
Volume 22

Issue 4 *Overcoming Women's Subordination:
Socialization, Law and Structural Inequalities.
The 6th World Conference on Women's Studies,
Colombo, Sri Lanka, 29-31 May 2020*

Article 7

April 2021

Entrenched Fissures: Caste and Social Differences among the Devadasis

K. A. Geetha
BITS Pilani

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Geetha, K. A. (2021). Entrenched Fissures: Caste and Social Differences among the Devadasis. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(4), 87-96.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss4/7>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Entrenched Fissures: Caste and Social Differences among the Devadasis

By K. A. Geetha¹

Abstract

The religiously sanctioned Devadasi system in India exemplifies intersectional oppression of gender, caste, and sexuality. Historically, Devadasis, or “servants of God,” were women wedded to God who performed temple duties and were considered sacral women with ritual powers. As part of her duties, the Devadasis offer sexual services to her patrons, invariably the economically and socially powerful patriarch/s in society. The Devadasis were not a monolithic community; there were caste-based segregations within the Devadasi community which delineated their social positions. Devadasis were drawn from castes lower in the hierarchy (non-Brahmins) and the Scheduled castes (Dalits). To distinguish the two categories, the Devadasis from the non-Brahmin castes were referred to as *Kalavantin/Isai Vellalar/Kalavantulu* and those from the Dalit castes were referred to as *Jogini/Mathamma*; their social and economic status were entirely different. The Devadasis from the non-Brahmin communities performed classical music and dance, while the Dalit Devadasis performed folk dances during temple festivals. Though the Devadasi system was outlawed in 1988, the practice of dedicating young girls as Devadasis continues to be prevalent among the Scheduled castes. This paper argues that the activists who fought for the liberation of the Devadasis from the oppressive system focused mostly on the Devadasis from the non-Brahmin castes, excluding the Devadasis from the Scheduled castes. This paper contextualizes the prevalence of the Devadasi system within the interconnected matrices of caste and gender structures in Hindu society. Drawing on the socio-historical trajectory of the emancipation of Devadasis in Goa, a state in Western India, this paper analyzes the caste hierarchies and social inequities embedded within the Devadasi system. Apart from discussing the legal interventions initiated by the State to abolish the Devadasi system, this paper also analyses the role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the emancipation and empowerment of Dalit Devadasis.

Keywords: Devadasi, Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Dalit Devadasi, Caste hierarchy, Gender based violence

Introduction

The stratification of Hindu society in India is pivoted on the caste system². B.R. Ambedkar states that caste is a system of graded inequalities premised on religious ideologies of

¹ K. A. Geetha is an Associate Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani KK Birla Goa Campus, India. Email: geetha @goa.bits - pilani.ac.in. She has nearly two decades of experience in teaching different modules in English literature, Language and Cultural Studies. Her doctoral research focused on the production, institutionalization and reception of Tamil Dalit literature. Her research interests are Dalit writing, Women's Studies, Postcolonial literatures, and Cultural Studies. She is currently researching the Devadasi system with a specific focus on Dalit Devadasis.

² The social structure of caste is based on the *varna* system. Varna (meaning colour) segregates the caste society on the basis of hereditary and occupation. The four basic categories within the varna system are Brahmins

purity and pollution³. Analysing the reasons for the consolidation of the caste system over centuries, Ambedkar points out that the purity of the castes is maintained through the practice of endogamy or marrying within castes. Within the caste society, women play a pivotal role as procreators, enabling the continuation of family (read: caste) lineage. Drawing on Ambedkar's analysis, Sharmila Rege argues that within the caste society, endogamy is the basis for the regulation and control of female sexuality.(2003,94-95) Women's modesty and purity is synonymous with caste purity, and control of women's sexuality legitimates male domination and patriarchal order. The caste system is thus premised on female sexuality, and the emphasis on "arranged marriage"⁴ enables the continuation of caste purity. Women's sexuality needs to be controlled through "proper social control, idealization of familial roles and an emphasis on female modesty" (Dube 234). Thus, patriarchy is an inherent feature of the caste order, and its hierarchical structure has led to multiple patriarchies. While Brahminical patriarchy is at the apex of this hierarchy, there are different forms of female subjugation, with specific gender norms functioning within each caste community. As a system of graded inequalities, within the caste society, there are not only multiple but "graded patriarchies" structured within the grid of Brahminical patriarchy (Rege 2006, 73). Hence, female oppression is not unitary, and women succumb to the gender norms of their respective caste.

The suffering of the caste Hindu⁵ or Savarna women is different from that of the women from the Dalit castes. The caste Hindu women generally suffer domestic violence which is related to cases of dowry⁶, female infanticide⁷, and "honor killing"⁸. While this kind of "private patriarchy"⁹ or domestic violence is a predominant form of oppression among caste Hindu women, the problems of Dalit women are compounded by the hierarchical norms within the caste system. Though the caste Hindu women suffer under "private patriarchy" they enjoy considerable status within the caste society if they conform to caste ideologies by living as a "*pathivratha*", a virtuous and faithful wife. On the other hand, since most Dalit women are from economically disadvantaged sections of society, they will have to work in the public realm to earn their living. In the public domain, Dalit women suffer from constant threats of sexual

(priests, teachers, intellectuals); Kshatriyas (kings, warriors); Vaishyas (traders, agriculturists); Shudras (labourers, artisans). Communities which were not categorized within the four varnas were grouped as Avarnas. The Avarnas lived in the peripheral sections of the caste society and were assigned village duties like cleaning drainage, removing dead cattle, and partaking in death and funeral ceremonies. In the 1930's a liberation movement was pioneered by Babasaheb Ambedkar against the discrimination of the untouchable communities. The ex-untouchable castes identify themselves as 'Dalit' meaning oppressed or rooted in the soil. While Dalit is their cultural identity, they are constitutionally categorized as Scheduled castes.

³The hierarchy within the caste system is consolidated through the ideologies of purity and pollution. The status of a caste within the system is dependent on the degree of caste purity. Accordingly, Brahmins were considered the purest, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and Avarnas. In this order, the degree of purity decreases, and the castes placed in the lower order are considered to be polluted. Hence, Brahmins are placed at the apex of caste order, while the Avarnas /untouchables (Dalits at present) are at the bottom.

⁴ Family arranging the marriage of the girl by selecting a groom within the caste.

⁵ In recent times, the term "upper castes" is being substituted with term "Caste Hindus" or "Savarnas" which denote the people following the norms of the caste order.

⁶ Dowry is the transfer of property, or money to the groom for marrying the daughter. In most cases, lesser dowry or a delay in giving dowry results in physical/verbal torture and at times, murder.

⁷ Deliberate killing of the girl child mostly because of the inability to give dowry and the expenses related to her marriage.

⁸ Honor killing refers to the practice of some caste Hindus who would kill the daughter, if she chose to marry a person from those castes, inferior in the hierarchy, such as Dalits or the "Backward castes".

⁹ Oppression of women by men within the domestic domain.

molestation and rape by caste Hindu males. They become victims of intersectional oppression of caste and gender structures. Similar to caste Hindu women, Dalit women are also controlled and oppressed by males within the family. However, violence related dowry is less common among Dalit women. Dalit women are doubly oppressed on the basis of caste and gender and suffer under private as well as public patriarchy, regulated by caste norms (Dietrich 58; Guru 2003 81; Larbeer 10).

The feminist movement that emerged in India in the 1970's was largely initiated by women belonging to the caste Hindu or Savarna women. Their resistance towards patriarchal structures was confined to their personal experiences of gender oppression. The movement failed to accommodate the specific problems of Dalit women, who are doubly oppressed in their position as women and Dalit. The 1970's also witnessed the emergence of Dalit liberation movement fighting against caste inequalities. However, the Dalit movement was male dominated; it focused on issues of caste discrimination and was indifferent to gender-based oppression. The masculinisation of the Dalit movement and the Savaranisation of womanhood led to an exclusion of Dalit women subjected to interlocking oppressions of caste, class, and gender (Rege 2003, 91; Yesudasan 87).

The exclusion of Dalit women from the mainstream, male-dominated Dalit movement and women's movement of the Savarna women led to the emergence of a Dalit feminist movement in the 1990's. While discussing the emancipatory power of the Dalit feminist movement, Sharmila Rege points out that it is pivoted on the individual experiences of Dalit women subjected to caste and gender oppression (2003, 99). However, the category of Dalit woman is not homogenous as the Dalit community is not a monolithic structure and consists of diverse castes, each with a unique history and culture¹⁰. Most importantly, despite suffering under caste discrimination, Dalits replicate caste hierarchy within their community. Hence the subject or agent of the Dalit women's movement is multiple and heterogeneous, and there is a need to critically examine the different forms of oppression experienced by Dalit women (ibid). Of the Dalit women who suffer from the interlocking identity of oppressed caste and gender, the worst affected and most oppressed are the Dalit Devadasis, women dedicated to the temple.

Legitimated by religion, the Devadasi system is a unique Indian tradition which exemplifies the interconnectedness of caste, gender, and class. Based on a historical and sociological study of the Devadasi system in Goa¹¹, I point out that the Devadasi community is not a monolithic structure and is embedded in caste ideologies. Through an analysis of *Gomantak Maratha Samaj*, the liberation movement of the Devadasis in Goa, this paper argues against the homogenous categorization of the Devadasi community. It seeks to unravel the inherent caste hierarchy and the differential social positioning of the Devadasis drawn from the non-Brahmin and Scheduled castes. Most importantly, their social histories and trajectories of emancipation are different, and the Dalit Devadasis have been excluded from the liberation process initiated by both the anti-Devadasi movement and the Dalit liberation movement.

The Devadasi system: Multiple patterns

The Devadasi system is premised on caste ideologies, and the temple emerges as an arbitrator and assumes control over the social identity and sexuality of a group of women who

¹⁰ For more details see Geetha, K.A. "Unified Tamil Dalit Identity: Problematics and Anomalies" *Prose Studies* (2014) Vol 36, No. 2 pp. 130-140 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01440357.2014.933575>

¹¹ A state in Western India.

occupy the lowest rungs in the caste order. Devadasis, or “servants of God” were women wedded to God who performed temple duties and were considered sacral women with ritual powers. (Vijaisri, 19). Devadasis were predominantly drawn from non-Brahmin castes lower in the hierarchy (at present OBC¹²) and the Outcastes (Scheduled castes/Dalits). They are well-trained in fine arts like music and dance and give performances during the temple festivals. Considered “Nitya Sumangali”¹³ their presence at weddings and important social and religious functions is considered auspicious. As a part of their duties, the Devadasis must offer sexual services to her patrons, invariably the economically and socially powerful patriarch/s in the society.

The Devadasi system, also referred to as sacred prostitution, was prevalent in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, (Southern India) Orissa (Eastern India) Maharashtra and Goa (Western India). The nomenclature ‘Devadasi’ and their homogenous categorization emerged only during the colonial period. Prior to that, they were referred to as *Devanatiyar* (Tamil Nadu), *Bogam/Sani/ Natavollulu* (Andhra & Karnataka), *Kalavantin* (Goa & Maharashtra), and *Mahari* (Orissa). They were also colloquially referred to as *Jogini* and *Basavi*. Contrary to the general perception that the Devadasis were a homogenous entity, they were caste and functional distinctions within the system and there were multiple patterns of sacred prostitution across the different regions. While discussing the synchronic dimensions of the prevalence of the system, Vijaisri points out that in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh there were three patterns of sacred prostitution: *Matangi*, *Bogam/Kalavantin/Sule/Sani*, and *Jogini/Basavi*. The *Matangi* were ritual specialists who were considered spiritual intermediaries and were given more respect within the community. The *Bogam/Kalavantins* were confined to specific temple duties. The *Jogini/Basavis* were mainly drawn from the outcaste communities and were associated only with the Yellama¹⁴ Temple. There were differences in the kind of temples that the Devadasis were dedicated to. While the *Kalavantin/Bogam* were dedicated to the temples controlled by the Brahmin establishments, the *Jogini/Basvai* were dedicated to the local or village temples which were presided by priests belonging to the non-Brahmin community. Dedication to the Yellamma Temple was specific to the *Joginis* drawn from the Scheduled castes. Among the three groups, the dedication of Matangi was specific to some regions in Andhra Pradesh and has diminished over a period of time (Vijaisri, 78-79). On the other hand, the dedication of *Bogams/Kalavantins* and *Jogini/Basavi* were the two common patterns of sacred prostitution that were prevalent across the different regions. One was the temple women, the *Bogams/Kalavantins* with distinct social and ritual identities within the temple, and the alternative model was the outcaste women, the *Jogini/Basavi* who had no ritual service within the temple and who were in most cases pushed to prostitution (Vijaisri, 239).

The inherent differences between the *Bogams/Kalavantin* and *Jogini/Basavi* are revealed in their ceremonies performed for the initiation into the Devadasi system. Since the *Kalavantins/Bogams* were drawn mainly from the non- Brahmins (lower in the caste order), they were initiated into the system through elaborate rituals akin to a Brahmin wedding. *The Jogins/Basavis* were primarily from the outcaste communities and they were wedded to god

¹² To implement reservations in educational and government institutions for castes lower in hierarchy, the government of India categorized the various castes within Hindus as GC (General or Open category which included castes higher in hierarchy) BC (Backward classes which included castes lower than the caste Hindus) OBC (Other Backward classes, the most backward castes) SC (Scheduled caste) & ST (Scheduled tribe).

¹³ Sumangali is a term that refers to a married woman whose husband is alive. Since the Devadasi was wedded to God (who is eternal), she remains a Nitya Sumangali throughout her life.

¹⁴ Yellama is a female goddess worshipped mainly by people in Karnataka. The practice of the dedication of girls to the Yellama temple is common among the Dalits or Scheduled castes in Karnataka.

without any rituals, with the temple priest tying the *Taali*¹⁵. Most importantly, given their outcaste status, their access to sacred spaces was limited (Vijaisri, 4-7).

Among the Devadasis, the *Bogam/Kalavantulu* excelled in classical music and dance while the *Joginis/Basavis* performed folk music, dances, and drama during temple processions. Though all the groups within the Devadasi community were sexually exploited, there were stark differences in the lives they inhabited. The Kalavantulu received the patronage of wealthy men and enjoyed a superior social and economic status while the *Joginis/Basavis*, drawn from the outcastes, suffered caste discrimination and mostly lived in penury.

The Anti-Devadasi Movement and legislative interventions

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed an upsurge of Devadasi reformist in the southern regions of British India. Pioneering protests against the system were initiated during the Madras presidency¹⁶ by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a woman from the Devadasi community. She vehemently attacked the Devadasi system and introduced a bill in 1930 which made the dedication of women to temples illegal. During the Bombay presidency¹⁷, a similar bill was introduced in 1933 against the devadasi system and in 1934 the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act was passed. The bill, which was introduced by Muthulakshmi Reddy in 1930, culminated in The Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 which was applicable to all the regions within the Madras presidency and declared the custom of dedicating girls to temple service as unlawful (Vijaisri 238-252). In 1982 in Karnataka, a state in Southern India, The Karnataka Devadasi Prohibition of Dedication Act was passed. In 1988, the Devadasi system was outlawed in all of India. Despite the legislative interventions against the Devadasi system, the custom of dedicating young girls continues in some parts of Southern and Western India. The last section of this essay discusses the continuation and prevalence of the Devadasi system in specific parts of Goa, a state in Western India.

Devadasis in Goa

Within the historiography of colonial India, the State of Goa's unique colonial history sets it apart from other Indian states. While the rest of India was under British control, Goa was colonized by the Portuguese in the 16th century, and they ruled the state for nearly four hundred years. Goa attained independence in 1961, nearly sixteen years later than the rest of India. Despite having a different colonial history, there was a strong presence of the Devadasi system in Portuguese ruled Goa akin to the southern regions of British India. The Devadasis were mostly found in the "new conquest" regions of Goa¹⁸. While the nomenclature 'Devadasi' became widespread in British India, in Goa it was very rarely used. The Devadasis in Goa were generally referred to as *Kalavantins*. The Portuguese referred to the Devadasis as *bayadere/bailaderia* (meaning ballet dancers). Though the *kalavantins* were categorized as a unitary social group,

¹⁵A sacred thread tied to the bride during a Hindu wedding.

¹⁶ The Madras presidency was the administrative headquarters in Southern India during the British period. It included parts of present-day Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka.

¹⁷ The Bombay presidency was the administrative headquarters in Western India during the British period. It included parts of present day Maharashtra, Gujarat, and North Western Karnataka.

¹⁸ Seven districts (Ponda, Pernem, Sattari, Bicholim, Sanguem, Canacona and Queoem) that the Portuguese acquired from the Marathas in the eighteenth century. While people in the other regions of Goa were rapidly converting to Christianity, the new conquests remained predominantly Hindu.

there were inherent differences among them, and they were sub-groups within the community with specific functions in the society. The kalavantins were well-trained in music and dance, well-known as *ghanis* (singers) or *nachnis* (dancers). The *Bhavnis* were women who attended to temple rituals, and *fulkars* were flower collectors. There were also *chede*, who worked in the lands of the patrons, and *deulis*, male members of the community, mostly the sons of the Devadasi. The *pernis* mainly engaged in acrobatics and were considered the lowest within the group (Arondhekar 111; Cabral e Sa, 25). Dedicated to the local temple, the Kalavantins generally received the patronage of Saraswat Brahmins, the dominant caste within the region. Unlike the Devadasis from the other states, the *Kalavantins* were attached to a temple, but did not marry the deity. However, there are studies that point out that they were wedded to God through a ritual called *Sessa or Shens*¹⁹ (Cabral e Sa, 25; Arondhekar, 112).

Though categorized as a homogenous group, the *Kalavantins* in Goa followed rigid norms of caste and social hierarchy. The *Kalavantins* were accorded the highest rank within the system. They were mostly performing artists and enjoyed the patronage of wealthy Brahmins. In particular, the *Kalavantins* had relationships only with the Brahmins, while the other sub-groups within the system were open to relationships with men from all the castes. Anjali Arondhekar emphasizes that the *Kalavantin* were not “prostitutes” and “remained in structures of serial monogamy” and received the patronage of the *yajaman*²⁰ (Arondhekar, 112). Hence they were exempted from anti-prostitution laws of the Portuguese government (ibid; Cabral e Sa, 26).

While the *Kalavantins* were generally believed to have been drawn from the non-Brahmin caste lower in the hierarchy, there are studies that reiterate that they do not belong to any specific caste. Based on her ethnographic research on the Devadasis in Goa, Rosa Maria Perez argues that the *Kalavantins* were ‘a-casted’ and did not belong to any particular caste. She substantiates her argument by pointing out that an illegitimate girl child (born in any caste) or girls born in large families (in any caste) were given to the Devadasis. Widows (from caste Hindu families) who wanted to avoid *sati*²¹ also joined as temple women (138). However, during the colonial period, the *Kalavantins* successfully reconstructed their caste identity by launching a reformist and a liberation movement. Their strong protest against the system led to a transformation of an “a-casted” community to attain a caste status on par with Caste Hindus.

Resistance to the System: The Formation of Gomantak Maratha Samaj (GMS)

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed an upsurge of Devadasi reformist movements in the southern regions of British India. In tandem with the anti-Devadasi movement that was gaining ground in the Madras and Bombay presidencies in the early decades of the twentieth century, in Goa a strong wave of resistance to the *Kalavantin* system emerged. Similar to the anti-Devadasi movements pioneered by Muthulakshmi Reddy in Madras Presidency, the oppositional voices to the system emerged from Rajaram Ragongi Paigankar, a member of the *Kalavantin* community who suffered social denigration and discrimination in Goa. In 1921, during a domestic function, Paigankar resolved to reform the community to attain a dignified

¹⁹ Shens is a ceremony among the Devadasis where a girl is dedicated to a God or Goddess, through a wedding with a girl dressed as a man, holding a coconut and knife in hand.

²⁰ Master.

²¹ Sati is a practice among Hindu widows to die along with the husband by sitting on his funeral pyre. During the British rule, social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy vehemently protested against *Sati* and the practice was abolished in 1829 by William Bentick, the then Governor General of India.

social status within the Hindu community. After four days, his house was attacked by unknown miscreants²². Paigankar considered this incident as an opportunity to stage his protest against the discrimination suffered by his community. In a move to register his dissent against the hegemony of the Saraswat Brahmins, Paigankar sought legal redressal by submitting a writ-appeal to the then Portuguese Governor general of Goa, Jaime Alberto De Castro Morais. The writ appeal sought the liberation of the *Kalavantins* from the domination of the Saraswat Brahmins. It reiterated the resolve to emancipate and empower the women in the community through education and marriage. Accusing the Brahmins of hindering the progress of the community, the appeal sought the intervention of the Portuguese law in protecting their right to freedom from the oppression and social discrimination the community had suffered for centuries (Arondekar, 116-117).

Having internalized Judeo-Christian values, the Portuguese considered the *Kalavantins* as an “an embodiment of oriental stigma” and a threat to their Catholic morality (Perez, 129-130). Hence, when Paigankar approached the Governor-General with a writ-appeal, he swiftly gave official protection for the *Kalavantins* and denounced the domination of Saraswat Brahmins. Simultaneously, he ensured that the Brahmins restored the lands and property of the *Kalavantins* (Anjali, 117-118).

Though Paigankar had been rallying for resistance against the Brahminical hegemony since 1902, this incident set the stage for the formation of a reformist organization, *Gomantak Maratha Samaj*. Initially, the organization was named *Gomantak Kalavantin Samaj*. Since *Kalavantin* was limited only to performing artists, in 1927 it was renamed *Gomanta Maratha Samaj*, (henceforth GMS) mainly to include all the groups within the system. The Samaj included all the groups which were dedicated to the service of the temple, *Kalavantins*, *Bavins*, *Deuli*, *Chede*, and *Pernis*. Since the *Pernis* were considered lowest within the group, their integration within the Samaj was opposed by some members of community. However, the Samaj was successful in bringing together all the ritual and non-ritual temple groups. Referred to as “Bharatatil ek Agressor Samaj” (an aggressive community in India), the Samaj was remarkable for reforming the Devadasi community. Registered as a charitable institution in 1936, the Samaj established branches in Maharashtra and northern Karnataka. In Goa, the Samaj was instrumental in implementing a law against the Devadasi system in 1930. It was able to mobilize funds for opening schools to educate the women and children of the community. Within a few decades, the members of the GMS attained high levels of literacy and saw the rise of some very successful people in diverse fields such as arts, administration, and education. Notable personalities from the community include the first chief Minister of independent Goa, Dayanand Bondarkar and reputed Bollywood²³ singers Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle.

GMS and Caste Hierarchy

The Colonial period was a time when there was a reconstruction of caste identities, especially by the communities lower in the caste hierarchy (Dirks; Perez; Geetha). The GMS was

²² The attack by miscreants is described by Paigankar in the first volume of his autobiography, *Mee Kon (Who am I?)* published in 1969. However, in the second volume of his autobiography, he reveals that he staged his own attack on his house to initiate a protest against the hegemony of the Saraswat Brahmins. For more details see Anjali Arondekar’s article “Caste, Sexuality and the Kala of the Archive” in Anupama Rao Ed. *Gender, Caste and the Imagination of Equality*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2018. pp. 114-121

²³ The film industry based in Bombay (Mumbai) is referred to as Bollywood.

successful in getting rid of their social stigma by reconstructing their caste identity during and after colonialism. Though a-casted, the movement was successfully accommodated within the dominant social order and codified within the social structure of caste (Perez, 138). Paradoxically, the GMS was started with the primary objective of fighting caste discrimination and Brahminical hegemony in Goa. Though the Samaj endeavored to bring caste reforms, an analysis of their functioning reveals that they were entrenched in caste norms and values themselves. In the Post-colonial period, after independence, the GMS consciously decided to be constitutionally categorized as “Open Category” (OC) which is meant for the upper castes, including the Brahmins. Their decision to be categorized as “OC” is significant and reveals their internalization of caste norms of hierarchy and purity.

Dalit Devadasis in Goa: A Marginalized History

The inherent caste ideologies of the GMS are further substantiated in their indifference to the sufferings of Devadasis (*Jogini/Basavis*) in Baina, another region in Goa. Baina is 35 kms and an hour’s drive from Ponda, the epicenter of the Devadasi reformation movement. By the 1970’s the GMS was successful in abolishing the Devadasi system. From its inception to this day, the GMS has functioned as a social organization, working towards uplifting ex-Devadasi communities. However, it is pertinent to emphasize that their functioning is limited only to the Kalavantin community, excluding the Jogini/Basavi, Devadasis from the outcaste community. The Karnataka Devadasi Act, legislated in 1982, made dedication of girls an offence and the border state of Goa became a refuge for the Devadasi families. From the 1980’s there was an influx of Devadasi families from Karnataka (the neighboring state) to Baina in Goa. In Baina, it was common for young girls to be dedicated to Yellama as Devadasis, then later pushed to sex trade and trafficked to red-light areas of Sangali and Pune. Despite the vibrant presence of the GMS in Goa (which was formed to abolish the Devadasi system), dedication of girls continued in Baina²⁴ until ARZ (Anyay Rahit Zindagi), an NGO, intervened and worked towards abolishing Devadasi practice in Baina. The NGO was instrumental in implementing Goa Children’s Act in 2003, which defined dedication of minor girls as a criminal offence.

While discussing the marginalized history of Dalit Devadasis in Goa, Arun Pandey, the founder of ARZ, reiterated that there was no intervention from the GMS in liberating the Devadasis from the outcastes. He also emphasized the indifference of Dalit groups to the sufferings of Devadasis from their community (personal e-mail dtd. 22.06.20). The indifference of the GMS towards the Dalit Devadasis reveals that the Samaj is entrenched in caste norms and discriminates communities lower in the hierarchy. When they failed to engage in liberating the Devadasis in Baina, their initial grounding as a caste-reformist organization is also questionable. The unresponsiveness of the Dalit groups towards the oppression suffered by the Devadasis in Baina substantiates the gender bias prevalent within the group. Facing intersectional oppression of caste and gender, the problems of Dalit Devadasis were ignored by GMS on the basis of their outcaste status and by the Dalit groups because they were women and, most importantly, Devadasis. Arun Pandey points out that they were considered to be prostitutes and were excluded in the reformist movement led by the GMS and Dalit liberation movement. Further, the absence of the Dalit women’s group in liberating the Dalit Devadasis substantiates the social divisions prevalent within the community. The intersectional oppression suffered by the Dalit Devadasis is

²⁴ <https://www.incrediblegoa.org/society/the-fight-against-the-cult-of-the-devadasi-three-young-women-tell-their-story/#:~:text=59%20PM>

unique and cannot be homogenized within the historiography of the mainstream Devadasi or Dalit women's liberation movement. The marginalized history of Dalit Devadasis in Goa reiterates the need to move away from women's collective history and engage with personal and individual experiences. Devoid of such an engagement, the liberation and empowerment of Dalit Devadasis will remain a distant horizon.

References

- Arondekar, Anjali, "Caste, Sexuality and the Kala of the Archive" *Gender, Caste and the Imagination of Equality* Ed. Anupama Rao Women Unlimited: New Delhi, 2018. 114-121
- Cabral e Sa, Mario. "The Evolution of a Community: Devadasis of Goa" In *Manushi* 56 (1990) 25-27.
- Dietrich, Gabriele. *Dalit Movements and Women's Movements: Gender and Caste* Ed. Anupama Rao. New Delhi: Kali for women, 2003. 57-79.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002
- Dube, Leela "Caste and woman" In *Gender and Caste* Ed. Anupama Rao Kali for women: New Delhi, 2003. 223-248.
- Geetha, K.A. "From Panchamars to Dalit: The Evolution of Tamil Dalit Writing" In *Prose Studies* 33:2 (Nov 2011) 117-132.
- Guru, Gopal "Dalit Women Talk Differently" In *Gender and Caste* Ed. Anupama Rao New Delhi: Kali for women, 2003.80-85.
- Larbeer, Mohan. *Dalit Penniyam or Arimugam*" *Dalit Penniyam* Ed. Anbukarasi and Mohan Larbeer. Madurai: Dalit Adara Maiyam, 1997 2-16
- Perez, Rosa Maria. "The Rhetoric of Empire: Gender Representations in Portuguese India" In *Portuguese Studies* 21 (2005) 126-141.
- Rege, Sharmila "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint" *Gender and Caste*. Ed. Anupama Rao New Delhi: Kali for women, 2003. 90-101. *Writing Caste /Writing Gender Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006.
- Vijaisri, Priyadarshini. *Recasting the Devadasi - Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India* New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2004
- Yesudasan, T.M. "Caste, Gender and Knowledge: Towards a Dalit Feminist Perspective" *Haritham* 8 (1996): 77-90. <https://www.incrediblegoa.org/society/the-fight-against-the-cult-of-the-devadasi-three-young-women-tell-their-story/#:~:text=59%20PM> Date of Access: 30.04.2020