

The origin of caste system is in Hindu religion and caste system has many manifestations. It has not only divided the society in to various layers of graded hierarchy but has also created inhuman practices in the name of God. One of it is Devadasi system prevalent in different forms all over India.

The term Devadasi is a Sanskrit term denoting female servant of deity. But they are known by different names in different areas, such as 'Maharis' in Kerala, 'Natis' in Assam, 'Basavis' in Karnataka, ' Bhavanis' in Goa ' Kudikar' on the West-Cost ' Bhogam-Vandhi' or 'Jogin' in Andhra Pradesh; Thevardiyar' in Tamil Nadu; 'Murali', 'Jogateen' and 'Aradhini' in Maharashtra. In Karnataka, old devadasis are called as 'Jogati' and young devadasis as 'Basavi'. The term 'Basavi' refers to feminine form of 'Basava' a bull, which roams the village at will without any restriction.ⁱ

This cult is prevalent even today throughout India with some regional variances. When a girl is dedicated to or married not to a mortal-man but to an idol, deity or object of worship or to a temple, some rite is performed. The initiation ritual was said to include a "deflowering ceremony", known as "uditambuvad" in some parts, whereby the priests would have intercourse with every girl enrolled at his temple as part of his religious perks. A Marathi saying, "*Devdaasi devachi bayako, sarya gavachi*" (" Servant of god, but wife of the whole town"). Necklaces symbolise the bondage that defines devadasis girls from the lowest caste whose parents have given them to local goddesses or temples as human " offerings" .She has to remain unmarried, and maintain herself by ceremonial begging, a system called "jogava" in Marathi, to get both ends meet. With "chal" (a string of small bells) in her feet, she carries the "jag" (a metal mask of god) in a "pardi" (a basket) on her head and begs whole life, or ends up in a brothel.ⁱⁱ

In Andhra Pradesh, the girls are married to the god Potharaju. In the Shimoga District of Karnataka, the girls are handed over to the goddess Renuka Devi, and in Hospet, to the goddess Hulganga Devi. In the Vijapur district of Karnataka, girls are given to the Monkey God (Hanuman, Maruti). Many girls in Karnataka are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma. In Maharashtra the female child is betrothed at birth to *Khandoba*.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are various myths around this inhuman practice. The *Jogin* system is based on the traditional belief in Andhra Pradesh that evil over the family or the village can be avoided by dedicating a girl in the family to be a *Jogin*. As soon as she reaches puberty, she becomes the exclusive concubine of the feudal gentry in the village.^{iv}

In Maharashtra, the poor deluded women promise to sacrifice their first-born daughters if Khandoba will make them mothers of many children. Then after the vow, the first-born girl is offered to Khandoba and set apart for him by tying a necklace of seven cowries around the little girl's neck. When she becomes of marriageable age, she is formally married to Khandoba or dagger of Khandoba and become his nominal wife. Henceforth

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she is forbidden to become the wedded wife of any man. The parents of such girls do not feel ashamed to take her earnings.

In Karnataka, there is a traditional belief that when there is famine, drought or epidemics, to appease gods and goddesses a lower caste girl is dedicated to the local goddess Huligamma.^v

The Banchara, Rajnat, Dommara and Bedia tribes in Madhya Pradesh also practice traditional prostitution.

There has been influence of devdasi tradition on Muslim community as well. Some of the Muslim sects started offering girls to 'dargas'. Such girls were called 'acchutis'. There is a colony of such people in Lucknow in U.P. even today. The girl is married to the Koran. After the Nikah is performed, the girl is called as 'bibi' and is condemned to lead a life of prostitution.

Married to God before puberty, the devadasis, or Joginis, many of whom live in the temples, become sexual servants to the villages' uppercaste men after their first menstrual period. In some villages, the men who bought them keep Devadasis as concubines. In others, they are public chattels, who are used by men free of charge. Socially they are outcastes but they do suffer from severe venerable or sexually transmitted diseases from the men. AIDS also affects many of them.



At age nine Kariamma was dedicated by her family to become a *devadasi*" At puberty, she was offered sexually to upper caste patrons. Now, at age 30, she has given birth to five children, uncertain of whom the fathers are. Majority of the Devadasis after they reach a certain age migrate to the towns where they enter in to the brothels and become prostitutes. The label of being a Devadasi is put on them. Just like caste, they cannot change their identity and have to live with it until their death.

Some of the states where the Devadasi practice is going on tried to eradicate it through state laws like the Bombay Devadasis Prevention act, 1954, the Prohibition of Dedication act 1982 of Karnataka, the Andhra Pradesh Devadasis (Prohibition of dedication act, 1988.

However, the practice lives on in the states in South India mainly in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu. Districts bordering Maharashtra and Karnataka are known as the "Devadasi belt" According to the National commission on women of India it is estimated that around 2,50,000 Dalit girls are dedicated as Devadasis to Yellamma and Khondaba temples in south India Maharashtra - karnataka border.

I have personally been to two village' s one in Mehboobnagar district of Andhra Pradesh and another in the Bellary district of Karnataka. In both the villages, I have found that there is a separate residential area allotted for the ex-Devadasis families, which is outside the village just like the Dalits, being segregated from the main village. However, the earlier is through the government rehabilitation program while the later are the dominant castes. This shows the reflection of the caste system even the state machinery. All the families of ex-Devadasis are women-headed. There were some youth

who were born through the sexual abuse of their mothers. We asked the children of ex-Devadasis “ Do you go to school” ? They said yes. Most of the children said that when they go to school the teachers and other children treat them badly. They are called as bastards. One of the ex-Devadasi told us that when they fill the school admission form for their children, they mention “ **God**” in the column of father’ s name.

Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka Government have also allotted few acres of land to each Devadasi family. But the stigma attached to their identity cannot be removed through the rehabilitation program.

The village communities are not ready to accept the ex-Devadasis families. In both of the villages, the Devadasis through the support of the local Ngos organised themselves to form cooperatives. Through this, they have started income generating activities. Many strong ex-Devadasis are fighting against the Devadasi practice. Most of them have become human rights activists. Very few of them were able to get married legally. Almost all of the ex-Devadasis have decided that they shall not follow this practice. They want their children especially girls to get good education or vocational training to live a much better life.

The glimpse through the lives of Devadasis signifies their plight and suffering. In the present situation, what has come out is that until you do not suffer the pain you do not realise its intensity. When the Dalits took the leadership and started addressing their issues the outlook towards them has totally changed. After meeting the ex-Devadasi activists, I saw the anger of being subjugated in their voice, eyes and entire body. But it is a long way for them and if we cannot give them anything, then can we give them moral and emotional support?
