

The Role of NGOs for Control of Devadasis System in Ballari and Koppal District

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Abstract

In olden days, after dedication, the girls danced at temple festivals and functions. The priests freely used them for sex and were later passed on to the village chiefs. Then they were the sexual objects for village seniors before they were made available to anyone who wanted them for sex. They had little choice but to become sex workers.

Although traditionally, devadasis may have danced at temples, most of the contemporary devadasis do not even mention this. Sex work is the primary work. Most contemporary devadasis have a regular partner who supports them. They have children, although children have no rights on their father's name or property. Apart from their regular partner they have some clients they cater to, but they are selective.

Most devadasis say their families were driven to destitution, and as Schedule Castes they were at the very bottom of the social order, living in clusters on the outskirts of the village. Poverty was the primary reason for 'dedicating' a daughter – who would then operate from a part of the house itself that would be earmarked for entertaining clients. The religious reason may have been there traditionally, in most current cases, it was sheer desperation that prompted 'dedication'. They are not allowed to marry because technically they are "married to God". Therefore, they are referred to as nitya sumangali – someone who can never be a widow. Devadasi system is a religious practice in parts of southern India, including Andhra Pradesh, whereby parents marry a daughter to a deity or a temple. The marriage usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires the girl to become a prostitute for upper-caste community members. Such girls are known as jogini. They are forbidden to enter into a real marriage. There have been opinions of many hues and colors about the genesis and growth of this system. In this section, an attempt has been made to present a comprehensive understanding of the dominant schools of thoughts. There are many factors that come into consideration when we try to trace the origin and the development of this intriguing system.

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

Introduction

Factors like religious beliefs, caste system, male domination and economic stress have been recognized as the stimulants behind the perpetuation of this phenomenon.

The beginning could be perhaps mapped out in the inscription found in temples. "The word Emperumandiyar which was used in the sense of Vaishnavas before 966 A.D. got the meaning of dancing girls, attached to Vishnu temples, in inscriptions of about 1230-1240 A.D. in the time of Raja Raya III. [Raghavacharya: I,118] In Maharashtra, they are called 'Devadasis' meaning female servants of God'. It should also be noted that in many quarters the emergence of the "devadasis" has been linked to the downfall of Buddhism in India. "That the devadasis were Buddhist nuns can be deduced from many evidences.

They are unknown to ancient India. Jaatakas, Kautilya or Vatsayana do not mention them, but later Puranas found them useful. The system started only after the fall of Buddhism and records of them start appearing around 1000 A.D." [bharatiya sanskruti kosh, IV, 448]. It is viewed that the "devadasis" are the Buddhist nuns who were degraded to the level of prostitutes after the temples were taken over by the Brahmins during the times of their resurgence after the fall of Buddhism. The Devadasi system was set up, according to a Times of India report (10-11-1987) as a result of a conspiracy between the feudal class and the priests (Brahmins). The latter, with their ideological and religious hold over the peasants and craftsmen, devised a means that gave prostitution their religious sanction. Poor, low-caste girls, initially sold at private auctions, were later dedicated to the temples. They were then initiated into prostitution.

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.

Objective:

This paper seeks explore The role of NGOs for control of devadasis system in Ballari and Koppal district

Devadasi social compulsions:

One can refer to the list put forward by the famous Indian scholar Jogan Shankar to determine the evolution of the system. According to him; the following are the reasons which played a major role in supplanting the system with firm roots:

1. as a substitute for human sacrifice.
2. as a rite to ensure the fertility of the land and the increase of human being and animal population.
3. as a part of phallic worship which existed in India from early Dravidian times.
4. Sprang from the custom of providing sexual hospitality for strangers.
5. Licentious worship offered by a people, subservient to a degraded and vested interests of priestly Class.
6. And lastly, to create custom in order to exploit lower caste people in India by upper castes and classes.

On the basis of the historical studies and research one can see the way the "sacred prostitution" established itself and grew to become a part of the Indian society. "Vasant Rajas, "Devdasi: Shodha ani bodha", (marathi), Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 1997, mentions of an inscription of 1004 A.D., in Tanjor Temple mentioning the numbers of devdasis to be 400 in Tanjor, 450 in Brahideswara temple and 500 in Sorti Somnath temple." "According to Chau Ju-Kua, Gujarat contained 4000 temples in which lived over 20,000 dancing girls whose function was to sing twice daily while offering food to the deities and while presenting flowers." Eminent Indian historians like R.C Mazumder and U.N Ghoshal have corroborated these facts. They have acknowledged the "high proportion" in the number of the "devadasis" in the temples during the medieval period.

Sadly, due to the continuation of the factors responsible for the birth of the system, the tradition has maintained itself over the centuries. It is found in all parts of India, but was more prevalent in the south. In some parts of Maharashtra and Karnataka it is still prevalent and has become a source of exploitation of lower castes.

Acts and legislation

- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 (3 of 1988)
- The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
- Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973
- Indian Penal Code, 1860
- The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 (28 of 1989)
- Eve Teasing (New Legislation)
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929
- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 (34 of 1971)
- The Guardians and Wards Act, 1869
- The Indian Succession Act, 1925 (39 of 1925)
- The Minimum Wages Act
- The Factories Act, 1948
- The Guardians and Wards Act, 1860 (8 of 1890)
- The Hindu Adoptions & Maintenance Act, 1956
- The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique
- The Hindu Succession Act, 1956
- The Christian Marriage Act, 1872 (15 of 1872)
- National Commission for Women Act, 1990 (20 of 1990)
- The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976
- The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- The Special Marriage Act, 1954
- The Inter-State Migrant Workmen
- The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937
- The Hindu Minority & Guardianship Act, 1956
- The Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948
- The Indian Evidence Act, 1872 (yet to be reviewed)
- The Family Courts Act, 1984
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 (19 of 1929)
- The Foreign Marriage Act, 1969 (33 of 1969)
- The Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1979
- The Indian Divorce Act, 1969 (4 of 1969)
- The Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act, 2000

Various projects

Only when women are empowered, we may build a world, that is worthwhile to live in. The cause to empower women must not fade under any circumstances and there should be persistent genuine efforts to achieve gender equality. We are offering assistance for "ALL PROJECTS" that serve the cause of women empowerment.

A few projects undertaken so far are as under:

1. Women Education Awareness Generation Programs
2. HIV/AIDS Awareness Programs
3. Welfare for Widows
4. Campaign against Child Marriage
5. Education & Training programs
6. Accommodation & Housing for women
7. Welfare programs for Disabled
8. Campaign against Trafficking & prostitution
9. Rehabilitation of rape victims, prostitutes etc.
10. Women & Child Health
11. Self Help Group Projects
12. Help for the Elderly

Steps involved in approval of Projects:

1. Online Submission of Project
2. Summery Appraisal
3. Submission of Detailed Project Report
4. Appraisal of Detailed Project Report
5. Survey
6. Survey Report Evaluation
7. Board Appraisal
8. Sanction of Grant
9. Disbursal of Funds



Case profile Sakhi Trust

Sakhi Trust works with the underserved population in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region (HYKA) which comprises six districts of Karnataka: Bidar, Gulbarga, Yadgir, Raichur, Bellary and Koppala. The HYKA region is, according to the Human Development Indices, the most unprogressive part of Karnataka in terms of human development indices. The Nanjunadappa Commission report from 2003, submitted by the High Power Committee on regional imbalances, describes in detail the backwardness of this region.

The main reason for this lack of development is the 400 year long ruling of the Nizams of Hyderabad that lasted until the region's liberation in 1948. The Nizams neglected the youth in their territory immensely which led, among other things, to a huge lack of education and employment opportunities.

Sakhi started to intervene in the HYKA-region, more precisely in Hosapete Taluka (Bellary), in 2002. When our trust became registered as a formal trust in 2007, it became a platform for youth, women and children in both rural and urban areas. Since then, Sakhi gives a voice to the voiceless and holds out a helping hand to those who suffer from oppression and unequal treatment. At present, we are working in 5 slums, 10 villages, 3 girls hostels, 12 colleges and 20 government schools.

SHG the first steps towards the Devdasi empowerment

Devdasi is an age-old traditional system in which young girls from the Dalit community dedicate their lives to a local deity/goddess, and are expected to lead a life in service of the goddess. As part of the ritual, a ceremony is organised in which girls are dressed as brides and once it is over their clothes are removed by five boys. It is an oppressive practice where women and young girls are regarded as temple property and face sexual exploitation. Although the practice is widely believed to have been abandoned decades ago, young women are still being pushed to the system. Recently, this practice was reported from districts of Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh and Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu by some NGOs that forced the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to seek reports from the two states. In Karnataka too the ancient practice still exists in some areas because of socio-economic factors and lack of enforcement of the law. Devdasis are mainly exploited because they lack education. So to empower these women Dinesh Naik runs a crowdfunding campaign to support education of children of Devdasis. While the focus is to raise funds through crowdfunding, the campaign also aims to meet local industrialists, mobilise CSR funds, and government funds for skill centres and schemes. Once funds are collected, immediate attention would be given to provide coaching to children for entrance exams for admission to residential schools and also to re-start the learning centres that have been closed due to lack of funds. In recent times, the devdasi system has started to disappear, having been outlawed in all of India in 1988. Most of the devdasis could get the courage to step out of this evil custom with the efforts of the government and several NGOs, but life is still hard for them. One such NGO, Mahila Abhivruddi Mattu Samrakshana Samsthe (MASS), is based in the Belagavi (formerly known as Belgaum) district of the southern Indian state of Karnataka.

MASS mainly works with dalit (oppressed castes) women, with a focus on ex-devdasi women and their children. It is a membership association of ex-devdasi women and was registered as a society in September 1997. Current membership of MASS is 3628 ex-devdasi women. In the region where the Indian states of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Telangana meet, the traditional practice of devdasis lingers, despite having been banned in 1988. Girls between the ages of 10 and 12, belonging

to the Maha Dalit caste, are subjected to a ceremony in which they are dedicated to a goddess. With a necklace tied around her neck, a girl is committed to a life as a devadasi, literally translated as “servant of God.”

In reality, however, she becomes a servant to men, mainly to be used for sex. After the ceremony, the girl is paraded out in public: While the custom is to go and beg alms from houses, this serves to acknowledge her availability and invite extra-marital alliances. Once a man’s proposal for a devadasi is accepted by her parents, he is obliged to financially support her and her family. But often, he quickly loses interest and she and her family are left to fend for themselves. She is never allowed to marry, because she is considered to be married to God.

Begging is a cultural right of the devadasi, and the villagers of her community are obliged to give her food. If her partner is abusive or corrupt, she can ask him to leave so she can take another partner. But exercising this “right” earns the devadasi a reputation as “sulagis” – prostitutes – leading to lifelong discrimination and ostracization. At Sampark, been working with devadasis in the Koppal district since 1997. With our help, the women have organized themselves into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) that serve not only as cooperatives to engage in financial dealings and enterprise awareness, but also as safe spaces for social and political empowerment. The SHGs bring together women from different castes and allow them access to small loans for day-to-day consumption, such as buying food in lean periods, or for investment and income generation – for instance, as funding for agriculture, cows and buffaloes or small shops. The model offers the women the financial support they need to educate their children and offer them vocational training with a view to eliminating intergenerational poverty. Sampark has committed to working with these women for a long period – five to seven years at least – to ensure they have the time to overcome their multiple constraints gradually. The legal way to protect devadasis would be to invoke the laws against child sexual abuse and caste-based atrocities, and provide child protection to the dedicated girls. However, few NGOs have been able to use this legal route to stop the practice, as the laws are poorly implemented and many families dedicate their daughters in secret.

Role of NGO in eradicating the devdasi evil in in Ballari Koppal districts:

The role, status and position of women has not been static through the ages but has actually ranged from what is mentioned to have been one of freedom and a position of importance to the other extreme of considerable subservience.

Despite all the official proclamations about empowerment and the numerous government schemes designed to improve women's economic and social conditions, their present status still shows much cause for concern.

Although efforts have been made over the years by the Indian government to empower women socially, economically, and politically, enactment of legislation has been difficult to implement due to the vastness of the country, the wide distribution of the female workforce, lack of education and literacy, and the indifferent attitude of government bureaucracy.

IWWF was founded with this soul aim to initiate and facilitate such processes and initiatives where socially and economically marginalized women irrespective of age, caste, class or race are able to participate actively in the process of their development so that they are able to lead a life of dignity and respect. Women of India have nothing to say in shaping the economic and political space in which they live. It is imperative that their thoughts and visions, intuitive skills, concrete and effective participation in development, and their deep aspiration for a more peaceful world be considered to help catalyze the will for the transformation of systems and structures into pathways of equality, development and peace.

Every change on the planet starts with a new state of consciousness, a new awareness, and a new vision. The main thrust of IWWF programs is to create a new development paradigm, which is the result of a new awareness to set the motion for women's empowerment programs and worldwide culture for empowering women by mobilizing NGOs, governments and the media to spread the women welfare awareness and educate the public at large on effective measures like human right to equality, peace, health care & improved opportunities, protective skills and their right to dignity.

Conclusion

A sustainable solution to ending the practice of devadasis requires addressing the root causes of the problem: poverty, caste and oppression. If a devadasi is able to financially support her family and herself, she can choose not to have a male partner. But while economic empowerment is a crucial factor, it is not enough to stop the exploitation of women as devadasis. Being a member of a self-help group also socially empowers these women to speak up about their issues. If a girl is likely to be “dedicated,” the group puts a stop to it by reasoning with her parents and finding an alternate solution for her family. Gender-based violence is also better tackled by a women’s collective rather than a woman on her own. Membership in an SHG enables the women to pull back the curtain and expose and question abuse by their partners. Religion and culture have glorified devadasis, making the practice acceptable in local communities. Many sex workers call themselves devadasis and get themselves temple dedications to wipe off the stigma of being a commercial sex worker. This trend gives the government the excuse it needs to claim that there are no real devadasis left.

Despite the practice having been banned in India almost 30 years ago, a retired judge has estimated that there are still about 450,000 devadasis in the country. The government has not taken any notice of his report, leaving the oppression of young girls to continue – even become normalized – without any legal or punitive consequences. Many of the devadasi women who have taken part in our SHGs have overcome the poverty that so often leads their families to dedicate them in the first place. But educational support and vocational training for their children is still needed to prevent the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty.

The devadasi system is not a cultural practice by any stretch of imagination, but a system of child rape, sexual slavery, caste discrimination and gender-based violence. The importance of focused child protection laws to stop this practice cannot be stressed enough. All policymakers, donors and NGOs in the region also need to identify the remaining devadasis and provide them with the means to economically empower themselves, so their daughters will never have to don a necklace that dooms them to a life of exploitation, abuse and neglect.

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