Muvalur Ramamirthamal's
WEB OF DECEIT
Devadasi Reform in Colonial India

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koli for women
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Framing the Web of Deceit

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The Plot

A Minor, besotted by two devadasis he encounters on a train journey, gifts his watch to one of them. When he attempts to follow them, he is given a wrong address and encounters their cousin, a reformed devadasi who tells him the whole truth about the system, helping the Minor, through a day-long interaction, to return to his wife and conjugal bliss.

The only son of a wealthy zamindar, sent to Chennai against the wishes of his mother to study Intermediate, falls into the company of brahmin boys who habitually attend music and dance concerts. One such concert is the one in which the two devadasis mentioned above perform, and the junior zamindar, obsessed by their beauty, fails his examinations. His marriage is arranged with a cousin, whose father, also a zamindar, is an ardent propagator of reform. At the wedding, the junior zamindar’s father, a traditional zamindar, arranges a dance performance by these two accomplished devadasis, and the junior zamindar follows them the day after the wedding, accompanied by the Minor who in the guise of a Mama, is out to teach the sisters a lesson for “cheating” him of his watch. After several months of living with the devadasis, the Mama (the Minor in disguise) leaves, this time to fetch the young bride disguised as a junior zamindar. The dasi sisters then proceed to ignore the first junior zamindar, giving all attention to the new one. After extricating her husband from the clutches of the sisters thus, the wife, herself a reformer, now disguises
herself as a dasi to win back her husband, making him believe that she is, in fact, the devadasi he had lived with all these months. Meanwhile, the devadasis fall into abject penury, cheated of all their wealth by the Mama, and finally, in an impoverished state, agree to reform. The wealth spirited away from them is to form the corpus of the Devadasi Abolition Sangam.

The Author

I was born in a traditional non-devadasi family ... My uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution through the devadasi custom. They also advised him not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount to my family through the profession—given my talents in music and dance ... So my parents forced me into this custom. It was during this time that I deeply thought about this custom as evil and read those religious texts which advocated it. I felt that men have forced certain women into this degrading profession to pursue their indiscreet pleasures and for selfish reasons.

Born in 1883 in Muvalur village of Thanjavur district, Ramamirthammat began her political career in the Congress, and went on to become an active Self Respecer and a passionate abolitionist. While supporting Muthulakshmi Reddi's measures for legal reform, she struck a clearly different note in her articulation of the root cause of the system, locating herself firmly within the ideology of the Self Respect Movement. From her own account, she forced herself, uninvited, into marriage gatherings, preached devadasi abolition, conducted inter-caste marriages and organized abolition associations in different districts propagating the ideals of the Self Respect Movement. In 1949, however, she quit the Dravida Kazhagam in protest against Periyar's decision to marry his young comrade Manniammai.

The Novel

Dasigal Mosavalai (Web of Deceit) was written in 1936 by a Self Respecer and reformed devadasi, with the express pos-
ties the single available route seems to be to bring it under a more generic definition of racism and social exclusion in international law. This is particularly interesting because this conjecture is a culmination of a century of feminist internationalism in India that began with the formulation of a common agenda with Josephine Butler's campaign against prostitution and the debates around the Contagious Diseases Act, especially by Mathulakshmi Reddi. Fourthly, the questions raised in Web of Deceit are part of a larger debate on the material and emotional bases of the aesthetics of the self, morality and conjugalism, and can only be understood with reference to that debate. In order to construct a genealogy of the devadasi question then, it is necessary to take all these different routes and plot the resolutions and the problems in all their complexity.

In contextualizing Web of Deceit, our effort has been to trace the continuities and discontinuities across historical time, political ideology, region, caste and language, so that this novel, a quintessentially Tamil Self Respect text, through the writing of a shared history, becomes immediately relevant to the politics of the present, particularly in dalit women’s groups in the south. Web of Deceit, has generally been read as a novel that propagates reform, and has even occasionally been dismissed by feminist scholars as a “reformist” text. At the other end, it has been read as a radical text that is located in the politics of the Self Respect movement and one that provides a far more nuanced understanding of the problem than the movement for devadasi abolition. This is, however, a rather simplistic portrayal of what happened in the devadasi abolition movement and the context of the debate it generated. The novel, in our view, does the contrary. It contains in its unfolding, all the nuances and complexities of the devadasi institution and the demand for abolition. On the surface, it is a very straight and unequivocal demand—for abolition of the practice of dedicating girls to temples (a euphemism for prostitution) that the novel propagates. And yet in the very process of articulating the demand, the author also uncovers different layers of resistance and acquiescence to this demand.

Clearly articulated in Web of Deceit is the politics of non-brahminism premised on the values of equality, mutuality and self respect. This is a story of non-brahmin women, which traces the existence of an identity distinct from the brahmin and the non-brahmin man. To echo Geetha and Rajadurai, this work helps us understand non-brahminism as an experience which created and developed its own semantic, discursive and affective modes of articulation. It also dwells at length and in fair detail on the structure of feeling non-brahminism embodied—in contrast to and in opposition to brahminism. Self Respect then provides an imaginative response to the historical ‘truth’ of the condition of being devadasi.  

Web of Deceit is not just a novel. It is the story of lived lives, of political aspirations, of wealth, and of love in its several forms (maternal, paternal, conjugal, fraternal, sororal, erotic, for instance), of sexual desire—female and male. It is the story of how each of these must shift in the transition from one historical epoch to another, and how the process of change itself links all of these to each other. It uses the space of the devadasi system to map all these changes, a use that is significant in itself. There are moments when declarations in the novel tend to oversimplify the social practice of temple dedication (an oversimplification which is also characteristic of the political reading of the practice), and an oversimplification of the protest against it as anachronism of orthodoxy.

Writing about Rashunsari Debi’s Amar Jiban, Tanika Sarkar speaks of how the entire narrative is personalized and contained within the body of the author herself, and further, of how the economies of land and politics have little direct place in her narrative. In a sense then, this is the mental and physical space—limited and constricting—occupied by a middle class upper caste woman in late nineteenth/early twentieth century Bengal, the act of writing itself loosening the constriction enormously. The devadasi system, on the contrary, occupied a public, even political space, so that writing within that space opens out to view the large intersecting economies it contained. Part of the project of abolition sought to shrink that
space and its potential, yet another part sought to shift it from one realm to another within the public, and there was stiff resistance to both trends from within the community, not all the resistance evocative of any defense of obscurantist traditions. And this is where the significance of Web of Deceit lies. It operates and comes to life through a series of juxtapositions. The first or most basic one is in the material context: between two kinds of zamindari: one which remains trapped in orthodoxy, patronage of brahmins and traditions, the other which is progressive, enlightened and reform oriented. The zamindars are related by marriage, with the Dharmapuri zamindari taking wives from the Sornapuri zamindari, a fact of significance, because it is the wife givers who are propagating reform to begin with, and the wife takers who must be reformed. There is then the juxtaposition between non-dasi proponents of reform and dasi proponents of reform, with non-dasi women bearing the burden in a sense of absentee, profligate husbands. Yet, once reform is initiated, while the non-dasi protagonists can propagate it actively, the prime movers for it to succeed must be dasi women themselves. The next juxtaposition is between “chaste” wives and dasis in the profession. Between unfaithful men and unchaste women. Between wives and mothers, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. Between men of dasi families and other men. And so on. Far from the image of the reform oriented man educating his wife, Web of Deceit places before us the radical construct of the early twentieth century of the enlightened wife educating her husband and father-in-law, taking on the burden of reform, seemingly inverting at once the hierarchies of age and gender even while leaving untouched the “integrity” of caste. In laying out the ground for the story (stories) to take shape, Ramamirthammal does this in all its complexity, not economising on difficult, un-navigable terrain, but setting it out without attempting to iron out or resolve the contradictions that arise in the story between her stated intention and the lived reality. But solutions are seldom linear or simple, and what Ramamirthammal presents at the end of the story is not the resolution, but a resolution, the path she took, as the most rational among those available.

The State, Estates and the Law

Web of Deceit is set against the backdrop of the zamindari system, and the resolutions the novel finds are also located within that system. In reality, the devadasi institution was closely tied through entrenched systems of patronage, to the local aristocracy, particularly the landowning elite. Drawing its legitimacy from brahminical ritual and its sustenance from an elaborate network of patronage and tribute involving the non-brahmin landed classes, devadasis were an intrinsic part of the religious and social economies of landed families, fulfilling ritual obligations during marriages, funerals and other ceremonies, entering into sexual unions with patrons, and receiving land and other honours in return for ritual and other services.

The main protagonist, the prime mover of change, is a young zamindarini, who while being critical of the system, recognizes the responsibility of zamindars in initiating change even while retaining control over the estate, responsiveness to changing times being an index of good governance. The location of the novel in the zamindari system brings in yet another critical dimension of this practice—the linkages between state, estate and family—linkages, which have been critical since the documented beginning of the practice in the 11th century right into the colonial period. In the period immediately relevant to the novel, devadasi women were involved by the colonial government and reformers in a complex web of negotiations ranging from land revenue settlements to customary inheritance rights and from marriage reform to pressing charges of prostitution. And this entire process, complex as it is, finds resonances in the novel.

Devadasis had a hereditary right to inams, and tenants had hereditary occupancy rights. Although the devadasi practice was supported by and large by the brahmin priesthood and the non-brahmin landed elite who controlled and administered
the temple economy, the rights of these women were subject to constant contestation and abridgement at different levels by Dharmakarthas and priests, forcing devadasis to seek redress in courts for the rights and privileges of performance of service. At the time that the movement for abolition was at its peak, since public opinion solicited by the colonial government was ambivalent on the question of legal abolition, one solution was believed to be the enfranchisement of devadasi inams, and their conversion into ryotwari patta, thus freeing the land from enjoyment on condition of service.

In 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddi proposed an amendment to the Hindu Religious Endowments Act that aimed at delinking the grant of land from condition of service in temples, thus striking at the economic basis of the devadasi system. Prominent Congressmen like Satyamurthi opposed the Bill, but Muthulakshmi was backed in this campaign by Self Respecters and some devadasis and the Bill was eventually passed. Enfranchisement, however, meant first an enumeration of the inams, their extent and the names of the actual title-holders as also the exact nature of tasks to be performed for the enjoyment of inam. In effect, although some women were stated to be inamdras in temple records, they had either stopped service many years before, or had never performed it in their lifetime, the inams having come down to them because they were heirs. In these cases, the colonial government, in its enthusiasm for 'justice', ordered that where service had been discontinued, it should be revived before the lands were enfranchised, so that women temple servants actually benefit from this service. At least one Tahsildar recognized that this order was contrary to the purpose of the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments (Amendment) Act, 1929 and wrote to the Collector expressing his discomfort with carrying it out. What is clear from government records across the board was that by the time this enactment came, the reality on the ground had already changed considerably for the devadasi community, but the relations of land, especially the zamindari system, continued to enjoy legitimacy and power, a fact that is visible in Web of Deceit, in the pivotal and central positioning of the zamindari in the novel itself as a point of reference, both positive and negative.

At the time that this measure was proposed, devadasis had already been facing charges of procuring and disposing of Minors for purposes of prostitution under Sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The colonial government had proposed a bill, without success, in 1913, yet another was passed in the Central Legislature at the instance of Muthulakshmi Reddi which raised the age at which a girl could be dedicated to temples, and several estates in the Presidency had of their own accord, invited debate on the feasibility of abolition.

On March 3, 1911, the Indian Government Home Secretary, Butler, circulated a letter to the elders of the Presidency asking for opinions on the efficacy of sections 372 and 373 IPC in curtailing the devadasi system. In his reply to this letter, Narayana Iyer, the Madura Magistrate, said that devadasis traditionally protected the chastity of married women. But poverty had now forced them into common prostitution. He attributed their poverty to two reasons: first, their not being invited for marriages as a result of reform activity and second, the famine of 1876. A pre-famine and post-famine census of prostitutes, he felt, would demonstrate his point. Among the measures he suggested to curb this practice were the isolation of prostitutes and a ban on adoption, both echoed in Web of Deceit, where Gunabushani says that devadasis should be sent off to the Andamans.

In March 1914, the Pudukottai Darbar concluded, after inviting opinions from members of the Representative Assembly on the subject of devadasi abolition, that while it was not yet time to stop devadasi service in temples altogether, it was not necessary for this service to be performed by dedicated girls. It expressed agreement with the judges of the Madras High Court in construing the dedication of a minor girl as an offence under Section 373 IPC, and ordered the Dewan Peishkar to prohibit the ceremony of Pottukkattal (the tali tying dedication ceremony) in the state. It further issued four orders to safeguard the interests of Minors, which said that any woman of the
Melakkarr cast, single or married but not widowed, could serve as a dasi in temples provided she was accomplished in the performing arts; no girl under sixteen would be appointed as dasi to any vacancy arising after the date of the order, already dedicated girls being exceptions to this; there was to be a scaling down of dasis in terms of numbers, with vacancies being abolished as and when they occurred and finally, temples that had no dasis serving in them would continue without them.14

Already by 1915, there was an increasing consciousness of the problematic nature of devadasi service, but the fact of its complexity made it difficult especially for establishments and the colonial government to ban the practice altogether. In the words of the Law Member of the Council of State the “Government... would be prepared to assist the House in every way to suppress the evil, if as a matter of fact, the dedication of a girl does amount to her employment as a prostitute... this is an assumption the government as such is not in a position to make.”15

Rammithammal is herself located firmly within the paradigm of the “devadasi as prostitute”—a position validated through the application of Sections 372 and 373 IPC in the courts in the Madras Presidency to adoption of minor girls by devadasi women. Adoption was now seen in terms of procurement or sale of minor girls for purposes of prostitution, an interpretation that Rammithammal echoes in the novel. A look at the devadasi discourse over a period of five decades through which this interpretation was shaped would be useful at this point.

Early in the history of British penal law, the charge of prostitution was framed by accusing women not of prostitution but of the disposal or procurement of a Minor for purposes of prostitution. It would be interesting to look at the facts of a typical case in which the father of a girl is charged under section 372 of the IPC.16

In this case 1st prisoner presented an application for the enrolment of his daughter as a dancing girl of the great pagoda at Madura. He stated her age to be 13, and it has throughout been admitted that she is under 16. She attained puberty a month or two after her enrolment. Her father is the servant of a dancing girl, the 2nd prisoner, who has been teaching the minor dancing for some 5 years. Her father and herself lived in the 2nd prisoner’s house and after the ceremony returned there... [B]oth 1st and 2nd prisoners were present when the Bottu was tied and other ceremonies of the dedication performed;... 3rd prisoner as Battar of the temple was the person who actually tied the Bottu, which is equivalent to the Tali of an ordinary marriage, and denotes that the dasi is wedded to the idol. There is the usual evidence that dancing girls live by prostitution... the fact being admitted, it was not necessary to multiply witnesses on this point.”

The reluctance to multiply witnesses was also in large measure because witnesses resisted the inference of prostitution. The only evidence they unequivocally testified to was regarding the actual dedication ceremony. To frame this charge, therefore, the judiciary had to rely on

[The implicit admissions of the witnesses who resist the inference, no less than the direct evidence of those who assert that inference to be irresistible, (that) renders it abundantly clear that girls so sold and so registered are brought up as prostitutes, and that one principal purpose of such a transaction is that they shall be so brought up.”18

And since “Abbe Dubois and many other authorities had placed the matter beyond historical doubt,”19 the courts went on to make the assumption that dedication amounted to prostitution. There was also the question of public morality that the devadasi system immediately invoked. For the colonial government the devadasi practice, which was in strict accordance with personal law, violated the spirit of public law itself.20 The resolution of this contradiction was far more crucial than the immediate issues in question. The initial exercise of the courts in privileging the textual tradition over the customary or oral tradition now shifted to the privileging of Penal Law, which was based on “universal principles of the science of legislation,” over Hindu law, both textual and customary. The attempt to effect this shift became necessary because “such prostitution [was] strictly in accordance with Hindu law and customs,” and
a judge [upto this point] was bound to pass a decree which was in conformity with private law. The critique of Hindu law and customs and the argument that public morality must be privileged over Hindu law is one that Ramamirthammal echoes as well in very similar terms. Further, it was not just a question of whether the practice militated against public morality but whether all girls who were dedicated should have equal right to protection under the law irrespective of their status by birth. In *Queen Empress v. Ramam* (1889), Ramabai, the daughter of parents who belong to the “Bhogam or dancing class” was given in adoption to an aunt of her father’s. This aunt had, four years earlier, adopted a girl from another community and used her “for prostitution” in her minority. She was charged by the Deputy Magistrate and convicted of the offence by the Sessions Judge. In Ramabai’s case, however, it was argued that she could not be convicted because the child belonged to the Bhogam caste even prior to adoption. To support this contention the Sessions Judge interpreted Sections 372 and 373 of the Penal Code as being “directed against a disposal of a Minor which takes her from a position where she is not liable to become a prostitute and places her in a position where she is more liable to become a prostitute ... [These sections do not] apply to adoptions among the dancing women themselves, who do not alter for the worse the status of the child.” This was an interpretation that was contested on the ground that even children born into the prostitute class had civil rights and must have recourse to legal redress irrespective of their status by birth, namely caste.

British judges generally felt they could ill afford to turn a blind eye to the “main purpose of the devadasis’ profession—prostitution.” Although the issue in question related to religious services, “it is still impossible to regard their religious services as disconnected from the other inevitable pursuit of their profession as devadasis.” Recognizing custom, they felt, was giving sanction to “an association of women to enjoy a monopoly of the gains of prostitution, a right which on the score of morality alone, no court could countenance.” In their view, a practice founded on error and misconception could not constitute customary law by the mere fact of repetition. A blind adherence to usage, which was against public interest and in the process of extinction, would work to the detriment of “social progress”. The court therefore reserved the right to overrule a custom that violated “natural reason”.

To begin with, the unqualified equation of the devadasi with the prostitute caused considerable tension within the judiciary. As argued by devadasis who opposed abolition, the argument some judges put forth was that since Hindu law generally recognized adoption as a way of ensuring continuity of the lineage, “it should therefore not in the case of dancing girls be confounded with prostitution which is neither its essential condition nor necessary consequence but an incident due to social influences.” They further asserted that the devadasi was entitled to civil rights and hence had the right to adopt a daughter if she chose to, and to offer the girl a choice between her mother’s profession and marriage when the time came. Interestingly, running right through this entire debate is the choice between marriage and the “devadasi profession” (used synonymously with prostitution), a choice that is central to *Web of Deceit* as well. There is, for instance, no possibility within this framework for a third option. Stepping out of a devadasi life therefore must mean stepping into patrilineal monogamous conjugality. It is that space denied that, in a sense, holds the different layers of the institution, and finds articulation in the defense of matrilineal inheritance, of traditions of performance, of politics and citizenship, all of which will be discussed in greater detail here.

The entire judiciary, however, was consistent in its perception of this institution as an “unfortunate” and “undesirable” reality. The disagreement was on the manner and degree of intervention that the judiciary could engage in. Almost without exception English judges were insistent on pressing charges of immorality and moral depravity, while Indian judges, located in that reality, hoped that “[a]s the mind of the community becomes enlightened, its legal convictions will change, and this
will constitute a change in its common law as that law must, from time to time, be recognized and recorded in the courts. And Web of Deceit is the story of that enlightenment.

Within the Madras Legislative Council, the period from 1927 to 1930 witnessed a sharp polarization of brahmin and non-brahmin positions which roughly represented orthodox and reform positions on the devadasi question, with S. Satyamurthy representing the former and Muthulakshmi Reddi representing the latter. Although Muthulakshmi was an exception in that she supported the Congress, particularly Gandhian constructive work, this was also in general a polarization between the Congress and the Self Respect Movement. Web of Deceit is located in the context of the Self Respect Movement, demonstrating the indispensability of a larger political context for specific reforms to become possible.

Paradigms of Femininity and Masculinity

A dominant concern of the period echoed in the introductions and preface to the novel was the corruption and destruction of young men. The novel was primarily intended to educate young men and retrieve them from the path of vice. The emergence of strong and enlightened men, citizens of the new nation, was contingent on a modern femininity and the birth of the new woman. This concern is woven in different ways throughout the novel, and it is useful to trace the resonances of the struggles and anxieties the social reform movement outside was fraught with. One major concern of the reformers was the emasculation of the men of the dasi community, their utter dependence on the income of the women and the fact that their position was contingent on the respect and attention the women of their family commanded. In the process of inverting norms of being and relationship, this dependence had to be exposed and defined in terms of the new patriarchy. An important part of this concern was the need to counter the colonial construction of Indian men as effete, debauched and incapable of shoulder the responsibilities of citizenship. The emergence of the enlightened male citizen is contingent on and critically depend-
motherhood in the novel, citizenship being predicated on the fulfillment of the agenda of reform. Her call to the men of the community who “have lost their individuality by their abject and servile dependence on their women,” to recover their manhood, their self respect and self reliance by assuming their “rightful place as the economic unit of the family in place of the woman” is echoed throughout the novel and opens up the intersections of gender and power so integral to the agenda of reform. For Muthulakshmi, the devadasi institution, interestingly an institution, which provided stature and recognition as artists and scholars in the public sphere for women, epitomised the “loss of masculinity and cultural regression of the Hindus.”

Further, a strictly Utilitarian sexuality was being constructed as the ideal. Young boys were exhorted to practice continence, as it would lead to the moral regeneration of the race. “Our educated young men and women ... must take the vow of Brahmacharya and ... take light and knowledge to every poor and ignorant home in the [village].” This reduction of the attraction to dasis as purely sexual and divorced from any nuance of admiration for their artistic ability, wit, charm, capacity for informed, intelligent conversation is accompanied by a critique of existing forms of conjugalty as traditional and repelling to the young male, driving him to temptation and evil. And this ideal of a higher moral order devoid of sexual desire and gratification is one that figures repeatedly in this novel. Gnanasundari’s willing and even cheerful acceptance of a forced celibacy immediately after marriage when her husband leaves to gratify his desire for the devadasi sisters, and her refusal to view her situation as a personal calamity, rather than as part of a larger social crisis that needed resolution, captures the missionary zeal of devadasi abolition. And this was the new femininity: enlightened, self conscious, celibate, dependent and acquiescent in demeanour, patient and accommodating in the interests of the larger good. Sitambaranar writes about how qualities of courage, fearlessness, beauty, education, fame, and victory, essentially traits of the ideal man, are always described in terms of Lakshmi, a goddess, and points to the inconsistency in the Vedic system, where practice contradicts belief, under-scoring the fact that even within the Vedic schema women were superior to men, where masculinity itself was defined in essentially feminine terms, not in opposition to femininity.

Periyar’s treatment of the question of masculinity is, however, distinctive. In an article titled “Masculinity Must be Destroyed,” Periyar observed that the term masculinity itself degraded women, since it was built on the assumption that courage and freedom inhered in the man, with its obverse femininity implying subservience. The very existence of the norm therefore ensured that men and women would constitute themselves within its parameters. Despite constraints that women face, they had to begin re-constituting themselves as equal partners with men instead of remaining as dependent subjects. Without adopting a tone that was castigatory, and without speaking in terms of the emasculation of men of devadasi families owing to their dependence on women of the community (which are based on received notions of masculinity) he spoke instead of the denial of privilege, recognition and respect vis-à-vis the brahmin, linking gender, art, hierarchy and power within the paradigm of caste. Speaking about Segunthar men, he was concerned about the lack of self-esteem in this community of nadawaram vidwans. Although they were artists, they were denied the honour that was their due only because of their ‘low’ caste status, while less accomplished brahmins received acclaim with ease. The devadasi system, for Periyar, also foregrounded the disjuncture between class and caste, class privilege rarely upstaging caste privilege and position.

Even if a brahmin were to mediate between a dasi and her prospective patron (and lover) he was addressed as “swami.” It has happened that the patron (if he is a non-brahmin) who receives a missive from the dasi (through a brahmin courier) often stands up to receive it. It

Although there are several strands of Ramamirthammal’s work that resonate Periyar’s views, the question of masculinity is raised in terms of dependence, servitude and debauchery, rather than in the more sympathetic terms of denial.
Family, Conjugalitv and Sexual Desire

Conduct in relationships is a central concern of the novel. It also addresses the shifts in structures of feeling and emotion: there is a recognition of the fact that relationships involving devadasis were not devoid of emotion, love and fidelity, and that all these could be emptied out of that space only when marriage represented fulfillment on these counts. The shift to privileging consensual unions—the resistance to ritual as primarily a mechanism of alienation, the re-location of the language of love from non-conjugal “free unions,” to egalitarian, inter-caste, monogamous conjugality, and the re-inscription of marriage from an extended/joint family norm to nuclear, monogamous marriage as the ideal; the centrality of the demands of public life over “familial” obligations for women in marriage; the emergence of the possibility of “platonic” pure relationships between men and women (unrelated men and women could be brother and sister)—opening out the space for a more equal intellectual exchange in a de-sexualized context; the re-inscription of the ideal mother and mother-in-law (traditional mothers-in-law and mothers are in the new context negative examples and are seen as retrogressive forces)—are all part of a process where the fields of the deployment of sexuality and alliance were being reinscribed at that particular moment in history. Upto this point, the deployment of sexuality both outside and on the fringes of familial institutions was relatively autonomous of alliance. Griffin, speaking in a different context, explains the existence of separate fields of alliance and sexuality in terms of the rigidity in the norms of conjugal life, which denied married women independent wealth, inheritance and education, making all these the privilege of courtesans, so that the fields of alliance and sexuality were distinct with the deployment of sexuality outside familial institutions being a source of enormous prestige and wealth. These two distinct fields were brought together during the period of reform in India, both being re-inscribed in the process. To anticipate our argument, sexuality outside alliance was inscribed in negative terms of immorality and vice, while attempts were made to inscribe alliance in terms of a more easy, egalitarian (sexual) conjugality thus privileging conjugality and redefining the field of conjugality through the deployment of sexuality.

In Web of Deceit, while the marriage of Gnansundari and Somasekaran in the zamindar family follows caste and kinship codes, the alliance of Vivekavathi, a girl from a dasi family to her music teacher is autobiographical and challenges the tradition that made dasi women structurally unavailable to men of the community. Ramamirthammal infuses the Self Respect imagination into the more traditional marriage in the zamindar family, with the bride agreeing to an alliance because of the opportunities it offered to serve the people and propagate reform.

The question of motherhood was critical to the debate on devadasi abolition, and it is central to this novel: the uneducated, yet enlightened mother, the Dharmapuri zamindarini, and the self-seeking, acquisitive mother, Boga Chinthamani. And both these models, positive and negative, are rooted in history, the latter entrenched in a stereotype, which needs to be unpacked. In the course of research several years ago on the history of the devadasi system, a brahmin informant—a woman then in her early seventies—from Kumbakonam, observed that when she was a child, brahmin and devadasi houses used to be on parallel streets, back to back. When girls were born in brahmin homes, they would be passed over the wall, and similarly when boys were born in devadasi homes, they would be passed over the wall. Adoption of girls was a fairly normal practice in devadasi families. Adoption has traditionally been linked to property ownership and control and to inheritance (of property, title, knowledge). In the normal course patriarchies have witnessed and practised the adoption of boys, while dealing with girls in extremely derogatory ways. The question of the lack of maternal love in adoptive mothers, or of their vested interest in property has never been raised as a problem in the context of the adoption of boys. With devadasi families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, adoption of girls was seen as the primary reason for
the resilience of the practice. It was the independent possession and use of property and wealth by women, and the dependence of men on wealth acquired by women, that insulated the community. This immediately created a crisis of sorts in the changing order, because the new norm made for a further entrenchment of patriarchy and patriliny in patriarchal communities. Adoption of girls by women, the root cause, had to be eliminated.

The ruthlessness of “commercial vice” throws into question the sanctity of motherhood that this very discourse evokes in other contexts. So apart from femininity and masculinity, the relationship that is seen to be sullied by the devadasi system is the institution of motherhood, with the older women of the community being constructed as ruthless and mercenary both with daughters who lacked charm and beauty and sons in general.

[Boga Chinthamanai] yelled at Karunakaran, “Go fetch a cart and go to the station. Why do you stand there like a tree? Do you have to be told each and every thing? Don’t you know what has to be done for a trip out of town?... He asked his mother whether he could call a porter as there was a lot of luggage. ‘You fool! Where is the anna to pay the porter? When you are there why this needless expense? There is still time. Take it to the train in two trips.’ Karunakaran couldn’t say anything and he obeyed her (pp. 49–50).

The caste draws its legitimacy and its sustenance from beauty, wealth and proficiency in art. The sensibility for performance then, is the defining characteristic of the caste. It is not physical beauty alone. The alternative to this sensibility or aesthetic for women of the caste, if you like, is conjugality within monogamous marriage, which is the flip side of the devadasi system anyway. The constant juxtaposition of conjugality with its other also leads into the redefining of notions of conjugality itself. The idea of course is the possibility marriage offers for an equal partnership between men and women and the emotional support that marriage is seen as having the potential to provide. Marriage is also now an opportunity to do “good work.”

Gnanasundari in the novel was euphoric at the prospect of her marriage although she knew the family she was marrying into was extremely conservative because she saw it as an opportunity to do good work. The novel suggests an alternative in which, “[i]t is better to be born in a poverty stricken home than as a girl in a dasi family. In a poor home even if there is suffering there is still some time to speak together as man and wife.” (p. 48) The lament for conjugal bliss too, interestingly is first articulated by a woman who is beautiful no doubt, but too ill and lacking in charm to make a successful devadasi. In the very first articulation of this desire for conjugal bliss we witness an intersection of class, caste, gender and the new conjugality. And yet, the option of marriage as it is, is not a happy one:

Dasis usually make fun of the gentlemen who visit their houses. But the gentlemen seldom feel insulted and are so excited that as the ridicule grows they sit there smiling. Even the most intelligent, wealthy, well born gentlemen perform tasks for dasis which ordinary people would find distasteful. These same rich men get angry if their wives talk to them about family matters. They even demonstrate their bravery by using abuse and a stick.

“Wretched slave! Don’t I know? You presume to advise me. Do you know how I am respected? Don’t you know that I was invited to the Governor’s tea party? Do you know how much respect I received? Did they think I was a fool? I should have married a donkey instead of you. I feel disgraced if I look upon your face. Go to your mother’s house and I will send you money every month for your maintenance.” And so on. The same men will put up with anything from dasis (p. 55).

It was this double standard in male morality that Self Respecters condemned unequivocally. Geetha and Rajadurai point out that Periyar struck a different note on this point, criticizing “those social codes that were ready to call a woman a prostitute but demurred from judging male promiscuity.” To Periyar, they argue, “karpu and debauchery were two dissimilar constituents of the same sexual ethic ... Both terms referred to degrees of male ownership of female sexuality. The one insisted a woman could be possessed by only one man while the other
sought to make woman an object of public lust.\textsuperscript{44} However other Self Respecters were more ambiguous in their condemnation of the devadasi, an ambiguity that is a running thread in \textit{Web of Deceit}. Devadasis were generally seen, by all abolitionists, as victims of the system, but also as debauched, immoral women, pawns in a game played by brahmins, yet the archetypal seducers of morally weak Hindu men.

While there is a general comment running through the novel that devadasis use a repertoire of techniques of deception on guileless young men who fall easy prey, the actual narrative within the plot juxtaposes the utter rationality, reason and dignity of devadasi women in stark contrast to the lack of restraint on the part of men who encounter them.\textsuperscript{45} In the course of propagating abolition, the novel speaks far more to the fact that the demands and expectations placed on devadasis by men who visited them, both their patrons and those who desired them in very explicitly sexual ways, were what needed to be addressed. And what is caricatured throughout the novel is not repertoires of deceit, but the monotony, even insanity, of male desire, and through this \textit{Web of Deceit} offers a trenchant critique of the notion of masculinity itself. In proposing a new conjugal paradigm, Ramamirthammal was also critiquing marriage and family in caste society: the antagonistic relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the social distance between husband and wife, the practice of domestic violence, and the complete absorption of male debauchery. Her position presents a slight departure from Periyar’s critique of masculinity, where he locates the crux of masculinity in power, locating it instead in desire. Her solution then is the displacement of desire as the crux of relationships, bringing in the clearly Self Respect idiom of companionship and comradeship.

\section*{Caste and Religion}

Introducing the novel, Kunjitham Gurusamy, an active Self Respecter and Principal of the Cuddalore Girls’ High School wrote:

The author has pointed out in one place that devadasi descended from the Arya bramhins. To increase their caste population the brahmins indirectly introduced the dasi system. Those who give importance to human values and social reforms should support and welcome this novel.

The devadasi system, for Kunjitham and for Ramamirthammal was predicated on Hindu religion, brahmin hegemony and the traditional Hindu family. According to this interpretation, the tensions within the family, between the women and their mothers and sisters-in-law and the mandatory distance and reserve between husband and wife in a trans- wittary marriage forced the husband into easier and more relaxed relationships with dasis. Brahminical ideals of the unquestioning, self-effacing, obedient wife were clearly inadequate and even detrimental to the interests of women. The solution to the dasi question would be reached, Ramamirthammal felt, if the structure of marriage was loosened to accommodate a greater ease in conjugal relationships. The new ideal of marriage was thus based on the redefinition of an ‘ideal womanhood’ which would ideally bear the burden of birthing the new nation.

While Ramamirthammal supported, even drew on Muthulakshmi’s demand for abolition, there were very significant departures in the frameworks within which they articulated their demand. Ramamirthammal used the devadasi practice as a pivotal point in her critique of brahminical Hinduism.\textsuperscript{46} In this view religion and god (both terms by implication Aryan and brahmin) created caste differences, untouchability, enforced widowhood and prostitution. Devadasis, she said, were mere instruments of brahmin treachery.

If Brahma was such a great god with a sense of equality then he would have made man and woman equal partners. Is it right for him to tie the knot between a sixty year old man and a six year old girl? If that was alright then he should have also married a sixty year old woman to a six year old boy. That would have been justice.
The question she poses “God is the protector of the universe. How can he bear to see his wives practising prostitution with many men?” is a powerful indictment of not just the nationalist defense of the essential Hinduism but also of the pro-Hindu biases of prominent abolitionists, particularly Raghubapi Venkatraman Naidu and Muthulakshmi Reddi, both of whom were unwilling to step out of the parameters of Hinduism in their critique of the devadasi system. Superstition and blind adherence to custom, for Venkatraman, were just “outer abasements” which once removed would reveal the “native grandeur” of the nation. These premises however, could not stand on their own in the context of social reform. They had to find (and did find) support within native textual traditions. The Mahabharata, for instance describes the wife as “the friend in solitude, the father in duty, the mother in distress and the refuge in wilderness,” a role that women had to relearn in the new context. Muthulakshmi, likewise, held firm belief in a glorious Hindu past in which the devadasis who served in temples were pure and chaste like the vestal virgins of ancient Greece. The devadasi system, in her view, was a slur on the Hindu nation. The integrity of the Hindu nation had to be safeguarded against onslaughts from the Christian evangelical efforts to counter the system through proselytization. Crucial to her defense was the need to account for a practice, which was not only so widely prevalent in contemporary society, but also found mention in religious texts. This involved an exploration into textual origins. These explorations revealed that the devadasis were originally a band of pure virgin ascetics attached to temples. They were believed to have lived a holy life, wearing only the simplest clothes and subsisting on the food given to them by the temples. Muthulakshmi’s aim was to rescue Hindu society from the clutches of blind superstition and obscurantism, which, she believed, could only spell its doom: “(Prostitution) is a question that vitally concerns the dignity and status of every woman in India, inasmuch as it is a stigma on the whole womanhood, and a blot on Hindu civilization.”

And yet, Hindu law sanctioned the existence of courtesans and their rights to property. Also, the laws of Manu, which were given immense crediblity by Europeans, sanctioned a moral order that was altogether alien to the European experience. The following passage, an excerpt from a judgement, illustrates this point:

Courtesans have no doubt been a recognised institution in India from very early times. It is plain, from the rules laid down by the Smritis... that unchastity was, at the time of their composition, a very common and comparatively venial offence. Manus code indicates the influences under which it was composed, by exempting from penalty the virgin who makes advances to a high caste man. The case is contemplated of men who make money by their wives’ prostitution. Narada recognises the class of courtesans, and allows intercourse with them as with their slaves who are not kept secluded. He exempts their ornaments from confiscation, as he does the instruments of musicians... (Harlotry was an occupation of which the Hindu law took cognizance and has been deemed important enough in modern times to be made the subject of special rules in the Vyavahar Mayuka and Vivada Chintamani).

Drawing from various textual and customary sources, the judiciary, over a period of five decades ending around the time. Web of Deceit was written, built a broad framework within which devadasi inheritance could be decided. Devadasis, according to this framework, were Hindus, although their exact position in the caste hierarchy was difficult to determine. Male members of this caste as well as married female members were governed by the ordinary Hindu law of inheritance. It was not imperative, however, that female members of this caste marry. They could remain unmarried, and become professional whores without risking any degradation or stigma as long as they observed caste customs. And this is crucial to the devadasi practice.

The devadasi system functioned from the earliest times strictly within the parameters of caste, with women from different castes being dedicated. Relations between devadasis of different castes however were bound by the proscription on
interdining that was the cornerstone of caste based societies, and the threat of ex-communication or expulsion from caste was a threat devadasis faced, as did other castes, for violation of caste codes.\textsuperscript{53} Although during this period, at the centre of the debate on rights and abolition were devadasis who belonged to the relatively affluent middle castes, Thurston points to evidence of dedication of women from the Madiga caste in the Telugu areas in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{54} Later still in the mid-twentieth century, women in the Telangana Armed Struggle were campaigning against the devadasi system as a form of bondage and feudal servitude that was sexually exploitative of dalit women.\textsuperscript{55} There are suggestions of this trend in the pre-colonial period as well, with epigraphic records pointing both to the existence of notable courtesan-dancers who make endowments to temples and to women who are taken by some chieftains and “recovered” by others—all referred to by the term tevaradiyal.\textsuperscript{56}

Because of the fact of its entrenchment in caste society and its legitimacy in the caste order, devadasi women could not be treated on par with “degraded women” in the matter of their inheritance rights, notwithstanding their equation to prostitutes in legal discourse. Hence, courts argued that the dissolution of the relationship between degraded women and their relations who remained in caste could not be held to apply to members of this caste, as “... it will be seen at once that (the ordinary Hindu law of inheritance) which is based on a system of legal marriage and consequential relationship, cannot be applied at all or at the very least without very considerable modifications to the property of a woman of this caste who except her own children can ordinarily have relations only through females.”\textsuperscript{57}

If a woman of this community chose to marry, her rights to inheritance would be in conformity with the ordinary Hindu law and subject to the disability of the ordinary Hindu woman to take absolute estate. This would also apply to women who married and “lapsed” into their traditional calling later, as regards property they held while they were part of the ordinary Hindu family.\textsuperscript{58}

Where the case was one of inheritance by dasi descendants of dasis, judgements were governed by the general principle that daughters inherited “as sons” in this community.

There were, however, important exceptions which could not be decided by analogy. For instance, the self-acquired property of one member of the undivided Hindu family was not subject to partition according to textual sources. In the case of Chalakonda Alasani, it was decided that she, as head of the family, was entitled to the possession and control of the property that her daughter by adoption claimed to be her own self-acquired property.\textsuperscript{59} The ground for this was the business of the daughter started with the use of the mother’s resources and property and hence the mother’s claim as the eldest member of the Hindu joint family had to be upheld. Apart from textual sources, European text writer Strange supported this view when he wrote in his Manual of Hindu Law that “the essence of the exclusive title exists in the acquisition having been made by the sole agency of the individual without employing for the purpose what belongs in common to the family.”\textsuperscript{60} This was a provision that could be applied to all the devadasis in general because the profession or traditional calling was hereditary and the younger generation was schooled into the profession by the older one.\textsuperscript{61}

A second departure from the analogous textual tradition was made with reference to the norms of patrilineral inheritance, that entitled sons to coparcenary rights in the property of the undivided Hindu family. A coparcenary of dancing girls was constituted only of their rights to survivorship. Daughters did not acquire an interest in ancestral property by birth.\textsuperscript{62} This departure was essential in order to bring the question of adoption within the ambit of legality. Further, adoption did not need authentication through a ceremony. A unilateral act of adoption by a woman was legally binding. A daughter thus adopted would inherit her mother’s property in preference to the latter’s eldest surviving male relation.\textsuperscript{63} If this male relation was an illegitimate son, he could still not inherit his mother’s property because the sapinda or propinquity principle was appli-
cable only to male offspring governed by the Hindu law of succession. The propinquity principle was however applicable when the rights of illegitimate female offspring were at issue irrespective of whether they were married daughters or dasi daughters.

Defining the marital status of a dasi daughter was problematic. The texts, primarily the Mitakshara, made mention of only two classes of daughters—Kanya and Kulastri. The law for Sadharan Stri might have been applicable to these women if it had been codified. That it was not codified was probably because any woman “lapsed into prostitution, became a disqualified heir as either a patti (outcaste) or apapataki (vicious woman) and forfeited absolutely all right of inheritance.”

Clearly the dancing girl was not a sadharan stri either. It was this very ambiguity about the position of the devadasi that surfaces time and again in every aspect of the debate on the devadasi system. Property and inheritance were at the crux of the debate, the most keenly contested dimension. These rights had to be clearly defined and textualized; in order to be reorganized through reform.

The same courts of law, even while conferring legal recognition with respect to inheritance, pressed charges of prostitution on women who adopted female children, attempting thus to assert the primacy of penal law over customary law—oral and textual.

A critique of brahminical Hinduism as well as a more wide-ranging debate on the specific ways in which the devadasi practice is located within Hinduism figures centrally in discussions on the question of Hindu customary law and inheritance practices of devadasis in the courts of Madras Presidency. By positing an alternative Dravidian perspective of history, Justice Devadoss, a non-brahmin Indian judge in the Madras High Court, contested colonial interpretations which were derived from Aryan interpretations.

Ultimately it was the critique of brahminical Hinduism, and anti-caste politics that made the biggest impact on the system. However, two aspects of the system remained unexplored. The first, the question of dedication of women from “untouchable” castes, which then remained a problem even after devadasi abolition in 1947, and continues today as part of the larger derogation of rights of dalit people, in ways very distinct from the dedication of women from the middle castes. The second aspect, which we will address in the next section is the resistance to devadasi abolition and the different voices in that resistance.

Resistance to Abolition

The “web of deceit” that the novel elaborates is the whole complex of intelligence, artistic ability and charm of devadasis that not only attracted their patronage and clientele but also placed them in a class apart from and above ordinary family women. The author reiterates the fact that devadasis are not of divine origin or born with divine qualities but are actually trained in the art of seduction. Evidently the dasi household provided an environment that was so electric in its attraction and hold over men who patronized them that the attraction had to be rhetorically reduced to enticements into webs of deceit. For instance when the young zamindar, heir to a wealthy estate, first enters the dasi household he is dazzled by the glittering elegance of his surroundings and wonders whether the wealth of his entire kingdom can pay for their services. Gnanasundari also, after observing their free unrestrained conversation with men, is able to trick her husband into believing she is a dasi by free (essentially equal) conduct and a different (not necessarily vulgar) dress code. Somasekaran later is unable to accept the real dasi Kantha only because she is devoid of ornaments. He insists she will never appear in public without jewels, which are evidently markers of status rather than mere ornaments. At a time when the demand for abolition was at its height, all of these signifiers of autonomy were translated into the larger rhetoric of instruments of deceit. And Boga Chinthanani, who on the surface is the villain of the novel, resonates the anxieties and tensions of devadasi women in a situation of extreme adversity.
Many devadasis like Boga Chinthamani and her daughters Kantha and Ganavathi, resisted abolition. They formed groups to oppose the proposed Bill tabled by Muthulakshmi Reddi in the Legislative Assembly. Doraikannamal, Bangalore Nagarathnamma, and other devadasis met the Law Minister C.P. Ramaswami Iyer in November 1927 in an attempt to impress upon him the fact that contrary to Muthulakshmi’s assertions, there was no connection between the performance of religious services in the temple and prostitution. They asserted that if the object of the Bill was in fact to stop prostitution, Muthulakshmi ought to find other ways of doing it. In response to their representation, the Minister assured them that the matter would be thought over carefully and assured them that there will be measures to compensate for the loss of property rights in the event of abolition.

At yet another meeting in Georgetown on 27 November 1927, in which both Nagarathnamma and Doraikannamal participated, the question of equating the devadasi practice to prostitution was debated at length. Over a hundred and fifty devadasis and twenty-five prominent men of different castes attended this meeting. Resolutions were passed condemning the concerted attempts among some sections to discredit a group of women who lived their lives according to a widely respected religious tradition. It also condemned the demand to ban potukkkattal as a remedy for prostitution. Doraikannu, in yet another pamphlet expressed her unhappiness at the attempt by Muthulakshmi Reddi and her followers to target one group and open it up for public scrutiny. She felt that instead of looking at social evils and thinking of effective ways of stemming prostitution, a blind judicial system was being put into the service of men of the Isai Vellalar community who had a vested interest in dispossessing and discrediting the devadasis.

In response to Muthulakshmi’s plea for illegalizing potukkkattal, Nagarathnamma held that while prostitution was indeed a serious problem that had to be addressed, and while it was true that some devadasis did take to prostitution, removing the potukkkattal ceremony would not affect prostitution in any way. She felt that the link that was being made between the two was far too simplistic. Further, if the argument of the abolitionists was that potukkkattal was a disguise for prostitution, then removing it would only mean opening the field to the unhindered and undisguised practice of prostitution, not to its disappearance. Importantly, Nagarathnamma was of the opinion that the devadasi institution was being evaluated by the abolitionists from the standpoint of western religion and social practice. It was necessary instead to locate it within its own parameters and then articulate demands for reform.

The Madras Rudrakannikai Sangam, an active anti-abolition body, issued a statement that “the people who propose the Bill offer the same excuse that Isai Vellalar themselves support it. But Isai Vellalars are men born of Rudrakannikais. It is strange that they are supporting the Bill. We will soon see that selfishness prompts them to support the Bill. The women of this class have the sole right to property and the right to funeral honours... It is a fact that in this world men have always had a selfish motive. The men of this class wanted to have the right to property and therefore they bite the hand that feeds them.”

And from the same group: “A bill to abolish prostitution ought to exert control over and punish the men responsible.”

Another anti-abolitionist says, “Some members of the Madras Legislative Council, especially Dr. Muthulakshmiammal and some Congress leaders... have... been carrying on propaganda work under the misapprehension that the morality of Hindu society would be improved thereby... No healthy social conditions can be founded on inequality and injustice. Without male chastity female chastity is impossible.”

It is interesting that the abolitionists were also propagating a single standard of chastity. The difference in articulation however is that the anti-abolitionists did not see chastity or sexual conduct as the key issue. For them the question of identity and the safeguarding of rights tied to that identity were critical. However, it was precisely this disjunction in articulation that in a sense disabled the anti-abolition position, and made it impossible for the anti-abolitionists to sustain it. Inevitably, an
important part of the devadasis' defense was their attempt to portray themselves in a role that was both sanctioned by religious custom and acceptable to the changing ideology. The sanctity of marriage became a central issue: "As soon as a virgin who is born into that caste ties tirupottu she acquires the name tevaradhyal ... Just as a married woman belongs to her husband, so also the kannikai belongs to Iswaran and her tirupottu symbolises this."75

At one level, we could see the devadasis' defense of their practice as a reverse discourse, with the devadasi way of life beginning to speak for itself, to demand its legitimacy be recognized and acknowledged using the same vocabulary and categories by which it was being increasingly denounced and denigrated.76 But this is only a part of the explanation.

At another level, the articulations that got co-opted into the 'brahmin framework' were those of women who were articulating their position outside it. The polarization of politics and the particular configurations of political alliances that seemed possible at that time, equated modernity and political radicalism (especially that of the non-brahmin movement) with the abolitionist position, and reduced anti-abolitionist articulations to a backward traditionalism that hindered progress. This dichotomization of positions on the part of the reformers rendered invisible a discourse that could neither be contained in simple dichotomies nor be silenced.77

The positions that the anti-abolitionists like Nagarathnammal and Doraikannammal for instance took, were certainly not "brahmin" positions, nor can they by any stretch be called a "set of prostitutes set up by their keepers," as Muthulakshmi described them.78 Their own radicalism and sensitivity to issues is comparable to the radicalism of the non-brahmin movement, but they were located outside it and in opposition to it. It was the impossibility of fixing the anti-abolitionists firmly within any of the existing political-ideological frameworks that wiped out their resistance. Ramamirthammal herself gives little space for this standpoint through the voices of the unreformed devadasis in the novel, although and importantly, in our view, she recognizes that reform is only possible through the absolute impoverishment and complete dispossession of devadasis in the profession, by deceit if necessary, rather than through the change in the mindset of men, an ideal which remains unattained even in the final resolution in the novel.

**Aesthetic, Ethic and Citizenship**

The dasi herself is a recognised prostitute. The result is that a depraved woman who has wrecked many a family and who is a curse to humanity is considered to be entitled to an office in the temple of God and is allowed to tempt God's bhaktas away from the path of morality, by her dancing and singing, even at the time they are praying to overcome temptation79

This Muddupalani being a prostitute whose traditional occupation is adultery has cast off the modesty which is characteristic of women and filled the text with lewd descriptions of the sexual act in the name of Sringara rasa.80

It might be immoral for a married woman to go with another man, but a vesha cannot be called immoral. Anybody who reads Vatsayana's Kamasutra would understand our caste vocation and its history from the time of creation.81

Their official duties consist in dancing and singing within the temple morning and evening. The first they execute with sufficient grace although their attitudes are lascivious and their gestures indecorous. Their singing is almost always confined to obscene verses describing some licentious episode in the history of their gods.82

...to invite dasis to perform at music concerts is not liked by wise people these days. This is because dasis spoil and seduce youth in the guise of performing music. (Web of Deceit, p.41)

Jetti Thayamma (1863–1947) a renowned court dancer in the Mysore samasthnam from the age of fifteen who introduced churumika in dance for the first time caused the post of court dancer to be retained despite abolition for the preservation of her art. Bangalore Nagarathnammal (1878–1952) was
control over property passed from devadasi women to men of the community and in a few cases reverted to the state. And this question in all its complexity does not find a place in any of the discourse which focussed on devadasi abolition. The new language of sexuality conflated seduction with art (specifically the performing arts), charm and wit, reducing art to a mere vehicle for seduction, which in turn is linked to the commerce in bodies, namely prostitution. Music and dance thus become satanic or evil, bringing a protestant ethic to bear on a culture that is rich in its aesthetic and sensuous appeal. Take for instance Vivekavathis plea for a ban on all dancing and music because it is sensual as a prerequisite to eliminate the attraction to dasis. The entire discursive economy of the devadasi system by this period begins to revolve around commercial sex and seduction.

But again, the discourse on the female body in the Self Respect movement especially, focused on the valorization of the female body. Periyar for one was concerned about the manner in which women’s bodies were fetishized, and notions of female beauty dwelt excessively on the physical to the practical exclusion of the intellect. Women, he said, were seen as mere ‘pegs’ on which one hangs jewellery and lamented that such notions of beauty which almost always stressed the seductive and glamorous appeal of feminine good looks, were internalized by women themselves.87 This is an argument that figures repeatedly in Web of Deceit, and also in writing on beauty and aesthetics around that time by women. In an article titled “Women are not burden carriers,” Srimathi P. Ramabai argues that men have cheated women of their right to property and reduced them to objects of pleasure, utterly dependent on men. It is to escape penury on the death of the husband that women began to wear jewellery as investment. Over time, women began to wear jewels as mere ornaments, making them carry enormous burdens. She then goes on to urge women to protect natural beauty—i.e., natural build, healthy body, clean dress, a heart full of grace, a smile on the face and kindly eyes, which is what true female beauty is about.88 Time and again the exam-
freedom to be fulfilled. The dilemma was on where they should be placed in a hierarchical order of respectability. Early in the debate on reform, the question was raised whether children of dancing girls could read together in the same schools with children from “respectable” families. Some decades later, the question was, could they be treated on par with “respectable” women who were also part of the struggle? Should devadasis be seated separately in meetings that demanded freedom from colonial rule? If they courted arrest, could they lay a legitimate claim to the privileges of political prisoners or were they to be treated as prostitutes? Simultaneously with asserting the right to dignity and respectability for a vocation that was “debased”, devadasis were also staking a claim to seats of respectability in the then noble vocation of politics. They were asserting their claim, not just to cultural citizenship, but to political citizenship as well.

In claiming their right to the freedom of expression, and resisting powerful and hegemonic attempts at negating their historical place in society, devadasis across the board were in fact asserting their right to citizenship in the new nation, as bearers of the culture and heritage of the new land. They did this in several ways—some by completely side-stepping the moral question being raised as central to their lives, asserting instead, that the centre was the public space they inhabited, on the stage and in temples; and the art they embodied, their “private” lives being completely marginal to questions of citizenship as they saw it. For others, the moral question was in fact a distortion of their lives, conjugal for them being defined in terms other than the norm of monogamy that was fast emerging as the only permissible form of conjugality. This view then resisted the re-inscription of the private, domestic domain in hegemonic terms and asserted the right of women of this community to patronage and honours in return for their ritual and artistic services. And there were still others, like Muvval Ramamirthammal, who saw in the new ideal, a possibility for active political citizenship that might not exist outside of the parameters of that ideal, and thus accepted and propagated.
reform as the only path that promised equal citizenship to devadasi women on par with other “family women” in the new nation.

Notes and References


4. “A structure of feeling is, of course, never merely an ideological grid. It is entwined with material life, with context and circumstance. Yet it can never be reduced to either the material interests of a class or the consciousness of particular hegemonic social segments. A structure of feeling occupies a fundamentally unstable and fluid cultural space: that which lies between experience and the articulation of that experience; between feeling and expression, pain and language...” V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyoothey Thass to Periyar, Calcutta: Samya, 1998, p. xiv.


6. Women shouldered the burden of reform in distinct ways that were marked by gender. We have argued elsewhere that the intellectual history of reform was shaped by the very different impacts that reform had on the lives of men who propagated it and that of women, and the very different kinds of labour that went into the making of reform. Kandukuri Rajyalakshmi, wife of the famous Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu took young widows into her house, took care of their children if they wanted to remarry, cooked at their weddings because cooks would refuse their services, all work Veeresalingam was not expected to do. See, Volga, Vassanth Kannabiran, Kalpana Kannabiran, Mahilavaranam: Womanscape, Secunderabad, Aasita, 2001 and Vassanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran, “Citizenship and its Discontents: A Political History of Women in Andhra,” in Bharati Ray, ed., Women of India: Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods (Project of the History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture, Centre for Civilisations, New Delhi, General Editor: D.P. Chattopadhyaya), forthcoming.

7. In her preface to the novel, Ramamirthammal eulogizes the zamindarini of Sivagiri, Vellaturaichi Nachiyar for her enlightened support in publishing the novel, when a wealthy devadasi who had promised money for publication went back on her word.


9. Thurston, for instance cites the example of women seeking directions from the court in 1883 with respect to whether Dharmakarthanas could, of their own accord and without express consent from devadasis of that particular temple, appoint new devadasis to the temple, and whether Dharmakarthanas had the right to suspend services of devadasis. Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, reprint) 1975, pp. 125–53.

10. The Hindu Religious Endowments Act, 1925 was passed soon after the Justice Party came into power with the specific aim of displacing brahman secular and sacral hegemony. For a critical review and assessment of this measure see V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium, pp. 209–16.

11. A look at inam settlement records in Tamil Nadu during the period alluded to in the novel throws up some very useful insights. In the zamindari areas of Rammad district for instance, the zamindars were trustees of temples—major and minor—in their zamindari, and usually had a right to one-third of the melwaram share from the produce both from tenants and from inamdares. Among the inamdares, a large section consisted of devadasis who were given inams on condition of service in the temple. The inams usually consisted of two thirds of the melwaram share. The kudilwaram or the cultivator’s share was exclusively the right of tenant cultivators who also had occupancy rights to the land. There were instances where devadasis were declared as envoys of both shares. A survey found that most of the inams given to devadasis (“any unmarried Hindu female dedicated to a temple”) according to inam settlement records were “valakka morakari inams” or sweeps’ inams. At the local level, tahsilars were required to investigate into the existence of the devadasi service in temples that fell under their jurisdiction. On enquiry they found that in many cases, although women had been endowed land for the performance of service in a particular temple, organized worship in these temples had ceased long before 1939. See Kalpana Kannabiran, “Temple Women in South India.”

12. “...it is expedient to put an end to dedication of young girls as devadasis for the service in Hindu temples in the Presidency of Madras, the enfranchisement of lands held by them on condition of
service in the said temples from such condition will be an effective step in doing so..."

13. Krishnapriya, 7 July 1911.


16. Section 372 of the Indian Penal Code is as follows: "Whoever sells, lets to hire, or otherwise disposes of any minor under the age of 16 years, with intent that such minor shall be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or for any unlawful and immoral purpose, or knowing it to be likely that such minor will be employed or used for any such purpose, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."


18. The direct evidence was without exception given by the agency that charged the accused—inevitably the state. Exparte Padmavati, Madras High Court Reports 5 (1870) p.416 (hereafter MHC 5 (1870)) p.416.

19. Exparte Padmavati, MHC 5 (1870) p.416. The Abbe Dubois in his work on Hindu manners and customs says, "the official duties of devadasi consist in dancing and singing within the temple twice a day, morning and evening, and also at public ceremonies...For these services the devadasis were paid a fixed salary which was supplemented by selling their favours in as profitable a manner as possible," Abbe Dubois, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, (translated by H.K. Beauchamp), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, pp. 585-86.


28. "Another unfortunate feature of the system is the sad and pitiable condition of the male members of this community. From their very birth they are looked down upon and are neglected in every way. When they are grown up, their chief duty is to execute the orders of their sisters, who, being the supporters of the family, are considered to be the heads of the house. As they are generally illiterate and wanting in self reliance, they have to depend always on their sisters for maintenance. As the girls of the community are dedicated to temples and have to be prostitutes, the men have to remain unmarried. The few men among them who marry are provided with girls from other castes who are born out of wedlock, or are orphans or their parents are too poor to maintain them. Owing to the bad environment, some of these men succumb to vice." Prostitution under Religious Customs," Report submitted by Mr. P.G. Naik, Bombay Vigilance Association, 1928, p. 7.


32. Letter dated 8 September 1927, MRP, sf. 1111, pp. 349-51. At the time that Muthulakshmi entered the scene, the Koval Sengunthar Mahajana Sangam was among the most active bodies in the Tamil areas. It was established in 1913 and registered in 1924. The activities of this organization involved propaganda work in remote villages to "reclain" devadasis and their daughters. The Society for the Protection of Minor forms in Cochin in 1917. In the Andhra areas of the Presidency, the Andhradesa Kalavathulu Sangham was the most active pro-abolition body.


36. These attributes of the "modern woman" are dealt with at length in an article by one Kumudini, "Pudumai Penn" Kalaimagal, vol. XXVIII, no.2, February 1945, pp. 86-89. The birth of the modern woman was seen as possible only when women are allowed to enjoy rights to education, to property, to the vote, and to equal participation in public life. T. V. Chokkappa, "Pennurimai: Pennkalvi," Tamilagam, no. 7, February 1932. Physical strength and well being are indices of mental hygiene and discipline. Exercise and education for women therefore must go together. A.V.C.T. Chokkalingam, Sentamal Selvi, vol. 8, no. 7, July-August 1930, pp. 434-37.
40. This was also a concern with Periyar and the Self Respect Movement generally. See especially the views of Penn-inna-nallar cited in V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium, p. 379.
43. Quoting a proverb which says that an adopted son and mother are never united, an article on women's property rights raised the question rarely heard in the context of the adoption of boys, of the injustice to the wife and daughter caused by adoption of a son, sometimes even when the father was on the deathbed, only for reasons of property. The author argues that women in families without male heirs must acquire a share in the property and where the daughter does not have a son, the wife must inherit half the share which will pass on her death to her daughter, bringing some measure of justice to women in patriarchal households. V. Balambal, "Pennkalum Sotthumaiyum," Chinthamani, vol. 1, no. 5, December, 1924.
44. There is a constant appeal by women characters in the novel to men to explain things to them in a reasonable, rational manner, and to help them understand rather than treat them as ignorant. Also, interestingly, there is mention of the need to read newspapers to keep abreast of public affairs.
45. The position Self Respects took on the devadasi question as also their position on matters relating to the derogation of rights sanctioned by Hindu religion, the specific arguments, on the face of it were very similar to positions taken by people like Katherine Mayo. Mayo's Mother India, according to Geetha and Rajadurai "served as an effective instrument to harden the orthodoxy," (p. 397) because she was in fact raising similar objections and linking up her arguments to a thoroughgoing critique of Hinduism. However, while the Self Respects were operating within a paradigm of atheism, Mayo was critiquing Hinduism from the standpoint of Christianity. In Slaves of the Gods, Mayo gives a "fictional" account of a runaway devadasi, Lakshmi: "A devadasi! A Slave of the Gods! A runaway!" shouted the idler giving chase ... Lakshmi ran-ran ... "Lichtenour-darkness-defend-us-perils and dangers" ... And then it happened. Out of the doorway stepped a lady ... Lakshmi saw the face. 'For the love of our Saviour Jesus Christ,' she gasped aloud, and fainted dead away." (p. 122) The defense of the pro Hindu nationalists was a defense of the essence of Hinduism and a sifting out of its aberrations. See V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium, Katherine Mayo, Slaves of the Gods, London: Jonathan Cape, 1929.
47. Manu too "demands of him that would be a father ... to be wholly satisfied with her he has taken unto wife, and guarantees good fortune to the house where the husband is content with the wife and the wife with the husband." Raghupati Venkataramay, "Social Purity and the Anti-Nautch Movement," pp. 253–54.
48. MRP, sf. 11. M. Ramachandram, Secretary of the Aryan Mission adopts a similar position. "In times of yore, women who were discontented or satiated with family life, devoted themselves to the service of God, in the temples; they engaged themselves in cleaning the temple and decorating its walls ...These had plaited hair, wore kasuham (ochre robes), and lived upon the small ration given them out of the cooked rice offered to God, so as to keep body and soul together. In short they lived like ascetics. They prayed and danced in deep devotion to God, and centred their whole thought on Him and Him alone. But alas! ... They are now so many living monuments of debauchery and vice." "The Devadasis." (Gonemuram. S.K.B. Press, 1900).
49. Note dated 17.3.34 regarding Kudikars in Dewaswoms, MRP, sf. 11.III.
52. Thurston cites the very interesting case of a devadasi who petitioned the court for damages for rejected offerings and loss of honour, after priests expelled her from caste and from the temple because of bad conduct since she danced at the house of a Komati and refused to expiate her deed by drinking panchagavyam (five products of the cow that were supposed to purify pollution arising from contact), Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, p. 147.
53. Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, pp. 150–52. Also, Collection of Decisions of the High Courts and the Proby Council on the Law of Succession, Maintenance & c applicable to Dancing Girls and their Issues, Prostitutes not belonging to Dancing Girls' Community, Illegitimate Sons and Bastards, and Illicit Affiliation up to 1891. No date.
55. Kalpana Kannabiran, "Temple Women in South India." This practice is central to the understanding of derogatory caste practices today. See National Federation of Dalit Women, NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, World Conference Against Racism, Durban, South India, 28 August–7 September 2001.

56. Sri Shakti Sarghatana, "We were Making History": Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People’s Struggle, New Delhi: Kal for Women, 1989.


60. Quoted in Chalakonda Alasani v. Chalakonda Ratnachalam, MHCR 2 (1864) p.57.


67. "Though the sutras and smritis are applicable only to the Aryans, yet the text-writers have extended the law to all the residents of India, and the courts have applied the Hindu law to all the races inhabiting this vast country in the absence of proof of any special or local custom. The Dravidians of southern India who are of Turanian origin had settled in India long before the Aryans entered it. They had their own laws and customs which are prevalent even today. The Aryans when they settled in this part of India (tried to impose their own laws which) were never completely successful. The laws relating to family relations and succession and inheritance laid down by Manu and the commentators like Yajnavalkya and Vignaneswara were never accepted as binding by all the people. It was the East India Company’s courts that held for the first time that the laws contained in the ancient sutras and smritis were applicable to all Hindus in southern India in the absence of any custom or customary law governing any class of people. In order to extend the influence of the Aryans Manu compendiously uses the term ‘sudras’ to the people of this country who are not Aryans in the same way as the Europeans use the word ‘native’ to all those who are not of European descent, and postulates that they are all Sudras who have fallen away from the high place once occupied by them in the Aryan polity. This attempt of the part of the law giver Manu to extend the influence of the Aryans among the races who inhabited this land was always pushed in the direction of influencing their religion and rules of succession. In course of time the courts have come to regard Manu and the commentators as authoritative exponents of the law applicable to all the inhabitants of this country who don’t profess any distinctive faith like Muhammadanism or Christianity. The customary law was considered as an exception to that contained in the sutras and smritis." Viswanatha Mudali v. Doniswami Mudali, MLJ, 49 (1925) p. 687.

68. We find, for example, that in 1927 the anti-abolition Devadasi Sangam of Periyakanchipuram had 28 members; that of Chinakkanchivaram had 50; that of Tirukkalukkunram had 100; and the one in Chingleput had 25 members. The devadasis of the Seyyur Kandaswamy temple, Vanameeghanadha temple and Needamaniikkaswami temple in Chingleput district formed an association in 1927 of which Saradamall and Donisiamammal were unanimously elected President and Secretary respectively. The resolutions passed at the first meeting of this association condemned the proposed Bill tabled by Muthulakshmi Reddi, and defended the devadasi practice as part of a noble, ancient religion and appealed to the government not to wipe it out through the enforcement of law. The meeting also condemned speeches and writing that equated the lives of honourable people with prostitution. Yet another meeting of devadasis against abolition was held at the house of Maragatammal in Chinga Kankivaram. Krishnavennimal presided over this meeting, which was attended by approximately fifty men and women. Krishnavennimal and Kamammal were unanimously elected President and Secretary respectively, and thirty people were registered as members of the association. The resolutions of this meeting passed unanimously vehemently condemned Muthulakshmi’s Bill and appealed to the humanitarian government that the practice of Pottukkatte bears no connection with prostitution. The resolutions of this meeting were then released in the newspapers. Twenty eight devadasis of Periyakanchivaram formed a Sangam and sent the following appeal to the Law Member of the Madras Legislative Council: "We condemn Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi’s Bill. There is no connection between our ancient and noble practice of potiukkattu and the disgraceful profession of prostitution. We appeal to the government not to enforce any law that destroys our rights.” These were women who served in different temples and devasthanams in Periyakanchivaram. Ramamaniammal presided over a meeting of devadasis of the Vedagirisvaraswamikoi Devasthanam in Tirukkalukkunram, which was attended by over a hundred people. Ramamaniammal, Manickamammal, Tirupuramammal, Valliammal and Balammal, among others spoke about the need of Sangams that would
work towards the progress of and unity among devadasis, specifically with reference to Muthulakshmi Reddi's Bill on the Madras Legislative assembly. The bill and its implications were discussed at length at this meeting. Thereafter, a sangam was formed with eighty people being registered as members. A resolution condemning Muthulakshmi's Bill was passed at this meeting. The Madras Presidency Devadasi Association was a prominent anti-abolition group. T. Doraikannimal, the Secretary was elected with the specific responsibility of organizing her caste sisters through the Devadasi Association with the purpose of defeating the Devadasi Dedication Bill. Press Clippings (Tamil), MRP, sf. 12.

69. Swadeshamitr, Nov 30, 1927.
70. T. Doraikannimal, Chennai Unnikkantali Sangam, MRP, sf. 12.
71. Swadeshamitr, 30 November, 1927.
73. Newspaper article by the Madras Rudrakanikai Sangam, MRP, sf. 12.
75. B. Varalakshammamma, open letter to Muthulakshmi Reddi and Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, MRP, sf. 11:1
77. Most writing on the Self Respect movement for instance, mentions in passing that not all devadasis supported abolition, but does not pay attention to the texture of that resistance.
82. Abbe Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 585.
83. Muddupalani was a reputed courtesan and poet in the Tanjavur Court between 1739 and 1765.
85. For accounts on traditions of performance and the transformations that took place in the sphere of the performing arts see Saskia Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987; Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and

90. Kalki, "Deviyaran Desa Sevai," *Andalata Vakatan*, vol. 6, no. 8, September 17, 1931. Fuller cites instances similar to the one above where officers of the colonial government were entertained at public functions by "nauch girls," prompting the Hindu Social Reform Association to submit a memorandum asking the Governor of Madras to shun such gatherings. In reply, the Governor expressed his inability to conform to the wishes expressed in the memorial, because none of the nauchis that he had witnessed were in the remotest degree improper, and he did not think it was necessary to go into the moral character of performers. Marcus B. Fuller (1900) *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, reprint, New Delhi: Inter India Publications, 1984, p. 142.
91. "There is no denying that the songs and odes sung by dancing girls are lewd, and when the mother sings, will the children keep aloof and not learn them? If our children Happen to hear those songs sung to fine music, will they leave them unsung... We need not expect morality from the children of the dancing girl caste, who, after they go home from school, are the usual spectators of dancing performances, the dancing master in attendance with his musical instruments. The prostitutes take upon themselves to train up their children from their infancy and teach them nothing but how to lure the other sex. How, then, can we allow our children to read with these... Is this the same thing as arguing that a Brahmin cannot sit with a Pariah? No, we are strenuous in upholding the cause of education... Let the Government establish one school in each Division exclusively for the children of prostitutes." Report on Native Newspapers in the Madras Presidency. Report on Tamil Newspapers for the Week ending 3rd August 1878.
92. G.O. No. G Law 1559 (Councils, Leg. Councils, Prisoners), 15/4/32. We are indebted to Kamala Visveswaran for this reference.