



A study of the devadasi system as a form of brutal exploitation in terms of violence, discrimination, and oppression.

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Abstract

This paper attempts to disclose the brutal exploitation in the name of the Devadasi system. Many cultures in South Africa, Europe, and the Middle East have historically married girls to deities or priests. In India, this system is known by several names, including Devadasi, Mathamma, Jogini, and Basavis. Devadasi is a case of child prostitution. Because young girls are exploited in the name of ritual practices, the Devadasi system is not only an exploitation of women and the impotent, but it is also organizational exploitation of lower castes Dalits in religious rituals. Prostitution of helpless economically and socially deprived young girls and women is sanctioned; it is the glorification of women's humiliation. This system stifles personal and social development and has become a major issue in some southern Indian rural areas. These adolescent sex workers in "southern rural India" Victimization, poverty, and ancient traditional practices all collaborate to oppress these young sex workers in "southern rural India." which are very evidently proven in my further chapters.

Introduction

This paper attempts to study the gender struggle as explored through the devadasi system using the framework of intersectionality. The dissertation is dealing with the system called the devadasi system. Devadasi is a name given to a girl who is dedicated to a deity in a temple for the purpose of service as well as worship of the deity. This system is known by different names in India, such as Devadasi, Basavi, Mathamma, and Jogini. It is also referred to as a holy practice. This ancient practice of girls being married to a temple or god was similar to the practice of sacred prostitution prevalent in ancient Rome, Egypt, and Greece.

The word 'Devadasi' comes from the Sanskrit word 'Deva' meaning God, and the word 'Dasi' means a female servant. It celebrates the wedding of a girl to the deity, after which she becomes a temple caretaker. There is even a group of devadasis who perform all the rituals, including dance and music, in honour of the deity in the temple. "This tradition dates back to the sixth century"(Manoj) .

Originally, the girls learned and practiced the arts such as Bharathanatyam, Odissi, etc, as well as taking care of the temple and engaging in rituals while performing dance. Traditionally, the ceremony in which the girl is dedicated is similar to a wedding and is called 'Pottukattu'. Originally, devadasis were regarded as women well versed in culture, as well as the arts like dance, music, and literature, however, as time passed, the word devadasi became synonymous with a prostitute. Traditionally, the term 'Devaradiyar' was used to refer to devadasi girls, today the word has transformed into 'Devidiya' and refer to a prostitute.

According to the types of rituals and rites they are responsible for, Devadasis are usually divided into two groups. One group will perform certain kinds of rites and rituals. of cleaning the temple premises, and working and decorating flowers. The second group was involved in cultural arts such as dance and music in the temple. The majority of girls who are dedicated in this paper are from schedule caste communities, but women from other castes like Brahmans and Kshatriyas were also included. Several factors contribute to the Devadasi system in Karnataka and Kolkata. An important consideration, is how the devadasi system was prevalent during the shift of rulers particularly later after the involvement of Mughals and Britishers in the country during which many temples were broken and their status in society collapsed, they were also exploited and degraded by the authorities, the Hindu kingdoms were taken over by Muslim Kings who ruled the kingdom

from 1509 to 1529 AD. Under Krishnadevaraya's rule, all forms of art, including literature and religion, flourished, and this period saw the rise and prosperity of Devadasi women, who were respected by both kings and commoners alike. The devadasi system did not end with the girls being dedicated to the temple; the children of the devadasis were also dedicated to the temple, and the system persisted generation after generation. Additionally, devadasi children experience problems such as tagging, as in children of a devadasi.

Why do parents enroll their children in the devadasi system? Parents choose to dedicate their daughters, and it has been established that devotion is a forced act. The second, and most essential, the issue is poverty, which is a crucial component that facilitates devadasi system dedication. Unaware that the upshot of such a system is prostitution and begging, both of which were previously regarded as social evils. Society and women's relationships break as a result of such a relationship between parent and daughter because the girls understand that it is their family who forces them into the habit. Dr. Muthulakshimi Reddy was a unique figure who was a passionate and powerful advocate for the devadasi system's abolition. She became Vice President of the Madras Legislative Council in 1930, and it was in that council that she introduced the measure to repeal the devadasi practice. Though the practice is prohibited in most regions of India today, it is owing to poverty and a mixture of caste systems that open the way for such dedication even now.

This paper would then concentrate on the major two chapters. The second chapter attempts to analyze Shyam Singha Roy's use of the concept of mise-en-scene. The paper also explores questions such as what is mise-en-scene in film, the goals of mise-en-scene, and actors' roles in performing and delivering ideas and meaning to the audience. Beginning with the second half of the film, which is a retro section, it describes Nani and Sai Pallavi's retro look, including the costumes that Sai Pallavi wore during her dance performance. The third chapter establishes the area of female oppression, as seen in *Servants of the Goddess* and Shyam Singha Roy. The chapter also reveals heartbreaking life stories of devadasis, tying together the film and book. I examined how gender and caste bias was portrayed in the film and book.

Chapter 2

Reform and revival

This chapter will primarily focus on the film *Shyam Singha Roy*, released on 24-12-2021 directed by Rahul Sankrityan, and acted by Nani and Sai Pallavi. It begins with Vasudev aspiring to be a filmmaker, which is how he met Keerthi, by showing Keerthi smoking cigarettes, which is how Vasu was impressed by her body language, this defies stereotypes. and Vasu thought she was a cliché until he finally pursued her to act in his short film. The first half ends with Vasu facing a copy infringement case. The majority of shots about devadasi were taken in the second half. Devadasis remained wealthy thanks to the patrons of the arts, but in recent centuries, some devadasis were forced to become prostitutes in order to survive. The term prostitution is now considered an insult to women, also meaning a woman without morals, which validates disrespect for anyone tagged with a Devadasi's identity. Shyam becomes more active in social revolutionary fighting against the devadasi system in the second half after falling in love with a devadasi woman. He is the protagonist of the eponymous film. The majority of women trapped in this system escape thanks to the hero of the film, who also marries a devadasi woman. *Shyam Singha Roy* focuses on empowering these marginalized people and attempting to counteract negative stereotypes of Devadasis. He strongly believes that every woman deserves to be respected regardless of social or caste background. The film by including an ancient cultural artifact named the devadasi system that still exists in India today portrays the sad part of the drastic change from bestowing power and prestige upon the woman who chose to serve God to labeling devadasis as a prostitute resulting in the devadasi's status deteriorating over centuries. Although the film is about the plight of women and offers a solution in which a woman can be liberated from the role of devadasi, they are still shown as victims, with only a male hero as a savior and rescuer. This is one flaw in the film that undermines the message of female empowerment by making a man the hero. This chapter will examine the concept of Mise-en-scene, narrative techniques, and other catchy technical elements to study how the film engages with the devadasi system. Mise-en-scene is simply the French term for the "action of putting on the stage" in a film, and the director is referred to as metteur-en-scene, which means "one who puts on the stage." Lighting, composition, art direction, costume, and makeup are the elements of the concept of mise-en-scene that are involved, in other words, everything that happens in front of the camera. "Mise-en-scene is the term used to describe the art of designing and organizing the scenes for a film"(Matt).

Costumes

The costume is an important aspect of the mise-en-scene because it can express the character's situation and consciousness. Neeraja Kona is the costume designer for *Shyam Singha Roy's* major characters such as Sai Pallavi and Nani. “The costume adds value to the Mise-en-scene by strengthening and toning up the film's quality”(Matt). Cotton was the primary fabric used in the film, according to the costume designer, and cotton was mostly worn by the hero and heroine(Neeshita). The basic idea behind this could be that the team wanted the audience to experience the earthy feel that cotton and linen fabrics create. The costume design team worked hard to achieve the cloth texture or design that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s.



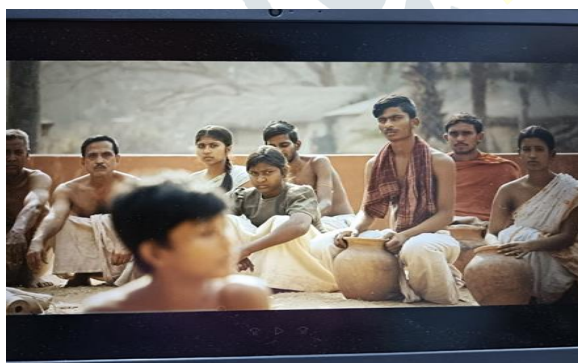
(*Shyam Singha Roy* 2:00:34)

As seen in the above image, Pallavi, who played Devadasi, wore an embroidered Bengal saree to stay true to the era. The costume team made this possible by checking the reference motifs from that time period, and most of the characters in the film wore authentic cotton fabrics. To make an impression of the early 1970s in traditional wear, Kano and the costume design team opted for a saree, the most famous of which was an ivory cotton saree with a red border, better known as the 'lal paar' saree, paired with a red puffed-sleeve blouse.



(*Shyam Singha Roy* 1:55:22)

The image above depicts a wedding in the film between Shyam and Rosy, during which she was dressed in an old vintage saree. According to the film's costume designer Kano, many of the costumes were purchased from vintage stores in the setting of Kolkata and Bengal, and many of them alternated the ripped saree with the same color of the fabric. Shyam's costume in the film reflects his upper-class personality by requiring him to wear fully ironed, neat dresses. The Dalit community and devadasis wear very mild color costumes with no brightening color, and only the upper caste community ladies were shown wearing blouses not the Dalit community or devadasis.



(*Shyam Singha Roy* 1:05:16)



(*Shyam Singha Roy* 1:42:22)

Makeup

The first poster that the team released is the look of Bhadra kali, a look created for Pallavi the heroine with a heavy makeup of bold eyes and red lipstick to give a vibrant touch dark bindi was also kept. In between movies, Bhadra Kali was shown twice. The actress is seen in a royal purple saree holding a trident in her hand,

also wearing a lot of jewelry and a lot of flowers in her hair. Except for this sequence of her performing Bharatanatyam, she was shown wearing heavy makeup, whereas, in the majority of the film's sequences, she is wearing very subtle makeup. Pallavi's jewelry was highlighted in keeping with the Bengali look; she wore traditional accessories such as a long neckpiece, bangles known as Shankha-pola, a delicate nose ring, and gold jhumkas. To make an impression, she was also holding a traditional, painted bamboo hand fan. The lead actor Shyam Singha Roy was also dressed to look appealing in his role as a Bengali Writer. In the film, his costume designer also stated that before settling on the final look, the team experimented with 15 different outfits. Roy underwent a brief makeover such as he grew mustache in order to fulfil his role as a social reformer and revolutionary writer in Bengal. Roy's appearance includes a hairstyle, mustache, and a complete change in clothing style that would represent men in Bengal in the 1970s. In terms of dialogue delivery, Shyam worked hard to perfect his diction in order to deliver powerful Bengali dialogues.

Lighting:-

Lighting is an important aspect of cinematography. It comes in a variety of styles, depending on settings, and techniques. This dissertation will look at the lighting techniques, placements, and setups used in the film, particularly the most prominent lighting techniques used in the film. The backlight adds depth to the shot and distinguishes your subject from the background. It should be placed behind the subject and shine a light on the subject's head and shoulders. The key light is simply the main light. It should be the primary source of light for the subject.



(*Shyam Singha Roy* 1:28:28)

The director uses natural light in the majority of the shots to emphasize the early 1970s feel. Natural light is light that comes from a natural source. The sun and the moon are the two most common sources of natural

light. One example is shown in the image above. Natural lighting was frequently employed, with a backlight focusing on the object and striking an actor or object from behind. This technique is used to distinguish an object or an actor from the background. They add shape and depth. Backlighting makes the frame appear three-dimensional.

Practical lighting



(*Shyam Singha Roy* 1:15:00)

Another prominent technique used in the film is practical lighting. The use of regular, working light sources such as lamps and wood fires is referred to as practical lighting. The set designer or lighting crew will usually include these on purpose to create a cinematic nighttime scene. Because there are so many scenes shot at night, the director may prefer to use this technique. Practical lighting is also used to illuminate the subject subtly.

Camera Angles



(*Shyam Singha Roy* 1:13:18)

The camera angle used in the above image is known as an "extreme long shot," in which objects take up only a small portion of the screen. The main purpose of using this shot is to establish the location by covering a larger area. The given screenshot clearly focuses on its surroundings. Nonetheless, the subject is shot from a distance, and the character is usually visible in the frame. This is evident from the fact that the devadasis

were focused on the left side, while the audience was focused on the right. This shot also shows how devadasis were always on the outside of society and were not equally mixed in with the audience.

High angle shot



(Shyam Singha Roy 1:07:07)

When combined with the appropriate mood, setting, and effects, this particular high-angle shot makes the subject appear vulnerable and powerless. The above scene was shot when Shyam drops a Dalit man inside the well in order to spark a revolution that all humans have equal rights. Initially, the Dalit people sat beside the well, requesting water from upper caste men and women. One of the dalit men was extremely thirsty but was unable to obtain water to drink. The unfortunate part is that they were not permitted to draw water from the well because they are considered untouchables. When the film's hero, despite coming from an upper-caste family, raises his voice against this injustice, the Dalit man is dropped into the well, and the film's high angle shot was taken during that scene. A circle surrounded the well, symbolically placing the upper caste people on the periphery, while the Dalit man inside the well representing being in the center of society. The film's hero is the one who attempts to bring the marginalized subaltern into the mainstream of society.

Chapter 3

Devadasi and the Goddess

Catherine Rubin Kermorgant's debut novel, *Servants of the Goddess*, was published in 2014. This novel is divided into three sections that describe the lives of devadasis, from how they fell into this trap to how it led to poverty and suffering among modern devadasis, particularly in small villages in India. In the film *Shyam Singha Roy*, will be a successful social writer, and in this selected novel, we meet an aspiring director who wants to film a documentary about Devadasi's life experience.

In *Servants of the Goddess*, Kermorgant stated that after finishing her research on devadasi, she decided to travel to India and film their real-life experiences of what they had gone through and how they were forced to be a part of this system. She traveled to a small village called Kalyana in India to learn more about the myths surrounding the devadasi system and the truth behind them. Another noteworthy feature is that her documentary would be sponsored by BBC On the research. Catherine was accompanied by Vani, who assisted her with interpretation; both women were emotionally moved by the Devadasis' heartbreaking stories. Stories about how, at a certain age, they were suddenly 'beaded' without their knowledge.

The issue of devadasi is really pushed into this system, whether they want to or not. The book reveals the answer through their stories of being forced to marry against their will by their families when they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. According to research, only after colonization did the impact in affecting the name that devadasis held vanish, and it's the colonial impact that the public more or less started calling them prostitution. This happened after they are bound by this profession to grant sexual favors to temple visitors, and thus the aftermath thread of survival for them.

Catherine stated in her introduction that Devadasis are mostly untouchables who dedicate themselves to the temple at a very young age, even before puberty. This is evident when the director of the film *Shyam Singha Roy* used a shot to showcase different age groups of devadasis who survive as a group; in that case, there is one scene in which a priest chooses a young girl for his sexual satisfaction and their sufferings begin at a very young age and last their entire lives. . The research process progresses, and as Catherine gets closer to the devadasis of Kalyana, she realizes the full impact of their plight. The novel focuses on the significant

theme of oppression caused by their poverty; devadasis are expected to work to support their families, including the responsibilities of marrying off their siblings.

There is a short film called 'Devadasi' which portrays how many young children killed themselves by attempting suicide in the temple. Similarly for Catherine, it was shocking to learn that devadasis mostly die young or in their mid-40s by either committing suicide or leaving temple but they couldn't settle in a decent profession. The majority of them are haunted by loneliness or suffer from severe depression. Unfortunately, some of them became addicted to alcoholics as well

In the three parts of the book, the first part of the book is an introduction in which Catherine discusses her interest in the field of research. It focuses on the devadasis revealing their story of oppression and destitution. In the second part of the book, Catherine returns to Kalyana with a film crew that includes Dilip, an upper caste Brahmin family boy who disappoints Catherine by revealing that the Devadasi system is simply an old Indian cultural tradition which has nothing to do with oppression or exploitation of poor women today. In another chapter, Dilip stated the benefits of the Devadasi system, such as financial stability, being considered God's wife, and so on. An aspiring Bengali writer and social reformer who wanted to make a huge difference in the lives of Devadasi and the power that the pen has to change the world around them, this is similar to Shyam in the film.

It is the woman who initiates encouraging Shyam also to save the lives of other Devadasis trapped in the temple, especially after marrying a Devadasi and saving her life. In the novel, we see Catherine preparing to document the lives of young devadasis in the hope that it will bring a positive change in their lives by being noticed globally.

Class and Caste

In the villages, untouchables were treated horribly, especially if it's a woman or even a devadasi, and we can see how caste and gender work together here to marginalize and silence women. Catherine discusses humanity and how the ill-treatment of untouchables was very cruel to witness. She also states that this happens with humans discriminating against other humans simply because they were born in different households.

The same situation occurs in the film when Shyam speaks out against caste-based discrimination, depicting the situation in Bengal during the period when the upper caste community refused to allow the lower caste to fetch water from the same well they used. A Dalit man asks the upper caste people to give him water, but they refuse, which is when the hero enters and erupted in rage at the people for not giving him water and speaks in favor of the Dalit community, despite being an upper-caste character in the film. Caste and class discrimination were also evident when Dalit community members were unable to stand equal to upper community members. Shyam starts his speech by stating that man-made terms and the realisation of how we have classified ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, into various aspects based on language, caste, religion, and ethnicity are personalised only to make ourselves feel secure.

The book depicts the reality of how only a certain class of women can rise to become the premier of the nation, while marginalized women classified by class and caste continue to be exploited, without a voice or empowerment. In the film, too we see how only the upper caste writer reformer speaks out against all of the social imbalances that affect the marginalized group of people. *Servants of Goddess* is an open book where one laughs and cries at the injustices that happen in their daily lives, but *Shyam Singha Roy's* film created a climax with a happy ending that the power of writing can change people's minds or at least the superstitious beliefs that we still follow in the modern era.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The final chapter will focus on the analysis of the movie poster of “Shyam Singha Roy” and the analysis of the book cover of *Servants of Goddess*. It is disheartening not to see the face of a woman on both movie posters and book covers, particularly in woman-centric projects.

The main focus is on the so-called hero, who is shown as the savior of the devadasis, and The background is on the place where Shyam worked as a writer and publisher. In fact, the trailer of the film is entirely focused on devadasis and the violence that occurs in their lives, but the main idea in the poster is that through writing, the world can be moved away from superstitious beliefs and old traditional rituals that are primarily focused on the man and women are affected as victims. The idea of portraying this is evident in the left and right sides in the frame of the poster, have the typing machine and the rickshaw that Shyam used were largely chosen by the film's director.

Similarly, in the book, we see how the woman's face is half-cut and barely visible; it is designed in such a way that close inspection is required to identify it as a woman's picture shown with a blouse and neckpiece.

The book cover features a lot of green tones, which is an auspicious color for devadasis and represents nature, growth, and life because the deities are associated with green. Another interpretation is that the unmarried form of the goddess Durga, Brahmacharim, is worshipped by the devadasis and the color green is worn on that auspicious day, as it represents the harmony that the deities bring into their lives. The book's title, *Servants of the Goddess*, is thought-provoking in terms of how the balance between treating devadasis as servants and goddesses is portrayed within a simple title and gives the reader insights into religion, myth, and tradition surrounding the devadasi system. In addition, the book discusses social structures and the caste system.

Songs in the movie and Quote in the book

“Is this much my wealth?

Says this Dussehra festival's night

Discovers him, his girl's dreams

fulfilling them brings in glitter in her eyes

How big is this beauty?

No one can match her beauty

Looks like she has taken birth when there was shown a mirror to the universe

This is an introduction of the sky to land"(Sastry)

Basavanna, a twelfth-century Bhakti saint

The rich will make temples for Shiva

What shall I, a poor man, do?

My legs are pillars,

The body the shrine,

The head a cupola of gold.

Listen, O lord

Things standing shall fall, but the moving ever shall stay" Kermorgant 82)

Both the movie song lyrics and the book quotes are similar in that they both discuss beauty by describing body structures. Both are intended to be prayers to God for well-being. Furthermore, the song lyrics begin with "This is my wealth," and the book quote begins with a description of the priest who built and owns the Shiva temple by extending God gave land to the rich, highborn people, and the poor must be a chore of working that land. And the high-caste women in the village as described in the book are mostly inside their homes without any work that the lower caste community women have to do. Women first incorporated into the temple services after the rock-cut cave temple of Badami were sculpted at the beginning of the Bhakti movement. Through these lines of both movie and book, the power structure of brahmin dominance combined with new agricultural techniques led to gradual changes in the structure and organization of society.

India was once a rich country; there was no poverty and no exploitation. "Everything was fine until foreign rulers emptied the coffers"(Kermogant). It was only the British, and their victorian values, that devadasis came to be looked down upon. It was the British with their reforms who degraded the system. Moreover, devadasis were exploited for the benefit of the ruling classes and paved the way for the oppression of women in many ways such as violence, discrimination, and resilience.

This research focuses specifically on the intersections of gender and caste in the Indian context. Men from lower castes face similar issues, but the Devadasi system is unique to women from lower castes. Women from higher castes are also dedicated to the temple, but they do not rely on the system for a living, according to the participants. They are also not compelled to offer sexual favors due to their social status as a result of their caste. Girls from higher castes who are dedicated to the temple are only named after the Goddess, and they only come to the temple once a year to pray and live a normal life. However, it does not happen in the same way for women from lower castes because we lack any financial or social background and are easily exploited by the villagers., the woman had the financial capital to stay away from the system and instead use her association with the system in a positive way. This example reinforces the argument that the intersection of the two fields of gender and caste, as well as the intersection of the two capitals financial and social, both, play an equally important role in shaping a Devadasi's experience. Devadasis are treated with the utmost importance and respect during festivals and rituals. Everyone in the village, regardless of caste, class, or gender, touches the feet of the Devadasis and seeks their blessings, as seen in the film when a lady with her child requests the Devadasis to bless her child and also touches the Devadasi's feet to seek blessing, but once they enter the temple, a big door is closed and the other side of the Devadasis is treated exactly the opposite way. However, this elevated status only lasts during religious ceremonies, and afterward, these women face numerous problems due to their gender and caste status.

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