

## A SYSTEMATIC STUDY ON THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES; DEVADASIS SYSTEM IN KARNATAKA

**Author: Smt. Kusuma Hariprasad**, PhD Research Scholar, Department of History, Bangalore University. Karnataka, India.

### ABSTRACT

*The paper explores vivid customs and practices maintained by Devadasis in the state of Karnataka in specific where Devadasis are considered as women given in marriage to God but the study reports in Karnataka that Devadasis have been portrayed as sex slaves/prostitutes. This practice is developed and now Devadasis are confronting many problems and challenges across different parts of Karnataka. As per 1993-94 Census, there were around 22,873 Devadasis in 10 districts of Karnataka, viz, Belgaum, Bagalkot, Bijapur, Bellary, Koppal, Raichur, Gulbarga, Dharwad, Haveri and Gadag. Later a survey was conducted in 2007-08 and 23,787 additional Devadasis were identified. Because of this, the total number of identified Devadasis doubled to 46,660 in the Census. Devadasis aged above 45 get pension around Rs.1500/- from government of Karnataka which is insufficient for their livelihood. In addressing the devadasi practice, this research study does the following: (i) Discusses the devadasi system's historically and highlights socio-economic, religious and educational conditions in Karnataka; (ii) addresses the issues and problems faced by Devadasis of Karnataka (iii) Focuses challenges and vulnerability (iv) discuss various programmes suggested to prevent a large range of different areas of devadasi problems.*

**KEYWORDS:** Devadasi, Socio-economic and educational problems, Issues & challenges

### INTRODUCTION

The system of dedicating young girls to temple as dancing girls is a centuries' old practice in Hindu religion. These young girls are considered to be married to Gods and are expected to dance before the Lord as per customs. They have to lead a life of strict abstinence, dedication and devotion to the Lord. Hence, these dancing girls were named as "Devadasi" i.e., servants of God. Since, she is married to God and she does not attain the widowhood in her lifetime and hence, she is called as "Nitya Sumangali".

Devadasis are known by different name in different parts of India. In Kerala as “Maharis”, in Assam as “Natis”, in Andhrapradesh as “Jogini Bhogam”, Tamil Nadu as “Thevardiya”, Maharastra as “Murali Jogaten, Arathini, Matang”, in Karnataka as “Basavi, Jogini.”

Historically Devadasis were an essential part of Indian Temples and they performed functions in temples like cleaning temple, lighting lamps and doing the duties of deities etc. They used to sing and dance in temple and they used to teach classical music and dance to the young girls. Devadasis kept alive and developed a tradition of Indian classical music and dance.

The history of the Deccan tells us that the ritual of temple women (or Devadasis) was well established in South India by the 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. women resided in the temples, and were educated as artists and courtesans. The inscription at Tanjore dates back to 1004 A.D. of Raja Rajachola. During this period, the temple Devadasis were treated second important after the priest. It is understood that there were 400 Devadasis were available at one stage at the Rajarajeshwara Temple. During the Ahom period in Assam around 10,000 Devadasis were settled at Hajo temple.

Evidence from temple inscriptions belonging to the later Vijayanagara period suggests the emergence of an elaborate system of economic patronage and support to Devadasis by courts and temples. The patronage of the Maratha rulers to the temples and to the Devadasis was crucial to the evolution of a performing art tradition in South India. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the decline of the royal patronage of many kingdom, chieftains and also rich landlords, the Devadasis faced a reversal of their fortune. Devadasi came to be equated with prostitutes in Karnataka.

During 1906 in princely Mysore state, the Wodeyars declared appointing of Devadasis to the temple serviced to be banned immediately.

During medieval period Muslim rulers invaded and destroyed South Indian Kingdoms and also temples for its richness. Because of the destruction of temples, Devadasis started searching their patronage in zamindars and rich landlords.

When Europeans arrived in India they called these “Devadasis” as “Nautch girls”, since they were dancing in temples. For a European mind, a dancing girl could be just an entertainer performing for the pleasure of rich men.

The Social Purity Movement began in 1880 in Madras by Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu against the practices of Devadasis system. During 1892 by “Hindu Social Reforms Associations” including some Missionaries registered their complaints against “Nautch girls” and they called these women as prostitute and started “Anti Nautch Movement”. The movement of the abolition of the Devadasi system came to a head under the leadership of Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968), Because of pressure from many social organisations the British accepted the abolition of Devadasi bill in 1934.

Even though several Legislations during Pre and Post independence have been passed and amended to prevent and eradicate the devadasi system, it is still prevalent in many districts of Karnataka. As per 1993-94 Census, there were around 22,873 Devadasis in 10 districts of Karnataka, viz, Belgaum,

Bagalkot, Bijapur, Bellary, Koppal, Raichur, Gulbarga, Dharwad, Haveri and Gadag. However, the report was said to have been incomplete and also there were allegations that the Census was not conducted in a scientific manner. Later a survey was conducted in 2007-08 and 23,787 additional Devadasis were identified. Because of this, the total number of identified Devadasis doubled to 46,660 in the Census.

The following are the brief list of socio-economic, religious and educational conditions which determine for the dedication of girl/women as Devadasis.

Religious:	Social:	Economic:	Educational backwardness:
1. To solve a family problem – Religious vows will be registered with God. 2. Fear of Goddess (Bhakti) compelling need for protection. 3. Hereditary role (family system) 4. Strong superstitions – Curse of Yellamma, Sacred prostitution, Faith, strong feelings of devotion (belief) 5. Reincarnated and birth in high caste in next life. 6. Growing mat, (jat) hair.	1. Social pressure – Zamindaars, Landlords, influence of local brothels, local Devadasis. 2. Wrong Advice – priest/old Devadasis. 3. Untouchable, dalit caste factor. 4. No respect in the society. 5. In ability to marry in a regular way. 6. Fertility 7. Vested interest of upper caste and class to gain accessibility to desirable women.	1. Acute poverty 2. To have an income - easy financial income. 3. To work in a brothel 4. To support family 5. Exploitation of economic conditions – rich landlords/priest. 6. Landlessness and total dependency on dominant group.	1. Illiteracy. 2. General ignorance 3. Alienation of elites among schedule caste. 4. Lack of awareness of government legislations 5. Lack of implementation, Legislations and schemes of governments. 6. Lack of active cooperation and coordination of exploited Devadasis and public and government officials.

## ISSUES AND PROBLEMS FACED BY DEVADASIS OF KARNATAKA

1. The problems & difficulties faced by the middle and old age Devadasis to earn their livelihood cannot be quantified. Because they are no more get attracted by customers and they will be suffering from disease and their faces became dark and wrinkled. The changing

life style of Devadasis made them to earn their bread and butter by doing labour work. Devadasis aged above 45 are getting pension of Rs.1500/- from government which is insufficient for leading day to day life.

2. Dalit women suffer from triple oppression resulting by gender, caste and classes. But in the case of Dalit Devadasis suffer a lot.
3. The policies are not taking complaints lodged by Devadasi women, in case they were raped.
4. Most of the Devadasis are suffering from mental and physical trauma of becoming Devadasis. The physical and mental problems of Devadasis like lack of appetite, anaemia, spontaneous abortions etc are common in nature. In addition to this some Devadasis are infected and suffering from STD/HIV/AIDS.
5. The educational opportunities for children of Devadasis are very poor. Even though government has announced many educational schemes and benefits, problem starts with school registration & without a father's name a child may be refused entry in many schools. Even Devadasis want to admit their children to school due to financial incapability to purchase stationary and humiliation & discrimination faced by their children they are not willing to send them to school and also many children are discontinuing their education.
6. Devadasis themselves are not aware of the prevailing legislation and stringent punishment given for dedication of young girls to the goddess will result in eradicating the Devadasi system.
7. Most of the Devadasis are illiterate and they are not aware of Government schemes available for their welfare. Government should take steps to proper implementation of the existing policies.
8. Devadasis don't have proper houses and most of the Devadasis live in one room houses. Lack of legal husband, all the cost of child raising fall on Devadasis.
9. They are suffering too much of discrimination in the home and in the community.
10. Generally it is seen that people are not inclined to marry children of Devadasis. Because of social stigma and labelling attached with Devadasis. Hence Govt. Should encourages marriages of Devadasi children and also should provide ample of incentives to those who are willing to marry the daughter of Devadasis.
11. Karnataka State women welfare department is conducting many awareness programmes like vocational training, tailoring, embroidery is taught to Devadasis in rehabilitation centres. And also given loan for small starts ups. These training should be made compulsory and incentive to be given to the learner and also assistance for small shops.
12. Karnataka government is giving lands to the Devadasis. But these lands are often unfertile and Devadasis can't make use of this. Hence, agricultural land should be given to them. So that they can get some regular income for their livelihood.

## **CHALLENGES AND VULNERABILITY**

1. “Devadasi system was so deeply rooted in the community and was a challenge to both NGOs and the Government. Government should make the constant effort to coordinate between police, voluntary organisation and media, to create awareness among the community members. And also along with creating awareness, it was a great task for the Govt. To provide economic stability and social security to this vulnerable group of women.
2. Complete eradication of this practise and implementation of the economic and social development programme for the ex-“Devadasis” in 14 districts of Karnataka.
3. It is observed that there is no uniform official statistics on the number of Devadasis living in our country. The Govt. Of Karnataka survey figure changed twice i.e., 1993-94 and 2007 still is retaining same numbers. National Commission for women’s mentions as 87000 and National Commission for Human Rights during 2014 has declared 45,000 Devadasis available in the country.
4. Many Devadasis have not declared their identification thinking of stigma and abuse by society and may lead fatal to their children’s future, during survey conducted by Karnataka Government in 1993 and 2007.
5. Many local population including Police personnel are not aware of legislations pertaining to abolition and banning of Devadasi system by states. As a result people are not interested to register the case or there is no registration of the cases under this Act. Some time corruption also plays major role in silencing the evil practice.
6. Empower Devadasi women through formation of collective of their own at different levels to prevent practise of dedication and plan for their future life.
7. Identify areas of interest, strengths/potential of Devadasi women and their children and channelize the same for development constructive activities.

## **FOLLOWING ARE THE VARIOUS PROGRAMMES SUGGESTED TO ADDRESS/CURE AND PREVENT A LARGE RANGE OF DIFFERENT AREAS OF DEVADASI PROBLEMS**

1. Providing education and health care services for Devadasis and their children.
2. Building awareness of their situation and trying to reduce stigma and exclusion.
3. Enlisting Devadasis themselves to stop further dedication of young girls.
4. Organizing marriages for Devadasi and their daughters.

5. Providing housing or other assets, with the title deeds-patta made out in the Devadasi's names.
6. Helping Devadasis obtain ration cards for cheap food grains.
7. Providing information about HIV/AIDS
8. Trying to break the links between Devadasis, trafficking and commercial exploitation.
9. Addressing the problems of rural poverty and disempowerment by forming self help groups.
10. Constitute a committee consisting of representatives, from Devadasi Women's NGOs including likeminded individuals and media to address issues such as prevent practise of dedication, deal with stigma attached and seek all possible support in the rehabilitation process.
11. Organising these women into different groups to discuss about the evils of this system and to draw mutual support in times of distress.
12. Encourage and motivate start savings. Training on how to conduct meetings and maintaining accounts to be provided to them to help them in managing the small funds and the confidence to maintain larger amounts.
13. Women to be trained in income generating ski8lls and made them aware the subsidies provided by the Karnataka State Women's development Corporation, with the assistance of social welfare department to take up various programmes.
14. Discuss the problems and the role of the community in eradicating the system. Awareness to be provided through campaigns, street plays, songs, distribution of pamphlets, posters and folklore performances to inspire the people into not dedicating their daughters.
15. Awareness programmes to be organised in the premises of the Yellamma temple region during the fairs because this temple were once homed many of the practices associated with the "Devadasi" system. Since messages through these fairs will reach out to wider people this opportunity to be utilized.
16. The Government should engage and motivate local NGO's and also ex-"Devadasis" to take active part in these programmes. Ex-'Devadasi' women act as spies to detect and stop further dedications. Any person, even under remote suspicion, is interrogated thoroughly. The combined effort of officers, NGO's, the individuals, the community and the police may lead to stopping this evil practise completely.

## CONCLUSION

It is suggested ex-Devadasis, NGO's, SHGs and Govt. Should emphasis on proper implementation of the scheme and enable Devadasis to form or become part of self help groups.

More efforts are needed from government officials, police & law enforcement officers, and members of local government institutions to work with village elders and others in a position to influence families who might consider dedicating their daughters. This research study concludes that the greater awareness at all levels of society would enable Devadasis themselves to access programmes and benefits more effectively, including loans from income generation, reproductive healthcare, HIV prevention, and education for their children.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

1. A Report on Six Regional Workshops on "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Children".
2. Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India, New Delhi 1998.
3. Asian Development Bank combating Trafficking of Women and Children in South Asia.
4. Regional Synthesis paper for Bangladesh, India and Nepal, Manila 2002.
5. A Report of Karnataka state Women Development Corporation 2012.
6. Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act 21982: The Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

1. Servants of the Goddess: The Modern-Day Devadasis – by Catherine Rubin Kemorgant.
2. Devadasis: Ancient and Modern – by Dr.K.Jamanadas.
3. Wives of the God-king: Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri – by Frederique Apffel Marglin.
4. Devadasi Cult: a Sociological Analysis – by Jogan Shankar.
5. Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis Memory and Modernity in South India – by D.Soneji.
6. The Devadasi and the Saint – by V.Sriram.
7. Women of Pride – by Lakshmi Vishwanathan.
8. Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India – by S C Kersenboom Story.

\*\*\*\*\*