puja*, appointing servants from both the Brahmana and non-Brahmana castes and notably *devadasi*.<sup>16</sup> Ahom monarch Rajesvar Singha nominated one 'Barthakur' as the head priest as well as some 'Thakurs' as assistant priests for the temple's customary and everyday *seva puja*.<sup>17</sup> The Thakur family's successors continued to worship the lord until the present day. The *devadasis* were tasked with performing dances and music. In this regard, it may also be mentioned that Queen Phuleswari was a *devadasi* of this temple in her past days.<sup>18</sup>

Many 'Hindu' religious rites such as weddings, *upanayan*, *annaprasanna* and many others are at present legally allowed by the temple authority. In the temple premises, all the important 'Hindu' rituals are celebrated. Every year on the day of *Sivaratri*, a large assembly is organized. Furthermore, water brought from the great river Brahmaputra and showered on the Linga during the month of *Sravan* (July-August) is a relatively new addition to the temple's rituals.<sup>19</sup>

## **Kamakhya Temple**

There are five Kamakhya temples in Assam, each in a different location. The others are in Darrang district's Kalaigaon, Dhubri district's Mankachar, Nagaon district's Silghat and Kamrup district's Khetri. However, for the sake of this study, the Kamakhya temple, which is located on the Nilacala hill in the Kamrup (Metro) district of modern-day Guwahati, has been chosen for the discussion. It is after all, the most recognizable of the five. It is regarded as one of India's greatest *Sakta Pithas*. In recent times, Goddess Kamakhya has long been the most omnipotent deity in the region, which has been famous as a place of magic and witchcraft since the remote past.<sup>20</sup> The legendary ruler Bhauma Naraka is said to have arrived in Assam from Mithila, which was situated near ancient Orissa, most probably between two to fifth century C.E.<sup>21</sup> This king of the Bhauma Naraka dynasty is also said to have had a significant role in the development of the Jagannath temple as a destination for pilgrims from all across India. Lord Jagannath's seat is titled after the Nilacala of Kamarupa site.<sup>22</sup> According to the *Kalika Purana* is that numerous other Gods and Goddesses, of whom eight important Goddesses are Padadurga, Guptakama, Vindhyavasini, Banasthi, Srikdma, Dirghesvari and Bhubanesvari, who circle Goddess Kamakhya.<sup>23</sup>

Lord Siva destroyed the *Daksha's Yajna* (sacrifice) after Sati immolated herself in the *Yajna* and began wandering with Sati's burned body. While he was roaming, God Vishnu utilized his *Sudarshan Chakra* (discus) to cut the Sati's immolated body into fifty-one pieces.<sup>24</sup> While the body has been dispersed across the Indian subcontinent, the *yoni* (the genital organ of the Sati) has dropped on the place of Kamagiri mount.<sup>25</sup> After

that, the place started to be known as Kamakhya or the Goddess of sexual desire, where the Kamakhya temple is located now.

There are two legends about the temple's construction. One legend claims, "Kama, the Indian cupid, was sent by other Gods to concatenate Siva's mourning after Sati's death and to reawaken in him the enthusiasm of creation. Siva was outraged and Kama was scalded to ashes by Siva's wrathful gaze. Rati, Kama's wife, who had no other choice, started to cry as other Gods advised her to keep the ashes and worship Siva. Siva restored Kama back to life after he was appeased, but he lacked his earlier elegance and beauty. Siva agreed to restore Kama to his previous shape on the provision that he had to build a temple over Sati's genital organ. For that purpose, Kama sought the assistance of God Vishwakarma, the craftsman and constructor of Indian mythology, to construct the temple."<sup>26</sup>

According to the second legend, Naraka, the son of Varaha Vishnu by the mother earth, built the temple. Vishnu instructed him not to pray to any other God than Kamakhya when he was installed on the throne of Kamarupa. Following the advice, Naraka invited a group of Brahmanas from his native region of Mithila to pray for Kamakhya.<sup>27</sup> One day, when the Goddess came before him, Naraka was attracted by Goddess Kamakhya's attractiveness and made overtures of love to her. In an attempt to meet the Goddess Kamakhya's condition of marrying him, Naraka nearly completed the building of a temple, a pond and a road from the foot of the hill to the top in a single night.<sup>28</sup> Henceforth, it is stated that Naraka is credited with the construction of the Kamakhya temple. He is also responsible for the four pathways leading from the foot of the hill to



the temple, notably Baghra Dvar (Tiger gate), Simha Dvar (Lion gate), Hanumanta Dvar (Hanuman gate) and Svarga Dvar (Heaven gate).<sup>29</sup>

In the year 1565 C.E., Koch king Visvasimha's son and successor, King Naranarayana (1540 - 1586 C.E.), reconstructed the temple and provided it with all the facilities for routine and everyday prayer in the Brahmanic tradition.<sup>30</sup> The king initially engage one 'Mahatram Basihya' in responsibility of the construction works, but he was charged of money laundering and later he was punished for that.<sup>31</sup> After that, Megha Mukudum, one of Naranarayana's generals, completed the task during a period of six months.<sup>32</sup> Two stone inscriptions presently found in the main temple's entrance state that king Malladeva (Naranarayana) and his brother Sukladhaja (Cilarai) erected the temple in the *Saka Era* 1487 (1565 C.E.).<sup>33</sup> According to historian K. L. Barua, credit should be given for reconstructing the temple to Sukladhaja. Naranarayana and Cilarai are claimed to be represented by the two stone sculptures now on display in the shrine. Recent studies, however, suggest that the two monuments are of different ancient kings.<sup>34</sup>

According to some experts, the old temple was renovated one more time until being rebuilt in the mid sixteenth century C.E. Hence, the temple was twice demolished and rebuilt.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the reasons for its devastation, the present temple's *Adhithana* and *Vimana* parts are from the original edifice (seventh to eighth century C.E.) and the *Sikhara* component was built in the sixteenth century C.E.<sup>36</sup> Later on, Ahom king Rajeswar Singha (1751 - 1769 C.E.) added the *Natamandapa* in 1764 C.E.<sup>37</sup> *Natamandapa* was very crucial as it provided the space for the *devadasis* to execute their performances.

Ahom *Swargadeo* Kamaleswar Singha (1795 - 1811 C.E.) also completed a miniature portion of the temple by using copper, which is known as the *Tamar Ghar* (Copper House).<sup>38</sup> Although the *Vimana* part of the temple resembles the *Khajuraho* series of temples, the *Sikhara* is normally Assamese and the *Tamar Ghar* component is an obvious replication of the Neo-Vaishnavites' *Namghar*.<sup>39</sup> The Kamakhya temple has benefited by donations from the rulers and their relatives, administrators and visitors from its beginnings. After receiving donations and protection from the reigning authorities, the Kamakhya group of shrines usually became a prominent *zamindary*.

The *puja* of Kamakhya is conducted pursuant to Krsnaram Nayabagis instruction, which is said to be founded on various holy books, including the *Kalika Purana*, *Bharavitantra*, etc.<sup>40</sup> As per the *Kalika Purana*, other sixty-four *Yoginis* are to be venerated in addition to the Kamakhya.<sup>41</sup> However, it is acknowledged that the *Kalika Purana* was written in the twelfth century C.E., and prior to that time, the *puja* of many deities was conducted in line with the original residents oral instruction.<sup>42</sup> Presently, Goddess Kamakhya's *nitya puja* begins with *snana* (ritual bathing) and adoration of the moveable idols of Kamesvara and Kamesvari known locally as *calanta*.<sup>43</sup> Following that, the temple's priests, called *Diksadhari*, perform *puja* with *naivedya*, which consists of rice, black gram, mustard oil and vegetables. A he-goat is slaughtered here every day in compliance with *Tantric* traditions.<sup>44</sup> Which is followed by the devotee's ritualistic tributes and a full day of programming.

Every month, an extra *puja* called *manani puja* is performed for Goddess Kamakhya on the occasions of two *Caturdasi*, two *Astami* and one *Samkranti*. The *manani puja* is celebrated every year on *Daksinayana*, *Mahavisuva*, *Uttarayana* and *Jalavisuva*

*Samkranti*.<sup>45</sup> The temple is open from 8:00 a.m. to sundown. However, the shrine door is shut for two hours at midday for the giving of *bhog* to the deities. In addition to the daily and regular *puja*, a special *puja* is performed on the events of the *Ambuvachi* festival in the month of *Asadha* (July-August), when the Goddess Kamakhya becomes impure.

### **Hayagriva Madhava Temple**

In the state, there are six Madhava temples with various names, each situated in a separate location. Others include Jamuguri's Sobhagya Madhava, Kurma-Madhava near Rangia town (currently ruined), Bokakhat, Golaghat district's Madhava temple (later shifted to modern Nagaon district during the Burmese attack), Barbhagia Mouza, Nagaon district's Sobhagyamadhava and Sonitpur district's Dulal Madhava. Though, the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo, is the most well known *Vaishnava* temple among them. The temple stands on top of Manikuta, a nearly forty meter high solitary mountain in the Hajo Town of Kamrup. A massive stairway connects the foot of the hill to the shrine. The shrine is located about thirty kilometers northwest of present-day Guwahati. There are four small temples near the Madhava temple, such as Kamesvara, Kedaresvara, Kamalesvara (these three are Siva temples) and Ganesa.<sup>46</sup> All of them are termed as *Hayagrivamadhavadi Panchatirtha* and controlled by the same management board, which is selected by the temple's *Bardeoris* (priests) and *Sevants* (officers).

A group of people known as the *Bajaniya* performed musical instruments such as the conch, bell and drums throughout the time of prayer in the temple, in accordance with the age-old custom of *devadasi*.<sup>47</sup> Many devotees perform worship rituals by reciting *Hariguna* (glories of God) to the rhythm of musical instruments. The primary focus of

the daily services is recitations of the various religious texts. It is important to note that three *akhandapradipa* (perpetual lamps) have been burning in front of the gods for a long time.<sup>48</sup> *Devadasis* used to perform dance and musical acts on the temple grounds during *Sandhya-arati* (evening prayer). In 1852 C.E., an Assamese Christian named Nidhi Levi Farewell stated that he witnessed the practice.<sup>49</sup> However, it is no longer used in practice. From the fifth century C.E. onwards, *Vaishnavism* flourished in ancient Assam, as evidenced by the archaeological remnants of an ancient temple and the icons of the god of the Hayagriva Madhava temple.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Devadasi* and their association with temples**

According to the Tezpur copper plate inscription of Salastambha dynasty king Vanamala (mid-ninth century C.E.), the king was a devoted believer in Hatakasulin Siva. Musical events, including dances by *devadasis*, were staged on a routine basis in the temple premises. It further mentioned that offerings were also performed there. The donation of a village by King Vanamala to a Brahmana named Vijjat, who was well versed in the Vedas, reflects that the inhabitants were familiar with *Vedic* customs.<sup>51</sup>

Temple dancing was an important aspect of temple rituals; according to a reference, ruler Vanamalavarmana presented *veshyas* who were associated with the temple as *devadasi*.<sup>52</sup> Like that, the Siva temples of Biswanathghat in Sonitpur district, Dubi in Barpeta district, Negheriting in Golaghat district, Kamakhya in Guwahati and Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo in Kamrup district are well known for their association with *natis* (*devadasis* were also called *natis* in Assam).<sup>53</sup> The *devadasis* were required to dance in the temples, which was usually succeeded by routine and everyday Brahmanical *puja*. However, there

is some record that Mirzumula, the Mughal General who took away some *devadasis* and polluted Negheriting Sivadoul and the Biswanatha Sivadoul.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Devadasi and temple property***

The rulers of Assam expressed gratitude to the temples in a variety of ways. Even Assam's first kingdom was formed on the foundation of a temple.<sup>55</sup> Many rulers of Kamarupa donated temples with gold, silver, horses, elephants, land and *devadasi* as we found a reference in the historical sources. From the beginning of time until the arrival of the British, kings, queens and many administrators donated goods on a variety of occasions, which assisted the temples in becoming wealthy establishments.

The properties of the temple can partly be divided into two categories like movable and immovable. Movable properties include the numerous utensils used in temples, in some circumstances cash money, assets such as gold and silver jewellery, boats and various animals such as cows, buffaloes, horses, elephants, and so on.<sup>56</sup> In addition to such properties, the temple priests and their associates as well as other servants from both the Brahmana and non-Brahmana castes, who were deployed to maintain the temple's ceremonies and wealth, might be considered as moveable properties. In this way, *devadasi* who used to dance in front of the Gods, were also regarded as movable property.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, in ancient Assam, a class of people termed as *Sastrakaras*, who lived in temple premises framed heavenly and unfold law to control people's religious activities and temple maintenance.<sup>58</sup> Vaidyadeva's Kamauli grant mentions the Brahmana 'Rajguru Murari', who was most possibly the priest of the Kamakhya temple, and

indicates that one 'Sri Kantha' was employed as a *Dharmadhikara* (Superintendent of religious affairs).<sup>59</sup>

The Koch king Naranarayana contributed twenty-five thousand coins to the Kamakhya temple in the sixteenth century C.E.<sup>60</sup> He also provided cymbals, *yantras*, conches, gongs, and other musical instruments along with golden, silver and bronze utensils. The presence of musical instruments suggests that *devadasis* dances were performed there. During the Ahom rule, *Swargadeo* Pramatta Singha granted a sum of rupees eighty-five, which earned ten *gandas* a month as its interest and this money was to be used for a daily *naivedya* at the Hayagriva Madhava temple.<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, land grants played a significant role in the immovable properties of temples.<sup>62</sup> According to several descriptions such as land grant records, it is known that the rulers of early Assam granted land to the temples and Brahmanas, who played a pivotal role in the temple's religious activities. The officials of the temple concerned were in charge of these endowments, which were subject to state supervision and accountability.<sup>63</sup> According to the Vanamala's grant of Tezpur, the king rebuilt Hatakasulin Siva temple and bestowed upon it men, villages, elephants and *veshyas*.<sup>64</sup>

The land in the Pandari area donated to the temples of Mahagauri and Kamesvara is mentioned in king Indrapala's Guwahati grant.<sup>65</sup> The copper plate inscription of king Dharmapala provides another reference to the land of the Kurmanatha temple.<sup>66</sup> Naranarayana (1540 - 1584 C.E.), the Koch king who reconstructed the Kamakhya temple, provided a huge contribution with one hundred forty employees for the temple's administration. His nephew Raghudeva (1581 - 1603 C.E.) also donated the temple of

Hayagriva Madhava at Hajo, including land and seven hundred *paiks* (*paik* is corvee labour).<sup>67</sup> Even the Mughals, who only dominated Assam for a very short time, provided land and men to the priests of Kamakhya, Sukresvara, Hayagriva Madhava and Umananda temples.<sup>68</sup>

The Ahom rulers started to make large grants of revenue-free estates for religious and charitable purposes beginning in the seventeenth century C.E. The Ahom rulers began donating large portions of land for religious establishments after Pratap Singha (1603 - 1641 C.E.) was initiated into 'Hinduism' in the seventeenth century C.E.<sup>69</sup> The successors of Rudra Singha (1696 - 1714 C.E.) in the eighteenth century C.E., such as Siva Singha (1714 - 1744 C.E.), Pramatta Singha (1744 - 1751 C.E.), Rajeswar Singha (1751 - 1769 C.E.), Lakshmi Singha (1769 - 1780 C.E.) and Gaurinath Singha (1780 - 1795 C.E.), issued a number of revenue-free lands to the temples and Brahmanas.<sup>70</sup> More than that, temples received donations of other kinds of land including *Brahmottara*, *Devottara* and *Nankar* lands. Historical evidence mentions that *Vati* or *Vastubhu* (homestead land), *rupit* (rice land), *Pokhari-badi* (homestead land with tank), *pharingati* (dry rice land), *kathiatali* (land for raising seedlings), *pharingati* (dry rice land), *habitali* (forest), *acala* (hillock), *dalani* (low-lying lands were supplying *dal* grass), *bil* (fishing water), etc., which throws some light on the region's geography.<sup>71</sup> It demonstrates that temples in the region have enjoyed a significant number of movable and immovable properties since ancient times.

The epigraphical and literary sources provide us information about the individuals, their clans, and the responsibilities that were allocated to them within the temple premises. According to the Tezpur copper plate offerings of king Vanamala, the ancient temple of

Hatakasulin Siva had collapsed and been left in ruins until Vanamala rebuilt it again and contributed land, men, *devadasi*, elephants and other things to be used in one or more services needed by the temple.<sup>72</sup>

Many temples in Assam employed at least seven categories of Brahmana caste servants and seventy-four types of non-Brahmana caste servants. However, the number of servants fluctuated depending on the amount of endowment granted to each temple. The employment of servants such as *hatimaut* (elephant rider), *gorakhia* (cowherd), *gowal* (milkman) and others suggests that the temples had a variety of animals such as elephants and cows. The royal authorities gave the servitors a part of the revenue-free lands in exchange for their services.<sup>73</sup> In 1757 C.E., more than two thousand individuals were estimated to be present in the Kamakhya temple including a significant number of attractive *devadasis*.<sup>74</sup> Ahom ruler Pratap Singha provided a large number of employees, including *devadasis* to the Negheriting *Sivadoul*.<sup>75</sup> Later, his descendant, *Swargadeo* Lakshmi Singha, donated one hundred fifty-nine *gots* (each *got* includes four members) of *paiks* as well as Brahmana for the upkeep of two *akhandapradipa* at the Umananda temple.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, *Swargadeo* Gaurinatha Singha granted seven hundred twenty-seven *puras* of land in the Hayagriva Madhava temple to maintain an *akhandapradipa*.<sup>77</sup> During the rule of Kamalesvara Singha, Pratapballabha Barphukan's wife Sayani, contributed seven people to be in charge of maintaining the *akhandapradipa* in the Hayagriva Madhava temple.<sup>78</sup>

The active participation of direct royal authority in temple construction activities gives it new impetus. For example, Koch king Naranarayana stepped forward to take



responsibility for the administration of the renovated Kamakhya temple. According to the *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, the ruler made a proper *seva puja* setup by employing Brahmanas and other *sevakas* in the temple premises as well as significant gifts.<sup>79</sup> His nephew, king Raghudeva, reconstructed the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo and contributed land, servants, and goods for its appropriate management following king Naranarayana.<sup>80</sup> During that time, the *Yogini Tantra* was written, which contained Hayagriva Madhava's rules of prayer in the form of a model of Puri's Jagannath temple as well as instructions on how to send *bhog* and *nirmali* to the king on a regular basis.<sup>81</sup>

The temples of medieval Assam along with their physical configuration enjoyed a large number of movable and immovable properties as well as a system of administration, which made them extremely powerful and wealthy institutions. According to the above-mentioned epigraphical sources, point out that it was the king who shouldered the responsibility of keeping the temple alive and prosperous. While donating to the temples and the Brahmanas, was not only done for his religious favor, some political as well as economic visions were also there. From the beginning, the king was the one and only who was responsible for the establishment and development of a temple. Followed by the king, the society with the priest's society, which grew up near the temple to serve the needs of the temple and devotees, is believed to have been responsible for the temple's upkeep.

## **Conclusion**

It can be argued that a number of temples have emerged in Assam from antiquity to the medieval period, which still have significant influence among the masses. These temples

were not only a place of worship, but they acted as a power center, from which the ruler obtained his legitimacy and influence over the subjects. In return, the ruler provided financial support to the temple. Apart from that, the temple also started to provide entertainment to the masses; hence, the concept of *devadasi* gradually emerged. Thus, it may be argued that with the emergence of Siva temples in medieval Assam, the *devadasi* traditions also gained prominence. Though these *devadasis* generally belonged to the lower strata of society, once they assumed the role, they could enjoy all the privileges of the higher strata. However, it was coated with religious color to justify its existence, but in reality, the *devadasis* were not more than an object of pleasure for the powerful.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

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## CHAPTER-III

### **HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF *DEVADASI* SYSTEM IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM**

While shedding some light on the *devadasi* system from a pan-Indian standpoint, it discusses various pertinent issues such as dedicating women to religious service, which prospered in different regions, the expansion of the practice all over India, and available historical records, especially with regard to the institution. It is noted that the dedication of women to the temples was a prevalent and very well developed practice in many places. According to Leslie Orr, the *devadasi* system predominated from the early medieval period onwards.<sup>1</sup> The growth of temples as important economic centers as well as socio-religious institutions has begun. Inscriptions discovered in various parts of India show it quite clear that the *devadasi* institution grew in lockstep with the temples, which were usually scattered across the country.

#### **The evolution of the *devadasi* system**

The *devadasi* institution had its growth and development in India within the framework of social and economic configurations that emerged in society during the early medieval times. One of the most recognizable and significant facts is that the *devadasi* institution was an intrinsic element of religious ceremonies in the temple, and that the temple itself became the foremost body as far as the social, economic, cultural and religious life of the early medieval times was concerned.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of such a temple-centered religious or social consciousness in India cannot be dated before the fifth to sixth century C.E.<sup>3</sup> From this period onwards, a new social and political arrangement had begun to become functional all over India, based on certain very important economic factors, such as a



newly decided land grant system.<sup>4</sup> The resulting shift in people's perceptions and understanding had far-reaching consequences for India's contemporary economic situation. Indeed, the social and political structures that developed during this time largely influenced the course of Indian history. Because of various historical transformations, a type of economic system emerged during this period. The earlier norm of offering money in cash as a salary for services given was interrupted as a result of the implementation of this new economic system and the tradition of gifting land for political, social, religious or any other kind of sublimation was adopted.<sup>5</sup>

Usually, land was divided into three categories under the new system - (a) Land under state ownership, (b) Waste or infertile land, which was generally not considered for donation and (c) Land under private ownership.<sup>6</sup> The first kind of land was usually donated to the temples and other religious organizations that grew up during this time and used to receive large portions of land as gifts from the king or other officials. Such factors created a constructive ambiance for the expansion of temple construction activity that reached its highest point during the tenth to eleventh century C.E.<sup>7</sup> This was highly beneficial to the expansion of the *devadasi* institution, as whenever a new temple was constructed, *devadasis* were also recruited there.<sup>8</sup> Various available records, such as inscriptions on stone, copper plates and walls of temples as well as the literary works of the contemporary period, enable us to reconstruct the course of events responsible for the development of the *devadasi* system throughout India.

### **Theories related to the evolution of the *devadasi* system**

There are numerous hypotheses and assumptions about the origins of the *devadasi* system. The most famous among them are occupation and mother goddess theory, matriarchy to patriarchy theory, racial theory, lineage continuity theory, religious tradition theory, political or selfless citizen theory, traditional theory and Sanskritization theory.<sup>9</sup> The tradition of appointing women to sacred ceremonies is an old and quite popular custom. Depending on the time and culture, each region's customs differed from the others. Babylonia, Egypt, Cyprus Mesopotamia and Greece were some of the nations where women were associated with sacred activities since thousands of years.<sup>10</sup> Women were gathered for religious purposes in the temples of Aphrodite, Anu, Osiris, Ishtar and Isis, correspondingly.<sup>11</sup>

Usually, theogony is the term used to describe the tradition of devoting women in the name of religious custom. Theogony, according to James Frazer, is the outcome of Mother Goddess prayer.<sup>12</sup> The tradition traced back to early India. Religious women have a holy position and their duties have been idealized in the form of Mother Goddess, who has received various tangible presents. Meanwhile, in a two-way process, the Mother Goddess custom was influenced by Sanskritic custom. One was that they were subjected to powerful male deities and another was that new stories were developed and promoted.<sup>13</sup> The male deity's abilities and capabilities were praised. The concept of ceremonial purity and pollution was developed. As the matriarchy gave way to patriarchy, they lowered their rank as simple rudimentary ritual performers.<sup>14</sup>

### **Historical origin of the *devadasi* system**

Several studies have revealed that the *devadasi* system has its starting point in a number of Indian states. It has a protracted and well-documented history, particularly in the southern region of India. In the case of Assam, it can be seen that a deplorable lack of evidence prevents the structure of any definitive judgment regarding the time when the *devadasi* institution founded itself as a fetterless system in the state's temples. The presence of many copper plate inscriptions found in different parts of Assam during the medieval era provides us with some data about the *devadasi* and their institutions in the temples of Assam.

The beginnings of the *devadasi* system as a part of religious activities can be traced back to several places of India in the distant past. However, it is challenging to make a definitive statement about which century the institution was founded in the Assam region as part of its distinctive and native cultural practice. Even in places like Tamil Nadu, researchers have been unable to identify a certain date for the *devadasi* system's origin<sup>15</sup>, regardless of the fact that many consider the system to have 'purely Tamil roots'. S. K. Mukarji believes it was a 'Tamilian custom'.<sup>16</sup> However, he is also unable to furnish us with a date for its establishment. Thus, it is seen that there is a severe lack of accountable and organized inquiries into the *devadasi* system. Due to such a handicap, it becomes quite difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at any definite opinion about whether the *devadasi* system of Assam had 'purely Assamese roots' like the system in Tamil Nadu, whether the institution became established in Assam after migration from some other

place as a result of cultural expansion, or whether it was a transformed version of some ancient 'purely Assamese tradition'.

According to researcher Maheswar Neog, the *devadasi* custom in Assam was connected to a few Siva temples in the state, as it was in other regions of India.<sup>17</sup> Banikanta Kakati also acknowledges the presence of a community of *Natinis* (female dancers), comparable to the *devadasis*, in Assam's temples in the remote past.<sup>18</sup> Historian Birinchi Kumar Barua suggests that the Assamese *Natinach* (*devadasi* dance), which was connected with the acts of worship of many Gods and Goddesses, is similar to the *devadasi* tradition observed in India's southern states.<sup>19</sup> According to Rajmohon Nath, the *devadasi* custom of dedicating women to the God of a temple is a direct impact of Austric culture.<sup>20</sup> S. K. Chatterji does not choose to state unequivocally that the *devadasi* custom has existed in Assam since ancient times.<sup>21</sup>

It has been observed that from ancient times onwards, *devadasi* dance performances were routinely performed in many temples of Assam such as Da-Parvatiya, Hatakasulin, Negheriting, Parihareswara, Biswanatha and Umananda Siva temple. Historian Pradip Chaliha asserts that *devadasis* have been doing ritual dancing and singing, which was prevalent in various temples in Assam since prehistoric times.<sup>22</sup> It can be undoubtedly understood from the above discussion that in some of the Siva temples of Assam, where the *devadasi* system was operational and they performed ritualistic dancing and singing in the temple premises. Moreover, the *devadasis* of Assam were also connected with Vishnu temples like Hayagriva Madhava and Sakti temples like Kamakhya.

### **Development of the *devadasi* system in Assam**

The basic principles of *Saivism* have always been accorded a specific acknowledgment and acceptability in and around the Siva temples in Assam and among the Assamese people since ancient times.<sup>23</sup> As found in the *Kalika Purana*, even before king Naraka came from Mithila and established his reign in the realm, Pragjyotishpur or Kamarupa was a site of ardent Siva worship.<sup>24</sup> Siva was commemorated as the tutelary deity by all kings in ancient Assam from the seventh to the twelfth century C.E.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, there were many more Siva temples than temples dedicated to any other God or Goddess. Moreover, the state was the original home to various indigenous tribes like the *Kiratas*, who were mostly Lord Siva's followers.<sup>26</sup>

Many ethnic characteristics of *Kiratas*, such as a passion for intoxication and meat, a lack of common sense for knowledge acquisition, and so on, were accommodated well with the ritual injunctions of *Saivism*.<sup>27</sup> A few copper plates pertaining to Assam, dating from the seventh to twelfth century C.E., familiarize us that many rulers of the region during the mentioned period had subscribed to *Saivism*, which had contributed greatly to the growth and development of the *devadasi* system in Assam.<sup>28</sup> In this context, the ninth century C.E., copper plate inscription of Vanamala, which mentions *devadasi*'s dedication to the Hatakasulin Siva temple,<sup>29</sup> can be kept in mind. One of the main responsibilities of these *devadasis* was to perform ritual dancing and singing in the temple premises during the prayer of Lord Siva.

It is said that the ancient name of Assam, Pragjyotishpur was slowly abandoned from the fourth to the fifth centuries C.E., onwards, and the new name, Kamarupa was being

preferred in its place.<sup>30</sup> One reason for such a preference for the new name could be the preponderance of *Saiva* kings in the state. It is evidenced by the fact that more or less all the kings from the first to the fourth century C.E., were followers of Lord Siva. These *Saiva* kings played a pivotal role in the spread of *Saivism* throughout the state and naturally, the *devadasi* system also found nourishment during their reign.

Most of the temples in ancient Assam were Siva temples according to scholar Maheswar Neog and *Saivism* was the major sectarian influence among the natives.<sup>31</sup> It should be remembered here that the evolution of the *devadasi* system in India is usually seen as taking place between the fourth and fifth century C.E., and the eleventh and twelfth century C.E.<sup>32</sup> The history of the *devadasi* system in Assam is customarily related to the *devadasi* system in India. Though the *devadasi* system of Assam has many similarities with that of India, the history of its origin and development is not crystal clear due to a serious scarcity of directly relevant records.

It has been determined with considerable certainty that no important Siva temples were constructed in Assam between the eleventh to seventeenth century C.E.; rather, the existing ones were either damaged or devastated by invaders and various calamities. In other words, for a period of six hundred years, the *devadasi* institution had to continue to be bloodless or behind a curtain of darkness in the region.<sup>33</sup> In Assam, the *devadasis* were predominantly associated with Siva temples. Disasters such as invasions by numerous invaders and natural calamities such as earthquakes, floods, etc., caused this setback in the condition of the once widely disseminated system. It may be due to such reasons that no sign of the temples like Hatakasulin Siva temple, the Tezpur Siva temple, the Singari Siva temple, and roughly eighteen Siva temples that existed in the vicinity of the great

stone bridge in the north Guwahati area are not able to be found, where the *devadasi* system was previously dominant.<sup>34</sup>

The disintegration of the ancient Kamarupa's unified continuity, largely due to invasions by various invaders, resulted in the emergence of many small kingdoms and principalities, which simplified the establishment of the Ahom kingdom in the Sivasagar area in the year 1228 C.E., and affirmed their foundation in the region. The *Tai* Ahom continued to consolidate their influence over the area, and eventually the entire area came under their authority, with the expansion of the Ahom kingdom, the territory slowly began to be known as *Asom* or Assam.<sup>35</sup>

By the sixteenth century C.E., Ahom's reputation had spread throughout the entire state of Assam. The rule of powerful Ahom kings lasted until 1826 C.E., and it also helped establish political and economic stability in the region. Under the supremacy of these Ahom kings for a period of almost six hundred years, the state undoubtedly experienced a sequence of conquests and defeats, attacks and counterattacks, truces and revolts, alliances and rivalries, trades and collections.<sup>36</sup> Despite these vicissitudes, the Ahom were able to provide the state with much-needed permanency for socio-cultural rejuvenation after its very identity had been threatened by many invasions by various invaders and administrative changes. Due to such various reasons, the temple-centered *devadasi* institution of Assam also had to face many disruptions during the pre-Ahom period. However, during the Ahom period, *devadasis* gradually started to regain their status and received royal favor once again and the custom became revitalized to a considerable extent.<sup>37</sup>

Many Ahom and Koch rulers, according to Kirtinath Sarma Bardoloi, had brought many *devadasis* from various regions and engaged them in the various temples of Assam.<sup>38</sup> *Swargadeo* Rudra Singha was a backer of art and culture from his young age. During his reign, he made significant contributions to the regeneration and growth of indigenous art and culture. The king also favored *devadasis* and talented dancers were frequently recruited as maids in the king's palace.<sup>39</sup> Rudra Singha's successor Siva Singha's queen, Phuleswari was formerly a dancer at the Negheriting Siva temple. The king was so enthralled by her dance that he first engaged her as a maid and later made her his queen consort.<sup>40</sup> Such information is extremely important because it indicates that the level of royal favor bestowed upon a *devadasi* during the Ahom period.

It was mainly due to royal and social favors bestowed upon *devadasis* that had given them an opportunity to come out from inside the temple walls to public spheres. However, this is a mere extension of the *devadasi's* duty into the public sphere. Mostly the Siva temples of the state continued to encourage the growth of the *devadasi* institution. There is no specific opinion about the timeline related to the origin of the *devadasi* system in Assam. Nevertheless, it can be assumed with some amount of certainty that the *devadasi* system emerged in Assam during the fourth to fifth century C.E., and attained its complete development during the ninth to tenth century C.E.<sup>41</sup> The *devadasi* tradition revived after a long period of discontinuity and attained some amount of development in the seventeenth to eighteenth century C.E., particularly during the periods of the Ahom kings Rudra Singha (1696 - 1714 C.E.) and Siva Singha (1714 - 1744 C.E).



### ***Devadasi and their categorization in Assam***

In Assam, *devadasis* is popularly known as *Natis* and ritual dancing by *Natas*, *Nartakas* and *Natis* was widely prevalent in the temples of ancient Assam.<sup>42</sup> The words *Nata* and *Nartaka* are synonymous the *Nata* and *Nartakas* were linked with the *devadasi*. Furthermore, the word *Nati* was more popular in the region and so it was commonly used in place of *devadasi*. In addition to *Nati*, *Natas* and *Natis* of both sexes who belong to the *Nata Kalita* community and are also known as the *Gandharva Kayasthas*, numerous words such as *Nartaki*, *Veshya*, *Barangana*, *Daluhangana* and others are also used.<sup>43</sup> The performance of ritual dance and singing was traditionally associated with members of this community.

The Ahom kings have continued the age-old tradition of dedicating *nati* (*devadasi*), *Gayana* (singers) and *Bayana* (musicians) to various temples in Assam. For example, in the 'Negheriting Siva Temple' young girls of the *Mela Bayana* from the *Nata Kalita* village in Dergaon were recruited as *devadasi*.<sup>44</sup> Two members of the same family, *Kharnaka Bayana* and *Natini Bhuyipriya*, were the first musicians and *devadasi* at the *Parihareswara* temple in Dubi, respectively. *Devadasis* associated with different temples, such as the *Biswanatha Siva* temple and the *Hayagriva Madhava* temple, were also chosen from the *Nata Kalita* community.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the credit goes to the Ahom rulers, who continued the tradition of dedicating *devadasis* to both the *Siva* and *Vishnu* temples in Assam.

They were cultivated and attractive women, who excelled at dancing, singing and ritual ceremonies. *Devadasis* in Assam as a whole can be classified into three broad classifications:

- *Natis* or *Devadasis*:- The one who used to execute ritual dancing for the contentment of the deity within the temple.<sup>46</sup>
- *Veshya* or Courtesans:- The women who were skilled at dancing and singing of a secular kind used to hold the traditional fan on both sides of the idol.<sup>47</sup>
- Ordinary dancers:- The one who used to perform in public spaces during weddings and other festivities for popular amusement.<sup>48</sup>

This temple-centered practice was preserved and nurtured in Assam for many generations because of the hardships and dedication of the *devadasis*. Despite repeated invasions and natural calamities of all kinds, society's very underpinnings were often disrupted. Nevertheless, the stream of the *devadasi* system never dried up. By the ninth century C.E., the system had practically reached its full potential. After the British took control of the state after signing the 'Treaty of Yandaboo' on February 24, 1826 C.E., there were many growing signs of its obliteration. However, due to the dedication of *devadasis*, temples such as Negheriting Siva temple and Parihareswara temple have been able to resurrect at least some features of the *devadasi* institution.

### ***Devadasi* in the historical records of Assam**

In the case of *devadasi*, historical fragments of evidence are insufficient. However, some scholars have been pressed to use some mythological speculation to establish their arguments. S. Mathulaxmi Reddy has questioned the *devadasi* system's mythological

theory and states, “These people are neither descended from heaven nor imported from foreign countries, but they belong to us, they are our own kith and kin.”<sup>49</sup> According to P. Thomas, the priests borrowed the *devadasi* system from the king.<sup>50</sup> Historian K. Sadasivan stated that temples recruited *devadasis* to sing and dance before idols and to participate in rites and celebrations, just as kings engaged armies of artistes and courtesans to heighten their pomp and pleasure.<sup>51</sup>

Temples dedicated to Lord Siva, who is the symbol of both creation and destruction in the form of ‘*Nataraja*’, were customarily connected with the origin or antiquity of the *devadasi* system. The *devadasi* system had its birth in such a religious atmosphere. Various historical documents or documented evidence, including copper plates, coins and stamps, the accounts of foreign travelers and religious texts provide us with important information about the *devadasi* system.

### ***Devadasi in copper plates***

So far, as many as a total of one hundred eighty-two copper plates and stone inscriptions relating to various subjects and issued by different rulers of Assam have been recovered. The copper plate inscription issued by king Vanamala (832 - 855 C.E.) at Tezpur, which depicts the king’s donation of elephants, attendants and *daluhangana* to the Hatakasulin Siva temple during the rebuilding accomplished by him, is one of the oldest among these.<sup>52</sup>

The amalgam word ‘Daluhangana’ found in this copper plate is evolved from the Austric languages. The two parts of the word, ‘Daluh’ and ‘Angana’, stood respectively for ‘Temple or Religious Institution’ and ‘Women’. Therefore, ‘Daluhangana’ denotes

‘Women associated with the Temple or *Devadasis*.’<sup>53</sup> This copper plate inscription contains a lot of information about *devadasis*, including the embellishment of *devadasi* with various ornaments. The sound of the *kingkinis* worn by these young women and about the supporting of the ‘*camara*’ or flywhisk near the idol, and so on.<sup>54</sup>

The famous ‘Borgaon Lipi’ (the first copper plate inscription issued by the Pala dynasty king Ratna Pala (920 - 960 C.E) explains many pertinent issues, including the purview of the form of the dancing Siva, as illustrated by their fingernails, by the *devadasis*; the beauty of grinning nymphs on the earth, the erotic and affectionate enterprises of soft and attractive women on the roofs of palaces, and so on.<sup>55</sup>

Gachtal copper plate inscription, the Pala of king Gopaladeva (990 - 1015 C.E.) illustrates the building of different Siva temples, the unconstrained *Sur-naris* (female singers) or *Nartakis* (*devadasis*) wandering around in their fascination for daring men, the reverberation of whose ‘Junukas’ (ankle ornaments that make a rhythmic sound) include the nearby area as well as the town called ‘Hadapyak’ is supposed to be teeming with women as attractive as the celestial nymphs, etc.<sup>56</sup>

The ‘Pracya Sasanavli’, compiled by Maheswar Neog, asserts that there are one hundred fifty-six documents regarding the medieval period in Assam, written in either Sanskrit or Assamese.<sup>57</sup> The Ahom king Gadadhar Singha inscribed an inscription on the second of *Baisakh*, 1607 *Saka Era* (1685 C.E.), which records the dedication of Brahmans, Sudra employees and eight *devadasis* to the Siva temple at Biswanath, along with other things.<sup>58</sup>

Including many things such as land, *Bardeori*, *Doloi*, *Paik*, *Gayana* and *Bayana* (singers and musicians, which may be included with *natis*), etc., to the Parihareswara temple at Dubi, according to an inscription of Ahom *Swargadeo* Siva Singha dated 1738 C.E.<sup>59</sup> According to historian Edward Gait, king Siva Singha recorded nineteen of the total forty-eight engraved copper plates documenting Ahom kings' land grants.<sup>60</sup> These are some crucial facts gathered from different copper plate inscriptions that shed some light on *devadasi* and reveal that the *devadasi* system was dominant during the medieval period of Assam.

### ***Devadasi* on coins and stamps**

The usefulness of coins and stamps as archaeological evidence is very informative and sheds some light on the *devadasi*. During the dedication of *devadasis* to *Saiva*, *Sakta* and *Vaishnava* temples in medieval Assam, coins and stamps were most probably issued. Such coins and stamps make available a lot of information about the *devadasi*. The letters *Ha*, *Va*, and *Ba* are engraved on certain copper coins discovered at the 'Dhulapadung Tea Estate' near Tezpur. Historians now presume that these coins originate from the periods of kings Hajaravarman (815 - 832 C.E.), Vanamala (832 - 855 C.E.) and Balavarman (860 - 880 C.E.).<sup>61</sup> These coins are also said to have been minted for specific celebrations.

Queen Phuleswari, originally a temple dancer in the Negheriting Siva temple at Devargaon, whom Ahom *Swargadeo* Siva Singha had married because of her beauty and qualities, not only assumed the title of *Bar Raja* (Chief King) Phuleswari but also issued coins and stamps in her and her husband's joint names.<sup>62</sup> *Swargadeo* Siva Singha

renamed Phuleswari as Prathameswari and in addition to making her; the *Bar Raja* bestowed upon her the royal umbrella, the Ahom symbol of sovereignty, as a great opportunity.<sup>63</sup>

Edward Gait states that coins and stamps made before 1726 C.E., only carried the name of Siva Singha. However, coins issued between 1726 C.E., and 1731 C.E., have names including both *Swargadeo* Siva Singha and *Bar Raja* Phuleswari.<sup>64</sup> The names of *Swargadeo* Siva Singha and *Bar Raja* Ambikadevi appeared on coins minted between 1732 and 1736 C.E., and the names of Siva Singha and Sarveswari appeared on coins made between 1741 and 1744 C.E.<sup>65</sup> These coins and stamps hence reveal that a former *devadasi* such as Phuleswari, who possessed tremendous imperial prestige, ascended to become *Bar Raja* of the Ahom kingdom and engraved her name together with the *Swargadeo* on coins and stamps.

### ***Devadasi* in accounts of foreign travelers**

The entry of the Chinese traveller Hiu-en-Tsang into Kamarupa in the seventh century C.E. (643 C.E.), at the request of the Varman dynasty ruler Bhaskar Varman, is clearly acknowledged in all Assam histories. However, it is known that trade and cultural exchanges between China and Kamarupa flourished even before that. In the Kia-mo-lupo's (Kamarupa) available narratives, Hiu-en-Tsang observed that people worshipped different Gods and offered animals before the idols. In Kamarupa, there were over a hundred *deva* temples and individuals from every community performed religious rites in these temples.<sup>66</sup> The majority of these temples were dedicated to Lord Siva.

Another visitor who had travelled extensively in India was Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, who is popularly known as Al-Biruni, and he left important information about the *devadasi* system. He says that among the ‘Hindu’ girls who danced, sang and performed theatrical acts in temples, they did not receive any sympathy or attention from Brahmans or priests when they were in need or no longer able to perform. They were tolerated throughout their infancy because they offered pleasure, and it was for this reason, as well as their activity as the city’s attractions, that the kings engaged them.<sup>67</sup> Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzani, a court chronicler from the thirteenth century C.E., has left some useful information regarding the Turkish invasion of Assam during the pre-Ahom period in his work *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*. According to him, after being defeated in 1206 C.E., Ibn Bakhtiar Khilji’s troops sought shelter in the Kedar temple at Hajo.<sup>68</sup> The *devadasi* system was customarily practiced in this temple and others nearby during this time.

### ***Devadasi in the Carit-Puthi***

The *Carit Puthi*, which includes biographical portraits of the *Vaishnava* gurus Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, also contains some valuable information about India’s social and cultural life in general, as well as Assam’s in particular. Guru Sankaradeva, the chief propagator of Neo-*Vaishnavism* (*Eksarana Nam Dharma*), had seen *devadasi* performances in Puri’s Jagannath temple.<sup>69</sup> The *Kathagurucarita* remarks that - “arati prasanga hal dasi nacaiche: eter kunbin khasil: gurujane hasya kaile: dekhi tarasave bole ene laghu karyat uttam loke haha nahai saj.”<sup>70</sup> The *devadasis* began their performances after the rites and devotional chanting: one of their *Kunbin* (a costume worn by *devadasis*) fell down; the sire smiled at this; when they (possibly the other devotees) noticed this, they asserted that it was not suitable for a man of such morality to laugh at

such small things. In addition, the *Carit Puthi* mentions Madhavadeva's visit to the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo, where he pleased the priests and *devadasis* with a reward for their hard work.<sup>71</sup> After talking for a few rounds around the temple, the guru turned downstream and arrived at Hajo, where he attended performances on the stage adjoining the temple. He gifted the priests and *devadasis* with remunerations for their efforts and then he went to a site named Cakrasila.<sup>72</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The *devadasi* system was widely practiced as a socio-cultural and religious belief in Assam. In the course of history, the system expanded with the support and encouragement of the royal court of that era. From the talk, one group of women, known as *devadasi*, whose social identity, particularly in the Assam region, was also addressed in the discussion. Despite the scarcity of sources, the different inscriptions, coins and religious texts provide precious information to recommend that the *devadasi* system was a prominent practice in the temples of Assam during the medieval period.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup>Orr, Leslie. C. *Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000: 5.

<sup>2</sup>Bordoloi, Paban. *The Devadasi Art Form of Assam*. Guwahati: Prabhat Prakashan, 2010:24.

<sup>3</sup>Singh, A.K. 1990. *Devadasis System in Ancient India*. Delhi: H.K. Publishers and Distributors, 1990: 33.

<sup>4</sup>Bordoloi, Paban. 2010. *Op.cit.*, 25.



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- <sup>5</sup>Singh, A.K. 1990. *Op.cit.*, 33
- <sup>6</sup>Thapar, Romila. *Bharatbarser Itihas (1000 B.C.E – 1526 C.E)*. Kolkata: Orient Longman, 1988: 108.
- <sup>7</sup>Singh, A.K. 1990. *Op.cit.*, 29.
- <sup>8</sup>Bordoloi, Paban. 2010. *Op.cit.*, 25.
- <sup>9</sup>Tarachand, K.C. *Devadasi Custom: Rural Social Structure and Flesh Markets*. New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1991: 19- 23.
- <sup>10</sup>Singh, A.K. 1990. *Op.cit.*, 7.
- <sup>11</sup>Lewinsohn, Richard. *A History of Sexual Customs*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958: 28.
- <sup>12</sup>Tarachand, K.C. 1991. *Op.cit.*, XI.
- <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, XII-XIII.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, XIII.
- <sup>15</sup>Sadasivan, K. *Devadas System in Medieval Tamilnadu*. Tamilnadu: Akani Veliyeedu, 2011:17.
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- <sup>21</sup>Barpujari, H.K. Ed. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol.I. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 1990: 224.
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## CHAPTER-IV

### **THE FUNCTIONS OF *DEVADASIS* IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM: A HISTORICAL STUDY**

The *devadasis* performed certain important functions in the temple premises. Their roles vary depending on the temple. These included both prestigious and menial services. King Rajarajan I formed the guidelines for temple services when it came to the appointment of dancing girls.<sup>1</sup> The *Vaishnava* saint Ramanujar in the temple service at Srirangam's Sriranganathar temple implemented the *Udaiyavar* Code (reforms). According to that code, *devadasis* were placed in the third group and their responsibilities were given to them. It was afterwards listed in the canon of *Koyil Ozhugu*, the Srirangam temple's chronicle. It is reported that *devadasi* would bathe and beautify them at dawn, and then they would be able to visit the temple and place themselves well in the spectacle of the deity.<sup>2</sup> According to Abbe Dubois, a French Christian missionary, bringing water for the temple rituals was regarded as an auspicious ceremony in most of the magnificent temples. Generally, water was carried out on the backs of elephants, escorted by Brahmins and other temple functionaries. The procession was preceded by the temple's musicians and dancers.<sup>3</sup> Within the temple institution, the recruited *devadasi* had to multitask. They had to participate in the daily cyclic of the temple prayers from the morning after waking up to the sleep time of the deities at night.<sup>4</sup>

Usually, according to tradition, *devadasis* were well trained and the division of their labor was clearly defined. Academician Rekha Pande classified temple women's activities into ritualistic and non-ritualistic in the sacred clime.<sup>5</sup> The former was voluntary, whereas the

latter was essential. Dancing, *tirualatti* or *karpuraalattai* (a mixture of turmeric, lime and camphor) and *tiruchulam* (the sacred trident) were among the ritualistic services. The non-ritualistic responsibilities were carrying the lamp, maintaining everlasting lamps, providing water for worship, husking paddy, fanning shrines, cleaning rice and cooking vessels, washing garments, adorning surrounds, waiting upon the God with a fly whisk and offering holy flowers and plant leaves, etc.<sup>6</sup> *Devadasis* got a variety of reimbursement, including a house, land, food, tax exemption or reduction, specific rights and so on. *Devadasi* was also involved in charity efforts, such as donating their properties to the construction and redecoration of the temple, pond and other public facilities. *Devadasi* was generous with her donations of people, land, money, animals and other items. Most importantly, during regular *puja*, *devadasis* perform dance and music in front of the deity.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, they also accomplished specific duties assigned to them. They periodically served as priestesses for a few castes, specifically the lower castes, who were not allowed by custom to have their own priestess.<sup>8</sup> Whenever the deity was taken into a procession, especially during the religious ceremonies, *devadasis* were instructed to obey them. The cleaning of the shrine was also bestowed on the *devadasis*. The majority of these *devadasis* most likely came from the poorer classes of society.

The *devadasis*, also known as *natis* in Assam usually belong to the *Nata Kalita* caste.<sup>9</sup> The *devadasis* were responsible for numerous activities in the temple. They were responsible for preserving temple property, overseeing grants and other donations, deploying temple resources, leasing outlands and livestock, and executing a wide range of activities related to the temple's day-to-day management system.<sup>10</sup> These temple women were prominent members who held important positions in the

temple management. Their multiple donations to various temples demonstrate their affluent economic position. There are a number of offerings made by the *devadasis* for the temple's well-being. They even occasionally performed repairs at the temple while it was in a decayed situation. For their services, many of the temple dancers were acknowledged and granted special privileges. Because the assistance of the *devadasis* was constantly needed, it can be noticed that they were usually given accommodation at or near the temple. Unlike other parts of India, the *devadasis* did not stay in the temple complex in the Assam region, particularly at the Neghering Siva temple. The Ahom monarchs established a different *Gandharva* class known as *Gayana* and *Bayana* (singers and musicians) and designated specific villages for their living.<sup>11</sup> They were also residing on land, which was tax-free. The artists' class (*Nat* and *Natis*) also enjoyed these kinds of advantages. These artists resided with their guardians and went to temple services in the morning and evening gatherings. They saw it as a religious conviction.<sup>12</sup>

Without any kind of doubt, such was the grandeur and position of *devadasis*, particularly those from the upper classes, that rulers and aristocrats had no problems with marrying them. Siva Singha, the Ahom *Swargadeo* married Phuleswari, who was formerly a dancer associated with the Neghering Siva temple.<sup>13</sup> Temple women were even permitted to enter the sight of the king's wives, where they might spend quality time with them as well as taste a beetle leaf, a privilege that was not conferred on anyone else, regardless of their status.<sup>14</sup> *Devadasis* were considered permanent workers of the temple. In normal circumstances, *devadasis* were compensated in kind, with a portion of the temple's property. They were frequently given a portion of the *prasada* that was offered to the God.<sup>15</sup> They were occasionally compensated in cash as well. Many times, the

contributors defined the mode in which the temple girls would have a portion of the temple premises and paid a specific quantity into the temple treasury for their sustenance. The temple dancers gathered a significant amount of property, as evidenced by the various temple endowments. They also had to pay state taxes. They were allowed to receive financial compensation, land, and a share of *prasadam* as a part of their remuneration.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Devadasis and their dance performance***

The music and dance presented by the *devadasis* can be seen from historical sources. With the development of temple institutions, many art forms found their way into them. Music and dance were thought to be auspicious, hence they were used to attract Gods.<sup>17</sup> The *devadasis* were expected to be skilled in music and dancing because they played such an important function in temple worship. Even as infants, the recruited girls were subjected to regular training. They were trained in their particular arts by the *Nattuvan* (dancing master) and *Isaiasiriyar* (music teacher), who gave them proper training in their respective art forms.<sup>18</sup> For this purpose, the temple authorities recruited dance teachers and music experts in both vocal and instrumental music.<sup>19</sup> The women were great singers and dancers, as *Manasa Kavya* reminds us.<sup>20</sup> During theatrical performances and religious events, singing with musical instruments and dancing were widespread. Many musical instruments are mentioned in both the inscriptions and the early Assamese writings. Several dancing gestures like *nrityamurtis* are depicted in many medieval sculptures. The earliest dancing scene was recovered in a slab from Tezpur. Another dancing figure was discovered in the remains of Deo-Parbat.<sup>21</sup> Prior to the arrival of *Vaisnavism*, dance was seen to be the only domain of the courtesan's class.



The practice of employing women as dancers and concubines in connection with temple rituals, which is thought to have begun during the third century C.E. in India.<sup>22</sup> And it became quite common in Assam, according to historian Gunabhiram Barua, the rulers of Assam had dedicated a pair of dancers to the temples of Hajo, Dubi, Biswanath and Dergaon. They were required to dance to the beat of music, accompanied by musical instruments, in front of the temple deities three times a day during devotion and prayer.<sup>23</sup> The Tezpur charter also mentions king Vanamala's offering of dancing women to the Siva temple.<sup>24</sup> The dancers were also known as *Nati* and *Daluhangana*.<sup>25</sup> There was a class of individuals known as *Nat* in most Siva temples who supplied the temple with female dancers and singers.<sup>26</sup> Other than Siva temples, those dancers used the dance in front of other idols as well.

During the Ahom period, it appears that the ruling authority provided security to *devadasis*. The kidnapping of a dancer from Biswanath temple by Satrajit, a Mughal officer, was one of the causes that moved Ahom *Swargadeo* Pratap Singha to take up arms against the powerful Mughals.<sup>27</sup> In the Ahom court, dancing girls were also recruited as agents.<sup>28</sup> When king Siva Singha married two *Nati* sisters, Phulmati and Draupadi, who were devoted to the Siva temple at Dergaon, it indicates that *Natis* acquired a prestigious place in society during the later part of the Ahom rule. He awarded them with the titles of *Bar Raja*, and minted the coins in the joint names of himself and the queens.<sup>29</sup> When queen Sarveswari, Ahom king Siva Singha's third wife, began teaching a large number of young girls from various communities that the art of singing and dancing within the royal harem underneath her personal command.<sup>30</sup> Thereafter, the art of singing and dancing became a part of the royal harem. Singing and dancing became

much more widespread in the region during the Ahom period. Maheswar Neog noted that “the Parihareswara Siva temple of Dubi village was constructed over the last sign by the Ahom king Siva Singha, where a Brahman *Daloi* called Dharmavara, other *Sevants* or includes like *Bharali* (storekeeper), *Maliya* (garland makers), *Athpariya* (watchmen) and many others were designated. The *natis* were required to perform twice a day, at noontide *puja* and evening *aroti*. Outside of the temple, performances were conducted for *Pausa* and *Chaitra Samkrantis* as well as *Durga puja*.”<sup>31</sup>

In the Kamakhya temple, dancing was enormously popular. *Devadhani* may be called a separated form of *devadasi* dance. On the first and second days of the month of *Bhadra*, the *devadhani* celebration is organized and during that time, Goddess *Manasa* is worshipped.<sup>32</sup> Usually, the dancers are popularly famous as ‘*Deodha*’. They dance on sharp ‘*Daos*’ at times (sword without being injured). The *Kalika Purana*, which was written in Assam in the tenth century C.E., chronicles the worship pattern of Goddess Kamakhya, where songs and dances were performed by *devadasis*.<sup>33</sup> Maheswar Neog stated regarding the *devadasi* dance is that “considering our cultural heritage, we may claim that *devadasi* dance worth is equal to *Kohinoor*.”<sup>34</sup> The *devadasi* dance was famous in Siva and Sakti temples of Medieval Assam; however, the Vishnu temple of Hajo famous as Hayagriva Madhava temple seems to be an exception. Likewise, the *devadasi* dance is performed at Puri’s Sri Jagannath temple. The Hayagriva Madhava temple was created in the style of Puri’s Sri Jagannath temple. According to *Yogini Tantra*, a text from the sixteenth century C.E., this structure was constructed by the water God Varuna with the same material as the image of Sri Jagannath was prepared.<sup>35</sup>

It is extremely difficult to ascertain why and how a devotional performance like *devadasi* dance began to experience a series of difficulties. These dancers were once recognized as *Devakanya* (God's daughters) and held in high regard. They were regarded as auspicious, and their participation in *Subha Karjyas* (virtuous activities) was encouraging.<sup>36</sup> However, with the expansion of time, this institution fell into disregard. The *devadasi* dance seems to be no longer performed in any of the temples in Assam state. With the help and guidance of the Late Kausalya Bala and Late Raiya Bala (both were the last surviving *devadasis* of the Parihareswar Temple at Dubi), Late Ratna Kanta Talukdar of Pathsala, with the help and support provided by Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha (poet, writer, scholar, musician, folklorist, revolutionary and artistic grandee), was able to restore the *devadasi* dance and exhibited it under his supervision at various cultural gatherings.<sup>37</sup> Thereafter, under the headship of Girish Talukdar and Dilip Kakati and many other people's efforts, the *Devadasi Silpi Samaj, Pathsala*, is nowadays deeply involved in developing and promoting the restored *devadasi* dance form.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Devadasis and their attire***

Historical documents such as epigraphs, sculptures and many writings shed light on the types of clothes and accessories used by *devadasis*. Normally, in Assam, clothes are called *kapor*. During the medieval time, *devadasis* wore many types of jewellery of different designs consisting of various materials, their clothes and make-up showed throughout their dance moves. Assamese women wear *Riha* and *Mekhela* (*Chador* and Skirt) prepared by *Muga*, *Endi*, Cotton, and Silk. This very short narrative of Assamese women's apparel might be viewed as a precursor to the apparel used by *devadasis*. *Devadasis* wore a full-sleeved blouse and tied waistbands on *Mekhalas*. They also wear

gold and silver accessories. They put bands of brass on their feet.<sup>39</sup> Maheswar Neog stated that “the custom of *nati* consisted of three pieces of clean white cloth: a *lahanga* or skirt tied to the waist, a long *riha* a cubit wide and about ten cubits long, worn very tightly round the upper part of the body, one end being raised to cover the hair dressed in coiffeur: and a thin veil for the head. Ornaments of gold and silver were profusely put on, *galpata* (necklace with squire shaped units), *galmadolo* (necklace with a drum-like bead at the middle) on the neck, *sona* (a pair of small knobs weighing up to three *tolas* of pure gold) two pin to the earlobes, *nakphul* (gold and silver nose pins) silver waistband, *muthi* (bracelet) for the wrists, and *baju* (bracelet) for the ankles working as *payeli*.”<sup>40</sup>

The *Kalika Purana* provides a comprehensive list of forty kinds of gold, silver and other metal accessories worn by women.<sup>41</sup> Unmarried girls as appeared from the Tezpur grants of Vanamala wore *Nupur* with little balls within generating a jingling kind of sound.<sup>42</sup> *Devadasis* from the Negheriting Siva temple used colorful clothes occasionally and they also wore white dresses for certain ceremonies.<sup>43</sup> Negheriting Siva temple *devadasis* have a unique hairstyle in which they tie their hair in a knot above their heads known as *Negheri-Khopa*.<sup>44</sup> *Devadasis* of this temple usually use traditional cosmetics such as sandalwood paste, *agaru* powder and domestically manufactured scented oil, etc.

Apparels worn by the *devadasis* who performed dances at the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo wore clothing that was similar to that worn by Assamese women in general. *Devadasis* at this temple are required to wear white *Mekhelas* or *Lahangas* over their waists during routine performances and red colored *Mekhelas* or *Lahangas* during participation in *Madan-Chaturdasi* ceremonial occasions.<sup>45</sup> They usually wore two

*Anchals* on both sides of their waists and long-sleeved blouses. They were also given a cloth belt with elaborate flowery motifs that was fastened around their waists. Normally their breasts were covered with a piece of cloth called *Kanchal* or *Methanibandh*. Their hair was knotted in a knot at the top of their heads (*Natini-Khopa*) and covered with a fragment of flimsy netting.<sup>46</sup> Apart from this hairstyle, contemporary *devadasis* were familiar with a variety of other coiffures such as *Ghila-Khopa*, *Kaldilia-Khopa*, *Kamalijuli-Khopa* and so on.<sup>47</sup> These *devadasis* used to place a large, round stain of vermilion combined with oil on their foreheads, which was quite famous and popularly known as the *Hajeliyaphota* among the masses. *Devadasis* in the Kamakhya temple also used to dress in the same way as *devadasis* in the Hayagriva Madhava temple dressed.<sup>48</sup>

The jewellery worn by the *devadasis* is mentioned in the *Natyasastra*. In ordinary situations, *devadasis* in Assam wore silver or gold waistbands or *Kamarbandhanis* over their *Mekhelas*. In addition to this, they also wore gold or silver *Karadhwanis* and *Bajus* as wristbands as well as a variety of bangles such as *Bala* and *Muthikharu* encircling their wrists. Although there was, some other, silver jewellery items with gold poured on them or golden designs carved on them. According to the prevalent practice, *devadasis* were forced to remove their jewellery when their bodies were not considered pure enough to provide services to the deity, for example, during the menstrual period.<sup>49</sup> *Devadasis* used to wear a kind of bracelet known as the *Bharikharu* around their ankles. It is also undoubtedly true that they used to wear *Nupur* or *Payal* during their dance performances.<sup>50</sup> Various kinds of necklaces including *Galpata*, *Gal-Maduli*, *Jon-Maduli* and *Dana-Mala* are used by *devadasis*. The Tezpur grant records that women used scented oil and anointed their breasts with odorous substances.<sup>51</sup> The *Kalika Purana*

refers to different kinds of perfumes, like *cumikrts* (powder), *dehakarsita* (ashes), *ghrsta* (paste), *sammardaja rasa* (juice) and *pranyangodhava* (musk type), etc.<sup>52</sup> *Devadasis* are very fond of beauty products and perfumes. They were highly conscious about the beautification of their face. They used *Anjana* and *Kajal* to make their eyes attractive as well as *Jetuka* on their hands and nails.<sup>53</sup> However, during the British period the apparel, ornaments and cosmetic items used by the *devadasis* of medieval Assam went through some changes. *Devadasis* began to wear colored *saris*, long-sleeved *Mughali* dresses and other such attire. In addition to this, the *devadasis* started to incorporate modern cosmetics products such as talcum powder, face cream, scented oil, lipstick, and nail polish, so and so.<sup>54</sup>

## **Conclusion**

*Devadasis* were not only engaged in dancing, but also actively participated in other religious activities of the temples. However, in their private lives, they were not more than an object of amusement for the controlling section of society. As long as they were beautiful and attractive, they could enjoy the attraction of the male devotees and could fulfill all their desires. Moreover, once they are out of grace, they are hurled into oblivion. As a result, they remained just another religious object for societal use.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>50</sup>Hazarika, A. Chandra. *Hajor Nati* (Poem), Abahan, Aghon, 1857, Seventh Year, Vol.

II: 135.

<sup>51</sup>Sarma, Mukunda Madhava. Ed. 1978. *Op.cit.*, 96- 100.

<sup>52</sup>Tarkaratna, P. 1977. *Op.cit.*, 69.33.

<sup>53</sup>Barua, B.K. 2003. *Op.cit.*, 139.

<sup>54</sup>Bordoloi, Paban. 2010. *Op.cit.*, 133.

## CHAPTER-V

### CONCLUSION

The present dissertation, titled “*The Devadasi System in Medieval Assam: A Historical Study*” focused on the historical origin and evolution of the *devadasi* system and its functioning in medieval Assam. There are three objectives formulated to comprehend the historical origin and development of the *devadasi* system in medieval Assam. The first objective is to understand the emergence of temple institutions with special reference to the *devadasi* system in medieval Assam. The second one is to trace out the evolution of the *devadasi* system in medieval Assam. The third objective is to comprehend the different functions of the *devadasis* in medieval Assam.

*Devadasis* were women who were dedicated to a particular temple or sacred object. The institution was usually widespread in India as well as Assam. Generally, the *devadasis* were dedicated to a ‘Hindu’ temple. The dedicated, hard-working girls came from a variety of social backgrounds. The dedication ritual resembles the ceremonies of ‘Hindu’ marriages. Within the *devadasi* system, there was an unfair hierarchy among them. Girls from the upper castes, such as Brahmins, had a good position and were permitted to perform ritual activities. Non-Brahmin girls, on the other hand, conducted non-ritualistic activities such as fanning idols and maintaining perpetual lamps, so and so. Devoted temple women were educated, held property and had specific privileges like holding their flags and participating in the *devadasis* special funeral rites, which were not even acknowledged by caste men in society.

The *devadasis* were an important functionary in 'Hindu' societies in medieval Assam, who were directly linked with temple institutions. In the long history of temple institutions, ritual dance by the *devadasis* was a component of religious activity. The *devadasi* system's growth and development was not uniform in its character. It differed depending on the geography and political situation. The emergence of the *devadasi* tradition originated in India in the context of social and economic renovation, which occurred in the early medieval period. This was a direct outcome of temples growth and development as prominent socio-religious institutions. Inscriptions recovered in several Indian states clearly prove that the *devadasi* institution flourished throughout the country. Inscriptions pertaining to the *devadasi* institution have been discovered in Indian states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Karnataka and Assam, which belong to different periods of history. The institution was also dominant in West Bengal, as evidenced by a *devadasi* named Kamala recorded in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*.

The religious institutions, like the temples, played a pivotal role. The establishment of architectural temples used to have a magnificent impact on medieval society. The medieval temples were viewed as a point of contact with the sacred realms, giving meaning to both kingship and *devadasis* service. The *devadasi* system was enhanced in medieval Assam by the construction of a large temple. The temple had an enormous administration under its control, including the *devadasis*, who functioned in God's service and received special attention. Due to different social and cultural circumstances, the tradition has grown in consistency in many of the temples in Assam. The *devadasis* was an inescapable and undivided characteristic of the medieval temple institutions. The

*devadasi* performance was required for any ceremony or occasion to be completed. According to historical evidence found in various parts of Assam during the medieval period, the temples of Biswanathghat in Sonitpur district, Negheriting in Golaghat district, Dubi in Barpeta district, Kamakhya in Guwahati, and the Hayagriva Madhava temple of Hajo in Kamrup district were well known for their institution of *natis*.

The kings of Assam lavished their patronage on both the shrine and the *devadasi* institutions. The rulers of Assam used to generously patronize the temples on a continuous basis and used to donate gold, silver, lands, *paik*, horses, elephants, *devadasi* and other valuables. Temple properties are largely divided into two categories: moveable and immovable. In moveable properties, the different items used in the temples, cash money, gold and silver jewellery, boats and various animals, temple priests and their associates and many servitors from both the Brahmana and non-Brahmana castes who were recruited for the maintenance of the temple's rites and wealth. The *devadasi* was considered a moveable property. In terms of immovable properties, land grants were notable. The temples and Brahmanas received land from the kings of state. Apart from their physical structures, Assam's temples have a huge proportion of movable and immovable assets. As a result, the temples became tremendously powerful and wealthy institutions. From early times onwards, the king was the first person to take responsibility for the construction and development of a temple. These temples served as a seat of power from which the ruler obtained his legitimacy and influence over the subjects, as well as a place of worship. It also aided the ruler in maintaining his Brahmanical establishments.

In medieval Assam, the foundation of the Ahom kingdom in the thirteenth century C.E., marked the beginning of a new kind of monarchical system. With the development of the Ahom kingdom, Assam's temple-centered *devadasi* tradition gradually regained its importance and began to enjoy royal favor once more and the tradition was regenerated to a significant extent, after having been subjected to numerous disturbances during the pre-Ahom period. During the medieval period, the kings of Ahom and Koch brought many *devadasis* from different locations and appointed them to the various temples in their respective territories. The medieval documents detailed the *devadasis* responsibilities in society as a queen, wife, mistress, and so on. Medieval kings and aristocrats were attracted to them. Ahom *Swargadeo* Rudra Singha patronized *devadasis* and excellent dancers were frequently engaged as maids in the royal palace. His successor, *Swargadeo* Siva Singha married Phuleswari, a temple dancer at the Negheriting Siva temple. The king was so impressed with her dancing that he appointed her as a maid first, then promoted her to *Bar Raja* and bestowed upon her the royal umbrella, the Ahom symbol of sovereignty. The status of the *devadasis* improved significantly during the reigns of the Ahom kings Rudra Singha and Siva Singha, because of the support and protection offered by them.

In spite of repeated wars and natural calamities of all kinds, the state frequently wrecks the very foundations of society. Nevertheless, the *devadasi* institution's stream never stopped flowing. The practice was preserved and nurtured in Assam for many years because of the *devadasis* hard work and dedication. However, due to the commitment of *devadasis*, temples such as Negheriting Siva temple and Parihareswara temple were able to revive at least some portions of the *devadasi* tradition in later days.

The *devadasis* had distinct responsibilities in the temples, which differed from one temple to another. This comprised some prestigious and menial work. In the appointment of dancing girls, Rajarajan I prepared the regulations for temple activities. Normally, the *devadasis* would bathe at dawn, dress up, go to the temple and stand in sight of the deity. The role and activities of the *devadasis* at temples were mentioned in several medieval records. Within the temple institution, the appointed *devadasi* had multiple responsibilities. The functions of the *devadasis* in the sacred sphere were divided into ritualistic and non-ritualistic categories. The ritualistic services comprised dancing, performing a mixture of turmeric, lime and camphor and the sacred trident. Bringing water for worship, maintaining perpetual lamps, fanning idols, husking paddy, carrying the lamp, waiting on the God with a fly whisk, cleaning rice and kitchen vessels, offering sacred flowers, washing clothes, decorating surroundings, and so on were non-ritualistic works. Whenever the deity was taken into a procession, especially during religious ceremonies, the *devadasis* had to accompany them. The *devadasis* were also responsible for several other services within the temple premises. They were responsible for maintaining temple assets, overseeing grants or other donations, leasing outlands and cattle, and a variety of other activities related to the temple's day-to-day operations.

The *devadasis* wore a variety of ornaments, dresses and make-up during the medieval period. They wore full-sleeved blouses with knotted waistbands on *Mekhalas*. They wear *Galpata*, *Galmadolo*, *Jon-Maduli*, *Dana-Mala*, *Nakphul*, *Muthi*, *Baju Bala*, *Muthikharu*, and other gold and silver decorations. The *devadasis* wore their hair in a variety of styles or coiffures, including *Negheri-Khopa*, *Natini-Khopa*, *Ghila-Khopa*, *Kamalijuli-Khopa*, and so on. The *devadasis* were very affectionate of makeup and perfumes. They were

deeply concerned with the attractiveness of their faces. However, during the British period, the *devadasis* of medieval Assam clothing, jewellery and cosmetics items underwent some changes. The *devadasis* had begun to use colored *saris*, long-sleeved *Mughali* blouses, and other items.

The institution of *devadasi* was questioned and started to experience different setbacks towards the end of the medieval period in Assam, especially as the Ahom kingdom began to decline in the nineteenth century C.E. The lack of royal patronage for the *devadasi* institution created a kind of vacuum. They did not have any organization to address their worries and issues. The *devadasi* institution experiences emptiness because of political support from the ruling authorities. They were once thought to be auspicious, and their presence in *Subha Karjyas* was encouraging. However, gradually this institution began to disappear from society. Presently, the *devadasi* system is no longer practiced in any of the temples in Assam. However, receiving guidance from Kausalya Bala and Raiya Bala (the last two surviving *devadasis* of the Parihareswar Temple at Dubi), Ratna Kanta Talukdar of Pathsala, with the help of Bishnu Prasad Rabha, was only able to revive the *devadasi* dance portion and present it under his direction in many cultural festivals. Later, under the supervision of Girish Talukdar, Dilip Kakati, and many others, the *Devadasi Silpi Samaj, Pathsala* is very much engaged in popularizing the revived *devadasi* dance form. The *Samaj* provided a platform where dancers could perform their dances.

With the decline of the temple economy, the *devadasi* institutions also started to lose their patronage from the temple institutions. The *devadasi* began to suffer financial difficulties and started to experience a variety of challenges. Which questioned the



existence of *devadasihood*. Finally, the *devadasi* system in the Indian subcontinent faced numerous obstacles because of British intervention. Britishers social and economic developments harmed the lives of the *devadasis*. The *devadasis* sacredness was thrown into doubt, and they were compelled to find an alternative identity. To prevent the dedication of the *devadasi*, there was a strong objection against the *devadasi* system. Social reformers talked about the abolition of the *devadasi* institution, and they were successful in raising public awareness. Following these occurrences, during the third decade of the twentieth century C.E., with the intervention of the colonial British administration, finally the *devadasi* institution faded away in the Assam state.

## APPENDIXES



Appendix 1: Negheriting Temple



Appendix 2: Kamakhya Temple



Appendix 3: Sri Sri Parihareswara Temple



Appendix 4: Ornaments used by Devadasi





Appendix 5: Painting of a Devadasi



Appendix 6: Portrait of a Devadasi

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