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WATCHING AND BEING WATCHED: POWER, SURVEILLANCE AND AGENCY WITHIN THE *DEVADASI* SYSTEM

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Abstract: This article explores the *devadasi* system in India through the dual thoughts of Michael Foucault's Panopticism and Agency Theory, examining how power dynamics and social control mechanisms were both enforced and resisted. The *devadasi* system, originally a revered religious practice, evolved into a complex structure of exploitation and marginalization, where women dedicated to temple service were subjected to pervasive surveillance and disciplinary practices. By applying Panopticism, this study reveals how the British administrators and the

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nationalists maintained strict control over *devadasis*, ensuring their subjugation within the social hierarchy. Simultaneously, Agency Theory illuminates how *devadasis* challenged these oppressive structures, asserting their autonomy in subtle but significant ways. This analysis not only deepens our understanding of the *devadasi* system but also contributes to broader discussions on the intersections of power, control and agency in marginalized communities. The study also highlights the importance of examining historical systems of oppression through critical and theoretical frameworks to uncover both the mechanisms of control and the resilience of those subjected to them.

Keywords: *Agency Theory, Autonomy, Devadasi, Discipline, Panopticism, Power, Religion, Surveillance*.

1. Introduction

Power, in its many forms, permeates every aspect of human existence, from political and economic structures to cultural and religious practices. The *devadasi* system, a centuries-old tradition in India, offers a striking example of how power is exercised through social and religious hierarchies. Initially, *devadasis* were women dedicated to temple service, revered for their religious and cultural contributions. Over time, however, the system shifted into a mechanism of control and marginalization, reflecting broader dynamics of caste, gender, and domination in Indian society. Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism (1977) offers valuable materials for us to analyze and examine the pros and cons of this system. Panopticism explores how surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms enforce conformity, offering insights into the ways both colonial authorities and Indian nationalists exerted control over *devadasis*. The constant observation and internalization of control ensured their subjugation within rigid social hierarchies. Yet, Padma Anagol's Agency Theory (2016) offers a counterpoint by emphasizing the capacity of individuals to resist and maneuver within oppressive structures. Despite constraints, *devadasis* carved spaces of independence and resilience, refusing to be fully dominated by

systemic power. Their experiences highlight how marginalized groups negotiate control and assert agency even within highly restrictive frameworks.

This article positions the *devadasi* system as a crucial case study for examining power, control and resistance among marginalized communities. The discussion unfolds in three parts. The first explores Panopticism and its application to the *devadasi* system, focusing on mechanisms of surveillance and control. The second examines Agency Theory and how *devadasis* exercised agency despite severe limitations. The final section integrates these perspectives to present a comprehensive view of the power dynamics shaping the *devadasi* system. The objective is to provide a nuanced understanding that acknowledges both the oppressive structures and the resilience of those subjected to them. Beyond its historical context, this analysis offers broader insights into how power operates and is contested in marginalized communities. By employing Panopticism, the study reveals the mechanisms of surveillance that sustained the *devadasi* tradition, while Agency Theory illuminates the subtle yet significant ways in which *devadasis* asserted autonomy. Taken together, these frameworks deepen our understanding of the *devadasi* system and contribute to ongoing discussions about power, control and resistance, both in historical settings and in the struggles of marginalized groups today.

2. Contextual Background

Much of the understanding of the term *devadasi* comes from its etymology: *deva* (God) and *dasi* (servant), meaning "servant of the god" (Soneji 6). Dedicated to temples at a young age, these girls were trained in music, dance and ritual duties, such as preparing food, arranging garlands, cleaning temples and carrying lamps in processions (Prasad 149; Story 23). During the temple-building boom of the 11th and 12th centuries, the number of *devadasis* increased significantly (Prasad 192). Initially, temple women were regarded as performing sacred functions, and early colonial observers rarely described their role in sexual terms. However, Francis Buchanan, in 1907, classified *devadasis* as a separate caste

and declared that "all are prostitutes, at least to the Brahmins" (Buchanan 266). Abbe Dubois similarly lamented that temples had become "mere brothels" (Dubois 662). Intercourse with a *devadasi* was even believed to bring purification and divine blessing (Kermorgant 8). Unlike wives, *devadasis* were not bound by monogamous marriage, giving them a distinctive social position outside patriarchal family structures.

From the mid-19th century, British expansion reshaped this institution. The growth of cantonments and their surrounding bazaars, such as Lal Bazar, created new spaces for prostitution (Chatterjee 4). Concerned about venereal diseases among soldiers, the colonial government enacted the Contagious Diseases Acts, which required sex workers to register and undergo medical examinations (Wald 1476). Because *devadasis* could have multiple partners, they were classified as prostitutes and placed under surveillance, reinforcing their stigmatization (Wald 40). At the same time, Indian reformers, influenced by ideals of domesticity and conjugal morality, condemned the *devadasi* system. They viewed its sexual aspects as legitimizing prostitution and undermining the "ideal family life" (Kannan 251). Thus, both colonial legislation and nationalist reform converged in defining and controlling *devadasis*, casting them as symbols of social disorder and religious corruption. The transformation of the *devadasi* from revered temple servant to stigmatized prostitute illustrates how power, morality, and colonial governance intersected. Once valued as ritual specialists, these women were gradually reduced to embodiments of social threat—objects of regulation for colonial authorities and targets of reformist zeal within Indian society.

3. Panopticism and the *Devadasi* System

Foucault introduced the theory of panopticism in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), which deals with the rise of the prison system and the idea of punishing criminals. The panopticon can be understood as a machine to carry out procedures for the alteration of behaviour by training or 'correcting' individuals. This is in stark contrast to the types of public executions practised

up to the eighteenth century, which centred more on attempts to reform the criminal's 'soul' (Foucault 19). Bentham created the design of the Panopticon, a structure with a tower at its core and a ring-shaped structure made up of cells housing prisoners. This method reduced the need for supervisory resources while enabling constant inmate observation (Duncan 50). In light of Foucault's research, this shift was a turning point in the use of disciplinary authority and a major addition to the "machinery" necessary for it to operate.

It is an excellent method of exercising disciplinary power because it mostly relies on 'surveillance' (Gamble 5) as opposed to the use of force or violent acts. As an architectural device, the Panopticon ensures the automated operation of power by inducing a condition of conscious and permanent visibility combined with uncertainty. It guarantees that, despite the possibility of intermittent surveillance, its consequences are always long-lasting (Foucault 302). As pointed out by McHoul & Grace (1993), "the panopticon was accompanied by, and found its support in, a variety of training techniques which Foucault describes as 'disciplines'." These disciplines can take four main forms, the first of which is a particular technique of distributing people spatially. Considering the prison's structural component, confining the offender to a distinct area separates them from other members of the community. This distribution can also be achieved by separating certain groups of individuals from others (McHoul and Grace 69), as was done in the case of the *devadasis*. By labelling them 'prostitutes', 'sex workers', or 'degraded women', the British colonial authorities and Indian nationalists created the spatial distribution of women into 'sacred' and 'unholy'. This new image of the 'sacred woman' created by Indian nationalists was essentially a keeper of the spiritual domain. She was expected to reform and neutralise the dangers of female non-conjugality by leading by example. The image of the *devadasi* stood in stark contrast to the nationalists' portrayal of the "new woman."

Throughout the 19th century, Indian society saw tremendous shifts, with women classified as 'prostitutes'

suffering the most. The shifting perceptions of 'prostitutes' were associated with notions of family and appropriate gender roles (Sen 33). However, this term was problematic since it redefined many women who had previously had little in common with the stereotype of the cantonment prostitute or brothel inmate. For instance, there was no equivalent of temple dancing girls in Europe with which the colonial government could compare; hence, the reclassification of *devadasis* as sex workers opened up a cultural gap between India and Europe (Wald 1473). Because of this disparity, the commanding and medical staff began to alter the classifications of 'public women' to fit their own purposes. As a result, a distinct criminalised category known as 'prostitutes' was established, assisting colonial administrators in rationalising the physically and socially intrusive ways of controlling sexually transmitted infections. The *devadasi* tradition was not practised uniformly across India and was referred to as '*sule*', '*bhogam*' and '*sani*'. However, these practices were brought together under the title '*devadasi*' by nineteenth-century British observers (Sen 8). A *devadasi*'s patron was selected by an arrangement made with her grandmother or mother, depending on who had more influence. It was forbidden for the *devadasi* to break this sexual bond, as doing so might result in excommunication from the temple and community. This patronage served two important functions: it brought prestige to the Brahmin family and provided funding for the temple (Wald 1473). As noted earlier, this combination of ritual and sex meant that the temple dancer embodied prosperity and auspiciousness. However, this gradually started to change in the nineteenth century as the Company's interference with the *inam* grants to the temples had a direct impact on their livelihood (Kannan 247).

Under colonial rule, the structures of observation and control took on many dimensions. This can be seen in the various methods of formal surveillance introduced by colonial authorities through laws, census data collection and categorisation of the indigenous population. By highlighting the relationship between politics, law, morals, medicine and the military, we can compare the various surveillance techniques introduced by the colonial

government, demonstrating the state's need to assert and maintain control over the indigenous population (Levine 61). The colonial government approximated the practices of the nautch, temple dancers and courtesans to prostitution and stressed that these were accepted within Indian society. In later justifications of empire, they used these practices to show how India was a 'degraded' place needing civilisation (Wald 1472). The Revolt of 1857 brought the vulnerabilities of reliance on Indian soldiers (Kannan 248). Hence, the post-mutiny reorganisation significantly altered the ratio of Indian to British troops (Chatterjee 1). The new administration adopted the stern policy that no fewer than 60,000 British soldiers could be stationed in India at any time. This established a ratio of approximately one British soldier for every Indian soldier. Eventually, the increase of British military presence in India completely changed the economy as the growth of cantonments led to new urban spaces and trading environments (Hyam 122-123). These cantonments were surrounded by *bazaars*, and registered prostitutes were usually confined in the *lal* (red) *bazaars*. It was around this time that the British passed the CD Acts to legislate brothels and sex workers as they found it necessary to station healthy soldiers. Although the law was abolished in 1888, while in place, *devadasis* were also registered as sex workers (Wald 14).

The Contagious Diseases Act (Act XIV) was passed in India in 1868 to legislate brothels and sex workers due to growing concerns about venereal diseases among British soldiers (Arnold 85). It was modelled after the British Contagious Diseases Act of 1866 and the Cantonment Act (Act XXII) of 1864. Before the British Act, prostitutes were targets of defamation by both religious and legal authorities in Britain. However, in the 19th century, the Victorian state made a conscious effort to regulate prostitution to control the spread of venereal diseases among the military. This led to the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869, thereby known as the CD Acts (Mort 54). According to the provisions of this Act, if any woman was charged with being a common prostitute by a police inspector, superintendent or medical examiner, she had to convince the courts that she was not.

If she failed, she had to undergo a compulsory vaginal examination by an army surgeon. Failure to comply with the Act could result in imprisonment. Therefore, the CD Acts can be viewed as a perfect marriage between "medical discourses of disease control, moral discourses over the ordering of dangerous sexualities and legal discourses of crime and punishment" (Baker 93).

The British Contagious Diseases Act was eventually extended to the colonies as well. The passing of this Act in India created a system for regulating India's 'public women'. This was achieved through lock hospitals and *lal bazaars*, considered an extremely punitive system of surveillance. The lock hospitals functioned as a surveillance mechanism where the state had the authority to monitor women suspected of prostitution or venereal disease (Ballhatchet 10). As the name suggests, lock hospitals detained women suspected of infection. Initially used for leprosy, they later targeted venereal disease, as syphilitic eruptions resembled leprosy (Levine 62). The first London Lock Hospital was established in 1746, and in India, lock hospitals were set up at Baharampur, Kanpur, Danapur and Fatehgarh (Wald 1476). These hospitals, located within cantonment bazaars and surrounded by mud walls, were for the 'reception of diseased women.' Women suspected of infection were detained and inspected regularly (Wald 13). Internal surveillance staff included matrons and peons, while external surveillance involved police. Matrons also acted as disciplinarians, while *gomastahs* worked as secret detectives (Gopalakrishnan 36). Women were not released unless cured and had to present a Certificate of Discharge to the Superintendent of Police (Raj 108).

The CD Acts' focus on 'public women' can be seen as a clear manifestation of panoptic control. *Devadasis*, traditionally temple women and upholders of socio-cultural customs, were increasingly seen through the colonial era as vectors of venereal diseases. By enforcing medical inspections, the colonial state exercised control over their sexuality, deeming their bodies potential sites of contamination. Influenced by Victorian moral standards, colonial administrators misinterpreted the *devadasi*

system as prostitution (Kannan 534). Targeting women labelled as 'prostitutes' not only affected individuals but also created binaries between 'respectable' and 'immoral' women. These binaries, constructed by colonial administrators, surgeons and observers, were later adopted by Indian nationalists in defining respectable female sexuality (King 93). By regulating health, sexuality and social behaviour, colonial rulers sought to reshape indigenous populations to align with European norms. This categorisation of sexualities, as Foucault points out, created a spatial distribution of women into 'sacred' and 'unholy'.

4. Agency Within the *Devadasi* System

According to Padma Anagol, agency denotes "conscious goal-driven activities by women that embrace the possibility of change" (Anagol 14). As discussed in the previous section, the new definitions of *morality* and *purity* created by early colonial administrators, surgeons and observers had far-reaching consequences for women deemed *prostitutes*. Indian nationalists later adopted these binaries of *respectable* and *immoral* women in defining respectable female sexuality (King 93). Firstly, newly legislated Anglo-Indian law changed the judicial treatment of the *devadasis* (Parker 566). Their identity shifted from women linked with a tradition of multiple sexual partners to those seen as a moral drain on society. This moral outrage grew from the Purity Campaigns, which established the ideal of female sexuality as monogamous relationships (P. Chatterjee 10). These campaigns relied on the language of the colonial state, which included military surgeons, commanding officers, missionary observers and travellers (Wald). Interactions between these groups and the women they sought to regulate resulted in their re-categorisation as *immoral* and outside the boundaries of respectable society (Whitehead 41). Practices with no equivalence in European society were quickly deemed immoral.

Moreover, women of the lower and working classes were associated with poverty, sexuality and criminality both by Indian elites and European observers (Ramanna 1473; Gopalakrishnan 34; Gupta 322). During the first half of the 19th century,

incremental changes in the legal conception of women placed them under criminal rather than civil law in the Indian Penal Code (Parker 566). The judiciary now judged any sexual behaviour outside marriage as *unchaste* and *immoral,* as in the case of the *devadasis*. The officialization of Brahmanical rituals was closely linked to the criminalization of women as *prostitutes*. These customs aimed to set strict boundaries regarding marriage and acceptable sexual behaviour, reinforcing patriarchy and the authority of the male head of family. As these norms shaped ideals of *Hindu womanhood*, any public behaviour outside the home risked being labelled *prostitution*. This applied even to women working in jute mills who occupied public spaces (Sen 178). This was problematic because *devadasis*, although within the Brahmanical order, enjoyed rights largely unavailable to other women of the time, such as access to education, inheritance and adoption. They also had matrilineal traditions and freedom to choose multiple partners. Their case became complicated, but the courts declined to recognize the uniqueness of the custom. Instead, they interpreted it under Hindu law, classifying any sexual misconduct by women as *prostitution,* which stripped them of property rights (Parker 566).

The new law described them as *degraded Hindu women* with *original degradation from caste*. The terminology is important: the colonial state used *prostitutes,* not the modern term *sex workers*. While *sex worker* implies economic sustenance, *prostitute* denoted filth, vice, disease and rebellion (P. Chatterjee 11). Patrons who supported *devadasis* were overlooked; instead, women's economic survival through their services defined them. The 1872 census institutionalized caste hierarchies (Dirks 15–16). Colonial administrators struggled to categorize *devadasis* within caste: recognition would give them a position within Hindu law. Thus, they were labelled a *degraded caste* (Parker 563). This outlook was shaped by the perception of the temple as a sacred institution, supposedly degraded by prostitution. Photographs from the colonial period reflect this ideology, showing *devadasis* outside temple spaces, as Soneji notes (Soneji 76).

By the late 19th century, opposition to the *devadasi* system

intensified. In print culture, they were portrayed as scheming women seducing respectable men. In 1912, Maneckji B. Dadabhoy, a banker and legislator, proposed banning *devadasis* from adopting girls and criminalising dedication (Soneji 120–21). Bangalore Nagarathnamma, herself a *devadasi*, faced strong resistance when she sought to republish *Radhika Santwanam* (*The Appeasement of Radhika*), an 18th century courtesan text by Muddupalani. Dissatisfied with the diluted version in circulation, she insisted on restoring the original. Despite severe criticism, she persisted. Police Commissioner Cunningham confiscated all copies and prosecuted her publishers. After raids, the book disappeared from print in 1927 and was only reissued in 1952 (Bose 120).

Gradually, Indian nationalists constructed the figure of the *new woman,* distinct from the *common woman*. The latter included servants, washerwomen, barbers, peddlers and prostitutes, while the *new woman*—emerging from the middle classes—was portrayed as modest and virtuous (P. Chatterjee 125, 127). This ideal was restricted to upper castes and classes, excluding *devadasis*. Thus, citizenship became gendered and unattainable for women like Nagarathnamma and Muddupalani, who could only claim it through marriage (Bose 120). When *devadasis* sought to gift Gandhiji offerings, he refused, demanding they prove respectability by displaying a *thali* (Anandhi 7). This culminated in the *Devadasi* Reform Movement. Its key figure was Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, herself from a *devadasi* background though her family had distanced from the practice. She became the first female legislator and one of the earliest women doctors from Madras Medical College in 1912, as well as a prominent member of the All India Women's Conference.

Yet, resistance arose from *devadasis* themselves. Ramamirttammal, a *reformed devadasi*, denounced Brahmanical Hinduism, arguing the system served Brahmin interests. She suggested that stricter family structures pushed husbands toward relaxed relationships with *dasis*, and advocated relaxing marital structures to ease tensions. Several *devadasi sangams* opposed Reddi's abolition proposals. The Periyakanchipuram Devadasi

Sangam (28 members), Chinnakanchivaram (50), Tirukalkunram (50), and Chinglepet (25) all resisted reform. In 1927, *devadasis* from Needamanikaswami, Vanmeeghanadha, and Seyyur Kandaswamy temples formed an alliance, electing Saradammal and Doraisamiammal as president and secretary. Other organisations included the Madras Rudrakannikai Sangam, with leaders like Ramamaniammal and Bangalore Nagarathnamma presiding over meetings. The Madras Presidency Devadasi Association elected T. Doraikannammal as secretary; along with Nagarathnamma, she met Law Minister C. P. Ramaswami in November 1927 (Kannabiran 66–67).

5. Interplay Between Panopticism and Agency Theory

The *devadasi* system, rooted in the religious and cultural traditions of India, became a site of regulation and reform by colonial authorities, nationalists and social reformers. While Foucault's theory of Panopticism emphasizes surveillance and the disciplining of individuals, Anagol's theory highlights *assertion* and *resistance* as twin aspects of agency. Though distinct, both frameworks are critical for studying the *devadasis*, as they reveal how individuals resisted and subverted surveillance. By integrating the two, one can see how *devadasis* were shaped by mechanisms of power and control while simultaneously exercising agency within imposed constraints. In the colonial context, institutions such as lock hospitals, *laal bazaars*, census operations and reform movements functioned as panoptic mechanisms, while the ability of *devadasis* to negotiate these structures demonstrated their agency.

The *laal bazaars* and lock hospitals illustrate this interplay. Although they were subject to constant monitoring and inspections, many women evaded control by leaving cantonments or relocating their activities beyond legal jurisdictions (Tambe 39–40). European doctors and officials, angered by this defiance, sought to extend venereal disease regulations to a broader category of women, eventually including temple dancers. The vague phrase *common prostitute* under the Contagious Diseases Act enabled officials to target women who did not fit the

stereotype of *regimental prostitutes*. In at least two documented cases, *devadasis* objected to being labelled as prostitutes, yet their appeals were dismissed, and they were categorized as carriers of disease to serve colonial medical objectives.

The role of the police provides another example. Officers were authorized to arrest women who failed to register or undergo inspections. Between the 1870s and 1888, an average of 12 women were detained daily in Calcutta alone (Wald 1478). Despite this strict policing, venereal infection rates remained high. Women often bribed police and bazaar officials to avoid inspections or deportation to lock hospitals (Gopalakrishnan 144). This reveals both the limits of surveillance and the ways in which women resisted or negotiated coercive structures. Purity and reform movements led by nationalists also functioned as disciplinary projects. They sought to ban public performances of women dancers to *reform Hinduism* and redefine respectable femininity. As Wald notes, although the campaigns were directed against the *nautch*, their definition extended to temple dancing women. Yet, *devadasis* did not remain passive subjects; they employed strategies to assert their presence and challenge the reforms, thereby exercising agency within restrictive conditions. In short, Panopticism and Agency theory highlight broader dynamics of power in marginalized communities. Surveillance did not entirely erase the possibility of resistance. In the case of the *devadasis*, combining Foucault's Panopticism with Anagol's Agency theory elucidates the need to examine both control and resistance, contributing to wider discussions on power, surveillance and autonomy.

6. Conclusion

The exploration of the *devadasi* system through Panopticism and Agency Theory offers profound insights into the nature of power, control and resistance within this historically significant practice. Foucault's notion of Panopticism reveals how mechanisms of surveillance and discipline sustained the system, reinforcing hierarchies and subjugation. Constant observation by temple authorities, coupled with social expectations, dictated the

devadasis' roles both within temples and in the wider community. Later, colonial authorities and Indian nationalists intensified this surveillance by branding *devadasis* as "prostitutes" in need of correction, thus framing them as subjects of reform rather than agents of culture. In this way, the *devadasi* system became a microcosm of broader structures of authority and conformity. Agency Theory, however, shifts the focus from submission to resistance. Despite oppressive frameworks, devadasis carved out spaces of autonomy—negotiating roles, redefining boundaries, and asserting independence. Their actions, though constrained, disrupted narratives of total domination. This resilience illustrates a profound truth: even in the shadow of power, sparks of freedom endure.

Together, Panopticism and Agency Theory illuminate the dual nature of the *devadasi* experience. One uncovers the disciplinary practices that enforced conformity, while the other reveals strategies of resistance that preserved fragments of self-determination. These twin perspectives remind us that power and resistance are inseparable; wherever domination exists, the possibility of defiance emerges. Analysing the *devadasi* system through these frameworks not only clarifies its historical dynamics but also enriches wider debates on marginalized communities. It demonstrates how oppressive systems function and how individuals resist, offering insights into socio-religious contexts where authority collides with autonomy. The *devadasi* system thus stands as a compelling case of the eternal tension between domination and agency, reminding us that history is never a story of power alone, but of the unyielding human will to resist it. In the end, the *devadasi* experience teaches us that no system, however absolute, can extinguish the human spirit's quiet but relentless demand for freedom.

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