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GRT PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF DEVADASIS IN BIJAPUR DISTRICT



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Abstract: Devadasi practice is old practice and Devadasi means 'servants to gods'. It was prevailed during the ancient days to exploit the women. Due to the awareness about the evils associated with this practice, it was banned by government recently. But the existing Devadasis are facing many challenges and problems in the society. The paper is based on the field data collected on problems and challenges of Devadasis in Bijapur district. Total 120 Devadasis from Bijapur district in Karnataka were interviewed to collect the primary data. The findings revealed that illiteracy, negligence, exploitation, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, lower income, etc are few of the problems faced by Devadasis in Bijapur district. Even though there are many rehabilitation and welfare schemes, still only a few of the Devadasis have got benefits from such schemes, as many of the Devadasis are not aware about these schemes. It is suggested to give self-employment training and financial assistance to Devadasis to form their livelihood and strictly ban on the Devadasi practice and forced prostitution.

Key words: Problems, Devadasi practice, illiteracy, exploitation.

INTRODUCTION:

The Indian institution of Devadasi, a religious practice, offers 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 "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 Basavi 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).

Devadasis were supposed to be the wives of the gods, and expected to lead a pious life. But the priests and the ascetics could hardly be expected to be indifferent to the

presence of these girls, some of whom are described as surpassing Rambha, Menaka and Urvashi in beauty. And this is natural that some of these damsels would have illicit relations with the priests or ascetics who lived in the temple. The affairs of devadasis with the priests and visitors are suggested by inscriptional passages, warning priests and ascetics against the violation of the vow of celibacy (Panjra and Ralhan, 2000).

Dubois (1959) writes, "They are called devadasis (servants or slaves of the gods), but the public call them by the more vulgar name of prostitutes. And in fact they are bound by their profession to grant their favours, if such they be, to anybody demanding them in return for ready money. It appears that at first they were reserved exclusively for the enjoyment of the Brahmins".

Devadasi system is not only exploitation of women, it is the institutionalized exploitation of women; it is the exploitation of Dalits, the lower class of untouchables; it is the religious sanction given to prostitution of helpless economically and socially deprived women; It is the glorification of humiliation of women. Inherent in this system is the fascistic belief that a certain section of human population, the lower caste, is meant to serve the 'higher caste's superior men'. Inherent in it is the feudal-lord-temple-priest-nexus, where the priest, already having a psychological hold over the minds of simple people to the point of dictating their way of life, uses his power to give 'religious sanction' to the practice by declaring it 'sacred', and thus cajole and lure simple minded villagers into this worst form of prostitution.

The Devadasi system is still flourishing in parts of India, especially in the South and specifically in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Ironically, these are the techno-savvy states now synonymous with Indian progress in the global market. In Saundatti taluka of Karnataka, the Devadasi tradition is one of the most criticized forms of prostitution in India, is still practiced. Despite the governmental ban, hundreds of girls are secretly dedicated to Goddess Yellamma every year.

There are more than 450,000 Devadasis trapped in this form of prostitution, deified and glorified by the heinous religious sanctions. According to the 1934, Devadasi Security Act, this practice is banned in India. This ban was reinforced again in 1980s but the law is broken every day. Poverty and 'Untouchability' contribute to the persistence of this terrible practice.

A report commissioned by the National Commission for Women (NCW) in India reveals the shocking reality of how thousands of Dalit women continue to be forced into the Devadasi system in several states of India. Estimates suggest that girls dedicated to temples in the Maharashtra-Karnataka border area number over 250,000 and are all from the Dalit community of untouchables. More than half of the Devadasis become prostitutes.

Most Devadasis are single. However, 65 per cent of the Devadasis were associated with a patron. About 95.2 per cent have children. And among those with children, more than 95 per cent could not register the names of their patrons (as the fathers of their children) in school admission records. The overwhelming majority of Devadasis (95%) earn less than Rs 1,000 a month. The present study is conducted to know about the socio-economic problems and challenges faced by Devadasis in Bijapur district.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The present research study is made:

- 1.To look into the economic problems of Devadasis in Bijapur district;
- 2.To study the social problems and challenges faced by Devadasis; and
- 3.To see whether Devadasis were got benefits from the social welfare policies of the Government.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS:

The research study was begun with literature search and the authors searched the general problems and challenges of the Devadasis from research papers, journals, books, etc. Based on this theoretical background, the interview schedule was prepared to collect primary data from Devadasis in Bijapur district. Bijapur district is backward district located at North Karnataka.

Primary data was collected from total 70 Devadasis from rural areas and 50 Devadasis from urban areas and the total number of respondents is limited to 120 Devadasis in Bijapur district. The collected primary data from these 120 Devadasis is analyzed and discussed as under.

Analysis and Discussion:

The collected primary data through interview schedule is analyzed and discussed as under.

1. Age of the Respondents:

Age is an important factor while studying the problems of the Devadasis. It is noted that respondents interviewed are belongs to middle aged and old aged. Only a few of the respondents are of young age. Hence, the age-group of the respondents is shown in the following table.

Table No. 1. Age of the Retired Women

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-25 Years	06	5.0
26-40 Years	58	48.3
41-60 Years	45	37.5
More than 60 Years	11	9.16
Total	120	100

As discussed above, 58 (48.3%) of the respondents are in the age group of 26 to 40 years followed by, 45 (37.5%) are in the age group of 41 to 60 years, only 11 (9.16%) are of more than 60 years and surprisingly, about 06 (5.0%) are of young age, that is 18 to 25 years. It is observed that even though the Government banned Devadasi practice, it is still practiced as there are few respondents are of young age that is below 25 years.

2. Occupation:

For their livelihood, Devadasis are engaged in different occupations. Due to ban on Devadasi practice and rehabilitation measures, Devadasis are participating in employment and self-employment. The occupations of the Devadasis are shown as under.

Table No. 2. Occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Agriculture (Own Land)	04	3.3
Agricultural Labour	21	17.5
Small Business	22	18.3
Private Sector Employment	18	15.0
Government Employment	--	--
Unorganized Sector/ Seasonal Employment	30	25.0
Housewife	25	20.8
Any Other	--	--
Total	120	100

Occupations of the Devadasis revealed that only 04 (3.3%) have owned their agricultural land and working in

that land, 21 (17.5%) are working as agricultural labour, 22 (18.3%) are engaged in small business, 18 (15.0%) are engaged in private sector employment, 30 (25.0%) are working in unorganized sector and 25 (20.8%) of the respondents are married and living as housewives. It is surprising to note that even the reservation is given to Devadasis in Government employment; surprisingly none of the respondents are engaged in Government employment.

3. Monthly Income:

Income reveals the standard of living of the Devadasis. It also determines the status got by Devadasis. Hence, information was collected from the respondents on the monthly income and presented in the following table.

Table No. 3. Monthly Income

Monthly Income	Frequency	Percentage
Nil	25	20.8
Below Rs. 1500	31	25.8
Rs. 1501 to 3000	27	22.5
Rs. 3001 to Rs. 5000	23	19.1
Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10000	14	11.6
More than Rs. 10000	--	--
Total	120	100

It is noted from the above table that 25 (20.8%) of the respondents do not have their own income, 31 (25.8%) have lower income, that is below Rs. 1500 per month, 27 (22.5%) have monthly income between Rs. 1501 to Rs. 3000, about 23 (19.1%) have monthly income between Rs. 3001 to Rs. 5000 and only 14 (11.6%) have monthly income between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10000 respectively. It is emphasized that the income earned by the respondents is very low and it can't able to fulfill their necessities of life.

4. Whether Income Meets Necessities of Life:

As discussed above, the Devadasis are facing the problem of lower income and it was asked to the respondents that whether their income is able to meet their necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter. The collected information is tabulated as under.

Table No. 4. Whether Income Meets Necessities of Life

Income Meets Necessities of Life	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	42	35.0
No	78	65.0
Total	120	100

It is surprising to note from the above table that the income of a great majority, that is 78 (65.0%) of the respondents is not able to fulfill their basic necessities of life, whereas income of only 42 (35.0%) of the respondents meeting the essential expenses. It is observed that due to their inadequate income the Devadasis are borrowing the loans or living below poverty line.

5. Social Status and Respect:

Devadasi means 'servants of God', but in reality after becoming Devadasis, they will lose the status and respect. Even few Devadasis start prostitution as their occupation. As such, their status is lower and as per the conventions their status is higher as they are near to gods. Hence, information was collected from the respondents on their social status and respect and presented in the following table.

Table No. 5. Social Status and Respect

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Higher	13	10.8
No Differentiation	24	20.0
Lower	83	69.1
Total	120	100

Above table revealed that a greater majority, that is 83 (69.1%) of the respondents are getting lower status in the society, only 24 (20.0%) of the Devadasis covered under the study are not differentiated and about 13 (10.8%) of the respondents have higher respect and status. In reality, Devadasis are to be respected and will be given higher status as their real devotees of goddesses. Due to the social stigma attached to the Devadasis, their position in the society is degraded and even a few of them are practicing forced prostitution.

6. Problems and Challenges in Society:

The Devadasis are facing many of the problems as they are women, poor and above all Devadasis. Hence, broadly their problems include poverty, lower income, negligence, social mobility, forced prostitution, exploitation, sexual harassment, etc. The collected primary data on the problems and challenges are shown in the following table.

Table No. 6. Problems and Challenges in Society

Problems and Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Illiteracy, Negligence	56	46.6
Poverty, Lower Income	73	60.8
Exploitation, Discrimination	42	35.0
Forced Prostitution, Sexual Harassment	18	15.0
Untouchability	05	4.1
Any Other	14	11.6
None	15	12.5
Total	120	100

It is observed from the above table that many of the respondents are suffering from more than one type of problems. Particularly, 56 (46.6%) of the respondents have problems of illiteracy and negligence, 73 (60.8%) have poverty and lower income, 42 (35.0%) have problem of social exploitation and discrimination, 18 (15.0%) of the respondents are suffering from forced prostitution and sexual harassment, 05 (4.1%) are facing untouchability and alienation, 14 (11.6%) are facing other types of problems and only 28 (23.3%) are not facing any of the problems mentioned above. It is highlighted that even though untouchability, social alienation, prostitution, etc are legally

banned, still the Devadasis are facing such problems in the society. Hence, there is need to look into the problems faced by these Devadasis, so as to rehabilitate them with legal protection.

7. Benefits availed from Welfare Schemes:

There are many rehabilitation schemes and social welfare programmes formulated for the welfare of Devadasis by the Department of Women and Child Welfare, Government of Karnataka. They include Income Generating Activity (IGA), which provides capital amount of Rs. 10000 with a subsidy of Rs. 10000 to start new business by investment of Rs. 20000. There is also monthly pension scheme for the Devadasis aged above 45 years and the amount of pension is Rs. 400 per month. There is also a rehabilitation programme which provides house facility for the Devadasis, who possessed residential land and the Government provide Rs. 40000/- to construct their own house. There is also scheme a short term loan of Rs. 5000/- to Devadasi members of Self-Help Groups with 6% interest. Another scheme of incentive, which provides amount of Rs. 5000/- for formation of Self-Help Groups. There are also other programmes to train the devadasis in self-employment programmes such as Accounting, Handicrafts, Awareness Campaign against Devadasi Practice, etc. The information was collected from the respondents on the benefits gained by the Devadasis on the above discussed programmes and the collected information is tabulated as under.

Table No. 7. Benefits availed from Welfare Schemes

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
Income Generating Activity	16	13.3
Monthly Pension	43	35.8
Rehabilitation Scheme	36	30.0
Loan Facility	08	6.6
Loans to Self-Help Groups	11	9.1
Any Other	--	--
None	31	28.0
Total	120	100

It is observed from the above table that a few of the respondents have gained from more than one rehabilitation and welfare scheme. Particularly, 16 (13.3%) have got financial assistance to start income generating activities, 43 (35.8%) are getting monthly pension, 36 (30.0%) have gained rehabilitation, 08 (30.0%) have got loan facility from the government, only 11 (9.1%) of the respondents have formed Self-Help Groups and got loans to the same and 31 (28.0%) have not gained from any of the welfare schemes formed for the welfare of the Devadasis.

SUGGESTIONS:

THE following suggestions are made from the present study.

1.It is suggested to give self-employment training to Devadasis along with financial assistance to start their own

business. In this way, their economic security is emphasized. 2.Strict vigilance at pilgrim places such as Saundatti and Chandragutti in Karnataka to prevent and control Devadasi and Nude Service to goddesses.

3.It is essential to provide legal protection and security to the Devadasis against the problems such as sexual harassment, exploitation, etc.

4.More incentives should be announced to the grooms who would like to marry with Devadasis.

CONCLUSION:

It is observed from the present study that, less number of devadasis are there in young age group. Hence, it can be said that the devadasi practice is slowly disappearing and there are elder Devadasis, for whom there is need for rehabilitation. There is need to announce incentives for the men who marry Devadasis. Even though there are plenty of welfare schemes and rehabilitation programmes for the welfare of the Devadasis, still only a few of the Devadasis are aware on such schemes. Hence, there is need to increase awareness of Devadasis on such welfare schemes. There is need for more rehabilitation schemes and programmes for Devadasis such as to provide reservation to the Devadasis and their children in education and employment, special scholarships for the children of devadasis, etc. It is also suggested to the Devadasis to establish a new social welfare organization for the betterment and development of Devadasis and such other deprived women in the society.

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