DEVADASIS – courtesans between Power, Shame and Fame

by: Dr. Saskia Kersenboom (University of Amsterdam)

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).