

The Panoptic Temple: Surveillance, Discipline, and Agency within the Devadasi Institution

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Abstract: The Devadasi system remains one of the most contested socio-religious institutions in Indian history, reflecting the complex relationship between religion, gender, power, and social hierarchy. This article investigates the historical transformation of the Devadasi system through the combined theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism and Agency Theory to examine how mechanisms of surveillance, discipline, and power operate alongside practices of resistance and self-determination. Drawing upon historical records, literary narratives, and critical scholarship, the study analyses how a tradition that is initially associated with religious service gradually becomes embedded within structures of social control, marginalization, and exploitation. Foucault's framework of Panopticism demonstrates how colonial administrators, nationalist reformers, and dominant social institutions establish systems of observation and discipline that regulate the lives and identities of Devadasi women while reinforcing existing hierarchies of caste, gender, and morality. In contrast, Agency Theory reveals that Devadasis are not merely passive recipients of institutional control but actively negotiate, reinterpret, and challenge restrictive social structures through everyday acts of resilience, cultural practice, and personal autonomy. By bringing these theoretical perspectives into dialogue, the article moves beyond binary representations of Devadasis as either victims or symbols of religious tradition and instead presents their experiences as sites of continuous negotiation between domination and agency. The study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating that historical systems of oppression cannot be understood solely through institutional mechanisms of power but must also account for the diverse ways in which marginalized individuals exercise agency within restrictive social environments. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of the Devadasi system and expands contemporary discussions on surveillance, power, gender, resistance, and social transformation.

Keywords: Agency Theory, Autonomy, Devadasi System, Discipline, Gender, Panopticism, Power, Religion, Social Control, Surveillance

1. Introduction

Power manifests in multiple forms and shapes every dimension of human society, influencing political institutions, economic systems, cultural traditions, and religious practices. The Devadasi system, one of India's oldest socio-religious institutions, provides a compelling framework for examining how power is constructed, legitimized, and sustained through interconnected structures of religion, caste, and gender. Initially, Devadasis occupy an honoured position within temple institutions, where they perform religious rituals, preserve artistic traditions, and contribute significantly to the cultural life of their communities. Over time, however, this institution undergoes a profound transformation, gradually evolving into a system characterized by social exclusion, gendered exploitation, and institutional control. This transition reflects the broader processes through which social hierarchies reproduce inequality and reinforce relations of domination within Indian society.

Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism, developed in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), provides an important theoretical framework for understanding this historical transformation. Rather than limiting surveillance to physical observation, Panopticism explains how disciplinary power functions through continuous visibility, normalization, and



self-regulation. Within the context of the Devadasi system, this perspective illustrates how colonial administrators, social reformers, and nationalist ideologies establish mechanisms of observation and discipline that regulate the identities, conduct, and social status of Devadasi women. The persistent presence of surveillance encourages the internalization of social expectations, ensuring conformity while reinforcing existing hierarchies of caste, gender, morality, and religious authority.

While Panopticism reveals the operation of disciplinary power, Padma Anagol's Agency Theory (2016) offers an equally significant perspective by drawing attention to the capacity of marginalized individuals to negotiate, reinterpret, and resist structures of domination. Although Devadasis function within restrictive social and institutional frameworks, they do not remain passive recipients of power. Instead, they exercise agency in diverse and often subtle ways by preserving artistic traditions, negotiating social relationships, maintaining economic independence where possible, and redefining their identities within changing historical circumstances. Their lived experiences demonstrate that systems of domination rarely eliminate human agency entirely, rather, they create spaces in which resistance, resilience, and self-determination continue to emerge despite structural constraints.

This article positions the Devadasi system as an important case study for examining the interconnected dynamics of surveillance, power, discipline, and agency within marginalized communities. The discussion is organized into three interrelated sections. The first section examines Foucault's concept of Panopticism and analyses how mechanisms of surveillance and disciplinary power operate within the historical evolution of the Devadasi institution. The second section explores Padma Anagol's Agency Theory to investigate the ways in which Devadasi women negotiate, resist, and reinterpret oppressive social structures despite significant institutional limitations. The final section brings these two theoretical perspectives into conversation to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complex power relations that shape the Devadasi system.

The article seeks to demonstrate that the history of the Devadasi institution cannot be understood solely through narratives of oppression or victimhood. Instead, it requires a critical examination of both the disciplinary mechanisms that sustain institutional control and the diverse forms of agency through which Devadasi women respond to these structures. By employing Panopticism, the study identifies the surveillance practices and disciplinary processes that regulate the institution across different historical periods. Simultaneously, Agency Theory reveals the subtle yet meaningful strategies through which Devadasis preserve autonomy, negotiate authority, and assert their presence within restrictive social environments. By integrating these complementary theoretical frameworks, the article offers a more nuanced interpretation of the Devadasi system and contributes to wider scholarly debates on power, surveillance, resistance, gender, and social transformation. Beyond its historical significance, the study also demonstrates how the interaction between domination and agency continues to shape the experiences of marginalized communities, making the Devadasi system a valuable site for understanding the enduring relationship between power and resistance.

The term *Devadasi* derives from the Sanskrit words *deva* (god) and *dasi* (servant), literally meaning "servant of the god" (Soneji 6). This etymology reflects the institution's original religious foundation, in which young girls are ceremonially dedicated to temples and entrusted with a range of ritual, artistic, and ceremonial responsibilities. Their duties extend beyond devotional service to include training in music and dance, preparing offerings, making flower garlands, maintaining temple premises, and carrying sacred lamps during religious processions (Prasad 149, Story 23). During the extensive temple-building activity of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the number of Devadasis increases considerably, indicating the important role they occupy within the religious and cultural life of South Indian temples (Prasad 192). At this stage, Devadasis are widely recognized as ritual specialists whose artistic accomplishments and ceremonial functions contribute to the prestige and spiritual life of temple institutions. Early colonial observers also acknowledge their religious significance and seldom interpret their role primarily through the lens of sexuality.

This perception gradually changes with the expansion of colonial knowledge systems and administrative intervention. Francis Buchanan identifies Devadasis as a separate caste and describes them as women whose social identity is inseparable from prostitution, asserting that "all are prostitutes, at least to the Brahmins" (Buchanan 266).

Similarly, Abbe Dubois characterizes Indian temples as “mere brothels” (Dubois 662), reinforcing an interpretation that reduces a complex religious institution to a moral problem. Such descriptions profoundly reshape colonial understandings of the Devadasi tradition by replacing its ritual and cultural dimensions with narratives centred on sexuality and moral decline. Earlier beliefs that sexual relations with a Devadasi possess ritual significance and confer spiritual merit gradually disappear beneath these colonial representations (Kermorgant 8). Unlike married women, Devadasis are not confined within the conventions of monogamous marriage, a distinction that places them outside dominant patriarchal family structures and contributes to their unique, yet increasingly contested, social position.

The nineteenth century marks a decisive turning point in the historical trajectory of the Devadasi institution. As British colonial authority expands across India, administrative policies increasingly reshape existing social and religious practices. The establishment of military cantonments and the growth of surrounding commercial centres, including Lal Bazar, generate new urban spaces in which prostitution becomes more visible and more closely regulated by the colonial state (Chatterjee 4). Growing concerns over the spread of venereal diseases among British troops prompt the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which require women identified as sex workers to register with colonial authorities and undergo compulsory medical examinations (Wald 1476). Because Devadasis do not conform to the colonial ideal of respectable domestic womanhood and often maintain relationships outside monogamous marriage, colonial administrators increasingly classify them as prostitutes. This administrative categorization subjects them to systematic surveillance, medical regulation, and public stigma, fundamentally altering their legal and social status (Wald 40).

Colonial intervention is accompanied by a parallel transformation within Indian society. Influenced by Victorian ideals of domesticity and emerging nationalist conceptions of womanhood, Indian social reformers begin to question the legitimacy of the Devadasi institution. They interpret its sexual dimensions as evidence of moral degeneration and argue that the continuation of the practice threatens the sanctity of marriage and the ideal of the respectable Hindu household (Kannan 251). Consequently, colonial administrators and nationalist reformers, despite pursuing different political objectives, converge in representing Devadasis as symbols of social disorder and religious corruption. Through this convergence, the institution becomes the object of legal regulation, moral reform, and public scrutiny.

The historical transformation of the Devadasi system from a respected religious institution to a stigmatized social category demonstrates the complex relationship between power, morality, colonial governance, and cultural reform. Women who once occupy recognised positions within temple communities gradually become subjects of surveillance, classification, and institutional regulation. Their identities are reconstructed through colonial legal discourse and nationalist reformist ideology, both of which redefine the meaning of religious service according to new standards of morality and social order. The history of the Devadasi institution therefore illustrates not only the changing status of temple women but also the broader processes through which systems of power reshape social identities, regulate gendered bodies, and transform cultural institutions within colonial India.

Agency, as conceptualized by Padma Anagol, refers to the “conscious goal driven activities by women that embrace the possibility of change” (Anagol 14). This understanding provides an important framework for examining the experiences of Devadasi women, whose lives are often interpreted exclusively through narratives of oppression. While colonial rule and nationalist reform movements introduce new forms of regulation that profoundly reshape the institution, these developments do not entirely eliminate the ability of Devadasis to negotiate, adapt to, and resist the changing social order. Their experiences demonstrate that even within restrictive structures of power, individuals continue to exercise agency in diverse and often understated ways.

The emergence of colonial rule fundamentally alters prevailing ideas of morality, purity, and respectable womanhood. As discussed earlier, colonial administrators, medical officers, missionaries, and travellers increasingly interpret indigenous customs through Victorian moral standards, constructing rigid distinctions between women regarded as respectable and those considered immoral. These classifications gradually become embedded within legal and administrative institutions, producing consequences that extend far beyond colonial governance. Indian nationalist

leaders subsequently adopt many of these moral binaries while redefining ideal Hindu femininity, thereby reinforcing narrow conceptions of female sexuality and domestic virtue (King 93). Within this evolving moral framework, the social identity of Devadasis undergoes a significant transformation. Women who are previously associated with ritual service and culturally sanctioned relationships are progressively represented as symbols of moral decline and social disorder.

The institutionalization of Anglo-Indian law further accelerates this transformation by altering the judicial status of Devadasi women (Parker 566). Earlier understandings of their customary social position gradually give way to legal interpretations that evaluate their lives through the framework of Victorian morality. Rather than recognizing the historical and religious distinctiveness of the institution, colonial law increasingly associates the Devadasi tradition with sexual immorality and social degeneration. This shift is reinforced by the wider Purity Campaigns, which promote monogamous marriage as the only legitimate expression of female sexuality and present domestic womanhood as the foundation of moral society (P. Chatterjee 10). The language employed in these campaigns reflects colonial assumptions that circulate through administrative reports, missionary writings, medical discourses, and travel narratives, all of which contribute to redefining Devadasis as women who exist outside the accepted boundaries of respectable society (Wald, Whitehead 41). Practices that possess deep cultural and religious significance within the Indian context are therefore evaluated through European moral standards, resulting in their systematic reinterpretation as signs of social and religious degradation.

These changing perceptions also intersect with existing structures of caste and class. Colonial observers and sections of the Indian elite increasingly associate women belonging to lower and working-class communities with poverty, criminality, and uncontrolled sexuality (Ramanna 1473, Gopalakrishnan 34, Gupta 322). Such assumptions influenced the development of legal policies during the nineteenth century, gradually shifting the regulation of women's sexuality from the domain of civil law to criminal law under the Indian Penal Code (Parker 566). Within this legal framework, sexual relationships existing outside monogamous marriage are routinely interpreted as evidence of immorality. Consequently, the distinctive customs governing the lives of Devadasis receive little legal recognition. Instead, their practices are judged according to normative Brahmanical interpretations of Hindu law that privilege patriarchal marriage and female domesticity.

The increasing formalization of Brahmanical customs within colonial jurisprudence contributes to the criminalization of women whose lives do not conform to emerging ideals of respectable femininity. These legal and social reforms establish strict expectations concerning marriage, sexuality, and family life while simultaneously strengthening patriarchal authority within the household. As these standards become central to defining ideal Hindu womanhood, women who occupy public spaces or pursue occupations beyond the domestic sphere become vulnerable to accusations of sexual impropriety. Even women employed in industries such as the jute mills encounter suspicion because their presence outside the home challenges prevailing notions of feminine respectability (Sen 178). Devadasis experience this transformation with particular intensity. Although they remain connected to Brahmanical religious institutions, many continue to enjoy privileges that are unavailable to most women of the period, including access to education, inheritance, adoption, and matrilineal systems of property and kinship. Their ability to maintain relationships outside monogamous marriage further distinguishes them from dominant social norms.

Rather than acknowledging the historical uniqueness of these customary practices, colonial courts interpret Devadasi traditions through generalized principles of Hindu law. This approach overlooks the institutional and cultural specificity of the Devadasi system and instead equates female sexual autonomy with prostitution. As a consequence, legal decisions not only redefine the social identity of Devadasi women but also undermine their customary rights, including claims to property and inheritance (Parker 566). The gradual erosion of these rights illustrates how legal institutions function as instruments of disciplinary power by transforming long-established social practices into evidence of criminality and moral deviance. At the same time, the responses of Devadasis to these changing circumstances reveal that legal regulation does not completely extinguish agency. Even while confronting expanding systems of surveillance, moral judgment, and institutional discrimination, they continue to negotiate their identities

and seek ways to preserve dignity, autonomy, and cultural continuity within an increasingly restrictive social environment.

The legal and administrative changes affecting the Devadasi institution go beyond concerns about morality and significantly alter how social identity is understood. Colonial laws increasingly portray Devadasis as degraded Hindu women, blaming their supposed moral decline on their caste. This shift in how they are described is a deliberate part of colonial discourse, where language itself becomes a tool for control. The terms used by colonial authorities are particularly significant. Official records often use the word “prostitute” rather than “sex worker,” which focuses on economic work. The former term links to ideas of immorality, sickness, and disgrace (P. Chatterjee 11). This language reduces the complex role of Devadasis to a single moral label, ignoring the religious, artistic, and cultural aspects that had shaped their lives. Colonial discourse also neglects the support structures that sustain the Devadasi institution economically. Instead, it shifts the blame onto Devadasi women, using their way of earning a living as the main reason for social criticism.

By reinforcing caste through colonial administrative methods, this process of marginalization is further strengthened. The 1872 Census plays a key role in defining caste identities and integrating them into colonial governance (Dirks 15-16). However, there is a major challenge in classifying Devadasis. Recognizing them in standard caste groups would mean acknowledging their rights under Hindu law. Therefore, colonial officials choose to label them as a degraded caste, which justifies legal involvement while denying the unique nature of the Devadasi tradition (Parker 563). This classification reinforces the idea that serving in temples has become immoral, turning women once seen as sacred into symbols of social decline.

Visuals from the colonial era further support these views. As Soneji notes, photos of Devadasis rarely show them in temples or during rituals, even though these were central to their religious identity (Soneji 76). Instead, they are depicted outside religious spaces, removed from the roles that once defined their status. These images are not just records; they actively reshape public perception by highlighting moral decline rather than religious service or artistic skill. The image collection is thus another way colonial knowledge redefines the identity of Devadasi women and justifies ongoing monitoring and interference.

Resistance to the Devadasi system becomes more coordinated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Print culture emerges as a strong way to shape public opinion, often showing Devadasis as women who trick respectable men away from family life. These images reinforce existing stereotypes and create greater distance between Devadasis and the new ideals of respected womanhood. Such discussions also lead to legal actions. In 1912, Maneckji B. Dadabhoy proposes laws to stop Devadasis from taking in young girls and to make dedicating girls to the institution illegal (Soneji 120-21). These steps show how legal changes align with wider moral campaigns, reflecting a growing agreement that the system should be ended rather than changed.

At the same time, the experiences of Bangalore Nagarathnamma show that even in tightly controlled conditions, women can act. A notable Devadasi, scholar, and literary patron, Nagarathnamma re-published *Radhika Santwanam*, a 18th-century work by the poet Muddupalani. She was unhappy with previous versions that left out large parts of the original, so she insisted on publishing the full text. Her efforts faced strong disapproval from reformers and colonial authorities, who considered the work morally unacceptable. Police Commissioner Cunningham ordered the confiscation of the copies, legal actions were taken against the publishers, and police raids removed the book from circulation in 1927. It wasn't until 1952 that the text was published again (Bose 120). Nagarathnamma's actions show that resistance doesn't always take the form of direct political action. The preservation of literary heritage is itself a form of cultural empowerment that challenges efforts to erase the intellectual accomplishments of Devadasi women from public history.

Meanwhile, Indian nationalist ideas create a new ideal of womanhood. Nationalist leaders contrast the “new woman” with the “common woman.” The latter includes domestic workers, barbers, and those seen as prostitutes, while the former is depicted as educated, modest, self-sacrificing, and morally disciplined (P. Chatterjee 125, 127). This image of womanhood is based mainly on the experiences of upper-caste and middle-class households, leaving little

room for women outside these groups. Consequently, Devadasis are not included in the nationalist vision, even though they played important roles in religion, literature, music, and dance. Citizenship becomes increasingly tied to gender, with social acceptance connected to marriage and respectability. Women like Bangalore Nagarathnamma and Muddupalani are thus not fully recognized within the nationalist movement because their identities do not fit the established standards of respected womanhood (Bose 120).

This exclusion is also shown in public symbols. When groups of Devadasis tried to offer something to Mahatma Gandhi, he reportedly refused unless they showed respectability by wearing a *thali*, a symbol of marriage in Hindu society (Anandhi 7). These situations reveal how marriage becomes the key measure of moral legitimacy in nationalist discourse. Women who don't fit within this framework continue to be viewed with suspicion, no matter their religious or cultural contributions. These developments eventually lead to the Devadasi Reform Movement, led by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi. Although born into a family that distanced itself from the institution, Reddi became the first woman legislator in the Madras Presidency, one of the first women to graduate from Madras Medical College, and a key member of the All India Women's Conference. Her campaign for abolition represents broader reform efforts to reshape women's position through domesticity, education, and legal equality.

Despite the growing momentum of abolitionist campaigns, the history of the Devadasi system is not solely a narrative of external reform imposed upon passive subjects. Devadasi women actively engage with the changing political and social environment, articulating their own perspectives on reform, identity, and institutional survival. Their responses reveal that agency operates not only through individual acts of resistance but also through collective organization, public advocacy, and intellectual intervention. Rather than accepting the labels imposed by colonial administrators and nationalist reformers, many Devadasis seek to defend their social position, challenge dominant narratives, and preserve aspects of a tradition that they regard as culturally and historically significant.

Among the most prominent voices is Ramamirttammal, herself a reformed Devadasi, who offers a critical interpretation of the institution that differs from both colonial and nationalist perspectives. Instead of portraying the system solely as a source of female oppression, she argues that its continuation primarily serves the interests of Brahmanical Hindu society. In her view, the rigid structure of patriarchal marriage encourages men to seek relationships outside the domestic sphere, thereby sustaining the Devadasi institution. She therefore contends that meaningful social reform requires a broader reconsideration of restrictive marital norms rather than focusing exclusively on the abolition of the Devadasi tradition. Her critique shifts attention from the moral condemnation of Devadasi women to the wider social structures that produce and sustain gender inequality, demonstrating that women associated with the institution actively participate in contemporary debates concerning social reform.

Collective action becomes another important expression of Devadasi agency during the early decades of the twentieth century. Contrary to the widespread assumption that abolition enjoys universal support, several Devadasi associations openly oppose legislative reforms that threaten their livelihood, cultural identity, and customary rights. The Periyakanchipuram Devadasi Sangam, consisting of twenty-eight members, together with the associations at Chinnakanchivaram, Tirukalkunram, and Chinglepet, formally express their opposition to the proposals advanced by reformers. These organizations represent more than isolated local initiatives; they reflect an emerging political consciousness among Devadasi communities that recognizes the necessity of collective representation within an increasingly hostile public sphere (Kannabiran 66-67).

This process of organization continues to expand through alliances formed across temple communities. In 1927, Devadasis associated with the Needamanikaswami, Vanmeeghanadha, and Seyyur Kandaswamy temples established a united organization and selected Saradammal and Doraisammal as its president and secretary. Similar efforts are undertaken through the Madras Rudrakannikai Sangam, where leaders including Ramamaniammal and Bangalore Nagarathnamma preside over public meetings addressing the future of the institution. The Madras Presidency Devadasi Association also emerges as an influential body, appointing T. Doraikannammal as its secretary. Together with Bangalore Nagarathnamma, she meets Law Minister C. P. Ramaswami in November 1927 to present the concerns of Devadasi women directly before the colonial administration (Kannabiran 66-67). These initiatives demonstrate that

Devadasis are not excluded from political participation but actively engage with legislative processes, negotiate with state authorities, and seek institutional recognition during a period of profound social transformation.

These collective interventions challenge the prevailing assumption that the abolition movement speaks on behalf of all women associated with the institution. While many reformers interpret abolition as an unquestionable social necessity, numerous Devadasis perceive legislative intervention as a threat to their economic security, artistic heritage, religious identity, and customary rights. Their organized resistance therefore reflects a more complex understanding of reform, revealing that women occupying the same institutional space often hold divergent views regarding the future of the tradition. Rather than rejecting social change altogether, many seek reforms that protect their dignity and livelihood while preserving those aspects of the institution that they consider culturally valuable.

Viewed through the lens of Agency Theory, these developments demonstrate that the exercise of power is never absolute. Although colonial legislation, judicial reforms, nationalist ideologies, and social reform movements substantially reshape the Devadasi institution, they do not completely determine the lives of the women subjected to these structures. Devadasis continue to negotiate, reinterpret, and contest the changing social order through literary production, public advocacy, organizational leadership, legal engagement, and collective mobilization. Their actions reveal that agency is not limited to dramatic acts of rebellion but frequently emerges through sustained efforts to protect identity, preserve cultural memory, and influence the direction of social change.

The history of the Devadasi system therefore reflects the coexistence of discipline and resistance rather than the complete dominance of one over the other. Colonial authority, nationalist reform, legal institutions, and moral discourse undoubtedly transform the social position of Devadasi women, yet these women consistently respond by asserting their voices within the constraints imposed upon them. Their experiences illustrate that marginalized communities are not merely shaped by structures of power but also participate in reshaping the meanings attached to their identities and traditions. Understanding the Devadasi institution through the complementary perspectives of Panopticism and Agency Theory consequently provides a more balanced interpretation of its historical evolution. While Panopticism exposes the mechanisms through which surveillance, discipline, and regulation operate, Agency Theory illuminates the capacity of individuals and communities to negotiate these structures and to assert autonomy even within highly restrictive social environments. Together, these perspectives reveal the Devadasi system as a dynamic historical site where power and resistance remain in constant negotiation, offering important insights into the broader relationship between domination, identity, and agency in colonial India.

The historical evolution of the Devadasi system illustrates that power and resistance are not mutually exclusive but continuously interact within the same social and institutional framework. Although rooted in India's religious and cultural traditions, the institution gradually becomes subject to increasing regulation by colonial administrators, nationalist reformers, and social activists. Understanding this transformation requires a theoretical approach that examines both the mechanisms through which authority is exercised and the ways in which marginalized individuals respond to such structures. In this regard, Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism and Padma Anagol's formulation of Agency Theory provide complementary analytical perspectives. While Panopticism explains how surveillance, discipline, and normalization regulate individual behaviour, Agency Theory emphasizes the capacity of women to negotiate restrictive environments and pursue meaningful social change. Examined together, these frameworks demonstrate that the history of the Devadasi institution is shaped not only by systems of control but also by persistent acts of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance.

Within the colonial context, mechanisms of surveillance extend far beyond physical observation and become embedded in legal, medical, and administrative institutions. Lock hospitals, *laal* bazaars, census operations, and social reform initiatives function as interconnected instruments through which the colonial state seeks to classify, monitor, and regulate Devadasi women. These institutions exemplify the disciplinary processes described by Foucault, as they transform observation into an effective means of social control. At the same time, the responses of Devadasi women reveal that surveillance does not eliminate the possibility of agency. Instead, women frequently adapt to restrictive

conditions by negotiating, contesting, or circumventing the systems imposed upon them, thereby demonstrating that disciplinary power is neither complete nor uncontested.

The operation of *laal* bazaars and lock hospitals provides a clear illustration of this relationship between surveillance and resistance. Although women identified by colonial authorities are subjected to regular inspections and continuous monitoring, many evade these mechanisms by leaving cantonment areas or relocating their activities beyond the immediate reach of colonial jurisdiction (Tambe 39–40). Such actions expose the practical limitations of disciplinary control and reveal the inability of surveillance to achieve absolute compliance. Colonial officials and medical practitioners, frustrated by these acts of resistance, respond by extending venereal disease regulations to a wider category of women, eventually incorporating temple dancers within the scope of colonial medical administration. The broad and ambiguous designation of "common prostitute" under the Contagious Diseases Act enables officials to target women who bear little resemblance to the category of regimental prostitutes originally envisaged by the legislation. Historical records indicate that Devadasis challenge this classification in at least two documented cases, objecting to their identification as prostitutes. Nevertheless, their appeals receive no legal recognition, and they continue to be categorized as carriers of disease in order to support the broader objectives of colonial public health policy.

The activities of the colonial police further demonstrate the relationship between disciplinary authority and individual agency. Police officials possess the legal authority to detain women who refuse to register or decline compulsory medical examinations. Between the 1870s and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1888, an average of twelve women are reportedly detained each day in Calcutta alone (Wald 1478). Despite the extensive powers granted to colonial authorities, the incidence of venereal disease remains persistently high, revealing the limited effectiveness of these regulatory measures. Women frequently negotiate these coercive systems through informal means, including bribing police officers and bazaar officials to avoid compulsory inspections or confinement within lock hospitals (Gopalakrishnan 144). Such practices illustrate that surveillance does not operate as an infallible mechanism of domination. Instead, everyday acts of negotiation and evasion expose the gaps and inconsistencies within colonial disciplinary structures while highlighting the capacity of marginalized women to respond strategically to institutional coercion.

Nationalist purity campaigns and social reform movements likewise function as disciplinary projects that seek to reshape gender norms and redefine respectable womanhood. By opposing the public performances of women dancers, these campaigns attempt to reform Hindu society while simultaneously establishing domesticity, chastity, and monogamous marriage as the defining characteristics of ideal femininity. As Wald observes, although these campaigns are formally directed against the *nautch*, their influence extends equally to temple dancers, whose artistic traditions become increasingly associated with immorality and social degeneration. Yet Devadasis do not simply accept these reformist narratives. They continue to assert their identities through literary expression, cultural preservation, public advocacy, and collective organization, demonstrating that agency remains possible even within increasingly restrictive social and political environments. Their responses reveal that resistance often emerges through sustained negotiation rather than direct confrontation, allowing them to challenge dominant discourses while preserving elements of their cultural identity.

The relationship between Panopticism and Agency Theory therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of the Devadasi system than either framework can offer independently. Panopticism reveals the institutional mechanisms through which surveillance, classification, and disciplinary authority reshape the lives of Devadasi women, whereas Agency Theory illuminates the diverse strategies through which these women negotiate, contest, and reinterpret structures of domination. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that surveillance does not completely extinguish the possibility of resistance. Instead, power and agency remain in constant interaction, producing a dynamic historical process in which domination is repeatedly challenged, negotiated, and reconfigured. The Devadasi system consequently offers an important case through which broader questions concerning power, surveillance, autonomy, and social resistance within marginalized communities can be critically examined.

The examination of the Devadasi system through the combined perspectives of Panopticism and Agency Theory provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between power, discipline, and resistance within this historically significant institution. Foucault's concept of Panopticism demonstrates how systems of surveillance and regulation gradually transform the lives of Devadasi women by reinforcing social hierarchies and institutional authority. Initially shaped by temple administration and prevailing religious expectations, these disciplinary practices later became significantly more extensive under colonial governance and nationalist reform movements. Through legal classification, medical regulation, moral discourse, and administrative intervention, Devadasis are increasingly represented as subjects requiring surveillance and correction rather than as custodians of religious and artistic traditions. The institution thereby reflects the broader operation of power within colonial society, where mechanisms of observation and classification become central to maintaining social order.

Agency Theory offers an equally important perspective by directing attention to the responses of Devadasi women within these restrictive environments. Although their lives are profoundly influenced by legal, political, and social constraints, they continue to negotiate their identities, preserve cultural traditions, organize collectively, and challenge attempts to erase their historical significance. Their experiences demonstrate that structures of domination do not entirely eliminate individual or collective agency. Rather, resistance emerges in multiple forms, ranging from everyday acts of negotiation to organized political engagement and cultural intervention. These responses complicate interpretations that portray Devadasis solely as passive victims of institutional control and instead reveal the diverse ways in which marginalized women participate in shaping their own historical experiences.

Examining the Devadasi system through these complementary theoretical perspectives ultimately demonstrates that power and resistance are inseparable dimensions of historical change. Systems of surveillance and discipline undoubtedly reshape institutions and regulate social identities, yet they also generate new forms of negotiation, adaptation, and opposition. The history of the Devadasi institution therefore extends beyond narratives of exploitation or reform alone. It represents a continuous process in which structures of authority and expressions of agency exist in constant dialogue, each influencing the other across changing political and social contexts. This integrated perspective not only enriches historical understanding of the Devadasi system but also contributes to broader scholarly discussions concerning surveillance, gender, colonialism, social regulation, and the capacity of marginalized communities to assert autonomy within conditions of structural inequality. The experiences of Devadasi women ultimately reaffirm that even the most comprehensive systems of control remain incomplete, as individuals continually create spaces for negotiation, resilience, and self-determination within the very structures that seek to regulate their lives.

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