

DEVADASI SYSTEM: FORCED PROSTITUTION BY DALIT

WOMEN ON THE NAME OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

In India a system of ritualised prostitution, known as Devadasi System, exists. In this system a girl, usually before reaching the age of puberty, is dedicated or married to a temple, continues in several southern states including Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Kerala and some parts of Maharashtra and Orissa. Literally meaning „female servant of god, “Devadasi” is usually belong to the Dalit community. The word “Devadasi” originates from two Sanskrit words Deva” which means God and “Dasi” which means female servant. In this system, pre- puberty young girls were married off to the God or local deities of any temple and the girls became the property of the priest, other inmates of the temple and also local land lords and zamindars. The saying in Marathi is ‘*Devdasi devachi, bayko saarya gavachi*’, means servant of God but the wife of whole town. Devadasi cult provides a license for prostitution with religious sanction. Thousands of Dalit women are forced to become maidens of God in many villages. In Devadasi system Dalit women are induced into prostitution in the name of religion. They are taken from their families, never to see them again they are later sexually exploited by the temple priest and local land lords or zamindars and finally auctioned secretly into prostitution and ultimately die from venereal diseases and HIV Aids. At the end she leads miserable life.

KEYWORDS: Dalit Women, Devadasi, Hinduism, Indian Social System, History

INTRODUCTION

Objectives

The present study is an attempt to understand the origin and growth of Devadasi system and highlighting the status of Devadasis in Indian society. This study also envisages the exploitation of Dalit Women on the name of religious tradition.

- To find major reasons behind for persistence and continuity of this cult.
- To highlight the major impacts on Dalit women.
- To come out with suggestions to eradicate this unlawful religious system.

METHODOLOGY

To fulfill objectives of the study qualitative methodologies are employed.

Primary as well as Secondary data are collected for the study. Primary data are collected through some articles published by devadasis . The secondary sources are collected from the books and journals supplementing the Census

Records, Gazetteers, Ethnographic Notes.

REVIEW OF THE STUDY

Kaveri said. "Sometimes ten. Unknown people. What kind of life is that?" "We have a song," Rani said. "Everyone sleeps with us, but no one marries us. Many embrace us, but no one protects".

"Every day, my children ask, „who is my father? “They do not like having a mother who is in this business."

"Once, I tried to open a bank account with my son," Rani said. "We went to fill in the form, and the manager asked, Father “s name? “After that, my son was angry He said I should not have brought him into the world like this."

"We are sorry we have to do this work. But what is the alternative?"

"Who will give us jobs? We are all illiterate."¹

These are the real lives of Devadasis, who was forced to ritual prostitution without their will.

Many Devadasi children have no legal father, where as biological father are not ready to take responsibility.

The age-old practice continues to legitimize the sexual violence and discrimination that have come to characterize the intersection between caste and gender. The patrons of the Devadasis are generally from the higher castes because those from the Devadasis own castes are too poor to afford to (pay) for the rituals. In many cases a patron kept many girls and the number of girls used to be a yard stick of the status of that man. This system of patronage has given way to commercial prostitution in the populated big cities.²

Their perceived status in society, as women who are supposed to serve men sexually, also makes it more difficult for Devadasis to approach the police for help: "When a Devadasi is raped, it is not considered rape. She can be had by any man at any time".³

In the past Devadasi came from various different social groups, some become courtesans to princes, priests and other high cast men. This gave them a level of status and autonomy not available to Indian women at that time. However, the Devadasi are now almost exclusively Dalits. As women and Dalits, they are already members of the two most exploited

¹ William Dalrymple, "Serving the Goddess: The dangerous life of a sacred sex worker"

² Human Rights Watch ., Broken People: Caste Violence Against India“s Untouchables, p.150

³ Ibid., p.15

groups in India, at dedication they are degraded further by the stigma of being a Devadasi and a “fallen woman”. Because of this they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and will find it even harder to access their legal rights. ⁴

Activists involved in the Dalit women's movement explain that the nexus between caste and forced prostitution is quite strong and that the Devadasi system is no exception. Most Indian girls and women in India's urban brothels come from lower-caste, tribal, or minority communities. Like other forms of violence against women, ritualized prostitution, activists believe, is a system "designed to kill whatever vestiges of self-respect the untouchable castes have in order to subjugate them and keep them underprivileged".⁵

Keeping Dalit women as prostitutes, and by tying prostitution to bondage in rural areas, upper-caste men reinforce their declaration of social and economic superiority over the lower castes. According to the Ambedkar Centre for Justice and Peace, a Canada-based NGO: Thousands of untouchable female children (between 6 and 8 years) are forced to become maidens of God (Devadasis, Jogins, a Hindu religious practice in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka State, Maharashtra, Orissa State, to mention only a few). They are taken from their families, never to see them again. They are later raped by the temple priest and finally auctioned secretly into prostitution and ultimately die from AIDS. It is estimated by NGOs that 5,000 to 15,000 girls are auctioned secretly every year.⁶

Due to the cultural and geographical variations in different regions, Devadasis were denoted by several names such as *Tevataci*, *Tevaratiyar*, *Patiyilar*, *Tallicceri Pendukal*, *Tevanar Makal*, *Cottikal*, *Atikalmar*, *Manikkattar*, *Kanikaiyar*, *Emperumanatiyar* and *Koyil Pinakkal* in Tamilnadu, *Tevidicchi*, *Nangaimar*, *Kudikkari*, *Muraikkari*, *Kootachi*, *Koothichi*, and *Attakkari* in Kerala, *Suleyar or Sule*, *Poti*, *Basavi* and *Jogtis* in Karnataka, *Sanis and Bhogam* in Andhra

Pradesh, *Darikas*, *Patras* and *Maharis* in Orissa, *Kurmapus* and *Kudipus* in Assam, *Bhavin* and *Kalavant* in Konkani and Marathi and in Bombay Presidency each shrine had its own name for its girls.⁷

ORIGIN OF THEORIES

There are many speculations and theories regarding the origin of the Devadasi system. The theories are Occupation and Mother Goddess Theory, Religious Tradition Theory, Sanskritization Theory, Racial Theory, Political or Selfless Citizen Theory, Matriarchy to Patriarchy Theory, Lineage Continuation Theory and Traditional Theory.⁸

History

It is not definitely known when the institution of Devadasi commenced in India.

According to some, the naked figure of a dancing damsel, standing in an exciting manner, represents both a courtesan and a Devadasi. Some scholars think that the earliest mention of Devsadas found in an inscription, dating back to Ashoka's times (273-323 B.C), where the painter, Devadatta, is stated to have been in love with the Devadasi Sutanuka.

⁴ Megan Rowland, "A Light in the Darkness: Fighting ritual prostitution in south India

⁵ Human Rights Watch Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables,p.151

⁶ Yogesh Varhade., "International Advocacy and the Role of the United Nations and Civil Society" , Ambedkar Centre for Justice and Piece,p.3

⁷ Devadasi, cite note-93)

⁸ Tarachand,K..., Devadasi Custom: Rural Social Structure and Flesh Markets, pp.19-23

The inscription was discovered in the Jogimara Cave of Ramgarh, about 160 miles South of Varanasi.

The first clear literary reference to Devadasi occurs in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya.

According to him, the Devadasis were appointed for a specified time. After that, they were engaged in making threads.

Huin Tsang (India visit 630-643) writes that dancing women used regularly to sing and dance in the Sun-Temple of Multan. From the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana, refers that a Kashmirian king made a gift of one hundred women of his harem to a Siva temple.⁹

A seventh- century record from Rajasthan refers to Ganika (courtesan) associated with a temple and an eight century document from Orissa to Darikas. Kalhana and other writers of the age make frequent references to temple women (Devadasis). Three hundred female dancers, an Arab account tells us, danced at the gate of the Somanatha temple¹⁰ Bilhana of Kashmir states, in his *Vikramankadecarita*, that the Devadasis used to perform exciting dance in the dancing hall of the temple of Ksemagaurisvara.

Devadasis in Orissa were those of Svapneswar, Megheswar and Brahmeswar at Bhuvaneswar. At one time, Odissi dance was the monopoly of Devadasis, known as Maharis. One hundred and twenty Devadasis used to dance in the Car Festival (Rath-yatra) of Jagannatha at Puri.¹¹

The earliest reference to Devadasis occurs in some Tamil inscriptions of Rajaraja, the greatest Chola kings. An inscription of 1004 A.D states that, in the chief temple of Tanjoore, there were 400 Taliceri Pendugal's (temple girls). They used to live in the streets surrounding the temple, and got maintenance for service in the temple.

Earlier it was priests, but now it is for dominant caste men. It is not an uncommon thing to see even sacred temples converted into mere brothels. Devadasis receive a fixed salary for the religious duties which they perform; but as the amount are small. They used to live in the temples now anyone can use them including lorry drivers. Deadlocked hair is taken as a sign from the Goddess Yellamma that the girl is meant to be a Devadasi. In a festival, a marriage ceremony takes place between the girl and god. The eldest lady of the Devadasi community ties the Mangal sutra. In some ceremonies the girl was paraded almost naked. The girl is then given some money but still works in the fields. She lives separately in the village and is used by all the men, including Dalit men. Their perceived status in society, as women who are supposed to serve men sexually, also makes it more difficult for Devadasis to approach the police for help. When a Devadasi is raped, it is not considered rape. She can be had any man at any time.

Caste of women connected originally with great temples in southern India, where they dedicated themselves to the service of each temple Patron God. The caste appears to date from the 9th and 10th centuries, the great period of temple building in south India. The women attended the God-fanned the icon honoured it with lights and sang and dance for the Gods amusements. They played an important part in preserving the cultural heritage. Their sons and daughters had equal rights of heritance, an unusual practice among Hindu castes. Until the 20th century they were quite visible; the main temple

⁹ Banerji, Sures Chandra & Banerji, Ramala., The Castaway of Indian Society, p.133

¹⁰ Jha, D.N., Early India: A Concise History, p.200

of Kanchipuram (Canjeevaram) had 100 Devadasi's. As their occupation also involved temple prostitution they came to be held in low-social regard".¹²

"The courtesans or dancing-girls attached to each temple take their place in the second rank; they are called Devadasis (servants or slaves of the gods), but the public call them by the more vulgar name of prostitutes".¹³

The Madras Census Report, 1891 reveals that, during the celebration of village festivals, an unmarried Madiga woman, called for the occasion Matangi (a favorite), abuses and spits upon the people assembled, and they do not take this as an insult, because they think that her spittle removes the pollution. The woman is, indeed, regarded as the incarnation of the goddess herself. Similarly, the Malas use very obscene language when the god is taken in procession to the streets of the caste people.¹⁴

Many Dalit girls are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma/Renuka in a ceremony carried out on full moon nights in temples in Saundatti of Belgaum district in Karnataka and in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh and some other places. Following this "marriage to the god" most of the girls remained in their own village; they were considered accessible to any man but at the same time not bound or polluted by sexual relations. They remained independent, given the status of a man in many family ceremonies; their children usually took their name; and they had some important ritual prerogatives in village ceremonies. These girls were known as "Murali" among the Mahars, "Matangi" among the Madigas and "Basavi". Basavi from the term Basava applying to a bull roaming the village at will and which is said "alludes to the footloose position of the women".¹⁵

The institution of Devadasis attached to the better-endowed temples came to be seen as an additional source of income for the temple. Some Devadasis, where they were reduced to being merely temple attendants, came to be regarded as women of easy virtue. Others, however, who were highly accomplished women, were treated with difference. Because of their accomplishments, such women had a certain freedom of movement in that they could distance themselves from social conventions to a greater degree than most other urban women. Part of the reason for this was that they were educated and professionally trained in this art, particularly music and dance".¹⁶

Compared to North India, South India had a larger number of Devadasis; this institution lasted in the latter region. There are historical reasons for it. Most of North India was under Muslim rule. As Jogan Shankar observes:"Hence in North India the institution dedication to temple dancing is very rare. This may be due to Mohammedan rule which destabilized temple administration and sacred complexes were frequently attacked by alien plunderers. However, dedicated dancers were not attached to any temple as such. Mohammedan puritans like Aurangzeb treated this institution and other Hindu cults with contempt. He wanted to do away with such cults. In fact he succeeded in his endeavours to some extent."¹⁷

STATISTICS

In 2007, Anti-Slavery International published a study on the practice of ritual slavery or forced religious marriage. It found that 93% Devadasi were from Scheduled castes (Dalit) and 7% from Scheduled Tribes in India. According to their reports there are up to 22,943 Devadasi in Karnataka, and up to 16,799 in Andhra Pradesh.¹⁸

As per the latest reports about the state of Telangana there are 1143 Devadasis are existing even today in Mahaboobnagar, Karimnagar, Nizamabad, Medak, Adilabad, Rangareddy and Khammam districts in the name of Jogini,

Basivi, and Matangi.¹⁹

Quoting the National Commission for Women, the authority says there are 2.5 lakh

"Devadasi" girls who have been dedicated to Yellamma and Khandoba temples on Maharashtra-

Karnataka border.²⁰

Legislations

During the 19th century and 20th century the availability of the new knowledge system in

the Indian subcontinent questioned much on the superstitions and beliefs of the native customs and practices like Devadasi. Ultimately some of the states where the Devadasi practice is going on tried to eradicate it through state laws like The Bombay Devadasis Protection Act, 1934, The Tamil Nadu Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947, The Prohibition of Dedication Act 1982 of Karnataka, the Andhra Pradesh Devadasis (Prohibition of dedication) Act, 1988.

PROBLEMS

- Lack of legal husband, all the costs of child-raising fall on the mother.
- Failure of the authorities to implement laws and policies on their behalf. Sexual abuse from men.
- Discrimination in the home, at work and in the community.
- Lack of education (themselves and their children)
- Children of Devadasi suffers discrimination because they have no legal father. Due to this school managements are denied admission.
- Dalit women she suffers from triple oppression resulting by gender, caste and class. But in the case of Dalit Devadasi she suffers a lot

Suggestions

- Awareness Camps should be conducted in those areas.
- Government should establish Adult Education Schools at their locality to educate Devadasis. Education will bring awareness regarding this evil system.
- Government has to conduct skill training programmes and also provide financial assistance to establish small scale and cottage industries to stand on their own with self respect.
- Government and NGO's should adopt their children and take them away from such unhealthy environment at an early age and provide residential education.
- Employment should be provided by establishing industries. Government must provide governmental jobs to their children.
- Vigilance committees should be formed in villages in relevant areas.

- Housing construction or grants for home improvements.
- Scholarships to mainstream schools or provision of special educational facilities (Bridge Courses) for children of Devadasi.
- Provide free health cards.
- Establishing and Strengthening of Devadasi groups and federations.
- Government pensions for Ex-Devadasis.

CONCLUSIONS

While India has adopted measures to abolish forced prostitution and "rehabilitate" Devadasis, these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. Legislative initiatives are poorly implemented. The societal perception of Devadasis as women who are sexually available to men makes it more difficult for them to approach the police with complaints of sexual violence. Moreover, the police themselves have been known to exploit Devadasis.²¹

The Devadasi system violates several clauses of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including Article 4 which states that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms"²² The United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956, which India is a signatory to prohibit any practice where a child is handed over for exploitative purposes.

Furthermore, the Indian constitution ensures all Indian citizens "JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation"²³

Most of the Devadasis are Dalit community with poor economical background and who give no importance to education. They are a regular source of income for the family as long as they are young and useful. When they become old and useless, they are discarded by these very people and left with the choice of begging for a living.

Social changes cannot be brought about through law alone. Social education should be needed in India. That education should be on the foundations of rationality. When the people of India educated socially, automatically this kind of unscientific religious traditions will eradicate.

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