South Asian Feminisms

ANIA LOOMBA and RITTY A. LUKOSE, editors

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ANJALI ARONDEKAR

Subject to Sex

A Small History of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj

THE HISTORICAL FIGURE of the *devadasi*—a compound noun, coupling *deva* or god with *dasi* or female slave; a pan-Indian term, (falsely) interchangeable as sex worker, courtesan, prostitute—has become an established staple, or at least a sought-after staple, of gender studies in India, such that its recovery no longer merits much scholarly suspicion or incredulity. For many scholars, the devadasi archive proffers a different historical script, a much-needed shift in the terms through which genealogies of kinship and culture can be narrated. Devadasis (most prominently in Southern India) have emerged as privileged objects of study, propelled largely by feminist and state efforts to excavate sexual difference in India's past.[1] One of the more generative—as well as underarticulated—consequences of such efforts has been the mobilization of sexuality as the modality through which devadasi futures and pasts can be imagined and interrogated. Rescued from the detritus of history, devadasis, the lost and (falsely) maligned subjects of sexuality, are recast within larger redemptive contexts of artistic and legal empowerment. Such recuperations of the devadasi archive inevitably draw on invocations of pathos and misrecognition; the devadasi is disarticulated from her overidentification (and doomed associations) with sexuality and constituted in the density of other more promising configurations and allegiances such as caste, capital, or religiosities. Even as the analytical costs and limits of eliding the devadasi are emphasized, her coupling with sexuality is continually displaced. In the figure of the devadasi, we thus have a history of sexuality that promises a future only at the expense of its own attenuation.[2]

More broadly, the bruited recuperation of the devadasi illustrates how questions of difference produce moments of critical stress within historical thinking. In the case of the devadasi, we are specifically confronted with sexuality's difference, with the hermeneutical demands placed on histories of sexuality, particularly those that entangle with questions of caste and region, and with the multiple binds and enabling possibilities that result from it. Such an analytical challenge echoes the overall uneasy presence of sexuality within the political and intellectual landscape of contemporary India. To explain, two critical orientations to sexuality appear to currently dominate: the first, a largely progressive and expansive enterprise, rigorously extends the categories that define the idea of sexuality, and the second, a more rights-based project, contracts sexuality onto itself, by returning to static categories of identity and practice. The expansion model (exemplified in the work of feminist and queer historians) recruits the language of past difference to accentuate the coming of sexuality into its own, whereby divergent historical temporalities and subjectivities now exist within a model of a progressive politics. On the other hand, the contracted model (exemplified in the work of legal activists) strategically celebrates a past that externalizes difference and stabilizes sexuality as constitutive of Indian history. Yet, despite their ostensible critical segregation (the former internalizes sexuality's difference, the latter externalizes it), both models partake of a historical positivity where past and present understandings of sexuality accede to a script of teleological similarity. The differences of sexuality's past must be equal to the differences of its present and vice versa.[3]

The recent successful efforts around the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, for example, visibly engage both expansive and contractive readings of sexuality in their attempts to procure rights and privileges for alternative sexualities in India. Section 377, in brief, criminally penalizes what are described as "unnatural offences," to the extent that the said provision criminalizes consensual sexual acts between adults in private. The various petitions filed against Section 377 carefully made their arguments for its repeal by referencing a global lexicon of gay civil rights, alongside a more aggressive attentiveness to local instantiations within the context of postcolonial India.[4] Thus, even as the geopolitical ubiquity of same-sex behavior is acknowledged by the petition's references to evidence from around the world, the emphasis remained on its prevalence and acceptance within a wholly Indian landscape. For instance, the petition pointedly cites excerpts from texts understood as primarily Hindu: the Upanishads, the Gita, the Kama Sutra, and so on, disrupting, quite methodically, the logic of the Hindu Right, whose mobilizations have focused on coupling the sin of sodomy with Islamic bodies and texts.[5] To claim "sodomy" and "same-sex acts" as traditional, as a "historical value," as part of who we essentially are as Indians, is merely to invert the language of historical ontology that fixes even as it tries to shift meaning. In this version, Muslims are no longer the vilified sodomites; instead, we have in place the more traditional and historical stable Hindu avatar. Thus, one set of assumptions pathologizes the ontological connection, while the other affirms it.[6]

In the case of the devadasi, recourse to the historical archive produces a similarly recursive analysis. Put more simply, recuperations of the devadasi are too often simply mimetic and literalizing, their presence materializing subjects of our own historical desire, rather than opening to more complex understandings of sexuality's past(s). Devadasis become figures of radical possibility because they hold out the anachronistic promise of a past fashioned from the desires of the present. I want to emphasize here that such resignifying efforts arise not from some form of bad faith, but from feminism's ethical commitment to difference. Rather, the return to the devadasi requires us to ask how—that is, within which critical and political idioms—histories of sexuality are made visible and what the postcolonial politics of that visibility might now entail. To that end, I want to retool our routinized understanding of the devadasi as something much more than a doomed attachment to sexuality. I want instead to attend to the imaginative possibilities offered by sexuality to provide vibrant accounts of community at the scale of the personal and the political.

My argument here is thus less thesis-driven than a meditation on what there is to learn from a devadasi archive that refuses to settle sexuality into a fixed historicity (something that one is "past") or definitionality (something that accedes to a determinate set of meanings and forms). To do so, I shift regional location and emphases, to focus on a vibrant devadasi community in western India (principally in the states of Goa and Maharashtra): the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. If the restoration of the devadasi has been tethered to forms of paucity, loss, and erasure, the Gomantak Maratha Samaj offers a different possibility by denaturalizing any such presumptive understanding of the devadasi's customary forms, particularly under colonialism. The Gomantak Maratha Samaj was established as a community formation in 1927 in Goa and in Maharashtra, and officially became a charitable institution in 1936. The Samaj continues its activities to this day and has from its inception maintained a community of ten thousand to fifty thousand registered members. Two extraordinary features make this Samaj noteworthy: it is unabashedly celebratory of its devadasi past (and present), and it is the only devadasi community that maintains its own extensive and continuous historical archive. Differing crucially from the more familiar disavowal of sexuality, the Samaj's self-archiving project engages the force of sexuality in all its fractiousness, embodying instead a devadasi community alert to the challenges of its own survival. In engaging with its devadasi past, the Samaj archives (as I demonstrate) only occasionally speak idioms of shame or loss of self; sexuality is seen rather as a place of vitalized self-reform and optimism—even futurity.

In turning to the history of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, I am equally interested in understanding how the devadasi can be seen as a historiographical conundrum, as a locus of confounding identities between nationalist struggles and reformist efforts in colonial and postcolonial India. Even as the devadasi figure becomes taxonomized and rehabilitated through the passing of the various Contagious Disease Acts (1864, 1866, 1869) and the devadasi Protection Acts (1930, 1932, 1934), what falls away are its differentiated attachments to language, pleasure, and capital formation in a colonial India—attachments that need to be widely understood as multiply colonial—Portuguese, British, and, to some extent, French. Goa, for example, was a Portuguese possession, whose fraught relationship with British India complicated the scripts of colonial expansion and nationalist independence.[7] By linking histories of region, reform, and nationalism, I propose to stress and stretch alternate genealogies for the project of devadasi historiography to raise some of the following questions: What happens when the establishment of antidevadasi laws is read in conversation with the Gomantak Maratha Samaj's couplings of profit and pleasure? What forms of citizenship and subjectivity are being historicized through the figure of the devadasi, even as we recuperate its presence and expand our understanding of the colonial past?

In what follows, I engage two related but distinct reflections on the feminist recuperation of devadasis. First, in the section "Mediating Reform and Revival," I rehearse the established debates around the devadasi question to draw attention to the mutating concepts of reform and revival underwriting these discussions. Indeed, these debates register a series of tensions, most of which collate around the disparity between the formidable presence of the devadasis in the past and their (necessary?) disappearance within contemporary political formations. In the second section, I turn briefly to the emergence and success of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj as an example of a community that places interpretive pressure on such inherited readings of devadasi historiography.

MEDIATING REFORM AND REVIVAL

Recent scholarship on the subject of devadasis in colonial and postcolonial India largely falls into two conceptual domains that move within and against a language of reform and revival.[8] The first grouping largely attends to the devadasi question in terms of the devadasi's special status as artist and ritual specialist, and a treasury of lost cultural skills. Such a focus on the arts is best exemplified in the recent indictment of Rukmini Devi and her approach to the dance form Bharata Natyam. For dance scholars such as Avanti Meduri, Rukmini Devi's concerted brahminization and Sanskritization of the origins of Bharata Natyam erases the key contributions of devadasis to sustaining and enriching the dance form. Meduri argues, for instance, that Rukmini Devi's revival of Bharata Natyam relied on a sanitization of its origins, where devadasi contributions are rescripted within a more nationalist and Orientalist framework. Evacuated of its attachments to sexuality, the "temple dance" of the devadasi becomes instead a chaste, secular form, more easily interpellated into the rhetoric of an emergent postcolonial nation.[9] For Meduri, an appropriate recovery of devadasi influences requires a return to a more corporeal vocabulary within choreographic theory and dance compositions.

The second grouping focuses on discussions of the judicial and legal efforts that disenfranchised devadasis and minimized their claims to customary law. Here, the focus is largely on a language of rights and restitution, most vigorously embodied by the mushrooming of governmental and nongovernmental organizations devoted to the "upliftment" and reform of devadasis. Within such formulations, the figure of the devadasi is either a "social evil," worthy of rescue, or a victim of sustained societal "superstition, ignorance, and poverty."[10] Let me note here that such formulations are not to be entirely dismissed. There might well be a certain evangelical fervor to such pronouncements of search and rescue but there is also an equal awareness of the responsibility and entanglement of (postcolonial) state apparatuses in the very structures worthy of reform.

Several scholars have remarked on some key misreadings undergirding such arguments in artistic or legal recuperations of the figure of the devadasi. Of particular importance is the fact that nineteenth- and twentieth-century court cases and government documents rarely concurred on their understanding of the term "devadasi," and arbitrarily attached the label to questions of religiosity, culture, and labor. For example, court documents frequently refer to devadasis variously as "dancing girls" or "temple dancing girls." Colonial government and social reformers later broadened the usage of the term "devadasi" to include any and all labor conducted by women within the aegis of a temple and/or deity. Such a capacious usage of the term produced a false unity behind the term, especially as there were significant variations to an understanding of devadasis in regional and community practices and customs. (For example, *bhavin*, *naikin*, *jogti*, *basavi*, *kasb*, *mahari*, *bogam sani*, *khudikar*, *aradhini*, *mogarin*, and *phulkari* are only some of the many differentiated terms that are collapsed within the sign of the devadasi.)[11]

Other mystifications of the devadasi figure included assumptions that the women came solely from the lower castes, or were primarily engaged in illicit sexual labor: a narrative shift, Kay Jordan argues, "from sacred servants" "to profane prostitutes." Loss of royal patronage, declining support from *zamindar* (landlord) families, redistribution of wealth away from the temple, urbanization, and industrialization also contributed to such changes in the status of devadasis.[12] The shift in focus to the question of prostitution, as many scholars have previously documented, partially emerged from the ongoing complex terrain of the "woman question" in colonial India, which was dominated by issues of "social reform" of practices such as sati, age of consent law, reform of law regarding widows, and so on. Such a turn to reforms, feminist historians such as Kumkum Sangari, Lata Mani, and Sudesh Vaid have argued, was further complicated by the fact that reform discourses benefited largely upper-caste women, and that too problematically. That is, the debates between "tradition" and "modernity" that often undergirded the agenda of social reform of women's position routinely overlooked the interests of women themselves. Instead, the terrain of the "woman question" became a battleground for various actors in the confrontation between colonial rule and the indigenous elites.[13] The contentiousness of tradition and the promise of modernity solidly provided the political framework for the devadasi reform debates. Yet, as I demonstrate in the next section, such a framework was unevenly extended to the project of reform for a community like the Gomantak Maratha Samaj.

Feminist historians, such as Janaki Nair, situate devadasi reform alongside wide-ranging (and conflicting) efforts to transform diverse (Hindu-based) family structures and customs into more normative patriarchal family structures, resonant with Victorian models of heterosexual marriage. Central to such mobilizations was of course the salvific discourse on the status of Indian women. For example, Nair contends that colonial criminalization of the matrilineal traditions of the Nayars of Malabar placed the customary marriage of the devadasis outside Hindu law, producing structures of kinship and access that disempowered women. Colonial regulatory practices were aided, she argues, in large part by nationalist efforts to establish legal systems that drew on brahminical norms that further erased devadasi structures from visibility. Such efforts around marriage reform were further complicated by the examples of Nayar marriages that drew precisely upon Nambudiri Brahmin forms that were intrinsically "polygamous" in structure.[14]

Kunal Parker, on the other hand, proposes that colonial courts in India augmented devadasi reform through innovative and often unprecedented translations of the law. Legal norms that previously applied to different castes represented within brahminical taxonomies were extended to include an innovative set of patriarchal norms with respect to the sexual behavior of Hindu women. For example, the devadasi was cast less as a "temple dancing girl," and more as a "Hindu girl" engaging in sexual activities outside marriage. Such a shift from the "tradition" of devadasis to the aberration of their sexual practices allowed the courts to legislate against the devadasis without engaging their more complex functions as repositories of art, culture, and religion. According to Parker, these concerns affected the interpretation of the 1861 Indian Penal Code with reference to the devadasis. By focusing on the prostitution of minors dedicated to temples, Parker suggests that devadasi reform groups rerouted provisions intended to protect minors to nullify adoption by devadasis, and to outlaw any and all dedications of girls to deities. Such a turn to the protection of minors became a crucial part of the judicial reform movement aimed at eliminating devadasis.[15]

Amrit Srinivasan, in her now classic study "Temple 'Prostitution' and Community Reform," in Tamil Nadu, south India, links the devadasi reform debates to the revival of Indian dance and to the rise in communal politics in the early twentieth century. Srinivasan, like Parker and Nair, places devadasi reform squarely alongside questions of judicial and cultural formation. She suggests that males within devadasi communities in the Tanjore district supported devadasi reform and backward caste movements because they resented the property rights afforded devadasis under customary law. For Srinivasan, the language of reform and rehabilitation thus worked to erase an entire community of ritual specialists, with their practices replaced and reinterpreted as "a spiritual discipline for upper-caste women."[16] In the more recent postcolonial context, Lucinda Ramberg, studying devadasis dedicated to Yellamma in Belgaum, Karnataka, builds on Srinivasan's early formulations and situates the differentiated nature of devadasi community and kinship formation against state and NGO efforts to abolish and rehabilitate devadasis. Ramberg, like Srinivasan and Nair, remains convinced that devadasis challenge normative structures of kinship, caste, marriage, and property ownership, making reform efforts subject to simultaneous politics of revival and resurgence.[17]

A key text within such reform/revival debates is Kannabiran's superb translation of Muvalur Ramamirthammal's novel *Dasigal Mosavalai* (Web of deceit), which serves as a meditation on devadasi reform in colonial India. Written in 1936 by a follower of the "self-respect" movement (launched by the social reformer Periyar E. Ramasamy in 1925 to promote reform against the inequalities of a caste-based society) and a reformed devadasi, the novel exemplifies the historical complexities of a community trapped in the transition from tradition to modernity.[18] In part a biography of Muvalur Ramamirthammal, the story revolves around several devadasi figures, their relationship to a young zamindar, and the interventions of his wife to bring her husband back into the fold. The young wife disguises herself as a *dasi*, making the husband believe she is the dasi he has been in love with. The devadasis fall into abject penury, as the wife spirits their wealth away to form the corpus of the Devadasi Abolition Sangam.[19] While there is clearly much more to say about this very dense novel, the novel's "multiple" devadasi voices, S. Anandhi argues, robustly complicate the essentialist demarcations of devadasis within the reform or revival debates. The multiple devadasi characters in the novel alternately advocate for and against devadasi reform, while systematically reminding readers of the need to imagine the devadasi question within a larger nexus of affiliations and allegiances. Thus, for instance, S. Anandhi points to the author's interest in anticaste movements, and Dalit mobilization, particularly in Telugu- and Kannada-speaking areas.[20] While the predominant voice in the movement for devadasi abolition in Tamil areas was that of the self-respect movement, in Telugu areas, the anti-Nautch movement (Nautch is another, distinct type of performance) started even earlier and was firmly located within social purity and later social reform movements that followed a very different trajectory from the self-respect movement.[21]

A SMALL HISTORY OF THE GOMANTAK MARATHA SAMAJ

I turn now to a devadasi community, the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, that repeats and ruptures such inherited languages for scripting the devadasi story. Of significance is the relative paucity of sources on the emergence of devadasis within the Goan context. As a result, many speculative theories abound with respect to devadasi emergence and their consequent effacement within colonial and nationalist historiography. For scholars such as Rosa Maria Perez, there is much confusion around what constitutes a devadasi under Portuguese rule, especially given the variegated and often competing references to *bailadeiras* (dancing girls) and "devadasis" within the largely Catholic Goan sources, including ecclesiastical and administrative documents, travel accounts, essays, literature, and poetry.[22] Central to such formulations is the force of Portuguese conversion campaigns that often collapsed all Hindu ritual practices into a larger arena of excess and eroticism. However, in her rush to rescue devadasis from the detritus of Portuguese colonialism and to return them to their former (Hindu) histories and cultural formations, Perez conveniently glosses over similar atrocities committed against devadasis by Hindu and other indigenous elites.

Curiously, one of the few substantial accounts of the Goan bailadeiras appears not in a Portuguese source, but in an 1851 travelogue by the infamous British spy and ethnopornographer, Sir Richard Burton. Burton's interest in the "beautiful *Bayaderes*" situates them in the famed town of "Seroda" (now Shiroda), within a climate of Portuguese imperial decline and moral excess.[23] These bayaderes are lapsed "high-caste maidens," who interestingly have no ostensible ties to deity or creed. As Burton writes: "Having been compelled to eat beef by the 'tyrannical Portuguese in the olden time,' [they] had forfeited the blessings of Hindooism, without acquiring those of Christianity."[24] Yet Seroda is described as a "Hindoo town" (it remains one still) containing "about twenty establishments, and a total number of fifty or sixty dancing girls," some of whom read and write "Sanscrit shlokas" and speak a "corrupt form of Maharatta called Concanee."[25] Throughout his descriptions of the bayaderes, Burton routinely uses the terms "Bayadere," "Nautch" girl, and "dancing girl" interchangeably, thus effacing the distinctions between the different terms in Goa. "Bayadere" is a term exclusively used to describe Goan "dancing girls," whereas the terms "Nautch" and "dancing girl" function more as British Indian categories covering a range of regions and linguistic cultures.[26]

On the one hand, Burton's account of the Goan bayaderes can be written off as yet another instance of his prurient interest in all things carnal and exotic. On the other hand, his description of these bayaderes could also provide us with a complex prehistory to current understanding of the devadasi question in Goa. Seroda, or Shiroda, was and continues to be one of the central locations for devadasi congregation in colonial and postcolonial India. At the center of this "Hindoo town" lies the temple of Kamakshi, an incarnation of Goddess Parvati, consort of Shiva. By the side of the main temple are shrines dedicated to Shri Shantadurga, Shri Laxmi Narayana, and Shri Rayeshwar. Unlike the noted bayaderes, the devadasis in Shiroda were not known for their dancing skills, but were lauded instead for their prowess as musical *kalavants* (artists). Whether the devadasis of Shiroda were distinct from the bayaderes of Burton's Seroda is of less consequence than their historical entanglement within a diverse range of colonial texts and sources.

Postcolonial references to Goan devadasis rarely engage with the nominal substitution of "devadasi" with more fraught terms such as "Nautch girl" or "dancing girl." Instead, the focus is more on constructing genealogies of caste and labor that fix devadasis within a longer history of brahminic despotism. As the story goes, the Goan Saraswats were historically the primary patrons of the devadasis and devised a structure that demarcated kalavants who were either *ghanis* (singers) or *nachnis* (dancers) or both, *bhavnis* (women who attended to temple rituals) and *fulkars* (flower collectors). Of significance here is that *both* men and women did menial and physical labor on the farmlands of the Saraswat Brahmins and the Mahajans (elders associated with religious institutions) and were named *chede* or *bande*, literally bodies tied to the land. Included within the Goan devadasi structure was also *chadde farjand*, or *frejent*, a Persian term literally meaning "boy" but referring to the sons of unwed women who had sex with their employers. These latter groups of boys were referred to as *deuli* (male members of the Bhavin class) and were situated lower than the kalavants within the devadasi substructures.[27]

According to one theory, Goan devadasis were no different from their counterparts in the Deccan in function and history. Another account provides a different history of enslavement and labor by suggesting that the devadasis were brought to Goa by the migration of Saraswat Brahmins, who came in search of fertile lands and sustenance. The term "Gomantak," for instance, is "the Sankritised toponomic of the state of Goa," and denotes the prosperity of its cattle herds.[28] The irony however is that the region of Goa is geographically and topographically not suited for cattle rearing, and the term clearly references the nomadic Brahmins who came to its shores in search of lands and resources. Within the latter theory of enslavement and labor, devadasis were primarily "chattel," enslaved workers, whose services shifted into regimes of sex and art after their migration into foreign lands.[29]

The earliest official mention of the existence of devadasis as a social group appears in the Goa census of 1904. Of note is the careful demarcation of subgroups within the larger community; the first figure states the number of males recorded under the category and the second states the number of females:

Kalavants 305/420

Devlis 4615/4051

Bhandis (slaves) 3752/4099

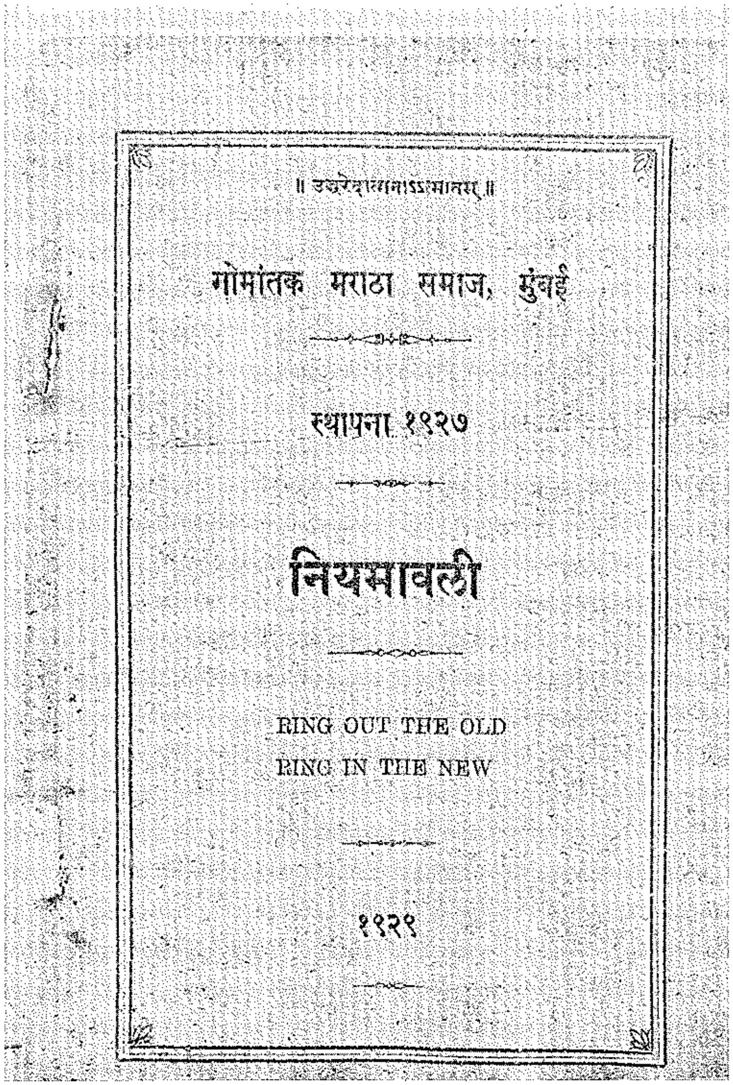
Adbaktis (semislaves) 900/1881[30]

The Gomantak Maratha Samaj, the focus of this essay, draws its members from such complex groupings of Goan devadasis, and traces its roots back to the early 1800s. Appearing first as a formal community formation in 1927, the Samaj continues to this day, providing services, scholarships, and outreach to over ten thousand members all over Goa and western Maharashtra. Unlike the well-documented histories of reform of other devadasi communities, particularly those in southern India, this community's story in Portuguese Goa underwent very little transformation and exposure, until the early part of the twentieth century. Kalavants in the Samaj community, unlike the devadasi figurations in southern India, rarely wed deities and were not "prostitutes" in any conventional sense of the word. Rather, these kalavants were mostly female singers, classically trained, placed through ceremonies like *hath-lavne* into companionate structures with both men and women. Only occasionally do we find references to dedications to deities through rituals such as the *shens* ceremony. And even then, the ceremony appears more as a proxy wedding, in which a girl who is to be dedicated to a god or goddess is wed to a (surrogate) groom, always represented by another girl dressed as a man, holding a coconut and a knife.

Portuguese colonial officials also granted Samaj members exemption from antiprostitution laws, primarily because its kalavants remained in structures of serial monogamy, supported by *yajamans*, both male and female, functioning as patrons and partners through the life of the kalavant. Kalavants were also, crucially, sworn to remain in the spatial proximity of temples, whether or not they performed ritual temple roles. One curious feature of such arrangements was that children born to kalavants were often given gender-neutral names, which made inheritance (particularly of land) less judicially contentious, especially after the death of a particular yajaman. With the passage of the antidevadasi bills, many Samaj members gradually made their way to urban spaces like Bombay, in search of work in the newly emergent Hindi film industry. The success of kalavants was not restricted to the arts, but extended to science, literature, and philosophy.[31]

Central to the Samaj's self-definition is its eschewing of any antagonistic relationship to its past. That is, its members are rarely encouraged to nudge their linkages to devadasis into the closet of history; rather, such connections are made public, often ad nauseum, to attest to the community's success and presence in contemporary society. Thus, for example, since its inception in 1927, the Bombay branch of the Samaj has held yearly public functions that celebrate the past and future successes of its members. Such functions routinely draw upon references to devadasi genealogies to attest to the artistic and religious wealth of the community. Initial efforts to organize the community were primarily led by Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar in 1902. Paigankar particularly rallied youth members of the community and staged multiple successful conferences all over Goa and Maharashtra. The belief was that education and caste reform could bring power to the community, not at the expense of erasing past histories, but rather by building on the legacies of the past. Based primarily in Panaji, Shiroda, Malvan, and Bombay, the Samaj championed itself as caste reformist (as it were), describing its shift in name from Gomantak Kalavant Samaj, to Gomantak Maratha Samaj, as a primary indication of its commitment to a progressive pancaste politics. As Kakodkar and Paigankar argue, the leaders of the Samaj deliberately expanded their movement in the 1930s through their inclusion of the word "Maratha" (a term referring to dominant Hindu castes of warriors and peasants) in their self-nominalization.[32] Saraswat scholars of the period often dismiss such an inclusion, arguing that regardless of such attachments, the kalavants were not Marathas.[33]

Yet, as Paigankar argues in his passionate biography, *Mee Khon*, such shifts in identity were radical as they made caste status inherently mobile and accessible, an option previously unavailable to members of the community. Thus, it is crucial to recall that in the early declarations of the *Samaj Sudharak* (the monthly publication of the Samaj), Paigankar and his collaborators strongly emphasize the inclusion of the Deuli community alongside its kalavant members, gesturing to a uniform caste identity for all subgroups under the rubric of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. A key feature of these early endeavors was the Samaj's concerted commitment to linking its own histories of sexuality and self-fashioning to a larger societal narrative of reform. The very first editorial of *Samaj Sudharak* goes to great length to explain why the publication is so loftily called *Samaj Sudharak* and not simply the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj Sudharak*. Entitled "Our Courage," the editorial justifies the choice of title by foregrounding the absence of public debate on questions of sexuality, caste, and tradition, particularly within Marathi-language publications. For the editors, societal



॥ उद्धरेदात्मनाऽऽत्मानम् ॥

गोमांतक मराठा समाज, मुंबई

स्थापना १९२७

नियमावली

RING OUT THE OLD
RING IN THE NEW

१९२९

FIGURE 1. Front cover of the first printed constitution (literally, "rule book") of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj (1929). The constitution is archived at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj Society, Mumbai, India, and is published courtesy of the society.

reform is impossible without an exposure of such issues, and their goal is to use the experiences of Samaj members to slowly but surely enlighten larger society on these questions.[34]

On the thorny issue of devadasi reform, the early issues of *Samaj Sudharak* are equally invested in understanding how sexuality is made intelligible within such reform efforts. From 1929 to 1948, much discussion focuses on the Samaj's relationship to the devadasi tradition and ways to outlive its past through education and marriage. Yet there appears no easy path to such a story of conventional progress and reform. For at the very time that the abandonment of the devadasi tradition is discussed, there is equally heated discussion on how the question of sexuality is to be managed. The issues raised by multiple contributors range from the inherent vagrancy of brahminical male sexuality and by extension all male sexuality (making the devadasi system inevitable) to more practical concerns of how women were to feed and clothe themselves outside of such established structures. One typical opinion piece (author unknown), entitled "Society, Open Your Eyes," angrily pleads with its readers to acknowledge the dictates of male sexuality. For this writer, the annointment of marriage solves nothing; after all, the men who serve as yajamans to Samaj women are themselves married. Rather, more of the community's men and women need to be educated as to their professional options outside the institution of marriage.[35] Many years later, Suhasini Borkar, one of the few female heads of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, makes a similar but more complicated contribution to the devadasi debate. In an eloquent speech to its women's group, entitled "Fallen Woman and Wife?," Borkar argues that the women fit neither category since their sexuality is not "fallen" through vice or "entrapped" through marriage. Instead, she calls for a third identification stressing the kalavant woman's sexual independence and skill in the arts.[36] The advertisements accompanying such expressed views raise an equally capacious vista of representation: advertisements for Ambrosia, a "woman's tonic," are placed alongside services offered by tailors specializing in weddings, while movie posters celebrating the participation of Samaj members carry story lines that cast them as unwed mothers or unsung heroines.

By the 1920s or so, many members of Gomantak Maratha Samaj chose to migrate to Bombay, where they could openly pursue their kalavant training, adopt Marathi as their lingua franca, assimilate into society, marry legitimately, and escape the stranglehold of older devadasi histories signified by continued Saraswat condemnation in Goa. An early study on the migration into Bombay and on the rehabilitation of "prostitutes in Bombay" (with a "reference to family background") applauds the positive efforts of the Samaj, and contrasts it sharply with other organizations such as the Association of Tawaifs and Deredars that continue to use the "singing girls" as a "shield" to propagate more "unscrupulous" and unlawful activity. But the study also notes that "the majority of their respondents" are women from Goa, whose mother tongue is Konkani.[37]

However, such upwardly mobile self-descriptions are complicated by the fact that members assumed different caste identities, and were regarded as "other backward castes" in western Maharashtra, and as Saraswat, Prabhus, and Sonars in parts of Goa and Karnataka. For example, many Samaj women maintained coerced and uncoerced monogamous relationships with Brahmin men (and occasionally with lower-caste men). Children born out of such structures were often given caste names not otherwise available to Samaj members. One potential explanation (offered by the Portuguese scholar Rosa-Maria Perez) is that the members of Gomantak Maratha Samaj, "instead of trying to get rid of their stigma, tried to restructure it (during and after colonialism) precisely according to caste components."[38] Thus, there exist in Goa and Maharashtra (and to some extent in Karnataka as well) Samaj members who have Saraswat Brahmin surnames (such as Kakodkar, Welingkar, Shirodkar) acquired primarily through their intimacies with Brahmin men. To this day, the Samaj passionately encourages intercaste, interreligious marriages, and is often referred to as "Bharatatil Ek Aggressar Samaj" (an aggressive community in India) due to the tremendous social progress it has achieved over such a short time.[39]

Such celebratory characterizations of Gomantak Maratha Samaj are echoed in established postcolonial histories of Goa. While the references to the community continually mark it as a "model" of social progress and success, they rarely connect its success to a critique of larger histories of caste and kinship within Goa itself. That is, the story of the Samaj remains a singular history of one community's upliftment, not an interrogation of the foundational (and teleological) processes of subject-formation and citizenship. For Gomantak Maratha Samaj to be termed Bharatatil Ek

Aggressar Samaj, it must make itself intelligible in the very formulations of sexuality and sociality that produced its segregations in the first place. Even less is noted about the community's own return to more conventional structures of gender and sexuality—an area of discussion that lies beyond the scope of this brief essay.[40]

Some final thoughts: My goal here has not been to provide a hagiographical or recuperative reading of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. To do so would be only to mirror the ideological certainty that characterizes some of the versions of the devadasi story I criticized earlier. Rather, I have highlighted the movement and figuration of sexuality within some of the narratives and histories of the community. There are no efforts within the Samaj archives to disavow the representational burden of its devadasi past; its efforts are focused more on an almost commonsensical understanding of how and what that past signifies. Indeed, what there is most to learn here is the many ways in which the Gomantak Maratha Samaj negotiated its attachment to sexuality, as evidence not of a failed past but rather as promise of future possibilities for social, cultural, and economic success. If the early reform or revival debates around devadasi formation rescue the sign of sexuality either through the language of judicial representation, or the consecration of cultural practices such as dance and music, on the other hand, the claims of a successful devadasi-founded Gomantak Maratha Samaj could produce sexuality as a fulcrum for regional debates on caste, kinship, gender, and beyond. The challenge is to link devadasi histories to a structure of attachments that seemed settled when we first embarked upon this inquiry.

NOTES

1. In Karnataka, for example, the state sponsors multiple projects aimed at the rehabilitation of devadasis. See Joint Women's Programme, "An Exploratory Study on Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme Initiated by Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation and Sc/St Corporation, Government of Karnataka in Northern Districts of Karnataka," report submitted to National Commission for Women, New Delhi, 2001–2.

2. For an excursus on the relationship between sexuality and archival hermeneutics, see Arondekar, *For the Record*.

3. For a related discussion in queer historiography, see Goldberg and Menon, "Queering History," 1608–17.

4. "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section. The offence made punishable under this section requires that penetration, however little, should be proved strictly. Thus an attempt to commit this offence should be an attempt to thrust the male organ into the anus of the passive agent. Some activity on the part of the accused in that particular direction ought to be proved strictly. A mere preparation for the operation should not necessarily be construed as an attempt. Emission is not necessary." *Of Unnatural Offences, Section 377, Indian Penal Code* (instituted in 1860, revised 1932, 1968, 1982 and still in effect). See Ranchhoddas and Thakoree, *The Indian Penal Code*.

5. Counteraffidavit, *Naz Foundation v. Govnt. of Delhi, Police Commissioner of Delhi, Delhi State AIDS Control Society, Union of India*, Civil Writ Petition 7455, 2001, 2004.

6. This section distills claims from my recent essay on the repeal of Section 377 and its colonial genealogies; see Arondekar, "Time Corpus."

7. Goa's official liberation came on December 19, 1961, when the Indian Army moved in against the Portuguese garrisons as part of Operation Vijay. Yet this late "liberation" by and into the Indian state did not come without a fair share of controversy and resentment. For many Goan historians and nationalists, Prime Minister Nehru's "soft policy" against the dictatorship of Portuguese rule provided late relief and relegated Goa to an extended state of historical stasis and neglect. See Shirodkar, *Goa's Struggle for Freedom*; Rubinoff, *India's Use of Force in Goa*; and Deora, *Liberation of Goa, Daman, and Diu*.

8. The reference here is to Amrit Srinivasan's well-known essay "Reform and Revival," 1869.

9. Avanthi Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the *Devadasi* and Her Dance," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1996.

10. Two classic examples of such efforts are Patil, "Devadasis and Other Social Evils"; and Trivedi, *Scheduled Caste Women*.

11. There is a small and well-recycled set of writings on the cultural history of devadasis in India. Key texts include Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali-Devadasi Tradition in South India*; Kamble, *Devadasi ani Nagnapuja*; Shankar, *Devadasi Cult*; Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*; and Chakraborthy, *Women as Devadasis*.

12. Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*, 1–15. To this day, Jordan's text remains one of the few scholarly attempts to actively bring together the multiple debates within devadasi historiography.

13. See Sangari and Vaid, "Introduction"; and Mani, "Contentious Traditions."

14. Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India*.

15. Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes," 559–663.

16. Amrit Srinivasan, "Temple 'Prostitution' and Community Reform: An Examination of the Ethnographic, Historical and Textual Context of the *Devadasis* of Tamil Nadu, South India," Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1984.

17. Lucinda Ramberg, "Given to the Goddess: South Indian *Devadasis*, Ethics, Kinship," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, with the University of California, San Francisco, 2006.

18. Hodges, "Revolutionary Family Life."

19. Ramamirthammal, *Web of Deceit*, 1–48. The introduction provides a useful context to the regional debates undergirding devadasi reform in the Madras presidency.

20. Anandhi, "Representing *Devadasis*."

21. Muthulaksmi Reddy was one of the iconic figures in these struggles. In 1927, she advocated an amendment to the Hindu Religious Endowments Act that abolished the granting of land in exchange for service in temples, thus striking at the economic basis of the devadasi system. What is less known is that many devadasis resisted abolitions, and formed groups to oppose the bill and argue against the codification of devadasis as prostitutes and not divinely ordained laborers. See introduction to Ramamirthammal, *Web of Deceit*.

22. Perez, "The Rhetoric of Empire."

23. Burton, *Goa and the Blue Mountains*, 118–35.

24. Ibid., 119.

25. Ibid., 125.

26. See entries for "Bayadere," "Nautch girl," and "Dancing girl" in Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*.

27. Archana Kakodkar, "The Portuguese and Kalavants," unpublished paper, 1991. I am grateful to Dr. Kakodkar, senior librarian (retd.), Goa University, for her invaluable help. To this day, she is the only scholar who has worked extensively on cataloguing the history of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj.

28. Sarkar, "Dedication to the Altar," 146.

29. Ibid., 145–51.

30. Figures cited in Mario Cabral e Sa, "Here Lived Batabai: The Story of a Remarkable Clan," *Goa Today*, January 2003, at goacom.org.

31. Archana Kakodkar, "Devadasis of Goa," unpublished paper. While female singers such as Moghubai Kurdikar, Kesarbai Kerkar, Lata Mangeshkar, and Kishori Amonkar remain the best-known members of Gomantak Maratha Samaj, others of note include the first composer of Marathi musical drama, Hirabai Pednekar; the former chief minister of Goa, Shashikala Kakodkar; and Sulochana Katkar, retired president of the Goa Congress.

32. "Marathas" is a collective (and heavily debated) term referring to Indo-Aryan groups of Hindu, Marathi-speaking castes of warriors and peasants hailing largely from the present-day state of Maharashtra. Through their creation of a substantial empire in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Marathas occupied a major part of India. Of note here is that the Marathas were known by the term primarily because their native tongue was mostly but not always Marathi. Thus, the terms "Marathi" people and "Maratha" people are not interchangeable and should not be confused for each other. See Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*.

33. Paigankar, *Mee Khon*.

34. *Samaj Sudharak* (January 1929). All issues of the *Samaj Sudharak* are archived at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj Society building in Mumbai, India. In 2004, the Samaj offices were moved from Gomantak Maratha Samaj Sadan, 345 V.P. Road, Bombay 400004, to Sitladevi Co-op. Housing Society Ltd., 7–16/B Wing, D. N. Nagar, New Link Road, Andheri (W), Mumbai 400053. A partial archive can be found at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Dayanand Smriti, Swami Vivekanand Marg, Panaji 403001, Goa. The magazine is still published but is now called *Gomant Shardha*.

35. *Samaj Sudharak* (May 1929).

36. *Samaj Sudharak* (January 1943).

37. Punekar and Rao, *A Study of Prostitutes in Bombay*, 169, 160. For a broader understanding of late-colonial debates on prostitution in Bombay, see Tambe, "Brothels as Families."

38. See Perez, "The Rhetoric of Empire," 141–43.

39. See Kakodkar, "Gomantak Maratha Samaj," 5–16; and Radhakrishnan, *Purushartha*.

40. See Pissurlencar, *The Portuguese and the Marathas*; Priolkar, *Goa Rediscovered*; de Souza, *Essays in Goan History*; Shirodkar, *Goa's Struggle for Freedom*; Danvers, *The Portuguese in India*; Newman, *Of Umbrellas, Goddesses, and Dreams*; and Axelrod and Fuerch, "Flight of the Deities."