

DEVADASI SYSTEM – A STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

The Term ‘ devadasi’ literally means “female slave to god”. At the present, the devadasi system is mainly prevalent in Karnataka, Andra Pradesh and Maharashtra and it is widely prevalent among the ‘Beriya’ and ‘Nay’ communities.

Social, Politically and economically, the devadasis had a better position during the ancient and medieval period. There was no widowhood among the devadasis because they were married to God,theImmortal Being. The presence of devadasis was considered to be an auspicious one in Social functions like marriages, puberty functions and so on.

Politically, they were better positioned in the government and were patronized by the rulers. They had the privilege of sitting with the king and eating betels on certain occasions. The British administrators too included their music and dance programmes in the government functions.

The European soldiers also arranged the dance and music programmes of the devadasis in the cantonments for entertainment. the British administration admired the art of devadasis but condemned the purchases of minor girls for engaging them in prostitution in the name of religion.

Regarding the economic condition of the devadasis, majority of them were financially sound. Their main source of income was derived from temple inams; presents given by Zamindars and other rich people and their personal earnings through music, dance and prostitution. Their economic condition began to decline since eighteenth century owing to the failure of royal patronage. The British administrators being Christians did not encourage the

devadasi system which was attached to Hindu religion. Hence the social, political and economic position of the devadasis began to decline.

Their excessive promiscuous life with temple priests, trustees and the high class people also paved the way for their degradation. The temple priests (Brahmins) and trustees converted the temple as brothels by their promiscuous relations with devadasis. The economic paucity pulled them into the hell of open prostitution and common people frequently used the word 'devadaya' meaning to devadasis, for demeaning a women.

In the matter of adoption, the poor people used to sell young and innocent girls in the devadasis system for high prices. The marriage expenses and the scarcity of suitable bridegroom within the community compelled parents of many female children to dispose them off to the devadasis for a price. The girls so purchased would be first adopted after conducting the ceremonies and then trained in music and dance. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, social reforms began to protest the existence of devadasi system.

Press and the Social reformers of the 16th century raised cry against Devadasi System. This discountenancing of the system. This discountenancing of the system was begun by missionaries and taken up by the Brahma Samaj and other Social reformers.

The secretary of state to the Government of India sent a dispatch. In this dispatch he condemned this practice and stated that he was thinking of passing a law against this practice.

Indian Ladies Magazines observed that while the legislature measures were going on in one side to eradicate the devadasi system the Self – respecters were also propagating the evils of dedicating girls for prostitution in the name of religion. R.D.Chinniah Pillai, a member of the Kumbakonam Circle temple committee Criticized the attitude of the Brahmins towards devadasis, when he moved a resolution in the committee to put a stop to the devadasi system. He stated that if the service of devadasi was essential, the women folk of the Brahmin priests also should take up the work and dance before the idols.

Indian Ladies magazines again reported that owing to the pressure from the public and government the number of those dedicated was declining and many temples stopped the services of the devadasis in the temple.

Journal Stri Dharma wrote, Gandhiji also advocated the abolition of devadasi system and appealed to the people and social reformers and press to fight against this system.

Indian ladies Magazines commented that both the well wishers of devadasis and the lovers of the art of music and dance stressed that the abolition of devadasi system would cause the decline of the age old art of music and dance performed by them.

The Anti-devadasi movement at Madras made quick progress and spread to the other towns in the presidency Associated with the editorial boards of the journal, 'THE PEOPLE FRIEND', 'THE FELLOW WORKER', and the 'BRAHMA PRACACICA' at Madras were constantly writing in their columns about the 'social purity' movement. The basis of the anti – devadasi movement, declared was not in fine manners but in good morals, its aim was not more elegant breeding but pure living.

Journal Veerasalingam condemned the evil practice in columns of his journal 'vivekavardhani' a weekly magazine, he condemned this evil practice. To educate people on this he used his creative talent and wrote a satire. VeyapriyaPrahasanam in which he ably met all the arguments of the reform. for example, the possible damage to music and fine arts if the devadasi system was abolished.

SatyasamVardhani a monthly journal, stated a movement against devadasi system parties at Madras. They convened a meeting in 1893 to sign the memories sent by the Madras Association to be submitted to the Governor of Madras on this issue.

Press tried to ameliorate the condition of these girls and gave support to them. They were educated in the Mission School, In the Madura School which was conducted by the Americans, Madura Mission, nearly 35 such girls (who were previously dancing girls of Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple) were admitted. They were trained in various professions. Some of them became "Bible women" in the "zenana Educational system" conducted by the same mission at Dindugal and Batlagunda. The Tanjore missionaries educated nearly 46 girls, who were dancers of the Tanjore temple and they were provided with facilities to get training in lace work, embroidery spinning, book binding etc. After their training they were married to the mission workers who worked at Erungaloremision. Tanjore Mission and catechist of Kumbakonam.

'Lokranjani' the native press lodged its protest against the system of having common schools for girls of the general public and the children of devadasi girls. They feared that such an arrangement would lead to the corruption of the children of the general public. They also pleaded with the government to pass legislation to abolish the institution of devadasi.

'Krishna patrika' a weekly journal published articles on the devadasi system problem and received the attention from the public including the 'caste' of devadasi girls.

The bill on protection of minor girls was introduced in the central legislature. It was welcomed by the native press 'krishnapatrika' exhorted the people to hold meetings in support of the bill and made it a law.

According to the same journal 'krishnapatrika' however the Bill that was finally passed in 1925 declaring the traffic among minor girls to be a criminal offence was not applied to the devadasis.

In the Madras presidency meetings were held by the women's Associations to get the support of the public and press of the Bill. The Bill got the full support of the Public and press. Lastly, the Bill was passed in the council and got the consent of the Governor General the act was called 'The Madras hindu Religious Endowments Act in 1929, which provided the devadasis the rights of holding and enjoying the imams, they did not stop the practice of prostitution and dedication of girls as devadasis. The amendment act was also silent. Hence, MuthulakshmiReddi decided to enact a new act to put an end to the devadasis system. In 1929 she prepared a Bill to be introduced in the legislative council.

On 24th January 1930, Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced a Bill to prevent the dedication of Hindu temples in the presidency of Madras legislative council.

According to the Bill, dedication of Hindu women to temple was declared illegal and the dedicated women could conduct valid marriages. The person who permitted or participated the ceremony of pottukattuor Gajjupujaor any Similar ceremony should be punished with imprisonment, which might extend to one year and would be also liable to fine.

Condemning the system of maintaining devadasi was to perform certain duties in Hindu temple. 'The Lokahitaish' journal wrote that to continue this custom was to encourage sheer debauchery. The abolition of the system in Mysore state cannot be said to have materially affected the work of the temples their public opinion has now undergone a change all over India and requests to the government were pouring in to introduce the necessary legislation to get rid of this system. Besides, many of the educated men and women think that it has a direct effect upon the moral backbone of the people consequently, the paper hopes that the resolution introduced in the assembly to eradicate the evil would receive the unanimous support of that body and will be passed.

Finally, the Bill was passed. The Madras Devadasis (prevention of dedication) act (Act Noxxxx of 1947) was passed on 26th November 1947 by which the devadasi system was ultimately abolished.

M.K.Gandhi wrote in YOUNG INDIA (journal) the custom of dedicating young girl to temples calling them as devadasis theoretically in the service of the daily but practically for immoral purpose was indeed an insult to god himself in the name of religion Gandhi was against this devadasis system.

Newspaper 'INDIAN TODAY' wrote that the efforts of the press, social reforms, education of the people, the oppressive measures of the government on prostitution and the enactment of the davadasis prevention act resulted in the abolition of the age old devadasissystem in Tamilnadu. Even though the system of dedicating minor girls to idols was wiped out in Tamil Nadu, the system still. existed in some parts of Mysore which was one of the pioneers of putting an end to it. At present certain people dedicate their girls to the gods perpetuating old traditions. Even today this still exists in the starts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

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