

LISTENING TO DEVADASIS - A STORY OF EXPLOITATION AND VULNERABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The growing consensus on the need to focus more directly on inequalities, in order to achieve development which benefits all groups stems, from the recognition that, the poorest and the most marginalized have not benefited equitably from the development process. Drawing on the experiences of Devadasis, this paper argues the case for a greater focus on gender inequality, which relates to social factors of difference and which contributes to marginalization. By focusing on the experience of Devadasis, the paper explores the dynamics and mechanism which marginalize Devadasis and calls for a greater focus, in the current and future development frameworks. This paper highlights the importance of the 'lived experience' of Devadasis.

The term "Devadasi" originally described a Hindu religious practice, in which girls were "married" to a deity. In addition to taking care of the temple, they learned and practiced Bharatanatyam and other classical Indian arts traditions, and enjoyed a high social status. Following the demise of the great Hindu kingdoms, the practice degenerated. The Colonial reform movement made an attempt, to suppress the practice legally but the system continues and persists till today. As a result of social changes, Devadasis are left without their traditional means of support and patronage. Colonial views on Devadasis are hotly disputed, by several groups and organizations in India, and by western academics.

In modern India the tradition has become associated with commercial sexual exploitation, as described in a recent report, by the National Human Rights Commission of the Government of India. According to this report, "after initiation as Devadasis, women migrate either to the nearby towns or other far-off cities, to practise prostitution". The practice of dedicating Devadasis was declared illegal, by the Government of Karnataka in 1982 and the Government of Andhra Pradesh in 1988. However, the practice is still prevalent in around 10 districts of North Karnataka and 14 districts in Andhra Pradesh.

Devadasis are also known, by various other local terms. They are sometimes referred to as a caste; however, some question the accuracy of this usage. "According to the Devadasis themselves there exists a devadasi 'way of life' or 'professional ethic' (vritti, murai), but not a devadasijati sub-caste. The high regard with which they were previously held, has deteriorated in recent years.

The popularity of Devadasis, seems to have reached its pinnacle around 10th and 11th century. The rise and fall in the status of Devadasis can be seen to be running parallel to the rise and fall of Hindu temples. The status of the temples fell very quickly in North India and slowly in South India. As the temples became poorer and lost their patron kings and in some cases were destroyed, the Devadasis were forced into a life of poverty, misery, and in some cases, prostitution.

In the past Devadasi came from various different social groups, some become courtesans to princes, priests and other high caste men. This gave them a level of status and autonomy, not available to Indian women at that

time. However, the Devadasi are mainly Dalits. As women and Dalits, they are already members of the two most exploited groups in India, at dedication they are degraded further by the stigma of being Devadasi and a woman of disrepute. Because, of this they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and will find it even harder, to access their legal rights. There are a number of complex, intertwined factors which result in the parent's decision to dedicate their daughter.

In Karnataka, tradition and social pressure plays a key role, with 31% of Devadasi being dedicated because, it is seen as a hereditary duty. Social acceptance of dedication is higher in Karnataka than in Andhra Pradesh, therefore, it is not only religious, but also social norms which need to be challenged.

In the 1990's, due to the limited effect of legislation, State authorities entrusted the implementation of the Acts to NGOs. Much of the work of these organisations has been done through sanghas, self-help groups, which help women to access benefits, subsidies and legal support. Rehabilitated Devadasi, associated with such groups have proven effective agents in preventing dedication ceremonies from taking place. However, due to the limited resources of self-help groups, they are not always as successful as they could be, in improving the lives of former Devadasi.

Literacy, poverty, superstitions are the major causes for the continuation of the tradition. Devadasi life is very miserable, because of its uphill struggle for the individual. Devadasi children are also more susceptible. Most of the women are caught in the debt-traps of pimps, agents and touts.

The desire to throw off traditional forms of religion endorsed patriarchal and casteist enslavement, has not yet taken hold of the masses of low caste workers, agricultural labourers and poor peasants, in the border areas between Karnataka, Maharashtra and in Tamil Nadu. Until it does, the system will undoubtedly continue. At present, all we can say is that, the efforts of the last decades represent the beginning of a fight for human dignity and human rights.

KEYWORDS: Devadasi, Historical Context, Cross Cultural Comparison, Socio-Cultural Milieu, Exploitation

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Devadasi custom prevailed not only in India, but in many countries of the world. The Ankor Borei inscription of Cambodia or ancient Kambuja, reveals that, seven dancing girls, eleven girl singers and four girl violinists were dedicated to the temple. The time of this inscription is 533 Sakabda i.e. 611 A.D. In countries like Egypt, Greece, Assyria, Phinisia and Babylon etc., similar practices were prevalent (Mishra, 2014). Similarly, in Sweden, every year a life-size image of Frey, the God of fertility was taken round the country, in a wagon accompanied by a beautiful girl who was designated, as the God's wife. She also functioned as the priestess in the great temple, at Upsala. The people assembled in huge numbers to meet and offer sacrifices to the image of God, and his blooming young wife in anticipation of a fruitful year.

Many eminent scholars have tried to trace the origin of the system in India. Prof. A.S. Altekar (1956) traces the origin of the system, to the Puranic Gupta age. In his view, the system came into existence in about the 3rd Century A.D. B.N. Sharma (1972) and R.N. Saletore (1974), attribute it to the age of Kautilya. This is with reference to Kautilya's remark that, women attached to temple mastered music and dance, and were employed as weavers.

Reasons for Dedication

In spite of the laws that exist against the Devadasi system, it still prevails in many parts of India. A vast majority of these women not only belong to the lower caste groups, but they suffer double oppression in terms of caste and gender.

They also suffer from social exclusion and are devalued by the Society. We need to explore and understand, what impels the parents to dedicate their daughters to become Devadasis.

A significant contributing factor in the dedication of daughters, as Devadasi is precisely that: they are daughters. Action Aid report, on 'Disappearing daughters' states 'Whilst boys are expected to bring wealth into a family, girls are seen by many as expenditure'. In many states, dowries and expensive marriages are inevitable outgoings for families with daughters. As daughters traditionally become part of another family after marriage, it is sons who are expected to provide for parents in their old age. In Andhra Pradesh 20% of Devadasis are dedicated because, there is no son in the family. By dedicating their daughter to the goddess, not only do poor families avoid the cost of a dowry, but the daughter can then take on the role of a son, in providing for the family and perhaps even in performing certain religious rites.

One can refer to the list put forward by the famous Indian scholar Jogan Shankar (1994), to understand the evolution of the system. According to him, the reasons which play 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. And lastly, to create custom in order to exploit lower caste people in India by upper castes and classes.

In a 1993 study, Asha Ramesh found that, dedication to the Goddess or God was justified on the following grounds: a. if the parents were childless, they vowed to dedicate their first child, if it happened to be girl. b. if there were no sons in the family, the girl child was dedicated and could not marry as she becomes a 'son' for the family (earning the family's livelihood).

Yet another economic reason contributed to the dedications. If, the girl's family had some property, the family ensured that it stayed within the family, by turning the girl into 'son' by dedicating her.

Despite modernization and globalization, superstitious beliefs remain rampant in rural society. Girls end up with knots (Jat), because of lack of hygiene and uncombed hair. However, the parents are often told that, if the girl is not offered to the goddess the whole family would earn the wrath of the goddess. So strong are the beliefs that they are internalized and parents do not hesitate sacrificing their daughters.

Dedication Process and Life after Dedication

From the late medieval period until 1910, the Pottukattu or taii-tying dedication ceremony was a widely advertised community event, requiring the full cooperation of the local religious authorities. It initiates a young girl into the Devadasi profession and is performed in the temple, by the priest. In the Brahminical tradition, marriage is viewed as the only religious initiation (diksha) permissible to women. Thus, the dedication is a symbolic 'marriage' of the pubescent girl to the temple's deity.

In puberty ceremonies, the Devadasi- initiate consummates her marriage with an emblem of the god borrowed from the temple as a stand-in 'bridegroom'. From then onward, the Devadasi is considered a Nitya Sumangali: a woman eternally free from the adversity of widowhood.

She would then perform her ritual and artistic duties in the temple. The puberty ceremonies were an occasion not only for temple honor, but also for community feasting and celebration, in which the local elites also participated. The music, dance and public display of the girl also helped to attract patrons.

In India, temple women constituted a social category that was distinct. However, temple women in all times and places in Indian history have not had the same identities, activities, status or significance. Their identities were bound up with a particular place;

Welfare of Devadasis - The Historical Context

The Devadasi welfare could be visualized as acting on three means, such as: (1) Devadasi Rehabilitation: Making present Devadasis leave the tradition and facilitate their resettlement, or rehabilitate in social mainstream through economically gainful activities. (2) Devadasi Prevention: Preventing new girls from entering the tradition; and (3) Devadasi Traditions: Totally eliminating the Devadasi tradition from the socio-religious culture.

It is noted that, for the first time, during 17th Century, Mogul Emperor Aurangzeb tried to abolish the Devadasi tradition, by demolishing the temple of God Khandoba at Jejuri in Maharashtra. The temple was producing a large number of 'Muralis' (Devadasi of God Khandoba). The effort, however, did not succeed and to this day, Khandoba temple continuous to be the fountain head of 'Muralis'. Majority of Muralis' belonged to the backward class community, which is exploited sexually and socially today.

During 20th Century, Christian lady Missionary Amy Carmichael witnessed the Devadasi practice in South India. On 1st March 1901, she rescued a young girl just initiated as Devadasi in Tuticorin village, near Madurai in Tirunelveli district of the then Madras province. Later on, she led a delegation to the administrative officers of the district. From June 1904, Amy Carmichael had rescued and adopted about seventeen such girls from the clutches of Devadasi tradition. She started a Devadasi Rescue Home, named 'Tara Mandal' for them as a part of broader rehabilitation programme and also started giving them basic education. She extended her Devadasi rehabilitation work, by starting a home for the children of the Devadasi at Donavar. The year 1901, therefore is recognized as the beginning of the organized effort, for the rehabilitation of the Devadasi in Tamil Nadu.

In Maharashtra, renowned social reformer Vithal Ramji Shinde has conducted a census of 'Muralis' and 'Devadasis' and published an essay on the Devadasi exploitation, in 1907. According to his findings, majority of the Muralis and Devdasis belonged to the backward castes (then known as depressed classes). He also pointed out that the males in these classes condoned even supported, the tradition because of their addiction to alcohol. On 25th April 1930, he organized a public meeting at Jejuri against the practice of Murali. Maharaja Sarjajirao Gaikwad (King of Badodra) of the erstwhile Princely state of Baroda, had extended his support to Shinde's exertions.

In 1934, the British Government of India enacted a Devadasi Prevention Act and made it applicable first, to the Bombay Province and later to Mysore state. But, the Act remained on paper and was never really enforced in independent India. During the period from 1940 to 1950, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar rapidly improved the depressed classes, to eradicate the Devadasi tradition from amongst them. He published quite a few articles on this problem and maintained that, the Devadasi tradition was the creation of the upper castes and it is for the lower castes to abolish it.

The social reform movements, spearheaded by Ram Mohan Roy, Iswhara Chandra Vidyasagar, GovindRanade, 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 socio-political thinker E.V. Ramaswamy, popularly known as “Periyar”. Condemning the practice, he advocated freedom and marriage of Devadasis.

The tradition is sustained by the adolescent and young girls dedicated to the Goddess Yellamma of Saundatti. Particularly, the lower caste population in Belgaum district of Karnataka and Kolhapur, Sangli district of Maharashtra is in the grip of both the tradition and the fear of the Goddess. The combination has been the fountainhead of several social malaises.

Changing Scenario

There was a time when Devadasis were considered auspicious and holy, and their presence was compulsory at every wedding, for the making of the Mangal Sutra. This was based on the belief that, a devadasi is an eternally married Suhagan, 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 never become a widow. The lives of the Devadasis of Maharashtra and Karnataka are dedicated to Yellamma, the universal mother. They are married to her and can marry no one else.

Most of the Devadasis belong to lower castes that have little access to education. People belonging to these communities are so very poor that the immediate family members do not hesitate to dedicate the girl to the system. Then she can become a regular source of income for them as long as she is young and useful. When she becomes old and useless, she is discarded by these very people and left with the choice of begging for a living. If she is diseased by then – which she very often is – she dies alone and in penury. The traumatic experience of old Devadasis have been of little concern and do not find any place in the women’s movement.

Present Scenario

Negative attitudes towards the Devadasis, the discrimination and the experience within the family, community and society deny them opportunities, for personal development. As a result of discrimination and social exclusion, lack of positive role model they often suffer from low esteem confidence and aspiration. The inability to participate in all spheres of life social economic and cultural alienates them from society.

There has been a growing body of a literature to demonstrate that, a large number of Devadasis live in extreme poverty, with multiple disabilities. Lower educational attainment makes alternative employment opportunities extremely difficult. Their lives are a constant struggle, against the oppressive system. There is a need to improve the life of Devadasis, in terms of participation which leads to their capacity building, development and social transformation.

Challenges and Vulnerability

Devadasis face multiple discriminations in various spheres. In terms of housing they lack proper amenities. Since, they have no proper husband they do not become a part of the in-laws family. Devadasis lack the security in a world, where they have no male support. Single handedly they have to rear their children. They have the additional disadvantage of depriving them from home or secure place to live for the rest of their life. They either live in a room provided by her male protector, or they remain at their parents’ house or they live independently. Whatever may have been the case in times gone by, today Devadasi do not live at the village temple. The exception may be the large temple complex at Saundatti, where among the regular residential population older Devadasi are much in evidence.

As becoming a Devadasi does not mean taking on the occupation of sex work, as a means of livelihood, although, over time it has become more common for Devadasi, to be pushed into or resort to this due to compulsion. The practice itself is outside any modern economic system. In the past, the religious service implicit in the role meant that Devadasi and all those married to the deity would receive gifts-in-kind at festivals, and be given food and other items, such as clothes when local families summoned them to give blessings or participate in religious ceremonies at their houses. This rarely happens today; or else it provides so little income that no Devadasi can live off it.

Today, most Devadasis, including those not yet initiated, are obliged to work to earn money. Since they belong to lower caste group and have very little resource in terms of education or wealth, their employment opportunities are extremely limited. Most Devadasis work, mainly in unorganized sector to sustain themselves and their families. Devadasis work as coolies in the field of agriculture labourer, or construction workers and they are paid at the lowest rates.

Financial Problems

Devadasis face a lot of financial problems which is one of the biggest drivers to them staying in the system. They rely on the system for their livelihood and they need money not just to survive but to be able to educate their children and get them married. They mentioned that begging, dancing at different events and the annual festival is the biggest chunk of their earnings, while manual labor on agricultural fields provides them, with supplemental income.

Stigma: In addition to the financial hardships faced by Devadasis, they also face a lot of problems, due to the stigma and taboo attached to the system. While they are expected to have multiple sexual partners, this is still looked down upon. They are deprived of human dignity.

Being born to a Devadasi, all our children are born with the stigma. Even though they are educated, we have a hard time getting them married. Even if they find someone they like, no family wants to have anything to do with a Devadasi family. If it is a son, no one wants their daughter married into a Devadasi family and if, it is a daughter, no one wants to welcome a Devadasi's daughter into their family. They feel that, Devadasi is a tag they lived all their lives with and they do not want their children, facing similar problems due to this identity. Though, we want to change and are coming out of it, this is a mark or identity that is stuck with us, since we were children. It is a tag, people attach to us and do not let go, no matter what. The ones who are already a part of this system need to drown. Once all of us die, we hope that the tags, taboo and the system will drown with us. (Anne, M. 2014).

Legal Initiatives

In 1924, Indian Penal Codewas amended. Section 372 and 373, declared the practice of dedicating girls for the ultimate purpose of engaging them, in prostitution as illegal. Analysing the *Devadasis* in the present context, we find that, against these wrongs of Indian womanhood, several movements emerged in different parts of our country. In 1890 anti- dedication movements emerged. Such movements pressed the concerned governments, to ban this practice. Many legislations were passed such as:

- The Bombay Devadasi Act, 1934.
- The Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Madras Act, 1947;
- The Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982.

In spite of passing these progressive legislations, anti-dedication campaigns, this cult is still prevailing in many parts of the country, particularly in drought prone, poverty stricken border areas of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh. Even today, hundreds of girls are being dedicated defying laws preventing dedications in the temples. The initiation of such a girl is sold at a high price with endeavour of her own family, and her future is destined. Every year hundreds of such girls are exported to the notorious red light districts of Mumbai and other cities.

In the 1990's, due to the limited effect of legislation, State authorities entrusted the implementation of the Acts to NGOs. Much of the work of these organisations has been done through *sanghas*, self-help groups, which help women to access benefits, subsidies and legal support. Rehabilitated Devadasi associated with such groups have proven effective agents in preventing dedication ceremonies from taking place. However, due to the limited resources of self-help groups, they are not always as successful as they could be in improving the lives of former Devadasi. Furthermore, the authorities see their existence as the fulfilment of state responsibilities to the Devadasi, rather than the results which are produced.

Later, many of the schemes and programmes were organized by voluntary organizations, NGOs and social workers such as (1) Devadasi Marriage Scheme, (2) Devadasi Pension Scheme, (3) Devadasi Rehabilitation Centre (sponsored by the Western Maharashtra Development Corporation), (4) Hostel for Devadasi Children, apart from it many social voluntary organizations are working for Devadasi rehabilitation directly and indirectly. 'JatNirmulan' is one of them presently working by Dr. B. S. Ghatage working as Associate professor Karmveer Hire College, of Gargoti, Kolhapur Maharashtra.

Although the journey so far towards eliminating the Devadasi system has been difficult Terrain, hope still floats. There are numerous NGOs, which are continuing the fight against this disgraceful system. They have been working towards increasing the awareness of the ignorant Devadasis regarding HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. A case for instance is the PLAN/ MYRADA. The project sponsored periodic health camps for the Devadasis. The project claims, "More than 250 members of the Devadasi groups received health cards that enabled them, their partners and their partners' spouses to seek treatment for STDs and other reproductive tract infections".

The Devadasi community also continues to reap the benefits of both the prevention project and MYRADA's long-term economic empowerment program. Many have been able to leave sex work for new careers as weavers, basket makers or vegetable vendors. Some have married and settled to a new life. In retaliation to the initiation of Devadasis, a new and progressive process of de-initiation has been introduced, as a result of which many women can finally liberate themselves.

Andhra Pradesh Anti-Devadasi System Struggle Committee (APJVVPS), a local NGO active in Andhra Pradesh, which is trying to rehabilitate former Devadasis and prevent new initiations. APJVVPS first move was in 1993 when it set up a school for the daughters of 22 Devadasis. In supporting and educating the children, it gained the trust of their mothers and started to make contact with the Devadasis all over the region. APJVVPS' objectives include the limitation of the Devadasi tradition, the marriage of Devadasis and development of community-based organizations to create awareness against the custom and ensuring education for children born to Devadasis. This association also provides self-help groups, leadership training, financial advice and support for women to find the strength to stand up to the social pressure that keeps them in this situation.

In both Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, rehabilitated Devadasi are entitled to a variety of state benefits. These include monthly pensions, assistance with housing, free healthcare and education for their children. Due to a mixture of corruption and prejudice, they often find it difficult to access these benefits. Additionally, many are not aware of their full rights. In January 2012, Karnataka State finally issued the 23,000 registered former Devadasi with entitlement certificates, enabling them to claim benefits, though these certificates were backdated, it had taken four years for them to be issued (The Hindu, 2012).

Changing their Lives

Mehendale, L. (1991) has related her experience as a collector of Sangli District where she tried to prevent the ritual offering of Devadasi girls. These offerings met opposition from village leaders, priest and older Devadasis who had a vested interest in perpetuating the system. She discussed issues of human dignity and self respect, social rights and their deprivation, the question of religion faith and superstition. The question which was raised was what alternative does society offer to us? They were registered under TRYSEM and trained in poultry training course, Knitwear and other occupation. The immediate success was that nearly 100 Devadasis gathered to request to be enrolled.

Devadasi system is still in practice in several parts of India, as no scientific rehabilitation measures were possible due to lack of appropriate data and non-cooperation from the victims and village elders. As it is linked with the sentiments of the community, the official machinery and the political parties shy away from taking on the tradition. The victimised Devadasis are largely viewed as a minority group, with no influence on vote-bank politics. Devadasis system was a testimony to centuries of exploitation and vulnerability. The practice would continue as long as the system was deprived of economic development. (The Hindu, Kalivikodi, U., 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

Many Scholars, Social activists and NGOs have tried to transform the Devadasi System, change their lives and empower them, through vocational skills and training. However, a major constraint is the social taboo that remains entrenched in Indian society. The patriarchal social structure, with gender and caste hierarchies and lack of economic and social capital to support their families, make them dependent on a system that perpetuates their inequality.

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