



A Light in the Darkness: Fighting ritual prostitution in south India.

By Megan Rowland



In the South of India a system of ritualised prostitution, known as the Devadasi System, exists. Young girls are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma in symbolic ‘marriage’ ceremonies. The girls, excited by the new clothes and attention, have little or no knowledge of the significance of the ceremony. A string of red and white beads are tied around their neck and they irrevocably become *Devadasi*: maidservants of the deity.

What is the Devadasi System?

Most prevalent in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the Devadasi are mainly associated with the goddess Yellamma. The Devadasi system, *Devi* being a female servant or slave and *dasi* meaning god or goddess, is thought to have originated from a pre-Hindu fertility cult. The virginity of dedicated girls was ‘sacrificed’ to ensure that the goddess, and so the land, remained fertile. The belief that when a man has sex with a Devadasi he is actually having sex with the goddess is still perpetuated by some. Today the dedication of a girl may also be directly related to the family’s reproductive life. Where there are no children, parents may decide to dedicate any unborn daughter, or a daughter may be dedicated in order for parents to obtain favour and conceive a boy.

Dedication ceremonies involve a ‘marriage’ to the deity, this can take place pre- or post-puberty. Girls will be initiated either after the ceremony or upon reaching puberty, often by a patron who pays for the privilege. Girls do not usually understand the significance of the ceremony in which they are partaking. They experience trauma and a sense of betrayal when they discover the truth, often on the night of their initiation. As well as sexual abuse, Devadasi experience physical, emotional and spiritual abuse.

In the past Devadasi came from various different social groups, some become courtesans to princes, priests and other high cast men. This gave them a level of status and autonomy not available to Indian women at that time. However, the Devadasi are now almost exclusively Dalits. As women and Dalits, they are already members of

the two most exploited groups in India, at dedication they are degraded further by the stigma of being a Devadasi and a 'fallen woman'. Because of this they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and will find it even harder to access their legal rights.

Why are girls dedicated?

There are a number of complex, intertwined factors which result in the parent's decision to dedicate their daughter.

A significant contributing factor in the dedication of daughters as Devadasi is precisely that: they are daughters. As Action Aid's report *Disappearing Daughters* states: 'Whilst boys are expected to bring wealth into a family, girls are seen by many as 'expenditure'. In many states, dowries and expensive marriages are inevitable outgoings for families with daughters. As daughters traditionally become part of another family after marriage, it is sons who are expected to provide for parents in their old age.'¹ In Andhra Pradesh 20% of Devadasi are dedicated because there is no son in the family². By dedicating their daughter to the goddess, not only do poor families avoid the cost of a dowry, but the daughter can then take on the role of a son in providing for the family, and perhaps even in performing certain religious rites.



Religious superstition, coupled with a lack of education and knowledge of health issues, all contribute significantly to families decisions. The interpretation of certain health problems, such as coughs, hair discolourment resulting from malnutrition, and dehydration, as a sign of the goddess' displeasure, marks the daughter out for dedication.

In Karnataka, tradition and social pressure plays a key role, with 31% of Devadasi being dedicated because it is seen as a hereditary duty³. Social acceptance of dedication is higher in Karnataka than in Andhra Pradesh, therefore it is not only religious, but also social norms which need to be challenged.

A violation of human rights: a violation of the Indian constitution.

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

Furthermore, the Indian constitution ensures all Indian citizens 'JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the [unity and integrity of the Nation]' ⁴

What the Indian and state governments are doing about it.

The *Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of dedication) Act, 1982* and the *Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1988* have outlawed the dedication of girls as Devadasi, but the practice still continues. Since 1988 only seven cases have been registered in Andhra Pradesh, so far there have been no convictions. In Karnataka despite over 45 cases being registered, only one case has resulted in convictions. ⁵

¹*Disappearing Daughters*, Action Aid (Action Aid, 2008) p.12

²*Women in ritual slavery*, Maggie Black (Anti-Slavery International, 2007) p.14

³*Women in ritual slavery*, Maggie Black (Anti-Slavery International, 2007) p. 14

⁴*The Constitution of India*, Government of India: Ministry of Law and Justice, (Delhi, 2007) p.1

⁵*Finally an end to the Devadasi system*, ND Shiva Kumar, Times of India, January 23rd 2009 <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-01-23/hubli/28030078_1_devadasi-system-ddpos-project-officer> [accessed 11/07/2013]

In both Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, rehabilitated Devadasi are entitled to a variety of state benefits. These include monthly pensions, assistance with housing, free healthcare and education for their children. Due to a mixture of corruption and prejudice, they often find it difficult to access these benefits. Additionally, many are not aware of their full rights. In January 2012, Karnataka State finally issued the 23,000 registered former Devadasi with entitlement certificates, enabling them to claim benefits, though these certificates were backdated, it had taken four years for them to be issued.⁶

Official figures suggest that there are 23,000 Devadasi in Karnataka, and 17,000 in Andhra Pradesh. These figures are based on the number of Devadasi registered to receive benefits. Other sources suggest that there may be as many as 100,000 in Karnataka⁷ and 60,000 in Andhra Pradesh. These figures illustrate not only the need to educate Devadasi women as to their entitlements, but also the dramatic need for States to expand and develop their benefit programmes.

In the 1990's, due to the limited effect of legislation, State authorities entrusted the implementation of the Acts to NGOs. Much of the work of these organisations has been done through *sanghas*, self-help groups, which help women to access benefits, subsidies and legal support. Rehabilitated Devadasi associated with such groups have proven effective agents in preventing dedication ceremonies from taking place. However, due to the limited resources of self-help groups, they are not always as successful as they could be in improving the lives of former Devadasi. Furthermore, the authorities see their existence as the fulfilment of state responsibilities to the Devadasi, rather than the results which are produced.

HART and the Devadasi.

HART partners with Operation Mercy India (OMI), an NGO which works to free Dalits from the oppression of 'untouchability'. Though illegal, 'untouchability' is still perpetuated by Indian culture and society today. HART specifically supports OMI's work with the Devadasi and has helped them to set up a centre for the rescue and rehabilitation of Devadasi women in Belgaum, Karnataka State. The centre focuses on the education, health care, economic development and social justice for the women. This not only provides opportunities for the future but helps to remove some of the main contributing factors in dedication of their children. As well as assisting Devadasi women on the ground, OMI advocates for the rights of Devadasi and the effective enforcement of legislation, holding the authorities to account on implementing laws designed to protect this vulnerable group of people.



⁶ 22,875 former Devadasi to get benefits due to them, January 22, 2012<<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-karnataka/22875-former-devadasis-to-get-benefits-due-to-them/article2822030.ece>>

⁷ *Sleeping with the Goddess*, Shelly Ngo with Sanjay Sojwal, <http://www.houseofrefuge-india.org/sleeping_goddess.html> [accessed 11/07/2013]