The javali is a musical and literary form that likely has its origins in the nineteenth-century court of Mysore, under the patronage of Mummadi Krishnaraja Udaiyar III (1799-1868) and Chamaraja Udaiyar IX (1881-1894). Composed in Telugu and Kannada, these distinctively “modern” songs are parodies of the older Telugu padam genre, from which they derive their structure and narrative contexts. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Madras, javalis become the most popular compositions performed by devadasi—courtesans during salon performances patronized by elite Brahmin and landowning communities. Unlike the apotheosized padam poets Annamayya and Kshetrayya, the majority of javali composers (javalikartas) worked in the civic heart of the colonial city, employed as Taluk clerks or post office workers.

Almost ubiquitously dedicated to Krishna, javalis are concise, colloquial lyrics tuned to popular rāgas. As texts, they are sites for multiple experiments in syncretism with regard to language, music, and devotion. Incorporated into Parsi-theatre inspired Tamil plays, sometimes written in a combination of Telugu and English, and subject to Orientalist analyses, javalis are distinctively “modern” songs. As with most late literary forms, javalis are self-reflexive lyrics that conflate the identities the courtesan-performer and the heroine who is at the heart of the text. But the life of the javali is short-lived. The genre loses its popular status in light of social reform movements directed toward courtesans in the region that begin around the same time the form emerges. Indeed, the last flashes of the javali’s presence are captured in dance sequences by women from courtesan communities in early Telugu cinema. This paper maps the multiple historical and affective registers through which the texts and performances of javalis are understood and performed in modern South India.

Prof. Davesh Soneji’s research and teaching focuses on gender, ritual and performance in Tamil and Telugu-speaking South India. Prof. Soneji has co-edited, with Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India (Oxford University Press, 2008), and has recently been commissioned to edit the Oxford Anthology of Writings on Indian Dance. He is currently completing a monograph entitled Recalling Gestures: Devadasis, Modernity, and Memory in South India.