

## **Devdasi system: A Plight of Women**

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'Devdasi system' is an institutionalized subordination of women in many parts of India. It is embedded in caste, class hierarchy in Indian society. Devdasis are dedicated to god Yellamma, they cannot marry a mortal.

It is noteworthy that girls families of the 'untouchables', or lower caste are 'married' to yellemma as young as four. No longer allowed to marry a mortal, they are expected to bestow their entire life to the service of the goddess.

However, the devdasi system has been part of southern Indian life for many centuries. Generally, devdasi are trained in classical music and dance, they lived in comfortable houses provided by a patron, usually a prominent man in the village. The situation change as the tradition was made illegal across in 1988, and the temple itself has publicly distanced itself from women's plight.

But now devdasi system has changed its meaning. Now it is a system relief of poor parents. This system is seen as a means for poverty-stricken parents to unburden themselves of daughters.

Etymologically, 'devdasi' originates from two Sanskrit words; 'Deva' meaning 'god' and 'dasi' meaning a female servant. As the name suggests, devdasi is a young woman who dedicates her life into the service of god.(1) The system is prevalent in India since time immemorial. In ancient times, girls were married off the Gods or deities of the temples. As a result, they were not allowed to marry anyone else and they had to devote their entire life in the service of God.

Traditionally, they danced in the temple premises and were considered as reincarnation of the courtesans in the Court of Lord Indra and other devas. However, in the reality, they became sexual interests of the priests of the temples, the kings, zamindars and other well off men.

Devdasi system is related to dancing. Originally, in addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, these women learned and practiced Sadir (Bharatnatya), Odissi and other classical Indian artistic traditions and enjoyed a high social status as dance and music were essential Part of temple worship.

Traditionally, devdasis enjoyed high status in society. After marrying wealthy patrons, they spent their time honing their skills instead of becoming housewife. They had children from their husbands who were also taught their skills of music or dance. Often their patrons had another wife who served them as housewife.

However, devdasis are also having different names in different regions in India, such as jogini. Furthermore, devdasi are known as bainavi in Karnataka and matangini in Maharashtra. It is also known as venkatasani, naillis, murails and theradiyan. There were devdasis from iyer communities as they performed Bharatanatyam.

Against this backdrop, this paper deals with two parts, first part deals with evolution of devdasi system in different times in Indian society. Second part focuses on legislative initiatives taken by Indian government to obsolete devdasi system in post independence times.

### **Evolution of devdasi system in different times in Indian society**

In the ancient times, Kalidas emphasized devdasi as dancing girls in temples in his celebrated writing 'Meghdoot'. It is said that dancing girls were present at the time of worship in Mahakali temple in Ujjain. Some scholars are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6th century, as most Puranas combining reference to it have been written during this period.

However, the total number of devdasis in temples was reflected to the wealth and prestige of the temple at the end of 10th century. 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. (2)

Local kings often invited temple dancers to dance their courts, it projected a new category of dancers, rajadasis, and modified the technique and themes of the recitals. A devdasi had to satisfy her own soul while she danced unwatched and offered herself to the god, but the rajadasi's dance was the purely entertainment towards wealthy men.

However, the popularity of devdasis seems to have reached its pinnacle around 10th and 11th century. The rise and fall in the status of devdasis can be seen to be running parallel to the rise and fall of Hindu temples across India. Invaders from West Asia came to India, they started the destruction of temples from the north eastern border and spread through the whole country. Thereafter the status of the temples fell very quickly in Northern India and slowly in South India.

### **Devdasi in south India**

The chola empire encouraged the devdasi system. In Tamil nadu they are known as Devan Adigalar (where in Devar means in Tamil as 'God' and Adigalar means in Tamil as 'servants', which is put together into one makes as God's servant). Devdasi are generally engaged in music and dance during temple festivals.

With the expansion of chola empire, more and more temples were made throughout the country.

### **Mahari Devdasi of Odisha**

Unlike in other parts of India, in eastern state of Odisha had been followed devdasi system as Mahari in Jagannath temple. They have never treated as prostitute in Odisha.

### **Yellamma cult of Karnataka in South India**

In the state of Karnataka in the region of South India the devdasi system was followed for over 10 centuries. Chief among them Yellamma cult.

### **Colonial period of India**

In the 19th Century social movement is also emphasized on devdasi system. This movement can be classified into two categories: Reformists and Revivalists.

#### **Reformists**

Reformists face the devdasi as a social evil, Devdasi to be prostitute. The first anti-nauch and anti-dedication movement was launched in 1882. Reform lobbyists were drawn mainly from missionaries, doctors, journalists and social workers. They urged the abolition of all ceremonies and dedication by which girls dedicated themselves as devdasis of Hindu shrines.

Due to the devdasi being equated to prostitutes, they also became associated with the spreading of venereal disease in the various being operated at that time.

#### **Revivalists**

The Hindu revival movement consciously stepped outside the requirements of state electoral politics and western scientific traditions. The movement received strong support from the Theosophical Society of India, whose anti official stance and strong interest in India home rule bound them with the revival of dance and music.

The support later given to a revival of sadi as Bharatnatyam by the Theosophical Society was largely due to efforts of Rukmini Devi Arundale, an eminent theorists, and E. Krishna, Iyer. Arundale were emphasized on respectable status in Indian society. Later on, revivalists stressed that the dance of devdasi was a form of 'natya yoga' to enhance an individual's spiritual plane.

### **Legislative initiatives to abolish devdasi system**

The reformers and section of the devdasis insisted the colonial government to legally abolish the system. In 1930, with the effort of Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Madras Legislative council banned the pottu ceremony (the processors of the dedication of the devdasis to the particular deity) in Madras Presidency (modern Tamilnadu). The first legal initiative to outlaw the devdasi system dates back to the 1934 Bombay //protection Act. The Act also provided rules, which were aimed at protecting the interests of the devdasis. By the year 1947, the year of independence, the Madras



Devdasi (Protection of Dedication) Act outlawed dedication in the southern Madras Presidency. The Karnataka Devdasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982, Andhra Pradesh Devdasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1989 and Goa's Children Act, 2003 were implemented to abolish the system of devdasi in India. The devdasi system was outlawed in all of India in 1988, yet some devdasi system are practiced illegally.

### **Conclusion**

Devdasi system is the gravest violation of women's human rights of Indian women. Though, devdasi system is practiced for various reasons like religious beliefs, caste system, male domination and economic stress have been recognized as the stimulants behind the perpetuation of this phenomenon. In the colonial era, devdasi system was practiced in the Indian subcontinent for the entertainment of kings who were patrons of temples and temple arts become powerless. Later on, reformists tried to abolish this social evil 'devdasi system'. But revivalists opined that music and dance of the devdasi system is related to natya yoga. Foregoing analysis reveals that devdasi has different name in the different region of India but what is common that is dedication of devdasi towards god in the temple complex in the veil of prostitution. After independence era, India's National Commission for Women, which is mandated to protect and promote the welfare of women, has collected information on the prevalence of devdasis in various states. The government of Odisha has stated that the devdasi system is not prevalent in the state. Despite of that facts, devdasi system is practiced illegally some parts of the India. Proper education, access to employment market, awareness programme led by government etc may abolish detrimental practice like devdasi in near future.

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