

## **Devadasi System in India and Its Legal Initiatives – An Analysis**

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**Abstract:** *The Devadasi system was once prevalent right across India. It was known by different names in different places such as Devarattiyal in Tamil Nadu, Mahriss in Kerala, Natis in Assam, Muralis in Maharashtra, Basavis and Muralis in Andhra Pradesh and Jogatis and Basavis in Karnataka. The word “devadasi” is derived from two words, “deva” meaning God and “dasi” meaning slave or servant-woman. Every devadasi therefore, is a slave of God. Almost in all the parts of India, there is an ancient tradition of offering young boys and girls to deities; the tradition is prevalent in many rural areas. Particularly southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka state young boys and girls of tender age are offering to the Goddess Yallamma (or Renuka), whose main Shrine is situate in village “Soundati” in the nearby Belgaum district of Karnataka State (South India). These living sacrifices are known as “Devadasi” and they lead a wretched life. The word “Devadasi” might connote “Servant of god”, but in reality a girl child who is dedicated to the goddess is no more than a prostitute. For centuries the repressive tradition of Devadasi system has been prevailing in many parts of India. Devadasi system is not only exploitation of men, women and impotents but it is the organizational exploitation of lower castes Dalits in the religious rituals. Sanction given to prostitution of helpless economically and socially deprived young girls and women; it is the glorification of humiliation of women.*

**Keywords:** *Devadasi, Yellamma, Exploitation.*

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### **I. Introduction**

In South India, a devadasi (Sanskrit: servant of deva (god) or devi (goddess) is a girl "dedicated" to worship and service of a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. The dedication takes place in a Pottukattu ceremony which is similar in some ways to marriage. Originally, in addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, these women learned and practiced Bharatanatyam, Odissi and other classical Indian artistic traditions and enjoyed a high social status as dance and music were essential part of temple worship. Devadasi are Men and women were dedicated to temple & god's service. They developed the system of music and dance employed during temple festivals. Nattuvanars were the male accompanists of the devadasi during her performance. They conducted the music orchestra while the devadasi performed her service.

### **The Myth**

The myth behind dedication of girls to the goddess goes like this. Renuka, consort of sage Jamadagni, was a pure woman. She was so pure, that she could carry water in a freshly-moulded pot. She would mould one pot everyday on the banks of the river where she went to fetch water. On one of these trips, she happened to see a *Gandharva*<sup>1</sup> couple bathing in the river. She was struck by the handsome looks of the male partner as she saw his reflection in the river waters. But, because of this 'alleged violation' of her marital vows, the pot broke and her husband 'caught' her in this 'act of adultery'. He decided that she had 'sinned' by coveting a man who was not her husband. Angered by this puncture to his saintly ego, the sage at once ordered their 12-year-old son Parasuram to behead his own mother. The son did as told. Happy with his son's unquestioned obedience, Jamadagni wished to bless him with a boon. The clever son requested his father to bring his mother back to life. At this point, the sage saw a *matangi*<sup>2</sup> pass by. He beheaded her and attached the head to Renuka's body. When Renuka was thus resurrected, with the body of a saintly woman and the head of a matangi, Jamadagni wished to make amends for having acted in fury. He blessed her saying that unmarried girls would worship her as their Goddess and these girls would be dedicated to her for the rest of their lives by 'marrying' her and would then be ready to satisfy all sexual demands made on them by her son Parasuram, present as he was, within every man. The girls, said Jamadagni, would look at every man as Parasuram in human form and would thus readily satisfy his sexual needs without asking for anything in return – marriage in any form, or any kind of permanent bonding, or anything in cash or kind. These girls, Jamadagni endorsed, would have no right to turn back a man even if he was a leper asking for sexual favours. Their source of livelihood would come from begging for alms from door to door on the Friday of every week in the name of *Yellamma*.<sup>3</sup>

## The History

The custom of dedicating girls to Yellamma and to the temples of the Goddess is traced back to the 3rd Century A.D. during the period of the *Puranas*<sup>4</sup>. Devadasis at that time worked in temples as entertainers. They sang and danced at temple functions and religious festivals. A reference to the Devadasi system of the time as stated in the Puranas stated that persons who dedicated dancing girls to temples attained *swarga loka*<sup>5</sup> when they died. During the rule of the Pallava and Chola dynasties in the southern parts of India between the 6th and 13th century A.D., devadasis were accorded great respect and dignity by the society at large. They were the custodians of culture and the arts such as music and dance. Mention of them in ancient classical literature describes them as beautiful, accomplished, famous and honorable women. There is no hint of ostracism. They were bestowed with grand gifts of land, property and jewellery by wealthy and royal patrons so they were quite affluent. Inscriptions dating back to 1004 A.D. on the Raja Rajeshwar temple at Tanjore in the south maintain that there were 400 devadasis in the temple who were second in importance only to the temple priests who performed the religious rituals. The Someshwar shrine at Gujarat maintained 500 devadasis.

But the earliest reliable and explicit reference to the devadasi system in Pune, Maharashtra is found in copper plate inscriptions of the Rashtrakuta kings in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries. But the existence of devadasis in this region predates these inscriptions by many years. The Yadava kings of Daulatabad overthrew the Rashtrakuta kings in 973 A.D. But the devadasis continued with dancing in front of temple idols and in the bed-chambers of the new rulers, the Yadavas.

Pune came under the rule of Shahaji Bhonsale in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. By this time, '*peths*<sup>6</sup> in Pune such as Shaniwarpeth, Ravivar Peth and Somwarpeth had emerged. By 1818, devadasis had deteriorated to prostituting themselves for money. Devadasis remained entertainers but their entertainment now was through their bodies. They evolved into practicing courtesans skilled in the art of love-making.

There was a time when devadasis were considered to auspicious and holy that their presence was compulsory at every wedding for the making of the *mangal sutra*<sup>7</sup>. This was based on the belief that a devadasi is an eternally married *suhagan*<sup>8</sup> who is never widowed. It was believed that if she made the mangal sutra with her own hands, the bride who would wear it would also die a *sumangali*<sup>9</sup>. Those days have gone. Exploited by wealthy and powerful classes of men on the one hand and beset with poverty on the other, devadasis have been driven to prostitution.

Local kings often invited temple dancers to dance in their courts, the occurrence of which created a new category of dancers, rajadasis, and modified the technique and themes of the recitals. A devadasi had to satisfy her own soul while she danced unwatched and offered herself to the god, but the rajadasi's dance was meant to be an entertainment.

## Different Names of Devadasis

Such dancing girls of the temples are known by different names in all over India. In **Tamilnadu** they are known as Devaradiyar, Padiyilar, Taliccherippandugal, Empuremanadiyar, Adukkalaip-pendugal. In Kerala they are called Tevidicchis, Nangainar, Kudikkaris, Muraikkaris. In Karnataka as Poti, Jogtis<sup>10</sup>. In **Southern part of Karnataka** they are called as Nayaka Sani, Ranga Sani, Muttukatti Kondavlu, Devarasuli, Nityasumangali, Kasabi, Patradevalu<sup>11</sup> where as in **Central Karnataka** as Basavi which are grouped as Gudi Basavi, Nadikola Basavi, Balgada Basavi, Ura Basavi, Nadikola Basavi and Chowri Basav<sup>12</sup>. In **Andhra Pradesh** the dancing girls are identified with Sani and Bogam<sup>13</sup>. The dancing girls of Assam are named as Kurmapus<sup>14</sup>, Kudipus, Nati or Natin<sup>15</sup>. In **Goa** they are known as Bhavin. But in Bombay the dancing girls are named according to the presiding deities as Murali, Bhavin, Jagavins, Naikine, Kalavanti, Devali, Matangis and Sharnis<sup>16</sup>. In **Odisha** the dancing girls of Sri Jagannath Temple are called Mahari and Nachuni<sup>17</sup>.

## Categories of Devadasis

In the ancient times the Devadasis were divided into seven categories. They are known as

- ❖ Dutta,
- ❖ Hruta,
- ❖ Bikrita,
- ❖ Bhrutya,
- ❖ Alankara
- ❖ Gopika or Rudraganika.

Such categories reveal the origin and status of the Devadasis.

When a sacred man offered his daughter to a temple as a Devadasi, she is known as "**Dutta Devadasi**". But when a lady was kidnapped and subsequently employed in a temple, she is known as "**Hruta Devadasi**". Sometimes when a lady was sold to the administrator or the priest of a temple, she is known as "**Bikrita Devadasi**". If a lady voluntarily worked in a temple as a Devadasi, she is known as "**Bhrutya Devadasi**". Some women who devotionally offered themselves to serve the temple are known as "**Bhakta Devadasi**". When a woman after-attaining a certain degree of competence, is offered to the temple with ornaments, she is known as

“**Alankara Devadasi**”. The Devadasis who were getting remunerations for offering dance and music in the temple in a particular time is identified as “**Gopika**” or “**Rudraganika**”. These classes of the Devadasis were receiving fixed remunerations and some landed property for their personal use.

### **Stages of Dedication and its Processes**

In general, converting a girl into **Devadasi / Jogin** has two stages. The first stage is dedication and is called “**First Pattam**” or “**ghattam**” in some areas. The next stage is deflowering and is called “**Second Pattam**”. The ceremony of Second Pattam is carried out on her attaining the age of puberty when the girl surrenders herself to the village landlord or headman. After Second Pattam she becomes a collective property of the village. Jogan Shankar (1990).<sup>18</sup>

“After dedication of a girl to the temple, she has to take bath everyday early in the morning and should present herself at the temple during morning worship of Yellamma. She is not allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum. But she will bow to the deity from outside. Thereafter she sweeps compound of the temple. Every Tuesday and Friday she goes for joga along with senior jogatis. During this period she learns innumerable songs in praise of Yellamma and her son Parashurama. If she shows some aptitude to learn playing instruments she will be given training by her elder jogatis. In Yellampura and other villages Devadasis do not dance but this is performed by eunuch companions. The main functions of Devadasis would be singing and playing stringed musical instruments and Jagate. They form a small group and go for joga, from house to house on every Tuesday and Friday.”

The following table gives a typical occupational profile of Devadasis.

**Table: Occupational Distribution of Devadasis of Yellampura Village**

S. No.	Occupations
1.	Prostitution in Urban Brothels
2.	Prostitution in Village proper
3.	Actual Cultivators
4.	Agricultural Labourers
5.	Household
6.	Temple Services
7.	Students
8.	Government Service
9.	Old Age Pensioner

### **Reformist or Abolitionists Movement**

Reformist or Abolitionists conceived Devadasi practice as a social evil and considered every devadasi to be a prostitute. The first anti-nautch and anti-dedication movement was launched during 1880-90. “Their main aim was to do away with this system. Reform Lobbyists were drawn mainly from missionaries, doctors, journalists and social workers. They urged the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls dedicated themselves as Devadasis of Hindu shrines. ... These anti-nautch campaigners began their attack on the devadasi system in 1882. They organized seminars and conferences to create a public opinion against the devadasi system. In the later part of 1892 an appeal was made to the Viceroy and Governor General of India and to the Governor of Madras. This appeal also defines the position of the anti-nautch movement.”

The social reform movements, spearheaded by Ram Mohan Roy, Iswhara Chandra Vidyasagar, Govind Ranade, Karve and other prominent social thinkers, questioned the practice of Devadasi system and pleaded for its abolition. Strong public opinion was created in 1929 through the “Self Respect Movement” led by the great sociopolitical thinker E.V.Ramaswamy, popularly known as “Periyar”. Condemning the practice, he advocated freedom and marriage of devadasis. The anti-Brahminism and anti-ritualism of the regional political parties of Tamil Nadu provided an ideological base to the Devadasi Abolition movement.

### **Legal Initiatives**

#### **Indian Penal Code Sec 372 and 373**

In 1924, **Indian Penal Code** was amended. Section 372 and 373 declared the practice of dedicating girls for the ultimate purpose of engaging them in prostitution as illegal. It was prescribed that whoever disposes off any person under the age of 18 years (or attained the possession of any person) with the intent that such person shall at any age be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or illicit intercourse with any person or with the knowledge that the person is likely to be employed or used for any such purpose at any age, is liable to be prosecuted.

#### **Bombay Devadasi Protection Act 1934**

In 1934 when the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act was passed by the British Government. This Act covered the Bombay state, as it existed then.

The Bombay Devadasi Protection Act declared dedication of a woman as an illegal act, irrespective of the fact whether the dedication was made with her consent or not. According to this Act, marriage by a Devadasi was to be considered lawful and valid, and the children from such wedlock were to be treated as legitimate. The Act also laid down grounds for punitive action that could be taken against any person or persons, who were found to be involved in dedications, except the woman who was being dedicated. Those found guilty of such acts could face a year's imprisonment or fine or both.

#### **Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947**

Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947 was also in operation in the then Mysore state which was renamed as Karnataka in 1972.

The two Acts then existing were replaced by the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act which was adopted by the State Legislature in 1982 and was notified by the Government through its Gazette in 1984.

#### **Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act 1982**

The 1982 Act strengthens the penal provisions that were hitherto available under the 1934 Act. The maximum punishment was increased to three years imprisonment and maximum fine was increased to Rs. 2000-. If the guilty was found to be a parent or guardian or relative of the dedicated woman, the penal provisions are even stronger. Imprisonment in such a case can extend up to five years with a minimum term of two years and the fine can be up to Rs. 5000- with the minimum fine being Rs. 2000

Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act quite significantly provided that rules may be framed to provide for the custody, protection, welfare and rehabilitation of the Devadasis. The rehabilitation of the Devadasis had to be central to the realization of the objectives set out in the Act and due recognition was given to this aspect in the Act itself.

The Government to undertake legislation at an very early date to put a step to the practice of dedicating young girls and young women to Hindu temples which has generally resulted in exposing them to an immoral life.

#### **Devadasi Abolition Bill December 20, 1947**

The first and foremost and the only object of the proposed legislation is that such a dedication of Hindu girls and women generally resulted in expressing them to an immoral life. This sympathises with the future of our womanhood and is generally against an immoral life. The community which dedicates their women to temple service is known as Devadasis. Shudda Nritta is the dance called "Bharatha Natyam". In the year of 1913, Government introduced a bill for the protection of women and girls. Further in the year 1923, Sec 372 & 373 of Indian Penal Code Amended. Various names of devadasis are Devaradiyar, Devadasis, Kanigai, Vilai-Mathar.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Role of Press**

##### **Suppression of Immoral Traffic In Women**

Reference to the speeches made by the Governor of Madras and others regarding the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Tamil Nadu writes: - As those who have taken to prostitution as a profession are hard hearted and base persons, it is the duty of the government to get rid of them by means of rigorous legislations. We feel glad that Lord Erskine has laid stress on this point. It has been pointed out by a D.S. Police that evens some of the rich mirasdars, earn money by allowing others to have intercourse with their paramours. If such evil practices are to be completely rooted out, the present Act should be amended and the police officials and judge should be given more powers. In addition to amending the act in such a way as to make prostitution itself an offence, the government should frame rules declaring even the practice of keeping paramours unlawful.<sup>20</sup>

##### **The Suppression of Immoral Traffic**

Feeling glad at the extension of the Madras Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act to Madura also the Ananda Bodhini desires that the act should similarly be brought into force in Srirangam and other Sacred places as well as in all district head quarters with a view to protect innocent young girls to a certain extent and prevent unseemly sights and quarrels in streets. The India (3<sup>rd</sup>) also urges the need for the extension of the operation of Mr. Venkatrama Ayyar's measure for the Suppression of Immoral Traffic to all the cities in the Madras Presidency and observes. Prostitution is growing from day to day in India on account of the existence of a class of licensed persons who are dedicated to temples for carrying on prostitution in the name of religion. Dr. Muthulakshmi's measure which was passed into law by the Member of Legislative Council has not produced the desired result. The trouble due to devadasis will certainly continue until a law directly prohibiting the

dedication of girls to temples is enacted. Adverting to the speech made by His excellency the Governor of Madras while presiding over the annual meeting of the Madras Vigilance Association recently, The Tamil Nadu Writes : -

It has become patent that Sir George Stanley is an adept in evading all requests made to him for help by giving some lame excuse or other. We, however, commend his action in having stressed the need for the Suppression of brothels and the extension of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act to all other places besides the city of Madras. But we cannot help regretting the observation he has made regarding the affording of financial assistance for rescuing girls in brothels and maintaining them. He has stated that it is impossible for the government to render financial assistance in this matter and that, if the government give money to any institution for rescuing the fallen girls, it will have to be under their management. We believe that even the governor will not deny that the governments are bound to save the people from the prostitution evil even as they are bound to save them from such grave offences as theft, murder etc. Hence, it is one of the duties of the Government to suppress brothels and make the girls found these in lead a good life. We would ask Sir George Stanley to consider deeply whether it is proper to think of showing even the responsibility of the government for maintaining the mortality of the people on to the shoulders of the local bodies when the financial position of these bodies is deplorable reference to this subject, the India (16th) writes : -

As long as rescue homes are not provided, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act cannot bring about the desired result in full. It is foolish to believe that prostitution disappears with the closing of brothels. It is only the poverty of destitute girls that is responsible for their taking to prostitution. Hence, as long as means are not devised for getting rid of the poverty of girls prostitution will go on though not public atleast secretly and no government can check it. Though it is the duty of the people to render financial aid to such charitable institutions as rescue homes, it is not known on what grounds the governor has stated that the governments have no responsibility in the matter.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Devadasi System**

Condemning the system of maintaining Devadasis to perform certain duties in Hindu temples, the Lokahitashis writes: - To continue this custom is but to encourage sheer debauchery. The abolition of the system in the Mysore State cannot be said to have materially affected the work of the temples here. Public opinion has now undergone a change all over India and requests to the government are pouring in to introduce the necessary legislation to get rid of this system. Besides many of the educated men and women think that it has a direct effect upon the moral backbone of the people. Consequently, the paper hopes that the resolution introduced by Mr. Jayakar in the assembly to eradicate the evil would receive the unanimous support of that body and will be passed.<sup>22</sup>

## **II. Conclusion**

Devadasi tradition is a part of India's socio-religious culture since ancient times. The original religious nobleness of the tradition, however, has given way to sexual exploitation of young females and the tradition has degenerated into a malevolent social practice. The tradition also acts as a conduit for the supply of young girls and illicit sex trade. Mostly the young men and women from backward castes, who also are illiterate, poor or physically handicapped fall victim to the Devadasi tradition. Literacy, poverty, superstitions are the major causes for the continuation of the tradition. Devadasi, Jogata life is very miserable because of its uphill struggle for the individual. By tradition he / she has to maintain himself / herself by begging only male Jogatas and adolescent Devadasi children are also more susceptible to addiction and morality / socially corrupt behavior. This in itself causes another set of Hindu religion social problems. But all these efforts have been useless in bringing about change. Most of the women are caught in the debt-traps of pimps, agents and touts. Others say they cannot wait for projects to come through because by then, their children would starve to death. A third group of women are so set in their lifestyle that prostitution seems an easier way of earning a living than knitting or weaving baskets.

### **Endnotes**

- [1]. Gandharva signifies angelic beings from Heaven.
- [2]. Low-caste woman.
- [3]. Interestingly, the incestuous implications embedded in this 'blessing' seem to have escaped scholars, theoreticians and social activists working ceaselessly for the rehabilitation of these young girls. The 'incestuous' reading comes across because firstly, Renuka is re-named Yellamma, who is female though she is a Goddess. How can a Goddess be wed to another female? Secondly, if a girl is married to Yellamma who is Parasuram's mother, doesn't having sex with the partner's biological son amount to incest which is forbidden even among the Gods and Goddesses in the Hindu pantheon? Thirdly, how can Parasuram in human form expect these girls to offer sex to him without giving back anything in return, not even a blessing? In that case, does this not reduce his status to that of a beggar too?
- [4]. Religious scriptures of a particular period in pre-historic times.
- [5]. The heavenly world.

- [6]. 'Peth' is the Maharashtrian word that roughly translates as 'street' in a larger sense – not street literally but more in the sense of a 'neighbourhood.'
- [7]. Mangal Sutra is derived from two words, mangal, meaning 'holy' and sutra, meaning 'thread.' In actuality, it is a chain worn round the neck of a woman by her husband at the time of marriage. This takes various forms such as black beads strung together with a golden chain with three golden balls for the locket in the centre – for the Maharashtrian woman. Lower down on the Indian map - among the Tamil Nadu women, the mangal sutra is called the thali – a rope-like gold chain with a different gold locket at the centre. Another ethnic group wear orange beads threaded on a chain of gold. Girls cannot wear these under any circumstances before they are married. Married women have to break the chain and their glass bangles when their husbands die so widows cease wearing the chain as soon as their husbands die. Interestingly, one ethnic group of Muslim women in Karnataka also wear the mangal sutra.
- [8]. Suhagan – this is the Hindi word that suggests a woman who is eternally in a married state whose husband does not ever die since she is married to a Goddess.
- [9]. Sumangali is derived from two words 'su' meaning 'good' and 'mangali' meaning 'holy woman.' If the bride dies while her husband is alive, she is considered to be a 'good, holy woman.'
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