



Exploitation of Scheduled Caste Women: A Devadasi Cult

Pratibha Desai¹

Introduction:

Woman carrying a jag (metal mask) in a Pardi (basket) on her head and begging is known as Devadasi, (Servant of God). This ceremonial system is called “jogava” in Marathi. She maintains herself by begging and ends up her life in brothel. We know that religion is a complex phenomenon, which pervades with a vast range of human activities in the society. It emerged with the belief in power, superior to human being and directs him to destiny and controls the nature. Its practical dimensions are expressed through a number of ways in the form of culture of the society. The religious scriptures always play a major role in the development of culture enriching language and literature. In spite of all merits of religion, one cannot overlook number of aberrations, crimes, superstitions and exploitation in the name of religion. In India Devadasi cult is such a religious practice, under which a girl is dedicated to or married not with mortal man but to idol or object of worship or to a temple.

This cult is prevalent even today throughout India, more particularly especially in the districts of Belgaum, Bijapur, Gulbarga, Bidar of the South Karnataka and districts of Solapur, Kolhapur, Satara, Sangli of Maharashtra.

Compared to other districts of Karnataka it is more prevalent in Belgaum district where thousands of untouchable female children (between 6 to 8 years) are dedicated to Yellamma deity. Yellamma deity is favorite among the dalit Community. The dedicated girls are in the form commercial sex workers. The saying in Marathi is ‘Devdasi devachi, bayko saarya gavachi’, means servant of God but the wife of whole town. According to an estimation at least one thousands girls belonging to backward community are initiated into Devdasi system every year and are pushed into trafficking and commercial work.

¹ Lecturer in Sociology, Walchand College of Arts and Science, Ashok Chowk, Solapur (Maharashtra)

The cult of dedicating girls to temples is prevailing many in states, despite of many governmental legislative measures. It is in different forms and names such as Maharis in Kerala , Ivatis in Assam, Murali's in Maharashtra, Basavis and Devali in Andhra Pradesh and Jogatis and Basavis in Karnataka State. With the spread of urbanization and commercial sex work, this cult is becoming more active with the new entrants. The backward areas of Belgaum district are more prone to this cult, where maximum number of Scheduled Caste women from all majority villages of Belgaum district is dedicated to Yellama Deity of Soundatti in Belgaum district. In view of this, the paper attempts to address following objectives:

1. To find major reasons behind for persistence and continuity of this cult.
2. To understand major impacts of this cult on backward caste women.
3. To devise possible measures to eradicate this deep rooted religious cult.

Methodology of Study: To fulfil objectives of the study qualitative methodologies are employed. A case study method is used focusing on a single village Chinchali in Belgaum district of Karnataka State.

Sources of data: Primary as well as Secondary data are collected for the study. Primary data are collected through face to face in depth interviews (case studies) by using interview and observation technique. Further, cross-sectoral information are gathered ones informal interview form key informants like leaders, brothel keepers etc.

The secondary sources are collected from the books and journals supplementing the, village records, district census handbooks, gazetteers, ethnographic notes, archival accounts, temple and math records, sands, government orders, scripts of dance and lyrics, and ritual songs. Collected qualitative information is presented descriptively by presenting case studies.

Area of the study: Belgaum district tops the list of districts having devadasi population. The famous goddess Yellamma temple at Soundatti is situated in this district and is popular for mass open initiation of girls to Devadasi cult. As a result the government of Karnataka passed legislation to ban dedications of girls to temples. Chinchali village is one amongst the 58 villages of Raibag. It is a big village having 3000 households with nearly 25000 populations. There are about 25% of households belong to SC and ST households. Out of the total households 750 households are SC and ST. The Scheduled Castes majority

prevailing are Mahar (Holeya) Mang, chamber, Bhuvi, Vaddar, Koravi, Dhor, Dhasar, Shikalgar and Talwar.

Evolution of devadasi system: The evolution of Devadasi cult can be traced during a much earlier period in the history in India. This cult appears to be the relic of Devadasian, matriarchal society. In the olden days it was highly honoured system patronized by the kings. Over a period of time, the system deteriorated because of the superstition, religious dogma and illiteracy and these women began to be exploited for the flesh trade, reducing their dignity to the level of cheap prostitution.

Dedication Process: When a girl is dedicated to or married not to a mortal man but to an idol, deity or object of worship or to a temple some rite is performed. This dedication ceremony is more or less similar to the marriage ceremony. It is called as Muttu kattuvadu (tying the beads) or “Devarige Bidavadu” (dedicating to the deity). Auspicious days for dedication ceremony take place on full moon day of these months. Unlike old times, such ceremony are now-a-days performed rather secretly without much fanfare at smaller temple or local priests’ residences rather than big temples like Yellamma at Savadatti or Kokatnur to avoid the expenses and also to escape clutches of law. The expenses are borne either by the would be companion or paramour or the “Gharwalis” mistresses of urban brothel where these girls would be expected to join their brothel, (Jogan Shankar: 1994,P-99).

The vows at time of initiation include the warning to parents or brothers that this girl will have a right in their property. Then the priest addresses the girl to be dedicated and seeks some set answers, to which the girl has to agree as follows:

Priest: look! Hereafter you cannot claim a right of wife with any man, you have to fast on Tuesdays and Fridays and beg on those days holding a Joga in your hand. You happen to see a calf; sucking its mother you should not forcibly withdraw the calf. If a cow grazes the crop before you, you shall not drive it away. You shall not speak untruth. If you are feeling hungry don't tell others and ask for food; offer shelter to shelterless and strangers. Provide food to those who are hungry and water to the thirsty. Help the helpless people. If anybody abuses you and beats you, never retaliate. If you come across with an event of death, you have bath, visit the temple of Yellamma; only after worshiping the deity you are supposed to take meals. You should not eat “Yenjalu (left out food) of somebody you shall chant “Udho Yellamma” all the time. (Jogan Shankar:1994, P-101).

There is another simplified procedure of initiation ceremony, which is economical and attracts less attention of the public. The girl is taken to a natural spring pond at

Yellamman Gudda. There the girl takes bath and wears a new white dress along with a few jogatis and relatives, she goes to Yellamma temple with naivedya to offer at to the deity. In the plate, which contains naivedya, a bead necklace is kept and it is covered by piece of cloth. Then they hand over the plate to the priest. He offers the naivedya to the main deity and picks up the bead necklace and touches it to the feet of the idol, then he keeps it back in the plate and covers it with the cloth. Then jogtis and parent come out of the temple. A senior jogati ties the bead necklace to the girl's neck all jogatis who accompany her to the temple are fed and offered some "dakshina". The girl after this ritual comes back to village and goes for joga (begging). As she goes for joga all members of the village realize that she has been dedicated to Yellamma deity.

Life After dedication: After dedication the ceremony of the first night is celebrated. It is called Uditumbuvadu or Deflowering in ceremony. The deflowering ceremony is conducted after the girl's first menstruation period. Previously the right belonged to the priest but now-a-days it is well public within the clientele of businessman and rich landlords. One who deflowers her gets right to her over others for the rest of her life but neither she nor the children of such union have any right over him or his property. He can leave her any time she has to lead a life of a cheap prostitute either near about or at metropolitan brothels. By the time her market value goes down and she is thrown out of business, she becomes a habitat for a number of diseases including may be AIDS, and ends up in some village corner, desolate, rejected friendless and rots to death.

The emergence of a new trend is noticed pertaining to deflowering of a devadasi who is destined to urban brother's throat agents or gharwali. For the purpose of deflowering ancient is fixed by the concerned flowered by that client who pays a huge amount as bhakshish (tips) to the gharwali or agent.

Major Factors responsible for persistence and continuity of this cult

Religious, social and economics are the three major factors responsible for persistence and continuity of this cult. These factors are interlinked.

Religious Factors: Religious orthodoxy and ingrained superstition play important role in the dedication process. Yellamma deity has maximum devotees from backward communities. These are mostly poor, illiterate be take vows that shows their wishes to be fulfilled if their daughters are given away to Yellamma. Some parents pray for the

fulfilment of a wish or cure from a disease others hope to be blessed with the birth of a son. All these blind beliefs lead the parents to dedicate their daughters. Devadasi cult becomes a major religious fitting centre, which provides the prostitutes to the majority of girls are from Schedule Castes. The other reason is that devadasis have a firm religious belief that they must not get married as they are married to god. This poses a difficult problem, not only to find them husband but also persuade them for marriage. Instances are abundant that these girls if married, lost their prestige in the eyes of their kith and kin. This strong belief forced them remain unmarried and lead of life prostitution.

Economic Factors: Economic factors play an important role in prevalence of devadasi system. The devadasi cult prevails in the corridors of Karnataka and Maharashtra which are chronic drought prone regions neglected for centuries for ever under successive governments after independence. Natural calamities like floods and famines are the annual hazards which leave people poverty stricken and encourage untouchables to practice this system. Landlessness and unemployment also encourage many Scheduled Castes to practice this system.

Social Factors: Major Social factors are vested interest of upper caste and classes to gain accessibility and desire of women of lower castes to appease their extra martial sexual needs. Illiteracy, general ignorance and alienation of elites among Schedule Caste force them practice the system. Upper castes reinforce their declaration of social and economic superiority over the lower castes by keeping dalit women as prostitutes.

Other factors are influence of agents of brothels, procures and local devadasis and gharwalis and influence of old devadasis (Jogatis) who have the germs of the evil system. They influence innocent parents by oracles and soothsaying. Childless devadasis adopt female children and dedicate to the deity to have somebody to look after them at their old age.

Devadasis of Chinchali:

There are many devadasis in Chinchali. Devdasis are found among only four Scheduled Castes Viz: Holers, Madars, Samagar and Bhuvi. Majority of the devadasis belong to age group of 21-30. Parents maintain the secrecy until girl attains puberty. Hence it appears that the number of devadasis below the age group of 14 is under enumerated. Devadasis of Chinchali are engaged in diverse occupations. Majority of devadasis are practicing prostitution in urban brothels and also to some extent in the villages.

In order to get the clear picture of devadasis cult, an indepth analysis of some cases is undertaken. Four case studies are presented in the study for giving insights of the problem.

Case 1 :

Muttavva Bhuvi is a Devadasi belonging to fisher community. She is 31yr old and practicing the prostitution in her village. She is illiterate and was dedicated at the age of 10 yrs. Her father is fisherman and landless agricultural labour and her mother is the devotee of the deity Yellamma. Her mother told that she had no child and she took a vow to Yellamma of Soundatti to dedicate a daughter if she delivered. Later she had only a daughter. She recalls that dedication was to be done at the local Yellamma temple in the April month. After attaining the puberty she was introduced to a local upper caste young man, who did the first ceremony with her. Sometimes she lived with him and now she has no economic support from him. She mainly depended on prostitution. She had no child. Her presence is essential at every religious function of Yellamma temple.

Case 2 :

Mala Kamble is a devadasi of Chinchali village. She is 35 yrs old. Her parents are landless agricultural labourers. As per family tradition she was dedicated to the Yellamma of Soundatti at the age of 8 yrs. She recalls that the dedication is done at the temple of Yellamma during the annual fair. They went to attend the fair in a bullock cart. After attaining puberty she was introduced to a local Lingayat young man, who did the first night ceremony. Now, she is living with him. She had got couple of children. Both of them are daughters. Her first daughter is studying in 10th standard and the second in 4th standard. She does not want to dedicate her daughters to Yellamma and she wants to educate them. According to her it is a cruel system where dalit women are exploited in the name of religion.

Case 3 :

Putala Mang is 70 yrs old devadasi living with her brothers' sons. She has no child. She had dedicated to Yellamma at early tender age. She belongs to Madiga caste. Accordingly the dedication ceremony was conducted at Soundatti. She attained puberty at the age of 13. A village Maratha landlord conducted deflowering. For a few days he continued relation during and he provided some assistance. She got some property from her later lovers. She gave full authority to her father and brothers to enjoy her property. She is living with her brother and she is getting pension from State Government. She told that early devadasis were given more respect in the society which is not the case present.

Case 4 :

Sakhubai Samagar is the daughter of shoemaker. At the age of 14 she got married with the Samagar from nearby village. Her husband was poor and he was very lazy. He used to remain idle and thereby accentuated further degradation of the economic conditions. Her married life became unbearable. Hence she deserted her husband and went to her father at village. The practice of keeping married daughter with the parents is usually considered to be improper in the village. An old devadasi of the village suggested her father to dedicate his daughter to Yellamma deity. Her father also accepted the suggestion. Soon after dedication, she was introduced to Bombay, Kamatipur red light area by a Gharwali of the same village. She was turned into Commercial Sex Worker when she was of about 8 yrs. She is HIV positive. Due to this reason she returned to her native. Now she is leading a miserable life without any hope.

Bad Impacts:

Dedication to devadasi cult provides a license for prostitution with religious sanction. Many downtrodden women are sexually exploited. Soon after dedication, she has to lead a life of a cheap prostitute either at metropolitan or nearby brothel. By the time her market value goes down. She is thrown out of business and she becomes helpless. At the end she leads miserable life. Majority of women are suffering from HIV Aids. Many Devadasi children have no legal father, where as biological father are not ready to take responsibility.

Measures

- 1. Awareness:** Awareness needs to be created among the lower caste people from where women are initiated as devadasi. Detail information regarding HIV Aids may be given to every member of this community. The Karnataka devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act,1982 should be made known to all the people in general and community leaders, various peoples' representatives at village. Law should be enforced strictly.
- 2. Education:** The members belonging to low castes from which women are initiated into devadasis should be educated through media. Children of devadasis should be educated. Education will bring awareness regarding this evil system. Daughters of devadasis should be educated with free education
3. It is necessary that rehabilitation and correctional centres be located in rural areas where the practice is prevalent with a high rate.

4. Poverty and unemployment are major factors which encourage lower Castes to practice this evil system. Poverty should be eradicated. It is necessary to launch the anti-poverty programmes. Employment should be provided by establishing industries.
5. Superstitions and blind beliefs should be eradicated from minds.
6. Frequent anti-dedication campaigns and rallies should be arranged in the area where this practice is popular.
8. The children of devadasis are more prone to the devadasi system. Hence, they should be kept away from such social environment at an early age. They should be provided education in residential schools.
9. Marriages of devadasis should be conducted and respect and social prestige should be given
10. Values and attitudes held by male members of the society who are responsible for continuation of exploitation should be changed.

Conclusions: Devadasi cult is evil system where many backward women are exploited in the name of religion. It is more in the borders of Karnataka and Maharashtra States. Devadasi cult is one of important Prostitute Fitting Centre through which more number of devadasis are provided to the brothels of nearby towns. This is major cause to spread of HIV Aids. Poverty and employment are the major factors to encourage the devadasi cult. Hence, it needs to be tackled properly for its eradication.

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