

DEVADASIS – courtesans between Power, Shame and Fame



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DEVADASIS (slaves of god) rank among the most controversial and powerful incentives of Western fantasy about the East. As a 'container term' *devadasi* came to frame nearly all women in the Indian public sphere, both sacred and secular; thereby it obliterated large differences in regional, historical, social and professional hierarchies.

This talk will attempt to capture its 'Logic of Practice' by the eloquent example of Smt.P. Ranganayaki (1914-2005) who was dedicated as *devadasi* to the Murugan temple in Tiruttani (South India) at the age of seventeen. In November 1947 the *Devadasi Act* legally forbade dedication of women to religious icons and their role in Hindu temple ritual. Crucial question remains whether its logic of practice was banned as well.

Saskia Kersenboom holds a PhD in Indian languages, cultures and Theatre Studies from Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Her dissertation *Nityasumangali, devadasi tradition in South India* (1984) is heading for its fifth edition (Motilal Banarsidass). Combining her language skills with participant fieldwork and artistic training, Saskia sought new horizons in Indian studies. A fellowship at the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (Amsterdam) resulted in *Word, Sound, Image, the Life of the Tamil Text* (Oxford, 1995), the first monograph to hold an interactive, multimedia CD. This led her to Cultural Anthropology, Musicology and Theatre Studies as Associate Professor at University of Amsterdam, and as Guest-Curator at Museum Rietberg, Zuerich. In 2006 Saskia emigrated to Hungary where she runs together with her husband *Paramparai Foundation* in support of *Devadasi Heritage* (www.paramparai.eu).