

- Devadasi tradition or “sacred prostitution” is a form of sex work that dates back several centuries with the ritual found in written records even in the 12th century.
- The tradition involves a religious rite, in which girls and women are dedicated, through marriage, to different gods and goddesses, particularly to the goddess .
- It is seen now as a ruse to do temple duties, which mainly involve providing sexual services to priests and patrons of the temples.
- Medieval town in India had some features – they were administrative centres, temple towns, as well as centres of commercial activities & craft production
- Temple towns like Thanjavur represent a very important pattern of urbanisation, the process by which cities develop.
- Temples were often central to the economy & society.
- Rulers built temples to demonstrate their devotion to various deities- endowed temples with grants of land & money to carry out elaborate rituals, feed pilgrims & priests & celebrate festivals. Pilgrims who flocked to the temples also made donations
- Temple authorities used their wealth to finance trade & banking. Gradually a large number of priests, workers, artisans, traders, etc. settled near the temple to cater to its needs & those of the pilgrims.
- Towns emerged around temples such as those of Bhilashvamin (Bhilsa or Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh), & Somnath in Gujarat. Other important temple towns included Kanchipuram & Madurai in Tamil Nadu, & Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh
- Temples were the hub of cultural activities & devadasis (temple dancers) performed before the deity, royalty & masses in the many-pillared halls in the Virupaksha (a form of Shiva) temple.
- The term devadasi or jogini is of Sanskrit origin and denotes a female servant of deity.
- Although there are differences between these ancient institutions of cult prostitution essentially they all involve religious dedication to a Hindu deity.
- Devdasis are dedicated to God, and Jogins are dedicated to Goddess Renuka.
- They are denied normal married life & are expected to serve the deity.
- All over the world, the institution of religion forms the normative structure of society.
- Its practical dimension is expressed in a number of ways in any given culture or society

- Its doctrinal aspects, moral and social theology, philosophy, and dogmas give rise to innumerable forms of ceremonies.
- Worship, rites, moral teachings and mystical experiences. There are also several religious customs and is known by different names at the local and regional level
- For instance, in Goa, devadasis are called bhavin. They are also known as kudikar, bogam or jogin in Andhra Pradesh, thevardiyar in Tamil Nadu, murali, jogateen and aradhini in Maharashtra, jogati or basavi in Karnataka, ganika in Orissa and as nati in Assam.
- One reason for the different usage of terms could be the diversity of traditions followed and languages spoken all over India

#### GENESIS

- The genesis of the devadasi cult and its regional variations is usually traced back to agricultural societies where young girls were voluntarily dedicated to God by their families to ensure soil fertility & to secure blessings for the community as a whole.
- It is believed that this custom of dedicating girls to temples primarily emerged as a substitute for human sacrifice.
- Another theory is that the system emerged from the belief that offering something propitiation the deity.
- Devotees visiting shrines with problems such as bad health, poverty, barrenness, etc., often interpreted these as the wrath of the deity.
- They thus offered one of their daughters to the deity, and using the concept of divine desire, priests started demanding young girls from devotees.
- The development & popularity of the devadasi system in south India has also been linked with the interaction between the brahminical patriliney & the strong tie of matriliney & matriarchal families in south Indian society.
- In the absence of a male heir to the family, women could temporarily revert to the system of descent through daughters (marumakkathayam). The daughter in turn was dedicated to the temple as a devadasi, among whom, descent was always in the female line.
- Devadasis were originally a special & venerated group of women attendants, some of whom, like the Vestal Virgins of Rome, were dedicated to the temple at birth or when they were quite young .
- They were required to participate in almost all of the temple’s daily rituals and occasional

ceremonies. It was a matter of prestige for the temples to employ devadasis in good number.

- Being in the service of the deity, the devadasi was accorded both ritual sanctity and social eminence.
- Important social occasions & functions were not considered auspicious & complete without the presence of a devadasi.
- She was a welcome guest at every marriage pandal, and it was the devadasi who prepared the tali (mangalsutra/ marriage badge) for the bride.
- However, in many temples, the devadasis were sexually exploited & their earnings were collected by temple authorities.
- In contrast, city courtesans, who were usually highly accomplished entertainers were treated with deference they had a certain freedom of movement, in that could defy social restrictions to a greater degree than other women.
- The term tawaif is a general one, but is chiefly used for Mohammedan girls, while the Hindu branch is usually called patar, patur, paturia (from Sanskrit patra-an actor)
- When they are nubile, the patar girls marry a pipal tree and then commence their career of prostitution. One of the numerous sub-castes is known as rajkanya, which appears to be only one, whose members actually dance in the Hindu temples.
- Among the tawaifi the girl is taught to dance and sing when about seven or eight years old.
- At the commencement of her training, sweets are offered at a mosque and then distributed among Mohammedan faquirs.
- At the first lesson, the master receives a present of sweetmeats besides his pay.
- When the girl reaches puberty, certain rites and rituals are performed and the brethren are feasted and the girl is ready for her first paramour.
- After the price is fixed she goes to him, which rite is known as sar-dhankai, or 'the covering of the head'.
- When she returns after her first visit, the brethren are again given sweetmeats, after which follows the rite of missi or 'blackening of the teeth'.
- She is dressed like a bride and paraded through the streets, afterwards attending a party with singing and dancing.
- Some researchers are of the opinion that probably the custom of dedicating girls to temples became quite common in the 6th century A.D., as it results from the sacred texts Puranas written during this period and containing reference to it.
- Puranas recommended 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).
- By the end of the 10th century, the total number of devadasis in many temples was in direct proportion

to the wealth and prestige of the temple, as seen in sacred texts and travellers narratives.

- The practice of consecrating young girls to temples was present since the 6th century, it only becomes widespread later, during the Rajput period, when devadasi were regarded as a part of the normal temple establishment and their number often reached high proportions.
- Traditionally, in addition to their religious duties, the devadasis were a community of artists. They sang & danced in temples to please the gods, a task which was highly regarded.
- Among ordinary homes was music & dance 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 & income.
- The invitation to perform at marriages & 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 & musicians who were often also invited into private households.
- During this period, devadasi had very prestigious status, a consequence of their religious dedication and their proximity with the leading or ruling families.
- 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.
- The devadasi represented a badge of fortune, a form of honour managed for civil society by the temple
- In this process the devadasis were able to bring considerable wealth and prestige to temples.

#### CURRENT SITUATIONS

- 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.
- 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
- In some regions a devadasi must dedicate her own daughter, otherwise her funeral rites would not be held & her body would not receive the necessary honours (Chakrapani, 1991).

- 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 Wodeyar, 1993).
- Some social activists judge rehabilitating devadasis children 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.
- 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 & inculcate cultural practices that sustain the distinctions & 'ritual status' in the caste hierarchy.
- 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.
- 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.

#### LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

- The first legal initiative to outlaw the devadasi system dates back to the 1934 Bombay Devadasi Protection Act. This act pertained to the Bombay province as it existed in the British Raj.
- The Bombay Devadasi Protection Act made dedication of women illegal, whether consensual or not.
- According to this act, marriage by Commercial Sex Workers, Transgender, Devadasi considered lawful and valid, and the children from such wedlock were to be treated as legitimate.
- The Act also laid down grounds for punitive action against any person or persons found to be involved

in dedications, except the woman who was being dedicated.

- The 1934 Act also provided rules, which were aimed at protecting the interests of the devadasis. Whenever there was a dispute over ownership of land involving a devadasi, the local Collector was expected to intervene.
- In 1947, the year of independence, the Madras Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act outlawed dedication in the southern Madras Presidency.
- The special children, with physical or mental disabilities, are more vulnerable to be dedicated as devadasis — nearly one in five (or 19%) of the devadasis that were part of the NLSIU study exhibited such disabilities.
- The NLS researchers found that girls from socio-economically marginalised communities continued to be victims of the custom, and thereafter were forced into the commercial sex racket.
- According to TISS study the devadasi system continues to receive customary sanction from families and communities.
- Despite sufficient evidence of the prevalence of the practice and its link to sexual exploitation, recent legislations such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012, & Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act of 2015 have not made any reference to it as a form of sexual exploitation of children, the NLSIU's Centre for Child and the Law noted in its report.
- Dedicated children are also not explicitly recognised as children in need of care and protection under JJ Act, despite the involvement of family and relatives in their sexual exploitation.
- India's extant immoral trafficking prevention law or the proposed Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill 2018, also do not recognise these dedicated girls as victims of trafficking for sexual purposes.
- The practice of "offering" girl children to Goddess Mathamma thrives in the districts of Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh and Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu, forcing the National Human Rights Commission to seek report from the two States.
- As part of the ritual, girls are dressed as brides and once the ceremony was over, their dresses are removed by five boys, virtually leaving them naked.
- They are then forced to live in the Mathamma temples, deemed to be public property, and face sexual exploitation, according to the NHRC.
- Mathammas can be found in the villages of Chittoor district, on the border areas with Tamil Nadu but also right in the heart of Tirupati.
- The Mathamma system has its equivalent in other regions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.
- The system is called 'Basivi' in Kurnool and Anantapur districts, 'Saani' in Krishna, East and West Godavari districts, and 'Parvathi' in

Vizianagaram and Srikakulam districts. Women are unable to leave the exploitative system due to social pressures.

- Social activists say the girls are exploited, and forced to live as sex workers. Many die old and lonely and sick as they are forced to sleep in the Mathamma temples or outside the homes where they work as domestic help
- The history of Devadasis speaks of complex sexual identities, misplaced sense of family, organised crime against lower castes, social stigmatisation, exploitative ideas of servitude and a painful human struggle for survival and dignity.
- An increase in the monthly pension, implementation of housing schemes, free education for children, distribution of BPL and ration cards and vocational training are some of the critical first steps.
- A good place to begin, is extensive research to bring in a more nuanced and data centric understanding of the economic and social dimensions of the lives of Devadasis.
- This must be followed by focused interventions in the areas of health, education, gainful employment and trafficking.
- According to the National Commission of Women, over 2.5 lakh girls, most of whom belong to the Depressed communities, are dedicated to temples in the Maharashtra-Karnataka border.
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- Some Devadasis seem to go into trance during festivals and direct families to dedicate their

daughter to the deity. Influential people from the higher castes may pay the Devadasis to go into a trance and select a certain girl they fancy for dedication.

- Inscriptions show that, after hereditary service, poverty was the most common reason for dedication. Families sold their daughters to the temple in times of drought, or when they could no longer afford to feed them. Devadasis were transferred between temples along with horses and elephants, and were frequently branded in case they ran away.
- In the wake of the Bhakti movement, song and dance grew in importance as a form of worship. The rapid proliferation of the system can be seen in light of competition between temples vying for political power.
- Sponsoring dance-worship and elaborate festivals was a way for priests to draw crowds, thereby filling the coffers of the temple and the kings
- The number of devadasis in the temple's retinue was in direct proportion to its wealth and prestige.
- Large urban temples, like the Jagannath Temple, had hundreds of devadasis.
- Exceptionally talented and beautiful dancing girls were transferred to the more sophisticated city temples, enabling dance-worship to reach high levels of artistic achievement.
- Devadasi dance tradition in Assam is known as 'Nati' dance .
- The term devadasi is Sanskrit in origin and has been translated as the following: servant of the god; slave of the god; or maid servant of the god.
- Its very first appearance appears in a Jogimara cave in the Ramgarh hills of Madhya Pradesh, within a Magadhi inscription variously dating back to 300 B.C. or 100 C.E.