

## Research Paper

## Devadasi Practice in Karnataka

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## ABSTRACT

*Devadasi practice is evil practice, which prevailed in Karnataka and it referred to the servant of god. In the name of god, women are sexually harassed by community people. Such women should not get married to one man, as she is servant to god and wife of whole town. The paper examined the historical background of the devadasis in Karnataka and their status in modern period. Realizing the evils of Devadasi practice, the Government of Karnataka passed the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication)*

Act in 1982 and also amended the same in 2010 to rehabilitate the existing devadasis. Many of the welfare schemes are also formulated by the government for the benefits of devadasis. The paper concluded with the remarks that there is need to educate devadasis against such practice and voluntary organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations must be active in this regard.

**Key Words:** Devadasi, Karnataka

**Introduction:**

Over the last two decades, studies on women in India have raised important questions about the invisibility, distortion and marginalization of gender as a category of analysis in mainstream disciplines and their practices of canonization. The recognition of caste as not just a retrograde but also oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in modern society, but on the contrary very widespread, required the feminist scholars to integrate questions of caste with those of class and gender (Torri, 2009). Since immemorial times, the lower class particularly scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women were exploited by upper classes in the name of culture and traditions. Devadasi practice is one of such evil practice, through which upper class people exploited women in 'forced prostitution'.

**Devadasi Practice:**

Devadasi is a religious practice that consists of the votive offering of girls to the deities in Hindu temples. The dedication usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires the girl to become sexually available for community members. Traditionally, it is believed that these girls are "serving" society as "ordained" by the goddess. In other words, "the devadasis are courtesans in God's court" (Kadetotad, 1983). Due to her sacred condition and her belonging to the divinity, a devadasi cannot be married to one particular man, as in the traditional idea of marriage women are transferable property gifted to husbands. Instead, she is a property of a divinity that benevolently concedes her to the whole community. This concept is well summarized by a saying that goes: "a devadasi is servant of God but wife of the whole town".

Devadasis are also known by various other local terms, such as jogini. Furthermore, the devadasi practice of religious prostitution is known as basivi in Karnataka and matangi in Maharashtra. It is also known as venkatasani, nailis, muralis and theradiyan. Devadasi 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 devadasi Jati (sub-caste). Later, the office of devadasi became hereditary but it did not confer the right to work without adequate qualification" (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985). In Europe the term 'Bayadere' was occasionally used.

Former temple servants, artists, and prostitutes, today most devadasis practice sex work (or dhandha) in their homes or small lodges and brothels in rural settings (Blanchard et al., 2005). Regarded for centuries as emblematic of both a defining element of Indian culture and fallen women of a "backward" tradition, devadasis have long occupied a contested socio-moral position within Indian society. This duality is reflected in the sentiments of contemporary populist reformers, who describe the rise and fall of the devadasi tradition and the parallel moral degeneration of the women from temple servants to "cheap prostitutes" (Vimochana, 1985).

Devadasis were chosen to serve God and dedicated to the worship of the presiding deities of major temples in the old days. This practice had its uses. Devadasis were placed high in the social hierarchy. They helped temple priests prepare for the pujas and other rituals by day and at night offered their worship to the presiding deity, with dance and music which the village community witnessed. Rewards for turning their backs on "normal" life were high. Community leaders and hence the community itself, respected and appreciated the services rendered by the Devadasis. They invariably came from the backward classes or lower castes. Once initiated into this practice the rich patrons of the temples saw to it that these women were well looked after. That is all history now. In northern Karnataka - Bijapur, Bagalkot and neighbouring Belgaum districts - the quintessential devadasi who was an accomplished artiste, possessed of social grace, and the punditry in subjects ranging from economics to the vedas, has abdicated. In her

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place is her pale shadow. She is discriminated on caste basis. The temples no longer need her. She is there, perhaps, only to satisfy man's lust. Her family - mother and brothers pushes her into a custom that is no more than a euphemism for sexual exploitation. Acculturation should have led to gradual fading of the practice. But economic security has forced these unfortunate women to carry on their profession by modifying it to meet contemporary needs. The families that once proudly dedicated their daughters to the Yellamma temple in Saundatti in Belgaum district, drove them into the brothels of the city. Feel-good schemes that seek to "rehabilitate" devadasis have been around for a long time, but as is their wont, achieved little more than enriching the record books. Superstition rules and ignorance and lack of education seem to help the exploiter. It is said that the legion of devadasis is being rescued from a living hell, thanks to the intervention of official and non-government agencies only to return to business as usual.

#### Devadasi Practice in Karnataka:

In Karnataka, the devadasi system was followed for over 10 centuries. Chief among them was the Renuka Yellamma (of Saundatti and Chandragutti) cult. Nudity and Nude worship to goddess are also considered practices of devadasis in Karnataka, especially in Chandragutti and Saundatti.

On the history of Devadasi practice in Karnataka, Jogan Shankar (1990) remarked that, 'the earliest inscription that refers to the word "devadasi" is found at Alanahalli dated 1113 A.D. (Epigraphia Carnatica, Vol II, No. 97). Prior to this, other epigraphic evidences refer to prostitutes as "Sule" (Prostitute). The earliest inscription referring to "Sule" is in Mahakala inscription (Indian Antiquary, Vol. II: 122). Hence the Antiquity of the word 'Sule' in Karnataka is 733 A.D. and for devadasi 1113 A.D. respectively... The custom of presenting girls as gifts to temples was prevalent in mediaeval Karnataka. This is evident from an epigraph from Malakere in Chitradurga district. It records "the great minister Manne and various Karnams having come to the Manakere Agrahara, made along with othergrants, of four Sule for the Mulastan God. Another inscription from Gogga in Shimoga district gives some information of some kind of donations to Shrines. The inscription (EC :XI: DG: 133, 1071 A.D.) records a grant of a 'Virgin' girl and certain quantity of grain to the temple. Since this particular inscription is incomplete, it is not clear whether the girl presented to temple was assigned to dance or as a mere maid servant. A copper plate from Manne, in Bangalore district registers the grant of village, to the Jain basti to provide subsistence for dancing girl'.

During 12th century a socio-religious movement emerged under Basaveshwara who revived Veerashaivism. He rehabilitated hundreds of devadasis of Kallyan, the capital of King Bijjala (Chalukya). Many of them became Shivasharanes and wrote Vachanas. Among them Sule Sankavva—a devadasi is famous.

#### Social Change of Devadasis in Karnataka:

Recently the devadasi practice has started to disappear, having been outlawed in all of India in 1988. However, devadasis still exist in India today, as shown in a 2004 report by the National Human Rights Commission of the Government of India. According to this report, "...after initiation as devadasis, women migrate either to nearby towns or other far-off cities to practice prostitution". A study from 1990 recorded that 45.9% of devadasis in one particular

district were prostitutes, while most of the others relied on manual labour and agriculture for their income. The practice of dedicating devadasis was declared illegal by the government of the Indian state Karnataka in 1982 and by the government of Andhra Pradesh in 1988. However as of 2006 the practice was still prevalent in around 10 districts of northern Karnataka and 14 districts in Andhra Pradesh. It is unfortunate that the devadasis are living with forced prostitution and begging for their livelihood. As such, considering their vulnerable conditions, the state governments have formulated welfare schemes and policies for their empowerment.

Devadasi welfare schemes aim at creating an environment that ensures a smooth transition. Initiatives in the districts where the devadasi system persists are strong. There is a realization that empowering devadasis to abandon their professions by choice and motivation is the best way. Nothing proves this better than the Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) of the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (KSWDC), under implementation in Bijapur, Belgaum and Bagalkot districts.

Government of Karnataka passed the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act in 1982 and also amended the same in 2010 to rehabilitate the existing devadasis. As per these rules, devadasi practice is strictly prohibited, but still many people are practicing devadasi practice. The government formulated "Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme" by providing counselling and awareness and shall be economically empowered by involving the said woman in income generating activities, if necessary by providing protection or shelter in remand home upto six months and see that the said woman shall become self-sustained by availing subsidy and loans through banks.

Further, Government has also announced financial assistance to those who marry devadasis and devadasis are also given reservation in getting employment. In noted places, where devadasi practice is prevalent, that is in Chandragutti and Saundatti, the Non-Governmental Organizations are active in abandoning devadasi practice by increasing the awareness of the people. It is emphasized that the Self-Help Groups are also of immense help for the devadasis to engage in self-employment.

#### Conclusion:

Compared to other social evils, devadasi practice is worst practice, which degrades women in society. Due to devadasi practice, there is increase in prostitution, in the name of devotion. Considering this reality, the governments have passed legislation to ban devadasi practice and also to rehabilitate the existing devadasis. But still it is not completely disappeared in Karnataka. Hence, it is essential on the part of the Non-Governmental Organizations and voluntary associations to increase awareness among common people against such evil acts on women. For this purpose, there is need to increase education among the poor, lower class and rural people.

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