

**DEVADASI SYSTEM IN INDIA-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND
SUPREME COURTS STAGE ON IT**

*A look into the old system of the Devadasi system and its prevalence in the present
time*

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Devadasi or devaradiyar is a term derived from the Sanskrit word 'dev' or 'devi' meaning god or goddess, and 'dasi' meaning servant. The devadasi system is a South Indian practice where a low-caste girl, a minor, is 'married' to a Hindu goddess. Their status was quite high during ancient times. Even though they were respected by the society and their standard was quite high, they were sexually exploited by temple patrons and upper caste individuals.

The history of Devadasis are not much known due to its early inception. The first time this practice was seen was during the Keshari Dynasty, in the 6th century A.D in South India. It started when one of the Queens decided that certain women should be trained to worship god. They were treated as if they were Goddess Lakshmi herself, and were honoured because they could control their five senses and completely submit themselves to god.

At present, Devadasis are nothing more than sex slaves or child prostitutes sent to the temple, landlords or someone wealthy as soon as she attains puberty. It is, as said above, practiced among the low-caste families to support their household. The man takes care of the household in all financial aspects provided he can use the girl for sex.

Although, after Independence this system was banned, according to the National Human Rights Commission in 2013, there were as many as 450,000 Devadasis in India. Another commission led by Justice Raghunath Rao revealed that there are about 80,000 Devadasi women in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

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Various laws have been made from the Supreme court's side to put an end to this heinous activity, these are as follows,

- *Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, 1934*
- *Madras Devadasi (prevention of dedication) Act of 1947*
- *Karnataka Devadasi (prohibition of dedication) Act, 1982*
- *Andhra Pradesh Devadasi system (prohibition of dedication) Act of 1988*
- *Maharashtra Devadasi (abolition of Devadasi) Act, 2006*

Apart from this, the section 372 of the IPC prohibits selling minors for the purpose of prostitution. Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, also makes prostitution in or the vicinity of public places an offense.

Although there are cases of girls being forced into this tradition, full efforts are being applied to put an end to it

Devadasi is a system practiced in the southern part of India mainly seen in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. A Devadasi is a woman who is considered given in marriage to god. She is dedicated to worship and serve a deity for the rest of her life. She is not allowed to marry any mortal after the rituals to become a Devadasi are completed. The ritual or ceremony conducted for the same is known as the pottukattu ceremony ²where the girl, very young of age, clad in green undergoes the ritual. Saundatti festival is celebrated from October till the month of February. The family of the girl can choose any month from November onwards according to what they think is auspicious for them. During this festival a huge number of girls are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma³. The Devadasi had a high status among the

²This dedication happens during the saundatti festival. The devadasis are clad in green and are made to wear a necklace called mutthu.

³Yellamma or renuka was the wife of jamadagni. She is believed to have originated from the fire of the yajna that king renu performed- a ritual performed to maintain peace and good health. She was

society and were well respected. They were not economically dependent on anybody but, later on lost this status and were made 'prostitutes of god' and are treated as sex slaves to merely feed the family or to help them financially.

The history of the Devadasi system or how and where it originated from is not clear due to its early inception. The first time this practice was said to be seen was during the Keshari dynasty, in the 6th century A.D in South India. It started when one of the Queens decided that certain women should be trained to worship god. They were treated as if they were the goddess Lakshmi herself, and were honored because they could control their five senses and completely submit themselves to god. Some cite that the system started in the 7th century A.D during the reigns of the Cholas, Pandyas and the Chelas. They were concentrated around Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. They are called different names in various states such as Mathangi in Maharashtra, Jogini or Mathamma in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana and Devadasi in Karnataka. They learnt 64 types of art and used to dance and sing in front of royalty and got gold and land in return. Some of them however, chose to stay loyal to god. Although the Devadasis couldn't marry a mortal, they were known to have sexual relationship with the priests in the temple. They could choose their partners from among married as well as unmarried alike. In all the states the Devadasis are made to worship one certain deity, Yellama, Holiyamma or Jogamma. Yellamma or Renuka is a Hindu goddess worshipped by and large in the southern Indian states of Karnataka, Telengana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Renuka or Yellamma or Ekvira or Ellaiamman or Ellaiamma is worshipped as the 'goddess of the fallen'. She is called the 'mother of the universe' or 'Jagadamba'. She was the daughter of King Renu. In many traditions, Renuka and Yellama is the same goddess. Renuka fled to a low caste community when her son Parashurama came to kill her. Parashurama found her and cut her head along with the low caste woman who tried to protect her. In an attempt to bring her back to life he attaches Renuka's body to that of the low caste woman and vice versa. The former was accepted by King Jamadagni while the latter was

said to hold so much power that she could create a pot to hold water and bathe with it. This power came with complete concentration and devotion.

accepted and worshipped by the lower caste. Matangi, Renuka, Yellama, Jogamma are all names of the goddess.

The girls would be dressed in green sari, green bangles, toe rings and a waistband during the ceremony. There would also be a bowl in which they would keep coconut and a facemask and the girl has to sit next to the bowl. Next, five older Devadasis will tie a mutthu (necklace) around the girl's neck and whisper the sacred rules of Devadasi in her ears. After tying the necklace around her neck, she becomes a Devadasi and returns to her house. After attaining puberty, which can be as late as the age of 13 years, they tell the other Devadasis who then find potential traffickers or landlords who will have sex with her and take care of her family, financially. The girls were forced to become Devadasis because they were the source of income for the households which only had daughters. They thought of ways to make a girl child an asset as they thought she there is no way she can bring money to the house. The Madiga, Nayikka, Kurba and the Valmiki castes were the once who believed in this system and would marry off their daughters to landlords who will use her for sex and then provide financial support or to the priests who will sell them to brothels as prostitutes. Most of the time, the girls give birth, are disposed off without a family and then are forced to sell their bodies for small wages just to live by. They then are forced to give their daughters to become a Devadasi for daily expenses. Some were either forced. or some seemed to like this system and would willfully become a Devadasi.

The Devadasis due to giving their bodies for money end up with HIV and AIDS. Due to the rise in mining Activities the risk for HIV has increased. They also catch this virus from the truck drivers and the roadside men who paid them meager amounts for having sex with them. They end up carrying this virus from them and suffer many health problems. Many partners forced them to abort the child. As they are forced to conceive and abort at a very young age they have very poor reproductive health. The Devadasis mainly suffer malnutrition due to not getting enough food. They have ration cards with which they buy grains but, the amount is not much for them to have their fill. In many cases the Devadasis and their children have turned out to be

severely anemic. They also suffer from tuberculosis. Along with biological problems they suffer from mental health problems.

Various laws were made for the protection of the Devadasis like the Bombay Devadasi protection Act (1934), Madras Devadasi (prevention of dedication) Act (1947), Karnataka Devadasi (prohibition of dedication) Act (1982), Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (prohibition of dedication) Act (1988) and the Maharashtra Devadasi (abolition of Devadasi) Act (2006). Apart from this, section 372 of IPC prohibits selling minors for the purpose of prostitution. Immoral traffic (prevention) Act, 1956, also makes prostitution in or the vicinity of public places an offense.

Although, after independence the system was banned, according to the national human rights commission in 2013 there were as many as 450,000 Devadasis in India. Another commission led by Justice Raghunath Rao revealed that there are 80,000 Devadasis in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana itself. According to a survey⁴, a huge percentage of Devadasis do not have adequate housing and their children do not have access to proper education. The children of Devadasis grow up in the fear of the upper caste community and end up having inferiority complex. They are treated as untouchables and marked as a being of humiliation. Even though the children especially the daughters have been educated they are still not accepted in the community just because their mother was a Devadasi. It has also been observed that the land reserved in their (the family of the Devadasi) name it was reverted back to the original landowners as they used structural influence to force these families to take meager compensation for their land. The number of dropouts among them is also large as they are forced to drop out of school and the daughters are forced to follow the path of Devadasi. During the survey, many of them were asked about the Acts and rights provided to safeguard the Devadasis and most of them responded that either it wasn't applicable in their area as they didn't have a say or they were not even aware of the Acts. Only more than a few knew the Acts and said that they were applicable in their region and actually safeguarded their rights.

⁴ Between June and August 2015, SAKHI-Resource Centre for women conducted a survey within 20 villages of Bellary district in Northern Karnataka. The survey was carried to comprehend the living conditions prevailing for the families of Devadasi women with reference to their socio-economic surrounding.

It is necessary first to provide the families of Devadasis with proper housing and enough grains for their families to have their fill. Next, their children must be given adequate education and motivate them to pursue their dreams and look for a job to help their families financially. It is also important to provide health support to the Devadasis especially, for their mental health. They should also be given proper sex education and provided contraceptives for the same.