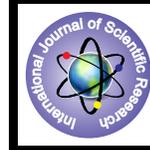


Devadasi Practice in Karnataka



Social Science

KEYWORDS :

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ABSTRACT

Devadasi is religious and cultural based social evil practice to dedicate girls before puberty to temples in the name of deities. There are few myths behind Devadasi practice. Devadasi practice has become exploitation of girls of the lower castes by rich and priestly classes. Even many of the Devadasis have become sex workers now. Considering the demerits of Devadasi practice, the Government has passed legislations. Even NGOs are increasing awareness and started rehabilitation programmes for Devadasis. Still, Devadasi is practiced among lower castes in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. Hence, it is suggested to increase education and knowledge against Devadasi practice among women.

Introduction:

Literally, Devadasi means 'Servants of God or Goddesses' and the practice of Devadasi was prevailed in ancient India. Currently, though it is banned by law, it is prevailed in North Karnataka, South Maharashtra and South-Western Andhra Pradesh. Under Devadasi practice, girls are dedicated, preferably as virgins, into temple service or religious mendicancy. Even a few of men were dedicated under Devadasi practice. Majority of the Devadasis are dedicated to temples of Sri Renuka Yellamma of Saundatti and Chandragutti in Karnataka. The Devadasis were also called as Jogini, Jogamma (females) and Jogappa (Male) in Kannada. As stated by Kamala Hampana¹, such practice was also prevailed in other countries such as Sumeria, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Babylonia, Syria, Israel, Libya, China, Greece and Japan.

Devadasis are women or girls dedicated to serving the deities as dancing girls at a very young age and are compelled to lead a life of indignity. Devadasis dedicated to the service of gods were regarded as married to those divinities, and therefore obliged to abstain from all intercourse with mortals. Devadasi is a derivative of two words from the Hindu Sanskrit "Deva" (god) and "Dasi" (servant or slave) which has a literal meaning of servant to the god. Women who are into this practice carry a Jagmetal mask of goddess Yellamma in a Paradi i.e., basket on their head when they are out for begging².

It is called by different terms in different regions such as - Devadasi, Rajadasi, Alankara Dasi, Rudradasi, Sule, Devasule, Jogathi, Basavi, Nithyasumangali in Karnataka. In Tamilnadu - Devaradhinar, Nithyasumangali, Chennaveedu, Kannigeyar, Nithyakalyani, Rudra Dasi, Manikattar and Andhra Pradesh - Bhogam Basavi, Sani, Devali, Kalavanthala, Maharashtra - Marali, Bhavin, Kerala - Chakyar, Kudikyar. Orissa - Maharis, Nepal - Dhuki, Madhya Pradesh - Bhavin, Kulavanthin³.

Devadasi Belief in Karnataka:

In Karnataka, it is believed that Goddess Renuka Yellamma was cursed by her husband Sage Jamadagni due disobedience of his orders and affected by skin disease. To get rid of her disease, the few of the sages were helped by advised her to take bath at Jogulabhavi located in Saundatti, Belgaum district and paste turmeric powder. Renuka Yellamma was get rid of her skin diseases following the suggestions of these sages and she become grateful to those sages and started chanting as "Yekkayya, Jogayya"⁴. Still the devotees of Renuka Yellamma and Devadasis pronounce the same chant now. Sage Jamadagni was become angry with those Sages, who were suggested Renuka Yellamma to get rid of her disease and cursed them to become eunuchs. Now, many of the eunuchs are devotees of Renuka Yellamma. Later, Renuka Yellamma settled in Saundatti on the hill after crossing Seven

ponds and now popularly known as 'Elukollada Yellamma' (Yellamma of Seven Ponds or waterfalls).

There is another 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 (Angelic beings from Heaven) 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 Parashuram 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 (low caste women) 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.

Origin of Devadasi Practice:

The Devdasi system is an old one, and apparently pre-Aryan. There is no mention of it in Vedic Sanskrit literature, but Tamil Sangam literature, which dates back to 200-300 BC, describes a class of dancing women called *parattaiyar*⁵. They were courtesans who performed some ritual function, lived in a separate part of the city, and eventually came to be associated with temples. Later, in the post Vedic and post Buddhist age, the system seems to have spread through India, though it remained strongest in the south. Young girls were usually dedicated to the goddess, or occasionally to gods, very often after the appearance of matted hair called *jath* which is taken to be a sign of the call of the goddess. The dedicated girl was forbidden to marry. When such girls came of age, they would perform dances in the temple, perform various services to the gods and goddesses, and take part in various rituals and religious ceremonies. They were considered to be married to the god or goddess, and were sexually available to any man who came to the temple. Devdasis were invariably from the lowest, usually the untouchable castes, and were considered lower than other classes of courtesans, or other classes of dancers and singers in the temple.

Devadasi Practice: The Present

In Karnataka, the practice is found to exist in 6 districts-Raichur,

Bijapur, Belgam, Dharwad, Bellary and Gulbarga. In Andhra Pradesh it is prevalent in 14 districts –Karimnagar, Warangal, Nizamabad, Karnool, Hyderabad, Medak, Ananthapur, Adilabad, Chittoor, Rangareddy, Nellore, Nelagonda, Srikakulam and Mahaboobnagar. In Maharashtra the devadasi culture exists in 10 districts- Pune, Sholapur, Kolhapur, Sangli, Mumbai, Latur, Usmanabad, Satara, Sindhudurg, and Nanded. The devadasi community is most marginalised and discriminated group. The practice is historically related to the worship of deities particular by the lower, Madiga caste (Schedule Caste). Extreme poverty and routine discrimination experienced by Madiga families further increases the incidences of dedication⁶.

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*. 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 also die a *sumangali*. 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. The lives of the Devadasis of Maharashtra and Karnataka are dedicated to Renuka Yellamma, the universal mother. They are married to her and can marry no one else. The only art they are conversant in is the art of submitting to any man who desires them and is willing to pay for their favours.

Devadasis, illiterate people in Belgaum district of Karnataka and few parts of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, who do not belong to the Devadasi cult are a conditioned by blind belief, ignorance and illiteracy. Realizing social evils of Devadasi practice, the central government passed the Prevention of Devadasi Act in 1935. This did not bring about the slightest change in the status quo of the practice in Karnataka and Maharashtra. The Janata Government of Karnataka succeeded in passing legislation banning the Devadasi cult, with Karnataka *Devadasi Samarpan*

Nishedhan Act 1982 that took effect from January 1984.

Alongside law, the processes of social change, namely the NGOs, other voluntary organizations and the governmental machinery should collectively pit themselves against religion and commercialism structured into the business for many years. At Manoli, 12 kms from Saundatti, some Devadasis are being trained to handle sewing machines at a centre run by the Akhmadhadevi Mahila Mandal. This voluntary body trains 40 girls at a time for six months. The Mahatma Phule Samata Pratisthan of Pune is trying to educate children of *devadasis* so that they can find employment in the mainstream. Revabai Kamble is President of the Pune Devadasi Sangathan founded in 1982. It raises health consciousness among prostitutes who visit the dispensary once a week. The Social Welfare Department of the Government of Maharashtra has set up a hostel for children of Devadasis at Bhukam, 12 miles away from Pune. Sawali at Nippani has Sushila Naik as president, who is a *devadasi* herself. It is a centre established solely for the rehabilitation of the *devadasis* and for deserted and displaced women. The Karnataka Dalit Action Committee based in Bangalore has constantly tried to raise public support against the degrading system. This organization forced the Karnataka Legislative Assembly to pass the 1982 Act mentioned above.

Concluding Remarks:

Though Devadasi was begun as religious practice, it has become providing service of unmarried girls to the rich and high caste people. Due to modernization, it lost its importance. As such, many of the present Devadasis are working as sex workers or prostitutes in cities. It is highlighted that only legal restrictions and social welfare schemes are not enough to ban and restrict this practice, it is also essential to increase literacy, education and knowledge among women, who believe blind beliefs in the name of religion, culture and god. Education and knowledge among women are essentially suggested to completely ban and restrict evil practice of Devadasi.

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