

“Staging the Female: De-scribing the Devadasi” is an interdisciplinary study that attempts to investigate the absent-presence of devadasis in the official historiographies and the cultural common sense of Kerala. Contesting the fixities and unpacking the fixations that undergird projections of the ‘ritual-prostitute’ stereotype as a badly made ‘other’ with which a selectively re-scripted cultural past

of the state and an abstract narration of Malayaliness, repetitively insulated from any devadasi connection or sanctified through the thesis of degeneration get to be projected, this study seeks to explore how a makeshift mirror composed in a piecemeal manner, of the 'disappeared' other, shall uncover such narratives of nation-ness formed of its displacing as a master fetish. How does one write about what 'common sense' dictates to be largely 'never been there' or stammeringly 'no longer there' without sounding nonsensical? Perhaps by pooling together fragments, which in the absence of panoramic vantage points of perception might unmask for us, the repetitive violence of framing with which common sense itself is produced. Traces left by the force of the said common sense may be spotted in a spectre of surrealness that had hung around me initially as I tussled with myself to make sense of what I was trying to work on. A spectre that often gave me company, as I learned to tune myself to the pervading lemon-grass scent at various archival institutions and the vigilant and disciplined care demanded by antique documents, brittle enough to resist the intrusion of human fingers or wandered up and down the state in search of telltale cues to undead pasts. A spectre that also made me swap the word *devadasis* with the less volatile term 'temple-women' in response to uneasy, at times openly hostile reactions, set off by any attempt to probe possible connections between native arts and devadasis. This swapping, which seemed to be less like swapping with practice, practically availed for me at times, easier access to library facilities. One of those moments when the researcher hits upon the key to unlock the dialectics of social practices she is trying to make sense of by reflecting on the practised performance of a 'lie' that opened up doors for her. The surreal feeling imposed by the common sense of history, however, had to deal with my own disbelief

paradoxically induced by the very insistence of the performative acts of fixation and negation that betray heavy doses of moral paranoia and/or acute desire felt towards the objectified fetish against whom 'authentic' representations of cultural heritage are repeatedly drawn. Perhaps, it is as a result of such introspection that the romance I had associated with my journeys in the initial phases of research work, giving me an aura of some kind of sleuth work shed skin at an uncertain period to emerge as a largely meditative and self-reflexive critical reflection on gender experience within Keralam. This project seeks to cheat the semantic closure imposed on devadasis by the official historiographies of Keralam and its cultural common sense in attempting a staging of the women who have quite dramatically been 'disappeared' from narrations of our collective selves and the auras of authentic heritage used to gild it, while also undertaking a de-scribing of trenchantly held notions of the term devadasi, as it investigates the complex interfaces between gender, performance, nation-ness and narrations of cultural pasts, without altogether abandoning the possibility that I could very well be adding another layer of paint myself.

The texts used to put together this study include a wide array of disparate materials from the earliest medieval temple inscriptions (9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries), the early Manipravalam literature (roughly dated as between 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries), personal interviews with descendants of erstwhile devadasi communities, Malayalam transcriptions of selected palm-leaf temple records from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, unexplored and/or rarely studied archival documents pertaining to devadasis, in addition to chunks of fragments, drawn from newspaper and magazine articles, notices, cartoons, paintings, testimonials and snippets of 'forgotten' representations in Malayalam literature from the late colonial period among others. As an inter-

disciplinary research work, my study draws from performance and later feminist theories as well as from the intersecting interests of post-structural literary theory, historiography and cultural anthropology to understand how legitimate subjectivities and licit cultural emblems themselves are formed of ghosts of criminalized entities 'disappeared' through repeated narrations of the nation-ness imagined and put in place through the invention of boundaries and alterities. The methodology employed involves a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and historical research; running through various chapters is an investigation of how the making of Keralam's hallowed past is repetitively made possible through its investment in suitably projected constructions of alterities enshrined in bodies, behaviours and spaces in general, and with respect to our study, that of the devadasis' subjectivities in particular.