

Davadasi Cult : A Sociobiological Morality

Jyotsna Bapat

Department of Sociology, University of Bombay, Kalina, Bombay 400 098, Maharashtra, India

KEY WORDS Polygyny. Position of Women. Matriarchal. Sociobiology.

ABSTRACT Since sperms are cheap while ova are expensive, because only eight hundred ova are produced by a human female in her life time, while a few million sperms are produced by a male in his life time sociobiology argues that a differential sexual strategy will be followed by the males and females of *Homo sapiens* species. Males therefore maximize their genetic fitness by being polygynous, while females maximize their genetic fitness by being monogamous according to the dictates of sociobiology. Anthropologists have stated that this is indeed true, seventy five per cent of world's cultures according to Murdock (Freedman, 1979), are polygynous in order to accommodate the basic male instinct. The paper argues that this basic assumption of sociobiology, namely the unequal sexual expression among sexes, is only a partial truth, viewed from a male perspective. There is historically ample evidence to substantiate that females are equally polygamous and social institutions to accommodate polyandrous females have evolved, just as institutions to accommodate polygynous males have historically existed. Oriental cultures had such institutions. In these cultures polygynous patriarchy emerged to accommodate polygynous males. It must be noted that in spite of these social institutions polygynous males were a minority. It is therefore logical to assume that in such civilizations polyandrous matriarchies would exist to accommodate polyandrous females. Because both these are population strategies adaptive to polygamous persons. A historical reconstruction of the Devadasi cult in India is used to substantiate this point.

INTRODUCTION

Sociobiology is the application of recently developed biological principles to behavior. Since biological principles are concerned with populations, an individual is seen as a unique variation on the species theme, with the species theme as the primary motive. Therefore a species theme is based on certain strategies that ensure population survival. If this is so, then these adaptive strategies would be common to the species on the

whole and will not differentiate between individual within the species especially based on sex. If certain social institutions emerge as adaptive strategy for a particular survival strategy, then such an institution will also not differentiate between sexes.

If one assumes an equality of human nature across sexes then all the genotypes (even those towards polygamy) would be equally distributed in both the sexes of the population and will follow a normal curve. The normal curve of a population strategy, say, towards 'assertiveness' will mean the following. There is a basic biological assumption that such complex traits as assertiveness will vary within the population roughly in the form of a normal curve *i.e.* a great majority will occupy the middle range and a minority of very passive and very assertive individuals will fall at either end. Any point in this curve - any form of assertiveness within the population - is normal. The central tendency may vary over time, due to evolution. It is therefore normal to find highly assertive people even though population on an average may show less assertiveness. There could also be an inter sex variation in assertiveness between men and women. So it is also normal to find highly assertive women even though women on an average may show less assertiveness than men in any population. (Freedman, 1987)

The same would hold true of the trait for sexuality in any population. It would therefore be normal to find that in both the sexes some small percentage of women and men who never have sex and a small percentage of men and women who are polygamous, even though the central tendency of the population may be towards monogamy.

If this is true and if social institutions have evolved over time based on basic human nature including human sexuality, then one would expect to find social institutions in all cultures that cater to these needs of a small polygynous minority. This would be observed even though the central tendency would be towards monogamy.

It is argued that polygynous patriarchy has certain advantages to society in the long run and to the male in particular. The male is in power and survival of his children is guaranteed, it gives more freedom to the wives and one parent is not burdened with child rearing exclusively (Freedman, 1987).

If a normal curve for population is assumed then there would genetically be as many polyandrous women as polygynous men. It is only to be expected that there would be equal and reciprocal advantage to the female in polyandrous matriarchies. This social structure puts the female in power and survival of her children is guaranteed, it gives more freedom to the 'husband' and one parent is not burdened with child rearing responsibility exclusively. In addition polyandry would free the female from biological constraints and single male domination that patriarchies force on a female (De Beauvoir, 1987). Thus they are free to transcend their sexuality and explore their human potentials in the form of creative art forms such as music, dance and erotic arts.

But the dominant view in sociobiology today is that of differential sexual expressions among men and women (Wilson, E., 1978). It is argued that because sperms are plentiful and easy to generate, men have higher stakes in being polygynous, while ovas are rare and infrequent women are more careful in mate selection and tend to be monogamous. This is only a paradigm, even though a dominant one. Biologically both men and women contribute equal number of chromosomes in the production of an embryo (De Bouvier, 1987). Therefore an equally valid case can be made for equal

sexual strategies adopted by males and females.

Thus if the paradigm of sexual equality is true, it is only to be expected that in cultures that take cognizance of normal human sexuality, parallel patriarchal and matriarchal institutions catering to the needs of polygamous persons, both males and females, would be observed.

Do we have evidence to validate this paradigm?

The answer to this is positive. In societies that are non western where sexuality is understood as a variation on the theme of polygyny, we do find a different expression of sexuality. Foucault (1978) has pointed out that unlike western cultures, which consider sex as legitimate only if used for the purpose of procreation, their oriental counterparts explore sex as erotic art form which can be used for salvation or transcendence. It becomes a means to explore creativity through music and dance.

CASE STUDY

The evidence for a powerful matriarchal institution catering to the needs of polyandrous female tendencies, can be found in the Devadasi cult in India. As it existed historically, Devadasi cult throughout the country reflects a powerful matriarchal institution. A Devadasi is by definition a woman who had married God and therefore could not be bound to any one man through marriages. She was thus liberated from the obligations that the society imposed on the women (De Bois, 1987). This cult unlike its western counterparts where nuns are expected to observe celibacy, does not deny the dedicated women her sexuality. She is free to 'keep' a man if she so chooses. In fact very often a patron is approached for the dedicated ceremony, after which the Devadasi is expected to spend some time with him. He therefore holds a privileged position among her admirers, but she is never bound to him.

The early reference to Devadasis in India dates back to the Puranas (Margalin, F., 1985). An explicit reference to the courtesan class was found in the Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency in 1885 (Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, 1885). The literature indicates that at least three distinct classes of Devadasis can be identified. These classes also reflected the social hierarchies of their caste. The most accomplished Devadasis are referred to in 921 A.D. attached to local temples, some even come from royal ranks. The second class group comes from the Marathas, Lingayats, Konkarnies, Telangs and Musalmans. The third group consists of Devadasis drawn from Dalvis, Malas, Madigas Holers etc. or the caste groups involved in leather tanning activities. The Devadasis are referred to by different names in various regions in India, namely Dasis, Basavis, Jogans, Parvatis etc. But they all share one thing in common, they are all dedicated to God and are married to God through a formal marriage ceremony. The form of the ceremony again differs from region to region.

Reference to highly accomplished Devadasis is found in 1930 edition of the Mysore Gazetteer (Mysore Gazetteer 1930). It describes the local temples having an income from endowments by the kings, private gifts, and taxes. The temples had to perform duties of hospitality, charity, imparting higher education, medical relief and local banking.

'Women were closely connected with the temple, especially for serving them in different capacities.' (Mysore Gazetteer, 1930, p. 1295). First as servants, for husking paddy and doing menial work and providing labour force for the temple. These women were prohibited from dancing, they also come from the lowest caste groups, but were permitted to be courtesans. Women were required for service as dancers trained to perform service to God on special occasions. Those who were

trained as dancers belonged to two classes those who danced only in the temples and others who danced in other peoples homes to celebrate life cycle events, such as births, marriages, and thread ceremonies, in the family. The former Devadasis come from upper classes such as business class, Brahmins and even royal ranks, the latter were drawn from middle caste namely cultivator castes. Devadasis from both these castes are no longer seen in modern times. The only caste that continue to dedicate their women are the leather working caste till date.

From 935 or 1013 A.D. there were women who entered the service under the temples as 'Devardayal' literally, servants of God and to these, gifts of land were made for performing dances before God. This is of special significance because no other women had direct ownership of lands, all property rights and inheritance was controlled by men. In the reign of Rajaraja III (1216 - 1257 A.D.) we have evidence of the prosperity enjoyed by the dancing women and gifts were made, by them to the temple, for gaining some privileges, in service of God (Mysore Gazetteer, 1930).

The position of women in the monastic class *i.e.*, the first class was largely influenced by the monastic system down to the 12th century A.D. A devoted religious life, not only afforded a career but also a position/status in society. Some of them were of the royal ranks and to the majority of them even secular learning was not forbidden. Tending the sick, managing the lands attached to the temples and care of the establishment offered them ample opportunity to exercise their talents. To women of ability the system should have been of considerable attraction, though married women were left out of it.

The second class of Devadasis were reported in the 1891 caste census conducted by Risley (Census of India 1891). Kalavant class had a strength of fifty in 1881 and were

found in Belgaum, Saundhatti, Yankammardi and Athani. They belonged to Kokani, Telang, Lingayat, and Musalman castes. Among them a girl was dedicated at the age of seven when she began to learn singing and dancing. The training lasted for ten years. They practised every morning and evening. They performed in groups or *tafas*. These *tafas* charged for their performance according to the occasion for which their services were sought and demand for their services. A *tafa* of five members two men and three women, earned Rs. 5-15/- for a thread ceremony, Rs. 30-200/- for a marriage, Rs. 5-25/- for a public feast, Rs. 5-15/- for house warming ceremony. Most earned Rs. 20-25/- per month per person. A few earned upto Rs. 50/- per month. The daughters were absorbed into profession. Some of their sons with the help of their mothers and sisters had become wealthy money lenders and cloth merchants, other owned lands, taught music and dance and charged upto Rs. 5-30/- a month.

All the men and women used to be dressed well, in bright clothes like the Brahmins and wore jewellery. Their houses were single storied structures with brick walls and tiled roofs. They had a good store of cooking vessels and kept cows and buffaloes. They considered oil-men, barbers, saddle makers and washermen as low and did not perform at their houses. They employed priests for rituals and cremated their dead.

'Dasis' have been listed as a separate caste. They are referred to as dancing girls (Census of India 1881). Among them the daughter inherits the mother's property and the brothers have to fend for themselves. They can marry private women. The Devadasies are bound to strong caste feelings, and social disputes are settled by the elderly devadasis. They are religious, worship Hindu Gods and have no Head man. each section has its own board of council, but they have no fixed rules. (Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency 1884). Whenever a dis-

pute arises one of the parties calls the elderly Devadasis in one of their houses and the dispute is settled. This indicates a well established matriarchy where men have no role to play either in inheritance or in everyday life or in settlement of disputes.

With the disappearance of monasteries in the 10th century and decay of temples in the 13th century the state patronage and protection enjoyed by the Devadasis declined. So by 1933 when the 'anti dedication' bill was passed any status associated with this class had declined. In fact the first act explicitly ensures the protection, of the ownership rights over lands enjoyed by the Devadasis. The law was to ensure that lands that were given to the Devadasi for performing of certain services to the temple, be consolidated. Further any obligation in the form of service for temple that the Devadasi had to perform was no longer binding on her. But to get into the political economy of the decline of the Devadasi cult is outside the scope of the current paper.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus to conclude a historical reconstruction of the Devadasi cult indicates that the cult existed as a strong polyandrous matriarchal tradition with its own inheritance laws, its autonomous and independent power centre and its own conflict resolving mechanism.

Therefore a strong case can be made to substantiate the hypothesis that the trait of polygamy follows a normal distribution for both males and females alike. This is in contrast to the dominant paradigm held in sociobiology, that human males are polygynous, while females are monogamous, biologically. The above stated case study of the Devadasi cult provides ample evidence to prove this. Thus to conclude, it is found in the above case study, that among human populations, the cultures that cater for social structures to accommodate polygynous males, also develop

structures to accomodate polyandrous females. This is because these social structures are based on the dictates of basic human nature. Therefore human sexuality also follow a normal curve and the trait towards polygamy is normally distributed among human males and females.

As a contemporary interpretation, with changing times though the phenotype for polygamy remains in the human population the cultural 'central tendency has changed towards monogamy over the last forty years (Freedman, 1987). Reverse of monogamy will therefore be monogamy. The ease of divorce in the modern cultures could therefore be interpreted as a strategy to accomodate these polygamous tendencies in contemporary times.

REFERENCES

- Bombay Government Gazetteer, Part V, Bombay Act No. X, 'Bombay Devadasi Protection Act 1934' Published by Authority, Govt. Press Bill no. XXVII of 1933 (Sept 13, 1933).
- Census of India* 1891, Vol I, by H. H. Risley, Madras Government Press (1892).
- Census of India* 1901, *Madras Part I & II*, Vol SVA, Report by Francis, W. Madras Government Press, (1902).
- Census of India* 1901, *Mysore vol IX part I* 'Report on castes and tribes', Mysore Government Press, (1902).
- De Bouvior, S. : *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parsley, Penguin Modern Classic, U.K. (1949). Reprinted (1987).
- Freedman, J. : *Human Sociobiology : A Holistic Approach* : The Free Press, New York (1979).
- Foucault, M. : *History of Sexuality Vol I & II* Translated by Robert Hurley, Penguin Books, U.K (1978).
- Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Vol XXI *Belgaum*, report by James Campbell, Government Central Press, Bombay (1884).
- Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Vol XXII *Dharwad*, report by James Campbell, Government Central Press, Bombay. (1885).
- O'Wilson, H. : *On Human Nature*. Haward University Press, U.S.A (1978).
- Margalin, F.A. : *Wives of God King*. (The rituals of the Devadasis of Puri). Oxford University Press, Oxford (1985).
- Rao Hayavadan (Ed.) : *Mysore Gazetteer Vol II, Historical Part II*. Government Press Bangalore, pp 461-1414 (1930).