

---

# **DEVADASIS – SINNERS OR SINNED AGAINST**

An attempt to look at the myth and reality of history and present status of Devadasis

By Anil Chawla

Available at

[www.samarthbharat.com](http://www.samarthbharat.com)

---

## CONTENTS

S. No.		Page No.
<b>A PREFACE &amp; INTRODUCTION</b>		
A1.	Preface	3
A2	Introduction	6
<b>B HISTORY</b>		
B1.	Ancient and Medieval History	9
B2.	Eradication or Revival	19
B3.	Legislative Initiatives	27
<b>C PRESENT STATUS</b>		
C1.	Reasons For Dedication	30
C2.	Dedication Process	35
C3.	Life After Dedication	40
C4.	Social Status	45
<b>ANNEXURES</b>		
I	Statistical Data	49
II	References and Bibliography	51
III	Acknowledgements	54

## PART A

# PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

## **A1. PREFACE**

*“If one copies from one source, it is plagiarism; if one copies from many sources, it is research.”* This mini-book is based on research since it copies from many sources. I claim no originality in this work, which attempts to present the history and present status of devadasis in a concise readable form for the common reader.

One may well question the need to write a book based on the writings of others. It seemed to me that authentic literature about devadasis is too scattered and is not available in a concise form for the common reader who has no time or patience to read academic research papers. Readable writings on devadasis are dominated by two categories of writers – (a) Leftist intellectuals who spare no opportunity to attack any religious institutions especially the ones that have not received a favourable mention in international Marxist literature (b) Christian Missionaries and their protégés. These writers have been using the institution of devadasi as a stick to beat Hindu religion and Indian culture. Unfortunately, many Indians are not aware of the true history of devadasis. This prevents them from answering the smear campaign that has been going on for more than a century.

The most unfortunate victim of the smear campaign has been the poor woman who has been portrayed as a prostitute. She was at one time a respected member of the community and was welcome in every house on even the most auspicious occasions. Suddenly, she was painted black without any compassion or empathy. She was an artist who kept classical traditions of dance and music alive for centuries. But the so-called social reformers ignored this aspect of her work and launched a movement asking people to boycott her performances. These pseudo-reformers destroyed her sources of livelihood and pushed her into prostitution. Surely, no woman deserves to be treated in the manner that this wife of god has been treated.

Voices against the so-called reformers are as old as the “*anti-nautch*” campaign. Annie Besant, Rukmini Arundale and Theosophical Society of India did a commendable job in preserving the dance traditions of devadasis. Yet, there is not much appreciation (or even realization) for the efforts of the revivalists who were devoted to the great cultural traditions of Bharat (India). The feminist matriarchal community of devadasis provided necessary atmosphere for the pursuit of arts by some women who were so inclined. With the changing times, the customs and practices of the community might have become unsustainable. That cannot be any reason for misrepresenting the history and maligning the few women who still practice the tradition.

I was inspired to study the plight of devadasis when I learnt that the country owes a large portion of its classical dance and some of the best singers to the devadasis. I learnt from hearsay that renowned Mangeshkar sisters – Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle and Usha Khanna – trace their lineage to devadasi community. (If the hearsay is wrong, my sincere apologies to the famous sisters). M.S. Subbulakshmi’s dasi parentage is of course well known. It is accepted that Bharatnatyam and Oddissi, the well known classical dances, are modified versions of the traditional dances of devadasis. A tradition that has given so much to the country surely deserves to be treated better than the way biased authors have done.

In a way, this work is dedicated to and inspired by the women who have survived a century of malicious propaganda with grit, determination and perseverance. They were painted as sinners by the educated urbane class. History will no doubt prove these poor women to be more sinned against than sinners.

If this mini-book helps in correcting the general perception about devadasi tradition in the minds of intelligent readers, I shall feel that my little effort has been worth it.

Anil Chawla

28 August 2002

E-mail [anil@samarthbharat.com](mailto:anil@samarthbharat.com)  
[hindustanstudies@rediffmail.com](mailto:hindustanstudies@rediffmail.com)

P.S. This mini-book is classified for copyright purposes as “**ALL RIGHTS FREE**”. Please feel free to publish or copy or pass it on in any form to as many people as you like.

## **A2. INTRODUCTION**

In some parts of India a few centuries ago a practice developed under which a few women were made wives of god and named as *Devadasis*, *Jogins*, *Basavis*, *Kalawants*, *Paravatis* or *Mathammas*. These wives of God lived in or around the temples. They performed some duties at the temples and participated in the religious functions. They were an integral part of many large Hindu temples. In addition to their religious duties, the Devadasis were a community of artists. They presented dance and music performances at the temple as well as at private functions. It was customary for the elite to invite devadasis at marriages and family functions.

The devadasis developed and preserved the classical dances of India. *Bharatnatyam* is a modern incarnation of the *sadir* dance performed by devadasis of Tamil Nadu. *Odissi* was performed by devadasis of temples in Orissa. The contribution of devadasis to music is also significant. MS Subbulakshmi, Lata Mangeshkar and her sister Asha Bhonsle (the three most renowned women singers of India) trace their lineage to devadasi community. Devadasis, as a community, developed distinct customs, practices and traditions that were best suited to enable them to live as artists without suppressing their physical and emotional needs. This professional community was controlled by women and was matriarchal.

The term caste has often been misused in the context of *devadasis*. “According to the devadasis themselves there exists a devadasi ‘way of life’ or ‘professional ethic’ (*vritti*, *murai*) but not a devadasi *jati*. The office of devadasi was hereditary but it did not confer the right to work without adequate qualification.” (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985)

About a century ago, a campaign was launched to portray devadasis as prostitutes and as immoral women. The smear campaign continues to this date. It has become customary to talk of abolition of the ‘evil’ of devadasi system. The system was legally abolished many years ago in all states where the practice was prevalent. The institution is almost dead and exists today as a fossilized version of its original form.

It cannot be anyone’s intention to revive the practice since the necessary supporting institutions do no longer exist. That should not, however prevent one from looking at the truth

about devadasis who were not (and a majority are not even today) prostitutes. She was married to a deity or god, but that did not mean that she had to live her life without the normal pleasures of sex and childbearing. It is true that a devadasi was not governed by the strict rules of sexual morality as applicable to married women. She lived a normal sexual life and exercised a fair degree of choice in the matter of choosing her sexual partner who was not her husband but nevertheless often maintained a long-term relationship.

Understanding the life and customs of devadasis is essential to understand the liberal traditions of Indian society, art and culture. There has been a tendency in recent times (especially by so-called Hindu organizations) to project an ultra-conservative neo-Victorian version of Hinduism, which seems to follow the Vatican in matters of sexual morality. One cannot understand the institution of Devadasis with such a mindset.

This mini-book attempts to look at the life and practice of Devadasis without the bias of Christian morality. There is no attempt to paint the devadasi either as a prostitute or as a nun. The golden rule that has been followed is to avoid passing judgement till it is absolutely necessary.

The mini-book is divided into four parts. The first part has the introduction (this chapter). The second part gives an historical overview of the practice. Starting from the supposedly mythological basis for the practice, this part discusses the debate that preceded the legislation banning the practice. The third part deals with the practice, as it exists today in some parts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. The last part has statistics, references, bibliography and acknowledgments.

## PART B

# HISTORY

## **B1. ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL HISTORY**

There are different stories in Indian legends regarding origins of this system. According to one popular story Jamadagni, father of great sage warrior Parushurama, ordered his son to behead his mother Renuka. Parushurama obeyed his father. Jamadagni was pleased at his son's obedience and granted him three boons. Parushurama used one of the boons to bring his mother back to life. Renuka's decapitated head could not be traced. Head of a lower caste woman named Yellamma was attached to Renuka's body. Thus a lower caste woman achieved the higher status of being a Brahmin's wife. Following the tradition a number of young girls of lower caste started to be dedicated to the goddess Yellamma (Vijaya Kumar, Chakrapani 1993).

Another story that is heard traces its origins to "Renuka Purana". Renuka the wife of the sage, Jamadagni was cursed by her husband to be a leper when he found out through his yogic powers that she had sinned by admiring another man. Thus cursed Renuka went to the "Ramshrunga" hills in the south (the present day Yellamma hillock) where she received the protection of Matangi, the daughter of the sage Matanga and was subsequently cured of her illness by two holy men named Yakkaya and Jogayya. Meanwhile Parashurama, son of Renuka and Jamadagni, was meditating and praying to Lord Shiva for divine weapons. While Parashurama was away for meditation, King Karthitekya attacked and killed sage Jamadagni to take possession of the celestial cow "Kamadhenu". Enraged by this, Parashurama vowed to cleanse the earth of Kshatriyas (warrior caste). After avenging himself and reviving his father from the dead, he asked his father to pardon his mother. No reference of Devadasis is made in this Purana.

Many scholars are now of the opinion that the Devadasi practice has no sanction of the scriptures. These scholars treat devadasi practice as "*sacred or religious prostitution*" and plead that Hindu scriptures do not have any mention of sacred prostitution. Various "Smritis" have recognized prostitution and there are instances of prostitutes being taxed. For example, "*Arthashastra*" written during 300 B.C. has a chapter dealing with "Superintendent of Prostitutes" But the chapter does not mention any sacred prostitutes or temple girls.

Similarly, “*Kamasutra*” written in about 250 A.D. deals in detail with courtesans but does not mention sacred prostitutes. The classic “*Mrichchha Katika*” of Shudraka written in 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D deals with the courtship and marriage of a poor Brahmin with an affluent generous prostitute named Vasantsena. Even this classic has no reference to any dedication to God. It has hence been said that the concept of dedication of a virgin girl to the Gods and marrying her to the Gods does not have any religious sanction. This line of argument is based on a wrong premise that devadasi practice amounted to “sacred or religious prostitution”. A search for the devadasi practice in books having reference of prostitution is bound to draw a blank since it would have been unimaginable at that time to link the two subjects (devadasis and prostitutes).

Reference to dancing girls in temple is found in Kalidasa’s “*Meghadhoot*”. It is said that dancing girls were present at the time of worship in Mahakal Temple of Ujjain. Some scholars are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. as most of the Puranas containing reference to it have been written during this period. Several Puranas recommended that arrangements should be made to enlist the services of singing girls at the time of worship at temples.

There can be no denial of the fact that by the end of tenth century, the total number of devadasis in many temples was in direct proportion to the wealth and prestige of the temple. During the medieval period, they were regarded as a part of the normal establishment of temples; they occupied a rank next only to priests and their number often reached high proportions. For example, there were 400 devadasis attached to the temple at Tanjore; so also at Travancore.

The term *devadasi* is of Sanskrit origin. Though it was commonly used, the institution and the women in profession were known locally by different terms. In Tamil Nadu they were known as *devaradiar* or *dasis*, meaning slave servants of God or slaves respectively; In Travancore region as kudikkars, those belonging to the house; In Andhra Pradesh as *dogams* and *sanis*; In Kannada speaking areas as basavis and jogatis; In Goa and Western India as bhavins or bhavinis, meaning beautiful wanton women; In Maharashtra (other than coastal area) as *muralis jogatis* or *jogtinis* or *aradhinis*; and In Marwar as bhagtanis or bhagtan, wife of a bhagat or holy man. Devadasis are also known locally by the names of *Nayakasani*, *Rangasani*, *Gangasani*, *Muttukattikondavlu*, *Davara Sule*, *Kasabi*, *Patradavalu*, *Jogti* and so on.

The *bhavins* of Goa and Konkan region were also known as *devli* (an attendant of an idol), or as *naikin*. The system was hereditary. Interestingly, these women came from the

households of the chiefs of the communities in which the system was in existence. A *bhavini* was free to choose two or three of her daughters to succeed her.

While the institution of *basavis* was prevalent almost all over the Kannada speaking areas during the British period, the institution of *jogatis* had been confined to northwestern Karnataka and the adjoining southern Maharashtra. In the former state of Mysore, there were two types of Basavis – Linga Basavis belonging to Shaiva sect and Garuda Basavis belonging to Vaishnava sect.

An important point that may be noted is the difference between Devadasi system and *Jogin / Basavi* system. Devadasi system is not confined to a particular caste. Unlike Jogins, the Devadasis are not treated as untouchables. The doors of every temple are open to them. They have, in fact, been honored in the public in the past, and even offered seats alongside the figures of royalty. Devadasis confined their activities to the boundaries of temples (especially great traditional temples), where as *Jogins/Basavis* participated in dances before chariots of god and goddess during processions in village festivals. Jogins/Basavis are not allowed to dance inside the great traditional temples and their activities are confined to little traditional temples in the villages. *Jogins/Basavis* are also called upon to dance at funeral processions, at the annual festivals, assorted village rituals during the harvest.

However, gradually the difference between these two different systems got diluted and the so called “traditional devadasi system” disappeared along with the kingdoms and royal patronages. In the later stages (that is in modern times) these Jogins/Basavis adopted the name Devadasi. (the term “Devadasi(s)” is used hereinafter to denote all local variants).

The following account of the Devadasi practice in Tamilnadu by Amrit Srinivasan is interesting:

“Traditionally the young devadasi underwent a ceremony of dedication to the deity of the local temple which resembled in its ritual structure the upper caste Tamil marriage ceremony. Following this ceremony, she was set apart from her non-dedicated sisters in that she was not permitted to marry and her celibate or unmarried status was legal in customary terms. Significantly, however she was not prevented from leading a normal life involving economic activity, sex and child-bearing. The very rituals which marked and confirmed her incorporation into temple service also committed her to the rigorous emotional and physical training in the classical dance, her hereditary profession. In addition, they served to advertise in a perfectly open and public manner her availability for sexual liaisons with a proper patron

and protector. Very often in fact, the costs of temple dedication were met by a man who wished thus to anticipate a particular devadasi's favours after she had attained puberty.

It was crucially a women's 'dedicated' status which made it a symbol of social prestige and privilege to maintain her. The devadasi's sexual partner was always chosen by 'arrangement' with her mother and grandmother acting as prime movers in the veto system. Alliance with a Muslim, a Christian or a lower caste was forbidden while a Brahmin or member of the landed and commercial elite was preferred for the good breeding and/or wealth he would bring into the family. The non-domestic nature of the contract was an understood part of the agreement with the devadasi owing the man neither any householding services nor her offspring. The children in turn could not hope to make any legal claim on the ancestral property of their father whom they met largely in their mother's home when he came to visit.

The temple institution's sanction to the pursuit of feminine skills and the exercise of sex and child-bearing functions outside the conventional domestic (*grhastha*) context was evident in many ways. Till 1910 the rituals of dedication were public and elaborately advertised ceremonies which required the permission and full cooperation of the religious authorities for their proper performance. The *Pottukattu* or *tali*-tying ceremony which initiated the young dasi into her profession was performed in the temple through the mediation of the priest. The insistence on the pre-pubertal status of the girl was in imitation of Brahminical custom which saw marriage as the only religious initiation (*diksha*) permissible to women. Similarly the *sadanku* or puberty ceremonies of the devadasi which confirmed her married status as wife-of-the-god were performed with an emblem of god borrowed from the temple as stand-in 'bridegroom'. On this occasion the procreative and nuptial rites performed at the time of actual consummation of a Brahmin marriage, (shortly after the girl attains maturity) were also carried out and auspicious wedding songs celebrating sexual union sung before the 'couple'. From now onward the devadasi was considered *nitya sumangali*, a woman eternally free from the adversity of widowhood and in that auspicious capacity, she performed for the first time her ritual and artistic duties in the temple. The puberty ceremonies were an occasion not only for temple honour but also for community feasting and celebration in which the local elite also participated. The music and dance and public display of the girl was meant to attract patrons.

A variety of competitive social pressures and traditional community obligations worked towards the setting up of particular arrangements between dancing girls and rich, landed or business households. The men of the patron class were expected to accept a young devadasi as a concubine despite the enormous expense it eventually entailed. The fact that

---

it was the eldest son alone (and that too one who was already married) showed the *normative* co-existence of a private decent way of life with one that was more wayward and idiosyncratic. For the devadasis their temple attachment granted sectarian purity and the promotional avenues to pursue a prosperous career. The economic and professional benefits were considerable and most importantly, not lacking in social honour.

Touching the dancing women, speaking to them or looking at them was mentioned as a ritual offence in the sectarian texts laying out the etiquette to be followed by worshippers when visiting temples. This misconduct was considered equivalent in blame to other varieties of desecration such as spitting in the temple, turning one's back to the shrine, looking covetously at consecrated property etc. Life honours were granted to the devadasi at the time of her death. Flowers, sandal paste and a garland from the god of the temple were sent on the occasion of her last rites. In some temples the fire of the kitchen in the temple was used to light her pyre and the deity observed 'pollution' for a token period of one day when no puja was performed at the shrine. Usually a funeral procession is not meant to stop anywhere but in the case of the devadasi the bier was placed for a moment on the floor near the entrance of the temple when the gifts mentioned above were made.

As *nitya sumangali*, a woman with the protection of a living husband – the deity and lord of the temple corporation – the devadasi was provided with the excuse to enter secular society and improve her artistic skills amongst the connoisseurs and their families who were obliged to respect her and treat her with chivalry. What in ordinary homes was performed by the *sumangalis* of the family – ceremonies welcoming the bridegroom and guests, singing songs of festivity at marriages and puberty ceremonies, tying the red beads on a woman's marriage necklace etc. – were in the big houses of the locality performed by the devadasi. As a picture of good luck, beauty and fame, the devadasi was welcome in all rich man's homes on happy occasions of celebration and honour. Her strict professionalism made her an adjunct to conservative domestic society not its ravager. It is this which lay behind the customary acceptance of married and financially secure family men as patrons. As the wives of men who had maintained dancing women often said, they far preferred a devadasi to a second wife as a rival as the latter would make domestic life intolerable. Even amongst some non-Brahmin groups where the devadasi could assume the status of a common-law wife of her patron, she never resided with him.

By co-operating in the ceremonies which conferred prestigious *sumangali* status on a section of its female personnel, the temple permitted the most intimate connections to develop between sectarian specialists and the laity. Crucially however, its mediation helped to simultaneously institutionalize and depersonalize these dyadic and erotic relationships. ...

---

---

Intimacy with a devadasi consequently demonstrated public success which visibly marked a man apart from his peers.

Seen in this light, the devadasi represented a badge of fortune, a form of honour managed for civil society by the temple. Land grants were given to individuals by rulers and patrons expressly for meeting their 'entertainment' expenses – the upkeep of a devadasi and her musicians. The whole idiom of temple 'honours' (*mariyadai*) in which the devadasi participated permitted a privilege contact with the deity and/or his possessions to have a more clearly secular significance and value. The temple for its own part was no disinterested participant – the patronage extended to the devadasi was by no means passive. It recognized that her art and physical charms attracted connoisseurs (in the garb of devotees) to the temple eager to promote her as their protégée in the world at large. The devadasi acted as a conduit for honour, divine acceptance and competitive reward at the same time that she invited 'investment', economic, political and emotional in the deity. In this way the competitive vanities of local patrons, their weakness for one-upmanship with their equals and rivals became inextricably linked with the temple institution. The efficacy of the devadasi as a woman and dancer began to converge with the efficacy of the temple as a living center of religious and social life – political, commercial and cultural.

The temple's sanction to the system of extra-marital alliance described above was particularly evident from the fact that it was the offspring of these 'mixed-unions' who were given prime monopoly over temple service. The temple also ensured in this way a permanent task-force committed to temple duties over all others.

The allied arts of Tamil Bhakti worship-*sadir* (dance), *nagaswaram* (instrumental music) and *nattuvangam* (dance-conducting) were traditionally organized into two orchestras: the *periamelam* (in Tamil literature 'big drum') and the *cinnamelam* (in Tamil literature 'small drum'). The *periamelam* was focused around the male *nagaswaram* virtuoso and was the hereditary specialization of the 'pure' section of the community. The *cinnamelam* on the other hand was focused around the devadasi or female dancer and her male guru or *nattuvanar*, and was the hereditary specialization of the 'mixed' section of the community. Recruitment to the profession was restricted from within each group on the basis of various natural and cultural criteria such as (i) sex – the *nagaswaram* as also dance-conducting was meant to be performed only by men while the *sadir*, was danced only by women, (ii) inheritance – 'shares' in the local service rights to the *periamelam* were transmitted through male links and to the *cinnamelam* through female links, (iii) initiation – dedication to the deity seen as a simple rite of incorporation for the men and as a special ceremony of 'marriage' for the women, marked entrance into the profession and was compulsory for the attainment

---

of privileges associated with temple office, and (iv) training – the public demonstration of skill in one's art subsequent to a ritual and social apprenticeship to one's teacher was the necessary preliminary to a professional career. Participation in each orchestra consequently required both technical and hereditary qualification.

The promotional advantages of a temple position for a professional career were obvious both in terms of publicity and income. The invitation to perform at marriages and other auspicious ceremonies in elite homes flowed from the artists' special status as god's servants. In this respect they were clearly superior to low-caste drummers and musicians who were the hereditary clients of private households. The public entitlements of temple office – a house site, cooked food and token payments – only partly accounted for the strong monopolies that operated in the field. Temple service provided a kind of 'union' membership without which no artist could count as a professional performer. It was the side benefits, the access to material advantage and artistic patronage in the secular world which made temple position so lucrative.

By providing the cultural context for the competitive fever of art to display and prove itself, the South Indian temple institution provided itself a valuable patron. It also gave a degree of respectability to professional skills by encouraging their excellence and ceremonially sanctioning as 'auspicious', not impure, the unusual ways of life that went with them. In the big temple centres of Tamil Nadu there is no denying that the involvement of the community with the secular elite, their celebrations and artistic patronage, improved the Bhakti dance and music as a concert performance. In the process the devadasis and their menfolk were able to amass considerable wealth and prestige and organize themselves better professionally. The statutory requirement to live proximate to the deity intensified local community relations which (as they saw it) had helped 'concentrate' and develop their skills. Art as a corporate function and mode of livelihood ensured competence and continuity of practice." (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985)

The above account of the devadasi system in Tamil Nadu is indicative of the practice as it existed throughout the country. Even in temples in North India similar practices were followed. Famous author and jurist KM Munshi describes the life of a Devadasi at the temple of Somnath in his famous historical novel "SOMNATH". The devadasi in the novel lived a life that was almost identical to the life of a Tamil devadasi as described by Amrit Srinivasan. Somnath is located in Gujarat (north western coast of India). There is even today a devadasi in Jagganath temple of Puri, Orissa (north eastern coast of India). References are found in literature to the girls who danced before deities and performed essential functions in temples

in Ujjain (Central India) and Varanasi (North India). One may conclude that devadasis were an integral part of large temples in almost all parts of India.

It must be mentioned that the devadasi custom had a very prestigious status. The devadasi who was drafted from the leading or ruling families in a community had the status of the wife of the patron deity of the community. They also played many types of roles in the ritual and religious life of the community. So, as an obligation, the temples and the society maintained them. The Devadasis were also persons of much skill and ability and were good dancers and singers and provided recreation to art-loving people. Even till recent times (post-independence), some Devadasis were involved in teaching music, dance and theatre in their local area in South India. Temples in Goa, Tanjavor, Puri, Mathura, Mysore etc. provided good examples of the prevalence of devadasi as temple singers and dancers.

It is interesting to compare the status and life of devadasis in a temple with that of nuns in a church. A devadasi was married to the deity. A nun on the other hand remains unmarried. The physical need of sex and the biological urge of childbearing were fulfilled in the case of a devadasi through an institutionalized system that encouraged good breeding. In contrast, a nun has to deny and suppress her sexual needs and biological urges. A devadasi was freed from the burdens of domestic work like cooking. A nun living in a convent may some times be freed but this is not an essential fringe benefit of her profession. The devotion to the deity or the Almighty was expressed in the case of a devadasi through her music and dance. A nun has no such avenues available to her. The devadasi was an artist and was appreciated and respected in the society for her skills. She commanded a respect that even some male members of the temple establishment could never get. A nun can rarely get any such respect. A devadasi's life did not involve a denial of her self. In fact her life was a celebration of human existence and in particular of her life as a woman. She was proud to be a woman and perfected her feminine charms through dance and music. Her sexual life was different from the life of a woman in the traditional patriarchal society. The devadasi family was a matriarchal society where birth of a son was an occasion for grief and a daughter's birth was celebrated. This 'feminist' society maintained a healthy institutionalized relationship with the mainstream patriarchal society.

Unfortunately, such a custom gradually degenerated to a very low status. The institution degenerated into prostitution as the temples fell to bad days.

The rise and fall in the status of Devadasis can be seen to be running parallel to the rise and fall of Hindu temples. Invaders from West Asia got their first victory in India at the beginning of the second millennium A.D. The practice that probably started around 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

---

seems to have reached its pinnacle around 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The destruction of temples by invaders started from the North Western borders of the country and spread to the whole of the country. Thereafter the status of the temples fell very quickly in North India and slowly in South India. One may possibly say the same about the status of Devadasis in India. As the temples became poorer and lost their patron kings (and in some cases temples were completely destroyed), the Devadasis were forced into a life of poverty, misery and, in many cases, prostitution.

The connection of Devadasis with prostitution seems to have been established during this period of decline of their status. Contrary to the impression that is often conveyed, there is absolutely no evidence to show that during the period of sixth to tenth century A.D. the dancing girls at temples were prostitutes, sacred or secular. It may be concluded that prostitution was forced upon the Devadasis at a time when the society was going through structural changes and upheavals caused by external aggression. The problem of the devadasi system is that it continued in spite of centuries of decline of temples, absence of patron kings and without the related social support systems.

## **B2. ERADICATION OR REVIVAL**

The devadasi system flourished under the patronage of the temple and the state for centuries. The decline of the system in North India probably began around 1000 AD and by the time British arrived the system had almost disappeared. The system had continued to survive and flourish in temples of South India till the beginning of the twentieth century.

Toward the end of the Nineteenth century, there was a spurt of social movements in India. Nationalism and search for national identity were manifesting in various forms. This naturally led to social movements relating to Devadasis. The social movements relating to Devadasis may be classified into two categories – Reformist or Abolitionists and Revivalist Movements.

### **Reformist or Abolitionists Movements**

Reformist or Abolitionists conceived Devadasi practice as a social evil and considered every devadasi to be a prostitute. The first anti-nautch and anti-dedication movement was launched during 1880-90. “Their main aim was to do away with this system. Reform Lobbyists were drawn mainly from missionaries, doctors, journalists and social workers. They urged the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls dedicated themselves as Devadasis of Hindu shrines. ...These anti-nautch campaigners began their attack on the devadasi system in 1882. They organized seminars and conferences to create a public opinion against the devadasi system. In the later part of 1892 an appeal was made to the Viceroy and Governor General of India and to the Governor of Madras. This appeal also defines the position of the anti-nautch movement.” (Jogan Shankar, 1990)

The following are some extracts from the Memorandum submitted by Hindu Social Reforms Associations:

1. That there exists in the Indian community a class of women community commonly known as nautch-girls.
2. That these women are invariably prostitutes.
3. That countenance and encouragement are given to them, and even a recognized status in society secured to them, by the practice which prevails among Hindus, to a very undesirable extent, of inviting them to take part in marriage and other festivities, and even in entertainments given in honour of guests who are not Hindus.

The reply from the Viceroy said “You base your request upon the statement that these women are invariably prostitutes and that it is therefore, undesirable to countenance, or encourage them, in any way. .... He has, on one or two occasions, when traveling in different parts of India, been present at entertainment of which a nautch formed a part, but the proceeding were as far as His Excellency observed them, not characterized by any impropriety, and the performers, were present in exercise of their profession as dancers, in accordance with the customs of the country.” Even the Governor of Madras replied in the same line.

Amrit Srinivasan writes on this as follows.

“The innovations introduced into the community through the fact of independent *female* professional skills contrasted well with the more conservative male profession which was also poorer economically. The abstract sectarian truths of Hinduism, which see the male elements as ‘passive’ and the female as ‘active’ in their cosmologies, appear here to receive confirmation on the sociological plane.

For the reform lobbyists – missionaries, doctors, journalists, administrators and social workers – strongly influenced by Christian morality and religion, it was precisely these features of the devadasi institution which were reprehensible in the utmost. The publication of the devadasi system as prostitution sought to advertise the grotesqueness of the subject population for political ends. For those who supported imperialism on the grounds of its ‘civilizing’ function, programmes of reform it must be remembered were not without their ideological rewards. The movement urging the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls dedicated themselves as devadasis to Hindu temples, was articulated in the first instance as Anti-Nautch campaign. The very use of the term ‘nautch’ (a corruption of

the Hindi term '*nach*' which was performed by a more common class of northern dancing girl) suggested the smear campaign that was to follow.

The Anti-Nautch supporters, largely educated professionals and Hindus, began their attack on the devadasis' dance in 1892. Using the declamatory and journalistic skills at their disposal to full effect. Collective public action took the form of signature protests and marches to the homes of the elite who refused to heed the call for boycotting the dance at private celebrations. ... The vigour of the Anti-nautch campaign led to the complete suppression of the *sadir* and its secular performance much before formal legislation was enacted against temple dedication in 1947." (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985)

The Reformist or Abolitionist movement was supported by some journals and newspapers like "The Indian Social Reformer" and "Lahore Purity Servant". The movement initially concentrated on building public opinion and to enlist members to refuse to attend nautch parties as well as to refuse to invite Devadasis to festivities at their homes. It was around 1899 that the anti-nautch and purity movement turned its attention to stopping dedications. The anti-nautch movement paved the way for anti-dedication movement.

The social reform movements, spearheaded by Ram Mohan Roy, Iswhara Chandra Vidyasagar, Govind Ranade, Karve and other prominent social thinkers, questioned the practice of Devadasi system and pleaded for its abolition. Strong public opinion was created in 1929 through the "Self Respect Movement" led by the great sociopolitical thinker E.V.Ramaswamy, popularly known as "Periyar". Condemning the practice, he advocated freedom and marriage of devadasis. The anti-Brahminism and anti-ritualism of the regional political parties of Tamil Nadu provided an ideological base to the Devadasi Abolition movement.

At the ideological level, a few questions may be raised at this stage. The punitive action against the devadasi seems most inexplicable if we consider that prostitution was not abolished with the same fervor. There are some accounts indicating that British rulers actually encouraged prostitution especially near cantonment areas. Even in independent India prostitution continues to flourish while the institution of devadasi is almost dead. The colonial context of the reform movement becomes obvious when one sees that the reform movement was strongly supported by the British.

"British officialdom's stake in encouraging regionalism and cultural divisiveness directly linked them with those who pressed for its ban. Even in sensitive areas such as women's

---

---

reforms, it was the power of ‘facts’ and arguments based on western rationality and reason and not the authority of the Sanskrit *shastras* that was increasingly invoked by Indians to bring about socio-cultural change. The reform movement associated with the Hindu temple-dancer continued on the the scientific plane, ‘civilizing’ arguments pushed forward earlier (with far less success) on the religious plane by the missionaries and the British Government.” (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985)

Coupled with the active support of colonial rulers, the antagonism felt by the men of the community (of performers and dancers) for the more successful women contributed towards the success of the reform movement. “The extraordinary success of the reforms was not unconnected with the fact that the community menfolk stood to gain by the legislation. ... The reform campaign forced the devadasis to acknowledge the moral supremacy of *grhastha* values. Even more importantly, it obliged them to relinquish all rights to temple service and its privileges. The men on the other hand continued to perform both in the temples and in people’s homes. The immense patronage they received from the DK/DMK regional party organizations favoured them financially. The *nagaswaram* today is even performed as a concert art. With respect to land rights as well, the abolition of the devadasi system benefited the men of the community over the women – in direct contrast to the historical situation.

In the 1920s the non-Brahmin Justice Party (the more elitist precursor of the DK) had taken great care to protect service benefits, in terms of lands and buildings attached to the devadasi’s office before finally pushing through the legislature Bill in 1930. The Madras Act of 1929 enfranchising *inams* and *maniams* as the tax-free land privileges were called, was justified on the grounds of social justice. The devadasi ‘bond-slave’ to the temple authorities could now own the house and land without the extortion of service. The process of converting traditional usufructory rights to public land (attached to office) into private taxable ‘property’ however favoured the men over their womenfolk in that they too could now inherit the shares earlier kept aside for their dedicated sisters. With land coming into the market, through the introduction of the *patta* (land deed) system under the British, the economic and moral infrastructure of matri-centred joint householding suffered. Internal strife over property division increased and the wealthier sections of the community benefited over the less fortunate. Most interestingly furthermore, the processes of rational, western social change initiated by the reform campaign, far from reducing casteism actually increased communal tendencies within the community. The imperial census data of the 1901-1921 period reveal this process of transition of the devadasi community from a professional class with a **higher** percentage of women (quite unusual for India) to a ‘caste’ with a more typical sex distribution. The resentment freely expressed by the devadasis at the loss of power and

privilege through the legislation provided ample verbal testimony that the 'reforms' had been pushed through largely by a politically aware minority of community, predominantly men." (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985)

The reform movement was aided on one hand by the conflict of sexes within the community and on the other hand by the communal politics of Tamil Nadu.

"By the 1920s the Anti-Nautch agitation had become inextricably linked up with the communal politics of the Dravidian movement. The abolition of the practice of female dedication became a powerful political and legislative cause espoused by the backward non-Brahmins as part of the overall Self-Respect campaign initiated by Ramaswami Naicker in 1925."

"The aggressive anti-Brahminism and anti-ritualism of the Backward Classes Movement of the South provided the men of the devadasi group with a powerful ideology with which to overcome the humiliation of the Anti-Nautch campaign and fight for dominance both within the household and wider political society.

With the increased politicization of Brahmin-non-Brahmin cleavages in Madras State, it was entirely to be expected that the revival of the dance in more 'correct' society would be pressed forward by the Brahmin dominated Congress and those sympathetic to the cause of Indian cultural and political nationalism. At the same time, these antagonisms surfaced in the form they did because of the imposition of a colonial framework of formal confrontation which (i) greatly accelerated the politicization of the Indian people and (ii) provided the very rhetoric and the facts on which political action was based." (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985)

The irony was that the Devadasi, who was a non-Brahmin, became a victim of the politics of anti-Brahminism of Dravidian parties on one hand and of the Christian missionaries and colonial rulers on the other hand. The support to devadasis came from two unexpected quarters – Brahmins and Theosophists.

### **Revival Movement**

The aggressive anti-nautch movement's campaign was followed with complete suppression of the dance of devadasi and its secular performances much earlier than formal legislation. During the same period there emerged a movement urging the 'revival' of Sadir or traditional dance of Devadasis. These revivalists feared that the emergence of anti-nautch movement

---

would lead to a ban on classical dance, which was performed only by Devadasis. They argued that the Devadasi dance was a sacred tradition, worth preserving.

The reform movement utilized the British official machinery, regional party politics and the rhetoric of rationalism and empiricism to achieve its ends. The revival movement on the other hand consciously stepped outside the requirements of state electoral politics and western scientific traditions. The movement received strong support from Theosophical Society of India, whose anti-official stance and strong interest in Indian Home Rule bound them with the revival of the dance.

Pioneers like Madam H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Oclott, the founding lights of Theosophical movement had undertaken an extensive tour of South India and propagated the revival of devadasi institution and the associated art of Sadir. They gained support from all sections of the native elite by their public denouncement of western Christian morality and materialism. In 1882, Theosophical Society of India had set up its headquarters in Adyar, Madras with the set goal of working towards the restoration of India's ancient glory, her art, science and philosophy.

The support later given to revival of *Sadir* as *Bharatnatyam* by Theosophical Society was largely due to the efforts of Rukmini Arundale, an eminent theosophist herself. She was groomed by Annie Besant and the elders of the Theosophical hierarchy as the chosen Vehicle for the World Mother. She took up the cause of evolution of Sadir into *Bharatnatyam*. The Theosophical Society provided the necessary funds and organization to back her as the Champion for India's renaissance in the arts especially Bharatnatyam.

The revivalists tried to present a utopian view of the institution of devadasi. According to their view it was the model of the ancient temple dancer as a pure and sacred, chaste women. They even stressed that in absence of immorality the dance of devadasi was a form of 'yoga' to enhance an individual's spiritual plane. The revivalists wanted to preserve the traditional form of Sadir dance by purifying it. As a consequence of purification, some modifications were introduced into the content of the dance. The revivalists basically belonged to Brahmin dominated Theosophical circles. Many Brahmin girls started to learn the dance from Devadasis.

The espousal of the dance by Brahmin dominated Theosophical (and Congress) circles was used by the British Government officials to play up suspicion in non-Brahmin circles against not only the dance but also against the movement of Indian nationalism. The political lines

---

were now drawn very clearly. On one side were British officials, Christian missionaries and 'backward' non-Brahmins. On the other side were the European (unofficial) Theosophists, Congress and Brahmins. The former used everything in their power to kill the dance and its community of performers (devadasis). The latter tried to preserve and promote the dance as a national art. The efforts of the latter helped the emergence of an elite class of amateur performers. But the efforts of both sides led to the demise of the centuries old professional performers known as devadasis.

(Based on Amrit Srinivasan, 1985 and Jogan Shankar, 1990)

The reformists presented devadasi as a 'Prostitute' in order to abolish dedication of girls to temples and the revivalists sketched her as a 'nun' in order to re-establish the institution of devadasi and her art afresh. The fact is that a devadasi was neither a prostitute nor a nun. She was a professional artist who did not suppress or deny her feminine skills. She was a woman whose life pattern was different from that of a typical woman in patriarchal society. The educated urban class acting under the influence of Christian missionaries delivered a fatal blow to the lifeline of the Devadasis by their anti-nautch campaign and thus pushed them into prostitution. The revivalist shut the doors firmly by creating a class of elite performers who preserved the dance of devadasis but usurped the position of devadasis as performers.

The Devadasi was (and is not) a 'prostitute'. It is indeed a great insult to brand as prostitutes the women who kept classical dance forms like Bharatnatyam and Odisee alive for centuries. The lack of empathy shown by reformists towards the Devadasis is indeed appalling and smacks of an imperialist and colonialist bias against everything Indian (and Hindu). It should come as no surprise that there have been no mass movements against the practice of Devadasi, except for the period when the anti-dedication movement could ride on the anti-Brahminical and anti-ritualism movement of DMK in Tamil Nadu, aided by the colonial masters.

The debate of Reformists vs. Revivalists is now a matter of history. The ground reality is that the Devadasi is today a poor woman who lives in a miserable condition with no family support as is understood traditionally and with no institutional support from temple or state.

### **B3. Legislative Initiatives**

In 1924, Indian Penal Code was amended. Section 372 and 373 declared the practice of dedicating girls for the ultimate purpose of engaging them in prostitution as illegal. It was prescribed that whoever disposes off any person under the age of 18 years (or attained the possession of any person) with the intent that such person shall at any age be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution or illicit intercourse with any person or with the knowledge that the person is likely to be employed or used for any such purpose at any age, is liable to be prosecuted.

Amendment of Indian Penal Code was not a direct interference in the Devadasi practice. The first legal initiative taken for stopping the Devadasi system dates back to 1934 when the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act was passed by the British Government. This Act covered the Bombay state, as it existed then.

The Bombay Devadasi Protection Act declared dedication of a woman as an illegal act, irrespective of the fact whether the dedication was made with her consent or not. According to this Act, marriage by a Devadasi was to be considered lawful and valid, and the children from such wedlock were to be treated as legitimate. The Act also laid down grounds for punitive action that could be taken against any person or persons, who were found to be involved in dedications, except the woman who was being dedicated. Those found guilty of such acts could face a year's imprisonment or fine or both.

The 1934 Act had provided rules, which were aimed at protecting the interests of the Devadasis. Whenever there was a dispute over ownership of land involving a Devadasi, the local Collector was expected to intervene. Concurrently with the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947 was also in operation in the then Mysore state which was renamed as Karnataka in 1972.

The two Acts then existing were replaced by the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act which was adopted by the State Legislature in 1982 and was notified by the Government through its Gazette in 1984.

The new Act declared dedication as Devadasi to be an unlawful practice. As was held by the Act of 1934, the new Act also seeks to declare unlawful the very act of dedication, whether the dedication is done with or without the consent of the dedicated woman.

The 1982 Act strengthens the penal provisions that were hitherto available under the 1934 Act. The maximum punishment was increased to three years imprisonment and maximum fine was increased to Rs. 2000-. If the guilty was found to be a parent or guardian or relative of the dedicated woman, the penal provisions are even stronger. Imprisonment in such a case can extend up to five years with a minimum term of two years and the fine can be up to Rs. 5000- with the minimum fine being Rs. 2000-.

Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act quite significantly provided that rules may be framed to provide for the custody, protection, welfare and rehabilitation of the Devadasi. The rehabilitation of the Devadasi had to be central to the realization of the objectives set out in the Act and due recognition was given to this aspect in the Act itself. (based on Asha Ramesh, 1993)

This was followed by the enactment of a similar act by Andhra Pradesh in 1988.

## **PART C**

# **PRESENT STATUS**

## **C1. REASONS FOR DEDICATION**

Even after decades of legislation abolishing the practice of Devadasis, the practice of dedicating girls to temples continues to the present day. It is important to understand the reasons that force parents to push their girls into a life of misery and prostitution.

In a recent study conducted by Joint Women's Programme, Bangalore for National Commission for Women, it is reported as follows (Page No. 101):

"Following are some of the reasons cited for dedication:

1. Being a blind, a deaf or a dumb or a crippled girl
2. Well being of the family
3. No male issues in the family
4. Mother was a devadasi
5. Only female child in the family
6. Followed from generations
7. Poverty
8. Father had undergone an operation and vowed to fulfill
9. It was a religious ritual
10. To appease Gods for the well-being
11. Father's brother made her a devadasi

## 12. Due to skin ailments”

The above report does not mention the relative importance of the above reasons.

Asha Ramesh in her study carried out in May 1993 gives the following reasons:

“Dedication to the Goddess or God was justified on the following grounds:

- (a) If the parents were childless, they vowed to dedicate their first child if it happened to be girl.
- (b) If there were no sons in the family, the girl child was dedicated and could not marry as she becomes a ‘son’ for the family (earning the family’s livelihood)

Yet another economic reason contributed to the dedications. If the girl’s family had some property, the family ensured that it stayed within the family by turning the girl into ‘son’ by dedicating her.

If a girl develops ‘jat’ (matted hair) she was dedicated as it was believed that she had received summons from the goddess to serve her.”

Asha Ramesh further adds – “Kaka Karkhanis, who opened a school for educating the Devadasis and scheduled caste girls in Bijapur half a century ago, observes further: ‘More than anything else, the motive of earning money by the prostitution of oneself or a relative is the chief cause of this dedication in recent years. The parents always take good care to choose a daughter of fair skin and regular features for this dedication so that she may attract more customers in her youth.’

Girls are generally dedicated at a young age, between the ages of eight to ten. Various modus operandi are adopted by the recruiters to ensure the entry of young girls.

Retired Devadasis, who have become *Jogtis*, often go into trance during festivals and direct a particular family to dedicate a particular daughter of theirs to the deity. Conversations with scheduled caste families indicate that sometimes, it is possible that a person or persons from higher caste who take a fancy to a scheduled caste girl may pay jogti to ‘go into a trance’.

Parents, who for reasons economic want to dedicate a girl, may even find the specious plea of having found a 'jat' or matting of hair of the girl, a condition that occurs because of poor tonsorial hygiene.

In villages where social awareness prevents easy dedication, the parents or the near relatives of the girl ensure that she become pregnant. They then challenge the village elders to get the girl married or let her become a Devadasi.

Devadasis working in Bombay and who are visiting their villages also encourage a large number of dedications in order to have their own brothel in Bombay.”

In the study by Joint Women's Programme a survey was carried out of 375 Devadasis. The survey showed the following in relation to the history of devadasi system followed in their family:

History of Devadasi System	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	144	38.4
No	231	63.6
Total	375	100.0

“Majority of the households do not have a history of previous dedication indicating the fact that they were first generation of Devadasis. 38% of the Devadasis reported about the previous history of dedication in the family either because their mother / grand mother or a distant relative was a devadasi.”

Even though the majority of the girls dedicated in the past few years or decades come from families with no history of Devadasis, all of them come from communities with a strong history of the practice. In a study conducted in 1990 by Jogan Shankar, a profile was prepared of Devadasi population of a village named Yellampura in Karnataka. He reports –

“Devadasis are found among only three Scheduled Caste Communities.

Table Showing population of Devadasis of Yellampura Village

	<b>Castes</b>	<b>No. of Devadasis</b>	<b>Per cent of the total Devadasis of village</b>
1.	Holers	73	85.88
2.	Madars	11	12.94
3.	Samgars	1	1.18
	<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table Showing Number of Households and Population of Devadasis among Scheduled Castes (Sub-caste-wise)

	<b>Castes</b>	<b>No. of Households</b>	<b>No. of Devadasis</b>
1.	Holers	77	73
2.	Madars	16	11
3.	Samgars	7	1

The table shows that about 95 per cent of households of Holers practise Devadasi cult, which is the highest in the village followed by Madars.”

From the above account it is clear that at present the Devadasi practice is social and caste based rather than something that has its roots in some families only.

One can sum up by saying that presently the practice of offering girls as Devadasis is followed mainly by scheduled castes and other backward communities. In addition to religious faith, there are other factors that have a crucial influence on the decision of parents to donate their daughter to the deity. The economic factor is as important as the religious factor. It is no coincidence that all Devadasis come from poor landless families.

The system has an obvious economic basis. The sanctions provided by social custom and apparently by religion, combined with economic pressures have pushed girls from poor families into becoming the wives of deity. The three factors (religious, social and economic) are interlinked.

## **C2. DEDICATION PROCESS**

“The dedication ceremony involves an elaborate preparation on the part of parents who wish to dedicate their daughter. This dedication ceremony is more or less similar to a marriage ceremony. It is called as ‘Muttu Kattuvadu’ (tying the beads) or ‘Devarige Biduvadu’ (dedicating to the deity) in colloquial language. Auspicious days for dedication are during Chaitra (March – April corresponding to the spring season), Magha (November – December) months. Usually dedication ceremony takes place on full moon day of these months. The place of dedication and cost depend upon the economic status of the parents or sponsors. They prefer a big temple for dedication but this involves a considerable monetary implication. In many cases the ‘would be’ companion or paramour will take care of all expenses. In some other cases ‘Gharwalis’ (Mistresses of urban brothels) also sponsor such ceremonies. They would sponsor the dedication of only those girls who would be expected to join their brothel in future.

On the day of dedication ceremony, parents and other relatives and local senior Devadasis (Jogatis) gather in a group. They prepare sweet dishes like ‘holiga’ (pancakes) and other religious dishes, to celebrate the occasion.

Invariably the initiation ceremony takes place on Tuesdays and Fridays. These two days are considered to be auspicious days and more particularly to worship the female deities. On such day the temple of Yellamma or the premises of the place where the initiation ceremony is arranged is cleaned with water and cow dung and purified. Five measures (seers) of each of the nine coloured powders such as Kumkum and Bhandar (vermillion and turmeric powder) and other powders as stated above will be collected and artistically spread in a design before the deity. This design is called ‘Jogati-Patta’. At the four corners of the ‘Jogati-Patta’ 4 pots (Kalasa) will be placed. In these Kalasas sweet oil is poured and lamps are lit. Each Kalasa is decorated with Vibhuti, Plantain bunches, arecanuts, dates, jaggery pieces and betel leaves. A few coins are placed in each Kalasa. The girl to be dedicated is asked to sit in the middle of the ‘Jogati-Patta’. Thread covering all four sides of the girl is wound three times. For each of Kalasa there will be a senior devadasi (Jogati) holding it by her right hand.

Then all other Jogatis present will sing a chorus in praise of Yellamma accompanied by Chowdaki, Tamboori and Jagate (musical instruments). Along with the ongoing song the thread passed through the 4 Kalasas is lifted by 4 Jogatis and folded 4 times, then by applying vermilion paste to the thread, it is tied to the neck of the girl to the accompaniment of a chorus chant of 'Tai Yellamma Udho Udho' (glory to mother Yellamma). Then the priest of Yellamma comes with a necklace made of white or red beads in his hand. Then he seeks set answers to set questions to to parents and brothers of the girl. The dialogue will be somewhat as follows:

Priest        Are you willingly dedicating your daughter / sister to the deity?

Parents       Yes. (Reasons of such decisions is revealed)

Priest        Look! In future she will be a nuisance. She will create many problems. She would not allow you to eat and sleep in peace. She will claim equal share in property. Are you ready to face such consequences throughout your life?

Parents       Yes

Then the priest addresses the girl to be dedicated and seeks some set answers.

Priest        Look! Hereafter you cannot claim the right of wife with any man. You have to fast on Tuesday and Friday and beg on these days holding a Joga in your hand. You have to visit at least five houses on doing so. If you happen to see a calf sucking its mother you should not forcibly withdraw the calf. If a cow grazes the crop before you, you shall not drive it away. You shall not speak untruth. If you are feeling hungry don't tell others so and ask for food. Offer shelter to shelterless and strangers. Provide food to those who are hungry and water to the thirsty. Help the helpless people. If any body abuses you and beats you, never retaliate. If you come across with an event of death you have to take bath, visit the temple of Yellamma. Only after worshipping the deity you are supposed to take meals. You should not eat 'Yenjalu' (left out food) of somebody. You shall chant 'Udho Yellamma' (Glory to Yellamma) all the time.

Girl            Yes. I will follow.

Then the priest will tie the bead necklace to the girl's neck by chanting 'Udho Yellamma, Udho Jogaldo, Udho Yekkeldo' and keep a Joga (begging bowl made of bamboo cane) on the head of the girl. All Jogatis join the priests in the chantings at their highest pitch. The girl then ceremoniously shows Kalasa to the deity after a brief worship. After these rituals the girl supposed to have undergone initiation, would hold the Joga in her hand or bear it on her head. She proceeds to main 'Uru' (village where upper caste people are inhabited). All others including singing and dancing Jogatis follow her. The Uru people receive the newly dedicated girl with respect and devotion. They wash her feet by pouring water, offer her rice, Kumkum, betel leaves and arecanuts keeping them in a winnowing fan made of bamboo strips. They worship and bow to devadasi's feet. The procession comes to an end after the devadasi's visit to at least five houses. After completion of the first begging (Joga) of newly dedicated devadasi, the procession comes to an end. Her parents feed jogatis and other relatives in their house. Next day the devdasi prepares 'naivedya' out of the rice offered by devotees during her first Joga and offers it to Yellamma deity. This completes the initiation ceremony for the new entrant to the cult.

There is another simplified procedure of initiation ceremony, which is economical and attracts less attention of the public. According to this procedure, only the parents and the girl proceed to Yellamma Gudda at Soundati. The girl is taken to a natural spring pond at Yellamma Gudda which is popularly known as 'Yenni Honda'. There the girl takes bath and wears new white dress. Along with a few jogatis and relatives, she goes to Yellamma temple with naivedya to offer it the deity. In the plate which contains naivedya, a bead necklace is kept and is covered by a piece of cloth. Then they hand over the plate to the priest. He offers the naivedya to the main deity and picks up the bead necklace and touches it to the feet of the idol, then he keeps it back in the plate and covers it with the cloth. Then other jogatis and parents come out of the temple. A senior jogati ties the bead necklace to the girl's neck. All jogatis who accompany her to the temple are fed and offered some 'dakshina'. The girl after this ritual comes back to her village and goes for Joga begging. As she goes for joga all members of the village realize that she has been dedicated to Yellamma deity. They offer her first Joga as in case of dedicated girls in local temple. After the first joga she prepares 'naivedya', offers it to the deity at local temple and feeds local Devadasis. After this event she joins the rank of devadasi." (Jogan Shankar, 1990)

The above detailed account of dedication ceremonies at Yellampura village in Karnataka is indicative of the ceremonies observed in different parts of the country. However, there are many local variants of the above. “Girls are dedicated to deities other than Yellamma. These Gods included Hanuman, Ganesha, Jamadagni (husband of Renuka) and Parashurama (son of Renuka). After Yellamma, it is Hanuman who attracts the largest number of dedications.” (Asha Ramesh, 1993)

Kaka G Karkhanis writes – “... the irony is complete when the girls meant for prostitution are dedicated to god Hanuman, who is famous in Puranas for his celibacy. .... On the day of dedication, the other prostitutes in the harijan colony are invited to the girl’s house. The girl anoints herself with oil and bathes. She then serves food in the begging bowl of all the prostitutes. She is then taken to the temple. In the temple some fixed fees are paid to the temple priest. .... In the Hanuman temple, the worshipper presses a hot ‘mudra’ on the left arm of the the girl as a sign that the girl has been dedicated. In some cases the girl is branded on her breast.”

The practice of tattooing or branding on the left arm or on the breast of the dedicated girl has been mentioned in some other literature also. But apparently, the practice is not very prevalent or widespread.

In general, converting a girl into Devadasi / Jogin has two stages. The first stage is dedication and is called “First Pattam” or “ghattam” in some areas. The next stage is deflowering and is called “Second Pattam”. The ceremony of Second Pattam is carried out on her attaining the age of puberty when the girl surrenders herself to the village landlord or headman. After Second Pattam she becomes a collective property of the village. Jogan Shankar (1990) provides a good description of the ceremonies connected with deflowering.

“As the dedicated girl attains puberty she has to perform certain ceremonies which are not connected in any way with the deity she is dedicated to. Soon after dedication the news will spread throughout the village. A procession of newly dedicated devadasi will give due publicity of availability of devadasi to Uru people. In the past, the priest of the local temple enjoyed the right of deflowering Devadasis after attaining puberty. But today it is not compulsory. Parents of a devadasi usually receive proposals from local landlords or businessmen. Usually parents of devadasi girls prefer upper caste well-to-do members to deflower the girl. These people contact the parents of devadasi through senior jogatis who capitalize at this stage as ‘go between’ (mediators). Prior to deflowering ceremony an agreement is made towards the payments and provision of subsistence, ornaments and

---

dresses to be provided to the girl. The person who deflowers the girl can have enduring sexual relations with the girl as long as he desires and is capable of maintaining her. In some cases she remains loyal to a single person throughout her life, who deflowered her. She gives him company as concubine. But she will not have any legal or otherwise right as concubine. Children born as a result of this union will not have any their father's property. Subsistence demanded by devadasi being just meager, maintaining a devadasi is economically not burdensome and less risky. In fact a few years back, it was a matter of prestige for landlords to maintain a few Devadasis. Hence for deflowering ceremony there will be a competition among well-to-do members of Uru. Such members are married and are of middle age. In some cases a few paramours even at their much advanced age managed to have the chance of deflowering a few Devadasis.”

The deflowering ceremony is generally conducted after the girl's first menstruation period. This effectively completes the process of dedication of the innocent girl, who is in her early teens, to a life of forced prostitution. At an age when she is barely able to comprehend the changes of puberty, she is forced to have sex with a middle-aged man. The process of dedication begins in a temple and ends in a rape.

### **C3. LIFE AFTER DEDICATION**

“After dedication of a girl to the temple, she has to take bath everyday early in the morning and should present herself at the temple during morning worship of Yellamma. She is not allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum. But she will bow to the deity from outside. Thereafter she sweeps compound of the temple. Every Tuesday and Friday she goes for joga along with senior jogatis. During this period she learns innumerable songs in praise of Yellamma and her son Parashurama. If she shows some aptitude to learn playing instruments she will be given training by her elder jogatis. In Yellampura and other villages Devadasis do not dance but this is performed by eunuch companions. The main functions of Devadasis would be singing and playing stringed musical instruments and Jagate. They form a small group and go for joga, from house to house on every Tuesday and Friday.” (Jogan Shankar, 1990)

The above is a description of the typical religious duties that are supposed to be performed by a devadasi. This is the bright part of her life. The dark side of her life involves her sexual life. Her initiation into prostitution is not a natural sequel of her dedication, though it eventually might lead to the dark alleys of flesh trade. A devadasi gets a Patron after the deflowering ceremony.

“Patronship in a majority cases is achieved at the time of dedications ceremony itself. The patron who secures this right of spending the first night with the girl may maintain a permanent liaison with the girl by paying a fixed sum of money or he can maintain the relationship for a fixed period of time on payment or he can simply terminate the liaison after the deflowering ceremony. A permanent liaison with a patron does not bar the girl from entertaining other clients, unless he specifies otherwise. In case the girl entertains, other men have to leave the girl’s house when her patron comes.” (Jogan Shankar, 1990)

There have been instances when the Patron who did the deflowering maintained relationship with the devadasi for life and supported her as well as the offspring. But such instances are

rare. In a majority of case the first Patron does not show such a sense of responsibility. “Use and Throw” seems to be the attitude adopted by most of the men who deflower a devadasi.

The tough life of a Devadasi really begins after the first Patron deserts her. Temporary alliances lead many of them eventually into prostitution. But all Devadasis do not become prostitutes. Classifying all Devadasis as prostitutes is an insult to the grit and struggle that many of them go through to maintain their sense of honour and self respect. The following table (Jogan Shankar, 1990) gives a typical occupational profile of Devadasis.

“Table : Occupational Distribution of Devadasis of Yellampura Village

	<b>Occupations</b>	<b>No. of Devadasis</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Prostitution in Urban Brothels	34	40.00
2.	Prostitution in Village proper	5	5.90
3.	Actual Cultivators	2	2.35
4	Agricultural Labourers	25	29.41
5	Household	9	10.59
6	Temple Services	2	2.35
7	Students	4	4.70
8	Government Service	1	1.17
9	Old Age Pensioner	3	3.53
	<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100.00</b>

... Out of them two Devadasis are actual cultivators having their own land and the remaining are landless agricultural labourers. Even among agricultural labourers they allow clients for sexual favours. But on this they do not depend for livelihood.”

A different picture of occupational status of the Devadasis is shown by the study of Joint Women's Programme. The study carried out by them was restricted to only beneficiaries of the Rehabilitation programme in Karnataka and is carried out more than ten years after the work by Jogan Shankar, so different results may be justified. The results of the study of Joint Women's Programme are as follows:

"Table showing the occupational status of the Beneficiaries

Occupational Status	Frequency	Per cent
Coolie	296	78.90
Agriculture	10	2.66
Petty Business	64	17.06
Not Working	04	1.00
Total	375	100.00

... This clearly shows that majority of the beneficiaries work as agricultural labourers."

Both the studies cited above confirm that all Devadasis are not prostitutes and majority of them engage in manual labour for livelihood. Though they are not prostitutes, many of them have relations with a patron and a few of them are married. The following table illustrates the marital status of the Devadasis.

"Table showing the marital status of the Beneficiaries

Marital Status	Frequency	Per cent
Single	244	65.0
Visiting Patron	75	20.0
Living with single patron	46	12.3

Married	10	2.7
Total	375	100.00

... The marital status of the Devadasis clearly indicates that most of them are single and presently do not live with any man, but at some point of time they were associated with a patron and their percentage being 65.0.”

It is also interesting to note that in the study by Joint Women’s Programme it is reported that only 4% of the patrons / husbands are landlords while about 82% of the patrons / husbands are coolies.

There can be some disagreement about the relationships that the Devadasis have with men and about their occupation, but there can be no disagreement about the poverty of Devadasis. The following table from the study by Joint Women’s Programme illustrates the point:

“Table showing the monthly income of the beneficiaries

Income in Rupees	Frequency	Per cent
Less than 500	143	38.1
501 to 1000	209	55.7
1001 to 1500	11	2.9
2001 and above	12	3.2
Total	375	100.00

...”

A majority of Devadasis is illiterate (about 95.2% as per the Joint Women’s Programme study). Most of them have children. The following table (Source: Study by Joint Women’s Programme) shows the number of children had by Devadasis.

---

No. of Children	Frequency	Per cent
No Children	65	17.3
1 – 2	167	44.5
3 – 4	101	26.9
5 – 9	42	11.2
Total	375	100.00

Large number of children, absence of support from spouse, poverty, landlessness and illiteracy combine to make life most difficult for a Devadasi.

The miserable conditions of life affect the health of a Devadasi. Her life expectancy is low. Though there are no formal surveys to confirm the average life span of a Devadasi, but it is rare to find a Devadasi aged more than fifty years.

That is the sad story of the life of a woman who is raped even before she can understand the meaning of sex, who lives a miserable life of poverty and disease, who dies early without anyone to care for her. Yet, she struggles to maintain her dignity and self-respect.

## **C4. SOCIAL STATUS**

Traditionally, no stigma was attached to the Devadasi or to her children and other members of their caste received them on terms of equality. The children of a Devadasi enjoyed legitimacy and in fact, Devadasis themselves were outwardly indistinguishable from married women of their own community.

Furthermore, a Devadasi was believed to be immune from widowhood and was called “*akhanda saubhagyavati*”. Since she was wedded to a divine deity, she was supposed to be one of the especially welcome guests at weddings and was regarded as bearer of fortune. At weddings people would like to get a string of the “tali” (wedding lock) prepared by her and she threaded on it a few beads from her own necklace. The presence of a devadasi on any religious occasion in the house of a upper caste member was regarded as sacred and she was treated with due respect and was presented with gifts.

However, times have changed. The tradition of this system has lost its actual form and has got diluted. The traditional respect accorded to a devadasi has vanished. The above customs are slowly disappearing. As the society becomes more money-oriented, the poor Devadasis are losing the privileges that they traditionally enjoyed. This has naturally led to a loss of social status for them.

The traditional institution of Devadasi endows masculine privileges to the dedicated girls. A Devadasi is entitled to inherit her parent's property and perform their funeral rites. Her children belong to the lineage of their mother and not to the lineage of their biological father. If she has a son, he inherits her property and perpetuates her father's family. If she has a daughter then the daughter is again initiated into the same system. This has an interesting but evil twist. In some regions based on superstition it is customary that a jogati must dedicate her own daughter, otherwise her funeral rites would not be held and the corpse would be eaten by dogs and other beasts. Though an economic aspect is also involved, her daughter would take her responsibility when she becomes old.

“No matter what social respect the jogatis enjoy, their daughters don't have match if they want to marry. No one comes forward to marry a jogati's daughter. So there is no other way left for the innocent girl but to be dedicated and this helps her mother as a means of livelihood, when she becomes old. This continues the tradition generation to generation.” (p. 33-34, Jonaki, November, 1998)

The legitimacy and upbringing of children remains a major problem for Devadasis. The report of Joint Women's Programme underlines the problems – “An attempt was made to find out how the children of devadasi are accepted in society. Table reveals that whether children of Devadasis could get their father's name or patron's name entered while admitting their children to school.

Table showing the whether the Children of beneficiaries have got their father's / patron's name entered in the admission records

Whether patron's name recorded in the admission records	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	19	5.0
No	356	95.0
Total	375	100.00

An analysis of this trend indicates that 95% were not successful in registering their patrons (currently associated, visiting or single category), entered in admission records. This indicates the fact that devadasi children would never get legitimate status and had to be content with getting their mother's or grandfather's or grandmother's name entered in the register.

Majority of the respondents (71%) revealed that their children were not discriminated in the school because they used to go to anganwadi or Government school of that particular village. Few of them have studied upto SSLC, while it was found that in Dharwad district, a beneficiary's son was working as compounder in a Government hospital after completing his diploma.

A negligible (11.5%) number said that the higher caste boys used to tease them in schools occasionally when there were fights while playing among children.”

## PART D

# ANNEXURES

## **STATISTICAL DATA**

(Courtesy National Commission for Women)

Devadasi practice was, at one time, prevalent in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa and Tamil Nadu. National Commission for Women (NCW) had written to the State Governments of the above states to ascertain the position of Devadasis in their respective states.

Government of Orissa intimated to NCW that (except one Devadasi in a Puri temple) there are no Devadasi in the state and the system is not prevalent in Orissa. Similarly Government of Tamil Nadu wrote that this system has been eradicated and now there are no devadasis in the state.

In Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka, Department of Social Welfare and Department of Women and Child Welfare of the respective states had conducted surveys to identify and enumerate Devadasis. The data as sent by the respective State Governments to NCW is as follows.

State	Total number of Devadasis Identified	Devadasis covered under rehabilitation program	Left outs
Andhra Pradesh	16,624	14,339 (86.25 %)	2,285 (13.75%)
Karnataka	22,941	16,560 (72.2 %)	6,386 (27.8%)

---

Maharashtra	*	*	*
-------------	---	---	---

Source: Respective State Governments.

\* Data not available.

Maharashtra Government did not provide the information as sought by the Commission. However, the State Government provided statistical data regarding the survey conducted by them to sanction “Devadasi Maintenance Allowance”. A total of 8,793 applications were received and after conducting a survey 6,314 were rejected and 2,479 devadasis were declared eligible for the scheme. At the time of sending the information, 1,432 Devadasis were receiving this allowance.

In Andhra Pradesh Devadasi practice is prevalent in FOURTEEN districts – Karimnagar, Warangal, Nizamabad, Mahaboobnagar, Kurnool, Hyderabad, Ananthapur, Medak, Adilabad, Chittoor, Rangareddy, Nellore, Nalgonda, and Srikakulam.

In Karnataka the practice has been found to exist in SIX districts – Raichur, Bijapur, Belgaum, Dharwad, Bellari and Gulbarga.

In Maharashtra the Devadasi cult exists in TEN districts – Pune, Sholapur, Kolhapur, Sangli, Mumbai, Lathur, Usmanabad, Satara, Sindhudurg and Nanded.

It may be pointed out that there are disagreements about the statistical figures supplied by the government agencies. Many NGOs are of the opinion that resurvey should be carried out in all the three states in collaboration with the NGO’s active in the field.

## **REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Altekar, A.S., *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Benaras: Motilal Banarasi Das, 1956.
2. Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XX, No. 44, November 2, 1985, pp. 1869-1876.
3. Artal R.O., "Basavis in Peninsular India", *Journal of Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol. IX, No. 2, 1910.
4. Asha Ramesh, *Impact of Legislative Prohibition of the Devadasi Practice in Karnataka: A Study*, (Carried out under financial assistance from NORAD), May 1993.
5. Banerjee, G.R., *Sex Delinquent Women and Their Rehabilitation*, Bombay: Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 1953.
6. Basham, A.L., *The Wonder That Was India*, New York: Grove Press, 1954.
7. Chakrapani, C, "Jogin System: A Study in Religion and Society", *Man in Asia*, Vol. IV, No. II, 1991.
8. Crooke Williams, *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, (Third Reprint), Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1968.
9. Crooke, W., "Prostitution", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. X, Eds., James Hastings and Clark Edinburg, Second Impression, 1930.
10. Desai Neera, *Women in India*, Bombay: Vora Publishers, 1957.
11. Dubois Abbe J.A and Beachampes H.K., *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928
12. Dumont Louis, *Religion, Politics and History in India*, The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1970

13. Dumont Louis, *Homo Hierarchius: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972.
14. Durrani, K.S., *Religion and Society*, New Delhi: Uppal, 1983.
15. Fuller Marcus B., *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1900.
16. Gough Kathleen, "Female Initiation Rites on the Malabar Coast", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, No. 85, 1952.
17. Gupta Giri Raj, *Religion in Modern India*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983.
18. Heggade Odeyar D., "A Socio-economic strategy for Rehabilitating Devadasis", *Social Welfare*, Feb-Mar 1983.
19. Iyer, L.A.K., "Devadasis in South India: Their Traditional Origin And Development", *Man in India*, Vol.7, No. 47, 1927.
20. Jain Devki, *Women's Quest for Power*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980.
21. Jogan Shankar, *Devadasi Cult – A Sociological Analysis* (Second Revised Edition), New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994.
22. JOINT WOMEN'S PROGRAMME, Regional Centre, Bangalore, *An Exploratory Study on Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme Initiated by Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation and SC/ST Corporation, Government of Karnataka in Northern Districts of Karnataka*, Report Submitted to National Commission for Women, New Delhi, 2001-02 (year not mentioned in the report)
23. *JONAKI (The Glow Worm)*, Devadasi System: Prostitution with Religious Sanction, Indrani Sinha (Chief Editor), Calcutta, Vol.2 No.1 1998.
24. Jordens, J.T.F., "Hindu Religions and Social Reform in British India", *A Cultural History of India*, Ed. A.L. Basham, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975.
25. Kadetotad, N.K., *Religion and Society among the Harijans of Yellamma Jogatiyaru Hagu Devadasi Paddati (Jogati of Yellamma and Devadasi Custom)*, Dharwad, Karnatak University Press (Kannada), 1983.
26. Kala Rani, *Role Conflict in Working Women*, New Delhi: Chetna Publishers, 1976.
27. Karkhanis, G.G., *Devadasi: A Burning Problem of Karnataka*, Bijapur: Radha Printing Works, 1959.
28. Marglin, F.A., *Wives of The God-king: Rituals of Devadasi of Puri*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985.

- 
29. Mukherjee, A.B., *Female Participation in India: Patterns & Associations*, Tijdschrift: Voor Econ, Geografie, 1972.
  30. Ostor Akos, *Culture and Power*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1971.
  31. Patil, B.R., "The Devadasis", in *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, Vol. XXXV, No. 4, January 1975, pp. 377-89
  32. Puekar S.D. and Kamalla Rao, *A Study of Prostitution in Bombay*, Bombay: Lalwani Publishing House, 1967.
  33. Rajaladshmi, Suryanarayana and Mukherjee, "The Basavis in Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh", *Man in India*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 1976.
  34. Ranjana, "Daughters Married to Gods and Goddesses", *Social Welfare*, Feb-Mar 1983, pp. 28-31.
  35. Sahoo, B.B, "Revival of the Devadasi system", *Indian Journal of Social Work*, Vol 58, No 3, 1997.
  36. Srinivasan, K., *Devadasi* (a novel), Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1976.
  37. Sujana Mallika & Krishna Reddy, *Devadasi System – A Universal Institution*, Paper presented in the A.P. History Congress at Warangal, January 1990.
  38. Tarachand K.C., *Devadasi Custom – Rural Social Structure and Flesh Markets*, New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1992.
  39. Upadhyaya, B.S., *Women in Rig Veda*, New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1974.
  40. Vasant Rajas, *Devadasi: Shodh Ani Bodh* (Marathi), Pune: Sugawa Prakashan, July 1997.
  41. Vijaya Kumar, S & Chakrapani, C 1993, *Joginism : A Bane of Indian Women*, Almora: Shri Almora Book Depot.

**Annexure III**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First and foremost, I must express my sincere gratitude and thanks to Mrs. K. Santhaa Reddy, Member, National Commission for Women for providing me the necessary books, reports and data relating to devadasis. This mini-book would not have been possible but for her initiation on the subject. She had conducted Public Hearings on devadasis at various places in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Hence, she had all the information that was needed for this work. I am most obliged for her kindness in sharing the data with me.

I am also most thankful to Dr. Amrit Srinivasan, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. Discussions with her helped me clarify my thoughts.

This mini-book is based on the work of all researchers who have studied the life and customs of devadasis with empathy and compassion. I thank them all from the bottom of my heart.

Lastly, I have also to thank my wife Anita and children (Nidhi and Ankit) for being patient with me during my long hours in front of the computer.

Anil Chawla

28 August 2002



E-mail [anil@samarthbharat.com](mailto:anil@samarthbharat.com)  
[hindustanstudies@rediffmail.com](mailto:hindustanstudies@rediffmail.com)  
[hindustanstudies@yahoo.co.in](mailto:hindustanstudies@yahoo.co.in)