

The Subversion of the Devadasis Myth

NOTES FROM NOWHERE | TISHANI DOSHI



“Myth is history,” says Vani, one of the many strong women in Catherine Rubin Kermorgant’s fascinating first book, *Servants of the Goddess, the Modern-Day Devadasis*. The book reveals how in India, all rivers connect to the Ganga; how the sacred and profane can coexist; how men can become women, and women men.

Catherine, a documentary film writer with a background in anthropology and classics, tells me that the most surprising thing about spending time with the devadasis of Kalyana, Karnataka, was discovering that modern India with its academic, artistic and scientific excellence, exists side by side with a more ancient world, where people still live by their myths and rituals. It is this fluid conversation between past and present that explains how Catherine connected with the *vachanas* of Basavanna, the poet-saint-humanist who lived 900 years ago, and how devadasis today draw parallels between their lives and the stories of the Yellamma myth.

It is this philosophical highway between centuries that allows us to understand how tradition can be manipulated, subverted and appropriated. Where once, devadasis were girls dedicated to the service of the deity, schooled in the art of song and dance, now they are commonly known as temple prostitutes. Post-1947, their art was purged of eroticism, usurped by the middle and upper classes, and reformulated as Bharatnatyam. Where once a girl’s *arangetram* occurred after her first menses, signalling her availability for sexual liaison, now it’s sanitised family entertainment, a necessary stamp for any respectable girl’s marriage CV.

Servants of the Goddess is an astute and provocative book, taking us into the intimate lives of devadasis, while putting forward larger questions about caste hierarchy, gender bias, and the economic pressures that exist within patriarchy. Reading the book I was reminded of Nikita Lalwani’s novel, *The Village*, where a British documentary crew arrive in remote North India with the intention of capturing life in an open prison, and things go terribly wrong. There’s a similar unravelling with Catherine and her crew, except the events in her book aren’t fiction.

“Things never happen the way you think they’re going to,” Catherine says. “Documentaries can give a voice to people who don’t have one... but the reality of documentary is that television, in Europe and America, is for entertainment... People watch TV after a hard day’s work to relax, they don’t want to be challenged... Serious content has been sidelined.”

Writing books by comparison is like running barefoot on the beach. As a nonfiction writer, she says, you never fully know exactly what happened or what the truth is. It’s essential to acknowledge that sometimes there may be only partial truths to tell—“perhaps by adding those partial truths, contradictory though they may be, we can grasp the complexity of the situations being described.” But even with all the freedom of the fiction writer to create worlds and myths of their own, she believes if you’re not respecting some ultimate truth about human nature, the work will fail.

There are many details to admire in *Servants of the Goddess*, including the description of the Ambassador as a bowler hat on wheels, but perhaps, none more moving than how the devadasis, by investing in tradition, are able to see themselves as living representatives of the goddess herself, proving that salvation can be found in the margins of mainstream society.

The writer is a dancer, poet and novelist.

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Catherine Rubin Kermorgant