# Chronicles from the Margins: Emotions, Sexuality, and Courtesans in Early Modern India

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**ABSTRACT---** ***Under British colonial laws that aimed at regulating prostitution in India and imposing ideals of Victorian sexual restraint, the devadasi system came under vapid attack. Imposing Victorian ideals of sexual restraint, these laws emphasized that the prostitute was meant to be invisible and anomalous to social and political life. Given the prominence of a predominantly male dominated archive, how can scholars approximate the courtesan's marginalized subaltern voice? One way to understand the emotional and intellectual agency, and sexual autonomy of the devadasis is to examine the poetry they composed and those, written by male poets, where the courtesan is the central character. Doing so problematizes a narrow portrayal of temple women as passive, lacking agency, and as sexual victims. This article examines poetry and songs sung by courtesans in early modern India to conclude that this literature suggests that many of them signified economic and self-autonomy, assertiveness, and sexual agency.***

**Keywords---** Courtesans, Sexuality, Emotions, Devadasi

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Courtesans or *devadasis* formed a unique feature of Hindu temples in south India. *Devadasis* (literally meaning "the servant of god") were female dancers and singers attached to temples. Traditionally the *devadasi* tradition arose from a long history of the courtesan as an important element of civic life in ancient and early modern India. While trained to be skillful in the art of lovemaking, dancing, and singing, she was also expected to gain expertise in writing poetry and the fine arts. Their dedication to temple service was understood as marriage to the deity. *Devadasis* married a male deity and were traditionally an auspicious part of a marriage ceremony in the community. As centuries passed, their services shifted from gods to earthly 'gods and lords,' and a *devadasi* usually led the life of a prostitute with religious sanction. They not only married, but also served as sex providers to the temple priest, who customarily received the privilege of the first night, followed by other males of that community. The idea of the *devadasi* as *prasad* (ambrosia) issued from the belief that a woman belonging to the deity might also be sexually enjoyed by worshippers. Such a woman, therefore, could be a conduit of divine favour from the gods to his male devotees. This practice survives in parts of India today despite being outlawed by the government. The cult of dedicating girls to temples in marriage exists all over India in different forms and by different names, such as *Maharis* in Kerala, *Natis* in Assam, *Muralis* in Maharashtra, *Bogams* in Andhra Pradesh, *Jogatis* or *Basavis* in Karnataka state, and *Thevardiyar* in Tamil Nadu.

Being married to a deity ensured that *devadasis* would never be widowed; therefore the beads in their sacred necklace (*tali*) were believed to bring good luck to the married women who wore them. *Devadasis* prepared the string for the *tali* of other brides and attached black beads from their own *tali* to it. They were deputed to walk at the head of Hindu marriage processions because they were thought to possess powers to ward off ill omens. When a *devadasi* died, her body was covered with a new cloth removed from the deity's idol. The temple with which she was associated supplied flowers for the funeral. No worship was performed until her body was cremated, as the idol, her husband, symbolically mourned her death the same way one observed the death of a family member.[1]

Under the British colonial laws that aimed at regulating prostitution in India and imposing ideals of Victorian sexual restraint, traditional courtesans, temple women or *devadasis* came under vapid attack in India. The slippage of the *devadasi* from a temple woman to a social outcast, the prostitute, was quick. Toeing the line of Victorian sexual morals the prostitute was meant to be invisible and anomalous to social and political life. The colonial regime introduced policies in India that furthered the stigmatization of prostitution. From the colonial perspective, prostitutes threatened the sanctity of marriage and ideals of Victorian family through the practice of non-conjugal sex. Additionally, colonial medical practitioners saw her as the carrier of venereal diseases who provided sexual recreation to British soldiers,

[1] Somadeva, *The Ocean of story, being C.H. Tawney's translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagara* (London: 1924), 260–261.

company officials, and various classes of Indian men. For the Indian nationalists, particularly within the Gandhian paradigm, the *devadasi* did not fit into the new model of ideal womanhood which was primarily Hindu, upper caste, chaste, obedient, maternal, spiritual, and most importantly, asexual.[2] Essentially for women sexual choices were limited to being a virgin, mother or harlot. The prostitute, thus, was a constant source of social decay, and conjugal, sexual, and health anxiety for both the colonial state and Indian nationalist, particularly the Brahmanical elites.[3] Scholars have discussed the criminalization of prostitutes that precipitated as a result of these new colonial legal regulations, and the rigid social stigma, cultural exploitation, and economical disenfranchisement that they faced.[4]

An equally damaging outcome of new colonial laws was the marginalization of courtesans' voices and consequently the marginalization of an entire cultural arena—one that was inherently a woman's space. Given the prominence of a predominantly male colonial archive that stigmatizes courtesans as people, how can one then approximate the courtesan's narrative, voice, and agency? How did courtesans who were criminalized under new strictures of British colonial laws challenge Victorian notions of 'devious sexuality' by writing songs that interwove sexuality with devotion and the poignancy of human emotions of love, separation, and pain? How were courtesans depicted in classical Indian literature? I argue that a useful approach to understanding colonial perspectives on marginalized subaltern voices would be to examine the emotional and intellectual lives of courtesans in the pre-colonial mediaeval period. A way to understand the emotions, agency, and sexual autonomy of the *devadasis* is to examine the poetry they composed, many of which are sung by courtesans even today. Doing so problematizes a narrow portrayal of temple women as passive, lacking agency, and as sexual victims. As I demonstrate, far from being experts in lovemaking alone, courtesans in early modern India expressed a refined sense of desire. They mostly commanded acceptance and prestige in customary classical traditions and in popular consciousness. Some, like Muddupalani (a *devadasi* in the royal court of the Nayaka kings of Tanjavur, the great patrons of arts and music) that I examine in this article, refused to be silenced or fade into the shrouds of invisibility and negotiated the transition to colonial modernity through their writing. Such a line of analysis helps trace the roots of their clichéd depictions to colonial Orientalist perceptions of a declining India and the degenerate position of women in that narrative. It also nuances the characterization of the history of Indian women as one of submission and victimization.

The notion of victimization in this context is a slippery slope for scholars to tread. On the one hand it is critical to not romanticize the courtesan resulting in overlooking or obliterating her oppression from historical narratives. On the other hand, it is essential to recognize the ways in which courtesans expressed their resilience, sexual autonomy, and power. To this end, this article undertakes a discussion of two corpuses: first, an eleventh century collection of Sanskrit stories by Somadeva titled, the *Katha Sarita Sagara* (The Ocean of Stories) where the courtesan featured as a central character*;* a series of Telugu songs sung by courtesans but composed by male authors such as *Ksetrayya*; and second, the Telugu poem *Radhika Santwanam* composed by the *devadasi* Muddupalani.[5]

## 2. THE COURTESAN IN INDIAN CULTURAL LIFE

The courtesan embodied the irresistible combination of music and love. In classical Indian traditions, music was the sonic embodiment of emotion.[6] Thus the courtesan did not simply possess a compelling erotic power; rather, she had also mastered the skills of arousing the sentiment of her listener/patron through her music. Classical Indian music traditions were based on the theory that music held the power to manoeuvre human emotions. Every *raga* or melody was designed to arouse a specific emotional essence. The ultimate aim of the performer was to reach a scale of perfection such that when a specific *raga* was executed, the particular sentiment associated with it would also be aroused in the listener to their utmost satisfaction. Mastering this skill empowered the most celebrated of courtesans because they could

[2] For a discussion on this point in the state of Mysore see, Janaki Nair, 'The *Devadasi*, Dharma and the State,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 29:50 (1994): 3157-3159+3161-3167.

[3] For a discussion on the regulation of prostitution under British colonial rule in India see Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and Phillipa Levine. *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (Routledge, 2013).

[4]See for instance Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) and Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[5] Somadeva, *The ocean of story, being C.H. Tawney's translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagara* (London: 1924); A. K Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman (edited & translated), *When God is the Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Ksetrayya and others* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Susie Tharu & K. Lalitha (ed.), *Women Writing in India 600 B.C to the Present Vol. I* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993)

[6] Katherine Butler Schofield, 'The Courtesan Tale: Female Musicians and Dancers in Mughal Historical Chronicles, 1556-1748,' *Gender and History* 24:1 (2012): 161.

evoke the transgressive power of music that encouraged the listener to become excessively attached to their music.[7] Evocative music also had the power to make the listener fall in love with the performer.[8] Mastery over music thus gave the courtesan a position of control. For, she could use the irresistible power of music to sway emotions, affect her patron's reason, and make him fall in love with her. In the process she could control his erotic power.

Courtesans were closely associated with the state, as entertainers, part of royal leisure, and military expeditions.[9] The *Dasa Kumara Carita* (The Adventures of the Ten Princes) praises the accomplishments of a courtesan but also regards her education and conversational skills to be more attractive than the paltry chatter of an uneducated housewife.[10] Courtesans wielded political power and influence, and were often wealthy. Patrons sought their presence during auspicious occasions. The very sight of them brought good luck—much different from the portended evil provoked by the spectacle of a pregnant woman. In the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the courtesan graced others with her presence on auspicious occasions. During the Mauryan period ($3^{rd}$-$2^{nd}$ centuries BCE), the Indian state's involvement in prostitution was at its height. Providing sexual entertainment to the public using *ganikas* was both strictly controlled by the state and mostly conducted in state-owned establishments.[11]

The *Arthasastra*, a book on kingship and governance, has an entire section on the Board of Administration for Courtesans. The *Arthasastra* describes the courtesan as one who not only provides sexual pleasures but also entertains clients with singing and dancing. The state's involvement in training courtesans in the faculties of singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, writing, painting, acting, shampooing, and the art of making love indicates the significance that the Mauryan state granted courtesans.[12] The head of the courtesan house was generally an exceptionally beautiful woman and, if closely trusted, could become the personal attendant to the king or queen. Once promoted as the king's personal attendant, she could collect an annual salary ranging from 3000 to 1000 *panas*, depending on her beauty and qualifications. Remarkably, the king's personal advisers and other attendants—such as the charioteer, physician, astrologer, and court poet—were paid 1000 *panas* as salary.[13] The *Arthasastra* recommends that courtesans be employed as spies for the state. Indeed, a section on military organizational structure, in Book 5 of the *Arthasastra* suggests that, "Secret agents, courtesans, artists and artisans, and retired military officers shall vigilantly watch over the loyalty of soldiers."[14] The Mauryan state employed them to detect, elude, or murder the "wicked."[15] Courtesans formed a part of the retinue of the Mauryan army as well.

Contrary to the colonial image of the prostitute as a diseased and disempowered body, studies from pre-colonial early modern India present a more nuanced picture. Historian Leslie Orr, who undertook an expansive study of the *devadasi* system during the Chola period ($9^{th}$-$13^{th}$ century A.D.) refutes that the system was a form of institutionalized and sacred prostitution. She argues that such a view emanates from a general trend of characterizing medieval Indian history as a period of cultural, religious, and racial degeneration and of the overall general decline of the status of women from the "golden age" of the ancient Vedic period.

Orr objects to the colonial practice of understanding Indian society and women's role in it through a study of religious texts, myths, symbols, and rituals. She instead proposes using a methodology that focuses on the behavior and experiences of individuals. Though her position is well taken, her proposition to reject the study of religious texts, myths, symbols and rituals—all of which are intricately linked to the daily experiences of a woman who spent the majority of her life in the temple—presents its challenges. These conditions not only must have had an impact on the courtesan, as an individual and community but also she, herself, would have contributed to their formation and transformations, thereby negotiating a space for herself within these structures. At the same time, understanding the *devadasi* system in terms of the overarching concept of "*shakti*," (feminine power) or "auspiciousness," obscures historical and regional variations in the activities and circumstances of temple women, effacing their individuality and concealing change.[16] Orr prefers to label them as "temple women," "devotees," and "daughters of god" instead of using the colonial category of a "prostitute." None of these terms were linked in application or meaning to any particular function or role; they were,

[7] Schofield, 'The Courtesan Tale,' 161.
[8] Schofield, 'The Courtesan Tale,' 162.
[9] For a study of the role of courtesans in ancient Indian theatre see Sanjay Gautam, *Foucault and the Kamasutra: The Courtesan, the Dandy, and the Birth of Ars Erotica as Theater in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
[10] Somadeva, *The Ocean of story*, 235.
[11] For a discussion on *ganikas* and their exalted status see Doris Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and God's Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Pre-Colonial India," in *The Courtesan's Arts,* ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161-81.
[12] Kautilya and L.N. Rangarajan (trans.). *The Arthasastra* (New Delhi, New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 351.
[13] Kautilya and L.N. Rangarajan, *The Arthasastra*, 352.
[14] Kautilya and L.N. Rangarajan, *The Arthasastra*, 686.
[15] Kautilya and L.N. Rangarajan, *The Arthasastra*, 351.
[16] Leslie Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamil Nadu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.

instead, markers of status.[17] These terms were also non-functional, as they do not refer to these women as "dancers," or by any other terms that indicate ritual or professional functions. An important argument that Orr makes is that *devadasis*, as temple women, become significant at a time when temples emerged as dominant centers of economic and political power, with the decline of the Chola political suzerainty.

Hundreds of Chola inscriptions, many of which record land grants that temple women made, suggest that the *devadasis* not only owned land as property but also made land grants and donations. Temple women were most evident and active in the periods and regions when the Chola power and influence were felt the least—that is, in the northern and southern regions of Tamil Nadu.[18] While royal women's patronage was concentrated in the core Chola regions of Tanjavur and Tiruchirapalli, temple women's donation has been found in the whole of Tamil country. According to ancient law books, the *Dharmasastras,* women were not allowed to own landed property. However, the fact that *devadasis* made land grants suggests that they had property rights and economic autonomy. Women in the Chola period had access to property and more autonomy in disposing of their property, though this autonomy was less compared to men.[19] The most striking feature of donations made by temple women is the very high proportion made to their home temples. Chola inscriptions evidence women in property transactions with the full acknowledgement of the local political and religious authorities, the brahmanas, and with little male interference, mediation, or authorization. However, Orr's account that they had an intermediary (mostly their sons or a male relative) or that their land transactions were "mediated by agents" presents somewhat of a contradiction.[20] She also noticed that, unlike other donors such as royal women who followed one another's example, temple women's patronage was diffused and individualistic. Making gifts to the temple was the single most important role for temple women, for which they received certain privileges[21]— however, Orr does not clearly identify what these privileges were.

## 3. REPRESENTATIONS: COURTESAN SONGS IN POPULAR LITERATURE

Composed in the eleventh century, *The Katha Sarita Sagara* presents perceptions of the courtesan in popular imagination.[22] A notable feature of the literature on courtesans was the emphasis on their deception. Tales from Sanskrit literature predominantly narrate how courtesans attract, entrap, and capture gullible men's minds and bodies, only to ultimately rob them of their money and leaving them destitute. However, while the courtesan could easily fool an ordinary man, the *Kamasutra*—the quintessential treatise on love—explicitly describes the men who alone are capable of enjoying erotic love with a courtesan and yet retaining self-control. These men possess four qualities that distinguish them from the ordinary members of society: good birth, wealth, urbanity, and beauty.[23] Continuous success at courtship thus indicated one's self-perception as a powerful man in court. In this understanding the king had to project himself as the perfect and skilled player in the contest of love.[24] Here, the king's confident access to the courtesan's body mediated status and power. For, only the man who has touched the courtesan's bosom can become the commander of a fort; only the one who has gazed at her face can become a king.[25]

In the *Katha Sarita Sagara's* four stories, the courtesan, who plays a central character in the plot, is essentially a cunning trickster and deceitful woman. Such representations serve as a caution to the reader. Only one story, "The Courtesan who fell in Love," portrays her as the beloved of a noble lover whose adoration leads him to endure a series of ordeals. But, even here, her mother—the elder courtesan—is portrayed as a wicked soul who will not let her daughter leave the profession and become the hero's wife. She beats up the hero, Lohajangha, with her goons and leaves him half dead. The story depicts Lohajangha's fight to claim his ladylove and his adventures in Lanka, where he receives aid from King Vibhisana. He finally wins her over but not before he inflicts the severest punishment upon her mother by making her shave half of her head and blackening her face.

In another story, "The Brahmin and the Courtesan," the learned brahmana Gunadhya approaches the courtesan Chaturika to learn the "ways of the world." But she hoodwinks him out of his wealth as part of her fees and teaches him nothing. Pranksters trick the brahmana, traditionally considered to be a master of Vedic knowledge, to approach the courtesan to gain knowledge. That the brahmana protagonist agreed to learn from a courtesan alludes to contemporary

[17] Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters,* 63.
[18] Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters,* 164.
[19] Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters,* 71.
[20] Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters,* 72.
[21] Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters,* 162.
[22] All references to the *Katha Sarita Sagara* in this section are from the Penguin edition, 1994.
[23] Daud Ali, 'Anxieties of Attachment: The Dynamics of Courtship in Medieval India,' *Modern Asian Studies* 36:1 (2002): 104.
[24] Ali, 'Anxieties of Attachment,' 138.
[25] V. Narayan Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in the Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 124.

social perceptions of the courtesan as a wise and learned person. Her knowledge and wisdom is reflected in her name Chaturika, which means "the clever one," but she also posed a threat to those who are unaware.[26] This theme re-emerges in "The Courtesan's Tricks," in which a rich merchant, Ratnavarma sends his young son, Isvaravarma, to an elderly courtesan to learn how to safeguard himself against the tricks and deceitful ways of courtesans, fearing that his naïve and gullible son could become their victim. Ratnavarma also fears the potency of the courtesan's sexuality. In his opinion, "God has created courtesans who are both beautiful as well as wicked to steal the hearts and wealth of young men who are intoxicated with their youth."[27] Isvaravarma is sent to the young courtesan Sundari, who feigns falling in love with him and shrewdly robs him of the money that Ratnavarma had given him to begin his own business. The story proceeds to show how Isvaravarma is rudely shaken by his deceived love. He vows to punish Sundari and the older courtesan and recovers his money through travails. Visiting courtesans, therefore, marked a coming of age for most young men. It was not immoral to send one's son to a courtesan to learn "the ways of the world," which the courtesan had mastered. However, she is seen as a shrewd trickster who a man must learn to outwit. In the story her sexuality is a path to deviance and decay.

*When God is the Customer* is a collection of songs by four male medieval Telugu poets—Annamayya, Rudrakavi, Ksetrayya, and Sarangapani. Annamayya is credited to have composed a song a day for Lord Venkatesvara at Tirupati. Folklore accounts praise him for having created over 32,000 songs—which perhaps is an exaggerated figure. Many of his songs that were inscribed on copperplates survive even today. Courtesans sang his songs while leading processions and dancing before the deity in temples. Ksetrayya was a seventeenth-century poet who lived in Tanjavur. While there is no evidence that his songs were sung in temple rituals, they are still sung by courtesans. These songs also form an integral repertoire of male brahmana *Kucchipudi* dancers who played female roles.[28] Most pieces in this anthology are erotic love poems that explicate themes of separation and longing between lovers. The courtesan is often an important character in these poems, with her relationship to her customer at times resembling the bond between god and devotee.

The courtesan offered rich possibilities as the *nayika* (heroine) of poetry. She was bold and free from the constraints of domesticity and family. Thus she represented the possibility of choice and spontaneous affection as opposed to calculated marital ties. She signaled a particular kind of knowledge that had achieved pre-eminence in the late medieval period in southern India. Devotionally, the courtesan experienced her divine client by taking him physically into her body.[29] *Sringararasa*, poetry with sexual themes, was composed about mythological subjects with gods as the protagonists and humans as heroes. But depicting the lovemaking of the gods was offensive, because they were regarded as fathers and mothers of the universe.[30] For poet Annamayya, for instance, love and devotion were synonymous and an important constituent for exploring the ideal experience of the divine. His idea of love is an ideal one, one that ultimately achieves harmony. God, in his poems, is always male, in control, and advantaged even when he adopts a subservient role to please the woman. Though the woman might complain and get angry, they end by making love, signaling the supremacy of god over humans.[31]

A remarkable shift occurs in Ksetrayya's poetry when the king is accorded divine status. He is identified with the deity, blurring, and then eradicating the distinction between gods and humans. As such, Ksetrayya could at once address his songs to the king and invoke the gods. As new economic forces emerged, and money assumed a more operative role in interpersonal transactions, a new elite gradually arose. Those with money enjoyed a status comparable to the king's; and, if the king was god, one with riches could be god, too. For Ksetrayya, who sang for kings as gods, the social slippage of the customer as god was not far fetched. Courtesans, who were earlier associated with gods and kings, were now connected with any "king" who had money. The customer was often referred to as the *Muvva Gopala*, the name of *Krishna* in the local temple.[32] Though songs with the divine aspect were more dominant in Ksetrayya's work, those addressed to the human customer can be recognized unambiguously. Annamaya's poetry does not depict a courtesan/customer relation between the devotee and god. However, by the time Sarangapani began writing, this trend was pronounced, and money was the only thing of value. This feature is visible in Rudrakavi's poems, too—with the significant difference being that the woman now threatens the god/customer, who is often accused of seeing another woman. In the end, though, she reconciles and submits to his embrace.[33]

Despite the dominant reference to god not all of these poems should be received as devotional. Ksetrayya's songs, for instance, portray the courtesan's bedroom, when she entertained her customers, as a sexual space. The

[26] Somadeva, *The Ocean of story*, 33.
[27] Somadeva, *The Ocean of story*, 134.
[28] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 25.
[29] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 18.
[30] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 22.
[31] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 24.
[32] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 24.
[33] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 24-25.

autonomy of the poetic universe should be kept alive; to reduce this poetic autonomy to metaphysical allegory is to extinguish the poem's integrity and, with it, most of its suggestive power.[34] The tendency to de-eroticize these poems is an outcome of nineteenth-century colonial discourse of morality, chastity, and ideal womanhood. No amount of apologetic spiritualizing or hypertrophied classification in terms of the Sanskrit courtly types should be allowed to distort the sensibility that gave rise to these poems.[35]

The poems also allude to the courtesan's agency and sexual autonomy. As such, they are remotely opposed in spirit to most Hindu *bhakti* devotional poetry. In *bhakti* poetry where the separation of lovers operates as the central theme, the heroine is often depicted in a relatively helpless position vis-à-vis the beloved. She can only wait for him and suffer the torment of his absence whereas he is free to come or not at all, to show compassion if he wishes or to let her languish in love. In the imagery of these poems, even the universe proclaims his emotional and physical remoteness. The courtesan is dwarfed by an inherent lack of equality between her and the lover. While she recognizes this disparity, she blames her innate womanhood for reducing her to a position of helpless dependency. She lacks control of her emotions and body, and curses her heart for turning against her—almost splitting a part of herself away. The woman's sense of a torn and conflicted personality, blocked desire, everlasting separation, and helplessness are some of the characteristic marks of Tamil *bhakti* poetry.[36]

Women in Ksetrayya's poetry, in contrast, present the opposite impression: assertive, haughty, articulate, sensual—they do not refrain from lodging their protest when the god/customer has an affair with other women. In one example, a senior courtesan chides her younger colleague for treating the customer/god haughtily, taking his money, and then not even giving him her address. The madam finds him wandering in the streets of the courtesan colony, too embarrassed to ask for directions. Though this customer is powerful and rules the world, the woman has an upper hand in the transaction, treating the deity as a plaything. He wants her, lusts for her, yet she easily eludes him. Here, the asymmetry of the Tamil bhakti poetry, though very evident, is boldly reversed. The atmosphere of separation dissolves and is replaced by a playful tone. The woman in Ksetrayya's poetry is an active and independent partner in the game.[37]

In another song, Ksetrayya depicts a conversation between the courtesan and a young customer; again, the woman assumes the commanding position. The customer has spent a night with her but does not have money to pay her. He tries to divert her attention with his handsome looks and convince her with his skillful sweet talk. But she is not easily fooled. She knows that she is worth nothing less than gold and refuses to let him leave without paying. He might be the most charming of men, she says, but she would not hesitate to leave him for other men who offer better prospects.

You are handsome, aren't you,
Adivaraha,
and quite skilled at it too.
Stop these foolish games.
You think there are no other men
in these parts?
Asking for me on credit,
Adivaraha?
I told you even then
I won't stand for your lies.
*Handsome, aren't you?*
Prince of playboys you might be,
but is it fair
to ask me to forget the money?
I earned it, after all, by spending tie with you.
Stop this trickery at once.
Put up the gold you owe me
and then you can talk,
Adivaraha.
*Handsome, aren't you?*
Young man
why are you trying to talk big,
as if you were Muvva Gopala?
You can make love like nobody else,
but just don't make promises

[34] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 12.
[35] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 36.
[36] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 13-14.
[37] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 15-16.

you can't keep.
Pay up,
It's wrong to break your word.
*Handsome, aren't you?*
Ksetrayya (cited from Ramanujan et al: 69)

Similar depictions of the courtesan appear in another Ksetrayya song, which portrays a courtesan's conversation with her lover—whom she calls a "servant"—who follows her everywhere and says "humble things" to her. The man has taken a vow of not making love and refuses to touch her. All this time she has "forgiven" him, but now she wants to make love with him. Here, the idea of a woman initiating sex is bold, empowered, and rather un-Victorian. He is helpless, she tells him, should she decide to detain him in her house and have sex with him. She builds up erotic tension but shows mercy by releasing him because she is a "good" woman:

Now I have you all alone.
If I hold you prisoner in this house,
who is there to release you?
*Because I am a good woman, I forgave you this time*
*Would any woman have let you off?*

With these lines, she assumes the man's role, going further in her teasing threats:

Now I've caught you.
If I tie you down to my bed
who is there to release you?
*Because I am a good woman...*

The poem ends with her having the final word, inarguably the dominant figure in the relationship. She has the power to make him succumb to her charms and beauty. She is aware of her power and control over him but is restrained enough to not always exercise it. Despite this, what makes this poem radical is that it asserts a woman's open claim to pleasure. She doesn't struggle for it; she commands it.

If I *choose* to make love to you now,
who is there to stop me?
*Because I am a good woman...*
Ksetrayya (cited from Ramanujan et al: 85)

Some of these songs communicate a cautionary tone. She has learnt her lesson well: she is aware of the man's unfaithful ways, his affairs with other women, and his deceit in love. But she has also learned how to control her emotions and be guarded. In a poem by Annamayya that depicts a woman talking to herself, she says:

Better to keep one's distance
than love and part....
The first tight embrace is easy,
but later you can never let go.
Begin your love talk---
once hooked, you can never forget.
Better to keep one's distance...
Annamayya (cited from Ramanujan et al: 51)

Those wielding authority and power also have their moments of weaknesses and emotions—a break from "rational" thinking, where faltering and failure are minimized. The courtesan songs invoke emotions that any other human being would undergo but are often not associated with. They provide a glimpse of emotions they would have felt as any woman would—emotions that are a far cry from their portrayal as initiators of sex, scheming extractors of wealth, and cunning tricksters who must be outwitted—in short, a social threat, as in the *Katha Sarita Sagara*. A courtesan who is cautious also understands the uncertainty and ephemeral nature of her relationship, and the pain associated with its rupture. Popular renderings of the courtesan do not limn this pain, which some of Ksetrayya's songs so beautifully trace. In one, the woman depicts her pain through a metaphor of a soft banana leaf torn apart by the harshness of a piercing thorn.[38] In another song, the woman expresses her pain when she finds marks of another woman on her lover's body:

"Your body is my body"
you used to say,
and it has come true,
Muvva Gopala...

[38] Ramanujan et al. *When God is the Customer*, 82.

Some woman has scratched
nail marks on your chest,
but I am the one who feels the hurt.
You go sleepless all night,
but it's my eyes
that turn red.
*"Your body is my body", you used to say*
Ever since you fell for that woman,
it's my mind
that's in distress...
Forgive me, Gopala,
but when you come back here,
I am the one who feels small
with shame.
*"Your body is my body", you used to say*
Ksetrayya (Ramanujan et al.: 65-6)

We now turn to a brief discussion of Muddupalani's erotic epic, *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika) composed in the eighteenth century. Though a literary heritage claiming universality nonetheless stereotypes women, we must turn to women authors for truly alternative images. The portrayals of womanhood in texts written by women are often more complex than those in the male canonized literature. As feminist scholars Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha point out, women writers who were widely read and critically acclaimed in their own time are often nonetheless forgotten.[39] Some did find a place but only after their work's radical and 'controversial' pitch was toned down. Muddupalani's *Radhika Santwanam* serves as a strong example of one such composition. Labeled 'lewd' and bawdy by the colonial regime, the book could not be translated without redacting most of its eroticism. Indian nationalist leaders shunned the book written by a courtesan for supposedly reinforcing the colonial imagery of India as a land of 'immorality' and sexual licentiousness—succumbing to a warped colonial ideal of chastity and morality in the process. Not until 1910, when the original text was rescued and translated by the *devadasi* and author Bangalore Nagaratnamma, can we today enjoy the delicate verses, poignancy, and art of the talented eighteenth-century poetess. Needless to say, this new translation markedly differed from copies of the "cleansed" text that were published under the aegis of the moralist British colonial regime.

The autobiographical prologue to Muddupalani's work suggests that she was a respected poetess of her times. Contemporary male poets dedicated their writings to her, a gesture not much in practice at that time. Muddupalani confidently sings praises of her beauty and learning without the coyness or apologetic tone often expected from women. She places confidence in her own command over knowledge as a means to resolve a problem, rather than cowering under the scathe of the harsh critic:

When you are reading, and you come to a thorn,
pull it out. Use your knowledge
to heal the book. Don't meddle with poets
who make a living out of finding fault.
They're bad news.[40]

That she was also economically self-sufficient emerges from descriptions of gifts and money that she made to other poets as tokens of her appreciation. If the rewards bestowed upon her by her patron and the ruler are any indication, she must have been very admired in her time.[41] Instead of tracing her paternal lineage, Muddupalani casts her literary skills as a legacy of her grandmother and aunt.

Tharu and Lalitha argue that what makes *Radhika Santwanam* an essential text in feminist scholarship is that it deviates sharply from the path of most traditional Indian literature, in which the man is the lover and the woman the beloved. Krishna woos and makes love to his consort Radha. Though Radha's longing forms an important theme, Krishna's pleasure remains the focus in traditional narratives.[42] Although many renditions portray the erotic charge of Krishna's lovemaking, the *gopikas* (Krishna's cowherd lovers) are asexual— essentially women without desire. Their bodies are meant to provide Krishna's sexual gratification although they themselves are excluded from fully experiencing

[39] Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (ed.). *Women Writing in India 600 B.C to the Present Vol. I* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993).
[40] Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Classical Telugu Poetry: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 397.
[41] Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing*, 6.
[42] Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing*, 7.

the pleasures of that lovemaking. Muddupalani's work, in this sense, repudiates patriarchal prescriptions. Muddupalani grants centrality to Radha's sensuality. Muddupalani's poems present the woman taking the sexual initiative, and her satisfaction and pleasure provides the poetic resolution.[43]

The challenge for Muddupalani must have been to discount the ideal of the 'eternal feminine' that was set up as an inspiration and complement to the male. Radha prepares Iladevi for her marriage with Krishna but is herself in love with him and cannot bear the separation. But she also does lodge her anger and protest to Krishna and demands that he keep up the relationship. Krishna responds warmly and tries to appease her by his embraces and sweet talk, the context providing the theme for Muddupalani to compose her poetry. In the third section of the *Radhika Santwanam* Radha initiates and insists on making love to Krishna, again a unique gesture on the part of the heroine in conventional Indian literary tradition influenced by Victorian norms where feminine sexuality was to be supressed. *Radhika Santwanam* provides a unique and rare occasion where Krishna, the quintessential erotic partner and skillful lover, complains about Radha initiating and fulfilling lovemaking even when he himself is not inclined to participate.[44] Yet, he also yearns for her love when it is taken away. As Krishna falls at her feet in remorse for neglecting this love and marrying Iladevi, a proud Radha brimming with self-esteem, raises her left leg to kick him away with "brute force."[45] Not one to be easily flustered, Krishna rises up unperturbed and tends to Radha's feet instead as way to simmer her down. The kick has a symbolic significance because the man Radha has kicked is no ordinary man. He has lifted the mighty Govardhan mountain with his little finger, slayed countless demons and magical beasts, strategized with the Pandava princes to win the Kurukshetra war in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*, and is revered by Brahma, the Creator of the Universe, himself.[46] There is an intense agency, both of the spoken word and of sexuality, in Muddupalani's compositions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Sexual symbolism was important in the devotional ethos and rituals performed by *devadasis*. Traditionally, the courtesan in India was not simply an expert in the art of love; she was also celebrated as a poetess. If we accept the myriad clues in Muddupalani's work, we may conclude that many courtesans signified economic and self-autonomy, assertiveness, and sexual agency. By composing *Radhika Santwanam*, Muddupalani refused to disappear silently from the historical record. Her writing suggests how courtesans negotiated the transition to colonial modernity regardless of the strictures of new colonial laws. These poems are crucial to understanding the history of women's writing in India, which has been shrouded in invisibility, in spite (or, perhaps because) of forming a powerful undercurrent, distinct from—but not subordinate to—the mainstream. The female voice of the courtesan in poems and songs is a symbol of open, intensely sensual, and what was perceived as potentially devious sexuality. This self-governing and, at times, brazen woman is a far cry form the helpless woman who spends her life waiting and pining for the absent god in Tamil *bhakti* poetry. Most of these poems culminate in orgasm, celebrating union instead of separation. In Ksetrayya's compositions she appears in a commanding position, powerfully choosing to ignore, god himself, lord of the world who is wandering on the streets in her pursuit. Instead of being passive the women protagonists come across as active participants in their relationships.

It is important to accord erotic literature the status of a distinct genre instead of cleansing it through imposed spirituality. Unlike popular literature's representation of the courtesan as shrewd and cunning, courtesan songs poignantly capture the core of their human emotions. In these songs, though she emerges as an assertive woman with sexual agency, one glimpses a sensitive mind that suffers the insecurity and pain of a transient relationship like any other woman. Under colonialism, the courtesan's status underwent a remarkable shift. Governed by the ideals of Victorian womanhood, the British regime placed the courtesan in the concocted category of criminal tribes and condemned them for their "lascivious" attitudes, "indecorous" dancing, and "lewd" songs. The Age of Consent Act (1891) made the practice of *devadasis* unlawful in India. Colonial intervention into the *devadasi* system was a severe blow to Indian classical dance and music—arts that flourished in the courtesan's courtyard. Colonial responses to prostitution and erotic literature originated in the fear of native female sexuality, on one hand, and the need to maintain male control over it, on the other. A woman who was vocal about her sexuality and put a price on it, was seen as an embarrassment by the Indian nationalist leaders, who consciously perpetuated Victorian ideals of feminine sexuality, morality, and chastity and, as such, sidelined her as a member of the new nation state. Such vacuous ideals also imposed spirituality upon erotic poetry— a gesture of clothing a shamed body.

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