



IN THE NAME OF THE GODDESS – SADHNA ZADBUKE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST RELIGIOUS PROSTITUTION IN MAHARASHTRA, INDIA

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Abstract:-

The word devadasi, as defined by the Encarta dictionary means a Hindu temple dancer, a member of a hereditary class of women dancers in a Hindu temple. Etymologically speaking, the word means slaves of the Gods i.e. Dasis of the devas, or devadasis. The devadasis were called *nityasumangali*, meaning that they could never marry a mortal man and thus were ever-auspicious. Of course, in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra, India, the girl so dedicated is sometimes married to an inanimate object which can be as varied as a dagger or a sword; drum or even bells or a *ghunghroo*. Devadasis are illegally dedicated even today – though the practice has been long banned; all this goes on under cover of secrecy at a very famous temple of India- the Renuka Yellamma temple at Belgaum, Saundatti. The struggle to eradicate the system is the driving force of the life of an elderly lady living in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Sadhna Zadbuke; this is the focus of this article. Rather for a devadasi, existence as a woman is secondary to her existence as a devadasi. She is first a devadasi, only then is she a woman. This is the manner in which, her denigration is complete. Religion in the case of a devadasi is the institutional monolith that shapes her sexuality. In a way, it is a classic example of the manner in which the society seeks to tighten its hold on the sexual practices of its people.

Keywords:-

Devadasi, Poverty, Kolhapur, Renuka Yellamma, Religion, Prostitution.

Anagha Tambeⁱ asks,

‘How can the agency of women in prostitution be articulated when the “lower caste” women enter prostitution not merely because of physical coercion or economic necessity, but because of the social injunction linked with dedication that deny them the options of marriage or stable sexual relation and even non-sexual work, and brand them as “sexually available”?’

Tambe is referring to the *devadasi* system (a form of caste-based exploitation) as being the third dimension of prostitution. In the sex war, it is yet another voice that is articulated, she opines. This is more so as the *devadasis* in Maharashtra are seen as a major source of recruitment to prostitution,ⁱⁱ both in urban brothels and in rural areas as ‘religious prostitutes’.

My article is a narrative of the battle waged against religious prostitution – in other words, the *devadasi* system in the city of Kolhapur in Maharashtra.

The Devadasi and her legend :-

The word *devadasi*, as defined by the Encarta dictionary means a Hindu temple dancer, a member of a hereditary class of women dancers in a Hindu temple. Etymologically speaking, the word means slaves of the Gods i.e. *dasis* of the *devas*, or *devadasis*. From time immemorial, the *devadasi* served the Gods (*deva*) and men who assumed Godly status. The *devadasi* shifted through the vicissitudes of temple, court and social life. She could not falter in either of these arenas, her training had to be perfect to acclimatize herself in all the spheres of her existence.ⁱⁱⁱ

One finds the earliest reference to the *devadasi* in the *Rig Veda* which mentions the Goddess of Dawn, *Usha* richly clad in revealing embroidered garments; the comparison is to that of a dancing girl. After that, the *Atharva Veda* refers to the *gandharva-grihita* i.e. a courtesan as possessed by a *gandharva*. The ancient Tantric literature mentions different categories of the *veshya* (courtesan) such as:-

- ✚ the *raja veshya*, or the king’s courtesan;
- ✚ *nagari*, a courtesan living with an accomplished citizen ;
- ✚ *gupta veshya*, who worked clandestinely ;
- ✚ *deva veshya*, one who danced in the temples ; and
- ✚ *Brahma veshya*, who visited the holy places ;

The *devadasis* were called *nityasumangali*, meaning that they could never marry a mortal man and thus were ever-auspicious. This was because they were married to the Gods who were immortal, thus, they could never become a widow. Of course, in Kolhapur today, there are even instances where the girl is married to some inanimate object which can be as varied as a dagger or a sword; drum or even bells or a *ghunghroo*. It was widely believed that those who dedicated^{iv} girls to temple worship would definitely attain salvation. A large part of the temple cleaning activities, reciting hymns, gathering flowers, making garlands, lighting of the lamps, activities linked to the *pujas*, and dancing in religious processions (like pulling of the temple chariot) , is performed by *devadasis*.

Various reasons abound behind this hideous practice of victimising young women throughout their lives...

- It was held by many that dedicating girls to the temples would help to pacify the gods and send rain in times of famine or poverty. However, poverty has always stood out as one of the chief reasons behind dedication; all the more so as dedication serves as a measure of protection to the parents in their old age. Moreover, many people are of the opinion that earning by prostitution is the only way out of their economic problems. This is all the more so because a *devadasi* girl will remain a permanent earning member of her parents' family, just like a son would have been. This is another way out of the debt trap which the parents fear of falling into if they have to provide some sort of dowry for the marriage of their children. Moreover, after marriage, the girl may take away her ancestral property to her in-laws home. If, on the other hand, she becomes a *devadasi*, the ancestral property remains intact within the natal family. Apart from this, a *devadasi* girl has the same rights as that of any male member in the family, i.e. she can even perform the funeral rights of her parents. In a way, this system is a very efficient way in which the parents exercise control over the sexuality of their girl child and it also serves as a sort of security for them in their old age. On the other hand, the *devadasi* too, inherits her parental property after her parents' death. Even if the government or any other NGO tries to rehabilitate them, they are often not satisfied as it is not sufficient for their survival. There are times when they keep reverting back to the old way of life, that of prostitution.
- Some other apparent reasons that I came to know in course of my interviews were tragedies in the family such as recurring deaths of children in the family, regular occurrence of diseases in the village or house or even pure lust of the landlords. However, since most of the reasons relate to health, a large percentage of dedication takes place when the girl child is between one month and five years old. Sometimes, an epidemic in a village is enough to attribute the cause to a lack of *jogins* or *matangis* in the village. Most of these diseases are due to unhygienic conditions of living; but they are attributed to the wrath of the Goddess *Yellamma*. Then it is believed that dedication is the only way to appease the Goddess. A petty reason such as a sick village bull can also be reason enough to turn a good looking Dalit girl into a *jogin*.

- Another important factor that encouraged the practice of dedicating women was the dominance of the upper castes or rich people and their craving for extramarital relations, claims V. Lalitha.^v Sometimes, it so happens that parents are unwilling to convert their daughter into a *jogin*. Then tremendous psychological pressure will be exerted on the *jogin* and her family whereby the landlords will ensure that someone in the village will be possessed by a God and make the prediction that the girl has to be made a *jogin* and this is the will of God.
- Again, it can be pure tradition and practice within a family to dedicate one girl in every generation to earn blessings for the family. But, one thing is very certain – people of all castes who have dedicated their daughters to the deities are usually always below the poverty line. Sometimes, it is held that *devadasis* are required to carry out their duties at social events like the death of a landlord; this necessitates their creation. However, at times, a decision to dedicate one's child is imbued with anxiety and tension. Such decisions are often made to deal with the crisis situation in life, due to faith of the village folk in the supremacy of the deity and also due to their material inabilities.
- V. Lalitha^{vi} cites another very different reason. She says that the custom of dedicating girls emerged as a substitute for human sacrifice to appease the Gods and Goddesses. Girls who were to be sacrificed thus, at the altar of the Goddess were definitely from the subservient classes.

The Devadasi and the Goddess :-

K.C. Tarachand^{vii} writes that the shrine of Sri *Renuka Yellamma* Purnya Kshetra at Saundatti in Karnataka is in much news recently for its association with the initiation of girls to 'devadasi'hood' and thus contributing to commercial prostitution in places like Pune, Belgaum, Hubli, Kolhapur and Bombay. The Goddess *Yellamma* is a very powerful name in the world of the *devadasi*; so deep is the connection between the two that as an expression, 'Yellamma character' suggests a woman of loose character.^{viii} Though she is worshipped by the *devadasis* on all days, Tuesdays and Fridays are considered to be auspicious days for the worship of the Goddess.

Myths abound regarding the legend of *Renuka/Yellamma*. Some of these myths belong to the Little Tradition (Non-Sanskritic) and some of them are a part of the Great Tradition (Sanskritic). The *Brahma Purana* says that she is the daughter of *Renuke*, King of *Ikshaku* clan; the *Harivamsha* states that she was born in a lotus flower and taken by the childless King *Renuke* and got his name. However, the *Vayu Purana* states that *Renuka* was the daughter of sage *Savana* and she was known by the name *Kamali*.^{ix}

According to the Mahabharata, another well-trusted source, *Renuka* married sage *Jamadagni*, who belonged to the *Bruga vamsha* clan. At a very young age, of eight, at the advice of *Agastya* saint, *Renuka* was married to *Jamdagni* (the son of *Ruchik Muni* and *Satyavath*). Together, *Renuka* and

Jamadagni co-operated in performing various rituals and *poojas* (worship). Every morning *Renuka* would go to the *Malaprabha* river to have a bath. There with complete devotion, she would fill the pot that she used to prepare out of the sand on the bank of the river. One day, when *Renuka* went to the river to have a bath, she came across a *Gandharva* angel called *Chitarta* playing in the river, with his wives. For a moment, she lost her concentration, and imagined herself playing in the river with her husband. When she regained her consciousness, she realised that she couldn't make the pot any more. Disappointed she returned to *Jamadagni*, empty-handed, at which her husband immediately realised what had happened. Seeing her thus, he cursed her and ordered her sons to kill her. When the first four of them refused, the sage cursed them to become eunuchs. Finally, he had her beheaded by her fifth son, *Parashuram*. On beheading, her head multiplied by tens and hundreds and moved to different regions. This miracle brought her innumerable followers, including her eunuch sons. As *Parashuram* had followed his father's command, he got a boon from his father. He wanted his mother's life back. However, as he was cutting off his mother's head, he also chopped off the head of a lower caste, *matangi* woman. As his mother was being restored to life, he interchanged the heads. In other words, he put his mother's head on the body of the *matangi* woman, and he put the *matangi* woman's head on his mother's body. Ultimately, both of them came to be worshipped – the Brahmin headed woman came to be worshipped as *Renuka* or *Mariamamma* and the low-caste headed woman came to be worshipped as *Yellamma*.

As per the ritual calendar of the temple authorities, the ritual year starts from the full-moon day in the month of October-November (*Banada Hummine*); following which every full-moon day is a festival day. However, the full-moon days in the months of October-November and January-February are especially important as they mark the change in the marital status of the deity. All *devadasis* are under an obligation to visit the shrine during this period to observe a few rituals and offer their vows since it marks the active state of the deity.¹ On *Banada Hummine*, in the month of October-November, it is believed that *Jamadagni* dies – to mark his death, all his wives (initiated *devadasis*, sexually active *devadasis* and retired *devadasis*) converge at the shrine and observe the custom of removing their sacred necklace and bangles to symbolise their widowhood. Three months after this, all the *devadasis* reassemble at the shrine on the full-moon day of *Muthaide Hunnime* to celebrate the resurrection of *Jamadagni*. This day is a very auspicious one as *Jamadagni*'s wives regain their marital status. New girls or *devadasis* are a part of the offerings to the deity on this day.

Particularly famous is the *Yellamma Devi Fair* (*Yellamma Jatra*) that is held at the temple. Even though the fair is held on many occasions between October and February, the biggest celebration takes place on the full moon day of *Margasira*.² On this day, the famous *Neeramanavi Yellamma Jatra* is also taken out. It

¹K.C.Tarachand op. cit, p. 81

²Margashira masam or Margasira month is the ninth month as per Telegu calendar. Margashira Masam 2010-2011 starts on 6 December 2010 and ends on 4 January 2011. Margashira month is considered as auspicious month for Telegu people as it is the favourite month for Lord Krishna.

is at this time that the goddess *Yellamma* is worshipped in the manner of *shakti puja*, together with its attendant rituals. During this fair, women are dedicated as *devadasis* or servants/slaves of god. More than thirty thousand devotees mostly from Karnataka: Raichur, Bellary, Bagalkot, Bijapur, Gulbarga, Bidar, Belgaum and various districts of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Goa participate in this festival. The devotees carry pots, *neem* leaves and cocks; this is also an occasion when womenfolk go into a trance and begin to dance. Not only that, during the annual festival, there was a time when naked women with matted hair used to go around the *Renuka devi* temple.

Though there is absolute silence on the issue of dedication today, yet indications are there that it goes on, if not overtly, very covertly. Even as far back as 2004, in Saundatti, two thousand girls were about to be dedicated to the Goddess *Yellamma*, but the event was nearly ruined due to the timely intervention of the Government. Nevertheless, the temple authorities were not deterred by this; they very quickly and quietly shifted the dedication ceremony to smaller *Yellamma* temples nearby. An interview with a priest at Saundatti³ revealed great disparities between what I already knew and what he told me. Conflicting accounts of the prevalence of the *devadasi* system prevails in present-day Saundatti.

On my last visit to the Renuka Yellamma temple, in Saundatti, I saw women, pregnant women, eunuchs and even children carrying baskets on their heads with pictures of the goddess on their heads-asking for *Jogwaa* (alms in the name of the goddess). It is a custom among the mendicant ritual functionaries of *Yellamma* who are eunuchs to wear the attire of their opposite sex such as women mendicants wearing the dress of the males and vice versa. Apart from assisting the pilgrims in worshipping the Goddess, they have many other functions such as singing, dancing and playing on a variety of musical instruments. They divide the area amongst themselves and spread the glory of the deity in their allotted area, thereby earning a living through that too. Sometimes, men too dedicate themselves to the deity; they may be sexually afunctional or functional; married or unmarried. All of them grow long hair and wear religious marks on the body when they go out to propagate the glory of the deity. Some of the men may wear sarees, shave off their moustaches and beards, grow long hair, wear ornaments and jewellery used by women (including the *mangal sutra*) that symbolises their marital status. Women who become religious mendicants carry several ritual objects with them such as a tuft of bear hair (*chowri*) that they use for fanning the deity, metal pot and the image of the face of the deity at the top and an empty basket.

My conversation with a *devadasi* eunuch at the *Parashuram* temple below the Renuka Yellamma temple revealed certain interesting facts - begging has become a means of livelihood for these *devadasis*; they are very well conversant in English (owing to the huge influx of foreign and Indian tourists who throng the temples); and the problem of HIV/AIDS too has reached alarming proportions among the *devadasi* community, especially among the eunuchs. During the *Sankranti* festival, they have to collect alms from at least five houses each.

³ Interview conducted on 11th June, 2010

The struggle against the system

The *Devadasi* problem is very rampant in Kolhapur even today, years after the practice has been declared illegal. Innumerable *devadasis* are dedicated to the *Renuka* Yellamma goddess in the nearby town of Belgaum in Karnataka (which borders Kolhapur), and then, they come to Kolhapur and start residing near the *Renuka* and Khandoba temples in and around the town. Today there are around a quarter of a million *devadasis* in Maharashtra and Karnataka, about half of them living round Belgaum. Even today, around one thousand to ten thousand women are dedicated annually. Dedication usually takes place of girls aged between six and nine years old and most of these ceremonies take place at night; that too no Brahmins are present at the place of dedication, which is usually a small village temple. Very rarely do the Brahmins attend the ceremonies for fear of arrest, and even if they attend they charge a high sum. In cases where the girls are very young, after the dedication ceremony, they are taken back home, where they wait till the attainment of puberty. Only then do they ritually begin their new lives^x. In Kolhapur today, it is a very well known fact that a majority of these *devadasis* are Dalit women. Pawar and Moon state that

“Those girls from the Untouchable castes, who as the result of poverty, ignorance and superstition were dedicated to village gods as devadasis or muralees, later turned to prostitution in the towns... In the villages, girls who became devadasis or muralees would sometimes be under the protection of a specific (typically high caste) patron, but they would be sexually available to others too. This practice was prevalent in some districts of North Karnataka, and in the adjacent districts of Maharashtra, such as Kolhapur, Sholapur and Sangli...”^{xi}

Sheer poverty and destitution force them to accept this lifestyle, which inevitably culminates in the oldest profession of the world – prostitution. Society and culture has worked hand in hand to ensure that these *devadasis* are degraded to a dreaded existence and gradually they succumb to the dictates of religion and patriarchy. Rather for a *devadasi*, existence as a woman is secondary to her existence as a *devadasi*. She is first a *devadasi*, only then is she a woman. This is the manner in which, reiterate Rohini Sahní and V. Kalyan Shankar, her denigration is complete.^{xii} Moreover, religion in the case of a *devadasi*, is the institutional monolith that shapes her sexuality. In a way, it is a classic example of the manner in which the society seeks to tighten its hold on the sexual practices of its people.

SADHNA ZADBUKE AND THE SAMVEDANA PROJECT

While conversing with a *devadasi* eunuch at Kolhapur, I heard about Professor Sadhna Zadbuke and the Samvedana Trust. That the organisation had fought and was fighting for the rights of these *devadasis* was a household story, I realised this later.

On the day of my return from Kolhapur in the year 2010, I met Sadhnaji or Sadhna Zadbuke, an elderly lady, at her flat in Vishwatara Apartments, Kolhapur. A social science researcher, teacher cum social worker, Sadhna ji lives in Prathibha Nagar, Kolhapur and is in charge of the Samvedana Project of the Anaghol foundation. As we spoke at length about the lives of the *devadasis* today, she clarified many concepts about *devadasis* which were constantly eluding me. I wish I knew her before, since I was introduced to her so late, she was unable to help me meet many more *devadasis*. Yet talking to her was like accessing a mine of information.

The Samvedana Project is sponsored by Anagol Foundation of Mumbai, it focuses on three key areas :-

- i) *Devadasis* – the victims of superstition, Commercial Sex Workers
- ii) Unwed Mothers, Victimized Deserted Women and
- iii) Widows, AIDS Victims and their innocent families, destitute, orphan and vagrant children

Dr. Malati Anagol was born in the family of Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil^{xiii} and possessed an earnest desire to continue with his legacy of educational and social work. As a result of her spirited efforts, the Anagol Foundation was established in the year 1980. In this, she was ably helped by her successful industrialist husband Shri Mahaveer Anagol. Dr. Malati Anagol retired as the Head of the Department of Commerce in Mumbai University. Till date, she has close connections with various social organisations in Mumbai.

Prof. Mrs. Sadhna Zadbuke, Hon. Director of Samvedana carries on the legacy of the Late Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil. With a Master's Degree in Sociology and an M.Phil in Social Work, she works as a senior faculty in Social Work at SIBER, a post-graduate Research institute at Kolhapur.

For the last 24 years, Sadhnaji has been actively involved in the following activities:-

- a) Eradication of the *devadasi* system and its rehabilitation.
- b) AIDS awareness campaigning and rehabilitation of AIDS affected families
- c) Rehabilitation of commercial sex workers, deserted women and divorcees
- d) Conducting field research to identify the root causes of the above problems and implementation of need based action plans
- e) Evaluation of the Government's plans and policies regarding women and children.

Apart from this, she has worked as a Member of the *Devadasi* Welfare Study Group in Maharashtra; acted as the Chairperson of the Kolhapur District Child Welfare Board as well as a Chancellor-

nominated Senate member of Shivaji University. She was also a member of the District Planning Board and the Amniocentesis Prevention and Vigilance Committee.^{xiv}

OBJECTIVES :-

Though the primary vision of the project is to work for the downtrodden women, treat them with dignity, empathy, sensitivity and to bring them into the mainstream of the society by making them self-reliant through appropriate rehabilitation, the broad objectives of the Trust are as follows:-

- 1) Creation of self-respect and dignity among women, particularly *devadasis*, prostitutes, deserted women and widows, so that they are enabled to resolve their problems by themselves ; economic, social and emotional enablement of such women so that they can join the mainstream society
- 2) Educational and developmental help to aspiring students so that they become responsible citizens of India
- 3) Implementation of sound programmes regarding social orientation, creation of awareness of social problems, literacy and fulfilment of social needs
- 4) Making the Government aware of the diverse social problems and issues and co-operating with the Government in policy formulation and implementation
- 5) Research on social problems for the formulation of strategies for resolving these problems
- 6) Publication of research papers and useful literature
- 7) Orientation, training, guidance, counselling and rehabilitation effort, focussed on the weaker persons in all age-groups
- 8) Organizing workshops and seminars whereby ideas could be exchanged on an expert platform

ACTIVITIES / PROGRAMMES:-

The Samvedana Trust is involved in various kinds of activities to help the *devadasis*, AIDS widows and also the *devadasi* turned prostitutes. Pioneering work has been done with regard to the *Devadasi* system in the following areas:-

1) Self-help Scheme :-

This is a Scheme that focuses on the socially forsaken and deprived women. It helps them to develop their latent skills and suggests a suitable economic activity so that they may become economically self-reliant. Under the aegis of the programme, several *devadasis*, prostitutes, widows, deserted women, AIDS affected women, eunuchs who too are *devadasis*, and unmarried mothers who are left to be prostitutes have been successfully rehabilitated.

2) Awareness Campaigning :-

Awareness of one's rights and duties helps one to be free from injustice and exploitation. 'Samvedana' regularly conducts awareness programmes regarding eradication of the *devadasi* tradition and *devadasi*

marriages, anti-superstition counselling (as superstition is considered to be one of the primary causes behind the propagation of this system) through lectures and the audio-visual media.

'*Jat-Nirmulan*' or 'matted hair removal campaigns' are conducted by Samvedana only after making these women aware of its evil effects through proper campaigns.

3) Counselling and guidance :-

Due to illiteracy and ignorance, a huge proportion of these *devadasis* are cheated by everyone around them. They are kept in the dark as to their rights and needs. 'Samvedana' helps them to be aware of the benefits of various Government schemes. 'Samvedana' also liaises with officials to strike a balance between the rules and the real-life situation.

4) Foster Care and Sponsorship :-

Under its 'Bal Samvardhini programme', Samvedana strives to retain orphan, vagrant, wayward children in their own homes under parental care and affection rather than sending them to observation or Juvenile Homes. Not only that, it also looks after AIDS affected, physically handicapped and mentally retarded children by providing various forms of aid. Samvedana also sponsors education, healthcare and other sundry expenses of such children, so that they may continue to live under the loving care of their grandparents, aunts or foster parents. The overall development of the children is the major emphasis of this scheme.

5) Dr. Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil Earn-and-Learn Scheme:-

The inspiration behind the Samvedana Project, Dr. Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil taught aspiring students to 'Earn and Learn'. Today, this scheme aims at bringing out the latent skills of the students. Under this, students are provided training in making paper- lanterns, kites, paper flowers, paper bags, as well as in book binding and rangoli. The articles that the students make are sold by them in an effort to teach them the value of honest hardwork and a life of dignity.

6) Workshops, seminars and research:-

Various workshops and seminars have been organised by Samvedana on the *devadasi* problem. These help in creating platforms where experts can come together and decide on future courses of action together with an exchange of ideas and notions and formulating public opinion. As far as research activities are concerned, through applied research Samvedana tries to identify the causative factors of social problems and the needs of the community. In this way, they try to prepare and implement action plans. Some of the issues that are handled are evaluation of Government schemes for *devadasis*, problems of AIDS widows, AIDS orphans, eunuchs and bar girls.

7) Renuka Self-Help Group:-

In Maharashtra, Samvedana promoted the first Self-Help Group of *Devadasis* by changing their mentality, so that these women can start sundry businesses, become economically self-reliant and do not have to go to private moneylenders. Both the President and the Vice-President of the saving group are former *devadasis*. All the eighteen group members attend the monthly meeting. Cent percent repayment of the loans granted for such activities as goat breeding, vegetable vending, *puja* material vending etc. is indicative of the success of the group. Apart from organising counselling sessions, they train women in matters of legal literacy and bank transactions, along with short-term courses in activities of the everyday life such as stove repair, under the guidance of experts.

FACING CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING THEM:-

Though the Project started in the year 1996, Sadhna ji has been working with *devadasis* for over 30 years.

'After 15 years of hard work, I got success in changing their mentality..' Sadhna ji mused. True, some *devadasis* are recognizing the ill effects of their profession, but again, there is still a long way to go. Today, the situation has taken a different turn. Says Balwant Kamble^{xv}, the *devadasis* themselves have a selfish motive in the system. They ask themselves, if we leave this profession, what do we eat? Thus, it is not just a religious duty for them, their survival instincts are linked up with it, making it all the more difficult for people like Sadhna ji. According to Kamble, the *devadasi* has given herself up to the gods to fill her hungry stomach. He feels that initially, though there is some reluctance to join the profession, they do not usually want to leave it, due to:-

- a) Fear of making ends meet and
- b) Fear of the purohits and pandits who keep them under tremendous pressure. Thus, they are free, but their freedom is within certain limits.

True, they have not accepted the trade happily, but once they have understood that their actually is no respite for them, they have learned to be content. Kamble reiterates that the duty of a priest is to provide religious guidance to the people and take them on the right path, but somehow, they are doing quite the reverse.

'Prevention is better than rehabilitation,' remarked Sadhna ji as I questioned her on her opinion as to the existence of the system today. The Maharashtra Government had started a *Devadasi* Welfare Study Group in the year 1990 and Sadhna ji was a part of that group. Then gradually the different schemes of pension for the *Devadasis* were discussed. At the beginning, there was the Sanjay Gandhi scheme according to which the *Devadasis* were given one hundred rupees per month. After this, under the Women and Gender category, they were given three hundred rupees as pension. Likewise, there were different schemes under different heads and leaders. Gradually, it was realised that all these schemes could be clubbed under one roof.

Even today, Sadhna ji is fighting a battle against this system, but the major problem according to her lies in the fact that the Government has given pension only to the ladies, not to the men. However after filling up an application, even eunuchs can avail of the pension under the scheme. It is a long-drawn process, and one needs to be patient to avail of any benefits. The *devadasis* usually have a sign of being married to a God—the *mangalsutra* or necklace with the red and white beads. However, not everyone who shows that can be accepted as a *devadasi*. Through surveys, the fact has to be verified, following which the *devadasi* has to show his/her income certificate, fill up the required certificate, before the person can get her/his pension. Usually at the age of 40, it is time for a *devadasi* to dedicate another small girl, in most cases her own child to the Goddess. It is at this point of time, if she becomes a pensioner under the scheme, she will not need the money obtained by dedicating the girl and thus, may refrain from it.

In most of the cases, a *devadasi* is dedicated, by marrying a God, before she attains puberty. After attaining puberty, she becomes and remains the mistress of a person, who ultimately becomes her patron. The occasion of consummating her marriage with this patron is called ‘*zulwaa*’. Many rituals adorn this occasion. Their children take up the surname of the mother, not the father. In fact, the children of a *jogin* cannot be called the children of the landlord, clarified Sadhna ji. Likewise, the son of a *jogin* can marry a girl of his own caste in the normal fashion, but, strangely enough, the daughter cannot. She has to succumb to ‘*joginhood*’ to continue the tradition.

In this context, Meena Seshu’s comment in a debate on women’s movements in India seems significant,

‘....a devadasi will never say whose kid it is, since it is always her kid. There may be a thousand men who could have fathered the kid, but the kid is always hers. The womb is always hers, and the seed is always hers.’^{xvi}

The patron is also referred to as the ‘*malak*’. The *malak* may at times allow his name to be given to the *devadasi*’s children, but usually this is not the case. A *malak* may at one point of time, refuse to maintain the *devadasi* and her children.^{xvii} Repeated changing of *malak* (as he may refuse to look after her) may eventually land her in a red light area in Mumbai, Pune, Kolhapur, Miraj or Sangli. Another interesting fact is that the *devadasi*, says Sadhna ji, cannot be engaged in any other profession. This is because she has been married to the God and she has to be cared for by the God (or his representative on earth, whichever be the case). They can only do one particular work, i.e. they can ask for *jogwa*; which refers to alms in the name of the God. These alms can be given to them both in cash as well as in kind. What Sadhna ji and her foundation asserted was that these *devadasis* should be employed in some small scale businesses; they should not eke out an existence simply by asking for *jogwaa*. After the intervention of the Samvedana Project, many of these menfolk who had been dedicated earlier as *devadasis* have started small scale ventures, and this gives Sadhna ji a great sense of fulfilment.

‘All devadasis are not Prostitutes...’ Sadhna ji mentioned, though the *devadasi* system is one of the major paths that lead to prostitution. When asked to illustrate on this fact, she explained the case of the *bal-jogtis* to me. A *bal-jogti* is a woman (who is dedicated to *Yellamma*), for whom God is the first husband. After

that, she will forever remain loyal to the God, thus she is clearly not a prostitute! Yes, there are *bal-jogtis* even today, according to Sadhna ji. The concept of *satpan* was also a way in which the purity of a *devadasi* was ascertained. A *jogin* who is in a stable *zulwa* relation with her *malak* and remains loyal to him is considered to be pure; the notion of *satpan* (purity of a *jogin*) is deeply valued. However, *jogins* living with *satpan* are generally very rare. If a *jogin* gets pregnant outside her *zulwa* relation, she is dishonoured and her progeny is considered to be illegitimate; chiefly because she will not be able to make the biological father of the child claim paternity openly. Thus there are often attempts by a *jogin* to abort the child. Moreover, the 'upper caste' men are condemned and deterred from forming a *zulwa* relation or even a more sustained relation with a *jogin*; this is mainly due to two reasons, firstly, she could claim legitimacy for her child and secondly, she could claim maintenance or a share in his property.^{xviii}

'The devadasis are facing a whole lot of problems, today,...' rues Sadhna ji. Some of them were discussed by her in details, as follows,

- 1) A pension scheme had started in the year 1993 and it stopped in 2002. The *devadasis* who were around twenty-five years of age then and are almost forty now, are the ones who are not getting the pension, as that particular scheme had already ended.
- 2) Also, the children of the *devadasis* are not getting proper money for their education; jobs are minimal, even if they can hear of the jobs, they fail to avail of them, because they cannot furnish the certificates on time. Certificates that establish their right to get their dues as they belong to the *devadasi* community can be collected from the 'Women and Child Welfare Department' of the State Government. This is very important because otherwise it becomes difficult for them to prove that they are *devadasis*.
- 3) The third problem that exists for the *devadasis* in Kolhapur is that not only women, men and eunuchs should also get the pension.
- 4) Fourthly, the implementation of the 2005 Act on *devadasis* is very important – it says that dedication of girls is a cognisable offence/ with three or four years punishment. It is non-bailable and those that are indirectly involved will also be punished. Not only in the temples, even if someone is found to encourage them to dedicate their girls anywhere outside, they should be punished very heavily, emphasises Sadhna ji. That act is a social act and so, in the act itself, rehabilitation schemes are there. Not only will the motivator be punished, but the girl also will be taken up for rehabilitation.

'At Saundatti, the Devadasis are very scared of the Gods,' remembered Sadhna ji. This is because, they fear that the Gods will curse them if they do not ask for *jogwaa*. Though Sadhna ji did not deny the fact that girls are not dedicated today, she commented that the percentage of girls who are dedicated is on the decline. Even then, a huge chunk of these women are from the dalit caste. When she had conducted a survey in Kolhapur, a while ago, around 75 % of the *devadasis* belonged to the Dalit communities. If a man

is dedicated to the Goddess *Yellamma*, he is called *jogtaa*, if a woman, *jogtin*, if an eunuch, *lugdawala^{xix}jogya*. At Saundatti, their main festival is the *Yellamma jatra* during *chaitra-purnima* (the full moon night in the Hindi month of *Chaitra*). Sadhna ji also mentions one occasion when the *devadasis* remove their bangles (break them) on the occasion of the ‘becoming widow’ of their Goddess *Yellamma*. For one month they too remain in mourning. During the Hindi month of *Shravan*, they too go to the river. Nowadays, they don’t have ‘*nagna puja*’ (or nude worship); over clothes, they wear *neem* leaves, not naked. Some *devadasis* have also become *sarpanches* (Panchayat heads) but still they cannot come in the mainstream of society. But their next generation Sadhna ji hopes, will come into the mainstream someday.

‘*I have a very positive attitude*’, Sadhna ji comments, ‘*Because now I am seeing the change, for 15 years I have been working, and I could not see any change. Because as I said I am changing the mentalities, they have dreams of education, they have dreams of getting married... Their girls are studying, even becoming engineers,*’ But as far as the issue of HIV AIDS was concerned, it was a persistent problem. Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a chronic infectious disease caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV); eunuchs and homosexuals constitute one of the earliest risk groups infected by HIV. Most importantly, reaching out to these groups for HIV prevention-intervention activities has its own unique challenges. The *hijaras* (eunuchs) of Bombay, and the rest of India are held to be the community most at risk of HIV infection. There have been improvements in organization, outreach, education and self-help, but for many *hijaras*, their lives continue to be characterized by mockery, humiliation, stigmatization, fear, and danger.

The public health and social implications of these vulnerabilities have multiple dimensions. First, homosexuals get deprived of their right to have a steady married and/or family life and thus secure some health and economic stability for themselves and their children. Second, their risk for acquiring STI’s including HIV increases manifold. This risk is perpetrated to their male clients, starting off a vicious circle and a network of sexual transmission that usually propagates beyond the high-risk groups. Third, another significant issue from the public health perspective is that the governmental health programmes and services are predominantly directed at the general population and organized sectors and homosexuals do not qualify to be classified in either. In fact, due to the clandestine nature of the profession, in the absence of special, targeted programmes, most homosexuals do not visit any health-care provider until they are fit to an extent of not being able to work and earn, i.e. until they are seriously ill with the complications of STI/HIV/AIDS or other chronic diseases. Thus, they continue to transmit infections for a long time and are seen in health care facilities only at a late stage of the disease, when palliative or supportive treatment is often the only available option^{xx}.

Even though, Samvedana does conduct workshops to create awareness among the *hijaras* and *devadasis* about this issue when I questioned her about distribution of condoms etc, among the eunuchs and sex workers, the reply was in the negative. Samvedana doesn’t distribute condoms or other contraceptives to

these *devadasis*, remarked Sadhna ji. This was because, there were other agencies that were looking into these aspects of the issue.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is the world's largest grant making philanthropic foundation, and the largest grant making area is Global Health. The India AIDS Initiative 'Avahan' with a total commitment of US 200 million dollars represents the largest commitment from the foundation to any single country. The major focus of the initiative is to reduce the HIV prevalence in high-risk groups and stabilize it in the general population by 2008. The Foundation has identified two core strategic initiatives as part of its focused prevention programme in the country. The 'District Focus State Impact' initiative supports HIV prevention programmes in the six highest-incidence states (and Maharashtra is one of them) for female and male sex workers, their clients, injecting drug-users and other high-risk population. The 'National Highways' initiative is being implemented along 7000 kilometres of the major highways in India, covering inter-state truckers/helpers and highway-based commercial sex workers and their partners.

'If you also don't wash your hair for a stretch of ten to fifteen days, you too will have a *jat*,...' laughed Sadhna ji, when I asked her about the history behind the '*jat*' or the 'knot in the hair'. The history behind the *jat* was a very simple one. Well, most of these *devadasis* who had had *jats* came from poor, dalit, families; neither did they have access to water or even soap/shampoo to wash their hair from time to time. So, it was quite normal to have a *jat*. Superstitions abound, recalls Sadhna ji. If any girl is found to have a *jat* in her hair, immediately it is a cause for alarm. She is taken to the Goddess and the lady over there recommends her turning into a *devadasi*. (as '*devi*' has come to her, in other words, she has received divine blessings) Ceremonially, she is dedicated, banyan tree gum along with turmeric is applied on her hair, and she is not allowed to cut or even comb it. Thus a simple girl turns into a *devadasi*.^{xxi} In reality, they get spondylosis and tuberculosis attacks due to this *jat*. Full of lice, Sadhna ji herself has cut off the hair of many *devadasis*, but she has never forced anyone, she does this only after convincing them and changing their mentality. At the Anaghol foundation there are many *devadasis* who are leaders and serve as role models for the rest; these women are *devadasis*, but they have successfully undergone rehabilitation due to the untiring efforts of Samvedana. Around thirty-six role models, as she terms them, reside in Kolhapur itself; *Anandi bai*, *Yelu bai*, *Sushila bai* are some of them.

SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS:-

Even today, girls are dedicated to different deities. But, with all the publicity and the media exposure with the Acts that have banned this practice after the Government has taken serious steps, I feel that the entire activity has become a bit **specialized, secretive and mechanized**. In fact, awareness among the exploited groups also has brought about a change in the scenario. The Dalit Movement rather than the Women's Movement has attacked and challenged the issue of prostitution as caste based exploitation. What is traumatic is that in the ultimate analysis, the cost of maintaining this institution is borne by women and that too, by women from the Dalit and most backward communities.

What is even more alarming is that despite the novel laws that are being framed to attack this evil, vigorous implementation of these legal provisions is almost nil. Dedication is rampant, despite official claims to the contrary. Under cover of secrecy, dedication takes place every year and a minimum of two hundred – two hundred and fifty innocent girls are sacrificed at the altar of the Goddess at Saundatti alone. Moreover, the dedication ceremonies that used to be conducted on a large scale at important temples throughout Maharashtra and neighbouring Karnataka are today conducted secretly in smaller *Yellamma* temples or at the homes of the poor families. There have been instances where mistresses or pimps of urban brothels called *gharwalis* & *madams* have sponsored these dedication ceremonies to make sure that the girls so dedicated join them in future. Most of these rituals take place in a hurry and in total secrecy. In fact, there are a handful of priests in the *Yellamma* temple itself who conduct these dedication ceremonies in their own houses and the police remain mute witnesses to these blatant violations of laws. In an article in the Economic and Political Weekly, Anil Achawat^{xxii} says that among the prostitutes (he is referring to the Poona prostitute market), a majority of the recruits are *devadasis*... it is quite often the girls' own families who bring them into the city and sell them directly to the madam and the brokers are not particularly active.

However, inspite of innumerable obstacles, some *devadasis* are showing an eagerness to come out of the social stigma in their lives. In their desire to lead an independent and respectable life, they are realising the value of self-esteem. Awareness and social consciousness is indeed helping them to return, though slowly, to the mainstream. Many of them are aware that their children should get proper education; they should be brought up in an entirely different atmosphere and their children should not be subjected to the same fate. The entire system being based on superstition, one has to strike at its very root in order to wipe it out completely.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

ⁱAnagha Tambe (2009) *Reading Devadasi Practice through Popular Marathi Literature* in Economic and Political Weekly, April25, 2009, Vol. XLIV No. 17, p.92

ⁱⁱAnagha Tambe "Different Issues/Different Voices – Organization of women in prostitution in India" in Rohini Sahni, V. Kalyan Shankar and Hemant Apte (2008) (ed) *Prostitution and Beyond – An Analysis of Sex Work in India* New Delhi: Sage p.73

ⁱⁱⁱLakshmi Vishwanathan (2008) *Women Of Pride – The Devadasi Heritage* New Delhi: Lotus Collection, p.1

^{iv} Dedication refers to the performance of any act or ceremony by which a woman or a man is dedicated to the service of any deity, idol, object of worship, temple or other religious institution or place of worship. Sometimes dedication takes place even before birth or when a child is just born.

^vVakulabharanam Lalitha (2011) *Women, Religion and Tradition – The Cult of Jogins, Matangis and Basvis* Bhopal, Rawat Publications, p.23

^{vi}Ibid, p.187

^{vii}K.C.Tarachand (1991) *Devdasi Custom : Rural Social Structure and Flesh Markets* New DelhiReliance Publishing House p. 69

^{viii} Vakulabharanam Lalitha op. cit, p. 33

^{ix}K.C.Tarachand op. cit, pp. 73-74

*For more on the process of dedication William Dalrymple op. cit, pp.236-237

^{xi}Urmila Pawar and Vasant Moon (2008) (ed) *We Also Made History* New Delhi: Zubaan pp . 28-29

^{xii}To understand this process of denigration better, I have referred to the Introductory Chapter of Rohini Sahni, V. Kalyan Shankar and Hemant Apte op. cit

^{xiii} Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil of Kolhapur was a social reformer and an educationist who was also a founder of the Rayat Education Society.

^{xiv}In recognition of her multi-faceted contribution to the social cause, Sadhna ji has been awarded various awards, some of which are :-

- FIE Foundation Award, Ichalkaranji
- Dalit Mitra Puraskar of Government of Maharashtra
- Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Puraskar of Maharashtra
- Smt. Rajmati Nemgonda Patil Janseva Puraskar, Sangli
- Kusumtai Choudhari Puraskar, Mumbai
- Late Rajivsheth Sable Puraskar, Pune
- Prof. Dr. Shivram Mali Parivartanvadi Puraskar, Kolhapur
- Victor Palace Award, Kolhapur

^{xv}Balwant Kamble (2008) *Devdasi, Potraj, Vaghya Murli, Roop Swaroop Vikruti* Pune Padmagandha Publications

^{xvi}Quoted in Women's Movements in India – A Panel Discussion in Rohini Sahni, V.Kalyan Shankar and Hemant Apte (ed) (2008) *Prostitution and Beyond – An Analysis of Sex Work in India* New Delhi Sage, p. 46

^{xvii}Sharan Kumar Limbale in his famous novel "The outcaste" or Uccchalya" talks about a similar sort of a practice. Dalit Mahar girls were sexually exploited by the Upper-Caste Marathas and used as their mistress to satiate their lust. What is even more shocking is the fact that Limbale, himself is a victim of such a heinous practice. He asks his mother as to why did she refuse to protest to the act that was responsible for bringing him into the world. Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow him to grow up in the foetus?

^{xviii} Anagha Tambe (2009) *Reading Devadasi Practice through Popular Marathi Literature* in Economic and Political Weekly, April25, 2009, Vol. XLIV No. 17, p.89

^{xix}A jogtaa in a saree, saree meaning lugda

^{xx}Rohini Sahni, V. Kalyan Shankar and Hemant Apte (ed) *Prostitution and Beyond – An Analysis of Sex Work in India* New Delhi Sage (2008) p.242

^{xxi}"Jogwa" the Marathi movie begins on a similar note. Jogwaa – The Awakening is a Marathi film directed by Rajiv Patil and produced under iDream Productions with screenplay by Sanjay Krishnaji Patil. Starring Upendra Limaaye and Mukta Barve in the lead roles, the film bagged five awards at the national film Awards for 2009. Looking at the rural life of Karnataka, this movie explores the kaleidoscopic variations in the life of the devotees of the Goddess *Yellamma* and deals with the issue of a young girl forced to become a devdasi.

^{xxii}"Prostitution in Pune and Bombay : A Report", in the Economic and Political Weekly Vol.21, No. 12 (Mar.22, 1986), p.481