

The Problems and Challenges of Devadasis Womens - A Sociological Study with Special References to Ballari and Koppal District

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Abstract

Devadasi is a woman who is considered given in marriage to God. These women dedicated to God once held high social status and were well respected. But now they are nothing more than sex slaves.

Imagine women having control over their bodies and sexuality. As in, getting to choose their partners (yes, in the plural sense, not a single partner for eternity and beyond), and more importantly, having the choice to decide if one wants a partner or not in the first place. Add economic independence to the mix, and you have the Devadasis of medieval India.

Sexual exploitation, especially of children, is an international epidemic. While it is difficult, given how underreported such crimes are, to arrive at accurate statistics regarding the problem, “it is estimated that approximately one million children (mainly girls) enter the multi-billion dollar commercial sex trade every year.” Although child exploitation continues to persist, and in many instances thrive, the international community has, in recent decades, become increasingly aware of and reactive to the issue. Thanks in large part to that increased focus, the root causes of sexual exploitation, especially of children, have become better understood. The first confirmed reference to a devadasi was during the Keshari Dynasty in the 6th century A.D. in South India. The practice began when one of the great queens of the Dynasty decided that in order to honor the gods, certain women who were trained in classical dancing, should be married to the deities. The inception of the practice was one that was imbued with great respect as the women whom were chosen to become devadasi were subject to two great honors: first, because they were literally married to the deity, they were to be treated as if they were the Goddess Lakshmi herself, and second, the women were honored because they were considered to be “those great women who [could] control natural human impulses, their five senses and [could] submit themselves completely to God.” As they were married to an immortal, the women were considered to be auspicious.

In addressing the devadasi practice, this paper does the following: (i) discusses the devadasi system’s historical and cultural underpinnings; (ii) addresses the evolution of the system to the modern day in Ballari Koppal districts; (iii) focuses on why the devadasi practice violates both domestic and international law.

Key words: Devadasis, epidemic exploitation, Ballari Koppal districts, India, sex trade.

Introduction

Devadasi or Devaradiyar means “servant of God”. These women were dedicated to God and were considered given in marriage to God, meaning that they could therefore not marry any ‘mortal’. Nevertheless, they were free to choose partners, from among married and unmarried men alike. These relationships could be long and stable, or just for a short

period of time. But in no way were these women economically dependent on their partners. They learned music and dance, and as many as 64 types of arts. They would dance and sing in temples or in front of royalty and earn gold and land as a reward. Some chose to dedicate themselves only to God and stayed without a partner all through their life.

The esteemed status of the devadasis began to wane under Islamic and British rule. Following their successful invasion of North India, Islamic rulers began to destroy Hindu temples throughout the region. Once the Hindu temples in the northern part of the subcontinent were destroyed, the devadasis, who were effectively tied to the temples, were left to fend for themselves. With the destruction of the temples, devadasis lost not only their patronage, but also their status in society, leading to the beginnings of their exploitation. The result of the loss of patronage forced the devadasis, who previously danced at religious temple events, to dance at “wedding feasts or other private entertainments. Dancing and prostitution [became] inseparable in India [at this time].” The system was further limited under British rule, which unlike the Islamic Empire reached the entirety of the subcontinent.²⁴ Although academics dispute what the British thought about the custom specifically, many argue that the British reformists sought to distinguish the practice from religious and traditional customs. Regardless of their view on the practice, the British hierarchy displaced patrons and rulers who were supportive of the traditional devadasi system.

The tradition of Devadasi culture can be traced back to as early as the 7th century, particularly in southern parts of India during the reigns of the Cholas, Chelas, and Pandyas. They were well treated and respected, and held a high social status in the society. It was common for them to be invited to be present at or initiate sacred religious rituals. As long as the temples and empires flourished, so did they.

Devadasis of modern India – Who are they?

At present, Devadasis are nothing more than sex slaves or child prostitutes who are dedicated to temples when they are as young as four or five years old. Almost all of them are Dalits, with a majority belonging to the Madiga and Valmiki castes, two of the most underprivileged castes in India. The Devadasis of modern India are largely concentrated in parts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. They are called Mathangi in Maharashtra, Jogini or Mathamma in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and Devadasi in Karnataka.

The children are forced into becoming Devadasis by their own parents, because these girls are their only source of income in most cases. A lot of these families aren't even allowed to enter or stay in the villages. They are ostracized because of their caste. Hence, inevitably, all of them are either illiterate or have received very little education, with no means for a stable income. The only jobs they can get are those of street cleaners or sewage collectors. Parents are therefore forced to act as pimps for their daughters and dedicate them as Devadasis in the hope of finding a means of survival. The modern iteration of the devadasi system, while not nearly as pervasive both in terms of influence and sheer numbers as in the past, is one that continues to promote the sexual exploitation of lower caste girls in India. The system is also, especially in its current form, inextricably linked to poverty and tradition. This section addresses three issues: first, how many devadasis there are in India today; second, what the practice currently looks like; and third, why girls are still being inducted into the devadasi system.

Irrespective of the size of the family, because of poverty, they most often find themselves living in a single room or under a thatched roof. Hence, it is very common for the entire family to wait outside, while the girl is inside gratifying the sexual needs of men in order to earn money. In a society where a girl child is often a liability, turning them into Devadasis is how patriarchy works to transform them into assets.

Given the disintegration of the devadasi system during Islamic and British rule, both the absolute number and geographic distribution of devadasis has become limited. Nevertheless, according to the Indian National Commission for Women ("NCW"), there are still at least 44,000 active devadasi in India, with the NCW noting that the number could in fact be as high as 250,000. Although the numbers are difficult to confirm due to the practice being not only underground but also difficult to differentiate from non-religious prostitution, the practice is particularly concentrated in a few states. According to the NCW, the majority of active devadasis are in Karnataka (22,491 individuals), Andhra Pradesh (16,624 individuals), and Maharashtra (2,479 individuals). While the geographic concentration of the institution may appear to indicate that the tradition is failing elsewhere, the problem continues to be a national one, as many girls are trafficked from different parts of the country to become devadasis.

Objective:

This paper seeks explore problems and challenges of devadasis womens a sociobiological study with special references to Ballari and Koppal district

Devadasi – Who is she?

Southern India's devadasi system, which 'dedicates' girls to a life of sex work in the name of religion, continues despite being made illegal in 1988. Each January, nearly half a million people visit the small town of Saundatti for a jatre or festival, to be blessed by Yellamma, the Hindu goddess of fertility. The streets leading to the temple are lined with shops selling sacred paraphernalia – glass bangles, garlands, coconuts and heaped red and yellow kunkuma, a dye that devotees smear on their foreheads. The older women are called jogathis and are said to be intermediaries between the goddess and the people. They all start their working lives as devadasis and most of them would have been initiated at this temple.

Girls from poor families of the "untouchable", or lower, caste are "married" to Yellamma as young as four. No longer allowed to marry a mortal, they are expected to bestow their entire lives to the service of the goddess.

The devadasi system has been part of southern Indian life for many centuries. A veneer of religion covers the supply of concubines to wealthy men. Trained in classical music and dance, the devadasis lived in comfortable houses provided by a patron, usually a prominent man in the village. Their situation changed as the tradition was made illegal across India in 1988, and the temple itself has publicly distanced itself from their plight. The change started in colonial times. Academics dispute what the British thought of the custom, but their presence meant that kings and other patrons of temples lost their power and much of their economic influence. Now the system is seen as a means for poverty-stricken parents to unburden themselves of daughters. Though their fate was known, parents used religion to console themselves, and the money earned was shared.

How does one become Devadasi sociobiological aspect?

A huge number of girls who become Devadasis are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma, who is otherwise known as Renuka, Jogamma, or Holiyamma. And the dedication happens most often in the Saundatti festival that takes place in the Yellamma temple in northern Karnataka. These women were dedicated to God and were considered given in marriage to God, meaning that they could therefore not marry any 'mortal'. Nevertheless, they were free to choose partners, from among married and unmarried men alike. These relationships could be long and stable, or just for a short period of time. But in no way were these women economically dependent on their partners. They learned music and dance, and as many as 64 types of arts. They would dance and sing in temples or in front of royalty and earn gold and land as a reward. Some chose to dedicate themselves only to God and stayed without a partner all through their life.

These women dedicated to God once held high social status and were well respected. But now they are nothing more than sex slaves or child prostitutes who are dedicated to temples when they are as young as four or five years old.

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The practice of Devadasi system in any form is in total contravention of the provisions of Section 370 and 370A as amended through Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 as well as Section 372 of Indian Penal Code. It is also against Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act.

The Saundatti festival, which is also known as the Yellamma Devi Fair, happens on many occasions from October to February, with the girls given in dedication from November onwards. Parents choose a day that is convenient for them and that they consider auspicious. On that day, the girls are fully clad in green during the ceremony, and older Devadasis give them in dedication to God.

Once the girl in Ballari Koppal districts attains puberty, her parents inform the community, which in turn helps them find a landlord or someone wealthy to “take” the girl. The man, in return, takes care of the financial needs of the family, partially or fully, as long as he uses her for sex. There is a huge demand for girls who are virgins, and they are paid more than the others.

What happened to the legal measures in Ballari Koppal districts?

Both before and after Independence, the government enacted laws prohibiting the dedication of Devadasis. It has been more than 20 years since the practice was banned across India.

However, according to the National Human Rights Commission, in 2013, there were as many as 450,000 Devadasis in India. Another commission led by Justice Raghunath Rao revealed that there are about 80,000 Devadasi women in just Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The people involved in the practice are either not aware that laws are there in place prohibiting it or choose to ignore them. Given how economically vulnerable the communities involved here are, the laws are probably not going to be helpful as long as the attempt is just to criminalize and prohibit the Devadasi system. This is evident from the stark difference between the number of Devadasis being dedicated and the number of people who have been charged under the act. Instead, providing these communities with basic education and making them economically empowered, along with sensitisation, would be the ideal way forward. Despite the practice’s honorable past, the devadasi system has devolved into institutionalized sexual exploitation of the poorest segments of Indian society. At the same time, it is important to note that the practice is not exactly the same as a conventional system of sex workers. The notable difference is the fact that many devadasis are forced into the lifestyle at an extremely young age due to a combination of religion and social beliefs. The devadasi tradition is singular due to the strength of the relationship between religious beliefs and sexual exploitation. There are a number of social beliefs within Indian society that perpetuate the devadasi practice. For example, many landowners, who almost always are from a higher caste, believe that it is prestigious to deflower as many young girls as possible.

The difference between the devadasis of the past and those of today, is perhaps best summarized by William Dalrymple of *The New Yorker*: There is an almost unimaginable gulf separating the devadasis of ancient poems and inscriptions and the lives lived by women [today]. In the Middle Ages, the devadasis were drawn from the grandest families in the realm—among them princesses of the Chola royal family—and possibly from slaves captured in war. Many were literate, and some were highly accomplished poets; indeed, at the time they seem to have been among the few literate women in the region. Today, the devadasis are drawn exclusively from the lowest castes—usually from the Dalit Madar caste—and are almost entirely illiterate. The majority of modern devadasis in Karnataka are straightforward sex workers

The girls become Devadasis at a very young age in Ballari Koppal districts, when they have no idea what it means to be one. The girls attain puberty when they are 11 or 12 years old, and they get their first sexual partner before they turn 15. At such a tender age, they are usually clueless about protection measures, nor do they have any knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases. Despite the existence of numerous international prohibitions, there are at least three issues with the application of international law to the devadasi practice. First, many of the aforementioned treaties and conventions do not have enforcement mechanisms for the hearing of individual complaints. For example, the UDHR, which was not originally meant to be per se binding, lacks any enforcement mechanism, which limits its practical applicability. As such, despite India's many international commitments, it is unlikely that the international community, or even individuals within India, will be able to hold the country accountable in an international forum. Second, given that the practice is entirely domestic, the international community must rely on Indian domestic courts to apply international law to the devadasi institution. Unfortunately, India suffers from a serious lack of enforcement of such laws.

The Devadasis are prone to AIDS and other health issues at a young age. Eventually, they also give birth to children, which makes it impossible for them to get out of the system even if they want to, with additional mouths to be fed. On the other hand in Ballari Koppal districts, giving birth to kids and aging also makes these women less desirable as younger women enter the supply chain of the Devadasi system.

Women as young as 30 are often considered old for the profession. As they do not have anything except their bodies to sell, they end up selling them wherever they can. This also means having sex with lorry drivers and random men on the road for just a meagre amount of twenty or thirty rupees. These men, in turn, carry and spread HIV through India's extensive road network. In a never ending vicious circle where everything, including caste, class, and gender, plays against them, the Devadasi system continues to haunt us.

The devadasi practice continues to exist despite both domestic and international law prohibiting it. As discussed, the chief reasons for its persistence are economic, religious, and societal, each of which force women to partake in the practice while also curtailing any meaningful action being taken against the tradition as a whole. While the reasons behind the perpetuation of the devadasi practice seems to have deep roots in the Indian consciousness, recent events in India indicate that the populace is beginning to push for meaningful change. This section first discusses the reason for that change in the Indian mindset. It then argues that judges can capitalize on this changing mindset and put the final nail in the devadasi practice's coffin.

Perhaps judges most obvious power is to ensure that the law, as laid down by the legislator, is interpreted and applied in an effective manner. In the case of sexual exploitation in India, and particularly in regards to the devadasi practice, judges would do well to vigorously apply the newly created laws, which as noted above, create expedited causes of actions against those who commit or facilitate sexual exploitation. The Indian Supreme Court seems to be taking the lead on the issue by taking an active role in the prosecution of those involved in the practice. For example, the Court recently required that various officials in India, in particular the Karnataka Chief Secretary, take meaningful steps to protect young girls who are going to be dedicated to the devadasi practice.

Conclusion

The Devadasi is a Sanskrit term which means servant of Deva (GOD) or Devi (GODESS). This is a kind of religious practice carried on basically in the southern part of India. In which a girl in her pre puberty period was dedicated to worship and service of deity or a temple for the rest of her life by her parents. They would be 'married' to the deity and after the ceremony they are required to perform useful functions at temples like cleaning of temples, lighting lamps, dressing the deities etc. They were also involved in singing devotional songs, dancing in devotion to the deities, teaching music and dance to the girls and to carry on and develop the tradition of classical music and dance. Devadasi's were respected member of the society and it was believed that they are eternally married suhagan who is never widowed. And their presence in marriage ceremony for the purpose of making mangalsutra was compulsory. It was believe that the bride who wears that mangalsutra will die suhagan.

The system of devadasis was misunderstood by the Mughal rulers and Europeans as because they were totally unaware about the idea of art as an offering to God. As per their understanding girls dancing and singing in temple are doing that for the purpose of entertainment of rich people and they were not better than prostitute.

But this religious practice was deteriorated during medieval period due to destruction of large number of temples. This phenomena in Ballari Koppal districts leads to degrade the status of Devadasi's in society and because of their financial problem they became mistress of royal and rich man. Any girl child born from that union was also dedicated to temple and boy born were trained as musicians. This led to the religious prostitution in temples of India which continues till date. The devadasis were exploited by the rich, powerful and upper class people and in the other side their economic needs were not permitted them to leave this practice and ultimately they were driven to the valley prostitution.

The first Law which declares this system illegal was enacted in the year of 1934 in the name of Bombay Devadasi Protection Act. Further the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947 outlawed this practice in Madras. In 1988, the devadasi system was completely outlawed all over India. What needed to be done is to think serious about the rehabilitation of devadasi's in society so to allow them to lead their life with human dignity.

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