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Devadasi System of Tamil Nadu and its Abolishment by Muthu Lakshmi Reddy

Thanishka T^a

^aTamil Nadu National Law University, Tiruchirappalli, India

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The Devadasi system in Tamil Nadu is one of the oldest practices, which was popular through the Bhakti movement, which brought the ritualistic worship of singing, dancing, and reciting. This paper analyzes the efforts of many social reformers including Muthu Lakshmi Reddy. Devadasis are a marginalized section of the population who were discriminated against and exploited through a very strong and rigid system of patriarchy and worship of Brahmins and temples. These devadasis were treated as prostitutes and were considered the property of the temple. We shall attempt through this paper to understand how devadasis were brought up as a family, secondly to analyze the institution of marriage and social customs, norms, and folkways in the lives of a devadasi. Thirdly, to trace the localities and places in Tamil Nadu where the devadasi system continued and to emphasize the sociological and empirical details of the devadasis in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: *devadasi system, prostitutes, localities, muthulakshmi, social habits.*

INTRODUCTION

The devadasi system emerged prominently during the Chola Empire, circa 850-1300 A.D. when the Saivite and Vaishnavite hymnists challenged the primacy of the Jain and Buddhist faiths. The bhakti movement popularized the ritualistic worship of singing, dancing, and reciting, which was how the devadasi system flourished. Quite possibly one of the most

fundamental errors to arise throughout the examination was the misuse of the term 'caste' about the devadasis of the colonial literature.¹ The Devadasi once held a very high social position but gradually the professions such as dancing as temple servants came to a slow halt. The once held and enjoyed devadasis system was introduced initially with 'noble intentions'² but with time the system degenerated.

The protest against prostitution was often laced with the unacceptability of the fine arts which accompanied worship within the temple and even outside it. During the ninth and tenth centuries, along with the rise of casteism, much activity prevailed regarding the building of temples and providing services to them. There were two distinct divisions among the devadasis, called the Valangai (right-hand) and Idangai (left-hand), which we will discuss in detail, and how Muthulakshmi Reddy, a devadasi herself abolished the system in 1948 against many men of high status. This research project deals with mapping the places in Tamil Nadu where the devadasi system flourished, the sociological aspects and characteristics of different devadasis who survived the oppressive and exploitative caste system, and the struggle for the abolishment of the devadasi system in Tamil Nadu.

LIST OF OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the institution of marriage and social customs, norms, and folkways in the lives of a devadasi.
2. To map and trace the localities and places in Tamil Nadu where the devadasi system prevailed.
3. To understand how devadasis brought and raised a family, as an institution.
4. To elucidate the sociological aspects of the devadasis in Tamil Nadu.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE DEVADASI SYSTEM

In these ways, polygamy was practiced at the cost of honest family women, who were not permitted to be polyandrous. This system enabled many priests to lead a life with much indolence. According to Abbe J.A. Dubois, a Christian missionary of Puducherry, the priests or

¹ A. Srinivasan, 'Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance' (1985) 10 (44) EPW, 1869-75

² Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Government Press 1909) 126-128

Brahmins made use of the devadasis to their advantage. The brahmin family women, however, looked askance at the devadasis. They were strictly prohibited from even uttering the term devadasi, which to them merely meant "prostitute". The construction of temples, as well as the introduction of aesthetic and cultural services, were patronized by the kings. However, the construction of a large number of temples coupled with their type of entertainment services corrupted the persons of the ruling class.

SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE DEVADASI SYSTEM

In the seminal years of the devadasi institution the established social customs and religious practices like the Sivagami Udal Utsavam at Saivite temples and the Pranayakalaka Utsavam at Vaishnavite temples, to please the gods, gave license and recognition to the priests to have sexual relationships with the devadasis. Further, the Tantric and the Fertility Cults also provided opportunities for loss of morality within the devadasi system. There was a common belief abroad that the union with devadasis was nothing but the union of spiritual good reflecting the bliss of man's ultimate union with divinity. There was another belief that a devadasi was considered a form of Prasada and, on that count, a woman belonging to the deity should also be sexually enjoyed by the worshippers. She was a kind of conduit of divine favour from God to his (male) devotees Thus the temple became the voluptuous and sinful center of the pujari's koodarams ('priest's nests') A popular folklore namely the Essakki story from Kanyakumari District also mentions the immoral behavior of the Brahmin with one Nila Dasi. It was a problematic task for census enumerators whether to enter such women as married or not. Contrary to popular belief, the children of the devadasis, both girls and boys inherited equally the share of property.

Many young boys are taught how to play instruments and play accompaniments to the songs women have to dance to. Following the caste profession, the daughters of the devadasis are carefully taught to dance, sing and dress up accordingly which is in contrast with the ordinary Hindu housewife, whose main duty would be wound up in the day's household work. In the tali-tying ceremony, the devadasi is adorned by jewels and made to stand on a heap of paddy along with two other devadasis with her. Puja is conducted where that particular evening she is taken beside a pony, to the temple, and the tali and other articles required for

doing puja also are assembled. The girl is now facing the idol and the Brahman gives her sandals and flowers and ties the tali around the girl's neck. The tali consist of a golden disc and black beads. There is a nuptial ceremony the girl has to go through, as she still progresses in the art of dance and music through practice. The maternal uncle and many other relatives are invited to her nuptial ceremony, where the uncle ties the golden band around her head. A Brahman priest recites mantras and prepares the sacred fire (homam). For the actual nuptials a rich Brahman, if possible, and, if not, a Brahman of more lowly status is invited. A Brahman is called in, as he is next in importance to, and the representative of, the idol.

VIRALIMALLAI

Population	10883
Sex Ratio	985
Literacy rate	85.72%
Total male population	5483
Total female population	5400
Scheduled Caste Persons	2254

(Source: Pudukkottai Census Handbook 2011).

TOTAL POPULATION OF DEVADASIS IN INDIA

Census Year	Dāsis
1901	1568 (males), 5294 (females)
1911	1691 (males), 3290 (females)
1921	5050 (males), 5970 (females)

(Source: Francis W "Census of India" 1901, Vol XV- A, pt. 2, Madras 1902: 158. Molony JC "Census of India" 1911", Vol XII, Pt 2, Madras 1912: 112-113, Boag, GT, "Census of India" 1921" Vol XIII, Pt 2, Madras 1922: 114).

DEMAND FOR ABOLITION

Among the anti- abolition groups, the Madras Presidency Devadasi Association was a prominent one led by Jeevaratnammal and T. Doraikannummal. The Madras Presidency Devadasi Association mobilized to instigate their people to express their solidarity by sending memorials to the concerned authorities with signatures. The other prominent members of the anti-abolition groups including Veena Dhanammal, Bangalore Nagartnammal, and Mylapore Gowriammal distributed printed notices outside the Legislative Assembly buildings and at prominent locations in the city. In courtly and elegant language, these bills set forth the position of the devadasis. For instance, legislator, Maneckji B. Dadhabhoy introduced a Bill in 1912. The bill was to make further provisions for the protection of women and girls for further other purposes. Though the bill received much acclaim in India from the government and the public, some orthodox Hindus and devadasis extended their protests against the Bill. They pleaded with the government that they should be permitted to adopt minor girls for successions.

Another group of people, who participated throughout the debate on devadasi abolition, was the association of those castes from which devadasi was, by and large, drawn such as Sengundars and Isai Vellalar of the Tamil region. While they sent, resolutions in their associations in support of the Devadasi Abolition Bill, they denounced devadasi as a dishonor to their community and as an obstacle to their progress as caste groups. In courtly and elegant language, these bills set forth the position of the devadasis, Devadasis who opposes abolition formed into groups and proposed bills tabled against Dr. Reddy in the Legislative Assembly. The following appeal was sent by devadasis to the law member of the Madras Legislative Council: "We condemn Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy's Bill. There is no connection between our ancient and noble practice of Pottukkattal and the disgraceful profession of prostitution. We appeal to the government not to enforce any law that destroys our rights."

REMEMBERING DEVADASI DANCE IN VIRALIMALAI

The town of Viralimalai, which is located in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu was known for its high rates of prostitution because of its links with the devadasis culture. Viralimalai is located along the Trichy-Madurai national highway and over the past fifty or sixty years and has acquired a status of a “red light” town whose sex workers are particularly favored by lorry workers. A recent study entitled “Trafficking in Women and Children in India (2005) claims: that Viralimalai is the most vulnerable area for trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation. The pottukkattutal is no longer practiced instead, it has been replaced by the exploitation of girls, reminiscent of the exploitative system that existed earlier under the devadasi cult (Nair and Sen 2005, 616). The last devadasi to have the pottukkattutal performed at the Viralimalai temple was Muttukkannammal. Critical scholarship around the anti-nautch debate dwells on the interface between caste, nation, law, and sexuality that led to the disenfranchisement of devadasis. Although the anti-nautch movement identified the devadasi in the larger world of patriarchal servitude, it was ultimately a nationalist project that failed to make citizenship available to these women in the context of the emergent state.

FAMILY AS AN INSTITUTION IN THE DEVADASIS

The temple community was divided into two groups, based on the nature of their performance art and gender: chinamelam, or sadir, the graceful, feminine, solo dance performed by women who were committed to the deity along with their musical accompanists, and periamelam or nagaswaram, instrumental music, played by men. Very often, the temple administrators used to give the dance priority at festivals since they knew people would gather to witness the devadasis. Sadir was the more popular and profitable form for the temple, as it attracted more patrons and hence, more funds and donations. This resulted in a matrilineal society in which women were the major earners and males were reliant on them.

Even though the temple assisted in the rites, demands to conduct the ceremony remained internal to the household and represented not just the family's self-interest against 'outsiders,' but also internal politics of competitiveness and rivalry that frequently created claims conflicts. The temple tenancy system of pre-colonial India provided a service allocation or manual for

the enjoyment of a group of Dāsīs linked to a certain temple "across generations" (vamshaparambirayam). The division of shares in this land was a subject of community internal administration and this property cannot be taken away as long as a family member was actively working in the temple. Hence women were also the primary source of ancestral property. Men were often given less importance in their sisters and mother's houses. When a man grew independently rich, he would move out of his mother's or sister's household and he would establish his own house and property. He would be allowed to leave only after establishing his name and stabilizing his profits. Normally, it was the women who provided the men with a living, arranged their marriages, and provided them with a place to live. Men were allowed to make careers in any field, but not in the case of women. So, women were preferred over men in property concerns.

Under customary Hindu law, Devadāsīs were the only women permitted to adopt a child and an adopted daughter was usually preferred above a son in terms of inheritance. The person "in charge" at a Dāsī business, the *Taikkizhavi* or 'old lady,' was the senior-most female member who was usually one of the most famous dancers of her time and who after retirement, exercised command over the junior members. This old lady's strict supervision over her family's private and professional life, as well as her management of joint income, pooling, and expenditure, provided the Dāsī household with a basic source of unity. The men agreed to the family demands because they, too, regarded their prospects as inseparably tied to the birth of a beautiful and talented sister or niece who would concentrate wealth. The flow of money into a devadāsī household was unequal, and individual prosperity differed tremendously.

The devadāsīs' brothers and uncles accepted their inferior status since it freed them of economic concerns and duties. The payments of a woman were in the form of the transfer of land control rights from her patron to her uncle (the effective manager). He was also regarded as the legal and moral representative of the caravan in the local community. Hence, women ruled the domestic domain, and white males dominated the professional sector as gurus, or instructors who were always male and they demanded unconditional devotion and obedience from their students, or else the teachers' curse could ruin a girl's career and prospects.

According to the rules, the temple performers had to learn under a man from a different household. As a result, members of the same family were both teachers and students to others, resulting in a very fine balance within the community. Marriage between two households was one way to reinforce this balance. This social system practiced by a well-established yet minor population did not stick to either the ideology of a colonial Christian morality or a reformist-nationalist ideal of chaste propriety. The devadasi's world came down to reality with the shift in royal and aristocratic patronage, which began to regard modernization as an empowering ideology and sensibly neglected those components of the previous feudal order that had been seen as unnecessary. The Anti-Nautch supporters, launched their attack on the devadasis' dance in 1892, by making use of their declamatory and journalistic abilities.

The Madras Devadasis Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947 prohibited women from practicing the profession, who had previously enjoyed the right to education and property. They were encouraged to marry, but most devadasis were opposed to getting married, especially if they had previously gone through the dedication ritual. People would either demand large sums of money as dowry before accepting to marry the girl, or they would oppose her in some other way. To name a few examples, M S Subbulakshmi, today's famous singer, married a Brahmin despite her Dasi background, and Jayalakshmi, the legendary Pandanallur dance girl, became the Rani of Ramnad. Marriage. On the other hand, marriage remained an expensive and difficult option for the majority of people. The reform movement compelled the devadasis to recognize the moral superiority of grihastha principles.

More crucially, it required them to give up all rights to temple service and its privileges. The temple performers' tradition was modified beyond recognition when the nagaswaram performers were urged to seek more influence within the temple to suppress the female counterparts and were offered the land originally granted to the devadasis as an incentive to do so. Now devadasis became connected with prostitution, and their condition was widely politicized through self-respect movements. The Theosophical Society's support for the revival of sadir as Bharata Natyam was primarily owing to the efforts of Rukmini Arundale, a famous Theosophist herself. The Theosophical Society supplied the necessary funding and organization to support her as the leader of India's revival in the arts, notably Bharata Natyam,

its ancient spiritual tradition of women. Though the devadasi's art was conceptually separated from them they were revived in a "purified" form by middle-class Brahmin women seeking to convert it to the nationalist vision of a unified India. The devadasi's reform and revival movements were triggered by the alien framework of knowledge in which she was put. The reformers portrayed the Hindu temple dancer as a 'prostitute' in order to eliminate her; the revivalists portrayed her as a 'nun' in order to reincarnate her. Now devadasis became connected with prostitution, and their condition was widely politicized through self-respect movements.

DEMAND THROUGH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

In the second phase of the legislation debate were basically three trends evident at the time. Dr. Mrs. Muthulakshmi Reddi represented the first trend, the devadasi associations, and the oppositionists. In 1928 Dr. Reddi, a medical doctor, and legislator who was hailing from a devadasi community introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislative Council to amend the 1926 Act. Subsequently, the Bill became an Act known as the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1929, with a new section 44A added to Section 44³. This act freed devadasis from the stipulation of temple service by imposing instead a quit-rent payable to the local government, either for renting temple land or for any land revenues received by them for their lands. Though this act provided the right to hold teams it did not stop the dedication of girls as devadasis. Hence, Dr. Reddi decided to have a new Act enacted in 1930 as "*A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Hindu Women in Temples in the Presidency of Madras.*"

According to the Bill, the dedication of Hindu girls in temples was announced illegal who, instead, could now contact valid marriages. Though many memorials and counter memorials were sent by devadasis and other members of the community to support and oppose Dr. Reddy's Bill.

ABOLITION OF SYSTEM

A) INITIATION:

³ Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act, 1929, ss 44A and 44

Muthulakshmi Reddy was born on 31st July 1886, in the princely state of Pudukkottai. Her father Narayana Swami was a Brahmin and worked as a principal at Maharaja's college. Her mother Chandrammal was a devadasi. Her father was disowned by his family as he married a devadasi. In those days women were rarely sent to school, but Narayana Swami broke all those rules and sent Muthulakshmi to school. Muthulakshmi has a long list of firsts to her name. She was the first girl student to be admitted to a men's college, the first woman house surgeon in Egmore government hospital for women and children, the first woman legislator in British India, the first chairperson of the state social welfare advisory, the first woman president of the Madras Legislative Council and first Alderwoman of Madras Corporation.

Then she married Dr. Sundra Reddi with whom she had two children. As a daughter of a devadasi, she was quite well familiar with the cruelty meted out to women like her mother. Muthulakshmi Reddy considered the devadasi system as a great injustice to the young girls. By using the word religion, the young innocent girls were pushed into an immoral life of promiscuity. This heinous practice affects both soul and the body of the young girls. Their lack of political agency, as well as the prejudices that affected their interactions with other members of society, worried her. This forced her to pass the ground-breaking law of abolishing the devadasi system.

B) PROCESS OF ENACTMENT:

Muthulakshmi was not the first one to take a step against the devadasi system. Dhabhi, Mudholkar, and Madge introduced three Bills to ban prostitution in 1912 for further consideration and discussion. V. Ramadoss Pantulu introduced a resolution in the Council of State at Shimla in 1927 to outlaw the practice of dedicating minor girls to temples. As it was a religious matter, the government refused to adopt this resolution. Even though there were provisions in the Indian Penal Code sections 372 and 373⁴ to penalize the dedication of minor girls to temples, they were proven ineffective in most cases where girls above 18 years were dedicated due to the temples prolonging their service and hence she aimed to completely eradicate the evil practice.

⁴ Indian Penal Code, 1860, ss 372 and 373

So, on November 5, 1927, she introduced a resolution demanding the Government to draft legislation as soon as possible to put an end to the practice of dedicating young girls and women to Hindu temples for immoral purposes under the false illusion of caste, custom, or religion. The Non-Brahmin Youth Organization wrote in favor of the Bill. It was predicted that the Bill would spark a lot of debate. It went on to say that her ardent fight to abolish the Devadasi system was a tremendous triumph. It expressed its heartfelt congratulations to her on the resolution's passage. Through his weekly *Young India*, Gandhi voiced his unconditional support for her efforts. The news of Gandhi's support was widely publicized in Tamil Nādu's liberal press to encourage public support for the change. Even though the resolution was backed by a large number of council members. However, orthodox leaders such as S. Satyamurthi worked hard to preserve the old system. Satyamurthi created anti-sentiment in conservatives. He argues that he was against the Bill, as this was against the very claim that the devadasis were the pillars of Indian culture and art forms.

In response to Satyamurthi's argument, Muthulakshmi Reddy stated in the Legislative Council that "such a caste was indeed necessary, and since the Isai Vellalas (devadasis) had done it for so long, why don't the Brahmin women take over from then on?" The *Stri-Dharma* remarked in support of her arguments. It referred to the devadasis as innocent. The Tamil Nadu Government criticized the orthodox for their negative attitude towards this noble cause. It posed a stinging question: if Brahmins like Satyamurthi saw this atrocity as religiously motivated? Would it not be possible to help the women of their community at all?

This question shook Madras as a province itself. Without attempting to fix the matter, the Madras government just reported the resolution Government of India. A special committee was subsequently formed to look into the matter. Muthulakshmi Reddy had to wait nearly a year for permission to propose the Bill to the Madras Legislative Council. Meanwhile, she made repeated efforts to abolish the devadasi system. Because Muthulakshmi Reddy's resolution looked to be more or less symbolic of the resolution submitted by V. Ramadoss Pantulu earlier in the Central Legislative Assembly on September 12, 1927, the Government of India set it aside as another step in the same direction.

The Madras government believed it was an all-India problem as well. Raja of Pangal had enacted the "Hindu religious endowment act" to control and direct the management of the temples for the good of the public. Later, Muthulakshmi Reddy proposed a Bill in 1929 to modify the Hindu Religious Endowment Act to provide pattas to devadasis, freeing them from the burden of temple service. The Bill received both support and criticism, the majority of the criticism came from orthodox Hindus and even some devadasis. She published several articles regarding devadasi difficulties and tried to educate both men and women about the devadasi community.

On May 13, 1929, Governor of Madras Viscount Goschen and Governor-General Baron Irwin granted their approval to the Bill. The Provincial Government was assigned the duty of having control over the administration of the temples for the welfare of the people by the Act. The Act assisted the devadasi community in developing a feeling of self-respect and dignity, and the community realized the system's flaws. V. Ramadoss Pantulu withdrew his resolution for the abolition of the Devadasi system from the Central Legislature, but Tamil Nadu's media has constantly pleaded for the abolition of evil. Muthulakshmi Reddy, backed by the majority opinion in favour of abolishing the devadasi system, proposed the Prevention of Dedication of Hindu Temples Bill in the Madras Legislative Council on January 24, 1930.

The media's efforts resulted in overwhelming popular support for Bill's passage. Knowing this, the government was compelled to take immediate and effective action. The Government of Madras issued an order in the middle of 1930 declaring that the law prohibited the dedication of women to temples. However, the Madras Presidency's order was unable to completely eradicate the devadasi system. The evil was able to sustain with the help of the Brahmins and temple trustees. Before the order was issued, Muthulakshmi Reddy resigned from the council as a protest against Gandhiji's imprisonment. She maintained her efforts outside of the council for the aforesaid goal. In 1931, she was elected as the president of the WIA (Woman's India Association). To broaden its influence within the country, the WIA also established Sri Dharma, a feminist and Indian nationalist-oriented journal through which she published several articles regarding devadasi difficulties and tried to educate about the devadasi community.

Muthulakshmi Reddy did not abandon her efforts after resigning from the Council. She addressed a letter to C. Rajagopalachari, the leader of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. In the letter, she stated that dedicating girls to the temple was as much of a social crime as raising palm trees for toddy. Rajagopalachari wrote to Muthulakshmi Reddy saying he was busy with other problems and had no time to address the issue of devadasis. As a result, he revealed that he was reluctant in such activities. Muthulakshmi Reddy wrote a letter on the devadasi system. She emphasized that the dedication of females above the age of eighteen was done in secret, exposing the failure of reform legislation. She saw that law could only make exterior changes, whereas awareness could only create interior changes.

In the letter, a photograph of a devadasi girl was featured with the text "Oh, Society, Protect us." It drew pity from the readers. It also released a photo of a young devadasi girl along with news about her. She was 17 years old. She was compelled to participate in the pottukattuthal ritual and eventually into prostitution and she was diagnosed with a variety of sexually transmitted diseases. She was hospitalized after escaping from such surroundings. During the 1930s and 1940s, her attempts to eliminate the devadasi system by law were unsuccessful since the Madras government was engaged in the freedom struggle; however, following independence, the Madras government abolished the devadasi system by legislation in 1947. Dr. Subbarayan submitted another Bill to abolish the devadasi system in the Madras Legislative Assembly on October 9, 1947, during the Ministry of O.P. RamasamyReddiyar. Following the committee stage, which was chaired by Mrs. Ammanna Raja, the Bill became law on January 17, 1948, and was known as the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947.

According to the Act, the Madras Presidency outlawed all kinds of the devadasi system. Muthulakshmi realized that even though the devadasi system had been abolished, there were still deep-seated prejudices that many women who had been freed from the restrictions of this evil system had to battle every day. This became clear when three young devadasi girls came to her home in 1930, seeking shelter and protection. When existing shelters refused to accept the girls, Muthulakshmi set out to build Avvai Home, a safe home for them and other numerous young girls like them. In 1950, Avvai home have introduced a school to these young

girls. Today, the Avvai Home and schools are blooming, and they have offered and continue to offer education for many girls.

ABOLITION: IMPACT ON TAMIL SOCIETY

During the pre-historical period of the Anti-Nautch movement, there was a debate about whether a devadasi could be charged with prostitution. Under 372 and 373 of the penal code, prostitution was considered an offense.⁵ To control the venereal diseases in the armed force, the 'Lock Hospital' system was introduced in the cantonment towns. The rhetoric became especially influential when it became necessary to justify the Indian Contagious Diseases Act, passed in 1868, to regulate prostitution in towns. The colonial government ordered sex workers to register and undergo compulsory medical examinations. When the law was in place, devadasis were forced to register as sex workers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the devadasis in Tamil Nadu experienced a massive surge of opposition against the tradition of dedicating minor girls as temple property was seen as discriminatory and violative of fundamental rights eventually. Muthulakshmi and the Self-Respecters were successful in mobilizing public opinion against the practices, and the Madras Legislative Council enacted the devadasi devotion resolution in 1930. Following the historical occurrence, revivalists who mainly followed Brahmanical principles began the movement of resurrecting the devadasi dance. Meanwhile, several Brahmin girls began to study dance from traditional nattuvanars, progressively occupying the stages of a devadasi and questioning the devadasi community's cultural economy.

⁵ Chakravarthi Uma, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script of the past" (K Sangari & S.Vaid) *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History* (Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1990)