



Women in  
**ritual slavery**

*Devadasi, Jogini and Mathamma in Karnataka and  
Andhra Pradesh, Southern India*

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Anti-Slavery International 2007

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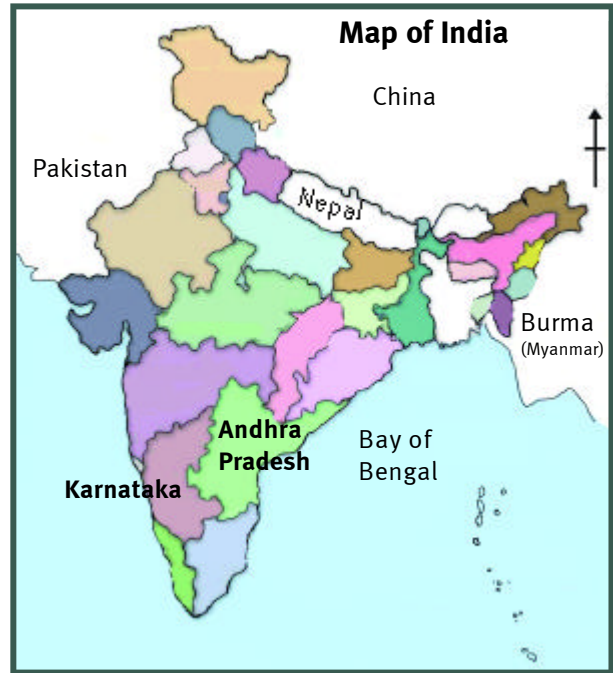
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# Introduction to the research project

During 2006, Anti-Slavery International undertook a research project into the practice of ritual sexual slavery or forced religious 'marriage'. The custom of 'marrying' girls to a deity, thereby depriving them of the right to ordinary marriage and assigning them to sexual exploitation by the deity's priests or devotees, existed in many ancient cultures, including in Europe, the Middle East, West Africa and South Asia. In a few settings, this type of ritual slavery or sexual servitude has continued until the present day, including the practice of *Trokosi* in some parts of West Africa; and various forms of Devadasi (from the Sanskrit words *deva* meaning god or goddess and *dasi* meaning servant) among Hindu populations in southern India and Nepal.

After consideration, Anti-Slavery International decided to confine its research to the practice of Devadasi\* in southern India. Accordingly, two partner non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were selected, one in Andhra Pradesh, the other in Karnataka, states where the practice has traditionally been most entrenched and where, especially in certain districts, the numbers of Devadasi remain high. In Andhra Pradesh, where the practice takes various names and forms including *Jogini* and *Mathamma*, the partner was Sravanti. This NGO is based in Rajahmundry, coastal Andhra Pradesh, and is experienced in working with victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, and with advocacy up to state level. In Karnataka, the NGO partner selected was Karnataka Integrated Development Services (KIDS), an organization based in Dharwad, also working with deprived children and victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, mostly in programme services.

Both partners undertook a situation analysis, including a research exercise among women and girls who have been initiated as *Jogins* and



*Mathas* (Andhra Pradesh), and as *Devadasis* (Karnataka). This information provides much of the basis for this report. Primary data was collected using questionnaires (in Telegu and Kannada respectively) and focus group discussions. In Andhra Pradesh, the research took place in two districts, examining *Jogini* in Mahbubnagar and *Mathamma* in Chittoor. In Karnataka, research took place in Belgaum district, where the main temple and commercial complex for the Goddess Yellamma (the deity most associated with the practice) is to be found, at Saundatti. *Devadasi* from Belgaum have for many years been prominent among girls and women recruited into the sex trade in nearby Goa, Mumbai and other large towns.

Both partners, with Anti-Slavery International participation, also conducted workshops with groups of *Jogini* and *Devadasi* respectively. These three-day workshops, one in Mahbubnagar, the other in Gokak, Belgaum, took place in November 2006. Their purpose was to supplement the primary research; expose Anti-Slavery International personnel directly to the practice and to *Jogins* and *Devadasi* themselves; explore with partner NGOs some principles and techniques for participatory learning and research; and enable participants to identify

\* The term Devadasi is used here generically to cover all forms of the practice, and used in italics - *Devadasi* - to denote the specific study group in Karnataka. *Devadasis* are dedicated to Yellamma, but in some other cases the dedication may be to a different village Goddess or God, or Yellamma under a different name. Other names for dedicated women in locations not studied include *venkatasani*, *basavi*, *kudikari*, *bhavani* and *yallamma*. Research in Andhra Pradesh focussed on *Jogini* and *Mathamma*, whose initiates are referred to in this report by the terms *Jogin* and *Matha*.

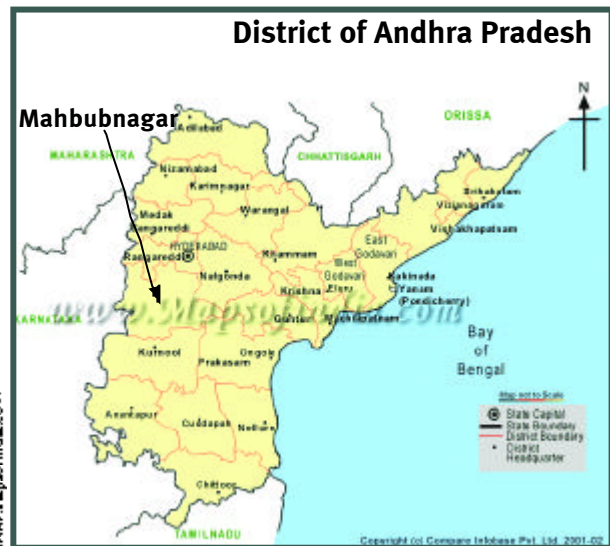
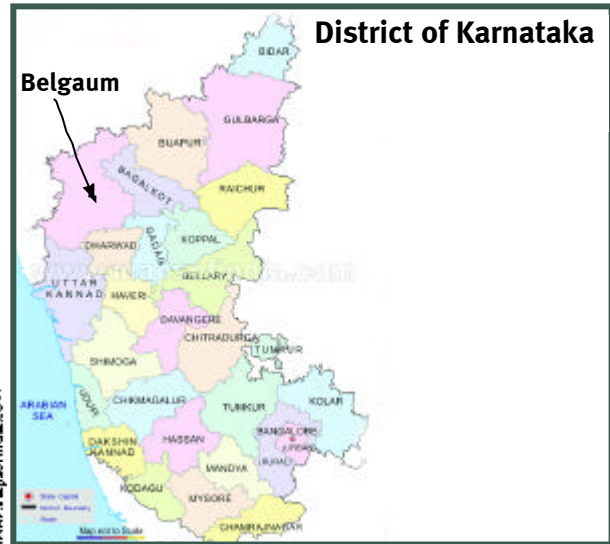
ways of solving their problems, to be used - immediately or subsequently - in advocacy directed at decision-makers. The workshop methodology, an important component of the research project, is described in an Annexe to this report.

## An overview of the practice

Although formally prohibited since independence, the practice of dedicating girls to a deity still survives in southern India in significant numbers. The latest available official figures for the key districts in Andhra Pradesh are around 17,000, and for Karnataka, around 23,000<sup>1</sup>. Initiations are in decline, but these figures indicate that tens of thousands of women exist who have had their lives severely damaged by the practice.

In both Andhra Pradesh and in Karnataka, state legislation passed in the 1980s outlaws all Devadasi rituals and ceremonies and recognises marriages of Devadasi as legal. These were not the first attempts to use the law to end the practice, but they have been more effective than previous efforts, especially where there has been active rehabilitative and preventive work in the communities. Organisations involved believe that a significant proportion of Devadasi (around 50 per cent of *Jogins* in Mahbubnagar, for example<sup>2</sup>) have been reached by their efforts, and that the number of new initiations has declined. However, they still continue clandestinely, particularly in more remote and underdeveloped areas. A high risk persists of the practice being used to entice families into trafficking their daughters into the sex trade, or to force daughters to become 'second wives' (concubines) to already married men.

Although rehabilitation programmes have brought benefits to many Devadasi, their impact is limited. The Devadasi status once entered into can never be entirely cast off, whatever the law may say. It is a life-long sentence to deprivation of regular marriage and family life, a source of stigma and discrimination, of sexual exploitation during youth and early middle age, and normally of extreme poverty for the rest of the woman's life. This life sentence is supposedly offset by a degree of spiritual standing, but in practice the 'holy' character of the service is little recognised



today. The cult of the Goddess remains strong, but the spiritual standing of her handmaidens has been tarnished over a long period by branding them as prostitutes, which strictly speaking they are not. Thus the history of efforts to abolish Devadasi practices since the days of British rule has had the effect of increasing the stigma attached to its victims by society at large, and has reinforced their risk of entry into commercial sex work.

At the same time, the deities to which girls are 'married' are still worshipped at shrines in villages all over southern India, and to Yellamma's devotees, the temples at Saundatti still represent the equivalent of Mecca or Rome. Pilgrims travel there year-round in their hundreds of thousands, especially for the two main full moon festivals in January and February, but also on an everyday basis. It is impossible to know how many devotees still believe in dedicating

daughters for spiritual gain since Devadasi ceremonies no longer take place publicly.

All Devadasi belong to particular scheduled castes and tribes, of which there are large numbers in the relevant areas of southern India<sup>3</sup>; in the Belgaum study, 398 (93 per cent) of those questioned were scheduled caste, as compared to 32 (seven per cent) from scheduled tribes. No Devadasi today comes from an upper caste although that did happen in times gone by. Thus all Devadasi are from already poor, mostly illiterate, and discriminated groups. Children of Devadasi also suffer discrimination because they have no recognised fathers. These are among the most vulnerable of all children to commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking both because of their mother's status, and because in some traditions the role is handed down through the generations. A risk of new dedications persists wherever beliefs surrounding the practice retain a powerful hold. *Jogins* in Mahbubnagar district report having prevented 'marriages' in the very recent past<sup>4</sup>, there are continuing reports of initiations of *Mathamma* in Chittoor, and of *Devadasi* in Karnataka<sup>5</sup>. In January 2007 the Kannada newspaper *Prajavani* reported police actions to stop secret *Devadasi* ceremonies in Raichur district and in Raibagh, Belgaum<sup>6</sup>.

Serious efforts to eradicate the practice began in both states in the late 1980s, with particular efforts in Belgaum given the known high proportion of *Devadasi* being recruited into the sex trade from there. Although officials tend to play down the continuing likelihood of such connections, trafficking of young girls into distant jobs linked to the sex trade, and the potential for HIV infection and other sexually-transmitted reproductive health risks, remain important concerns.

Thus advocacy on behalf of Devadasi and their children against perpetuation of the practice by corrupt or clandestine means, in favour of the delivery of services and programmes to victims and their children, and to reduce the discrimination they suffer, continues to be urgently needed. There is some sense that the high level of activity in the 1990s has dropped away, and that some reinvigoration of advocacy efforts on behalf of Devadasi would be timely.

## Why these practices amount to slavery

As in many other parts of the world, the common notion of slavery among officials and citizens encountered during the research project is that conjured by the transatlantic slave trade: the outright sale, purchase and ownership of human beings (chattel slavery). While this does not apply, becoming a Devadasi is to be subjected to a form of slavery identified in the United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956. Article 1 (d) prohibits: "... *any institution or practice whereby a child or a young person under the age of 18 is delivered by either or both of his natural parents or by his guardian to another person, whether for reward or not, with a view to the exploitation of the child or young person*".

Devadasis can be seen to suffer from a number of other gross violations of their human rights as laid down in other international treaties, including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. These are as follows:

- They are dedicated and initiated without their consent, by family members and village elders, and usually have no knowledge of what becoming a *Jogin*, *Matha* or *Devadasi* will involve;
- They are not 'free', in the sense that they become the servant of the deity and the common property of her devotees, and accordingly have no decision-making say over the nature and content of their lives or their means of livelihood;
- They are subject to gross exploitation, in the form of sexual servitude or non-consensual sex with one or many partners, often on demand;
- They are prohibited under the practice from marrying and leading a normal family life, nor can they enjoy the normal social standing of a wife and mother even if they do have a 'husband' or partner;
- They are denied protection from exploitation, discrimination, verbal abuse, and insulting behaviour whereby other

- rights may also be withheld (such as access to health care, education and proper remuneration);
- They are especially vulnerable to recruitment into commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking ; their children are similarly vulnerable because of their birth status;
- They are subject to discrimination from all parts of society, from which their 'holy' status in no way shields them;
- They are unable to escape or renounce the cultural status of *Jogini*, *Mathamma* or *Devadasi*; the status follows them through life;
- Some give up their name to be known merely as *Mathamma* or *Jogini*, a breach of their right to a name and personal identity.



Devadasi, now elderly and 'retired', make a living by 'begging for sacred alms' outside a temple at Saundatti.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Figures provided respectively by Velugu, a programme of the State Government of Andhra Pradesh; and the Women's Development Corporation of the State Government of Karnataka, via Sravanti and KIDS.

<sup>2</sup> Reported by Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya Society (APMSS) personnel at the Anti-Slavery International-Sravanti workshop, November 2006

<sup>3</sup> One estimate of India's *dalit* or scheduled caste population is 170 million. According to V.S. Manavade, Director of Vimochena Sangha, one-quarter of Scheduled caste members followed the Devadasi system or some variation of it. As recently as the early 1990s the practice was deeply ingrained in social beliefs and mores of a very large group, with around 45,000-50,000 Devadasi in Karnataka alone.

<sup>4</sup> Reported by the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya Society (APMSS) at the Anti-Slavery International-Sravanti Workshop, November 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Discussion with Sarpanch of Raibagh Gram Panchayat, November 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Information from KIDS, received in January/February 2007.

## Profiles of Jogini women, Mahbubnagar



### Pulimanni

Pulimanni is in her 40s, although she looks much older. She has managed to survive a life of terrible difficulty. 'Without my consent, at my innocent age, my grandfather made me become like this. My only brother was infirm in body and mind. My grandfather thought that this misfortune meant that the ancestors required that I be a *Jogini* - this was the way to change the family's fortunes and continue the family name. And since there was no fit male person in my generation, my parents needed a provider.'

She was 12 when she was initiated, when she reached puberty. Like so many other *Jogins*, she had no idea what was going to happen after her marriage to the Goddess. 'The first man who came to me was my mother's brother.' Even now, she trembles when she says his name. 'It was terrible. When I ran to my mother and asked her to shelter me she dismissed my tears and said "You have to accept this". He

gave me nothing, no money, nothing. After him, there were so many men, so many that I can't count or even remember. Since I had been given to the Goddess, there was nothing I could do. Even if I had a quarrel with someone or did not want anything to do with that person, I had to accept. There was no way to close the door. And nothing was given for my services, it was my duty.'

Like all women from landless families, life is an endless round of work. But without a husband, the work is redoubled. 'I have always had to work very hard. We *Jogins* have to do all the usual household work, feed and raise our children, but because we have no husband, we also have to do all the man's work as well. We are paid very little when we go to be coolies, and we suffer many insults. I have had to earn money to look after my parents, my sick brother, and my daughter - everyone.'

Despite what she has suffered, Pulimanni is a resourceful and strong-minded woman, with ambitions for her one child, a daughter. 'Above all, I did not want to make her a *Jogini*, so I went begging and making *pujas* (prayers) for many people, and managed to save up enough money to get her a dowry. I found her a husband, and now she has two daughters and she lives a happy family life. I see her occasionally, and she sometimes sends me a little money.'

Has there been any gain in being dedicated to the Goddess? 'Nothing good ever came to me from being a *Jogini*. My health was spoiled. My home was spoiled. My relationships were spoiled. My whole life was spoiled. But I never blamed my mother for what happened to me. She had no say in it. It was all the responsibility of my grandfather - it was his mistake.'

## Jogini song

“We are Indians. We are like dogs in the dustbins.  
No-one gives us a name. They make fun of us.  
We are told we are hopeless and useless.  
We have no father, a person who can take care of us.  
That man doesn't deserve to have children.  
But still we are Indians.  
I wish I had died at birth.  
For a son you sacrifice our lives.”



## Lakshmi

Lakshmi is 20 years old. Her mother made her a *Jogini* because she is old and has no-one to support her. The mother assigned her to a 'husband', but then he died. In desperate need of work, she went to Hyderabad as a 'coolie' to work in construction. During the time she was there, she became pregnant. Lakshmi can only envisage a continuing life of contract work, nine months away, and three months in the village where she is open to sexual harassment. After her baby is born, she will just have to take her with her. Lakshmi has not yet abandoned all belief in the system. 'If there is no-one to care for my daughter, when the time comes I will make her a *Jogini*.'



# Part I: Situation analysis

## History and meaning of the practice

The practice of Devadasi is often equated with 'temple prostitution', a feature of religious life in many ancient civilisations. The idea of dedicating girls as 'brides' of a god or sacred figure was taken forward into more powerful religions which replaced earlier belief systems, including Christianity. Traditions vary and overlap as to whether 'religious brides' had to be pure and chaste like nuns, or were obliged to provide sexual services to priests or devotees. This confusion of pure and impure, a unified embodiment of sacred and profane, pervades the practice of Devadasi. A saying in Marathi conveys the dual status: '*Devadasi devachi bayako, sarya gavachi*': 'Servant of god, but wife of the town'. However, it is important to note that neither in the past or present were Devadasi expected to make a living from trading in sex, and that they cannot therefore be described as prostitutes in the usual meaning of the term.

The Goddess of fertility, Yellamma, is at the heart of the ancient Dravidian cult with which the practice is identified. 'Marriages' of girls to Yellamma have been taking place for at least 2,000 years and probably much longer. The extraordinary survival of the custom has made it an object of folkloric and religious study, but its origins are obscured by accumulated mythology and successive layers of political, religious, economic and cultural influence. It seems likely that early farming peoples dependent on the fertility of the natural world developed a cult of the Mother Goddess, a super-deity among lesser gods (male and female) of crops, rivers, soil, and other natural forces. In order for her to remain fertile, active sexual congress was required. Drought or deterioration in the productivity of the land might be ascribed to her wrath. Therefore her propitiation was sought by dedicating pure young girls as priestesses devoted to her worship and care. At puberty, their sexuality must be sacrificed to maintain her fertility. This would be sustained by bringing male devotees together with the Goddess sexually through her handmaidens, thereby trying to procure her ongoing goodwill<sup>7</sup>.

The cult thus originates in a folk religion subsequently overtaken by Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism. However, such was the power of the iconic Mother Goddess that her worship throughout southern India never disappeared, even though many changes in religious practice, rituals and belief were absorbed. Most of these came from 'sanskritisation' during successive waves of Hindu conquest and the propagation of the pantheons associated with Vishnu and Shiva. The perpetuation of the Yellamma cult was reinforced by the losses and hardships - and the corresponding recourse to divine supplication - experienced by peoples overtaken by conflict, devastation, droughts and famines, and forced by conquerors and occupying armies into subject and servile roles. Male losses in wars may also have created a surplus of marriageable girls, who were allocated to temples in the same way as to nunneries in medieval Europe.

At the temple, the role of the Devadasi was to perform in rituals and celebrations, in particular weddings since the Goddess governed fertility. The attachment of female singers and dancers to temples was common all over Hindu India in the pre-Mughul period, and their brilliance at classical forms of entertainment was an important component of festivals, and in religious processions when temple deities were paraded in chariots through the streets. Local feudal lords (*zamindars*) also patronised the services of the Devadasi attached to the temples in their domains, for their own entertainments and to confer divine blessing on the hospitality they offered to their guests. However, since these performances were also a source of sensual titillation, this fused with the women's availability for sex. Some of these women and girls - also known during the Mughal and British periods as *nautch* - achieved high prestige at the courts of kings and nobles, who amply rewarded their favourite beauties, musicians and dancers - the female stars of those days. Similarities can be seen with the *Geisha* tradition in Japan.

Assimilation of the Yellamma cult into Hindu mythology brought changes in the practice of Devadasi. In Hindu pantheons, female deities

can only be wives of male gods, not their superiors. So a new mythology developed around Renuka, Yellamma's sanskritised form. Renuka is neither supreme nor a Goddess in spite of her magical powers. The lessening of Yellamma's sublime status meant that her priestesses also lost their ascendance to male priests and temple managers (*tanika*), to whom they became subject. The *tanika* insisted on dedications of Devadasi from devotees seeking Renuka's good will, as part of the temple dues on which they made their living. The Renuka myths include her sexual fall from grace, her husband's rage, her murder by her son, her return from death, and the subsequent penances of the two men. Altogether there are 61 major and minor centres dedicated to these and other figures in the Saundatti temple complex, showing the prolific nature of Yellamma-Renuka devotion. An important Renuka theme is the elevation of a non-caste woman to a high spiritual status despite her adulterous 'fall'. In the same way, a non-caste woman could be projected as blessed and elevated by concubinage to a noble or landowner.

However prolific the mythology surrounding the practice, its continuation is due less to its appropriation into mainstream Hinduism than to the long complicity of political systems, socio-economic realities and powerful commercial interests. It has suited a male-dominated society to perpetuate the initiation of girls from lower status groups into sexual service under cover of sacred duty. In earlier times, this allowed the great landowners to keep a special community of traditional singers, dancers, and artistes with compromised reputations at their disposal - a factor which has given the impression that these artistes constituted a sex worker caste. This is not, however, an accepted view.

Today, the inheritance of these prescribed roles among their descendents, or simply the continuation of belief in the need to propitiate gods and goddesses, suits the interests of those seeking recruits into the commercial sex trade - which is systematically organised on a considerable scale in Indian cities such as Mumbai and Pune. Agricultural depression and environmental pressures mean that hundreds of thousands of men go to the city as migrant workers on a temporary or permanent basis without their wives and families and therefore

constitute a ready consumer market for cheap commercial sex. Devadasi, given the antecedents of the practice, are natural recruits. In the rural areas, profound discrimination, lack of education, and strength of religious belief in the relevant localities has enabled upper-caste men to retain their use of a pool of specially designated *dalit* women for sexual enjoyment. The powerlessness of the victims, their families' poverty, prejudice against girls, and ongoing blind belief fostered by priests and temple managers that dedication confers spiritual favour, provide the context in which the practice has survived until the present day.

## Variations in the forms of Devadasi

Most versions of Devadasi share key common features. These consist of the dedication of the girl, usually at a very young age; her subsequent 'marriage' to the deity; her deflowering immediately after the ceremony or at puberty, usually by a caste elder or a man who has paid for the privilege; and her subsequent availability for sexual use until she becomes too old and unattractive. Most are 'married' between the age of eight and 12, and initiated by the age of 15; their sexual career is usually over by the age of 30. Devadasi also assume particular roles in rituals and festivities, including dancing and singing in folkloric or classical traditions. They are excluded from regular marriage (for all practical purposes, despite changes in the law), as they are known as *sumangali*, a word meaning 'already married'. Thus, although they have been through a form of marriage and wear insignia to show this, they are not accorded the status of respectable wives or mothers. Any girl who has been dedicated is vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking; that she is sexually available and free in her favours is socially assumed.

Complex variations in practices between localities are a product of different social, economic, religious and political influences at work in different settings over time. These have implications for the women's life experience, according to the importance attached to the three types of function: religious, entertainment, and sexual service. The forms discussed in this report are confined to those encountered in Mahabubnagar and Chittoor<sup>8</sup> (Andhra Pradesh),

and Belgaum (Karnataka); as already noted, further variations exist in other districts of these two states, as well as in pockets of Orissa, Goa, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. Even the patterns described here contain important variations in personal experience and in the degree to which the sacred nature of the role persists in the minds of the initiates. Some, especially older ones, continue to wear the special necklace which designates their 'married' status (noted in Andhra Pradesh); others have abandoned the necklace and other insignia, and may repress their status, for example by wearing the necklace of a married woman (noted in Belgaum); a few - those who are better educated, more socially advanced, and have been able to realise the advantage of recent legal provisions - may actually have managed to contract marriages in the recognised sense<sup>9</sup>.

**Devadasi:** The original role of *Devadasi* was to serve as temple handmaidens dedicated to Yellamma-Renuka, offering daily prayers and worship. Traditionally, *Devadasi* lived near or at the temple and performed in rituals and ceremonies. They were part of the complicated structure of temple commerce and management, whereby money and gifts - including their daughters - were extracted from devotees by priests and managers (*tanika*). Because the main temple of Yellamma is in Belgaum and thousands of young girls used to be dedicated there, many older *Devadasi* remain at Saundatti, begging for alms or living and working under the sway of the *tanika*, while young girls sell flowers and other offerings. Temple service was traditionally confined to pre-pubertal girls and post-menopausal women. During the sexually active period, they left the sacred centre to serve the Goddess by having sexual relations with 'her' men. From this grew the strong association between *Devadasi* in Belgaum and entry into the sex trade in nearby cities. However, a *Devadasi* is not like other prostitutes: she does not charge a fee for her service but receives 'gifts'<sup>10</sup>. When this part of her life is over, many return home, and attempt to settle with a partner. They are traditionally entitled to beg from five local families, but this custom has mostly been discarded.

**Jogini:** The practice of *Jogini* is less focused on a particular large temple and its commercial life, and less connected to the sex trade. The

religious trappings are more evident; the special insignia are often worn<sup>11</sup> and duties are required at festivals and weddings. The *Jogin's* 'wedding' (at the local temple or her parents' house) usually takes place after puberty. The stand-in 'husband', who is often a maternal uncle, then deflowers her. She may remain the concubine of this man, or he may drop her as and when he chooses. Where the 'husband' takes no responsibility for the 'bride', a *Jogin* continues to live at her parents' house. In some cases, the *Jogin* is given as a concubine or 'second wife' to a male relative on a semi-permanent basis and does not have to engage in sex with others. In other cases she becomes a common sexual property and is obliged to accept the advances of any man who wants her. *Jogins* in this predicament therefore amount to a pool of sexual 'slaves' freely available to all the men of the community. They may receive gifts, but are not entitled to payment. *Jogins* do not therefore obtain any financial reward from their status, although they are entitled to certain alms and some live by begging. A man does not normally accept paternity of any child a *Jogin* bears, even if she has been living exclusively with him.

**Mathamma:** In Chittoor and Nellore, the term used for a girl dedicated to the Mother Goddess is *Mathamma*. This is the name of a reincarnation of Renuka, who allegedly told the Madiga people that she would be re-born among them as their particular Goddess<sup>12</sup>. Madigas are one of the two main *dalit* groups in Andhra Pradesh; the other is Mala, who are less associated with the cult<sup>13</sup>. Madiga are leather-workers, and although much stigmatised in the Hindu system, have an ancient and prestigious history as a hunting people. Devotees of Mathamma hold elaborate festivals at their temples, over which their priests, the *Jambuka*, officiate and during which daughters are dedicated. Musical instruments and dancing are very important in the festivals, and *Mathas* play a prominent role. They are marked out by their showy dress and matted hair, and are expected to behave in a bold and seductive manner. Their dancing, often under the influence of stimulants such as alcohol, is frenzied and indicates possession by the Goddess; it is not dance in the classical tradition as with *Devadasi*. The first occasion on which a *Matha* dances publicly in this way is usually the night of her initiation, after which she is seen as sexually available. *Mathas* can expect to earn a

considerable sum of money during the festival period, and some become professional dancers.

## Prevalence of Devadasi

The available statistics (see tables below) indicate that there are up to 23,000 *Devadasi* in Belgaum, and up to 17,000 *Jogini* in Andhra Pradesh. In both these cases, the figures come from the districts in which the practice is well-known to occur, but there may be some victims in other areas as well, and in some other states (Maharashtra, Orissa, and Tamil Nadu). Since the practice has been outlawed, it is difficult to collect accurate contemporary figures, particularly in districts such as Belgaum where the police have been active in stopping ceremonies from taking place. Reports of dedications have significantly reduced, leading many officials to regard the practice as defunct. There may be pockets where this is the case: the NGO Vimochena Sangha, which operates in Athani *teluka* (block) of Belgaum, claims to have reduced the practice there by 95 per cent<sup>14</sup>. But reports of clandestine dedications, in both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, indicate that it continues. This is also borne out by the verbal testimony of *Joginis*, *Mathas* and *Devadasis* during the surveys and workshops.

## Devadasi in Karnataka

The figures in table 1, which are the latest available, were provided by the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation. They are

**table 1: Nos of Devadasi - Karnataka**

|    | District     | No.          |
|----|--------------|--------------|
| 1  | Koppal       | 4886         |
| 2  | Bagalokot    | 4804         |
| 3  | Belgaum      | 3600         |
| 4  | Raichur      | 2494         |
| 5  | Bijapur      | 1964         |
| 6  | Bellary      | 1635         |
| 7  | Gadag        | 1471         |
| 8  | Gulbarga     | 991          |
| 9  | Haveri       | 617          |
| 10 | Dharwad      | 481          |
|    | <b>total</b> | <b>22943</b> |

from the districts where the practice is known to be most common (there are 26 districts in Karnataka altogether). Interestingly, two districts have higher figures than Belgaum; but the presence of Saundatti in Belgaum and the association with the commercial sex trade has attracted more attention to *Devadasi* in that district.

## Jogini in Andhra Pradesh

The figures in table 2 were taken from a document published by *Velugu*, a programme of the state government of Andhra Pradesh run by the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, for the 14 (out of 22) districts in the state where the practice is known to occur; the list is not exhaustive as *Mathas* are also encountered in coastal districts not included here<sup>15</sup>.

**table 2: Nos of Jogini - Andhra Pradesh**

|    | District     | No.          |
|----|--------------|--------------|
| 1  | Srikakulam   | 140          |
| 2  | Nellore      | 220          |
| 3  | Kurnool      | 790          |
| 4  | Anantapur    | 556          |
| 5  | Chittoor     | 332          |
| 6  | Adhilabad    | 324          |
| 7  | Nizamabad    | 1256         |
| 8  | Karimnagar   | 9313         |
| 9  | Warangal     | 1551         |
| 10 | Mahbubnagar  | 1428         |
| 11 | Medak        | 384          |
| 12 | Nalgonda     | 68           |
| 13 | Rangareddi   | 50           |
| 14 | Hyderabad    | 387          |
|    | <b>total</b> | <b>16799</b> |

Both *Joginis* themselves and officers of the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya Society (APMSS, a women's organisation constituted by the state government) in Mahbubnagar consider that the practice is still alive, despite strenuous efforts to eliminate it. APMSS are only active in a certain number of *mandals* (blocks) of the district, and this means that they have only managed to reach the *Joginis* in these areas, representing around 50 per cent of the total.

## Profiles of Jogini women, Mahbubnagar



### Nagamma

Nagamma is a striking, well-dressed woman of 30, who has managed to rise above extremely difficult circumstances. She comes from a small village called Madwur in Mahbubnagar district. Her family were very poor landless agricultural labourers. She had four sisters and one brother, and her father was a drunkard. There was no money and her mother had to work in the fields in order to feed the family. 'We never had more than one meal a day, and sometimes only half a meal. My brother was very small and sickly - he was the youngest in the family.'

Nagamma went to school until the fifth grade, but at the age of nine she was taken away. 'I was withdrawn to go with my mother on contract work to Mumbai. The contractor came around every year and signed on a group of workers for the season. We were in a group of around 100, and we were paid Rs. 12 a day for digging canals. We were also given food which we cooked for ourselves. We were away for 9 months, and then returned. But when we were paid, my father took most of the money and spent it on drink.' For three

years in succession, Nagamma went on these contracts with her mother.

When Nagamma was 10 years old, her oldest sister was married. 'Another of my sisters died and our family was in distress. So my parents had the idea that that they should convert me into a *Jogini* since I was an eligible age. They decided to do this quickly before someone came to ask for me in marriage - at that time, it was common to be married at nine or ten whether you were physically mature or not.' A man close to the family expressed interest in her, and so her parents accepted his proposal that she be made a *Jogini* at his expense.

By the age of 12, she was mature. For six months she had an intimate relationship with her 'master', and she became pregnant. But he was already married. 'When my daughter was born, she had a serious illness. Her lungs were very weak and she contracted diphtheria.' It turned out later that the father had had several extra-marital affairs and Nagamma believes that the cause of her baby's illness was his own infection with sexually transmitted diseases. 'I sent word that the new-born was very poorly, and begged him to provide the money for proper treatment. He blindly rejected his daughter and disowned his paternity - he said I had slept with some other person. After a month and a half, the child died.'

This was only the first of many tragic events. Four family deaths - her mother, father, brother and a sister - took place in quick succession. 'I was very upset in my mind, and I did not want any further

(continued over)

## Nagamma

contact with men. So I remained alone with my younger sister: we two live together and neither of us is married. We always work together in the fields, we look after each other.'

One piece of good fortune is Nagamma's kindly aunt. Her mother's sister is an educated and cultured woman. She has money, and has given Nagamma and her sister saris and provided other kinds of help. Her aunt's example also encouraged Nagamma to improve her education: she has now graduated from Grade 10 with help from the APMSS programme. She has become confident and articulate, and now has excellent leadership qualities.

Nagamma is very active in the *Mahila Sangham* (APMSS movement), helping to form and foster self-help groups. 'It is very difficult to get the women involved to begin with. They are not used to meetings, sitting together and talking. They are very shy, and don't want to say that they are *Jogini*. It takes a long time to get to the point when they will talk about that part of their lives - they will only speak of other things. Until they are helped to think about it, they don't see what they have lost by being a *Jogin* - they lack self-awareness and esteem.'

In Nagamma's view, the main idea that needs to be dispelled to stop the practice is that the only way parents can keep a daughter whose help they need is by marrying her to the Goddess. 'They must learn to see that she can marry in the regular way and stay nearby, and then she can help her family - marriage does not mean that she has to be permanently lost.'

Although she agrees that the system of *Jogini* is declining, Nagamma thinks it is far from dead. She points out a young girl taking part in the workshop who was only recently saved from initiation. 'The legislation is there, but it is not enforced properly. Although NGOs and *sanghas* are pushing, the system still goes on in secret. Our law-makers are law-breakers. Some of those involved in policy-making are happy for *Jogini* to continue - it provides a service they enjoy. In spite of our awareness campaigns, there are still many remote places where we haven't properly reached. I am very sure that without our programmes and proper implementation of the law, things would definitely go on as before.'



## Yashoda

Yashoda is 30 years old. 'There are two types of *Jogini*. In one case, the woman becomes public property. In the other, which was the case for me, she remains single.' Yashoda was taken on as a second 'wife' and had two children, now aged six and four years old. But the man's wife reclaimed him, and now he never comes near her. 'When my children ask about their father, I say that he is dead.'

Yashoda has two sisters and a brother, but none of them give her any help. She never went to school and cannot read or write. She goes to work in the fields as a 'coolie' - she has chosen not to go for migration. She can only manage to earn Rs.20 a day, and whenever she goes for fieldwork she is abused.

'The *Jogini* system is very bad and no-one should have to enter into it. This laborious poorly paid work is a dreadful way to live. How can you feed your children properly on 20 Rupees?' But Yashoda has not tried to be active against it, unlike some of the others. She believes it is the family's business if they make a daughter a *Jogin* so she does not like to interfere.

*Jogins* active in APMSS *sanghas* (women's groups) also believe that there are many in remoter areas yet to be reached<sup>16</sup>.

While *Jogini* wedding ceremonies rarely take place today in the *mandals* in which they have been working, APMSS officers find that the custom of allocating a daughter to a maternal uncle or other relative as a 'second' or unmarried wife is still continuing. Although this is exploitative of the girl, damages her life, leaves her with no security and means that her children are regarded as illegitimate, this is not as demeaning as making her the sexual property of an entire village. It can be seen as stemming rather from economic motives - retention of the girl to work for the parents, no obligation to find her a proper husband and provide her with a dowry - than from religious beliefs (see below).

Even if numbers of dedications are declining, the idea that the traditional practice has therefore been wiped out overlooks the fact that many women who were dedicated in the past still exist, and that abolition in law of *Jogini* or *Devadasi* practices does not bring the difficulties in their lives to an end. As far as clandestine activity is concerned, it is difficult to distinguish between cases where girls have been initiated as traditional *jogins*, *mathas*, or *devadasi* in their communities and those where the practice is a precursor to jobs such as bar dancing in Mumbai or other gateways to the sex trade. APMSS was not aware of any trafficking in Mahbubnagar, but in Belgaum, it is widely believed that trafficking by temple managers, brothel owners, pimps and others complicit in the sex industry, including older *Devadasi*, takes place. In such contexts, recruiters may pay the costs of the 'marriage' ceremony.

According to a 2001 study into the development of a Devadasi self-help movement in Belgaum, 30 per cent were thought to have migrated to the red-light districts of Mumbai and other cities<sup>17</sup>. There is no doubt that in Karnataka, the motivation to dedicate a girl is driven by poverty, and is largely to do with the desire of parents, neighbours and commercial sex industry agents to derive income from a young girl's sexual saleability. Many parents will not be able to envisage the violence, pain and indignity their daughter may confront.

The KIDS survey data from Karnataka indicated a decline in dedications and initiations. Of the 430 women surveyed in 37 villages of Belgaum, only 27 per cent (118) were in the sexually active age groups (18-24 and 25-30), with only 6 per cent (25) in the younger group. This implies a marked reduction in initiations in recent years; but since the sample excluded those currently working in Mumbai and other cities, it may not be representative.

## Reasons advanced for dedications and initiations

The surveys shed different kinds of light on contemporary reasons (other than sex industry dynamics) for continuing to dedicate girls as *jogins*, *mathas* and *devadasi*. The first type of reasons are those connected to the underlying belief system associated with the Mother Goddess cult. These reasons include belief in the Goddess, belief in her presence in the community, and of her powers in the lives of her followers. In Karnataka, the highest proportion of respondees to the survey conducted by KIDS were born into families where dedication was the custom (31 per cent), or undertook dedication of a daughter for a religious reason such as devotion to the Goddess or fear of her disfavour (50 per cent). A further 16 per cent of girls were dedicated as a result of a family problem, for which dedication of a daughter was advised as an antidote (known as *harke hutt*). Alongside religious reasons, social and economic reasons were cited but religion plays a significant role (see below).

The second type of reason consists of the precipitating reasons for dedication. These types were examined more closely in Mahbubnagar and Chittoor than in Belgaum. They comprise two types of reason: either there exists some condition in the child, such as the presence of illness or disability, which was seen as denoting that the Goddess has singled out the child and needs to be propitiated, perhaps to gain the child's recovery; or there is a shortage of sons in the family, which means that the family lineage will end. If a girl is dedicated to the Goddess, any children she bears - including sons - will carry the name of her birth family. In addition, the dedicated daughter fulfils the role of a son in helping to provide for the family. When she goes

out to work, in the fields or in construction (sex work is not mentioned in this connection), she will bring income into the natal family rather than to a husband's family. She is also permitted to perform the rituals required at the parents' funerals normally undertaken by the eldest son. In some extremely poor families, the practice lingers as a means of disposing of a daughter in the cheapest possible way, especially where the 'husband' gives some payment to the parent(s) for sexual rights to his 'extra wife'.

### Precipitating reasons: Andhra Pradesh

Dedication normally takes place at a very young age, and from this point onwards and without her knowledge, the girl's course in life is pre-ordained. The following precipitating reasons in table three were given for the parents' decision, in a sample of 100 *jogins* and *mathas* from Mahbubnagar and Chittoor:

**table 3: Reasons for dedication - Andhra Pradesh**

|    | <b>Reasons</b>                  | <b>No.</b> |
|----|---------------------------------|------------|
| 1  | Cold, Cough and fever           | 56         |
| 2  | Fits                            | 46         |
| 3  | Failed to open eyes             | 30         |
| 4  | Dehydration                     | 24         |
| 5  | Small pox and chicken pox       | 22         |
| 6  | No male offspring for parents   | 20         |
| 7  | Not able to suck the milk       | 19         |
| 8  | Wounds                          | 13         |
| 9  | Polio                           | 7          |
| 10 | Illness of family members       | 7          |
| 11 | Physically handicapped          | 12         |
| 12 | Complications during childbirth | 4          |
| 13 | Deaf and dumb                   | 3          |
| 14 | Accident                        | 3          |
| 15 | Jaundice                        | 2          |
| 16 | Abdominal pain                  | 2          |

Source: Savanti report to Anti-Slavery international December 2006

In Karnataka, heredity and custom were more often cited, but in Andhra Pradesh the chief religious motivation was belief in the Goddess' displeasure shown by her mark upon the child. This can take the form of matted hair, or of the kind of hair discolouration (lightened) associated with protein-calorie malnutrition; medical conditions were more commonly cited. In some

cases, a sick child had been taken to the temple and survival left in divine hands; recovery led to dedication. The other main precipitating factor (20 per cent of cases in Andhra Pradesh) was lack of a son in the family (this was also a well-known cause in Karnataka but not cited in the survey). The implication of these findings is that, in the majority of cases in Andhra Pradesh, better health information and active involvement of maternal and child health (MCH) staff with pregnant women and mothers in vulnerable communities would act as an important disincentive. The idea that birth defects and illness in the child or in the family are due to supernatural forces and require divine propitiation needs urgently to be displaced.

Although poverty was not cited as a precipitating reason for dedication, the socio-economic status of most of those who have grown up as *Mathas* or *Jogins* is clearly very low. The difficulties of finding a dowry for a girl, and the idea that the natal family will no longer have to support her if she is made a *Jogin*, should thus also be seen as precipitating factors. Since lack of education is a characteristic of poverty, illiteracy is also a precipitating feature since among the unlettered, superstition and community sanction continue to play a powerful role in family decision-making. The associations with extremely low socio-economic status were particularly marked at the Mahbubnagar workshop on the basis of dress and physical condition. Many older *Jogins* were very under-weight, and the condition of small children accompanying their mothers was distressing. Few seemed to be growing normally, either physically or mentally.

### Precipitating reasons: Belgaum

In Karnataka, the immediate circumstances of their dedication were not cited by respondents to the research questionnaire. Rather they gave a range of religious reasons which indicate the comprehensive nature of Yellamma-Renuka devotion in local belief systems, and the many different ways that the Goddess is assumed to hold power in their lives. In a considerable number of cases, dedication appears to occur automatically: being Devadasi is regarded as hereditary.

Attempts were specifically made to look at social and economic as well as religious reasons in the Belgaum survey (see table 4 on next page).



**table 4: Reasons for dedication - Karnataka**

| Religious   | no.        |
|---|------------|
| <i>Harke Hutte</i> (to solve a family problem)                      | 69         |
| <i>Bhakti</i> (fear of the Goddess, compelling need for protection) | 108        |
| Family system (hereditary role)                                     | 133        |
| Belief (faith, strong feelings of devotion)                         | 110        |
| No answer   | 10         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>430</b> |

| Social          | no.        | Economic             | no.        |
|-----------------|------------|----------------------|------------|
| Social pressure | 177        | Poverty              | 100        |
| Wrong advice    | 9          | To have an income    | 124        |
| Other           | 14         | To work in a brothel | 0          |
| No answer       | 230        | No answer            | 206        |
| <b>total</b>    | <b>430</b> | <b>total</b>         | <b>430</b> |

## Characteristics of life as a Devadasi

The factors that lead to a girl being dedicated - from family misfortune or lack of means, to membership of a discriminated social group or caste and being female in a society that only values males - are universal in the societies in question and mean that most girls will lead impoverished and difficult lives. *Dalit* girls tend to receive little or no schooling, start work as unskilled labour at a very young age, and are forced into marriage soon after puberty, well below the legal age of 18. Becoming Devadasi both reinforces existing disadvantages of female powerlessness and poverty and adds severely to them.

## Inability to marry in a regular way

However, abusive the practice of early and forced marriage, the worst additional disadvantage for a Devadasi compared to her non-Devadasi sister is that she is prevented from regular marriage. In Indian society, especially at its lower levels, remaining unmarried is not possible for a respectable woman. According to strongly held social norms, a woman needs a husband for family membership and protection; to provide a

home and economic support; to be able to bear children, especially sons, that carry the father's name and are legitimate; and as a means of social acceptance. Being forced to become sexually active and remain unmarried is a life-time's sentence to deep social inferiority. A woman who has been sexually used by a man who is not her husband has been debased; thus it is almost impossible for a *Devadasi*, *Jogin* or *Matha* to transcend having been the sexual property of a man to whom she was not married (irrespective of whether the man was single or married or whether the relationship was monogamous). If she has had a series of relationships or been the simultaneous sexual property of a larger circle, the stigma is worse and her socio-economic status is likely to be worse also.

Legislation to allow lawful marriage by Devadasi has not much eased this situation. In Karnataka, a 1986 amendment to the prohibition of Devadasi Act (1984) offered Rs. 3,000 (£37.50) to any such couple. The marriages usually failed. The grant acted as an incentive to pimps and other unscrupulous husband candidates to marry women merely to claim the allowance. Since by her formal marriage a Devadasi forfeited her right of access to special benefits such as specific housing grants or pensions, she became worse off than before.

The NGO Vimochena Sangha in Athani, Belgaum therefore stopped encouraging such marriages<sup>18</sup>. Instead efforts were made to persuade families to marry their daughters rather than dedicating them. Even in these cases, some girls were abused and the marriages used by the in-law family to traffick girls into the sex trade. Therefore such marriages were postponed until girls had matriculated from school (Grade 10) or reached the age of 18, and undergone special life-skills and family life educational programmes to prepare them for married life. This finally seemed to break the cycle whereby daughters in Athani followed the same descent into the sex trade as their Devadasi mothers. The experience illustrates how many things have to happen to effect real change in social status and expectations.

## Partnerships and sexual relations

Although she may have no formal and binding union with a partner, in practice many Devadasis become the temporary or permanent concubine of a particular man or master (Malik). This may be the man who deflowered her, who may have been attracted to her and have paid a considerable sum to become her 'protector' although he is already married. In some cases, partnership with a Devadasi is a man's response to a miserable formal marriage. Many Devadasi have a series of male partners who leave them at will; even if the last such man has long since left they may still regard and describe him as their partner or

**table 5: Sexual relationships**

| Pattern of sexual relations among Jogins and Mathas in Andhra Pradesh  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1. Children below 15 years*  | 24  |
| <b>Sexual relations above 15 years:</b>  |     |
| 2. Without sexual relations  | 17  |
| 3. Relations with a single person  | 14  |
| 4. Relations with 2 persons  | 14  |
| 5. Multiple relations  | 22  |
| 6. Professional sex workers  | 09  |
| Source: Sravanti Report for Anti-Slavery International, December 2006<br>* Dedicated but not sexually initiated. |     |
| Pattern of sexual relations among Devadasi in Belgaum  |     |
| 1. Devadasi having had a single partner  | 46  |
| 2. Devadasi having had 1-3 partners  | 209 |
| 3. Devadasi having had 4 partners or more  | 175 |
| <b>Total: 430</b>  |     |
| Marital status   |     |
| 1. Devadasi who described themselves as 'unmarried'  | 285 |
| 2. Devadasi who described themselves as having a partner   | 125 |
| 3. Devadasi who described themselves as married or divorced  | 0   |
| 4. Devadasi who gave no description of their marital status  | 20  |
| <b>Total: 430</b>  |     |
| Source: KIDS Report for Anti-Slavery International, December 2006  |     |

'husband'. No such man regards himself as under any formal obligation to such a 'wife', nor to provide for children of his she may bear. Whether a woman is able to obtain and hold such a partner, and what she may manage to extract from him in the way of support, depends on luck and personal attributes.

Although the usual concept of Devadasi is that the perpetuation of the practice derives from demand by landowners and men of wealth and higher castes to maintain their access to a pool of sexual 'slaves', the reality in Andhra Pradesh is that the principal users of *Jogins* and *Mathas* are not higher castes, but men of their own or other scheduled castes. Table 6 below gives survey responses from Mahbubnagar and Chittoor as to customers.

**table 6: Caste of male 'partners' - Andhra Pradesh**

|   |              |    |
|---|--------------|----|
| 1   | Mala SC      | 47 |
| 2   | Madiga SC    | 45 |
| 3   | Reddy OC     | 05 |
| 4   | Washermen BC | 02 |
| 5   | Balija BC    | 03 |
| 6   | Yadava BC    | 02 |
| 7   | Raju OC      | 01 |
| 8   | Tribal ST    | 01 |
| 9   | Kamma OC     | 02 |
| 10  | Modaliar OC  | 01 |
| 11  | Vaddi SC     | 01 |
| SC = Scheduled caste; ST = Scheduled tribe;<br>OC = Other caste; BC = Backward caste.   |              |    |
| Scheduled castes are people in the lowest social categories, known in the past as 'untouchable', and outside the formal caste system (outcaste); today they are known as <i>Dalit</i> . Scheduled tribes are similarly outside the caste system; they are indigenous Dravidian people, known also as <i>adivasi</i> . Backward castes are within the caste system but are very low on the ladder; 'other castes' are higher castes. |              |    |

## Place of abode

Since the *Devadasi* or *Jogin* does not have a proper husband and does not join an in-law family, this has the additional disadvantage of depriving her of a home or secure place to live for the rest of her life. She either lives in a room provided by her (temporary) male protector, or she remains at her parents' home. Whatever may have been the case in times gone by, today *Devadasi* do not live at the village temple. The exception may be the large temple complex at

Saundatti, where among the regular residential population older *Devadasi* are much in evidence.

Among *Jogins* and *Mathas* surveyed in Mahbubnagar, 45 per cent lived with their mothers; around 50 per cent lived with a partner, and only five per cent lived independently. The inability to marry means therefore that their housing situation is very insecure. Housing of *Jogins* and *Mathas* in Andhra Pradesh was mostly of a very simple (mud and thatch) variety, and typically lacked facilities such as water taps inside their compounds or close to their homes.

Housing is therefore an important issue for *Devadasis* and *Jogins*. A number of rehabilitation programmes have provided housing, but the demand, especially among those whose parents are no longer alive and who have few means of support, is far higher than the amount available. Among those surveyed in Belgaum, an area of relatively high programmatic input, 62 per cent had been provided with housing assistance.

Where housing is provided, ownership may also be an issue, if the title deed - *patta* - somehow ends up in the hands of the current male partner, some assertive male relative or false 'protector' (it is rare for women of this social class to hold *patta*). In addition, housing needs maintenance and after a certain period, begins to deteriorate if the owner cannot afford to keep it under repair. Another problem is that, where a special housing colony has been constructed (as has happened in Andhra Pradesh), it may be seen as a 'sex colony'. The inhabitants may suffer from harassment, abuse and exploitation which is very difficult to oppose, especially where police and officials are complicit.

## Means of livelihood

As has already been underlined, becoming a *Devadasi* does not mean taking on the occupation of sex work as a means of livelihood, although over time it has become more common for *Devadasi* to be pushed into or resort to this. The practice itself is outside any modern economic system. In the past, the religious service implicit in the role meant that *Devadasi*, *Jogins* and all those married to the deity would receive gifts-in-kind at festivals, and be given food and other items such as clothes when local

families summoned them to give blessings or participate in religious ceremonies (*puja*) at their houses. This rarely happens today; or else it provides so little income that no *Devadasi* or *Jogin* can live off it.

Today, most *Devadasi*, including those not yet initiated, are obliged to work to earn money. Since they belong to scheduled castes and tribes (*dalit* and *adivasi* groups) and have little or no education (only 24 per cent of *Devadasis* in Belgaum had received any formal education), opportunities are extremely limited. This is why, in Belgaum, many *Devadasi* have been absorbed into the sex trade in local cities at least for some period. However, Belgaum has improved agriculturally in recent years due to dam construction and increased irrigation. This has provided more work opportunities on the land and raised rural income levels generally. Views differ as to whether this has helped lift *dalit* girls and women out of exploitative situations. This is because the new availability of wealth and its distribution has also affected consumption patterns, increasing local demand for alcohol, drugs and sexual services.

Most *Devadasi* in both locations describe themselves as 'coolies': unskilled workers in agriculture or construction. They are paid at the lowest rates (Rs. 20 or 25p a day is typical). Mahbubnagar is one of the poorest districts in Andhra Pradesh, suffering from drought and serious poverty. It is common, therefore, for girls and women from Mahbubnagar to enter into seasonal contracts and be taken as construction labour to cities such as Mumbai, Visakhapatnam or Hyderabad for nine months in the year. Around 80 per cent of survey respondees had done this one or more times. Girls dedicated as *Jogins* may go, although it appeared that functioning *Jogins* (initiated and sexually active) tended to stay back in the communities. Although there were reports of girls including *Jogins* returning pregnant from Mumbai, this was because they had been exposed to sexual contact while living in residential work camps, also therefore to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. They had not gone to the city for the purpose of sex work but because they had to earn a living somehow.

The survey in Belgaum, by contrast, showed out-migration for sex work as well as other purposes.

**table 7: Means of livelihood**

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Salaried Job</b>            | 01  |
| <b>Day labour (coolie)</b>     | 415 |
| <b>Agriculture (landowner)</b> | 03  |
| <b>Business</b>                | 11  |
| <b>Total</b>                   | 430 |

Of those in the age-group 18-40, 65 per cent had gone at some stage in their lives to Mumbai or Goa to profit from economic opportunities. Within this group of 280, 48 (17 per cent) said they had sought work as traders in cloth or vegetables; the rest had entered the sex industry.

Table 7 above shows the current methods of income-earning for the *Devadasi* studied in Belgaum. Some of these women may have been in the city and worked in the sex industry at some time; but currently they are living at their homes in villages and small towns, and if they continue to engage in sexual activity in the expectation of some remuneration, they do not usually acknowledge this. Considering that programmes for income-generation, credit and loans, and provision of cows or buffaloes and goats have been present in Belgaum for some years, the numbers of *Devadasi* still entirely dependent on day labour are discouraging.

The one salaried job was that of *anganwadi* (pre-school centre) worker. Such a job is extremely low paid - the worker is given a very small stipend and the employment is not formal. One or two of the Gokak workshop participants were also employed as outreach volunteers for the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (in MASS, see below). Their stipend was also extremely low, not enough to live on (Rs. 600 a month or £7).

Virtually all the *Joginis* at the workshop in Mahbubnagar, where the women were on average considerably poorer than in Belgaum, were 'coolies'. They reported that although the daily wage they received was the same as the daily wage of others, they were often discriminated against by being assigned the worst tasks, expected to work for longer hours, or suffering verbal abuse and insulting behaviour.

Farmers whose fields they worked might demand sexual services from them. Perspectives of this kind were not explored with the *Devadasi* at the Gokak workshop since they did not wish to engage in any issues of sexual exploitation related to their status.

## Problems of middle and old age

The livelihood problems faced by *Devadasi* or *Jogini* women are extremely difficult once they bear children and have no other provider to help feed and clothe their families. But they become even more acute when they reach old age - which happens prematurely, usually in their 40s - and become too infirm for heavy work on a daily basis in fields and construction sites<sup>19</sup>. Their status entitles them to seek alms, but as already noted few receive more than the barest pittance in this way.

Awareness of the economic plight of these women has prompted the introduction of special government and NGO schemes. These have been particularly pursued in Belgaum because of its well-known association with the practice. In 1991, the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (KSWDC) was entrusted with the rehabilitation of *Devadasi* via the extension of grants and other economic measures. When take-up was negligible, KSWDC brought in Myrada, an NGO from Bangalore known for its work with the rural poor, to undertake a major organisational effort to build a self-help movement of *Devadasi* women's groups; external funds were provided by a Dutch NGO, NOVIB.

In 1997, Myrada embarked on the development of MASS (Mahila Abhivruddhi Mathu Samrakshana Samasthe), an organisation which has succeeded in reaching and building self-awareness among a considerable proportion of *Devadasis* in Belgaum. Self-help groups have been developed and linked to loan-making bodies. Some *Devadasis* with leadership skills have been elected to *gram panchayats* (local councils). The NGO Vimochana Sangha has similarly provided loans, cows, and organised self-help groups or *sanghas*. But among the *Devadasis* studied in Belgaum, in spite of their membership of groups, 75 per cent are struggling because they earn so little and have

**table 8: Key problems identified by Devadasi**

|          | Young Age 18 to 25 |     | Middle Age 26 to 40 |     | Old Age 41 to 68 |     | Total |      |
|----------|--------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|------------------|-----|-------|------|
| Economic | 220                | 52% | 164                 | 38% | 46               | 10% | 430   | 100% |
| Social   | 150                | 35% | 129                 | 30% | 151              | 35% | 430   | 100% |
| Health   | 86                 | 20% | 128                 | 32% | 216              | 48% | 430   | 100% |

so few working opportunities. Only 25 per cent reported having a reasonable standard of living. Many of those at the workshop believed that developing small business opportunities is the only way to redress their poverty given the inadequacies of government schemes. In Andhra Pradesh, the APMSS (Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya Society) undertakes similar organisational and self-help groups efforts to address livelihood and related issues (see Part II for more information).

Income and livelihood support are important issues for all *Devadasi* and *Jogini*, although in Belgaum social and health problems became even more pressing as they grew older, (see table 8 above).

In both workshops there was a strong sense of disillusionment concerning programme benefits and services and the inadequacy and unfairness of their distribution. In Mahbubnagar, participants identifying those who they could enlist to improve their situation - government agencies and local councils (known as *panchayati raj* institutions or PRIs) - stated that they were suspicious of all of them since they tended to ask for money in return for assistance. Better two-way communication between women's *sanghas* and local officials seems essential.

In Belgaum, participants similarly reported that they had repeatedly put their problems to local community leaders and councillors to little effect. Something is severely lacking if membership of a *sangha* does not lead to the kind of personal and group empowerment that enables them to get a proper hearing from the authorities, nor strengthen their ability to access state benefits and programmes established on their behalf. One participant at the Gokak workshop complained bitterly: 'We are always being told to stand on our own feet

and help ourselves, but no one tells us how.'

### Income from festival dancing

*Mathammas* face similar livelihood problems with the caveat that they do have one major earning opportunity not available on the same scale to the other groups. Madiga communities in Chitoor normally hold a major annual festival to worship the Goddess Mathamma, some time between April and June. The Madiga caste leader of the village establishes the budget and seeks contributions from local families according to their means. Depending on resources, the festival runs for five or nine days, and different rituals are performed. The ceremonies in which *Mathammas* play important roles include *Agni Gundam* (walking on fire), and *Bali* (sacrifice and offering of an animal).

For a five-day festival, expenditure is around Rs.8,000-10,000 (£100-125); for nine days, Rs.10,000-15,000 (£125-190)<sup>20</sup>. These resources are mostly used to pay the various personnel: people who draw the *rangoli* (holy designs), musicians, drummers, story-tellers cum priests (*Jambukas*), and dancers (*Mathas*). During the festival, notably after the *Agni Gundam* celebration when *Mathas* parade the idol of the Goddess through the village, young girl children are offered to the Goddess. 'Marriage' ceremonies for older girls also take place at the festival, after which they are called only 'Mathamma' and lose their birth name. The ceremonies can be elaborate and costly (around Rs. 6,000, some of which is provided by the community), and include a procession, rituals, donning of insignia such as a special necklace, and a stand-in bridegroom (often the head of the shepherd caste, the highest Madiga group, who then has first sexual rights). Once initiated, *Mathas* dance in the ceremonies and receive around Rs.2000 (£25) per performance. The

dancing is closely associated with their sexual availability.

Experienced *Mathammas* can make as much as Rs. 20,000 per festival. If their dancing impresses the audience, they receive gifts, and admirers may also pin money to their clothes during their performance. Some become members of dance troupes attached to particular musicians and travel from festival to festival. The money earned provides an income which can be used to support the *Matha* for the rest of the year. Thus, although she is exposed to licentious male behaviour and ribaldry, and subject to gross sexual exploitation, at least for her dancing the *Matha* earns a reasonable sum. Sravanti reported that around 100 *Mathas* in Chittoor are operating as professional dancers. However, it should be noted that some campaigners want to stop the kind of dancing at festivals in which *Mathas* engage because it is so intimately associated with their sexual exploitation.

## Impacts of becoming Devadasi on girls and women

### Impacts on health

In Andhra Pradesh, information on the health of *Jogins* and *Mathas* was collected during the survey by visiting the nearest Primary Health Care Centres. The major reported health problems experienced were alcoholism (87 per cent), sexually-transmitted diseases (40 per cent), body pains (25 per cent), and menstrual bleeding disorders (35 per cent). Only two or three cases of HIV infection were reported during the survey in both districts, and these were among young women who had gone to Mumbai on contracts as migratory construction workers, not as sex workers.

Other physical problems included lack of appetite, hearing problems, anaemia, and white vaginal discharge. Spontaneous abortion was reported to be common and few knew anything of family planning or contraception. In responding to questions at the Mahbubnagar workshop about the number of children they had borne, it was noticeable that very few had more than one or two living children when their lifestyle would have naturally produced many

more. Poor reproductive health is almost certainly responsible for this low safe childbearing rate.

The health situation of *Devadasi* in Belgaum appeared to be better than that of *Jogins* and *Mathas* in Andhra Pradesh, even though only 20 per cent of respondees to the survey questionnaire stated that they looked after their health, with 65 per cent saying that they did not bother. However, the impact of HIV/AIDS appeared to be higher in Karnataka than in Andhra Pradesh; the survey team observed ten deaths from AIDS among *Devadasi* in Raibagh *taluka* during their work, but due to stigma statistics concerning such deaths are not published<sup>21</sup>.

The state of nutrition, physical condition, and dress of the Gokak workshop participants was better than at Mahbubnagar, and the average number of children they had borne was higher, three or more being relatively common. They also appeared to have better knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. In response to survey questions, their health and that of their children was reported as shown in table 9:

**table 9: Health issues**

| Own health |      | Health of children |      | Knowledge about STD HIV/AIDS |    |
|------------|------|--------------------|------|------------------------------|----|
| Healthy    | Weak | Healthy            | Weak | Yes                          | No |
| 396        | 34   | 298                | 132  | 342                          | 88 |

In Andhra Pradesh, their mental health was also poor. Nervous disorders and insomnia are common, and there were clear signs among many older women at the Mahbubnagar workshop of having suffered serious psychological or emotional trauma over a long period. They report that they frequently suffer from illusions and have hallucinations that spirits are haunting them.

However, their views about these spirit possessions appear ambivalent. In a mapping and painting exercise with older women at the

Mahbubnagar workshop, the first item that they drew around the village perimeter was the imagined footprints of the deity. Their sense of the Goddess in their lives remains strong, and may represent a mental anchor. Visitation by spirits happens especially on festive occasions and at times when the performance of rituals or other happenings evoke memories of their initiation ceremony. These spirit visitations appeared to represent an important part of their identity.

In the workshop at Gokak, few participants appeared especially anxious or traumatised. They seemed to have a very different attitude towards spiritual and cultural life. When asked if this was important to them, their view was that they needed money to participate in such festivities and since they had too little, this was denied them. One woman talked of her role as a singer, a role handed down within her family, and said that although she was looked down upon for continuing this tradition, she did so because it was in her family and she enjoyed it. Participants at this workshop gave the impression that they ignored the spiritual side of their *Devadasi* identity or denied it. Some repudiated spiritual life entirely. One woman declared: 'What has the Goddess ever done for us?'

## On education, especially of their children

Educational data was not collected systematically by the AP survey team. In Belgaum, however, educational levels were very low on average, as would be the case with *dalit* groups generally, with many workshop participants almost or entirely illiterate. A few women had gone to primary school and reached grade 8 or even higher, but most had then been removed for their 'marriage'. In the Belgaum study, around 24 per cent had received some formal education, with half of these attending Grades 6-10, and eight having studied higher than Grade 10. Since rehabilitation programmes began, 75 per cent had received informal education.

One of the most important changes of recent years in both localities is that most *Devadasi* and *Jogini* mothers make huge efforts to send their children to school despite all the difficulties. In

Gokak these were mainly identified as financial: mothers had too little money to buy books, pens, uniforms, shoes and other school-going necessities. Even if it is possible to send their children without these things, they did not want to because this would identify their children as coming from a 'bad' background and mean that they would face discrimination and become vulnerable to bullying.

In Mahbubnagar, school registration was identified as a problem. Without a father's name, a child may be refused entry. Even if it is no longer legal to turn away a child on this basis, the teacher may still make difficulties over the child's registration, or otherwise make such children miserable by segregating them, or putting them at the back of the class and ignoring them. As in the case of Belgaum, women also faced great difficulties in affording the necessities associated with sending children to school, and girls especially tended to drop out at an early age. Some children of *Jogins* had been included in Non-Residential Bridge Centres (non-formal educational centres for primary school drop-outs) run by APMSS, and a few had managed to reach Grade 10.

Educational opportunities for children of *Devadasi* (and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes children generally) have been so poor that the NGO Vimochena Sangha active in the Athani *teluka* of Belgaum has established special schools for them. Their educational establishments include a high school, a nursing school (set up in 2001), and a comprehensive pre-University College (2002) which is the first of its kind in the country. Vimochena Sangha have also explored a variety of avenues such as vocational training and short courses in entrepreneurship to boost earning capacity. The organisation also believes strongly in the need for psycho-social education so that young girls can be taught what they need to know about life, including sexual health and how to conduct relationships, to break the mould of an upbringing steeped in ancient ideas and beliefs.

All these measures illustrate the need for affirmative action until such time as Devadasis and their children can be absorbed into the mainstream (along with women and girls from other disadvantaged and discriminated groups).

## Profiles of Jogini women, Mahbubnagar

### Chinama

Chinama age 25, has a small daughter, Anusha, age one.

Chinama has a speech impairment, she hears very poorly and cannot speak properly. For this reason, she was made a *Jogini* by the family elders. She was 'married' to her sister's husband, but he subsequently discarded her and she now lives in her parents' house. She has therefore become sexually available to others, and the baby is the child of one of the men who come and demand her services.



### Bharathi and Jyothi

Bharathi and Jyothi are both aged 10 and their mothers are *Joginis*. Bharathi's mother Padma was 'married' to the Goddess at a very young age, and when mature she was given as a concubine to a near relative. She bore four children, three girls - of which Bharathi is the youngest - and one boy. Padma regularly migrates as a land reclamation 'coolie' to Mumbai, taking with her two of her daughters and her son. Bharathi wanted to study, so Padma admitted her to the residential 'bridge' school run by APMSS. Padma hates her *Jogini* status, and does not want her daughters to be dedicated. So Bharathi knows about the practice and is very anxious to avoid it. What she hopes is to become an APMSS social worker in due course, and help others to avoid it too.

Jyothi's mother, Lingamma, suffered terribly as a *Jogini*, living with a drunkard who was violent and abusive. She could not afford to send her children to school, so Jyothi's two brothers go out to work tending cattle for local farmers in their village. This at least provided the family with just enough to eat. When they came into contact with APMSS, Jyothi was offered a place in the 'bridge' school. So now she is doing well and has reached 5th grade.

Both Bharathi and Jyothi acted in the drama put on at the Anti-Slavery International-Sravanti workshop, in which the group depicted the story of a *Jogini* dedication and the sadness of her subsequent life.



## Ashamma

Ashamma was born around 40 years ago in a small village called Karni in Mahbubnagar district, Andhra Pradesh. Her parents, Laksmanna and Lingamma, were agricultural labourers. They had no son, so they agreed to her grandfather's proposal to dedicate their only daughter to the Goddess as a way of securing her as their life-long provider.



Ashamma (right) in focus group discussion.

At the age of nine, she was married to the village deity. 'From that moment, I did not live with dignity. I became available for all the men of Karni village. They would ask me for sexual favours, and I as a *Jogini* was expected to please them. My trauma began even before I had attained puberty.' Once that happened at the age of 11, she was forced to sleep with countless men, including many much older than herself. Before long she gave birth to a girl. 'I bore this child from the man I loved, but he did not marry me.'

When the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samathya Society (APMSS) started their programme of *sanghas* or self-help groups in Mahbubnagar, they set up a *sangha* in Karni and Ashamma joined in enthusiastically. When she became head of the group in 1997, she resolved to fight the practice of *Jogini*. Neither the police nor other villagers were initially prepared to help her. On one occasion she sat in protest until she succeeded in preventing the initiation ceremony for a nine-year-old girl. But she also fought for her filial rights as a *Jogini*. When her father died, she insisted on setting the light to his pyre in the place of the son he never had.

In recent years, she has worked tirelessly for the APMSS women's movement, travelling around the local villages with like-minded *Jogins* to help women organise and to stop dedications. 'As a *Jogini* I faced many difficulties so I am determined that no women should be made a *Jogini*.' In 2001 she received a national prize, the *Neeraj Bhano Award*, for her campaigning work. The prize was Rs. 150,000 (£1,875). Apart from Rs. 50,000 which she put in trust for her daughter, she gave the rest to her *sangha* because she saw their work as collective. To this day, she remains a 'coolie' like the others, earning a mere Rs. 20 a day.



Ashamma (right) rehearsing for one of the workshop plays.

In spite of what Ashamma suffered, she harbours no bitterness against men or marriage. 'Marriage is a must, for it gives you respect in society.' She no longer wants this respectability for herself: 'I have given up all my own desires', she says. 'But I want my daughter Anita to study and get married to a decent man.' In the meantime, she continues her work, in the fields and in the *sangha*. 'I will fight relentlessly and peacefully to solve the problems of *Jogini*.'

Although necessary in the short and medium term, affirmative action should be phased out as soon as possible because it can have the unavoidable negative consequence of making the recipient feel both special and inferior - 'specially inferior'. This means that, alongside their improved awareness and expectations in life, *Devadasi* and *Jogini* may also experience a learned sense of self-disgust and disapproval of their own or their families' previous way of life.

## Self-image and sense of personal control over life

Many Devadasi who have been reached by state or NGO programmes of assistance, as was the case with those attending both workshops, see themselves as having been terribly wronged. One older woman at Mahbubnagar described her grandfather as 'having made a dreadful mistake' in deciding that she should be made a *Jogini*, a mistake for which she had paid dearly all her life. She and others in Andhra Pradesh recounted how they had been dressed up for a marriage and treated like a queen, and then without advance warning as to what was coming, been raped by their uncle or a stranger. To their horror, their parents had refused to comfort them or protect them from the subsequent advances of men coming to their homes since, they were told, this was now 'their lot'. Their sense of helplessness in the face of what they had been forced to endure was profoundly moving, and some had symptoms of permanent psychological disturbance.

There was a marked contrast between the attitude of the workshop participants at Mahbubnagar and those at Gokak. At Mahbubnagar, after an initial exercise of dramas (facilitated by members of the local cultural department) which opened up a window on their feelings and experiences, many of the women talked quite comfortably even on the first evening about their lives as *Joginis*, including such sensitive issues as sexual exploitation. At Gokak, it became clear at a very early stage that the women did not wish to acknowledge their *Devadasi* status or discuss it at all. This was not connected to the size of the group (around 20 initially in Mahbubnagar, 16 initially at Gokak), nor to a greater presence of strangers. Unlike at the Mahbubnagar workshop, a decision had to

be made at Gokak not to attempt to find out about their experiences of sexual exploitation, and instead focus only on contemporary problems the women identified. Whereas at Mahbubnagar, the participants - especially the older ones - were grateful to have taken part in a large-scale event where they were treated as equals and listened to in public, perhaps for the very first time in their lives, at Gokak some participants were quite antagonistic in the early stages and their cooperation had to be won.

In trying to interpret this strongly contrasting situation, the following factors may be relevant. The *Devadasi* in Belgaum have been on the receiving end of campaigns to end the practice, and of NGO rehabilitation and government self-help organisational programmes, for several years and with more intensity than elsewhere. This is mainly because of the historical connection of the Saundatti temple complex with the practice of Devadasi and the strong links to the commercial sex industry in nearby Goa and Mumbai. The Belgaum women were on balance a more sophisticated group with strong opinions on what was wanted from outsiders. Some were frustrated and embittered by experiences with officials and others active on their behalf. At this stage of their 'rehabilitation', they may deeply resent being asked to talk to outsiders about a status - given its sex worker connotations - that they have done their best to discard. Although it may well be true that building their own self-help efforts may be the best way forward, being lectured to this effect may also be hard for them to bear, given their many difficulties in accessing benefits and the patronising or insulting attitudes to which they are frequently subjected. The views of *Devadasi* surveyed in Belgaum towards those who had influence in their lives was illuminating (see table 10 next page).

The way in which an organisation or official body treats those whom it purports to assist may be very significant in terms of reinforcing an existing poor self-image and arousing their resentment, or alternatively enabling them to come to terms with their situation and release their energies in a more positive way. Although the women in Belgaum appear to have much more control over their lives and more prospects of accessing improvements, the women in Mahbubnagar were more positive, less angry, more able to share, less distrustful towards the organisations

**table 10: Views towards important and influential people in Devadasis' lives**

| Male Partners |            | Gram Panchyat (Council) Leaders |            | Village Leaders |            | Social Workers /NGO |           |
|---------------|------------|---------------------------------|------------|-----------------|------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Good<br>211   | Bad<br>219 | Good<br>73                      | Bad<br>357 | Good<br>264     | Bad<br>166 | Good<br>385         | Bad<br>45 |

working with them, and better reconciled to their (more seriously disadvantaged) situation. This atmosphere was much to the credit of the APMS, the organisation working in Mahbubnagar with whom Sravanti put on the workshop.

There was no equivalent representation at the Gokak workshop by officials from Myrada or MASS, and therefore it is hard to know whether the reasons for the participants' resistance to discussion were to do with negative self-image among *Devadasi* in Belgaum generally, or some other set of organisational circumstances.

The need to open up debate about their situation and the problems they face, especially with departmental officials and *Panchayati Raj* (local government) institutions, and to enable *Devadasi* and *Jogini* women themselves to take an active lead in such debates, was the main conclusion from the workshops. This requires active work within self-help groups and programmes of all kinds to rescind negative self-image and work to avoid the reinforcement of such images by those in official positions. When they are talked down to, patronised and lectured, it is difficult for such women to feel empowered to improve their situation through their groups or other means, or to assume effective control over their lives and those of their children.



top right: Jogini women dancing during the workshop.

middle: These girls are the daughters of Jogini women and particularly vulnerable to dedication as they approach womanhood.

bottom: Devadasi participants watch a drama at Gokak.



**Jogini women paint the ceremony of the bride being dedicated, in all her finery, to the Goddess, as part of the workshop.**

## Endnotes

- <sup>7</sup> The main source for this analysis is Dr. KG Gurumurthy, *Religion and Politics: A Cultural Study of the Sacred Complex of Renuka-Yellamma*, originally written in Kannada in 1996; translated by Dr. AA Mutalik-Desai, IIT Bombay, and published by Vimochana Prakashana, Athani, Karnataka, March 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> Sravanti were assisted in their research by an NGO working with *Mathas* in Chittoor, Sree Shakti Sanghatanan (SSS).
- <sup>9</sup> An evaluation conducted in 2001 into the work of MASS (Mahila Abhivruddhi Mathu Samrakshana Samasthe) an organisation for Devadasi in Belgaum, reports that a few Devadasi have managed to become ex-Devadasi, marry and join the social mainstream.
- <sup>10</sup> See Dr. KG Gurumurthy, *Religion and Politics*, cited above.
- <sup>11</sup> The word *Jogini* comes from a very old word meaning saint or demi-goddess; the word *joga* means corn, and the *Jogin* carries special grains or *joga* in her hand and wears them around her neck during her initiation and at ceremonies, representing her association with fertility.
- <sup>12</sup> *Jogins* are also from the Madiga caste, but dancing seems to be less significant. However dancing, singing and performance (with immoral overtones) at festivals - all of which are essentially religious and based on the local temple - are associated with all forms of the practice.
- <sup>13</sup> The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950 lists 59 Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh.
- <sup>14</sup> Brochure of Vimochana Sangha, Devadasi Rehabilitation and Rural Development Organisation, Athani, Belgaum.
- <sup>15</sup> The date at which this data was collected was not identified.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with Nagamma; see case studies.
- <sup>17</sup> *Empowerment of Devadasis* (A project undertaken by Myrada, Karnataka), An evaluation study for NOVIB undertaken by Y. Padmavati (SCUK Hyderabad) and Mondira Dutta (School of International Studies, Jawaharlal University New Delhi), 2001.
- <sup>18</sup> Discussion with V.S. Manavade, Director, Vimochana Sangha, Belgaum, November 2006.
- <sup>19</sup> A description of a Mother India Community Development Association (MICDA) project for the eradication of *Mathamma* at <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=409> states that only 1% of *Mathammas* in Chittoor are older than 45, due to poor sexual health and early death.
- <sup>20</sup> This information on financial aspects comes from Sravanti's Report to Anti-Slavery International, December 2006.
- <sup>21</sup> Information provided by KIDS; certain NGOs, including BIRDS, are engaged in HIV/AIDS awareness among sex workers in Karnataka and there is an active state programme for HIV prevention.

## Part II: The Response

### Laws and their enforcement

Legislative efforts to ban ceremonies and procedures whereby girls were dedicated to the Goddess go back to the early 20th century under British rule and continued after Independence. But the strength of religious passion for Yellamma-Renuka discouraged serious attempts to ban the practice and dedications continued virtually unhindered. However, after strong concerns were expressed during the 1970s and 80s about the numbers of Devadasi drawn into commercial prostitution in Mumbai and elsewhere, renewed movements for social and legal reform developed. Both the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka subsequently passed new legislation, following strong lobbying against the practice and all associated rituals (oaths, insignia, ceremonies, *tanika* fees, mendicancy, etc.).

The Karnataka Devadasi (prohibition of dedication) Act was put forward in 1982. Only after extensive lobbying by social activists against those who wished to leave the practice in place, and securing the approval of the President of India, did it enter into force in 1984. The Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (prohibition of dedication) Act was passed later, in 1988. In both cases, the ceremonies under which dedications occur are declared unlawful, as is any forced sexual use of such girls, or of those who have taken part as dancers or singers in religious processions and festivities and as a result are regarded as sexually available, with or without their consent. Such women are declared entitled to marry and their children should not be regarded as illegitimate.

Fines (between Rs.2,000 and Rs.5,000) and terms of imprisonment (between two and five years) are set for those found responsible for such dedications of girls. No penalties are mentioned for the exploiters, although the girls and women themselves are regarded as indictable where complicit. During the research, no case was identified of action against procurers of girls or performers of dedications under the terms of the Acts<sup>22</sup>. Critics of the Acts

describe them as 'poorly enforced and suffering from corruption among officials', and cast in such a way as to make the Devadasis rather than their patrons the culprits in the system<sup>23</sup>.

In 2001, the Andhra Pradesh state government additionally passed a resolution to ban a particular ritual associated with the annual festival of Yellamma at Polepally in Mahbubnagar. This involved the tying of a naked *Jogin* woman into a basket on the end of a pole, and hoisting her 120 feet into the air to be spun five times around the temple, while scattering blessings on pilgrims in the form of vermilion powder and flowers. The successful ban on this custom was the result of pressure from women's groups, notably the Andhra Pradesh Jogini Vyavastha Vyathireka Porata Sanghatana, an offshoot of Aashray, an NGO with offices in Hyderabad.

The passage of laws against the practice of Devadasi, given that it was so entrenched and still supported by millions of Yellamma-Renuka devotees, could not of itself achieve very much. Officials had always been reluctant to antagonise a large and already discriminated *dalit* population by pursuing strict enforcement. The question of who was to act as the protectors of vulnerable young girls was also delicate since their families were usually responsible for their dedication. Certain NGOs and women's organisations therefore began to undertake action with and on behalf of the victims themselves.

During the early 1990s, when legal abolition appeared to be having little effect, the state authorities in both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh entrusted the task of Devadasi rehabilitation and prevention to the appropriate women's development organisations: the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (KSWDC) and the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya Society (APMSS). Effectively, these programmes became the means of bringing about the implementation of the law. At the same time, by the late 1990s, police action at Saundatti and at other sites of Yellamma

worship, especially during the key full moon festivals, acted as a powerful disincentive for Devadasi dedications.

## Programmes of action

Over the past 10-20 years, a number of programmes have been set in place with the purpose of rehabilitating *Devadasis* and *Jogins*. Some of these efforts have taken place within much larger programmes designed to improve the lot of the rural poor, targeted at those 'Below the Poverty Line'<sup>24</sup>, or for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, within which Devadasis may be eligible. Others have been specially targeted at rural women and children in particularly poor areas and among scheduled castes; these have been the main vehicle for bringing *Jogins*, *Mathas*, and *Devadasi* into contact with women's movement and self-improvement possibilities. Other NGO programmes have been specifically geared towards Devadasi themselves or their children. Thus there is no dearth of programme ideas or experience.

These programmes have attempted to address a large range of different areas: providing education and health care services for Devadasi and their children; building awareness of their situation and trying to reduce stigma and exclusion; enlisting Devadasi themselves to stop further dedications of young girls; organising marriages for Devadasi and their daughters; providing housing or other assets, with the title deeds - *patta* - made out in the Devadasis' names; helping Devadasi obtain ration cards for cheap government food grains; providing information about HIV/AIDS; and trying to break the links between Devadasi, trafficking and commercial exploitation. Some of these are programmes to which others in disadvantaged groups are also entitled: integration of social groups is an aim to which some social activists aspire.

As has already been indicated, the record of these programmes is patchy. Many programme providers have worked hard and long to arrive at good solutions, but difficulties have been profound. And these difficulties partly stem from the lack of interest and engagement by the authorities, many of whom appear to be ignorant of the numbers of women involved and of their continuing problems.

## Beneficiaries of programmes in Belgaum

Table 11 (below) shows the programme and service benefits received by the 430 *Devadasi* studied in Belgaum (including programmes for all low-income groups and communities).

Certain initiatives have proved double-edged, offering enticements to unscrupulous operators and carrying new risks for those who access benefits. Recently, the Karnataka state government announced that Devadasi are now entitled to pensions of Rs. 300 (£3.75) a month, and a publicised distribution was made to the first 292 candidates, with the intention of extending the scheme to 2,500 beneficiaries. But problems of 'monitoring' have subsequently inhibited progress<sup>25</sup>. These monitoring issues may relate to claims made which the authorities find questionable and to difficulties in accounting for disbursements.

The availability of benefits for disadvantaged groups can, regrettably, lead to corrupt officials siphoning off funds into their own pockets. At Gokak, *Devadasis* talked of their right to pensions of Rs. 250, but the official amount is Rs. 300: why were they misinformed? Even if they do know accurately about their entitlements, what can they do if these are refused or partially withheld? Powerlessness can mean they are deprived of benefits by unscrupulous exploiters; alternatively lack of information and the absence of people acting on their behalf can mean that

**table 11: Benefits received by Devadasi - Karnataka**

| Loans | Health care services | Ration card for food grains | Housing | Livestock | Water supply | Electricity |
|-------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| 65    | 385                  | 430                         | 268     | 126       | 79           | 113         |

they access nothing at all.

By the same token, *Devadasi* and *Jogini* may be deprived of other benefits to which they have a right, such as free health care or education for their children. The failure of the extension of benefits to all those entitled to receive them was a common theme at the workshops. Because of their low sense of self-esteem and the disdainful way they are usually treated, Devadasi have great problems standing up for their rights. To assert these rights, they have to declare their status, which is to wear a badge of shame. For example, if they visit a health care centre, they may be kept at the end of the line and asked to pay for medicines they cannot afford, even though they should receive them free. In some cases, for example in the case of children needing books and uniforms to attend school, Devadasi women do not want their children to have attention drawn to their low status by their lack of equipment and poor presentation. They would rather they did not go to school, whose quality they challenge, than suffer humiliating treatment from staff and other students.

The problems of housing and of gaining title deeds for land, cows or other assets to which they were entitled were constant refrains. Addressing a senior police officer at the Mahbubnagar workshop, one woman said: 'We give our commitment to leave the profession and to help others do so too. We want to tell the police that we are very pleased to have them with us in this struggle. But we also know that sometimes the benefits and services are not reaching us. So we hope in the future we will have all your support in this struggle. This opportunity has enabled us to share this with you.'

## Self-help groups

Both in Andhra Pradesh and in Karnataka, as noted earlier, the key state instrument for addressing the problems of rural poverty and disempowerment has been the formation of self-help groups (*sanghas*) among those in common predicaments. The promotion of women's groups, since women are more willing to organise and be organised, has been at the vanguard of anti-poverty programme initiatives in many parts of India and elsewhere in recent

years. This is principally because self-help groups provide a mechanism for savings and micro-credit inputs, seen as the leading edge strategy for livelihood enhancement among the rural poor, especially women<sup>26</sup>. These groups also provide a structure for participatory learning and empowerment. However, as a general rule the potential of such group organisation is not always realised, especially among the poorest and hardest-to-access groups. This is mainly because of lack of effective back-up and developmental support by social mobilisation agents.

The record of APMSS in reaching and mobilising disadvantaged Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe women in rural communities in the districts and *mandals* where it is working is impressive. According to a 2004 evaluation of its programme, the setting up of groups (*sanghas*) has changed the lives of their women members, bringing them confidence and providing them with an identity which transcends their family and kinship networks<sup>27</sup>. The testimony of the *Jogins* attending the Anti-Slavery International-Sravanti workshop in Mahbubnagar supported this perspective. The issues the groups address with APMSS support include education, health, natural resources management and social issues; *Jogini* and *Mathamma* fall into the latter. APMSS also conducts sensitisation with health care, local government, *anganwadi* (early childhood care), teachers and other personnel to reduce discrimination against Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes in general and against *Jogins* and *Mathas* in particular.

As already described, under the auspices of the NGO Myrada, a district-wide organisation - MASS - for *Devadasi* in Belgaum was launched in 1997. The MASS groups ought to be a means of enabling their members to gain access to better incomes, positions of authority in the community, and entitlements of many kinds. But the implications of the research project are that so far these gains are insufficiently realised. Some *Devadasis* have become indebted from loans and credit provision they were not equipped to handle, and from business ventures - such as handloom cloth and handicrafts - they were misguidedly allowed to pursue in a shrinking and difficult market. Solidarity has brought benefits, and some members have become empowered and moved up in the world, serving on *gram panchayats* and other local

## Profiles of Devadasi women, Belgaum

### Mahadevi

Mahadevi from Raibagh *teluka* (block) in Belgaum was dedicated as a *Devadasi* when she was eight years old. Her parents, who were not well off, had three daughters but no son, and so they decided to dedicate Mahadevi so that she could bring in income for the family. She had not been to school, was completely illiterate and says she 'knew nothing'. At this time, and for some years more, she helped her family by selling vegetables in the market.

'At the age of 13, my partner entered my life. He was a good man, a bachelor, and he came from the Jain community. He was also a landlord and owned six acres of land.' They lived together and had three children, but since she was a *Devadasi* they could not marry. His family, however, wanted their son to marry a girl from a nearby village, and they came and put pressure on her to leave him. Both of them were forced to accept his marriage to another, in spite of his own reluctance. Because he loved Mahadevi very much, he maintained financial responsibility for her and the children and she did not have to sell vegetables or continue to work.

Soon after his marriage, he began drinking heavily. His wife's family managed to make him sign over all his property into their names, so his support for her dried up. His mother and sisters maintained good relations with Mahadevi, and helped her with food and other items. But after the mother's death, this also ceased. Meanwhile her partner drank even more heavily and finally died.

In 1992, Mahadevi came into contact with the work of the NGO Myrada and became a member of a self-help group. At that stage, she began to recognise the evils of the *Devadasi* system and became motivated to reject it. Involvement with the group also helped her to get a ration card and assistance with housing. The problem today, for her and for many others, is that the housing has deteriorated over 15 years and since she is very poor and her only source of income is daily agricultural labour at very low wages, she has no money for repairs. Neither can she afford to send her children to school.

After her partner's death she stood in the *gram panchayat* elections and won a seat. But this does not

seem to have helped her to improve things in any dramatic way. Despite being articulate and energetic, Mahadevi's life is very tough, and as she gets older her health is not so good. Although she feels that she lacks respect from society, she has had the blessing of good relations with her relatives and won their respect. Now she is looking for training, loans and self-employment - maybe in the vegetable business once again - to improve her fortunes.



Mahadevi (3rd from right, bottom row) with other Devadasi participants.



## Kamalaya

Kamalaya, also from Raibagh in Belgaum district, was eight years old when she became a *Devadasi*. At that time, her small brother was extremely sick, and her parents were advised by community elders to dedicate their eldest daughter to propitiate the Goddess Yellamma, obtain her goodwill and enable the boy to recover. They were a poor and illiterate family and belief in Yellamma's powers was strong. But the boy did not survive.

Until she was 14, Kamalaya worked in a labour camp as a 'coolie'. But at that age, two men 'misbehaved' with her - that is how she describes what happened - and from then on her life changed. She was taken to Sangali, a large town in Maharashtra over the border from Belgaum, where she became a commercial sex worker, receiving four or five clients a day. After three years, she was able to return to her village of Horoger in Belgaum. At that time, the man she calls her 'life partner', Srikanth, entered her world. For the next few years, until she was 20 years old, they lived together and she bore two children.

A married man with four children, Srikanth was from the Jain community. He was well-off, with eight acres of land. So although he returned to live with his wife, he would frequently visit Kamalaya and provide her with Rs.50 or 100 each time. Life went on amicably in this way, but two years ago, Srikanth was killed in an accident. Things were very hard after that, especially as her elderly mother is very ill and depends on her. Even though she had not been married to Srikanth, he did provide for her and protect her. Once he was dead, she had no inheritance or family support and nothing but 'coolie' work to survive on. But Kamalaya has not since taken any new partner.

When she returned from Maharashtra in 1993, Kamalaya was very pleased to put her *Devadasi* and sex worker past behind her, thanks to her savings and to Srikanth. It was at this time that she first had contact with the NGO Myrada and joined a local self-help group. Since then she has learned many things, including about the risks of HIV. She says: 'The NGO people have made us much more aware and they give us support. Although we may not be respected in society at large, at least in our own community we have respect.'

Kamalaya's son is now 18 years old and works as an agricultural labourer. Now that he is grown, at least his wages mean that they don't have serious financial difficulties. Her daughter is married, and has one daughter of her own. Kamalaya has a ration card for purchasing cheap food grains, and was also given housing some years ago. Like many others, she now hopes to get some training so that she can obtain a loan and run a small business venture - she sees entrepreneurial activity as her best future hope for livelihood security.



Above: The small temple at Saundatti used for Devadasi 'marriage' ceremonies.



Above: A view of the temple complex at Saundatti.

committees. But many still languish in extreme poverty and, according to their own testimony, the situation in which many find themselves evokes a striking lack of official concern. Among such officials, there is a noticeable inclination to describe the problems of *Devadasi* and *Jogini* as resolved, as if there was little further for them to do.

The formation of self-help groups ought to be seen as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. The creation of MASS was a stepping-stone, which ought to have led to a greater degree of empowerment. Equipping *Devadasi* and *Jogini* to say 'no' to the practice in their own communities and families is one important aspect - and appears to have been carried out effectively in a number of areas. But it is not enough. They have been successfully enlisted as agents on behalf of the Act of prohibition, and have probably themselves contributed more to its enforcement than state actors such as police and legal officers. However, in terms of enabling *Devadasi* and *Jogini* to overcome their economic disadvantages, develop their skills and capacities, and access benefits to which they are entitled, there has been less success. A 2001 evaluation of the Myrada and MASS programme operated by KSWDC in Belgaum suggests that while the organisational elements for setting up groups had been strong, the empowerment aspects and the necessity to address broader inequities such as gender discrimination were lacking<sup>28</sup>.

The experience of the Anti-Slavery International-supported workshops was that the *Devadasi* and *Jogini* who attended - even though they were all members of groups or *sanghas* - have had few, if any, opportunities to articulate their problems and present them effectively and in a public forum to officials and key actors: police, media, PRI members, state departmental and NGO personnel. The point powerfully made at Gokak - 'We are always being told to stand on our own feet, but no-one tells us how' - indicates their frustration at not being able to overcome the obstacles they face. When self-help groups are passive entities they can do little for their members. The creation of such groups without the necessary back-up from mentors, and without corresponding sensitisation of officials, leaves their potential unfulfilled. Worse: from the official point of view, the groups' existence can

become a pretext for leaving members to their fate. They have their organisations. What more do they want? Since benefits exist, it is not the officials' fault if they do not access them.

The results of the Anti-Slavery International research project imply that some reinvigoration is needed to enable the *sanghas* or groups organised by MASS, APMSS, and other actors to move to a new phase of activity, become more empowered and confident, develop links with individual officials and entities willing to assist them, and gain the ear of those in positions of authority who can make a difference.



top: Mahbubnagar: the first exercise of the workshop - telling the story of going to the temple in celebration of the Goddess.

bottom: Gokak, Belgaum: Facilitator and group developing an action plan to solve Devadasis' problems.

# What do Jogini and Devadasi themselves say?

## 1. Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh

The *Jogins* at the Mahbubnagar workshop identified the following as their key problems:

### Poverty and lack of economic means

- Lack of a permanent husband to provide support
- All the costs of child-raising fall on the mother
- Work inequality: lower wages for the same amount of work as others
- Child labour: their children have to start work at a very young age
- Lack of family support: their own sons who find work in the city may fail to provide support for their mothers
- Failure of the authorities to implement laws and policies on their behalf

### Psycho-social problems

- Sexual abuse from men
- Discrimination in the home, at work and in the community
- Victimised by superstition; for example, a man may put a curse on a *Jogin* if she refuses to sleep with him\*
- Sexual harassment, including by employers
- Lack of education (themselves and their children)

### Causal factors and agents

- The men to whom they refused sex
- Family and village elders

- Landlords and those with economic power
- Traditions and superstitions

### The following solutions were identified:

- Provision of and access to schooling for their children
- Collective action, federation and support for their *sanghas*
- Women's empowerment and equality with men
- Enforcement of the law and proper implementation of programmes
- Provision of hostels
- Old-age pensions
- Full access to primary health care services, especially reproductive and early childhood care
- Access to the early childhood programme, ICDS (Integrated Childhood Development Services)

**The following actors were identified as potential helpers in solving their problems, with the proviso that these helpers needed to be sensitised so that they are able to understand Jogini problems, and encouraged to take the lead in actions against those who are responsible:**

- Government officials and service staff
- *Panchayati Raj* officials, such as councillors and *sarpanches*
- NGOs and community-based organisations
- Police
- Members of the Legislative Assembly and MPs.

\* *Jogins* who are 'common property' (as opposed to concubines or 'second wives') are not supposed to refuse a man sex. However, today sensitised *Jogini* may choose to refuse and this may lead to other forms of persecution by the man affected.

## What do Jogini and Devadasi themselves say?

### 2. Gokak, Belgaum, Karnataka

The participants at the Gokak workshop did not discuss issues to do with being Devadasi. The problems they identified were to do with their daily lives, grouped as follows:

- **Household:** The women received little or no support from men or boys in helping undertake the necessary tasks to run the house, including subsidiary productive activity (managing cows).
- **Water collection:** The priority problem was the lack of water taps at or immediately adjoining the houses.
- **Agricultural work:** Low wages - Rs. 20 a day - was the main problem as this was not enough to buy food; men were paid more than twice as much for their field work (Rs.50 a day).
- **Child care:** Child care was very difficult, mainly because of their lack of income. Education was costly and of poor quality.
- **Animal husbandry:** The main problem was lack of fodder, especially in the dry season, and its expense.
- **Cultural and religious activity:** Religious worship was mostly dismissed as too expensive and one woman strongly believed that 'there is no point in worshipping the Goddess as she has brought us nothing'.

The following is a representative sample of solutions:

- **Household:** Boys as well as girls should take on responsibilities at home, undertaking such tasks as collecting water and washing buffaloes.
- **Water:** Since everyone in the community pays a water tax, the *Gram Panchayat* should be asked to provide taps nearby all the houses in the village.

- **Agricultural work:** Since it will be hard to raise wages, it will be better to earn money by other means; by working as a collective, taking loans, and going in for small business ventures. They might rent land and run their own farming business.
- **Child care:** Since there is a high rate of drop-out, teachers should be familiarised with the problems their children face and asked to give them special attention.
- **Animal husbandry:** They should look into government schemes and find out what possibilities there were for grants or subsidies to obtain fodder in the summer (dry) season. They should also enlist the help of men and boys in collecting fodder.
- **Cultural and religious activity:** Join together in their *sanghas* in order to make more money, so that they could take part in festivals and afford a television.
- **Action plans:** The participants, grouped according to their locations, then worked on action plans that they could advance to bring these solutions nearer to fruition, by taking up issues at home, and with councillors and others in their own community settings. They discussed each area separately, identifying key **messages**, target **audiences**, potential **helpers**, and **strategic opportunities** (times and places) for putting their messages across. Thus they assumed to themselves an initiating role in solving the key problems they had identified in each context, rather than remaining passive recipients waiting for outsiders - NGOs, officials, local councillors - to come and help them. The women also thereby began to see that those who usually appear to obstruct their progress could be recruited as potential helpers and allies. This completed the cycle of empowerment, from assessment through to action.



Young girls involved in temple commerce at Saundatti.

## Advocacy on behalf of Devadasi and Jogini

During the course of the research project, it became clear that a number of issues concerning the practice of Devadasi and the situation of Devadasi themselves remain outstanding, and that concerted advocacy with key state institutions and other actors is needed to engage them with these issues. Success in reducing the numbers of public dedications has permitted some official complacency concerning the risk of new dedications particularly linked with the commercial sex trade, and of other problems faced by Devadasi dedicated in earlier years. Organisations working on behalf of those victimised by the practice need more support and official backing. The authorities' commitment to better delivery of services and benefits, and the reduction of discrimination among police, teachers, health workers, councillors and other official personnel needs to be better secured.

Although organisations such as the Women's Development Corporation (WDC) of Karnataka and APSS have helped organise Devadasi and enable them to form or become part of self-help

groups, the advocacy potential of such groups has not yet been mobilised effectively. There has been more emphasis on women's and children's welfare and too little on the empowerment of members of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe groups including Devadasi. More effort is needed to sensitise government officials, police and law enforcement officers, and members of local government (*panchayati raj*) institutions, and to work with village elders and others in a position to influence families who might consider dedicating their daughters. Greater awareness at all levels of society would enable Devadasi themselves to access programmes and benefits more effectively, including loans for income-generation, reproductive health care, HIV prevention, and education for their children. It would also familiarise families with the dreadful experiences encountered by girls trafficked to Mumbai for the sex trade, and help counter the influence of those who continue to promote Devadasi practices.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Anti-Slavery International hopes that the publication of this report will raise new awareness and bring national and international attention to the continuing existence of Devadasi practices and of the women and girls at risk, and draw further attention and resources to their situation. This, it is hoped, will help to promote and consolidate the kinds of initiatives identified during the research project, to be carried forward by actors that include NGOs, state officials and local authorities.

The following is a synthesised list of the issues identified by Devadasi themselves, partner organisations and other actors, on which action and advocacy are needed:

### Benefits and services:

- Housing construction or grants for home improvements (such as water taps outside their houses) for Devadasi, but not in separate colonies which reinforce stigma;
- Scholarships to mainstream schools or provision of special educational facilities ('bridge' courses) for children of Devadasi;
- Income-generating programmes, including

- well-managed savings and micro-credit for Devadasi via self-help groups;
- Capacity-building and empowerment for such self-help groups, including through informal education programmes and participatory techniques;
- State pensions for Devadasis, by means of an efficient, open and accountable system of disbursement;
- Promotion of maternal and child health services in vulnerable communities to dispel superstitions about illness in small children; special encouragement to attend reproductive health clinics and take preventive action against sexually transmitted diseases;
- Incentives for delaying the marriage of young girls, especially daughters of Devadasi, and keeping them in school at least until matriculation (Grade 10);
- Vocational training and short courses for business and entrepreneurial skills specially targeted to Devadasi and discriminated groups;
- Residential camps for adolescents, especially daughters of Devadasi, at which they learn life-skills such as how to look after personal and child health, how to manage sexual relationships and married life, conflict resolution, livelihood issues and human rights, as well as sports, artistic activity and recreation.

### **Awareness-building**

- Sensitisation efforts with local government officials, police, relevant NGOs and media to change attitudes towards *Jogini*, *Mathamma* and *Devadasi* women and enlist societal support in delivering their rights and entitlements;
- Spread of information about the damaging nature of the practice to elders, caste leaders and parents in vulnerable communities to help prevent further dedications and the entry of adolescent girls into the commercial sex trade;
- Sensitisation of educational, health and other local service staff to ensure that Devadasis and their children are not subject to discrimination or denial of services;
- Work with self-help groups and others to dispel blind faith in supernatural forces as the source of illness and family misfortune; this needs to be done in a way that respects religious belief systems as far as possible;
- Reduction of prejudice and discrimination against single women; similarly, efforts should be made to reduce prejudice, discrimination and harassment against children without formally recognised fathers;
- Vigilance committees should be formed in villages in relevant areas, with membership from local leaders and Devadasi themselves, to work pro-actively to avoid dedications and initiations, child marriages, and trafficking of vulnerable children;
- Efforts should be made to ensure that no *Jogins* or *Mathas* are called by anything other than their own names; those who have lost their names need to be encouraged to choose new names and these should be respected;
- Special awareness campaigns should be undertaken in advance of key festivals, with their organisers and among leading devotees, to avoid all practices which debase women or encourage their sexual exploitation;
- In all awareness-building activities concerning Devadasi issues the principle of participation should be respected, and those who have been dedicated as *Devadasi*, *Jogini* and *Mathammas* should be closely involved, both in terms of developing messages and in presenting them to chosen audiences.

## Research and review

- Legal provisions and the implementation of policies regarding the prohibition of Devadasi practices and the rehabilitation of women and girls should be made the subject of review and improvements introduced as necessary;
- More up-to-date research is needed into the contemporary situation of Devadasi, including into whether existing initiatives on their behalf are effective, whether their coverage is adequate, and what more needs to be done.

## Strengthening of Devadasi groups and federations

The research activity and the two workshops made it clear that while there has been significant progress in reaching Devadasi women and enrolling them in *sanghas* (self-help groups), these programmes have not yet succeeded in empowering more than relatively few outstanding individuals. While these have managed to transform their situation in life, and they now act as leaders among other Devadasi and even in the community, most others are still extremely poor and disempowered. Opportunities to use these networks of self-help groups to access benefits and services and build a better life through concerted action are being lost. This is partly due to their own incapacity, partly to official disregard.

Existing networks of self-help groups involving Devadasi need more support in building capacity to identify their problems and bring these problems in a timely and effective way to the attention of the authorities. This can be assisted by building up the organisational network of self-help groups and bringing them into a federated structure at village, village cluster, and *mandal* or *taluka* (block) level. But organisation in itself is not enough. It has to be done in a way that unleashes the women's own capacities and potential for self-help.

'Self-help' is a concept around which misunderstanding can arise and it needs to be properly understood by all parties involved. It does not mean simply organising groups whose

members are expected to depend on their own resources and stand on their own feet - a concept which can make people feel as if they have been left stranded and without help; it means equipping them to build their personal resources and skills so that they can negotiate change on their own behalf. This was the key message emerging from the two research project workshops. At the Mahbubnagar workshop, the presentations made by *Jogini* themselves greatly impressed the officials attending the public event, who will respond differently to these women on future occasions. Although a similar event was not organised for the Gokak workshop, the outcome in terms of detailed action plans prepared by the participants was also impressive. If the women carried the plans out, they would gain self-confidence from their encounter with officials, as well as widening their access to benefits and services.

A key recommendation from this research study is, therefore, that more emphasis be given to the empowerment of Devadasi to bring their concerns to the attention of the authorities, and more effort be similarly made to sensitise the authorities to listen and respond. Anti-Slavery International believes that the two workshops carried out in Mahbubnagar and Belgaum were effective in identifying methods for closing the gap between Devadasi concerns and possibilities for their remedy, and moving towards negotiated change. It therefore recommends that future workshops of a similar kind be carried out in relevant localities at village cluster, block and sub-district level. Ideally, these should be scheduled in advance of local festivals or appropriate National Days so that dramas can be performed and artistic work displayed.

The methodology developed during the course of the workshops was designed to achieve the following process:

1. **Assessment:** exploration of the participants' daily lives and experiences, in a non-threatening, confidence-building and participatory manner;
2. **Analysis:** identification of main areas of daily activity, including income-generation, access to basic services, child-raising, cultural and household pursuits; analysis of the key difficulties faced in each context;

- 3. Action planning:** articulation of the key messages and the development of action plans to take these messages to the appropriate audiences, with the aid of identified allies, at strategically selected times and locations.

A synthesised form of the methodology is provided in the final part of this report. It can be adapted and used with groups of Devadasi and other seriously discriminated women and adolescent children wherever gaps need to be bridged between the presence of problems, the availability of solutions, and the failure of officials, political leaders, law enforcement officers, and others to put them into effect. The task of partner organisations, other NGOs and state bodies is seen as promoting the empowerment process, and providing victims of rights abuse with access to platforms on which effective advocacy can take place.

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## Endnotes

<sup>22</sup> A small news item in The Hindu of 15 February 2006 notes that the APMS had requested the State Government to take action against those who had dedicated an eight-year-old girl in a village in Rangareddi district, but no action was subsequently reported.

<sup>23</sup> *A cry for justice* article on the National Public Hearing on Dalit Human Rights in Chennai by V. Vasanthi Devi; Frontline, India, Volume 17, Issue 13, 24 June - 7 July 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Below Poverty Line or BPL is a designation which establishes a very poor person in India as having entitlement to such state benefits as a ration card for food grains, or access to certain types of grant or free service.

<sup>25</sup> Information from KIDS, received in January 2007.

<sup>26</sup> See for example World Bank 2004, *Women's Self-help Groups in Andhra Pradesh - Participatory Poverty Alleviation in Action*, Joy Deshmukh-Ranadive, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi; paper prepared under the auspices of the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, Hyderabad.

<sup>27</sup> *National evaluation of the Mahila Samakhya Programme (APMSS)*, Executive Summary, December 2004, available at <http://www.education.nic.in/ms/APES.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> *Empowerment of Devadasis* (A project undertaken by Myrada, Karnataka), An evaluation study for NOVIB undertaken by Y. Padmavati (SCUK Hyderabad) and Mondira Dutta (School of International Studies, Jawaharlal University New Delhi), 2001.



# Part III: The workshop methodology: 'Assessment, Analysis, Action'

## Introduction

The Anti-Slavery International supported workshops for *Jogini* and *Devadasi* women in Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh (with the partnership of Sravanti) and in Gokak, Belgaum District, Karnataka (with the partnership of KIDS) had the following objectives:

- To provide training in the use of participatory learning and empowering techniques;
- To learn about the experiences and perspectives of *Jogini* and *Devadasi* women, as an input to the research report;
- To assist the process of formulating solutions to *Devadasi/Jogini* problems in an interactive and participatory manner;
- To use available opportunities for carrying out immediate advocacy, if possible via a presentation to invited guests on the last workshop day.

This note on methodology used at these workshops is intended to draw 'best practice' lessons from the experiences of both. It is not an exact account of either, but draws on their best features.

## Workshop composition

The number of participants at Mahbubnagar was 20 on the first day, rising to 35 on the second, and reaching more than 50 by the third. At Gokak, the number of participants was 18. For a workshop using participatory methodology of the kind outlined here, between 18 and 30 is best. In the first workshop, where there were participants from different age-groups, adolescent participants worked together as a group for some activities in order to address their own issues.

The workshop activity required two full days; in both cases, the workshop only began in the afternoon of the first day, not the morning as intended. It turned out that the women felt they must go and work in the morning - they could not afford the loss of earnings for more than two days. Time also had to be allowed on the third day for them to get home. Thus it was necessary to cram what was envisaged as a three day programme into a little over two days. In one case, the ceremony with presentations to invited guests had also to be accommodated within the two and a half days. Ideally this should have been given an additional half-day session. Each session in the combined methodology described here occupies a half-day; this also allows time for introductions, explanations, recaps, breaks, games, songs, dances, etc., all of which need to be interspersed as appropriate. It is important to allow plenty of time for any exercise undertaken with an illiterate or semi-literate group. Thus there are four sessions and a fifth half-day session for a ceremony with invitees. Three of these are for the three stages of the main methodology: collection of information or **assessment**; review of information or **analysis**; and advocacy plans, or **action**\*. The fourth session, used strategically to break up the process and de-intensify it, is used for the development and presentation of dramas, or for production of artwork or story-telling. This is best done as the third session in the four-session sequence.

The fifth half-day session is the ceremonial occasion with invited guests. Ideally this should come at the very end, when participants' action plans can be presented. If that is impracticable, then it should come as late as possible (after session three), and all the work done up to that point (artwork, problem analyses, at least one drama) should be presented, *before* the guests are invited to speak.

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\* This 'triple A' approach to programme and advocacy planning echoes the 'assessment, analysis, action' framework proposed in Anti-Slavery International handbooks on advocacy and 'programme best practice' for child domestic workers. It is derived from UNICEF programming approaches.

## Workshop resources

The workshop is conducted in the local language. Therefore all hands-on facilitators need to be able to speak and write in that language. Any external facilitator will need dedicated translation.

Equipment required is not sophisticated. A good wall space and large sheets of paper are needed, with big multi-coloured marker pens; paper of flip chart size; and a good-sized white or blackboard if possible. Also A3 (or A4) sized paper and felt-tip pens for doing individual timelines.

People who can orchestrate cultural activity are a huge asset as this helps to break down tensions and inhibitions and facilitate expression of feelings. Some members of the facilitating team need to be able to sing, dance and do group games to build participation and enjoyment.

Apart from any special facilitators (such as for artwork, music or drama) enough group facilitators are needed to be able to divide into groups of no more than six people for much of the work. A main facilitator is also needed, whether or not there is an additional external facilitator.

### **'Assessment, analysis, action' empowerment methodology**

In most developing countries, especially in South Asia, there is a huge gap between the availability of services and benefits mandated by the state for disadvantaged groups, and access to these services and benefits by the people who need them. The process described here aims to enable people in such predicaments to cross that gap, with the help of allies they will enlist and by reinforcing their own solidarity. A few participants are likely to be better educated, or more self-confident and articulate, and will be able with prompting to assume leadership roles. For the final stage of the process, participants should work with others from their own locality, so as to build solidarity for the future.

It is important to appreciate that people in the societies in question, most of whom suffer severe discrimination and are of very low social

status, need not only skills but a psycho-social and attitudinal upheaval to be able even to think of taking up their problems with those in positions of official authority. They have little education or familiarity with learning situations, potentially low levels of comprehension, and few taught skills of deduction or objective reflection. They are socialised to expect lectures and admonitions from senior men, officials and 'important people' and to be abject and silent in front of them. To change this requires a long process, and it would be naïve to think it could be accomplished in a workshop of a few days. What this methodology aims to do is to kick-start that process. It shows participants that they are able to identify the important problems in their lives, articulate them, and make practical plans for tackling them with those in decision-making positions who could make a difference.

The methodology is made up of component parts extracted from the literature on participatory learning. It is not original except in one important aspect. This is that instead of a participatory exercise and follow-up discussion (such as mapping, timelines, role-playing, Venn diagrams, etc.) being seen as self-contained, it starts with one exercise, and builds from it into inter-connected others, for different types of cognitive activity. These are: the collection of information (assessment); its analysis (to determine what needs to change); and the development of an action plan to bring these changes about. Thus there is one inter-connected process. Used separately, participatory methods often produce overlapping perspectives, adding to assessment, but not leading to sequential analysis or plans of action.

### **Session 1: Timelines**

The principle of a timeline is explained and demonstrated on the board to the whole group. The line is to be determined by the moment of getting up, and the moment of going to sleep. The idea of blocking out chunks of time, and drawing or describing in writing the activity undertaken in each block is explained.

The participants are then divided into groups of no more than six members, each with a facilitator, and given paper and pens. If possible this paper should be A3 size, so they have plenty

## Session 1: Timelines - example of matrix

(NB all words should be written up in the local language used in the workshop, in all examples)

| Activity              | Men | Women | Boys | Girls |
|-----------------------|-----|-------|------|-------|
| Cooking, cleaning     |     | ••••  |      | ••    |
| Field work (earning)  | ••• | •     | •    | •     |
| Child care            |     | •••   |      | •••   |
| Collecting water etc. |     | •••   | •    | ••    |

of room to draw thumbnail sketches and write. If they can use felt tips, the results will be more visible when pinned up. However, A4 is also ok.

Each participant should produce a time-line. Where literacy is very low, each participant will need considerable help and facilitators will therefore need to give attention to each person. Time should be allowed for this. It may be best to ask the group to think about the beginning of the day in detail and then work on that with each one. Those participants with some education, once started, may be able to continue the timeline with less individual aid.

An alternative is to ask participants to do drawings of their home and all the things and people around it. This may be preferred with children and adolescents, but with adults timelines are more manageable and productive of information.

When the timelines are finished, they should be pinned up in groups on the wall. Then in front of the whole group, each woman, with the help of the facilitator, should explain her timeline and describe her day.

This can be used as a prelude to discussion: why have certain activities been emphasised/left out/what about others; do children join in, do men join in etc.

It is also possible to project this information into a matrix, in which the activities identified (household work, child care etc.) are listed in a left-hand column (see example above). In each row, six large dots can be distributed between males and females according to who the group says does most of the activity. These dots can then be added up at the bottom. This invariably illustrates that women and girls work harder than men and boys, which provides a departure

for discussion.

## Session 2: Analysis of information

A very large sheet of paper (or contiguous sheets) is pinned up on a wall. With the assistance of the whole group, the information in the timelines is then grouped into five to six categories, which are listed in a left-hand column in the language of the workshop. For example: *Household work, collecting water, child care and upbringing, working in the fields, etc.* At the top of the next column are illustrations of a smiley face (in one colour) and a frowning face (in another).

The group is then asked whether the activity in question is something they are happy doing, or something they have a problem with. Smiley faces and frowning faces are allocated, according to the emphasis they give. The reasons given for at least one good aspect and one bad aspect are then written out in the third column. This is repeated for all categories of activity listed (see example over the page).

Thus participants undergo a process of analysis and reflection on the activities they carry out during their daily life. Some perspectives are highly predictable - such as 'low wages' for working in the fields; others may be unpredictable. For example, women may say they enjoy household work because it gives them a 'we' feeling - i.e. it is associated with self-respect. The upbringing of children may be given a large number of frowning faces because it is seen as so difficult and expensive, not as a source of joy.

The participants are then divided into their previous groups with the same facilitators. They are asked to consider **what has to change**, in

## Session 2: Analysis of information - Example of analysis matrix or table

| Activity              | ☺ good feelings | ☹ bad feelings | Reasons  |
|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------|--|
| Household work        | ☺☺☺             | ☹☹             | ☺ positive 'we' feeling<br>☹ men and boys don't help           |
| Field work            |                 | ☹☹☹☹☹          | ☹ low wages, verbal abuse, tiring, hot sun, discrimination     |
| Child care            | ☺               | ☹☹☹            | ☺ son for support in old age<br>☹ major expenses for education |
| Collecting water etc. | ☺               | ☹☹☹            | ☺ if tap is in the house<br>☹ long distance to tap or well     |

the case of each category of activity, to reduce the problems identified by the frowning faces. This should be set out on a large sheet of paper, in the language of the workshop, by the facilitator for the group.

These findings should then be pinned up and presented to the whole group. In each case, a person from the group should be invited to make the presentation, even if the facilitator has to prompt because they cannot actually read the paper. Building the women's ability to present information to an audience and overcoming their shyness in public is an important part of the workshop process.

## Session 3: Cultural session

As already outlined, it is better to hold a session of a different kind so as to give the participants a break from concentrating on their daily lives and problems. This can be geared towards information generation, via cultural activity such as dramas, drawing and painting, or story-telling. If dramas are selected - these need no extra materials or special skills - then groups should be re-constituted, to contain at least eight or nine members. This is needed to provide a cast of characters.

Either a title of the drama should be given, or half a story which the group will complete. If titles are used, 'a day at home', or 'a day at school' (for adolescents), can be used. Themes should be very simple. Note that 'A festival day' can be good if the action is specified as taking

place at home; otherwise there is a danger it will be used for an uninformative display of ritual and dancing. 'A sad day' is a useful way of drawing out problems. For those involved in sex work, 'In the evening' is a potentially revealing topic. If half-stories are given to help the process along, these should reflect situations familiar to the players. It is useful to present at least one character as comic (for example, drunk).

A full morning or afternoon session will be needed for the groups to develop and rehearse their dramas, and then present them. Afterwards, a discussion can elicit people's views about the authenticity of the stories and what the characters and audience did and felt about the events they depicted.



Ashama (left) explains the significance of the artwork depicting the dedication of the Devadasi bride to the Goddess to the district chief of police and other non-governmental organisations.

## Session 4: Development of action plans - Example of advocacy plan development

| Messages   | Who to?  | With whom?                                      | How?  | When and where?                     |
|--|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| 'Men and boys should help with household work'           | Husbands, sons, village elders                     | Members of the women's group                    | Discussions                                     | Several times, at women's homes     |
| 'Field work wages for women should be higher'            | Landowners, employers, village heads               | All local women's group members, for solidarity | Presentations, meetings, sit-ins if no progress | Several times, at the workplace     |
| 'Support is needed for our children to go to school'     | Teachers, local education committee, bank managers | Women's group, village councillors              | Meetings, appointments, loan proposals          | Several times, at schools and banks |
| 'We all need to have water in our yard or very close by' | Village council, water committee                   | Local councillors, women's group                | Meetings, appointments, sit-ins                 | Repeated visits to council offices  |
| Etc  |  |   |   |                                     |

### Session 4: Development of action plans

This is the final session dealing with the information emerging originally from the timelines. Large sheets of paper on the wall are needed. The presentations on **what needs to change?** should all be pinned up. The whole group first considers what the main **messages** are in each category of activity to emerge from the previous presentations. These are listed in the left hand column. For example, the message about *household work* might be that boys and men should share the tasks. The message about *field work* could be that wages should rise.

The rest of the columns across the top should be headed as follows (in the language of the workshop): **Who** do we address the message to? **Who** do we enlist to help us put the message across? **How** do we put it across (e.g. by discussion, drama, song); **When** do we put it across and **where?** For the first message, go through the exercise of answering these planning questions with the whole group. Then, break up into small groups to discuss the rest of the messages. If possible, break into groups of people from the same locality, so that in the

future they could act together to put these plans of action into effect (see example above).

When the groups have finished, these plans of action should be presented to the group as a whole. Discussion can be held on omissions, and further elaborations of what to do if progress is not forthcoming.

### Session 5: Ceremony with invited guests

If the sessions have all been completed, the action plans should be the basis of presentations to the guests. If there is not time for all to be presented, then one or two will be enough. Group artwork and a drama may also be presented. If the workshop is not yet complete, the previous work on **what has to change?** should be presented, if possible with some indication of how the dignitaries could themselves aid this process. **It is very important that the dignitaries be asked to look at and listen to the presentations before being asked to speak themselves.** Otherwise the ceremony will not fulfil its empowerment and advocacy purpose.

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