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Sexual Slavery and Economic Dependency: A Critical Study of the Nachni Performers of Eastern India in the context of the Devadasi Tradition

Abstract:

Despite being declared an illegal practice, the Devadasi tradition (of female artists dedicated to the worship and service of a deity or temple) remains active in certain states of India, like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Odisha, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. This lecture proposes to explore the inescapable dependency of the Devadasis on the temple priests, patrons or the influential members of their own community. It also attempts to focus on this victimological perspective in the existing legislations, policies and literary representations with reference to the *Nachni* tradition prevalent in the border districts of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha – three major states of Eastern India.

Nachnis of Purulia district in West Bengal and some other regions of Jharkhand and Odisha are traditional Dalit performers, often compared to Devadasis due to their long, semi-religious devotion to art. However, they experience social repression and stigma as “fallen women.” Conventionally, they have to partner with a male musician, the ‘Rasik,’ to perform *Khemta Nach* and *Jhumur* songs. This relationship is central to their survival, offering a form of protection but also culminating in complex, often exploitative social engineering. Despite being committed rural artistes, *Nachnis* are often humiliated as social outcasts, similar to the historical treatment of courtesans, although their plight is more marginalized in the contemporary contexts. With the lack of traditional patronage from local landlords, many *Nachnis* now struggle for survival, often performing for poor wages in public forums. The economic dependency, aggravated by the social stigma, would accentuate the experience of humiliation typical to the state of slavery.

Short Bio:

Dr Indranil Acharya is Professor and Former Head of the Department of English Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India. He is also the Coordinator of the Centre for Translation and Foreign Language Studies of the university. Dr Acharya is a Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Fellow (2024-2025). His host institute was University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. He also served as a Visiting Professor in the Centre for History and Art History at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK in 2025. Dr Acharya is currently engaged in an ICSSR Major Research Project on the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of West Bengal as the Co-Project Director.