

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ROLE OF THE DEVADASI SYSTEM AND CHALLENGES TOWARDS ABOLITION

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ABSTRACT

In India, a devadasi is a female artist dedicated to worshipping and serving a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. Devadasi translates as "female slave to god." Women's conditions continue to deteriorate under this system. Efforts to abolish the Devadasi System almost always encounter resistance due to strong underlying beliefs about caste and culture, as well as community acceptance of the system. In addition, inadequate rehabilitation (e.g. lack of vocational skills and job opportunities), lack of awareness, and weak enforcement of the laws create further challenges for complete elimination of the system. 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. The devadasi system is currently most common in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra, where it is especially common among the "Beriya" and "Nat" communities. They were not permitted to marry human husbands due to their devadasi status.

KEYWORDS: Caste System, Sexual Exploitation, Cultural Exploitation, Institutionalized Sexual Exploitation, Socio-Economic Vulnerability.

Introduction

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 sensitization, would be the ideal way forward.

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. Their primary responsibilities included looking after the temple and studying ancient Indian dances, particularly Bharatanatyam, which they used to perform at temple rituals. Devadasis were respected members of the society and it was believed that they are eternally married suhagan who is never widowed. Despite the practice's honorable past, the devadasi system has devolved into institutionalized sexual exploitation of the poorest segments of Indian society.

What Is the Devadasi System?

The Devadasi System is a traditional practice in which young girls were dedicated to a temple deity and expected to serve the temple through rituals, music, and dance. With the passage of time, the structure of the system deteriorated, resulting

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in exploitation and social discrimination towards the Devadasis. Today, it is widely condemned and illegal in India, although some form of the practice continues to exist in some areas. The Devadasi System is a traditional practice where young girls were dedicated to temple deities, later leading to exploitation and social discrimination in many regions of India.

Coordinated Social Reform Initiatives for Devadasi System

Devadasis were treated with tremendous respect back then because they were married to the gods. They were dedicated to a life without marriage and were regarded as auspicious with the tradition gradually deteriorated, especially throughout the Mughal Empire, British, and medieval sultanate periods. Their prestige declined due to the destruction of numerous temples and a loss of patronage, which led to their exploitation. It involves a ritual in which young girls, usually before puberty, are married off or dedicated to deities. It has been infamous for the sexual exploitation and discrimination against the girls and women.

It is recommended that even whilst acknowledging the sometimes-clandestine measures engaged in, in the continuation of this practice the Government must develop targeted interventions that allow one to identify the prevalence of various forms of the devadasi system. One such measure could include the availability of an anonymous tip line to allow people to report on this practice without fear of prosecution or punishment. These tips should be followed through with an investigation and actions carried out should form part of a reporting structure. Each police station where such cases are reported should keep an accurate database of these cases and then also detail how they dealt with the complaints.

The discriminatory and economic vulnerability of these lower caste devadasis make them more prone to sexual exploitation. Empowering people around their social, economic and political situation will strengthen their status in society and help them to understand the vulnerability of their position. It is essential to raise awareness and provide education to the devadasis to help them overcome the social and economic hurdles they face today.

Hence, inevitably, all of them are either illiterate or have received very little education, with no means for a stable income. Many Devadasis married into the local nobility or became mistresses of them. The offspring of such a relationship would be given to the temples as offerings. The sons of

such couplings would get musical training, while the daughters would be devoted to the temple.

- Domination
- Religion
- Poor Enforcement of Laws
- Poverty
- Patriarchy

Major Issues by Rehabilitation Measures for Devadasis

The Devadasi System often subjects women involved to considerable social, economic, and psychological pain. Several of those trapped in the Devadasi System are perpetually victimized, encounter barriers to education, and suffer from stigma and other limitations that curtail opportunities. The tradition declined over time, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate, Mughal, and colonial eras, due to the loss of patronage and mass destruction of temples.

Bearing in mind that the government has international reporting obligations, each State should call upon its specific bodies as contemplated in the Acts, to provide detailed statistics on the devadasi practice, the number of complaints, actions taken, false claims etc. The government must show its commitment to eliminating this exploitative practice by ensuring that every state is held accountable.

Strengthening and implementation of already existing legislations, policies, and programmes for the prevention of dedication and rehabilitation of devadasis is required as a starting point. Devadasis' social status degraded, leading to exploitation and their involvement with local rulers and noble classes. Offspring born from such relationships were dedicated to temples, contributing to the rise of religious prostitution. Initially a matter of pride, being a devadasi later became associated with prostitution, with their social status deteriorating during colonial rules.

It has been reported that a major contributing factor to this extreme level of exploitation can be linked to the continued practice of an ancient Hindu tradition called devadasi, a Sanskrit word which literally means 'servant of God' (Hartmann 2019). There are also income generation activities, scholarships, and hostels for children of devadasis and special importance is given to girl children of devadasis. But the major problem is that there is no mechanism to identify the devadasis, leading to exploitation of the state programmes for devadasis with these interventions is that it fails to address issues such as regular income for devadasis, proper education for the children of devadasis,

and the overall rehabilitation of devadasis. The devadasi practice is one in which low-caste girls, the Devadasi System also entrenches caste discrimination (within a caste society) and increases women's vulnerability to trafficking, violence, and poverty.

The Challenges Towards the Devadasi System

The Devadasi System almost always encounters resistance due to strong underlying beliefs about caste and culture, as well as community acceptance of the system. The practice of dedication to Yellamma and other deities continues in various regions of India. A study has confirmed that complex issues surround the cult of Yellamma devi temple, the biggest controversy being its association with prostitution. In addition, inadequate rehabilitation (e.g. lack of vocational skills and job opportunities), lack of awareness, and weak enforcement of the laws create further challenges for complete elimination of the system.

For law enforcement, eliminating the Devadasi tradition encounters barriers, such as:

- Limited Awareness
- Tradition Endorsement
- Weak Enforcement
- Underreporting
- Lack of Awareness and Education
- Poverty and Economic Vulnerability

To completely eradicate this system, experts suggest a multi-sectorial approach involving strict legal enforcement, targeted economic rehabilitation almost always encounter resistance due to strong underlying beliefs about caste and culture, as well as community acceptance of the system. Regarding control over sexuality, most devadasis are Dalit women and are sexually exploited by priests and higher caste men. By keeping Dalit women as prostitutes, upper-caste men reinforce their declaration of social and economic superiority over the lower castes. The females of lower castes are exploited through their caste and gender-based social evils such as dowry practice, child marriage, devadasi, etc., of which, devadasi remains a social stigma. As women and Dalits, they are already members of the two most exploited groups in India. Widespread education, and community-based, sustained awareness campaigns to challenge the cultural acceptance of this exploitation.

Conclusion

This system was originally intended to honor deities through dance and music. But it has been marred by exploitation and abuse over time. The

practice often leads to the trafficking and forced prostitution of young girls. Despite being outlawed in 1988, the system continues to persist in certain pockets of the country. The Devadasi system's origin is debated, with theories including myth, occupation, mother goddess, Sanskritization, and more. It involved dedicating women for religious services, similar to practices in Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece.

Suffering from profound discrimination, a lack of education, and strength of religious beliefs, the devadasi practice has enabled upper-caste men to retain a pool of Dalit women for their sexual enjoyment. Poverty, social pressures, prejudice against girls, weak enforcement of laws, and a continuously blind belief fostered by society, priests, and temples that dedication confers spiritual favour creates the enabling environment within which the practice has survived until the present day. The gamy, arising from Mother Goddess worship, saw young girls married to deities and serving temples with divine status. Over time, the system shifted from matriarchal to patriarchal trends due to Sanskritization and the influence of powerful male deities.

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