



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

CHANGING STATUS OF DEVADASIS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Devadasi system was a complex institution with religious, cultural, and social dimensions. It played a significant role in the history of India but eventually faced criticism for its exploitation of women. Efforts have been made to eradicate the system and provide support for women who were once a part of it, while preserving the rich cultural heritage associated with Devadasis. Devadasi is a name given to a girl 'dedicated' to a deity in a temple for worship and service of the deity for the rest of her life. This was prominent in southern and parts of western India. The dedication of the girl takes place in a ceremony similar to marriage and is called 'pottukattu'. The practice often leads to the trafficking and forced prostitution of young girls. Despite being outlawed in 1988, the system continues to persist in certain pockets of the country. It is crucial for society to work collectively to end the Devadasi system. The empowerment and protection of women and girls across India. In this article, we have discussed the origin and background of this practice, and its various prospects.

KEYWORDS: Devadasi, Religious, Cultural, Traditional

INTRODUCTION

The Devadasi system was a traditional practice in India with deep historical and cultural roots. The term "Devadasi" is derived from two Sanskrit words, "deva" (meaning god) and "dasi" (meaning servant or slave), and it referred to a system in which young girls were dedicated to serving a specific deity or temple. Here is an introduction to the Devadasi system:

Historical Origins: The Devadasi system has ancient origins, dating back several centuries in India. It was closely associated with Hindu temples, and the women who were dedicated as Devadasis played a significant role in temple rituals and ceremonies

Religious Significance: Devadasis were considered to be married to the deity or god they served. They were expected to lead a life of celibacy and purity, devoting themselves to the temple and its rituals. Their service included singing, dancing, and other artistic and religious duties.

Cultural Contributions: Devadasis were often highly skilled in various forms of classical Indian art, including dance (e.g., Bharatanatyam and Odissi) and music. They made important cultural contributions to their communities and were an integral part of religious festivals and cultural events.

Evolution and Decline: Over time, the Devadasi system underwent significant changes and faced criticism. It evolved into a practice that was often associated with sexual exploitation, with Devadasis being forced into prostitution. The British colonial authorities and later the Indian government took measures to abolish and regulate the system.

Legal Changes: Laws were enacted in India to address and restrict the Devadasi system. For instance, the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982, made it illegal to dedicate women as Devadasis in the state of Karnataka

Contemporary Issues: While the Devadasi system has largely been abolished, remnants of the practice and its associated issues, such as human trafficking and the exploitation of women, may still persist in some parts of India. Efforts to protect and rehabilitate the women affected by the system continue

In summary, the Devadasi system was a complex institution with religious, cultural, and social dimensions. It played a significant role in the history of India but eventually faced criticism for its exploitation of women. Efforts have been made to eradicate the system and provide support for women who were once a part of it, while preserving the rich cultural heritage associated with Devadasis

DEVADASI SYSTEM

Devadasi is a name given to a girl 'dedicated' to a deity in a temple for worship and service of the deity for the rest of her life. This was prominent in southern and parts of western India.

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In this article, we have discussed the origin and background of this practice, and its various prospects.

DEVADASI SYSTEM – ORIGIN & BACKGROUND

- ❖ This tradition dates back to the sixth century where young girls were married to the deity, after which they would act as the Temple caretakers and perform all rituals, including dance and music in the honor of the deity.
- ❖ Originally, the girls learned and practiced the arts like Bharathanatyam, Odissi or other classical dance forms, apart from taking care of the temple and engaging in rituals.
- ❖ They traditionally enjoyed a high status in society as music and dance were integral parts of worship in temples. They were considered auspicious as they were committed to the deity.
- ❖ Later, after the involvement of Mughals and Britishers in the country, many temples were broken and their status in the society deteriorated and they were being exploited and degraded. The children of Devadasis were also made to learn music or were dedicated to the temples.
- ❖ It is one such practice which is illegally being done in a few parts of India till date.

CAUSES FOR DEVADASI TRADITION PREVALENT IN INDIA

In India, there still are few states which continue to practice the Devadasi tradition despite the Supreme Court orders to abolish this system.

Discussed below are the causes for the extent of the Devadasi System:

- ❖ It is a religious belief that if a family devotes their daughter, it would make the deity happy and bless the family. This is one of the biggest reasons why people still choose to practice this tradition.
- ❖ Since in the earlier times, Devadasis were given a higher status in the society, many economically weak families believe that devoting their daughters will improve their social status.
- ❖ Even after strict orders from the Supreme Court to abolish this practice, certain states have not yet enforced laws or acts to prevent the Devadasi culture.
- ❖ Superstitious beliefs and the continuation of lineage is another cause for the present existence of the tradition.

DEVADASI SYSTEM – LAWS & OFFENCES

Kerala-based NGO, S.L. Foundation had brought to the notice of the judiciary the existence of this practice in multiple parts of the country. In 2016 that the Supreme Court had ordered the states to implement strict laws to completely abolish the system.

The following laws have been passed to stop the Devadasis tradition:

- Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, 1934
- Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947
- Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982
- Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1988
- Maharashtra Devadasi (Abolition of Dedication) Act, 2006
- Juvenile Justice Act 2015 (JJ Act)

To stop abandoning young girls in name of a tradition for sexual exploitation and prostitution, Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956 (ITPA Act) and Trafficking of persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill 2018

ABOLITION OF DEVADASI SYSTEM – CHALLENGES

To completely remove the tradition from the society there are certain challenges which are being faced by the law-enforcing authorities. These include:

- ❖ Lack of awareness of this ill tradition in the name of religious practice. People are not completely aware of how this system illegal and a punishable offence
- ❖ Since it is considered a tradition, people are not willing to accept the abuse faced by a girl as a result of this system. It is still believed to bring a blessing to the family performing the devotion.
- ❖ Lack of legal actions is also a challenge which has been faced. People do not report cases which ultimately leads to ignorance of such issues
- ❖ Law enforcement is not very strict
- ❖ The Devadasis themselves do not register complaints against their families and accept the social pressure

Educating the lower and economically backward sections of the society is one of the first initiatives which must be taken into consideration for completely removing this malpractice.

DEVADASI SYSTEM – MOVING FORWARD

- ❖ The Department of Women and Child Development must conduct regular surveys to check the prevalence of this tradition provide rehabilitation to the young girls affected. They must also promote employment opportunities for the Devadasi women for a better future of their children.
- ❖ Devadasis cases must be brought under the purview of IPC and the authorities must try spreading awareness of the existence of this practice.
- ❖ Steps must be taken to educate the children of the affected women.
- ❖ Reforms must be brought in to completely put an end to the malpractice.

DEVADASI SYSTEM – CHALLENGES

There are many challenges faced by the Devadasi System. Some of the challenges are listed below:

Changing community behavior through public awareness programmes. The awareness to abolish the Devadasi system should be effective, and it should affect public behavior towards eradicating it.

Health Diseases: Girls who are forced into the Devadasi System are vulnerable to various sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, Gonorrhoea, Syphilis.

Inefficient Police Role: The role of local police is very important as it is seen, that due to pressure from the community, the police neglect to take suo motu actions in cases of the Devadasi System and do not register the cases that are brought to them.

Response by Community and Society: Society accepts and celebrates the Devadasi System which led to the sexual abuse of these young girls. Those who would report but hold back so out of concern for the reaction of the Community and Society.

Preventive Measures are not Adequate: The authorities are not doing much to stop the Devadasi System and are instead concentrating on projects to benefit the older Devadasis. There is also a lack of co-ordination between various departments, agencies and functionaries.

Lack of co-operation from Victims: It might be difficult to get victims to report crimes against their parents or other family members. There is a strong likelihood that the victim will become even if the complaint is registered.

CONCLUSION

The Devadasi System is a deeply rooted cultural practice in India. It has a significant implication for the lives of the women involved. This system was originally intended to honor deities through Dance and Music. But it has been marred by exploitation and abuse over time. The practice often leads to the trafficking and forced prostitution of young girls. Despite being outlawed in 1988, the system continues to persist in certain pockets of the country. It is crucial for society to work collectively to end the Devadasi system. This thus ensures the empowerment and protection of women and girls across India.

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