

Women: Upholders of Religion and Culture

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ABSTRACT

Religion, culture and tradition have varied manifestations and have become central focus of discourses not only in India but also in the west. In spite of globalization when it comes to women and upholding the traditions India because of its multi ethnicity goes back to feudalism and religion becomes an adjunct to accomplish these so called complex phenomenon pervading a wide range of activities in the society which leads to social exclusion, discrimination and exploitation. In the 21st century in India there are states like Tamil Nadu , Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh where women are still grappling in darkness in the name of religion and are forced to enter into this trade which is considered pious and holy.. This paper will therefore point out how patriarchy uses religion as a ploy to sanctify man's carnal instincts and then doubly marginalize women as devadasis and ultimately reduce their lives to mere prostitution. In this connection the paper will give an insight into the social and cultural fabric of the society which needs a great transformation. The society should encourage women to break the age old barriers of prejudices and create a casteless and classless society for themselves because further stratifications will only stifle their lives .They themselves have to awaken to light and freedom and restore India's cultural heritage which in many aspects hailed women as a forceful and rightful contender of the society. Jawaharlal Nehru had once totally ascribed to the well-known remark of a French writer that the test of culture and civilization of the people lay in the status and condition of its women. To realign the social structure therefore, women have to rise above religious orthodoxy and help in nation building.

Key words: religion, devadasis, tradition, patriarchal, prejudices

INTRODUCTION

From the spiritual perspective no discrimination ever existed in the eyes of god. He created basically the two sexes for procreation of species, but as the society moved towards civilization human beings became selfish and one sex tried to overpower the other. Our early Vedic period was basically matriarchal, but unfortunately during the later Vedic period when the caste system became rigid and the seeds of patriarchy had been sown the status of women kept changing frequently since men started deciding roles for her. The Manusmriti, one of the textual sources shows the misogynistic attitude of the Indian society. It says it is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females .It further states girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father ,women in the custody of their husbands once they are married and widows in the custody of their sons and in no circumstances she should be allowed to assert herself independently.

In the 6th century B.C Jainism and Buddhism which arose as a rebellious child of Hinduism also would not allow its women to stay at home if they chose to propagate religion .In the medieval period ,the Bhakti movement declared that God dwells in every individual and brought religion to the downtrodden bringing more misery and oppression thereafter .In the name of culture and traditions religion thus became the foundation of oppression and tried to push this poor woman into oblivion .Lot of social reforms emerged in areas of culture and steps were taken to create a society devoid of all overt social aberrations like polytheism ,polygamy ,casteism, sati ,child marriage ,illiteracy-all believed to be impediments to the progress of women(Rekha Pande,2009,p.27).All reformers believed that no society could progress if women were backward. But one important aspect needs a special mention. The patriarchy structure was never challenged and the reformers picked up those issues which had been pointed out by the Britishers as evidence of degeneration in the society. Women organisations sprang up but they too did not have any independent ideology. The direction and content of reforms was also laid down by a male. So women just became passive recipients upholding traditions and culture without questioning its biased implication became its carrier. Women however were always considered emblems of tradition (Kumkum Sangari; Vaid Suresh,1989,p.90) and for any kind of reworking a debate on rights of women is necessary which may pose as a threat to the society. So they always considered wise to impose roles on women which would be traditional and cultural. Writing about women whether in India or in the west is therefore always an exhilarating challenge but often ends up in frustration .Lot of movements and legislations have also been undertaken to rectify this patriarchal superiority which has led to the subordination of the women race in the form of sexual exploitation, exclusion, marginalisation, and discrimination. Sexual exploitation of minor girls be it in the name of caste, religion, race, colour, social status tradition or culture, in any form is an internationally acclaimed epidemic .But sexual exploitation in the name of religion prevails in India ,the world's second most populous country. The result of this exploitation ultimately leads to discrimination and exclusion in the social system and gives birth to this social evil. These poor girls have to bear this brunt all their life and live as Devadasis.. So whether it is a rural housewife or an urban woman it is they who are the engines that drive religion.

OVERVIEW OF THE DEVADASIS AND THE SOCIAL SYSTEM

Over the past two decades due to the rise of modern feminism there has been a dramatic increase in the meaning and exploration of gender. Gender is not a homogenous category but is internally differentiated and elaborated by class, race, caste, education ethnicity, region and above all the author believes caste interacts with gender. Intersection of caste and gender has also posed great challenges since women has less prestige and respect compared with men within the same caste. Gender therefore as a marker of disparity is ubiquitous and this paper aims to analyse the concept of marginalization on the basis of caste and religion. With this challenge this paper specifically seeks to analyze the Indian Institution of devdasi, a religious practice which consists of the votive offering of poor and Dalit girls to the deities in Hindu temples. This shameful practice gives birth to child prostitutions in our country and is very much an acceptable social phenomenon in the Indian society.

This paper will give us an overview of the Devadasi system as it was in the past and the changing scenario in the present times. They are known by different names as devadasis in Belgaum district in Karnataka;

Joginis in Mahbubnagar, Andhra Pradesh and Mathamma in Chittor, References to devadasis is found in Hindu scriptures almost dating back 4000 years.

The Shaiva sect of Hinduism fancied the Devadasi custom more than others. The Shiv Purana lays that when Shiva temples were built and endowments made for the conduct of the daily rituals, the gift of damsels versed in dance and song should also be made to the temple. History records the fact when in the 9th century A.D Raja Chola built the Brihadeswara temple in Tanjore he had gifted 400 devadasis to the temple. Kautilya's Arthashastra considered to be written in the 3rd century B.C has reference to Devadasi dance tradition which developed through the temple dancers is an important type among the dance patterns of India like Bharatnatyam in Tamil Nadu. Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh, Odissi in Orissa and Mohiniyattam in Kerala though Devadasis from Andhra Pradesh dominated the cultural scene in South India. The classic example was the celebrated devadasi Muddupalani who adorned the royal court of the Nayaka King of Tanjore, Prastapsimha (1739-1763) a great patron and lover of music, literature and art. This is the reason why we see various Bharatnatyam postures in Hindu temples. Earlier devadasis were involved in dancing and daily propitiations of the temple. In addition to this they performed dances in the king's court and came to be known as Rajadasis.

The traditional belief was that these girls would be serving the community as per God's directive. In other words, "the devadasis are courtesans in God court" (Kadetobad, 1983). This sacred condition and her belongingness to the divinity just ceremoniously but otherwise that benevolently concedes her to the whole community. There is a saying which goes like this "a devadasi is the servant of God but wife of the whole town". Lot of research have begun investigating the socio-economic, religious and emotional dynamics associated with female prostitutions (Hwang, S.O Bedford, 2004, Montgomery, 2001 Sarajjakool, S, 2003). The topic of religious female prostitutions pervades the contemporary discourse about devadasis in India and is being dealt in this paper. Traditionally devadasis were temple servants, artists, rajadasis, but in the modern times they have become full-fledged prostitutes and practice sex work in their homes or small lodges and brothels in rural settings (Blanchardetal.2005). For centuries devadasis were considered emblematic of Indian culture and since she was weddings and was regarded as bearer guests at weddings and was regarded as bearer fortune because she was immune from widowhood. However times have changed and the tradition of this system has lost its actual form and has got diluted and this fall in their socio-moral position has led to a social and moral degeneration from temple servants to cheap prostitutes (Vimochana, 1985)

The paper argues that it is not religion alone but the caste and socio-economic background that affect the lives of these devadasis. Religion no doubt is a contributory factor but the elements of caste and socio-economic background interwoven together represent a form of dominance and social control over these lower caste women. Caste conflicts and caste marginalization are recurrent elements in the devadasis' experiences and accounts. Dalit women are victims interpersonal and structural violence and this is a legitimate reflection of the caste dynamics (Rozario,2000). Ironically the construction of purity pollution is conveniently forgotten when pure and upper caste men are engaged in sexual encounters with 'impure' lower caste women.

OBJECTIVES

- To find out whether caste, religion, socio economic background affects the lives of devadasis.

METHODOLOGY

The author of this paper reviewed the works of eminent researchers. Content analysis was done and the findings are presented in a tabular form

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The present study aims to analyse the problems and challenges faced by the devadasis. The author of this paper has reviewed a few researches already conducted by eminent researchers on this topic, hence the secondary data will briefly highlight and assess the research gaps wherever possible to assess this social evil which still exists in the name of religion in the 21st century.

Name of the Researcher	Topic	Findings
Desai 2007	Exploitation of Scheduled Caste women: A devadasi cult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevalent in districts of South Karnataka, Assam, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and known by different names in different places. • Women from lower castes are pushed into the trade in the name of religion, • Devadasi cult is one of the important prostitute fitting centres to the nearby towns. Poverty and caste are the main reasons for its encouragement .
Maggi Black 2007	Women in ritual slavery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research project was undertaken in 2006 in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. • Girls were dedicated

		<p>between the age of 8 and 12 and initiated into this cult by the age of 15.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditionally, the children of devadasis became victims of trafficking, a social evil handed down through generations, • Absence of the father figure ,dire poverty ,no education were reasons for forced religious marriage and sexual exploitation.
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Orchard 2007	Impact of gender sexuality and relationships for the devadasi sex workers in rural India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project was undertaken in Karnataka. • Culture dynamics of sexuality and relationships were examined and it was found that devadasis participated in this religious practice out of their moral and religious obligation. • They considered themselves above sex workers since they wanted to uphold the tradition from the cultural perspective.
Thappa , et. Al . 2007	Prostitution in India and its role in the spread of HIV infection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The devadasis became objects of sexual pleasure of temple priests due to ill treatment of parents, ignorance, prior incessant rapes, early marriage and dissertations, etc.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This commercial sexual industry is a multi-billion dollar company and this industry will keep on running as long as men want to indulge in it.
Laxmi Vishwanathan 2008	Women of pride: the devadasi heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bharatanatyam a dance practice monopolised by the devadasis has now gained worldwide reputation and is no more within their boundaries.
Ramberg 2009	Magical hair as dirt : ecstatic bodies and post colonial reforms in South India.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The matted locks of hair was compared with Devi Yellamma's hair and the devadasis who possessed it were considered to be a part of her manifestation who had extraordinary powers and could give oracles. • Anthropologists interested in the relationship between body and culture have found associations between hair practices and sexuality.
Tambe 2009	Reading devadasi practice through popular Marathi literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In day to day practice it was found that devadasis who were attached to the temples were undoubtedly from the Dalit community but did not have any right in the temple nor did they have any space to pursue their artistic skills. • The hierarchy division of labour determined by the caste system still continued.
Torri 2009	Abuse of lower caste in south India: the institution of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young girls are still consecrated in rural areas

	Devadasi	<p>in this cult because of sanctions provided by social customs and religion as we know is also combined with economic and social pressures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social control and hegemonic masculinity of the upper caste men is still overpowering the lower caste Dalit women. • So caste relation of domination and subordination exists in the Indian society.
Mytheli Srinivas 2011	Creating conjugal subjects: Devadasi and politics of marriage in colonial Madras Presidency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A devadasi women was prohibited from marrying mortal men. Even though many of them maintained sexual relationships with upper caste male patrons. • The role of devadasi is to render services within the temple and for the service rendered they may or may not receive any income.

<p>Dalavi and Badiger 2012</p>	<p>Awareness and opinions of devadasis on selected income generated activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to them, and the secondary data used they came down to the conclusion that most of the devadasis belong to middle age group (72%), were scheduled caste. (86%) were illiterate , but most of them were aware of the income generating activities like diary, papadh preparation, tailoring etc.
<p>Devraj and Doddamani 2012</p>	<p>Socio economic welfare policies for the rehabilitation of devadasis in Belgaun district.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was concluded based on the information taken from an interview schedule. • Even after the prohibition of this practice there is a need to increase awareness on the rehabilitation and social welfare schemes for the devadasis. <p>In spite of ban and prohibition the system still continues and women still become prey to sexual harassment and prostitution.</p>

<p>Shwetha and Manjula (2015)</p>	<p>Devdasi system and its impact on their children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devdasi system according to them was considered to be nothing more than commercial sex in the name of god. • Children took the tag of devdasi children. Most of them missed out on parental care as they were not allowed to stay with their mothers. • This study gives an insight in what the children may be feeling and the impact of this system on them. The study was conducted with a small sample size. The children though did not blame their mother but they felt sorry and perceived her to be a victim of this heinous social system. • The kids did not want to be labelled as devdasi's children.
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Based on the above content analysis the author of this paper concluded that this practice is still prevalent in the number of districts of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. In spite of its ban this heinous social evil of throwing young girls into this flesh trade in the name of religion is still dominating due to innumerable reasons of poverty, caste, tradition, moral and religious obligations and patriarchy etc. The author of this paper wants to highlight that from the cultural perspective the devadasis at times take up this practice gladly to uphold the traditions. They consider it as a sacred duty and offer themselves to the service of God and eventually in the hands of the upper caste men and priests of the temple. They still live by prejudices and in spite of awareness programmes and welfare schemes they still

cling on to this social evil. They consider themselves above sex workers and transmit the same to the next generation as a matter of right.

CONCLUSION

Marginalisation, Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Identity Formation have become central focus of discourses in India. Social exclusion and discrimination refer to the process and outcome of keeping a social group outside the power centres and resources and marginalizing them in the name of religion, superstition, prejudices, socio-economic status and caste system. In a posthumous article title “An obituary on caste as a system” Srinivas(2003) argued that caste as a system is dead while individuals flourish due to the specific nature of the Hindu society and its denial of the individual as a unit of the society. The primary unit of the society is caste. The rights of an individual accrue to him not in his personal capacity but also due to his membership of a caste. Religion too is a complex phenomenon, which pervades with a vast range of human activity in the society. It emerged with the belief in power, superior to human beings and directs him to destiny and controls the nature. Its practical dimension are expressed through a number of ways in the form of culture enriching language and literature. In spite of all merits of religion, one cannot overlook the aberrations, crimes, superstitions, exploitation and marginalization of women in the name of religion.

Sociologist and historians have extensively analyzed the treatment of women under the caste system, Historian have argued that the caste system not only determines the social division of labour but its sexual division as well. Literature suggests that endogamy (a crucial feature of the caste system) should be seen as a mechanism of recruiting and retaining control over the labour and sexuality of women; the concepts of “purity” and pollution segregate groups and also regulates the mobility of women (Dasgupta 2000)

In India women population constitute about half of the total population and history has put on record that women in the name of caste and religion have been marginalized since there are multiple socio-economic disadvantages women face whether at work place or otherwise. The advocators of feminism have always upheld their liberation and upliftment but from the reality perspective women have always been attacked by the so called elitist men and feudal lords who have even gone on to the extent of sacrificing women in the name of religion. This religious heinous tradition and prejudice has exploited and doubly marginalized Indian girls sexually as “Devadasis” or female servants of god. This paper argues that it is not solely religion but the caste and socio-economic background which affect the lives of these devadasis. Religion considered a holy calling has all the more made the devadasis tread on a direct path of sexual exploitation which is shameful and disgusting. This system of devadasis is therefore quite controversial since some authors associate this practice with power and prestige and others over a period of time due to its social control and hegemonic masculinity of the upper caste associate it with degradation and prostitution. As a result this paper therefore aims to combine gender analysis to the concepts of sexuality, caste and marginalization. Caste and gender are therefore intersections and lead to such a heinous practice where domination and subordination are an ongoing product of everyday social practice. Over the last two decades studies on women in India have raised important questions about the indivisibility, distortion and marginalization of gender as a category of analysis in mainstream disciplines and their of canonization. The recognition of caste as not just a retrograde but also oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in

modern society but on the contrary very wide spread, required the feminist scholars to integrate questions of caste with those of class and gender. Social rank is therefore determined with reference to caste which creates a rigid and oppressive form of inequality and its origin therefore becomes a subject of debate. (Chakraborty 2000) “Untouchability” along with rituals and ritual prohibitions are an essential feature of the caste system. This practice of untouchability isolates those belonging to the lower caste or Dalits from those belonging to the upper caste. As noted by Shah (2001) “though the visible practice of untouchability has declined –certainly in public spheres – incidents of atrocities against dalits have shown a similar downturn, and continue unabated in post independence in various forms murder, arson, rape, “Power and social control find expression in both caste and relations. (Kannibrn, 1991. Omvedt, 1993, 1998).

There are different stories in Indian legend regarding the origin of the system. According to one popular story Jamadagni, father of great sage warrior Parushurama, ordered his son to behead his mother Renuka. Parushurama obeyed his father. He was so pleased at his son’s obedience and granted him three boons to bring his mother back to life. Parushurama used one of the boons to bring his mother back to life. Renuka’s decapitated head could not be traced. Head of a lower caste woman achieved the higher status of being a Brahmin’s wife. Following this tradition a number of young girls of lower caste started to be dedicated to the Goddess Yellamma (Vijaya Kumar Chakrapani,1993). Even this sacred story has been justified by marginalizing and sacrificing a woman considering this as an elevation to her image and status. Right from the childhood the lower caste girls are therefore brought up with the notion that if they are chosen or offered to the Goddess or the feudal lords it is a matter of pride for them. Indian religion though a holy calling becomes a forced sacred prostitution for them.

This sacred prostitution is mainly developed in South Indian but also exists in the rest of the country in smaller proportion. Muslim influence has probably attributed to his system (Shankar 1990) Shankar Jogen 1994 has put forth different hypothesis to explain the evaluation of devadasi system. First, according to him the custom of dedicating girls has considered a substitute for human sacrifice and was above all an ultimate offering, second it could be that it would ensure the fertility of the land and increase human population, third the devadasi system has believes could be a part of phallic worship that existed in India from early Dravidian times. Another hypothesis could be that the sacred prostitution sprang from the custom of providing sexual hospitality for strangers and if such hospitality is offered by a woman of the same rank of a Goddess, prosperity would prevail. The author of his paper too draws a hypothesis with a belief that, when Muslim invaders were attacking the Indian temples, woman could have been offered to them to save the temples from being demolished. None of these hypotheses can however provide exhaustive explanations of the complexity of this system’s origin. Since the devadasis were connected to the temple a lot of wealth was showered upon them by the rich feudal lords. The efficiency of the devadasis as a woman and dancer began to converge with the efficacy of the temple as a living centre of the religious and social life- political, commercial and cultural (Singh 1997, O’Neil, 2004). From the 6th to the 10th century there is no clear evidence to show when the devadasis became prostitutes but the rise and fall in their status could be visualized when the society was going through the structural changes and upheavals caused by external aggression after the 10th century. With the passage of time gradually however these young innocent girls

sucked into the ugly vortex of sexual exploitation has put them at a social disadvantage and has been relegated to the fringes of the society.

Despite a 1988 law banning the practice in India, the Devadasi tradition is thriving across the southern states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. The National Commission for Women estimated in 2008 that there are 4,50,000 Devadasis in India. The National Commission for Women survey states that the devadasis in Karnataka account for approximately 80% of all sex workers, while overall these girls account for an estimated 15% of all sex workers in India. According to the National Commission for Women 2002 India, this practice of devadasis thrives due to a complex interplay of reasons such as poverty, social acceptance, well being of the family, ancestral history of devadasis, no male issue in the family, pushed into the trade by a member of the family, or born a crippled, deaf or blind child and sex trade enmeshed inextricably with religious practices that have gradually institutionalized the sexual exploitation of women. Most devadasis are single and theirs is a matriarchal family but their status is continually declining and eroding.

Devadasis system therefore is not only exploitation of women : it is institutionalized exploitation of women; it is exploitation of Dalits, the lower class of untouchables; it is the religious sanction given to prostitution of helpless economically and socially deprived women, it is the glorification of humiliation of women of women. The constitutional provisions for women and that too if it is from a lower caste needs to be heavily underlined and addressed. The interpretation that the institution of Devadasi is the result of power and social control of the upper castes over the lower caste is confirmed by the process of dedication. With the passage of time the feudal lords and the aristocracy lost its glory but the system of appeasing a particular class and caste is an ingrained feature of the Indian society. Indian in the 21st century must put an end to this evil practice and strong constitutional provisions should be legislated and implemented to bring an end to this fully fledged sacred prostitution.

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