
DEVADASI SYSTEM AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION- A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: Social exclusion is treated as social problem which has grieving repercussion on multiple factors of person's social support system. Quantitative studies in the literature are suggestive of definitive multi factorial – multi dimensional disadvantages. Several studies have identified social exclusion causing further harm in accessing the basic necessities like living arrangement, employment, healthcare, social interaction, community arrangement, and autonomous participation etc. Devadasi system is unique for the reason of culture and religious background that it entails. Devadasi system leads to the exclusion of the women and men belonging to the lower Hindu religious denominations like Madiga and Holeya. The current study aims to understand the social exclusion experienced by the mother daughter dyad where both have been victims of the system.

Keywords: Case study, Devadasi System, Social Exclusion, Victims.

Introduction: “When everything is visible and appears to be dumb, that's when the details take on larger meanings. -David Byrne, *Social Exclusion*

People have an innate drive to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), when this need is thwarted (e.g., via social exclusion), people experience a variety of negative consequences. In short, threats to belongingness have significant effects on the self. In seven experiments conducted by Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco & Bartels (2007), on Social Exclusion they found that Social exclusion caused a substantial reduction in pro-social behaviour. The implication is that rejection temporarily interferes with emotional responses, thereby impairing the capacity for empathic understanding of others, and as a result, any inclination to help or cooperate with them is undermined.

Social exclusion is a complex and multi dimensional process. It involves the denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of the individual and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole” (Levitas, 2006).

Social Marginalization is a slippery and multi-layered concept. Whole societies can be marginalized at the global level while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order. Similarly, ethnic groups, families or individuals can be marginalized within localities. To a certain extent, marginalization is a shifting phenomenon, linked to social status. So, for example, individuals or groups might enjoy high social status at one point in time, but as social change takes place, they lose this status and become marginalized. Similarly, as life cycle stages change, so might people's marginalized position (Burton and Kagan, 2003). *Structural Discrimination* can work explicitly, through

institutions, norms and values. It can also have invisible impacts, where values and ideas affect the self-perceptions of excluded people and their capabilities to claim their rights. It is because of this structural location that dalit women were accorded statuses like –devadasi (Kumar, 2009). Study on Devadasi Practice in Karnataka (Prasannakumar, Shivasharanappa and Srinivasa, 2012) explains that Devadasi practice is an evil practice, which prevails in Karnataka. In the name of god, women are sexually harassed by community people. Such women should not get married to one man, as she is servant to god and wife of whole town.

Devadasi system is a religious practice in some parts of southern India, in which women are married to a deity or temple. In the later period, the illegitimate sexual exploitation of the devadasi's became a norm in some parts of the country. This cult is prevalent even today throughout India, especially in the districts of Belagavi, Bijapur, Kalaburgi, Bidar of the South Karnataka and districts of Solapur, Kolhapur, Satara, Sangli of Maharashtra (Deasi 2007). Originally a sacred, religious practice, the Devadasi system of dedication of girls to temples has turned into a systematic sexual abuse of young Dalit girls, who over a period of time start serving as prostitutes for dominant caste members and subsequently get auctioned into brothels. They are prohibited under the practice from marrying and leading a normal family life, they cannot enjoy the normal social standing of a wife and mother even if they do have a 'husband' or partner. All Devadasis belong to particular Scheduled Castes and Tribes in a system which is predominantly found in Southern India (Minority Rights Group International, 2011).

Review

Sharma's, (2007) study related to social world of Prostitutes and Devadasis discusses the Social structure and its politics in early modern India. The research discusses two groups of professional women who had a distinct place in the sexual economy of the

period. The study of these professionals shows different strands of Indian culture and one could state that the world of entertainment, to which these professions belonged, itself is a cultural reproduction of society. Devadasis were the custodians of the arts of singing and dancing and their dedicated status made them a symbol of social prestige, while the economic/professional benefits were considerable, they did not lack social honor either. This shows that the women who were part of this set-up, which thrived on the commercialization of women's reproductive labor, had those skills and expertise which eventually got appropriated by politico-economic structures. This gives a better insight into the politics of human relations. However, on the contrary contemporary status of women being dedicated to god is enjoying meager status in the society Torri's (2009).

Poverty and Economic Marginality-People who are experiencing marginalization are likely to have tenuous involvement in the economy. Poverty, dependency, and feelings of shame are everyday aspects of economic dislocation and social marginalization (Burton & Kagan, 2003). Mowli (1992) conducted a study on Jogin Girl Child Labour and revealed that the majority of Devadasis come from poor landless families. Many dalit women are dedicated to the Goddess at a very young age by poverty-stricken parents unable to pay their future dowries and hopeful that a pleased Goddess will make the next pregnancy a boy.

Psycho-Social Effects of Exclusion-Psycho-social effects may include: psychological problems, relational problems, loss of identity, loss of cultural affiliations, de-integration from work relations, problems of mental depression, internal de-structuring of the person, loss of purpose, de-integration from family ties, processes of subjective implication, the inner dimension of poverty, and de-integration from social relations (Peace, 1999). 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 (Fuller & Marcus, 1900). The children of Devadasi and Jogini suffer from discrimination because they do not have a recognized father. Their daughters are particularly at risk of sexual exploitation because of their mother's perceived 'availability' and in some cases the status is inherited. Although the practice of dedicating young girls to a temple has been prohibited by law, it still continues (Anti-Slavery International, 2007). There are some caste-related social customs and religious practices in Hindu society that exploit only women from Dalit communities. One of these customs is devdasi or

jogini, involving religious prostitution imposed on unfortunate girls who are married to a village god and then become the subject of sexual exploitation by upper caste men in the village. The system exists in states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra where Dalit women are designated as devdasis or devotees of god (Thorat, 2010).

Method:

Research Question: What are the different types of social exclusion experienced by women dedicated as devadasis

Aim: To understand the Cultural and Religious Practices that lead to Social Exclusion of Devadasis

Objectives

1. To understand the social exclusion from the point of view of Devadasi mother and daughter dyad.
2. To understand the impact of social exclusion on the devadasi mother and daughter dyad

The current research is exploratory in nature.

Technique adopted: In-depth unstructured interview.

Sample - Purposive Sample of eight participants i.e. four devadasi mother-daughter dyad from North Karnataka. Age range of the participants was from 18-65 years.

Data collection procedure - Data was collected in two continuous sessions. The responses were written verbatim. Observations were documented.

The Study is confined to North Karnataka. Case Dyads consists of mother and daughter who are having Devadasi system running in the family. Dedication to deities Huligemma, Yellamma and, Renukamma are considered.

Narratives:

M1-(63years); I was around five years of age when my parents dedicated me to the god. My parents told me that it was god who had shown the path grandmother was dedicated earlier, and now god had chosen me. Parents were afraid of doing wrong or going against god's decision. I have three elder sisters. Father always felt that four daughters' marriage would be a burden and it just meant that there will be no one to take care of them once all the daughters were married off. So I was told that god chose me. I had no choice, rather I could not even think of any choice as I was still a child. The current generation think but I belong to the generation where questioning was never encouraged. I have no regrets' for what I am today. I have grown up to be Jogamma who goes places to sing and collect alms. Chowdike and Huligamma bestowed that talent to sing and have made my life. Being with others who are also jogamma, jogappa and jogathis, I have been able to learn various devotional songs which praise Huligamma and Yallamma. Earlier I used to go by walk from place to place singing songs in praise of the goddess but later I was selected along with others for

various audio recording when I was sixteen. I have one daughter and no husband. Now my daughter has also picked up all the practices. When I was dedicated to this system as such I was not afraid. I was told not to expect anything from a man to whom I would dedicate myself. He would visit me once in a while. We shared a friendly relationship. I used to go to places I did not have much difficulty. Now I do not go to sing but I am concerned about the future of my grandchildren. Since there are no men in my family sometimes my grandchild question me about that and I won't have an answer to it.

D1-(47years); I was very young when my mother decided that I should continue the family tradition. I was not told anything and since I was young I could not understand anything much. When I started growing I realized what my life was. Once we are dedicated there is no way out. We cannot talk against family, people and god. Only my mother should answer why I was dedicated. Till my mother stopped singing I used to sing along with her and we made our life. I have a daughter and a son but I do not want them to follow this path. There is no life here. Man whom I served was a land lord. Initially he helped me to bring up the children, but he stopped visiting as I started aging. My children have gone to school but they tell me how they were ill treated. They do not have good jobs. My mother was recognized for her talent but now-a-day's our tradition is losing its value. None of the relatives lend us any help. Sometimes I get scared about the future. I do not have peace of mind because neither my children nor the society respects us. It's really painful experience being dedicated to this system. After going through this kind of experience many of us are not dedicating our children to this inhuman practice.

M2-(57years): I was eight years old when they dedicated me to the goddess. The dedication to the goddess brought an end to my education. My classmates and other children from school stopped talking to me. I never went back to school. I had no idea what it meant. How could I? The older devadasi, who underwent this practice, did not say anything to me about this system. But what could I do? How could I understand? So the ceremony took place. I was like a goddess that day. They dressed me up like a bride. Flowers and new clothes were given to me. In fact I enjoyed that moment. I felt good as I was the centre of attraction. I used to go with older girls to the temple. I took care of my younger brother who was born subsequent to my dedication. At times I used to go with my father to the field as I enjoyed agricultural work. My mother and father showed more affection to my brother because they felt he was born because of Yallamma's blessings. Older girls who were dedicated to the system would talk about something which I could not relate to, but they

would help me to go about in the temple. Deep down I felt I was different compared to the girls who went to school. If girls from the school asked me why I did not go to school I would cry bitterly. I started mixing more with the older girls dedicated as devdasis but slowly one by one they would disappear, other girls would talk about it and say that she got a lover. But I could not comprehend it much. Finally one among them became close and she would tell me about everyone, stories of Yallamma & Renukamma and also would mimic her aunt who plays choudike, I used to laugh looking at her. As I started growing up men would come and trouble me, and some would propose to me. I had no peace. Day and often at night people used to come and irritate me. They used to say that it was duty to go with them. If I refused they would make a derogatory remark saying that, after all I was a devadasi. One day I met the man I loved. He was caring and also helpful; he came forward to marry me. But the community was against it. 'You can't', they told us. Following that I continued to accept the fact and never made an attempt to come out of the practice instead I continued. But even today I feel why god gave me this kind of living where I cannot enjoy a family life like others. Out of this relation I had one son and two daughters, out of that one daughter was born hearing impairment, and my family members and villagers insisted that I dedicate that child to the god, so that she would be with me in my old age.

D2-(37years);(This participant is partially deaf, hence the researcher and the participant communicated largely by writing, at times the mother of the participant also would explain what the participant communicated symbolically) -I was in 1st standard or 2nd standard, I remember I was going to school. I had one brother and sister. We were very poor. In our village people with some birth defects will be offered to god. As I was moderately hearing impaired my mother believed I cannot be married off. The only alternative that she could think of was to dedicate me to the goddess. After dedication I stopped going to school. I used to go to temple on full moon days with other children. I did not see any differences when I had similar company. When I started going for agriculture work. I started feeling different. I realised only when I grew up what this life meant. My brother-in-law (elder sister's husband) started having sexual relationship with me and whole family knew about it. I don't have any children and I live with my mother, and I take care of my sisters children and mother. I do not go to my sister's house. Rarely I meet my sister, now I do not have any sexual relationship with my brother-in-law or any other man.

M3-(65years); I don't even remember exactly when I was dedicated as a devadasi. Devadasi system was

followed in our family because one of my uncle i.e. my mother's brother became a jogathi and following it he continued worshipping god Yallamma. As we believe in the goddess it is necessary to continue this practice, so my family members chose me. It was a big event in my life as many of my relatives and neighbours gathered. I felt happy. Later, I used to go along with my uncle who was jogathi and continue the rituals at temple. Following this I learnt all songs which we sing at the time of worshipping. As I attained menarche they made an arrangement where a business man who came forward to accept me as his keep. Following this for three to four years he was my regular visitor and provided me clothes and money. Later he did not turn up and over a period of time he stopped visiting me. Then another man came in my life and he became close to me and he was from the neighboring village. From this relation I had four children, and for some time he helped me in taking care of the children. Now, I am living with my four children. At present I am not able to earn, as I am having health issues. I have faced lot of difficulties in life. So, I have decided to educate my children so that they do not struggle like me at the same time I strongly believe that if I don't continue this practice Yallamma may curse us. So, after thinking many times my younger daughter has been dedicated to the goddess, initially she was reluctant but I convinced her to continue the tradition of the family.

D3-Ms.K. (21 years) My mother is a victim of this practice. She is a Devadasi (Temple prostitute). She gave us love and met all our needs. She is very good and also humble. I have seen her working hard to take care of all of us. I came to know about my mother's status when I was in 3rd standard. It was my friend who asked me about my father. That made me approach my mother regarding my father. She initially kept quiet and after a few months she reported that he cannot stay with us and told me that I would understand that as I grew up. I had a desire to complete college, obtain a good quality job and build my own identity in society. The community looks down on us and also my mother, because she is a Devadasi. Many of them tease me by calling names. It was my mother's wish to make me a Devadasi. I had my plans but it was shattered when my mother informed me to leave home and become a Devadasi as it is a family tradition. I really felt bad and also helpless but I could not do anything about it as no one was there to support me. Since my childhood I had a dream of having my own family and enjoy normal life which became a dream for ever, I feel sad about my current status in society. Now I earn my living by singing hymns in praise of Yellamma and begging. I do not have any sexual partner.

M4-(60 years); I was dedicated to Huligamma as Devadasi when I was small, may be at the age of six

years. It was my mother's sister, who was also a Devadasi, who took care of me when I was a child. We were very poor, so my family made me a Devadasi. I continue this as an honor to my family. Today my family takes care of me when I am ill and also respects me but in society they talk about me when I am passing by the streets, which is very humiliating. Where I am wrong I don't know, because I just continued the practice as a tribute to my family but today I am not given respect. Now I have a daughter and also a son. My father was basically expert in musical instrument which is called chowdaki in Kannada; he wanted me to acquire the skills from him to continue this in our generations. We were called by village people when ever important events used to take place. Now my father is no more but I continue playing this musical instrument and I have also been honored by many organizations. But I am grateful to my father who was the source of inspiration even though I regret being a devadasi and I had only one patron and he was also helpful in my tough time but only one thing bothers me that even though my children know who their father is, they cannot claim any rights either over his property or paternity.

D4-(42years); My mother is a devadasi so I was expected to continue the tradition. I also want to keep up our musical practice as I am the only daughter to my mother. Since the age of seven years I am learning as well practicing playing this instrument. I and my mother together give programmes. I completed 6th standard, I had difficulty paying school fee, so sometimes I used to go for field work along with my mother to earn money to maintain the expenses of our household. Later I decided that I would join my mother so at least my brother could have bright future by studying well. Then my mother dedicated me to devadasi system at the age of eleven, subsequently I started worshipping the goddess Huligamma. I have only one patron and he takes care of me. I don't have any children. Now at present my brother has completed B.Ed. and is working in school as a teacher and helps us financially sometimes. Now we go for programmes when we are invited and at other times I go for construction or agricultural work to take care of the family. Sometimes I think as to whether I made a right choice.

Findings:

Devadasi system though inhuman has existed for generations and has resulted in the exploitation of people belonging to the marginalised communities. The exploitation continues because of the staunch belief of the exploited that if they do not submit themselves to the system they would have to incur the wrath of the goddess. The elder's in the family decide as to who should be dedicated to the system in

the following generation. While the individual is dedicated to the system the elder's fail to understand that the person dedicated will have to face ostracism and social exclusion. Some of the ways in which social exclusion is experienced by the people who practice this system are:

They are denied education and undergo humiliation from their peer group and society.

The relatives do not associate much with them.

Despite a man volunteering to marry them they cannot come out of the system and marry him.

Even after being dedicated to the goddess she is not permitted to go inside the temple.

Even if she wishes to be sincere to one man, other men may sexually exploit her as she is perceived to be available to any man.

Cannot inherit property either from the parents or the partner even if she stays sincere to one partner.

Despite knowing who the father is the children cannot mention his name in any of the records.

Figure 1
Concept map of the mechanism which sustains the practice of Devadasi system



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