

Exploitation of Women as Devadasis and its Associated Evils

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Devadasi system is a socio-cultural practice which has a long history in India. In the years around Indian Independence, there was a widespread demand for the abolition of Devadasi system by the Reformists and Revivalists. This was precipitated by the anti-Nautch campaign of the British colonial government. Even though many of the states have since outlawed the dedication of young girls as devadasis, the practice still continues in different forms and guises. Thus there is a veritable gap between official statistics and ground reality. This research study proposes to conduct a combined descriptive and evaluative study to examine the practice of Devadasi system in contemporary India especially in states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh (Andhra and Telangana), Karnataka and Maharashtra. The study also focusses on the associated evils of Devadasi system, namely, prostitution and begging.

The figure of the devadasi in the Indian imagination has changed in different historical periods. True to her name, a devadasi was held in respect and social standing because she was the “handmaiden of God”. However, the Social Reform Movements sought to abolish the Devadasi system as it foregrounded a morally reprehensible social practice. The clarion call coincided with the withdrawal of royal patronage and temple subsidies. This economic factor forced the devadasis to take up other occupations. Prostitution and begging were adopted in a large scale because they were approved and sanctioned occupations within the Devadasi system. The figure of the devadasi in contemporary India is a corroded version, which does not display her artistic and intellectual accomplishments. So, there is an ‘ideal’ courtesan, like Amrapali or Madhavi, and the ‘real’ prostitute and beggar, both of whom are connoted by the name ‘devadasi’.

This research project has been conducted over a one year period. The objectives of the project are: 1. To determine the factors contributing to the Devadasi system in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh (Andhra and Telangana), Karnataka and Maharashtra 2. To examine the prevalence of and legislations on devadasis in prostitution 3. To analyze qualitatively the contemporary cultural discourses on Devadasi system and 4. To suggest measures for rehabilitation of women in prostitution/Devadasi system.

Four Field Investigators were appointed for a six month period. They first conducted a literature survey in the libraries in Chennai and on the resources available online. Then, the team identified the districts in the four states where Devadasi system is still prevalent. This survey clearly highlighted the presence of devadasis in large numbers. The field investigators also identified

stakeholders such as health workers, social workers, government officials, NGO personnel, academics, members of judiciary, law enforcement and correctional administration who served as respondents.

An Interview Schedule was constructed. It consisted of 90 questions under twelve sub-headings. On the one hand, the Interview Schedule focussed on the basic objectives of the project. On the other, it highlighted the life process of devadasi from dedication through initiation and prostitution to rescue and rehabilitation. A total of 205 responses were received from the five states. In addition, 18 case studies and 12 profiles of respondents were created.

Some of the overarching findings and recommendations, based on the ground reality have been enumerated below:

Major Findings

- Majority of girls who are dedicated are from the Schedule Caste community.
- Parents make the decision to dedicate their girls.
- Dedication is a forced act. Poverty is a significant factor which aids dedication. Poverty, illiteracy, hereditary, caste system combine together and facilitate the dedication.
- Begging and prostitution are two important social evils resulting out of Devadasi system.
- Many devadasis work in commercial sex industry and practice prostitution till the age of 40.
- Devadasis are subjected to different forms of abuse.
- Children of devadasis face problems, such as branding and stigma.
- There are no uniform policies, programmes and schemes for the welfare and benefit of devadasis in the five states.
- There are no policies, programmes and schemes for children of devadasis.
- Lack of awareness is the major reason for the Poor/Non implementation of legislations.
- Rescue and rehabilitation become problematic because dedications happen within the closed family unit.
- Devadasis are not ready to reintegrate into the family and society because it is their family which forces them into the evil practice.

Recommendations

- Poverty is the lead cause for the continuance of this evil system. Effective poverty eradication schemes will help in prevention and abolition of dedication.
- To prevent dedication and to abolish the system, the government has to provide alternative source of income generating programmes for the sustainable livelihood of devadasis.
- The stigma attached to the children of devadasis prevents them from continuing their education. Hence school authorities need to be educated to not ask for details and not divulge to others.
- Majority of the devadasis are rescued from their own families. Hence sensitizing the family members of devadasis in prevalence areas will help in reducing the number of dedications.
- Awareness campaigns about socially inclusive policies and programmes need to be conducted among devadasis and various stakeholders of the system.
- Stakeholders need to be educated on State Legislations to ensure effective implementation.
- Awareness campaigns need to be conducted targeting young girls, especially educating the girl children of devadasis.
- Dissemination programmes need to be conducted at various levels starting from block level to state level to enhance the number of beneficiaries for the existing schemes need to be rectified.
- Lack of focus on the victimological perspective in the existing legislations, policies, programmes and schemes.
- Devadasi system has to be approached holistically by considering the intersections of caste, class and religion.
- The immediate need in the rehabilitation of devadasis is to create safe shelter homes and provide monetary assistance.

Recommendations by Devadasis

- Devadasis in all five the states are not aware that the system is a social evil. Hence, at the district level and in prevalent districts, awareness raising campaigns need to be conducted from time to time by the government and the NGOs.

- Devadasis have to be educated to demand names which identify them as individuals and not generic names such as basavi or jogini. This task may be taken by the Directorate of Social Welfare Board in each State.
- At present, dedication happens very frequently among the Scheduled Caste communities, there are intersecting factors such as poverty, illiteracy and social exclusion therefore, special training programmes combined with capacity building for young girls need to be organised by local administration and NGOs. SHGs can play a major role in preventing dedication.
- The pattern of dedication has changed significantly over time. However, legislations still define dedication within a narrow ambit. Hence, suitable modifications need to be made at the Centre and State levels in defining what constitutes dedication.
- Religious beliefs and hereditary practices play a major role in the dedication of girls from disadvantaged communities. More stringent action oriented laws need to be put in place to monitor perpetrators such as temple priests and village henchmen.
- Of late, there are instances of Devadasi women getting married. However, the marriage is short lived, unsustainable and oppresses the Devadasi women. So media has to play a major role in removing the stigma associated with Devadasis in marriage. Hence documentaries on perpetration and prevention of Devadasi system need to be included as trailers in movie halls in prevalent districts.
- One reason for perpetration of Devadasi system is because older Devadasis are neglected by family, society, and need to fend for themselves. Already pension schemes exist in some States like Karnataka. These pension schemes need to be executed in all the States and properly monitored, so that the benefits reach the Devadasi.
- The active period for Devadasis is fifteen to twenty years, starting at the age of 13-14. They are more prone to sexually transmitted diseases. Exclusive medical camps need to be conducted to prevent and treat the Devadasi women.
- Children of Devadasis form vulnerable targets. Stigma and neglect turn them into socially deviant. There have been some attempts to create hostels and schools for these children. In terms of social inclusion, the purpose of such measures is debatable. It is imperative to formulate specific policies at the State level to integrate them into the mainstream society.

