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# THE INDEPENDENT

September 20, 2010

## Prostitutes of god

By Interview by Matilda Battersby

*Journalist Sarah Harris has made a documentary about temple prostitutes in south India -Devadasi girls are dedicated to a Hindu deity and spend their lives selling sex.*

Former *Independent* journalist Sarah Harris has made a documentary about India's temple prostitutes - Devadasi are young girls who are dedicated to a Hindu deity at a young age and support their families as sex workers.

The first instalment of the four-part exclusively online documentary 'Prostitutes of God' goes live today on VBS.tv [<http://www.vbs.tv>].

***Harris talked The Independent Online about making the film:***

I first went to India after I left *The Independent* three years ago. I wanted to run away and do something really different, so I went to volunteer with a charity in southern India which rescues victims of sex trafficking.

On my very first day there I stumbled into a meeting of Devadasi prostitutes. I was told that they were temple prostitutes, but didn't have any understanding of what that meant.

I began to research it and in February 2008 was invited to northern Karnataka, which is the centre of the tradition in India. I interviewed a few of the women and wrote an article about it for Vice magazine. But visiting them stayed with me, and I wanted to find out more.

When you approach a Devadasi girl for interview the response varies hugely. There's a huge spectrum of women. A really wealthy brothel madam in Mumbai would be quite proud to talk about what she does. But in very poor rural communities, like in Karnatak, they're much more difficult to talk to. These young women are ostracised and exploited and they're ashamed of what they do. They wish they could get married, but they can't and are in this dreadful prison.

The only thing that has changed since the Devadasi practise was made illegal in 1988 is that the ceremonies have been driven underground. It's still very common in some parts of India. A Westerner wouldn't know to look at the girls that they are Devadasi, but Indians know on sight who they are and what they do. Really it comes down to caste.

Caste is a massively complicated issue still in India. My understanding of it is that originally when the Devadasi tradition first came about, the women dedicated were from high caste families, even royalty. They held a very special place in the Indian culture: were incredible dancers, poets, artisans. They had specific religious roles to play within the temple performing various sacred religious rites. They were almost like nuns and it had nothing to do with sex. It was more like being a priestess.

The film shows how much the tradition has deteriorated over the centuries. Specifically in the 19th Century when the Christian missionaries came, the Devadasi became less well thought of. These days it's very much a low caste tradition. Girls from the Madiga caste, otherwise known as the "untouchable caste," have really limited prospects. They can be agricultural labourers, sewage collectors or prostitutes, essentially. As prostitution is the most lucrative, a lot of Madiga women get into sex work.

Some girls are dedicated to the goddess at age two or three. They won't actually enter into sex work until they reach puberty at around twelve. The girls most at risk of being dedicated will have grown up in very matriarchal Devadasi communities. There aren't any men. They don't have fathers. So there probably is some understanding from a young age that they're not from traditional families, they don't have husbands.

The girls probably won't have a real understanding of the sex work element until what they call their 'first night'. This is when their virginity is sold to a local man, normally the highest bidder. He might be a local farmer, landowner or businessman. Some of them say, "I was dedicated to the goddess, but I didn't know this was what was expected."

When I first went to India I thought some of the women might consider it a kind of honour to be a Devadasi, because it is an act of religious devotion. Sexuality and divinity are very closely entwined in the Hindu faith. Religion is closely linked to sexuality and beauty. But I think there's very little religious link left now. Most of the women that we spoke to don't even pay any heed to the traditional religious practises of the goddess. They see it as a business.

HIV is very prevalent in the community. Our translator, who works very closely with these communities, describes HIV as being like plucking a bunch of grapes. As soon as a woman is infected then her whole family becomes infected. Every man she sleeps with then becomes infected. Then the men pass it onto their wives. It's very difficult to measure the disease's prevalence because many don't understand what that they've got.

There is widespread ignorance about AIDS and HIV in those communities. And a huge stigma attached to using condoms. People die of HIV related illnesses and they call it "dying of a fever." The infected often go undiagnosed. There's also huge disparity. One of the towns we went to had a huge NGO which was campaigning for the rights of sex workers, distributing condoms and educational materials, so the Devadasi were quite switched on about it.

It's very difficult for girls to leave the profession. You see groups of former Devadasi becoming social activists and campaigners against the tradition. That's one way out. Another is to become an educator or a social worker. There is a huge movement to try and stop dedications happening, and the impetus for that is coming from the grass roots. The former Devadasi women.

Living a normal life in India after having been a Devadasi prostitute is extremely, extremely hard because they're seen as damaged goods. In India marriage is everything. If there's any suggestion that a girl has had sex before marriage then she's ostracised from society. Women are still stoned to death in some villages for those kinds of transgressions. So it's very difficult for them to rebuild their lives.



***The rest of the four-part documentary will be screened on VBS.tv later this week***

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## India's 'prostitutes of God'

An ancient tradition which sees girls dedicated to a lifetime of 'religious prostitution' has become a big business on the streets of southern India. Sarah Harris, who spent two years uncovering the practice, explains what it means to be a devadasi in the twenty-first century.

By Leah Hyslop

Published: 9:42AM BST 20 Sep 2010

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It was in 2008 that Sarah Harris first made the acquaintance of India's *devadasi*. The former journalist from *The Independent on Sunday* had, in what she calls "a moment of madness," thrown in the towel at her old job, and gone to work with victims of sex trafficking in southern India.

"One day, I walked into a meeting at an NGO," she recalls, "and there were a group of women sitting there, whom I assumed were prostitutes. But later, someone told me that they were actually *devadasi* or "servants of god"; religious prostitutes, and part of an ancient Hindu tradition. It was at that point my interest was piqued."



Devadasi in Karnataka

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Deciding that the *devadasi* would make an interesting subject for a documentary, Harris began to research the custom's history, concentrating particularly on the state of Karnataka. She discovered that the tradition

there stretched back as long ago as the sixth century, when young girls, often from wealthy backgrounds, were dedicated to local temples. After going through a dedication ceremony which "married" them to the fertility goddess Yellamma, they would act as temple care-takers: performing rituals in honour of their goddess, as well as dancing and playing music for the entertainment of wealthy locals.

Over time, however, the tradition began to change, and the *devadasi* became less respected. "Many ended up becoming the mistress of a particular 'patron' - often a royal, or nobleman - as well as serving in the temple," says Harris, "and eventually, the connection with the temple became severed altogether. Today, although there are still many women called *devadasi*, and who have been dedicated to the goddess, a lot of them are essentially prostitutes."

So how did the *devadasi* fall from grace? "The practice was outlawed in India in 1988," says Harris, "by which point, its connection with prostitution was well-established. But it seems to have been linked to the fall of the old Hindu kingdoms over several hundreds of years. As Christianity spread especially, temples lost their influence, and women were forced out onto the streets."

As research for her documentary, *Prostitutes of God*, Harris and her team spent several months tracking down and meeting some of the estimated 23,000 *devadasi* in Karnataka. Getting access to the women posed a challenge, but Sarah's experience working for NGOs managed to provide her with several leads. Out of those she interviewed, nearly all cited economic need rather than religious tradition as the main reason behind their chosen path.

"Many *devadasi* are sold into the sex trade by their families," she says. "The parents know that they're not really giving their children to be religious servants, but they turn a blind eye. The only *devadasi* I met who saw the tradition as strictly religious was a rather bizarre cross-dressing male version, who spends several hours a day in prayer."

The most interesting fact yielded by Harris' investigation was how female-driven the industry is. "It's very much women recruiting women. When the *devadasi* become older and can't attract the same business, they end up trafficking, and taking girls from the small villages to big cities like Bangalore, where they set up brothels. Most of the girls chosen are illiterate agricultural workers, who go because they think they'll make more money as *devadasi* than if they work on the land."

Do any make their fortune? "A few can - a client might pay a few thousand pounds for a night with a virgin *devadasi*. But a lot of *devadasi* in their 30s or 40s are selling sex for about thirty or forty pence. The strange thing is that though they see themselves as superior to non-religious prostitutes - and even though they often dress to look different, with distinctive jewellery and clothes - I don't think the clients see much difference."

Nearly three years after a whim first took her to India, Harris is back in Britain with her documentary in the can. "One of the reasons I wanted to go to India was because I visited it when I was 19, and it was so strange it just terrified me," she says. "Now, I feel that I've got to know the country properly - and learnt about something astonishing on the way."

*Prostitutes of God* can be watched at **VBS.TV** (<http://www.vbs.tv/en-gb/>) from September 20.

Got an expat story to tell? Email us at [weeklyt@telegraph.co.uk](mailto:weeklyt@telegraph.co.uk)

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10/11/2010 11:34 PM

I strongly suggest watching this, highly critical. response from some of the sex workers featured in Ms Harris's film: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16OGyssJTvo>

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16OGyssJTvo>)

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"Surely devadasi was always essentially a form of prostitution. "

No it wasn't - the tradition started off with life long celibate women who danced for god in private which then degraded to dancing for kings for entertainment the songs became more for entertainment.

There are still devadasi's for example Jaganatha Puri who are life long celibates who perform songs and dance only for God in the inner sanctum.

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"The practice was outlawed in India in 1988," says Harris, "by which point, its connection with prostitution was well-established."

Surely devadasi was always essentially a form of prostitution.

To suggest that they were anything other than prostitutes is like saying that gladiators were not gladiators because they were originally connected with funerary rites, and always retained a religious as well as entertainment aspect.

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# "Prostitutes of God:" Film Mocks, Belittles Sex Workers

By [Bebe Loff](#)

Created Sep 29 2010 - 4:03pm

By [Bebe Loff](#) [1]

September 29, 2010 - 4:03pm

Last week, four episodes of a film entitled *Prostitutes of God* were posted on [VBS.TV](#) [2], which is owned by Vice Magazine. *Prostitutes of God* producer Sarah Harris, spent time with members of Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (meaning 'Prostitutes' Freedom from Injustice') or "VAMP," and let her into their lives, their families and their workplace. The result? Films that are inaccurate and misrepresentative, and insulting to the people who agreed to participate and to the Hindu culture.

VAMP was formed in 1996 and now works with more than 5000 women, men, and transgenderers in sex work to promote and protect their human rights and health. The group covers six districts in Western Maharashtra and two in North Karnataka. VAMP has been internationally recognised by groups like Human Rights Watch for their contribution to human rights and for their work in HIV/AIDS prevention.

However, you would not know any of this from Harris' film, which is full of stereotypes and representations of Indian culture that are designed to mock and belittle. In addition, Harris' film puts people in danger-- of stigma, discrimination and misinformation--through her uninformed and judgemental editorial lens. In a [recent interview of Harris in the UK Independent](#) [3] (LINK)—in which she describes her interest in sex work as having originated when she spent time as a volunteer “with a charity in southern India which rescues victims of sex trafficking—Harris recounts someone who told her that HIV/AIDS is like “plucking a bunch of grapes. As soon as a woman is infected, then her whole family becomes infected.”

This ignorance and irresponsibility runs rampant throughout *Prostitutes of God*. One case in point is that of Belavva. The film maker wrongly states that the "Devadasi" religious ritual demands that poor families traffic their daughters into prostitution (that is dedicate them to the goddess Yellama). She then states that when Belavva was young her family sent her to work for a landlord who asked her parents to dedicate her - or pimp her out. This is stated, not implied. It is not true, neither in the instance of the individual concerned, nor with respect to Hinduism.

Sadly there are many more examples throughout the film, examples that prompted VAMP to issue the following rebuttal:



It is to be hoped that a person would pretty sure of their evidence when making these sorts of allegations to the world. Sarah Harris has managed to misconstrue most of what she has reported, has exploited a trusting community in the worst possible ways, and has produced a series of films that are extraordinarily offensive. She has demonstrated racism and has behaved in ways reminiscent of the most unpleasant forms of colonialism. She has abused the poorest of people for her own ends.

To manipulate poor people to meet one's ends is blameworthy. It is reprehensible to betray the trust of a most vulnerable people merely to make a film. To, in addition, vilify and disparage a culture and religious beliefs, as Sarah Harris and VBS TV have done, requires either wilful ignorance or a determination to produce work that panders to the worst type of media sensationalism imaginable. The people in the film are part of a community that wishes to tell their stories and be understood by a broad audience, but we will not stand by while we are being misrepresented to the world.

It is to be hoped that a person would be pretty sure of their evidence when making these sorts of allegations to the world. Sarah Harris has managed to misconstrue most of what she has reported, has exploited a trusting community in the worst possible ways, and has produced a series of films that are extraordinarily offensive. She has demonstrated racism and has behaved in ways reminiscent of the most unpleasant forms of colonialism.

Sarah Harris and VBS must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. VAMP members are people with rights including reputational rights.

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