DEVADASI PRACTICE IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

3.1. Introduction:

Sociologists and historians have extensively analyzed the treatment of women under the caste system. It has been witnessed throughout the Indian history; the caste system not only determined the social division of labour, but its sexual division as well. The literature suggests that endogamy (a crucial feature of the caste system) should be seen as a mechanism of recruiting and retaining control over the labor and sexuality of women; the concepts of “purity” and “pollution” segregate groups and also regulate the mobility of women (Dasgupta, 2000). The females of lower castes were exploited through their caste and gender based social evils such as dowry practice, child marriage, Devadasi, etc. Of which, Devadasi is social stigma, to a greater extent adopted among lower castes in India.

When the socio-economic, religious, and emotional reasons associated with female prostitution are explored, Devadasi has also become important. The topic of female prostitution pervades the contemporary discourse about devadasi girls and young women in India. Former temple servants, artists, and prostitutes, today most devadasis practice sex work in their homes or small lodges and brothels in rural settings (Blanchard et al, 2005).
Of course, Devadasi practice was treated as holy practice in ancient India with greater aim to serve the deities by unmarried and young women. With the change of time, Devadasis have become prostitutes by upper caste communities. A Devadasi cannot belong to any one particular husband (generally the Indian ideas of marriage are that daughters are transferable property gifted to husbands), instead she is a common property. In other words, the Devadasi system is a “system of votive offering of girls to the deities in Brahmanic temples”.

3.2. Devadasi Practice:

The Indian institution of Devadasi is a religious practice, which offers girls to the deities in Hindu temples. The dedication usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires the girl to become sexually available for community members. Traditionally, it is believed that these girls are “serving” society as “ordained” by the goddess. In other words, “the Devadasis are courtesans in God’s court” (Kadetotad, 1983). Due to her sacred condition and her belonging to the divinity, a Devadasi cannot be married to one particular man, as in the traditional idea of marriage women are transferable property gifted to husbands. Instead, she is a property of a divinity that benevolently concedes her to the whole community. This concept is well summarized by a saying “a Devadasi is servant of God but wife of the whole town”.

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Thus, Devadasi tradition is a religious tradition in which girls are ‘married’ and dedicated to a deity (god or goddess) or to a temple and includes performance aspects such as those that take place in the temple as well as in the courtly and home context. Originally, in addition to this and taking care of the temple and performing rituals, these women learned and practiced Sadir, Odissi and other classical Indian artistic traditions and enjoyed a high social status (Devaraj and Doddamani, 2012).

Devadasis are called by different terms in different regions such as - Devadasi, Rajadasi, Alankara Dasi, Rudradasi, Sule, Devasule, Jogathi, Basavi and Nithyasumangali in Karnataka. In Tamilnadu - Devaradhiyar, Nithyasumangali, Chennaveedu, Kannigeyar, Nithyakalyani, Rudra Dasi, Manikattar and Andhra Pradesh - Bhogam Basavi, Sani, Devali, Kalavanthalu, Maharashtra - Marali, Bhavin, Kerala - Chakyar, Kudikyar. Orissa - Maharis, Nepal - Dhuki, Madhya Pradesh - Bhavin, Kulavanthan (Shwetha and Manjula, 2015).

Devadasis are dedicated to Goddess Sri Renuka or Yellamma in south Maharashtra and north Karnataka, “Potraj” (male) dedicated to Goddess ‘Laxmi’ all over Maharashtra, “Murali” (female) and “Vaghya” (male) dedicated to God “Khandoba” in central Maharashtra, “Bhavin” or “Devali” (female) dedicated to numerous local deities in Konkan and Goa, Kadaklaxmi / Ladlaxmi (male) dedicated Goddess laxmi, “Basavi” and
“Kasabin” (females) in some parts of Maharashtra and “Naikin” (female) in Uttar Pradesh and South India. “Sule”, “Devara”, “Diyan”, “Guappa”, “Nirwan Hijara”, “Devdas”, “Dev” in Maharashtra, Sanis, “Kurampus”, “Bogmus”, “Vallangai”, “Idngai” in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and also some other parts of India “Hijara” mostly found in M.P. and U.P. and Maharashtra’s capital cities like Bombay, Agra, Delhi, Lucknow, Calcutta, Pathana, Kanpur etc. In reality the tradition serves as a large conduit for the supply of new flesh to the country’s commercial sex trade (Rajan Gavas, 1985).

Devadasi are sometimes referred to as a caste; however, some question the accuracy of this usage. “According to the devadasis themselves there exists a Devadasi ‘way of life’ or ‘professional ethics’ but not a devadasi Jati (sub-caste). Later, the office of devadasi became hereditary but it did not confer the right to work without adequate qualification” (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985).

3.3. Faith on Devadasi Practice:

In Karnataka, the Devadasi system was followed for over 10 centuries. Chief among them was the Renuka Yellamma (of Saundatti and Chandragutti) cult. The stories seem to indicate that in the state of Karnataka Devadasis originated from Brahmin women who were thrown out of their homes by their husbands.
There are many stories about the origin of the Renuka Yellamma cult. The most prevalent one says that Yellamma was the daughter of a Brahmin, married to sage Jamadagni and was the mother of five sons. She used to bring water from the river Malaprabha for the sage's worship and rituals. One day while she was at the river, she saw a group of youths engaged themselves in water sports and forgot to return home in time which made Jamadagni to suspect her chastity. He ordered his sons one by one to punish their mother but four of them refused on one pretext or the other. The sage cursed them to become eunuchs and got her beheaded by his fifth son, Parashuram. To everybody's astonishment, Yellamma’s head multiplied by tens and hundreds and moved to different regions. This miracle made her four eunuch sons and others to become her followers, and worship her head. According to another version, after Parashuram beheaded his mother, he felt guilty and attached the head of a lower caste woman named Yellamma to Renuka’s body. Thus a lower caste woman achieved the higher status of being a Brahmin’s wife. Following the tradition, a number of young girls of lower caste started to be dedicated to the goddess Yellamma (Gupta Giri Raj, 1983).

Another myth revolves around the relationship between Renukamba and her woman servant Mathangi. Renukamba’s son Parashurama asks Mathangi’s son, the valiant Beerappa, to protect his mother before he goes
to do battle with the *Kshatriyas* (the ruling warrior caste). However, Beerappa turns lustful and tries to molest Renukamba. Mathangi then rescues Renukamba and offers her clothes in protection. The myth of Mathangi as protector is integral to the *bettale seve* at Chandragutti. After the devotees bathe in the Varada River, they go to Mathangi’s temple, which is close to Renukamba’s, where they are given new clothes. This symbolises the giving of new life to the worshippers (Anantmurthy, 1996).

In another myth, significant to the identity of Yellamma-Renuka is that according to the Karnataka tradition Renuka embraces an untouchable woman (Matangi) and both are beheaded (Spratt, 1966). On restoration to life the heads are transposed and the resulting goddess is a woman with a Brahmin’s body and an untouchable woman’s head. Such a transpose represents two ends of social and ritual hierarchy which in ordinary circumstances are kept separated by pollution taboos, but which the cult of Yellamma-Renuka transgresses and reverses with a marriage of an untouchable woman-become goddess Matarigi and Brahmin Jamadagni (Ramanujan, 1986).

The Matangi complex could be the link which explains the relationship between the iconographic representation of the goddess, myth and the experience of the contemporary devaddsi (Tarachand, 1992). Matangi is an untouchable dedicated ‘prostitute’ (i.e. Devaddsi) who
overcomes pollution taboos relating to the sexual relations between caste males and untouchable females by allowing her saliva to touch caste males on ritual occasions (Spratt, 1966). The ritual linking of Matarigi’s saliva reverses the pollution effect of intercourse between a Devadasi and a caste male, making it instead ritually auspicious. Both a goddess and a sacred prostitute, Matangi articulates well the ambivalent gendered representations of the Karnataka Devadasis whose life-cycles mirror the myth of Yellamma-Renuka as Jamadagni’s ‘chaste’, ‘degraded’ and ‘pious’ wife.

3.4. Origin:

Devadasi system is a religious practice in many parts of India and mostly southern India, whereby parents arrange marriage of daughter to a deity or a temple. The marriage usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires the girl to become a prostitute for upper-caste community members. Such girls are known as Jogini or Devadasi or Basavi. They are forbidden to enter into a real marriage.

The Devdasi system is an old one, and apparently pre-Aryan. There is no mention of it in Vedic Sanskrit literature, but Tamil Sangam literature, which dates back to 200-300 BC, describes a class of dancing women called Parattaiyar. They were courtesans who performed some ritual function, lived in a separate part of the city, and eventually came to
be associated with temples (Omvedt, 1983). Some researchers are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6th century A.D., as it results from the sacred texts Puranas written during this period and containing reference to it. Puranas recommended in fact that arrangements should be made to enlist the services of singing girls at the time of worship at temples. They even recommend the purchase of beautiful girls and dedicating them to temples (Gupta Giri Raj, 1983). There can be no denial of the fact that by the end of the 10th century, the total number of devadasis in many temples was in direct proportion to the wealth and prestige of the temple, as seen in sacred texts and travellers narratives. Even if the practice of consecrating young girls to temples was present since the 6th century, it only becomes widespread later, during the Rajput period, when Devadasi were regarded as a part of the normal temple establishment and their number often reached high proportions (Torri, 2009).

During this period, Devadasi had very prestigious status, a consequence of their religious dedication and their proximity with the leading or ruling families in a community. As they played many types of roles in the ritual and religious life of the community, in reward they were given praise and financial support. In this light, “the Devadasi represented a badge of fortune, a form of honour managed for civil society by the temple and permitted to develop the most intimate connections between
sectarian specialists and the laity” (Singh, 1997). In this process the Devadasis were able to bring considerable wealth and prestige to temples. The efficacy of the Devadasi as a woman and dancer began to converge with the efficacy of the temple as a living center of religious and social life - political, commercial and cultural. (Singh, 1997, O’Neil, 2004).

Factors like religious beliefs, caste system, male domination and economic stress have been recognized as the stimulants behind the perpetuation of this phenomenon. The beginning could be perhaps mapped out in the inscription found in temples. "The word ‘Emperumandiyar’ was used in the sense of Vaishnavas before 966 A.D, which means dancing girls, attached to Vishnu temples, in inscriptions of about 1230-1240 A.D. in the time of Raja Raya III. In Maharashtra, they are called ‘Devadasis’ meaning ‘female servants of God’.

The Devadasi system was set up, according to a Times of India report (10-11-1987) as a result of a conspiracy between the feudal class and the priests (Brahmins). The latter, with their ideological and religious hold over the peasants and craftsmen, devised a means that gave prostitution their religious sanction. Poor, low-caste girls, initially sold at private auctions, were later dedicated to the temples. They were then initiated into prostitution.
On the history of Devadasi practice in Karnataka, Jogan Shankar (1994) remarked that, ‘the earliest inscription that refers to the word “Devadasi” is found at Alanahalli dated 1113 A.D. (Epigraphia Carnatica [EC], Vol II, No. 97). Prior to this, other epigraphic evidences refer to prostitutes as ‘Sule’ (Prostitute). The earliest inscription referring to ‘Sule’ is in Mahakala inscription (Indian Antiquary, Vol. II: 122). Hence the Antiquity of the word 'Sule' in Karnataka is 733 A.D. and for Devadasi 1113 A.D. respectively… The custom of presenting girls as gifts to temples was prevalent in mediaeval Karnataka. This is evident from an epigraph from Malakere in Chitradurga district. It records “the great minister Manne and various Karnams having come to the Manalkere Agrahara, made along with other grants, of four Sule for the Mulastan God. Another inscription from Gogga in Shimoga district gives some information of some kind of donations to Shrines. The inscription (EC :XI: DG: 133, 1071 A.D.) records a grant of a ‘Virgin’ girl and certain quantity of grain to the temple. Since this particular inscription is incomplete, it is not clear whether the girl presented to temple was assigned to dance or as a mere maid servant. A copper plate from Manne, in Bangalore district registers the grant of village, to the Jain basti to provide subsistence for dancing girl’.

An analysis of the inscriptions of medieval south India gives a lot of information about the Devadāsis. All the Devadāsis did not belong to one
class. In medieval times the temple girls came from different social backgrounds, each having to perform a different ritual and they had a different status. Some of these girls participated in charities, public utilities work and were also involved in elaborate ritualistic services. Few of these women were the honored ones because the king appointed them. Probably their public appearances were restricted to certain ceremonial occasions. These girls represented the hereditary class namely, Sampradayamuvaru or Kanya Sampradayamuvaru. They came from elite and royal families and attached themselves to the service of the temple and the deity. Prostitution by this class is doubtful or false as there no much evidence (Jeevanandam and Rekha Pande, 2012).

The temple girls were paid generally in kind, with a share in temple property. They were often given a part of the Prasāda offered to the deity. Occasionally they were also paid in cash. Many a times the donors specified the manner of enjoying share in temple lands by the temple girls and deposited certain amount in the temple treasury for their maintenance. The temple dancers acquired a lot of wealth as can be seen from the numerous grants made to the temples. They also paid taxes to the State. An epigraph dated 1547 AD records the remission of taxes paid by the dancing women to the villages of Kommuru, Voruganti, Ravipadu, Gomgulamudi belonging to the God Agastyeswara of Kommuru. They
were entitled to receive monetary benefits, lands, share of prasādam towards their remuneration (Jeevanandam and Rekha Pande, 2012).

According to Jogan Shankar (1994), the following are the reasons which played a major role in supplanting the system with firm roots: “1. As a substitute for human sacrifice. 2. As a rite to ensure the fertility of the land and the increase of human being and animal population. 3. As a part of phallic worship which existed in India from early Dravidian times. 4. Sprang from the custom of providing sexual hospitality for strangers. 5. Licentious worship offered by a people, subservient to a degraded and vested interests of priestly Class. 6. To create custom in order to exploit lower caste people in India by upper castes and classes.

On the basis of the historical studies and research it is revealed that, “sacred prostitution” established itself and grew to become a part of the Indian society. Vasant Raja’s Marathi book entitled ‘Devdasi: Shodha ani bodha’ (Published by Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 1997) described of an inscription of 1004 A.D., in Tanjor Temple mentioning the numbers of devdasis to be 400 in Tanjor, 450 in Brahideswara temple and 500 in Sorti Somnath temple. According to Chau Ju-Kua, Gujarat contained 4000 temples in which lived over 20,000 dancing girls whose function was to sing twice daily while offering food to the deities and while presenting flowers. Unfortunately, due to the continuation of the factors responsible
for the birth of the system, the tradition has maintained itself over the centuries. It is found in all parts of India, but was more prevalent in the south. In some parts of Maharashtra and Karnataka it is still prevalent and has become a source of exploitation of lower castes.

The Devadasis, spread all over India, lead intolerable lives. They have been quenching the thirst of millions of upper caste Indian male’s lusts. Since the inception of this “deplorable” system, the Devadasis have been subjected to merciless subjugation and injustice.

Many of these women were tiny girls when they became Devadasis, dedicated to the sect by poverty-stricken parents unable to pay their future dowries and hopeful that a pleased goddess would make the next pregnancy a boy. Tradition has for centuries locked Devadasis into a proscribed and highly stigmatized social role. Forbidden to marry or work outside the temple, they have spent their lives tending the shrines and decorating altars, singing and dancing, telling devotional stories and collecting coins from worshippers to support themselves and their religious work.

With the passage of time, the practice changed into an organized social system and the noble intention of serving the God changed into serving the priests, the patrons and the worshippers. Particularly, the young girls come to be exploited for physical pleasures by all and sundry
warped minds in the society encouraged the practice as it would ensure free supply of unattached young maidens. Predatory male also were not long in devising ingenious ways for heightening their pleasures; “Angbhog” (sexually caressing a Devdasi bedecked in fine clothes and ornaments), “Rangbhog” (enjoying the company of a singing and dancing Devdasi) and “Shayanbhag” (actually sleeping with a Devdasi for sex) (Uttam Kamble, 1984).

They continue to face discrimination and indignities on the basis of caste, remain politically powerless and suffer from acute poverty, oppression and exploitation. They run high chances of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases. Although in independent India, many steps have been taken to prevent the system and rehabilitate the Devadasis, they are not enough to improve the situation as the root cause of poverty continues to push young girl to the roads of “sacred prostitution”.

3.5. Process of Dedication:

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).

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 at Saundatti. 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 and then he keeps it back in the plate and covers it
with the cloth. Then Jogatis 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 (Pratibha Desai, 2007).
The followers of Shri Renuka Yellamma, who are mostly poor, and illiterate, take a vow to dedicate themselves, their spouses or their children in the service of Goddess Renuka Yellamma when they are unable to face the hardships of life. The typical situations include life-threatening diseases, infertility, and dire financial troubles. These are the people who are primarily responsible for propagating Goddess Yellamma’s virtues and achievements and glorify the Goddess. An elaborate ceremony is held in order to initiate the Jogathis (female) and Jogappa (male) volunteers in the service of Goddess Renuka Yellamma. New followers have to bathe in three holy ponds and proceed to the head priest accompanied by community elders and other members of the family.

Generally, the girls are dedicated to deities during Jatras or full moon days through Bettale Seve or Nude Worship. Mostly women from the lower castes perform bettale seve to fulfil a harake (vow) undertaken when a calamity has befallen the family (such as sickness or death), or for a wish to be fulfilled (such as a wish for a husband or a child).

During Bettale seve, worshippers bathe in the River or ponds near to Sri Renuka devi temples (Malaprabha river in Saundatti and Varada river in Chandragutti) and run up to the temple covering a distance of five kilometres. Bettale seve is part of various other forms of seve like shirasashtanga namaskara seve (where the devotee lies fully prostrate on
the ground), *urulu seve* (where the devotee rolls around the sanctum sanctorum), and *hejje namaskara seve* (where the devotee goes around the sanctum sanctorum with foot-length steps). Interestingly, *Bettale seve* belongs to a set of worship forms that revolve around the motif of ‘clothing’ (*udige*) or foregrounds what you wear as central to it: *Oddheyudige seve* is a service performed wearing wet clothes, *arashinadhudige seve* is that performed applying turmeric paste over the body, *gandhadhudige seve* involves wearing sandalwood paste, neem leaves are worn during *bevinudige seve* and flowers during *huvinudige seve*. *Bettale seve* or nude worship is itself another name for *huttudige seve* which implies a form of worship wearing birth clothes or nude service.

The priests give them a long sermon on what they have to do please Renuka Yellamma. They have to identify themselves with the very poor and unfortunate ones and serve the society. At least twice in a year they have to visit the Yellamma shrine on full moon days (Poornima) to express and confirm their obedience. During this semi-annual ritual, they have to observe preferably total nudity. If not, they have to cover their bodies with Neem foliage or scanty clothes. Such rituals, especially in the last decade, have become heavily publicized events due to the youngsters and tourists who gather around such pilgrimage centers to have glimpses of nude and semi-nude human bodies.
The paradox of this system however, is that on certain occasions, the Devadasis are seen as a receptacle for the goddess herself and are therefore highly respected. At weddings, funerals and more important during the Jatra festival, an annual five-day celebration of Yellamma, a Devadasi is awarded a semi-holy status and is worshipped (Marglin, 1985).

As cited by Tarachand (1992), Gurumurthy suggests that the cult and worship of goddess Yellamma-Renuka who for centuries has been worshipped by the people of Karnataka as a healer of diseases and granter of boons is now represented as a threat to the health and wealth of her devotees: ‘the goddess, like the ritual tradition is abused and misused’.

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 (Pratibha Desai, 2007).

As described by Omvedt (1983), during the feudal period, Devdasis became bound to the service of feudal lords, from rajas and maharajas down to the village overlords. Even today, they continue to be enslaved to such masters. Rich merchants, landlords, big farmers, pay the Rs 600 to 800 required for the dedication ceremony of a girl, and thus buy the right to have the first sexual relation with her. They continue to have special privileges after that, even though she remains available to other men as well. However, the more prevalent system today is that the pimps from the Bombay prostitution industry pay for the dedication ceremony, and often pay something to the girl’s parents, in order to directly recruit the girl for a commercial brothel in Bombay.

One of the most dangerous threats for Devadasis is AIDS. Being women with multiple sexual partners, awareness on issues of personal hygiene is very low. Consequently, most of the women suffer from
reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases (Nag, 1995). In Bombay, virtually all such women suffer from several forms of venereal disease. It has been estimated that 20% of the Devadasis are infected with HIV (Nag, 1995). Generally these women perceive any such problem as a normal feature of their life cycle and never take their health seriously.

3.6. Reforms and Rehabilitation:

Evidence shows that the Devdasi tradition was part of socio-religious life of India since antiquity till about Middle Ages, Populace was in utter awe of God and Godly affairs and in total subjugation of the priestly class. Particularly, the age-old Devdasi tradition must have caused a considerable social strife, because in the 17th Century India, Mogul Emperor Aurangzeb for first time tries to abolish the Devdasi tradition by demolishing the temple of God Khandoba at Jejuri in Maharashtra. The temple was producing a large number of “Muralis” (Devdasi of God Khandoba). The effort, however, did not succeed and to this day, Khandoba temple continuous to be the fountained of “Muralis”, majority numbers of Muralis are belonged to the backward class communities which is exploited sexually, socially by Hindu religion today (Ghatage, 2012).

The Devadasi system violates several clauses of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including Clause-4 which states that ‘no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall
be prohibited in all their forms.’ The United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956, which India is a signatory to prohibit any practice where a child is handed over for exploitative purposes.

The Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1988 has outlawed the dedication of girls as Devadasi, but the practice still continues. Similarly, the Government of Karnataka passed the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act in 1982 and also amended the same in 2010 to rehabilitate the existing Devadasis. As per these rules, Devadasi practice is strictly prohibited, but still many people are practicing Devadasi practice. The government formulated “Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme” by providing counseling and awareness and shall be economically empowered by involving these women in income generating activities, if necessary by providing protection or shelter in remand home up to six months and see that these women shall become self-sustained by availing subsidy and loans through banks.

Further, Government has also announced financial assistance to those who marry Devadasis and Devadasis are also given reservation in getting employment. In noted places, where Devadasi practice is prevalent, that is in Chandragutti and Saundatti, the Non-Governmental
Organizations are active in abandoning Devadasi practice by increasing the awareness of the people. It is emphasized that the Self-Help Groups are also of immense help for the Devadasis to engage in self-employment.

Although the journey so far towards eliminating the Devadasi system has been bumpy and difficult, hope still floats. There are numerous NGOs which are continuing the fight against this disgraceful system. They have been working towards increasing the awareness of the ignorant Devadasis regarding HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. A case for instance is the PLAN/ MYRADA. The project sponsored periodic health camps for the Devadasis. The project claims, “More than 250 members of the Devadasi groups received health cards that enabled them, their partners and their partners' spouses to seek treatment for STDs and other reproductive tract infections”.

The Devadasi community also continues to reap the benefits of both the prevention project and MYRADA’s long-term economic empowerment program. Many have been able to leave sex work for new careers as weavers, basket makers or vegetable vendors. Some have married their former boyfriends, or are limiting their sex work to one or two steady customers. In retaliation to the initiation of Devadasis, a new and progressive process of de-initiation has been introduced, as a result of which many women can finally liberate themselves.
Andhra Pradesh Anti-Devadasi System Struggle Committee (APJVPS), a local NGO active in Andhra Pradesh, which is trying to rehabilitate former Devadasis and prevent new initiations. APJVPS first move was in 1993 when it set up a school for the daughters of 22 Devadasis. In supporting and educating the children, it gained the trust of their mothers and started to make contact with the Devadasi all over the region. APJVPS’ objectives include the limitation of the Devadasi tradition, the marriage of Devadasis and development of community-based organizations to create awareness against the custom and ensuring education for children born to Devadasis. This association also provides self-help groups, leadership training, financial advice and support for women to find the strength to stand up to the social pressure that keeps them in this situation.

In both Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, rehabilitated Devadasi are entitled to a variety of state benefits. These include monthly pensions, assistance with housing, free healthcare and education for their children. Due to a mixture of corruption and prejudice, they often find it difficult to access these benefits. Additionally, many are not aware of their full rights. In January 2012, Karnataka State finally issued the 23,000 registered former Devadasi with entitlement certificates, enabling them to claim
benefits, though these certificates were backdated, it had taken four years for them to be issued (The Hindu, 2012).

Alongside law, the processes of social change, namely the NGOs, other voluntary organizations and the governmental machinery should collectively pit themselves against religion and commercialism structured into the business for many years. At Manoli, 12 kms from Saundatti, some Devadasis are being trained to handle sewing machines at a centre run by the Akhmahadevi Mahila Mandal. This voluntary body trains 40 girls at a time for six months. The Mahatma Phule Samata Pratishthan of Pune is trying to educate children of *devadasis* to that they can find employment in the mainstream. Revabai Kamble is President of the Pune Devadasi Sangathan founded in 1982. It raises health consciousness among prostitutes who visit the dispensary once a week. The Social Welfare Department of the Government of Maharashtra has set up a hostel for children of Devadasis at Bhukam, 12 miles away from Pune. Sawali at Nippani has Sushila Naik as president, who is a *devadasi* herself. It is a centre established solely for the rehabilitation of the *devadasis* and for deserted and displaced women. The Karnataka Dalit Action Committee based in Bangalore has constantly tried to raise public support against the degrading system (Malagi and Sindhe, 2015).
Official figures suggest that there are 23,000 Devadasis in Karnataka, and 17,000 in Andhra Pradesh. These figures are based on the number of Devadasi registered to receive benefits. Other sources suggest that there may be as many as 100,000 in Karnataka and 60,000 in Andhra Pradesh. These figures illustrate not only the need to educate Devadasi women as to their entitlements, but also the dramatic need for States to expand and develop their benefit programmes.
3.7. References:


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