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Notice for the PhD Viva Voce Examination

Ms Jisa Ann Thomas, Registration Number: 2270061, PhD Scholar at the Department of International Studies, Political Science and History, School of Social Sciences, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), will defend her PhD thesis at the public viva-voce examination on Wednesday, 07 October 2026, at 10.30 am in Room No. 044, Ground Floor, R & D Block, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru - 560029, Karnataka, India.

Title of the Thesis : **Intersectionality and the Devadasi System: Power Structures and Identities in Princely Colonial Mysore (1870-1950)**

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The members of the Research Advisory Committee of the Scholar, the faculty members of the Department and the School, interested experts and research scholars of all the branches of research are cordially invited to attend this open viva-voce examination.

Registrar (Academics)**Place:** Bengaluru**Date:** 25 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The devadasi has always held a pivotal and debated position in the social and cultural history of south India. Devadasis have been theorised in different ways - as ritual specialists, temple performers, or the objects of reform, whose shift into prostitution has been seen as a straight-line path of inevitable degradation. But these interpretations smooth over the complexities of the historical constructions of devadasi identity, negotiations, and transformation. This thesis looks at the devadasi system in the princely state of Mysore from 1870-1950, in the context of the larger issues of caste, gender, labour and the extension of modern state power. Based on a comprehensive set of archival documents, such as the Muzrai Department records, the legislative proceedings, sanitary reports, and the Mysore Residency correspondence, the study traces back the institutional setting of devadasis in a ritual economy based on land grants, temple service, and hereditary claims. In this context, devadasis were not only entertainers but ritualists in the network of kingship and religion, and society. They continued their functions by means of mechanisms of patronage and inheritance, which allowed both continuity and variation between regions and communities. These roles were not fixed either, nor were they necessarily privileged, but instead, they were negotiated by internal dynamics of caste, access to resources, and modalities of institutional recognition. Colonial administrative regulations and the emerging middle-class morality from the late nineteenth century onwards introduced new ways of thinking about devadasis. In the early 20th century they came to be defined in official discourses as immoral, public health, and prostitution. This transformation did not occur in one single instance but through a continual process of bureaucratic categorization, the restriction of temple endowments, and legislation. With increased monitoring of temple administration, the situation that had allowed devadasi labour to continue was slowly changed. In this process, a complex and layered identity was simplified, made more readable and governable, and made to fit into a state's need for classification, regulation and intervention. This change was not uniform, nor even accepted. Ethnographic texts, administrative documents, and legislative debates show conflict between ritual status, economic role and moral evaluation. Devadasis themselves responded to these changing circumstances through petitioning, negotiating and sometimes even acting in opposition. The thesis also looks at how these dimensions can be traced by engaging with oral histories gathered from devadasi women and their descendants, which reveal how historical processes of classification and dispossession live on in contemporary memory, identity and stigma. Adopting intersectional and subaltern perspectives, the study suggests that devadasi was not an ahistorical social identity but a historically constructed category, which formed at the intersection of caste, gender, labour, and governance. It shows that the concept of devadasis as a form of prostitution is not inherent to the institution, but is the result of multi-layered redefinitions that occurred hand in hand with the establishment of administrative power in the modern era. This thesis positions the bureaucratic and moral discourses in foreground, to account for the process of reshaping social identities and thus offers a more nuanced understanding of the construction, stabilisation and transformation of categories of gendered labour within colonial and princely context.

Keywords: Devadasi system, Mysore state, gender and sexuality, caste and labour, ritual economy, state regulation, colonial governance

Publications:

1. **Thomas, J. A., & Varghese, A. (2026).** Tradition and Transformation: The Resilient Devadasis Between Devotion and Exploitation in the 'Servants of the Goddess.' *Sexuality & Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-025-10519-w> (WEB OF SCIENCE INDEXED).
2. **Thomas, J. A., Varghese, A., & Vagishwari, S. (2025).** Watching and Being Watched: Power, Surveillance, and Agency within the Devadasi System. *Journal of Dharma*, 50(1), 9–26. <https://dvkjournals.in/index.php/jd/article/view/4853>. (SCOPUS and WEB OF SCIENCE INDEXED).
3. **Thomas, J. A., & Vagishwari, S. P. (2025).** Surveilling bodies, governing morality: Biopower and the Contagious Diseases Acts in colonial India. *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health*, 33, 101088. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jemep.2025.101088>. (SCOPUS INDEXED).
4. **Thomas, J. A., & SP, V. (2025).** At the intersection of tradition and exploitation: unveiling the Dichotomy of Devadasis in Contemporary India. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2024.2445374>. (WEB OF SCIENCE INDEXED).