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## **Abuse of Lower Castes in South India: The Institution of Devadasi**

By Maria-Costanza Torri<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The 'devadasi' system has been the object of several studies and is quite controversial. Some authors, particularly in the past associated the 'devadasi' with power and prestige, other, more lately, with degradation and prostitution.

This article firstly explores the origin of 'devadasi' practice and its evolution over time as well as its religious and ritual meaning, while attempting to identify the main factors explaining the signification of the 'devadasi' system in the past. Secondly it analyses the social status and economic condition of 'devadasis' and draws a global view of the reasons why young girls are still today consecrated in rural areas. Our argument is that the sanctions provided by social custom and apparently by religion are strictly combined with economic and social pressures. The social control and hegemonic masculinity of upper caste men is asserted and maintained through defilement and appropriation of lower caste and 'dalit' women's sexuality. The symbolic meaning of the devadasis relies upon the gendering and sexualising of caste relations of domination and subordination. In this logic, this article examines the intersections between gender, caste and violence.

*Keywords:* devadasi, lower castes, religious prostitution, South India.

### **Introduction**

Since its introduction, gender has emerged as the closest thing we have to a unifying concept of feminist studies, cutting across the various disciplines and theoretical schools that make up the field. Many feminist historians and sociologists use gender as an analytical concept to refer to socially created meanings, relationships and identities organized around reproductive differences (Connell, 1989, Scott, 1986). Others focus on gender as a social status and organizing principle of social institutions detached from and going far beyond reproductive differences (Acker, 1990, Lorber, 1994). Still others see gender as an ongoing product of everyday social practice (Thorne, 1993).

By examining gender as a constitutive feature and organizing principle of collectivities, social institutions, historical processes, and social practices, feminist scholars have demonstrated that major areas of life – including sexuality, family, economy – are organized according to gender principles and shot through with

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conflicting interests and hierarchies of power and privilege. As an organizing principle, gender involves both cultural meanings and material relations. That is, gender is constituted simultaneously through the deployment of gendered rhetoric, symbols, and images and through the allocation of resources and power along gender lines. Thus an adequate account of any particular gender phenomenon requires an examination of both structure and meaning.

The most recent theoretical work is moving toward imploding the sex-gender distinction itself. The distinction assumes the prior existence of ‘something real’ out of which social relationships and cultural meanings are elaborated. A variety of poststructuralist feminist critics have problematized the distinction by pointing out that sex and sexual meanings are themselves culturally constructed (Butler, 1990). Lorber (1994), a sociologist, carefully unpacks the concepts of biological sex (which refers to either genetic or morphological characteristics), sexuality (which refers to desire and orientation) and gender (which refers to social status and identity) and shows that they are all equally socially constructed concepts.

Over the last two decades, studies on women in India have raised important questions about the invisibility, distortion and marginalization of gender as a category of analysis in mainstream disciplines and their practices of canonization. The recognition of caste as not just a retrograde but also oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in modern society, but on the contrary very widespread, required the feminist scholars to integrate questions of caste with those of class and gender. Social honor, power and advantages are organized in both caste and gender relations. “*Caste is and remains essentially social rank*” and the central position of the Brahmans “*rests more upon the fact that social rank is determined with reference to them than upon anything else*” (Weber, 1916). The Indian caste system comprises four single castes or *varnas* and several sub castes are categorized within each caste (Dumont, 1980).

The caste system is perceived as a particularly rigid and oppressive form of inequality and its origin a subject of debate (Chakraborty, 2000). “Untouchability” along with the rituals and ritual prohibitions are an essential feature of the caste system. The practice of untouchability isolates those belonging to the lower caste, especially the *Scheduled Caste* or *dalits* from those belonging to the upper castes. More than 160 million people are categorized as *dalits*, meaning “downtrodden” (Government of India, 1999). As noted by Shah (2001), “*though the visible practice of untouchability has declined – certainly in public spheres – incidents of atrocities against dalits have not shown a similar downturn and continue unabated in post-independence India in various forms- murder, arson, rape*”.

Shah adds, “*Conflicts over material interests and political power contribute to a great deal to such incidents*”. Power and social control find expression in both caste and gender relations (Kannibiran, 1991; Omvedt, 1993, 1998).

Over the past two decades, the changing status and roles of women combined with the rise of modern feminism have promoted a dramatic increase in concern with the meaning and exploration of gender. Feminist scholarship and women in development (WID) research have led to the consensus that gender is a fundamental organizing principle of human societies. Gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power (Scott, 1986) and constructing hierarchies. Gender is not “only about women”, it refers to a structural relationship between sex categories that is linked to the state, the economy,

and other macro and micro processes. Gender is not a homogeneous category; it is internally differentiated and elaborated by class, race and ethnicity, region and education. Like caste, gender organizes social prestige and status in rituals of interaction (Ridgeway, 1992). In different ways and for different reasons, all cultures use gender as a primary category of social relations. Integrating race, class and gender into feminist thinking requires a process of transformation that involves seeing race, class and gender in relational ways. In the Indian context, caste also interacts with gender.

Feminist scholars have persuasively argued for the analysis of race, class and gender as intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression (Andersen, 1993; Hill-Collins, 1990). This model can usefully be applied to gender-class-caste dynamics as well. Focusing on the mechanisms of intersection across caste and gender allows for exploring how individuals negotiate, resist, and struggle against inequalities. In the Indian context the caste system is an important aspect of the social sphere. The hierarchy and characteristics that govern the caste system constrain life changes gained through acquiring skills. Intersection of caste and gender lead to women having less prestige and respect compared with the men even within the same caste.

Sociologists and historians have extensively analyzed the treatment of women under the caste system. Historians have also argued that the caste system not only determines the social division of labor 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).

Gender as a marker of disparity is ubiquitous; the literature analyzing gender disparity in India is huge. The issues that this literature analyzes range from the falling sex ratio, educational disparities between men and women, trends in women’s employment, health issues in general and reproductive rights in particular, gender and environment, poverty of female headed households, and so on (Dube, L. 1988). Again, research investigating the interlinkages between gender and other forms of group disparity is not very large. Thus, in this paper we aim to combine a gender analysis to the concepts of sexuality, caste and power inequalities.

With this challenge in mind this paper seeks to analyse the Indian institution of *devadasi*, a religious practice that consists of the votive offering of 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 in.. that goes: “*a devadasi is servant of God but wife of the whole town*”.

Researchers have begun to investigate socio-economic, religious, and emotional dynamics associated with female prostitution (Hwang, S., O. Bedford, 2004, Montgomery, 2001, Sorajjakool, S., 2003), local constructions of sex work (Wardlow, 2004), and issues of violence and the social construction of gender identity (Gorkoff and

Runner, 2003). The topic of female prostitution pervades the contemporary discourse about *devadasi* girls and young women in India, who are the focus of this paper. Former temple servants, artists, and prostitutes, today most *devadasis* practice sex work (or *dhandha*) in their homes or small lodges and brothels in rural settings (Blanchard et al., 2005). Regarded for centuries as emblematic of both a defining element of Indian culture and fallen women of a “backward” tradition, *devadasis* have long occupied a contested socio-moral position within Indian society. This duality is reflected in the sentiments of contemporary populist reformers, who describe the rise and fall of the *devadasi* tradition and the parallel moral degeneration of the women from temple servants to “cheap prostitutes” (Vimochana, 1985).

In this paper we question the importance of the religious factor in explaining the logic of the *Devadasis*’ institution. On the contrary, we argue that the element of caste and socio-economic background are two fundamental aspects that should be taken into account. These factors, strictly interwoven, contribute to keep this practice alive. In our vision, the *devadasi*’s consecration is deeply embedded both in the rural social structure and religious beliefs and represents a form of dominance and social control of upper castes over lower ones. Untouchability, caste conflicts and caste marginalisation are all recurrent elements in the *devadasi*’s experiences and accounts. Untouchable (or *dalit*) women as ‘victims’ of interpersonal and structural violence, is a legitimate reflection of the caste dynamics (Rozario, 2000). Ironically, the ideological construction of purity/pollution is conveniently forgotten when ‘pure’ upper caste men are engaged in sexual encounters with ‘impure’ lower caste women.

The paper begins with an overview of the *devadasi* system in the past and in the present. Two sections that feature the socio-demographic profile of the *devadasi* follow it. The paper concludes with a critical discussion of the institution of the *devadasi*, particularly with respect to the social construction of this phenomenon and some suggestions for policy makers.

### **The meaning and the historical evolution of the institution of the *devadasi***

The term *devadasi* or *jogini* is of Sanskrit origin and denotes a female servant of deity. While widely used, the institution and these women were known by different names in different areas<sup>2</sup>.

Although there are differences between these ancient institutions of cult prostitution<sup>3</sup>, essentially they all involve religious dedication to a Hindu deity (Dasgupta,

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<sup>2</sup> In Tamil Nadu they were known as *devaradiar* or *dasis*, meaning respectively slave servants of God or slaves; in Travancore region as *kudikkars* (those belonging to the house); in Andhra Pradesh as *dogams* and *sanis*; in Goa and Western India as *bhavins* or *bhavinis*, meaning beautiful wanton women; in Maharashtra (other than coastal area) as *muralis jogatis* or *jogtinis* or *aradhinis*. *Devadasis* are also traditionally known by the names of *Nayakasani*, *Rangasani*, *Gangasani*, *Muttukattikondavlu*, *Davara Sule*, *Kasabi*, *Patradavalu*, *Jogti*.

<sup>3</sup> An important point that may be noted is the difference between *devadasi* system and *jogini* /*basavi* system. *Devadasis* confined their activities to the boundaries of temples (especially great traditional temples), where as *joginis/basavis* participated in dances before chariots of god and goddess during processions in village festivals. Besides, *joginis/basavis* were not allowed to dance inside the great traditional temples and their activities were confined to little traditional temples in the villages. However, gradually the difference between these two different systems got diluted and the term “*devadasi(s)*” is used hereinafter to denote all local variants.

2000). The majority of *devadasi* are consecrated to the goddess Yellamma<sup>4</sup>, also known as Jogamma, Holiyyamma or Renuka. This divinity is supposed to be the goddess of abundance and strength.

The cult<sup>5</sup> of Yellamma is more widespread in South India, in particular in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, where there are innumerable devotees of this goddess.

The *devadasi* system flourished under the patronage of the temple and the state for centuries. We find that though secular prostitution is mainly developed in Southern India, it seems to also exist in the rest of the country, but in smaller proportion. This is probably attributed to Muslim<sup>6</sup> influence (Shankar, 1990).

There have been opinions about the genesis and growth of *devadasi* system. Here an attempt has been made to present a comprehensive review of the dominant schools of thought. Some researchers are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>7</sup>, 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> There are many stories about the origin of the 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).

<sup>5</sup> It is not clear if the Yellamma cult has been always directly linked to the *devadasi* tradition. Infact, it can happen that girls could be as well dedicated to deities other than Yellamma. These Gods included Ganesha, Jamadagni (husband of Yellamma) and Parashurama (son of Yellamma). After Yellamma, Hanuman attracts the largest number of dedications (Ranjana, 1983). It is also noteworthy to say that at the origin Yellamma was a divinity mainly worshipped by the lower castes (mostly *dalits* and *bahujans*) and did not therefore belong to the Brahminic deities. Progressively the culte of Yellamma, as many other lower castes divinities, have been homologized in Brahminic order. According to Joga Shankar at the origin Yellamma was a dravidian goddess that after the Aryan invasion had been homologized by Brahmins.

<sup>6</sup> Some authors as Vasant Rajas (1997) affirm the influence over Muslims which has been exerted by hindu *devadasi* tradition. He mentions in fact that some muslim sects offered girls to religious prostitution. Such girls were called '*acchutis*'. Even currently, there is a colony of such people in Lucknow in Uttar Pradsh. These girls are called 'bibi' and are condemned to lead a life of prostitution.

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, others authors affirm that *devadasi system* started around 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century, during the Rajput period. According to this hypothesis, the existence of *devadasi* system is mapped out in the inscriptions found in hinduist temples. The word *Emperumandiyar*, which was used in the sense of dancing girls, results in the inscriptions of Vishnu temples about 1230-1240 A.D., in the time of Raja Raya III.

and travellers narratives. We can therefore state that even if the practice of consecrating young girls to temples was present since the 6<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

As has been underlined by Jogan Shankar (1994), several hypotheses could be put forward to explain the evolution of the *devadasi* system. According to this author, the custom of dedicating girls to temples emerged as a substitute for human sacrifice to the gods and goddesses to appease and secure blessings for the community as a whole. In every religious cult, in fact, dedicating a young child is the ultimate offering in worship. Another possible explanation could be that the young girls' dedication is a rite to ensure the fertility of the land and the increase of human and animal population on the principle of homeopathic magic (Jogan Shankar, 1990). However it is not clear why the cult of this divinity implies the dedicated girl must provide sexual service for the members of her community. In answer to this proposal, one possible hypothesis could be that the *devadasi* system is part of the phallic worship that existed in India from early Dravidian times. Another hypothesis could be that sacred prostitution sprang from the custom of providing sexual hospitality for strangers; and if such hospitality is offered by woman so close to a deity like a *devadasi*, prosperity would result. None of these hypotheses can however provide exhaustive explanations of the complexity of this practice's origin.

Traditionally, in addition to their religious duties, the *devadasis* were a community of artists.<sup>9</sup> They sang and danced in temples to please the gods, a task which was highly regarded<sup>10</sup> (Amrit Srinivasan, 1985, Gathia, 1999). What in ordinary homes was performed by the *low-caste* musicians – ceremonies welcoming the bridegroom and guests, singing songs of festivity at marriages and puberty ceremonies, marriages etc. – were in the elite houses performed by the *devadasi*. The promotional advantages of a temple position for a professional career were obvious both in terms of publicity and income. The invitation to perform at marriages and other ceremonies in elite homes flowed from the artists' special status as god's servants. In this respect, the *devadasi* were clearly superior to low-caste drummers and musicians who were often also invited into private households.

It must be therefore emphasised that 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*

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<sup>8</sup> At this proposal, one inscription of 1004 A.D. in Tanjor Temple mentions the numbers of *devadasis* to be 400 in Tanjor, 450 in Brahideswara temple and 500 in Sorti Somnath temple. According to eminent Indian historians like R.C Mazumder and U.N Ghoshal in Gujarat around 10<sup>th</sup> century there were around 4000 temples in which lived over 20.000 "dancing girls".

<sup>9</sup> The *devadasis* preserved and developed the classical dances of India. *Bharatnatyam* is a modern incarnation of the *sadir* dance performed by *devadasis* of Tamil Nadu. *Odissi* was performed by *devadasis* of temples in Orissa. The contribution of *devadasis* to music is also significant. MS Subbulakshmi, Lata Mangeshkar and her sister Asha Bhonsle, the three most renowned women singers of India, trace their lineage to *devadasi* community.

<sup>10</sup> Temples in Goa, Tanjavor, Puri, Mathura, Mysore etc. provided good examples of the prevalence of *devadasi* as temple singers and dancers.

*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).

Contrary to the impression often conveyed, there is absolutely no evidence to show that during the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the dancing girls at temples were prostitutes, sacred or secular. The connection of *devadasis* with prostitution seems to have been established after the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The rise and fall in the status of *devadasis* can be seen running parallel to the destruction of temples by invaders which started from the North Western borders of the country and spread to the whole of the country around the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Under the "warrior kings" (A.D. 1300–1700) *Devadasis* were displaced by increasingly androcentric forms of worship, and kings assumed greater importance in directing women's activities (Orr, 2000). This was a decisive point in the *Devadasis*' passage from persons with agency and ritual significance to symbols of divine sexuality for the enjoyment of royalty, wealthy donors, and attendants. Although this transition was not instantaneous, and the system remained important within religious worship and practice, the examples set by kings, priests, and wealthy landowners helped solidify connections between these women, sex work, and sacred eroticism often assumed to be ingrained features of the *Devadasi* tradition.

### **The "modern" phenomenon of *Devadasis***

At present in India the practice of dedicating girls to temples continues, despite legislation abolishing the practice of *devadasis*.<sup>11</sup> In northern Karnataka, the *Devadasi* system remains a culturally and economically valued form of sex work, and approximately 1000–10,000 young girls are inducted into the system annually (Chakraborty, 2000). According to an estimate by UNICEF (2006), there would be about 27,000 *devadasis* in Andhra Pradesh, figure that is much higher than the one officially declared by the government.

#### *Devadasis: when caste belonging and socio-economic status become a prerequisite*

Belonging to a lower caste is a kind of "prerequisite" to become a *devadasi*. From the few studies that were carried out in South India, it results that almost all *devadasis* belong to the *Harijan* (Untouchable) group (Tarachand, 1991). The *Devadasi* system cannot in fact be fully understood if one does not examine the lower caste status (generally identified with the term *Harijan*, those who were defined "untouchable" or

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<sup>11</sup> The first legal initiative dates back to 1934 when the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act was passed by the British Government and covered the Bombay state, as it existed then. The Bombay Devadasi Protection Act declared the dedication of a woman as an illegal act, irrespective of the fact whether the dedication was made with her consent or not. The Act also laid down grounds for punitive action that could be taken against any person who were found to be involved in dedications. The two Acts then existing were replaced by the Karnataka Devadasis Act which was adopted by the State Legislature in 1982 and was notified by the Government through its Gazette in 1984. With the creation of the Devadasi Act, turning a girl into a temple prostitute was made illegal and punishable by up to 5 years imprisonment as well as by a fine of 5000 Rs. As was held by the Act of 1934, the new Act also seeks to declare unlawful the very act of dedication, whether the dedication is done with or without the consent of the dedicated woman.



with the term *Dalit*, which means *oppressed*) and their role inside the Indian society. Positioned at the bottom of India's caste, class, and gender hierarchies, largely uneducated and consistently paid less than their male counterparts, lower caste women make up the majority of landless laborers.

A recent study on untouchability in rural India, (Shah et al. 2006) covering five hundred and sixty five villages in eleven States, found that public health workers refused to visit *Dalit* homes in 33% of villages, and *Dalit* children sat separately while eating in 37.8% of government schools. *Dalits* were prevented from entering police stations in 27.6% of villages, did not get mail delivered to their homes in 23.5% of villages, and were denied access to water sources in 48.4% of villages.

The violence of upper castes towards the lower castes seems to be a widespread phenomenon. Police statistics averaged over the past five years show that every day three *Dalit* women are raped, eleven *Dalits* are beaten up and for every eighteen minutes a crime is committed against a *Dalit* (Crime in India, 2005)

The subordinate position of the *Harijan* make them particularly vulnerable to every kind of abuse, sexual included.<sup>12</sup> As Human Rights Watch was told by a government investigator in Tamil Nadu, “everyone practices untouchability when it comes to sex.” A common expression quoted to describe the hypocrisy in this system is “untouchable by day but touchable at night”.

Caste-conflicts are often negotiated on the sexualized (impure and available) body of the *Dalit* women (Orchard, 2004). In rural areas rape is a common phenomenon<sup>13</sup> and often form part of the tactics of intimidation used by upper-caste gangs against lower castes. Women are raped as part of caste custom or village tradition. According to *Harijan* or *Dalit* activists, lower caste girls are often forced to have sex with the village landowner (*zaminder*). *Harijan* women are also raped as a form of retaliation. The use of sexual abuse and other forms of violence against lower caste women are used as tools by upper castes to inflict political “lessons” and crush dissent and labor movements within *Dalit* communities. Thus rape is a clear message from the upper castes and classes that they would not allow anyone to disturb the existent social structure. Lower caste women are often raped by members of the upper caste and by *zaminders* (land owners) in retaliation when their male relatives demand for example the payment of minimum wages or when they reclaim lost land. In rural area rape is also used to settle sharecropping or land disputes.

Economic dominance is closely associated with issues of access to lower caste/*Dalit* women's sexuality (Orchard, 2007). Sexual violence against lower caste women is linked as well to debt bondage as landowners may lend money to lower castes. Often they cannot honour their debt due to their extreme poverty. Rape can be therefore a way for lower castes to settle their debts with upper castes. The latter due to their prominent economic position can easily abuse the former and link them in a relationship “dominant-dominated”. The prevalence of rape in villages contributes to the greater incidence of child marriage in those areas. Early marriage between the ages of ten and

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<sup>12</sup> According to Ramanika Gupta, in certain parts in Bihar, even now, a new *Dalit* bride has to spend the first night with the village head man (Sohoo, 1997). Always according to the some author, a bazaar is organized in Dholpur for the sale of *Dalit* girls.

<sup>13</sup> The Home Ministry reported that, between 2000 and 2001, there has been a 16.5 % increase in reported rape cases in rural areas.

sixteen persists mainly because of *Dalit* girls' vulnerability to sexual assault by upper-caste men. Once a girl is raped, she becomes unmarriageable.

It is important to mention that the perceptions of *Dalit* and upper caste women's sexuality are associated with the way they position themselves in relation to the public and private spheres. Unlike upper caste women, lower caste and *Dalit* women are not confined to the domestic/private domain (Orchard, 2007). The social control and hegemonic masculinity of upper caste men is asserted and maintained through defilement and appropriation of lower caste and *Dalit* women's sexuality. For example, the infamous case of Bhukli Devi who was paraded naked by Bhumihar Brahmins on the charge of stealing four potatoes from a field in Samastipur district (central northern state of Bihar) in 1994. She was then raped and killed after her sari was inserted into her vagina. The insertion of a piece of cloth in her vagina can be understood as symbolic of the 'impurity' of the womb of the *Dalit* women and condemnation by the upper castes of the birth of any further progeny.

The fact that the constitutional, statutory protections afforded to lower castes women in India are very weak should be heavily underlined. Cases documented by India's National Commission for Women, by local and national nongovernmental women's rights organizations, and by the press, reveal a pattern of impunity in attacks on women. The government's failure to prosecute cases of rape and the manner in which differential rates of prosecution are compounded by corruption and caste and gender bias, even at the trial level.

Until recently, various political movements, even feminist and dalit also neglected the plight of lower caste women. Ruth Manorama, head of the newly constituted National Federation for *Dalit* Women explained: "*Dalit women are at the bottom of Indian society. Within the women's movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously. Within the Dalit movement, women have been ignored. Caste, class, and gender need to be looked at together*".

In addition to low social status, there are other factors with a crucial influence on the decision of parents to donate their daughter to the deity. The economic factor is important and is often closely linked to the low social status of *Scheduled Castes* and *Dalits* (Rozario, 2000). The majority of *devadasis* come from poor landless families. Many *Dalit* women are dedicated to the goddess at a very young age by poverty-stricken parents unable to pay their future dowries and hopeful that a pleased goddess will make the next pregnancy a boy (Mowli, 1992).

Some parents may also consecrate their daughter as an offering for the fulfilment of a wish or hoping to receive divine help to cure a disease. Traditionally, these communities believe that the presence of certain girl characteristics are a sign of predestination and a mark of the divinity choosing that girl to become her servant. That is, when a girl presents matting or knotting of her hair or has copper-coloured hair. It is important to notice that usually these factors are due to a lack of hygiene or malnutrition. In fact, among the poor lower castes where the majority of Yellamma's devotees are found, the birth of a girl is regarded as a misfortune and consequently the girl's health, hygiene and nutrition are often grossly neglected. In many areas there is the custom of abandoning a sick baby girl outside Yellamma temple in the night. If she is still alive in the morning, the family believes she is born for the goddess.

The interpretation of the dominant position of the upper castes and their important role in the creation of the *devadasi* institution is confirmed by some scholars, such as Orchard (2007). In his interpretation, the system of *devadasi* expresses the great social and economic prominence of upper class landowners, able to control the village priests. In this view of the facts, the upper castes have influenced the establishment of an order of prostitutes who are licensed to carry on their profession under the protective shield of religion. The establishment of such a system facilitates their access to low caste women to fulfil their sexual needs. In this light, the temple priest has traditionally been a pawn in the hands of powerful upper caste landlords. This hypothesis can be confirmed by the fact that often temple priests, when trying to convince parents to consecrate their daughters to the divinity, are carrying out the instructions of upper caste men who have bribed them (Orchard, 2007). It is possible that a person from a higher caste who fancies a lower caste girl, may order the priest to say to an old *devadasi* to go into a trance during a religious festival and indicate the name of that girl (Orchard, 2007).

Frequently upper caste families influence the lower castes that often are their main workforce on their land to dedicate their daughters to the divinity. The landowner can offer a sum of money (normally 2000-3000 Rs) to the father for this arrangement. Some poor families force their girls to become *devadasi* (Tandon, 2001). A *devadasi* affirms: “When I was 11 years old and had not attained puberty there was discussion about dedicating me a *devadasi*. Within a week everything was decided and arranged. The landowner gave Rs.5000 towards expenses”. (Interview from Daily Times, 5 August 2002).

The interpretation that the institution of *devadasis* is a mirror and the result of power and social control of the upper classes over the lower ones is confirmed by the methods through which the dedication process and the associated rituals take place.

Girls are generally dedicated with an official ceremony at a young age, between the ages of eight to ten. This dedication ceremony<sup>14</sup> is more or less similar to a marriage ceremony.

As the dedicated girl attains puberty, another ceremony (*Uditumbuvadu*) is conducted, which effectively completes the process of her dedication. In this second ceremony, the priest “marries” the girl, dressed as a bride in a ceremonial red *sari*, to the deity. After the ceremony the young virgin is forced to spend her “wedding” night with a village elder who invariably belongs to a higher caste, and thereafter she cannot refuse sexual services to any member of the village. In the past the priest of the local temple, who normally belonged to the caste of Brahamans enjoyed the right of deflowering

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<sup>14</sup> Usually the dedication ceremony takes place on full moon day of *Chaitra* (March – April corresponding to the spring season) or *Magha* (November – December), which are considered auspicious periods (Story, 1987). About the rite of initiation, it is stated that, unlike old times, such ceremonies are nowadays performed rather secretly at smaller temples or local priests’ residences, rather than in big temples, to avoid high expenses and also to escape clutches of law. To attract less attention of the public generally only the parents and the temple priests take part to the dedication ceremony. The girl is taken to a spring pond where she takes a bath. After that, she wears a new white dress, symbol of her new condition of consecrated woman. Along with a few other *devadasis* and family members, she goes to Yellamma temple with an offer to the deity. In the plate a bead necklace is kept and is covered by a piece of cloth. Then a senior *devadasi* ties the bead necklace (*thali*) to the girl’s neck and place rings on her toes, a *devadasi* sign she would never be allowed to remove (Jogan Shankar, 1990).

*devadasis* after attaining puberty<sup>15</sup>. In fact, priests claimed that as representatives of the gods on earth (*bhudevas*), they should have the first claim. As anything offered to a god belongs to priest, so the girls offered must belong to them also.

Nowadays parents of *devadasi* girls prefer upper caste well-to-do members to deflower the girl. These people contact the parents of *devadasi* through a senior *devadasi* who plays the role of mediator. It is a matter of prestige for landowners to deflower a *devadasi* so that normally there is a competition among well-to-do members of the village.

Prior to the deflowering ceremony, an agreement is made between the upper-caste man and the *devadasi*'s family for the payments and provision of subsistence, ornaments and clothes to be provided to the girl. Traditionally it is socially accepted that the person who deflowers the girl can have enduring sexual relations with her as long as he desires and is capable of maintaining her.

#### *Social status and living conditions of a devadasi*

Traditionally the *devadasis* have been locked into a prescribed and highly stigmatized social role. In fact, as mentioned above, the *devadasis* come from the *Dalit* community, the lowest social group that is considered impure.

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 Jatar festival, an annual five-day celebration of Yellamma, a *devadasi* is awarded a semi-holy status and is worshipped (Marglin, 1985). During this festival, the *devadasi* enters into trance. This contributes to making her an object of devotion and admiration in the eyes of villagers: "*Three times a year we devadasis used to go to the temple for important festivals. Everyone worshipped us and treated us well. We danced and went into a trance. Everyone fell at our feet and called us goddesses. On those days we became very important. The rest of the time they made fun of us*" (New Internationalist 380, July 2005, Interview by Mari Marcel Thekaekara).

During most of their lives, the *devadasis* continue to face discrimination and indignities on the basis of caste, remain politically powerless and subjected to oppression and exploitation by upper caste members.

From one point of view, some *devadasis* do not consider themselves as prostitutes but their condition of *Dalit* and unmarried women make them particularly vulnerable. A *devadasi* says:

*As a young girl, I remember picking quarrels with many men in the village. From old to young, from Dalits to upper castes, they would come to our house, saying they would pay me a bag of paddy, half a kilogram of silver and clothes, if I would agree to have them for the night. As I did not understand what they meant, I was hurt at being singled out for this humiliation among other girls of my age. Even today I forget their demands when I come across them in the village."* (CERD; 2002). Besides to the stigma of belonging to a lower caste is added the

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<sup>15</sup> Concerning the sexual supremacy of temple priest, we can remember the traditions present in Gujarat and Rajasthan of sending young brides before marriage to temple for one night to be spent with the priest. Similarly, there is the tradition, always prevalent in Gujrath and Rajasthan, of sending one woman from every household at night to visit the temple priest during the nine nights in *navaratra*.

fact that inside the village social system, the *devadasi*'s family is generally extremely poor. "Since the day of initiation, I have not lived with dignity. I became available for all the men who inhabited Karni. They would ask me for sexual favours and I, as a *devadasi*, was expected to please them. My trauma began even when I had not attained puberty." (testimony of a 35-year-old former *devadasi* named Ashama)" (Interview from National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), 2005).

In rural areas the *devadasis* are often the object of public mockery and disrespect. Tarachand (1991) describes a custom, called 'Sidi attu' in the town of Madakeripura in Karnataka which was in vogue till 1987, when it was banned by the government. Here a *devadasi* is suspended with a hook in her back on one end of a transverse rod placed on a vertical pole planted in ground, and rotated by a rope at the other end. She salutes the gathering, while her garments fly and all the naked lower part of her body is visible to all, for their amusement. This was supposed to bring prosperity to the town, and the *devadasi* used to get a sari, a coconut and a betel nut, for which she thanked the gathering.

The subordinate position in the society of a *devadasi* - her subjugation to both gender and caste structure and her being 'controlled' - is obvious as she normally gets a "patron" who generally belongs to the upper-caste. "Patron ship" in a majority of cases is achieved at the time of the dedication ceremony itself. The patron who secures this right of spending the first night with the girl may maintain a permanent liaison with her by paying a fixed sum of money or he can maintain the relationship for a fixed period of time on payment or he can simply terminate the liaison after the deflowering ceremony. A permanent liaison with a patron does not bar the girl from entertaining other men in the village, as traditionally a *devadasi* is expected to do (Kadetotad, 1982). These patrons are also to care for her parents, an expectation that can motivate a very poor family with only one daughter to dedicate the girl to this life. Thus, in rural community, girl children can be an asset, as the responsibility of providing for the family rests on the eldest daughter who is dedicated to the temple goddess.

In some cases in fact, obtaining the protection of a member of upper-caste is the main reason for dedications in recent years (Blanchard et al., 2005). The parents always take good care to choose a daughter of fair skin and regular features for this dedication so that she may attract more powerful men:

*My mother died when I was three. When I was seven, my brother got polio and was paralyzed. My father had to take out a loan and I went to work rolling bidis (cigarettes) to help pay it back. But it was not enough and the landlord suggested to my father to dedicate me to the goddess to earn more money. I didn't want to go. I felt very bad. My father said: 'If you don't obey me, I will die.' So I went to the temple. (New Internationalist 380, July 2005, Interview by Mari Marcel Thekaekara).*

The form of protection assured by an upper-caste man however, does not provide the *devadasi* or her family with any guarantee and security for the future. In fact, the protector has no obligation either to her or her children, as he never recognizes them as his children. Generally, as her youth vanishes and she is no longer desirable, the *devadasi* doesn't benefit any more from this form of protection. The uncertain and difficult life of a

*devadasi* really begins after the first patron deserts her as she often has several children she cannot care for correctly:

*My protector gave me money and rice. After one year I had a child, a baby boy. Soon after that, he dumped me. I went to Bombay for construction work to support my child. When I returned to the village another fellow called Raghav was very nice to me. He said to my father: 'I will protect her.' I became pregnant again and had a girl. But he left me after six years" (New Internationalist, July 2005 Interview by Mari Marcel Thekaekara).*

Forced to remain unmarried, the *devadasis*, especially when they are not young any more, feed themselves and their children by working in the fields, by fulfilling the ritual of begging (*jogava*) twice a week in the village and on occasional hand-outs from the men who come to them.

The study of Jogan Shankar (1994) and the study of Joint Women's Programme (2000-2001) show that the majority of *devadasis* is engaged in manual labour for a livelihood.

It is a distressing reality that most older *devadasis* live under conditions of poverty and social vulnerability. Many children, absence of support from spouse, poverty, landlessness and illiteracy combine to make life most difficult for a *devadasi*. Today, numerous *devadasi* end up in the hands of unscrupulous "protectors", who in turn sell them to pimps. Districts bordering Maharashtra and Karnataka, known as the "*devadasi* belt", have trafficking structures operating at various levels (Tarachand, 1992). These procurers take the girls to the red-light areas of Bombay, Delhi or some other big city. In Bombay's brothels along Falkland Road and Shuklaji Street, there are little prayer shrines devoted to Yellamma, and some of the prostitutes sport Yellamma tattoos. In one Karnataka brothel, all 15 girls are *devadasis* (Menon, 1997).

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.

As almost all of the deliveries are domiciliary and taken care of by the older women in the community, abortions and stillbirths are alarmingly frequent. Contraceptive measures are strictly a taboo. Unwanted pregnancies are subjected to crude methods of induced abortions. The most common practice is to insert a stick coated with oleander milk into the uterus of the pregnant woman. The effect that it could have on her reproductive health is not given any consideration. Frequent pregnancies, abortions and deliveries render a majority of *devadasi* women physically weak and anaemic (Orr, 2000).

The children of *devadasis* do not face better conditions. Traditionally, a stigma is attached to *devadasi* children who are not perceived equal by the other members of their caste. The children of a *devadasi* cannot enjoy legitimacy and have no rightful father they can claim (Fuller Marcus, 1990).

As they are very often marginalized, their mothers, fearing they will not have any future and that nobody will marry them, dedicate their daughters to become *devadasis*. As a matrilineal-based practice, it is often assumed that girls enter the system on account of their maternal family's long-standing participation in the tradition (Orr, 2000). In some regions it is believed that a *devadasi* must dedicate her own daughter, otherwise her funeral rites would not be held and her body would not receive the necessary honours (Chakrapani, 1991). Sometimes a *devadasi*, aware that nobody will take of her in old age, sees her daughter's dedication as a way to assure her last years of life: "*although I have four children, I know that my two sons will be of no use to me in old age, that is why I have dedicated my eldest daughter to Yellamma. She and her children live with me. We cannot give up this work even if we want to, as the survival of our children and families depends on it*" (Interview from National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), 2008).

### **The devadasi system: what is the way forward?**

There are several NGOs active in the fight against the *devadasi* system.<sup>16</sup> They have mainly been working towards increasing the awareness of the *devadasis* and the local villages on the health consequences of this system, like the spread of HIV and other venereal diseases. Although these initiatives are extremely important to prevent the spread of diseases and to improve *devadasis*' health, it must be stressed that they are not sufficient and should be integrated with other measures, necessary to reduce the negative social impact of the *devadasi* tradition and to prevent the dedication of new *devadasis* in the future.

An example in this pattern of action is given by APJVVPS (Andhra Pradesh Anti-Devadasi System Struggle Committee), a local NGO active in Andhra Pradesh, which is trying to rehabilitate former *devadasis* and prevent new initiations. APJVVPS 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.

APJVVPS' 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. During the last few years, one big achievement has been the end of a 500-year-old custom involving *devadasi*, called *jatara* (fair). This consists in making a *devadasi* sit in a cradle hung to a hydraulic crane. As the cradle rotates, she throws flowers, turmeric powder over the crowd below. The cradle rotates so fast that the woman very often fractures her ribs and even dies.

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<sup>16</sup> The first anti-devadasi movement was launched during 1880-90. They organized seminars and conferences to create a public opinion against the *devadasi* system. In the later part of 1892 an appeal was made to the Viceroy and Governor General of India and to the Governor of Madras. (Jogan Shankar, 1994) The movement initially concentrated on building public opinion and to enlist members to refuse to attend nautch parties as well as to refuse to invite *devadasis* to festivities at their homes. It was around 1899 that the anti-nautch turned its attention to stopping dedications. The anti-nautch movement paved the way for anti-dedication movement.

Another organisation active in this direction is the Atheist Centre. In particular, this organisation runs a rehabilitation program under a government scheme for the former *devadasis* of Andhra Pradesh. These women are given a small patch of land and some livestock and try to set up marginal agricultural enterprises. Thanks to these initiatives, in several areas of Andhra Pradesh a number of *devadasis* have been able to limit their dependency on their protectors and are today engaged in small agricultural or craft activities.

However, in spite of these attempts to fight the *devadasi* system, in remote backward areas of southern Indian States there are still many young girls who have been dedicated. Currently, *devadasi* practice has become a submerged, hidden practice and for this reason more difficult to tackle. NGOs active in fighting the *devadasi* system state that currently, due to the increase of government control in this direction, initiation rites are often conducted secretly, often far away from big temples (Heggade Odeyar, 1993). The implementation of effective initiatives to tackle the *devadasis* marginalisation is no easier neither.

Some social activists judge rehabilitating *devadasis* children rehabilitating in special schools promoted by the government as a practice that leads only to further isolation and segregation from other children (Asha Ramesh, 1993). Similarly the amount of money the government has decided to assign to whoever marries a former *devadasi*, instead of providing the victimized women with security and dignity, often seems to encourage unscrupulous people to marry these women and later trade them to brothels in big cities. Many rehabilitation programmes aiming merely to quantify results in terms of numbers of women rehabilitated, seem ineffective in the long term and even contribute to worsening *devadasis*' conditions.

## **Conclusion**

In the institution of the *devadasi*, the sanctions provided by social custom and apparently by religion are strictly combined with economic pressure and contribute to keep this practice alive. The *devadasis* have to abide and inculcate cultural practices that sustain the distinctions and 'ritual status' in the caste hierarchy. The struggle against the *devadasi* system is difficult and arduous and needs the active role of several partners such as government, NGOs, field workers, social movements etc... This issue, given its complexity requires far more than isolated initiatives and interventions, such as health and credit. An effective strategy should consist in a comprehensive approach, in order to address the multiple needs of the *devadasis*. As the *devadasi* system is directly linked to the low socio-economic status of lower castes, consistent efforts should be promoted to tackle questions of untouchability, caste conflicts and marginalisation at a wider level. Particular importance should be given to promoting better awareness and attitudinal change among these women, an essential factor to facilitate social change among them and among the other members of community.

The sanctions provided by social custom and apparently by religion, combined with economic pressures, push poor families to consecrate their daughters. One should therefore remember that in the *devadasi* system, the social and the economic factors are interlinked and contribute to keep this practice alive. Although many steps have been taken to eliminate this system and rehabilitate *devadasis* they are not enough to make a breakthrough: economic and social discrimination and caste abuse continue to push lower



caste families to dedicate their daughters. The education of *devadasis* children is a very important issue, as it can help preventing future dedications and contribute to giving them better chances in the long term. This is necessary to help break the chain of social marginalisation and economic poverty to which these children are likely to be exposed.

It should be stressed as well that the *devadasi* system has not only a social and economic basis but is directly anchored in rural traditions and presents therefore a strong cultural and religious dimension. The way towards the change of existing attitudes and mindsets in local communities is a long process requiring time and will often be reached by progressive stages.

The better comprehension of the former should be always kept in mind and should not be underestimated in any government initiative wanting to effectively oppose the *devadasi* system and its practices.

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