What future for the Devadasis and their children?

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1. Introduction

The Devadasis system is one according to which children are dedicated to the service of a Goddess. "Deva" means God and "Dasi" stands for a woman who is in willing servitude. Thus, etymologically, a Devadasi is a servant, a slave of God. The tradition of the Devadasis stems from the myth of Yellamma, a Goddess of south India, in whose shrine in Saundatti, thousands of children are dedicated each year. The Devadasi system is still prevalent in the districts of Belgaum, Bellary, Bijapur, and Gulburga in Karnataka. It is estimated that around 10,000 girls are dedicated each year, amongst whom 3,000 on the January–February full moon day. The following study is the result of a three month field research undertaken in India. The writer focused on the situation in Bombay and in South India. In doing so, she traveled to

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1 Boys are also dedicated to Yellamma although on a much lesser scale than girls. However, this article will concentrate mainly on the issue of girl dedication because they are the ones which are trafficked into the fresh trade. Some boys are also recruited for homosexual prostitution but it has proved very difficult for the author to meet any of them in reason of the high level of criminality and the taboos still attached to this activity.


3 Dr. I. S. Gilada and Dr. V. Thakur, Devadasis: A Study of Socio-Cultural Factors and Sexual Exploitation. Asian Regional Conference, pp. 71–78.

4 Malathi Saroj, Devadasis, 1990 unpublished. According to an informal study and survey conducted by Pragna, an organization working with the Devadasis in the Belgaum area, out of every group of 15 women from scheduled casts and scheduled tribes communities in the 5–6 neighboring districts, 11 are dedicated.
Belgaum, Karnataka, to explore the situation of the Devadasis and their children. After examining the Devadasi custom and its consequences for the children and women involved, this article, therefore, demonstrates that this tradition, as it is performed today, violates the fundamental human rights of the persons dedicated. It, then, turns to a study of the undertaking of the issue by the Indian authorities, assessing the efforts made and to be made to eradicate the system. Finally, the article examines the possibility for the Devadasis and their children to seek asylum on the grounds of their persecution for being members of a particular social group.

2. Background

2.1. The framework of exploitation: The myth of Yellamma and the traditional duties of the Devadasis

According to the legend, Renuka, the wife of the sage Jamadagni, was a woman so chaste that she was capable of carrying water in a pot made of fresh clay. One day, as she went to fetch water for the ablutions, she saw a couple of nymphs bathing in the river. She was very much moved by this beautiful sight and for the first time had sensuous feelings. At this, the clay pot burst and Jamadagni who was in samadi (meditation), realized his wife's adulterous feelings. Furious, he ordered his sons to behead her. While the eldest sons refused to do so, the younger one, Parashurama, obeyed his father. Pleased with such an obedient son, Jamadagni told Parashurama that he would grant him any boon he desire. The latter promptly asked for his mother's life. A lower caste woman, Yellamma, happened to be passing by, and her head was replaced on Renuka's corpse bringing her back to life as Renuka-Yellamma, thus enabling a lower caste woman to achieve the status of a Brahmin's wife. This myth has therefore been deliberately used, and is still used today to perpetuate the system of Devadasis by promoting the belief that by being dedicated to the Goddess, a lower caste woman can redeem herself and be born again as an upper caste woman. The girls dedicated to Yellamma are invariably from the lowest castes, scheduled castes (SC) and Scheduled tribes (ST).

5 Gilada and Thakur at n. 3 above: “most of the girls dedicated come from the Harijan communities like the Mahar, Mang, Dowri, Chambbar, etc.” And see Gail Omvedt, Devadasis Custom and the Fight Against It, Manushi (19) (4(1)), November–December 1983, pp. 16–19: “A study of Pune prostitutes showed that more than 60% of them were dalits, and of the Devadasi prostitutes 90% were dalits. The survey did not find a single prostitute from the brahman, maratha, Jain or lingayat castes.” See, also, Dr. Jogan Shankar (1990) Rehabilitation of Devadasis, Journal of Social Welfare: p. 8: “At the time of the survey, it was found that no single upper caste woman was dedicated to the deity.” And finally, see A. K. Singh, Devadasis System in Ancient India. A Study of Temple Dancing girls of south India, 1990, p. 16. “A large number