

## Devadasi: An Institutionalized Exploitation of Women

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### Abstract

Devadasi literally means God's female servant, where according to the ancient Indian practice, young pre-pubertal girls are 'married off', 'given away' in matrimony to God or Local religious deity of the temple. These girls are not allowed to marry, as they were supposedly married to the temple. She 'serves' the priests and inmates of the temple, and the Zamindars and other men of money and power, in the town and village. The 'service' given to these men is considered akin to service of God. The Devadasi is dedicated to the service of the temple Deity for life and there is no escape for her. If she wants to escape, the society will not accept her.

It is a practice among lower caste people who worship a female deity called 'Yellamma' or 'Huligamma'. Fear of diseases, curses, and superstitious beliefs force parents to dedicate their daughters to the goddess. A Devadasi is not allowed to marry, but is expected to satisfy the lust of any man, for that is her religious duty.

Hundreds of young women have been devastated by a system that forces them into prostitution. The children of Devadasies have no one whom they can rightfully call their father.

**Objectives:** 1. To know the socio-cultural background of the system and how is effecting on Devadasies. 2. To highlight the social interaction of Devadasies regulated by sanction. 3. To discuss legislative measures to abolish the problem. **Method of Study:** The study was undertaken collecting information from secondary sources. Many journals, magazines and research articles have been consulted to prepare the paper.

**Keywords:** Devadasi-God's female servant; Puranas: Epics; Dalits: Hindu Lower class of untouchables.

### Introduction

#### *The Historical Evolution of the Institution of the Devadasi*

The term Devadasi is of Sanskrit origin and denotes a female servant of diety. While widely used, the institution and these women are known by different names in different areas. The first reference to dancing girls in temples

is found in Kalidasa's "Meghadhoot". It is said that dancing girls were present at the time of worship in the Mahakal Temple of Ujjain. Some scholars are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6th century CE, as most of the Puranas containing reference to it have been written during this period. Several Puranas recommended that arrangements should be made to enlist the services of singing girls for worship at temples. By the end of 10th century, the total number of devadasis in many temples was in direct proportion to the wealth and prestige of the temple. During the medieval period, they were regarded as a part of the normal establishment of temples; they occupied a rank next only to priests and their number often reached high proportions. For example, there were 400 devadasis attached to the temples

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The popularity of devadasis seems to have reached its pinnacle around 10th and 11th century AD. The rise and fall in the status of devadasis can be seen to be running parallel to the rise and fall of Hindu temples. Invaders from West Asia attained their first victory in India at the beginning of the second millennium CE. The destruction of temples by invaders started from the northwestern borders of the country and spread through the whole of the country. Thereafter the status of the temples fell very quickly in North India and slowly in South India. As the temples became poorer and lost their patron kings, and in some cases were destroyed, the devadasis were forced into a life of poverty, misery, and, in some cases, prostitution.

#### *Yellamma Cult of Karnataka in South India*

In the state of Karnataka in the region of South India the devadasi system was followed for over 10 centuries. Chief among them was the Yellamma cult. There is a temple of Renukaamba, built in 14th century, at the top of Chandragutti hill in Shimoga district in Karnataka. The gullible masses from Dalit and Bahujan communities are made to believe that Renukaamba Devi is the incarnation of Renuka or Yallamma of Saundatti. The specialty of this temple is that Dalit women must go naked to worship this Devi. It is called 'Betale Seva' or 'Nagna Puja' i.e. naked worship. A legend in the Purana says that if the girls go naked and pray to the Devi they get good husbands and married women get all their wishes fulfilled, the childless women get children, and that those Shudra women and girls who do not follow these traditions meet with a lot of calamities.

The chief Minister of Karnataka had to appoint a committee to investigate whether "Nagna-puja" has any religious sanction of Hindu Sastras. The report was submitted in 1988 and states that there is no such sanction in Hinduism. In 1992 a ban was imposed on "Nagna-puja". There was a huge and cry rose against it, but since then it has stopped.

#### *Reasons for Dedication*

The followers of Yellamma, who are mostly poor, and illiterate, take a vow to dedicate themselves, their spouses, or their children in the service of Goddess Yellamma when they are unable to face the hardships of life. The typical situations include life-threatening diseases, infertility, and dire financial troubles. These are the people who are primarily responsible for propagating Goddess Yellamma's virtues and achievements and glorify the Goddess.

Even though the majority of the girls dedicated in the past few years or decades come from families with no tradition of devadasis, all of them come from communities with a strong history of the practice. For example, a village named Yellampura in Karnataka, 95 percent of households of Holers have practicing devadasis, which is the highest percentage in the village, followed by Madars.

The system has an obvious economic basis. The sanctions provided by social custom and apparently by religion, combined with economic pressures, have pushed girls from poor families into becoming the wives of a deity. The three factors (religious, social, and economic) are interlinked.

In a 1993 study, Asha Ramesh found that: dedication to the Goddess or God was justified on the following grounds:

- (a) If the parents were childless, they vowed to dedicate their first child if it happened to be a girl.
- (b) If there were no sons in the family, the girl child was dedicated and could not marry as she becomes a 'son' for the family (earning the family's livelihood).

Yet another economic reason contributed to the dedications. If the girl's family had some property, the family ensured that it stayed within the family by turning the girl into 'son' by dedicating her.

#### *Social Status of Devadasis*

Traditionally, no stigma was attached to the

devadasi or to her children, and other members of their caste received them on terms of equality. The children of a devadasi were considered legitimate and devadasis themselves were outwardly indistinguishable from married women of their own community. Furthermore, a devadasi was believed to be immune from widowhood and was called akhanda saubhagyavati.

Contemporary statistical data India's National Commission for Women, which is mandated to protect and promote the welfare of women, has collected information on the prevalence of devadasis in various states. The government of Orissa has stated that the devadasi system is not prevalent in the state. There is only one Devadasi in Orissa, in a Puri temple. Similarly the government of Tamil Nadu wrote that this system has been eradicated and there are now no devadasis in the state. Andhra Pradesh has identified 16,624 devadasis within its state and Karnataka has identified 22,941.

In Karnataka, the practice has been found to exist Devadasi system is not only exploitation of women, it is the institutionalized exploitation of women; it is the exploitation of Dalits, the lower class of untouchables; it is the religious sanction given to prostitution of helpless economically and socially deprived women; it is the glorification of humiliation of women. Inherent in this system is the fascistic belief that a certain section of human population, the lower caste, is meant to serve the 'higher caste's superior men'. Inherent in it is the feudal-lord-temple-priest-nexus, where the priest, already having a psychological hold over the minds of simple people to the point of dictating their way of life, uses his power to give 'religious sanction' to the practice by declaring it 'sacred', and thus cajole and lure simple minded villagers into this worst form of prostitution in Raichur, Bijapur, Belgaum, Dharwad, Bellari and Gulbarga.

Despite the governmental ban, hundreds of girls are secretly dedicated to Goddess Yellamma every year. There are more than 450,000 Devadasies trapped in this form of

prostitution, deified and glorified by the heinous religious sanctions. According to the 1934 Devadasi Security Act, this practice is banned in India. This ban was reinforced again in 1980s but the law is broken every day. Poverty and 'Untouchability' contribute to the persistence of this terrible practice.

#### *Continuing Practice of Dedicating Dalits as Devadasies:*

A report commissioned by the National Commission for Women (NCW) in India reveals the shocking reality of how thousands of Dalit women continue to be forced into the Devadasi system in several states of India. Estimates suggest that girls dedicated to temples in the Maharashtra-Karnataka border area number over 250,000 and are all from the Dalit community of untouchables. More than half of the Devadasies become prostitutes.

According to a survey carried out among 375 Devadasies by the Joint Women's Programme, Bangalore for the NCW, 63.6 per cent of young girls were forced into Devadasi system due to custom, while 38 per cent reported that their families had a history of Devadasies. The survey pointed out that Devadasi system is more prevalent among three Scheduled Caste communities - Holers, Madars and Samgars in Karnataka. Nearly 40 per cent of them join the flesh trade in cities and the rest are involved in their respective villages. A Devadasi, in a way, is considered "public property" in the village.

#### *Dalit Devadasies*

When it comes to sex they are not only 'touchable' but are actually forced into sex by the higher caste Hindus and practices such as the Devadasi system are invented to facilitate and perpetuate their exploitation.

It is these powerful sections of the society, who control not only the economic and social activates but also the minds of the poor villagers that pose the biggest impediment to elimination of this evil. There is a crying need for a more comprehensive legislation to

emancipate these vulnerable girls.

#### *Modern Devadasi: A Giant Step Backwards*

It was only as late as 1975 when awareness of this deplorable act came to the fore. Around five hundred women gathered in Kohlapur to discuss and find solutions to this problem. In 1985, a conference was held at Nipani which gave strength to the voice demanding the abolition of the Devadasi system. Gradually the demand to end this practice increased and compelled the Karnataka government to pass an act banning the Devadasi system. Some of the provisions in the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982 are:

Anyone found guilty in helping a girl to become a Devadasi or even attending the ceremony is liable to get 3 years prison term and would be fined upto maximum Rs 2000/- Parents and relatives would be fined upto maximum Rs 5000/- if they are found guilty encouraging the girl to be dedicated.

#### *Social Reform Movements*

Reformists and abolitionists conceived of the devadasi practice as a social evil and considered many Devadasi to be prostitutes. The first anti-dedication movement was launched in 1882. "Their main aim was to do away with this system. Reform lobbyists were drawn mainly from missionaries, doctors, journalists and social workers. They urged the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which girls dedicated themselves as Devadasis of Hindu shrines. They organized seminars and conferences to create a public opinion against the Devadasi system. In the later part of 1892 an appeal was made to the viceroy and governor general of India and to the governor of Madras. This appeal also defines the position of the anti-nautch movement (Jogan Shankar, 1990).

The social reform movements, spearheaded by Ram Mohan Roy, Periyar, Muthulakshmi Reddy, S. Muthiah Mudaliar, Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer, M. Krishnan Nair, C. N. Annadurai, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar,

Govind Ranade, Dhondo Keshav Karve, and other prominent social thinkers, questioned the practice of devadasi system and pleaded for its abolition.

#### *Legislative Initiatives*

The first legal initiative to outlaw the devadasi system dates back to the 1934 Bombay Devadasi Protection Act. This act pertained to the Bombay province as it existed in the British Raj. The Bombay Devadasi Protection Act made dedication of women illegal, whether consensual or not. According to this act, marriage by a devadasi was to be considered lawful and valid, and the children from such wedlock were to be treated as legitimate. The Act also laid down grounds for punitive action that could be taken against any person or persons found to be involved in dedications, except the woman who was being dedicated. Those found guilty of such acts could face a year's imprisonment, a fine, or both. The 1934 Act also provided rules, which were aimed at protecting the interests of the devadasis. Whenever there was a dispute over ownership of land involving a devadasi, the local Collector was expected to intervene.

In 1947, the year of independence, the Madras Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act outlawed dedication in the southern Madras Presidency. The devadasi system was outlawed in all of India in 1988, yet some devadasis still practice illegally.

#### **Conclusion**

In the institution of the Devadasi, the sanctions provided by social custom and apparently by religion are strictly combined with economic pressure and contribute to keep this practice alive. The Devadasi have to abide and inculcate cultural practices that sustain the distinctions and ritual status in the caste hierarchy. The struggle against the Devadasi system is difficult and needs the active role of several partners such as government, NGOs, field workers, social movements etc. As the

Devadasi system is directly linked to the low socio-economic status of lower castes, consistent efforts should be promoted to tackle questions of untouchability, caste conflicts at a wider level. Particular importance should be given to promoting better awareness and attitudinal change among these women, an essential factor to facilitate social change among them the other members of community.

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