

## **LISTENING TO DEVADASIS - A STORY OF EXPLOITATION AND VULNERABILITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The growing consensus on the need to focus more directly on inequalities, in order to achieve development which benefits all groups stems, from the recognition that, the poorest and the most marginalized have not benefited equitably from the development process. Drawing on the experiences of Devadasis, this paper argues the case for a greater focus on gender inequality, which relates to social factors of difference and which contributes to marginalization. By focusing on the experience of Devadasis, the paper explores the dynamics and mechanism which marginalize Devadasis and calls for a greater focus, in the current and future development frameworks. This paper highlights the importance of the 'lived experience' of Devadasis.

The term "Devadasi" originally described a Hindu religious practice, in which girls were "married" to a deity. In addition to taking care of the temple, they learned and practiced Bharatanatyam and other classical Indian arts traditions, and enjoyed a high social status. Following the demise of the great Hindu kingdoms, the practice degenerated. The Colonial reform movement made an attempt, to suppress the practice legally but the system continues and persists till today. As a result of social changes, Devadasis are left without their traditional means of support and patronage. Colonial views on Devadasis are hotly disputed, by several groups and organizations in India, and by western academics.

In modern India the tradition has become associated with commercial sexual exploitation, as described in a recent report, by the National Human Rights Commission of the Government of India. According to this report, "after initiation as Devadasis, women migrate either to the nearby towns or other far-off cities, to practise prostitution". The practice of dedicating Devadasis was declared illegal, by the Government of Karnataka in 1982 and the Government of Andhra Pradesh in 1988. However, the practice is still prevalent in around 10 districts of North Karnataka and 14 districts in Andhra Pradesh.

Devadasis are also known, by various other local terms. They are sometimes referred to as a caste; however, some question the accuracy of this usage. "According to the Devadasis themselves there exists a devadasi 'way of life' or 'professional ethic' (vritti, murai), but not a devadasijati sub-caste. The high regard with which they were previously held, has deteriorated in recent years.

The popularity of Devadasis, seems to have reached its pinnacle around 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century. The rise and fall in the status of Devadasis can be seen to be running parallel to the rise and fall of Hindu temples. The status of the temples fell very quickly in North India and slowly in South India. As the temples became poorer and lost their patron kings and in some cases were destroyed, the Devadasis were forced into a life of poverty, misery, and in some cases, prostitution.

In the past Devadasi came from various different social groups, some become courtesans to princes, priests and other high caste men. This gave them a level of status and autonomy, not available to Indian women at that

time. However, the Devadasi are mainly Dalits. As women and Dalits, they are already members of the two most exploited groups in India, at dedication they are degraded further by the stigma of being Devadasi and a woman of disrepute. Because, of this they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and will find it even harder, to access their legal rights. There are a number of complex, intertwined factors which result in the parent's decision to dedicate their daughter.

In Karnataka, tradition and social pressure plays a key role, with 31% of Devadasi being dedicated because, it is seen as a hereditary duty. Social acceptance of dedication is higher in Karnataka than in Andhra Pradesh, therefore, it is not only religious, but also social norms which need to be challenged.

In the 1990's, due to the limited effect of legislation, State authorities entrusted the implementation of the Acts to NGOs. Much of the work of these organisations has been done through sanghas, self-help groups, which help women to access benefits, subsidies and legal support. Rehabilitated Devadasi, associated with such groups have proven effective agents in preventing dedication ceremonies from taking place. However, due to the limited resources of self-help groups, they are not always as successful as they could be, in improving the lives of former Devadasi.

Literacy, poverty, superstitions are the major causes for the continuation of the tradition. Devadasi life is very miserable, because of its uphill struggle for the individual. Devadasi children are also more susceptible. Most of the women are caught in the debt-traps of pimps, agents and touts.

The desire to throw off traditional forms of religion endorsed patriarchal and casteist enslavement, has not yet taken hold of the masses of low caste workers, agricultural labourers and poor peasants, in the border areas between Karnataka, Maharashtra and in Tamil Nadu. Until it does, the system will undoubtedly continue. At present, all we can say is that, the efforts of the last decades represent the beginning of a fight for human dignity and human rights.

**KEYWORDS:** Devadasi, Historical Context, Cross Cultural Comparison, Socio-Cultural Milieu, Exploitation