

DEVADASI TRADITION: PROGENY OF CASTE AND GENDER

ANKITA GUPTA

Abstract: This paper tries to establish concept of **double marginalization** faced by **dalit women** in our society. This has been done by highlighting the **devadasi tradition** of the **Yellamma cult of Karnataka**, which preyed on young dalit girls, and continues to do so, in the name of religion. This paper works on two levels which establish relationships between **high castes** and **low castes** and **zamindars** and **landed labourer**. The problems faced by these women, social, economic, cultural and medical, are discussed at length in this paper, giving a peak into the lives of a section of our society who have become victims of religion, and despite contrary belief continues to affect them even today. This paper further illustrates how these women are forced to become prostitutes, due to becoming misfits in their own society after a certain period.

Keywords: Devadasi, Double Marginalization, Yellamma, Dalit, Prostitute.

*Mother, you never understood:
this land does not value the woman,
the shudra, the worker, the landless.*

-Namdeo Dhasal

Introduction: India as a country can be specifically distinguished from all other countries on the basis of its unique system of caste. Emerging from the Vedic, Varna system that was organised for a systematic management of society, the caste system took an ugly form as the years went by. Many treaties on the Varna system were reinterpreted and this finally led to the contemporary form of caste system that India has been encountering and fighting for centuries.

The myth that the various Varnas had emerged from the various body parts of Brahma-which makes Brahmans to be the most supreme, and the Shudras and lower castes to be at the lowest end of the hierarchy- is the centre of the inequality that is evoked by the caste system.

According to Tapan Basu the term "Dalit" is a frame of self-reference used by the lower castes themselves as opposed to the menial term untouchables given by the upper castes. This term was used by B.R. Ambedkar, which meant 'downtrodden' as opposed to Gandhi's term Harijan (god's own people) which had patronising implications. (Basu, Tapan 2002).

Along with the caste system another major source of inequality and debates based in the social stratification of India is the problem of gender, especially of the women's question. The patriarchal society that frames the nexus of Indian culture is highly biased for the males and gives a second-class citizen like treatment to the women. Women when thought of as a marginalised or oppressed group can be said to be doubly marginalised, when considered in the frame work of caste. This comprises the situation of a Dalit woman. Tapan Basu quotes Jyoti Lanjewar's opinion in saying that "Dalit women are also Dalits in relation to Dalit men within the Dalit community. They are thus Dalits twice over in so far

as they bear the burden of both gender and caste oppression" (Basu, Tapan, 2002).

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani writes:

When has my life been truly mine?

In the home male arrogance

Sets my cheeks stinging,

While in the street caste arrogance

Splits the other cheek open.

We may believe that the constitution has provided many rights to the Dalits and the women, by providing reservations but this is true of only a very minor part of India, majorly the bigger metropolitan cities where media tries to influence the culture and society by creating awareness. The heart of the Indian Subcontinent lies in the rural spaces, and in these areas issues of inequality are more pertinent. Uma Chakravarti observes "Even today, especially in rural India, the caste system hinges on the power to enforce caste based obligations to the privileged upper castes, by the dominant caste of the area. Dominance is based on wealth, i.e control over land, which also gives the dominant caste access to political power. The most numerous castes in a village are the dominant caste and that which provides the greatest part of labour, usually the untouchables." (Chakravarti, Uma, 2002)

This implies, she says, that two kinds of hierarchies work within the Indian society- one based on caste and ritual purity which gives superiority to Brahmins and inferiority to the 'Untouchables'. The other hierarchy is based on the political and economic status of the landlords versus the landless labourers.

Coming to the double marginalisation of women in this power politics and hierarchical paradigm, Chakravarti observes that the upper caste women are seen as "gateways". The upper caste women become a source for the entry of the lower caste man into the

hierarchy and hence he becomes a sexual threat to the upper caste male. Therefore he is prevented to have sexual access to the women of higher castes who are kept under constant surveillance.

On one hand where the sexuality of the upper caste women is guarded and controlled with utmost vigilance, and her main motive of sexual indulgence is seen to be for the purpose of procreation especially of sons, the upper caste male's sexuality is far less controlled.

Chakravarti elaborates "Upper caste men have sexual access to lower caste women –an aspect of material power they have over the lower castes...the upper caste man's casual or continuous use of a lower caste woman is naturalised." (Chakravarti, Uma 2002)

Chakravarti says that "apart from using their labour, masters of dasis (servants) in early literature used sexual services of women in servitude."

Taking this point I wish to show how the "dasis" turned into "devadasis", who were basically women of the lower caste whose sexuality was exploited due to their caste and economic status, hence doubly marginalizing them as both women and as Dalits.

Right before the Bhakti period Aryanism, Brahmanism and Vedic culture had lost their importance to the new developing religions of Buddhism, and Jainism. They were much more lenient in terms of equality, where caste and gender were far less problematic and hence invited a larger number of people to take up their philosophy of life. The Brahmanism, of the past evolved in the Bhakti tradition and gave rise to various sects and cults like Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism. This is the time when Devadasi culture could be said to have gained momentum. At this period, in trying to lure the common man to their own religion, the Brahmins devised a way to increase their followers. By building Temples, and putting in artists like singers and dancers to attract the people, the Brahmanical system came up with the idea of the Devadasi system.

In my opinion the establishment of this system had a twofold role. Firstly, it gave importance to performance and caused sensual titillation, leading to a mass attraction towards the faith. Secondly, the opportunity that it gave to women to become a part of the temple culture, that too women of poor economic status or lower castes may have excited the interest of various castes into the Temple culture.

In Sanskrit 'dasi' means a female servant. In the traditional sense of the term, Devadasi means a servant of god. The concept of marrying a girl to the local deity and devoting her in service of god in the form of dancing girls/ performers of the temple was called the Devadasi system. "The most important validation ceremony for the Devadasi who danced as part of temple ritual was to be formally married and dedicated to the temple deity or to a ritual object

(kalyanam). This usually took place before puberty and allowed her to dance as part of temple ceremonies and celebrations. For the Devadasi who danced in temples her marriage and dedication to a deity ranked as a more important qualification than her dancing ability", says Anne Marie Gaston. A prevalent concept of South India, Devadasi system is considered to have become common during the sixth century C.E. The popularity of the system was at its peak from tenth- eleventh century C.E.

Since the rise of the Bhakti movement was at its peak in the Southern parts of India, the Devadasi system came to be highly established in this area [Karnataka-Raichur, Bijapur, Belgaum, Dharwad, Bellary and Gulburga; Andhra Pradesh-Karimnagar, Warangal, Nizamabad, Karnool, Hyderabad, Medak, Ananthapur, Adilabad, Chittoor, Rangareddy, Nellore, Nelagonda, Srikakulam and Mahboobnagar; Maharashtra-Pune, Sholapur, Kolhapur, Sangli, Mumbai, Latur, Usmanabad, Satara, Sindhudurg and Nanded; (Shwetha, T.S. and Manjula, M.Y. 2015), Goa and so on]. The practice is particular to Madiga caste.

Gail Omvedt observes "Thousands of young girls from low caste poor families in Belgaum, Bijapur and parts of Kohlapur districts are unable to escape the fate (of becoming a devadasi)...A survey of Pune prostitutes by Vilas Wagh shows that more than 60% of them were dalits and of the Devadasi prostitutes 90% were dalits." (Omvedt, Gail, 1983).

Focussing on the Yellamma cult of the Karnataka region makes it easier for one to understand the relationship between the Dalit women and the Devadasi system.

Yellamma Cult: According to Black and many other scholars, in Karnataka, the main temple and commercial complex for goddess Yellamma is situated in Belgaum- Saundatti. "To Yellamma's devotees, the temples of Saundatti still represent the equivalent of Mecca and Rome". (Black, Maggie 2007) Arun Jaganathan V.R. says that, though in most places a male god dominates the religious beliefs, there are also local female deities in most villages known as the "Gramadevata". This "Gramadevata" is considered to be the one who protects them from evil and bad happenings. Yellamma too is one such deity. He opines that these female goddesses are represented by trees or small statutes in shrines, or in uncarved stones and help to cure diseases, calm calamities and mostly their names end with 'amma' which means mother (Yellamma, Miriamma, Mathamma and so on.) (V.R. Jagannath, Arun 2013).

Myths: There are many versions of the Yellamma myth. In the Sanskritic Tradition myth, She was the daughter of Renuka (the king of Ikshaku dynasty) and was called by the name Sri Renuka. Married to Jamadagni, every day she would go to the

river Malaprabha to get water for her husband's rituals. Owing to her loyalty and chastity she could carry the water without a pot. One day while approaching the river, she lost her mental composure at the sight of a Gandharwa sporting in the river with his wife. When she returned home without water (as she had lost the miracle power due to loss of loyalty) , her husband understood her disloyalty. In anger he cursed her to lose her youth and beauty and leave his hermitage. Sickly and ugly, she wandered on a hillock for food and shelter. Twin brothers Ashwin Kumaras saw her and cured her. When she returned to her husband, in fury, he commanded his sons to behead the mother. All of the sons, except Parashurama, declined the command. Parashurama, being an obedient son, agreed to behead the mother. According to myth Renuka ran and took refuge in a lower caste woman's house, hoping that being a Brahmin, Parashurama would not come near. But in his wrath, he approached her with an axe and cut the head of both his mother and the low caste woman. Being happy, that Parashurama had been an obedient son, Jamadagni gave him two boons. In the first boon he asked to restore the life of his mother and the second boon he asked to be relieved of the sin of beheading his own mother. Jamadagni granted the boons. In excitement Parashurama joined the low caste woman's head on the high caste woman's body and the high caste Renuka's face on the low caste woman's body. Jamadagni accepted the woman with high caste body and the low caste bodied Renuka was called Yellamma – mother of all and became a deity of low caste people. (Pattnaik,D ,2003)

In The Non Sanskritic Tradition: The myth claims that Yellamma was the sister of the head man of Uguragola – a village located near Saundatti. She was a leper and was kept away from the village. She used to come to the village outskirts to take food and resources from her brothers. One day she met two saktas – Ekayya and Jogayya and told them her story. They had miraculous powers and so they cured her of her leprosy. She started serving them and collecting food and alms for them. The two men became popular for their miraculous power and were approached by locals for solving their problems. Before dying they taught the powers to Yellamma and so she became the central figure and received devotees. By the time of her death people started believing that any vows taken by her name could solve all problems and diseases. (Singh, Nagendra Kr., 1997).

According to Jaganathan the origin of Yellamma can be explained in various ways- once on her visit to Saundatti ,someone asked her “yella amma” which means “where mother” in Kannada and so she was named Yellamma ; in Karnataka ‘Yollumma’ (seven mother deities) are held in high regard. Yellamma

could be a corrupt form of that name; yella means all and amma means mother, Yellamma is considered to be a mother to all protecting the whole village; Yellamma could also be the representative of mother earth. “There is a peculiar rite performed on the full moon days coming between December and January and between March and April. The former full moon day is considered to the day of widowhood and the later to be of begetting marital status. This ritual represents by harvesting of crops, the earth loses its prosperity and this condition is thought to be similar to widowhood. Again in Caitra month the spring starts with fresh blossom everywhere and this is supposed to be regaining the marital status. This rite is performed by the Devadasis in the areas of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.” (V.R.Jagannath, Arun 2013)

Black opines that Yellamma is considered to be the goddess of fertility, i.e. is the “heart of the ancient Dravidian cult” with which the practice of Devadasi is related. Marriages of girls to Yellamma have been taking place for over 2000 years. “It is likely that the early farming people depended on the fertility of the natural world and so they developed the mother Goddess .So for Yellamma to remain fertile active sexual congress is required... at puberty , sexuality must be sacrificed to maintain her fertility.” (Black, Maggie 2007) Yellamma cult and Devadasi tradition in these areas and areas of Karnataka are closely interwoven.

The term Devadasi in this context becomes extremely important. Ordinarily deva stands for a deity/ god. In the Yellamma cult the women are married to Yellamma who is a female deity. This concept of marrying a female to a female deity seems problematic. But in my opinion there can be two ways in which this ambiguity can be understood. If we see the earliest forms of writings of the bhakti poetry, the god is always considered to be of the male form and the devotee is always seen in the female form. This may have had some basis in the cultural and religious beliefs in society. Hence the provider, the beloved, the deity remains ‘male’ in spirit (as in a Patriarchy the male is symbol of protection, strength, and economy etc.), and receiver, the lover, the devotee, becomes female in spirit.

The other way of understanding this is close to what I mentioned above, but more so practically than in terms spirituality. Lucinda Ramberg observes “For the Dalit (outcaste women)...in the south Indian state of Karnataka...marriage is not to men but to a *devi*. When they are girls they are ‘given’ or dedicated by their families to *devi* Yellamma, they become her wives. By virtue of this they become responsible for the *seva* of Yellamma; they become their pujaris. In turn Yellamma provides for them- As several dedicated women put it to me, “she is my husband,

she takes care (of me)”(Ramberg, Lucinda 2015). The traditional Indian belief system warrants that a wife may be provided for and taken care of by her husband. The Yellamma cult provides for her social and economic needs, hence rendering Yellamma the status of a husband, and the Devadasi the status of her wife. This provision is elaborated upon in the next section of this paper.

Gail Omvedt says that Devadasis were generally from the lowest castes specially untouchables who were considered lower than other caste courtesans, dancers and singers of the temple. Lucinda Ramberg observes that the Devadasis of Karnataka are usually from landless or small landholding Dalit families. These families are the ones who are trying to sustain in an area which is prone to draught and is entirely almost dependent on land agriculture. In Yellamma temples of these areas of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, the puja is “virtually always conducted by a devadasi from the dalit community”(Ramber, Lucinda 2011). Omvedt’s remark almost three decades ago adds to Chakravarti’s point in saying that the caste based system of devadasi allowed the “high caste men free and religiously sanctioned sexual access to the best looking Dalit caste women” (Omvedt, Gail 1983). This was done through the intermingling of the Temple Brahmins and the Patrons of the temples who took part in the power politics and sexual politics to their advantage. “The dedication of the girls to the devi Yellamma initiates a network of exchange relation, mutual obligation and forms of care that flow among Dalit, dedicated women, dominant caste devotees of the devi and the devi herself” (Ramberg, Lucinda 2011)

Common Features: The common features of the various versions of the Devadasi are- dedication of the girl at a young age, generally before or at puberty, marriage to deity, deflowering of the girl after the ceremony or at puberty, by a caste elder or a man paying for the privilege of consummation until the girl becomes old or unattractive. Their main duty was the art of performance including singing and dancing at the temple. This performance followed the folkloric and classical traditions and the performances are also given at rituals and festivals. Devadasis were not eligible for a regular marriage. They were patronised by zamindars for their own entertainment and were seen to be a source of “sensual titillation”

It is a common belief that due to these practices of the caste elders or a temple patrons, deflowering the devadasis and their continual sexual consummation caused them the status of a sex worker/ prostitute in society, even though devadasis were not expected to make money from trading in sex and could not be described as prostitutes in the usual sense. Maggie Black says “Devadasi status once entered into can

never be entirely cast off, whatever the law may say. It is a lifelong sentence to deprivation of regular marriage and family life, a source of stigma and discrimination, of sexual exploitation during youth and early middle age and normally of extreme poverty for the rest of the woman’s life”(Black, Maggie, 2007).

Becoming A Devadasi: According to Jaganathan “manifestation of signs such as *jata*, dry hair, white patch, leprosy and even mental problems have been traditionally interpreted as signs of the call of Goddess Yellamma to join her” (Jaganathan, 2013).

According to Jaganathan girls are dedicated to the goddess at the request or command of rich zamindars or patrons and even temple priests. The poor farmer is in a dilemma whether to dedicate his daughter or not (Jaganathan, 2013). According to Black the various other reasons for dedication were –to solve a family problem, bhakti, hereditary, belief, social pressure, wrong advice, poverty, lack of a son or male heir. (Black, 2007). Turning a girl into a Devadasi is not a parent or Patron’s decision. It requires social and community approval. Sometimes it is the entire community that decides the fate of the girl. It’s a politics on the part of the priest as well because, priests too got to maintain sexual relations with devadasis in the name of religion.

Megan Rowland says “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 initiation. As well as sexual abuse, devadasi experience physical, emotional and spiritual abuse” (Rowland, Megan 2013).

Patron: According to Gaston “for a man, married or single, association with a devadasi enhanced his prestige and publically confirmed his status and wealth”. Omvedt remarks “today the devadasi system is no longer a feudal one...it has been pushed into the service of voracious capitalism...” (Omvedt, 1983). He further says “rich merchants, landlords, big farmers, pay six hundred to eight hundred rupees required for the dedication ceremony of a girl and thus buy the right to have the first sexual relation with her” (Omvedt, 1983)

Health Issues: According to Black the lifestyle of a devadasi can lead to many kinds of health issues like alcoholism, S.T.I., body pains, menstrual bleeding disorders, H.I.V, lack of appetite, hearing problems, anemia, white vaginal discharge, poor mental health, nervous disorders, insomnia, psychological or emotional trauma, illusions, hallucinations and spirit visitations. (Black, 2007) According to Rosemary Candelario, Karnataka is one of India’s six states with high rates of HIV (Candelario, Rosemary, 2008).

Devadasi Vs Married Woman: According to Omvedt the whole life of a Devadasi was completely a

reversal of the life of an ordinary woman. She was allowed to roam about freely, she could take up any occupation and earn her own income. Omvedt quotes Maria Mies in saying that devadasis had higher freedom, higher social status and religious prestige, were not bossed around by a husband and did not have to bear the husband's beatings.(Omvedt,1983) The devadasi in fact was treated like a male having inheritance rights as a son, she could perform her father's *shradh*, her children took her surname and she was free from the moral controls of *Pativrata*.

On one hand we claim that the devadasi is sexually exploited but on the other hand the patriarchy has such high control over the morality and life style of a married woman.

Devadasi Vs Sex Worker: According to an article '*Understanding the Social and Cultural Context of Female Sex Workers in Karnataka, India: Implications for Prevention of H.I.V. Infection*' – "26% of the FSWs (female sex workers) stated that induction into the devadasi tradition was at least one reason that they entered sex work, and 66% of these FSWs listed it as the only reason that they entered sex work". Sundarakka is not the only character who faces this situation.

According to Lucinda Ramberg "Having married a deity, devadasis do not take other husbands, but may take patrons, work in brothels, or remain celibate. In contemporary Karnataka this illicit sexuality has attracted the attention of feminist, anti-caste and public health activists". She takes an in between stand and is against both "romantic accounts of devadasi as women uniquely free of patriarchal

constraint and the tragic narration of them as victims of sexual exploitation".(Ramberg,2011)

It clearly seems that there is a classic fight between the two kinds of patriarchies that operate in our society. One that is threatened by female sexuality and hence keeps them in submission and surveillance, when they enter the constitution of marriage. On the other hand they have no problem is leaving some sections of society "free" in the name of religion, where yet again the patriarchy uses them for their own benefit. It may seem like that their conditions as devadasis is better in terms of the economic security and other benefits that apparently equalise their male counter parts in society. But this so called liberty in the name of rights cannot on the surface claimed to be right. The question of female sexuality and her own control over her own body still remains like a puppet in the hands of the male dominated society. And unless we find a way that is neither of surveillance nor of exploitation women's sexuality, one cannot claim to have found a clear understanding of what it is to have gender equality.

One needs to understand that in rural areas like these, where bigger problems like sexual exploitation exist, the need for awareness is much more. If one keeps waiting for a formal education system, or a law and order to prevent such evils of society, it will take a longer time. The need of the hour is to provide education and awareness about the first hand issues and problems that people at these levels face. Primary education, education on equality can follow, once these communities are made aware of the evils of such superstitious believes and provided with some agency to take better decisions for their lives.

References:

1. Basu,T. "Introduction" Translating Caste, Katha Publication, New Delhi, (2002).
2. Basu,T, "Narratives of Suffering :Dalit Perspectives", Translating Caste, Katha Publication, New Delhi, (2002).
3. Black,M, *Woman in Ritual Slavery :Devadasi, Jogini and Mathamma in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh , South India*, <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3951&context=globalgocs>, (2007)
4. Blanchard ,James F., John O'Neil, B. M. Ramesh, Parinita Bhattacharjee, Treena Orchard and Stephen Moses, "*Understanding the Social and Cultural Contexts of Female Sex Workers in Karnataka, India: Implications for Prevention of HIV Infection*" The Journal of Infectious Diseases, Vol. 191, Supplement 1, Advances in Multilevel Approaches to the Epidemiology and Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Infections and HIV Oxford University Press, (2005), pp. S139-S146 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30077766> (accessed 24-8-2015).
5. Candelerio, R., *Fragmented Bodies*, UCLA Centre for The Study of Women.<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3rw866ww.pdf>, (2008).
6. Chakravarti,U,"*Through Another Lens:Men, Women and Caste*" Tapan Basu (ed) Translating Caste, Katha Publication, New Delhi, (2002).
7. Chawla, A., "Devadasis –Sinners Or Sinned Against :An attempt to look at the myth and reality of history and present status of Devadasis" (www.samarthbharat.com), (2002).
8. Omvedt, G., "*Devdasi Custom And The Fight Against It*" www.manushi-india.org/pdf_files-19, (1983).
9. Pattnaik,D "*Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent*", Inner Traditions Publications, Vermont, (2003).

10. Rowland, Megan, "A Light in the Darkness: Fighting ritual prostitution in south India" www.hart-uk.org/uploads/2013/07.
11. Ramberg, Lucinda, "When the Devi Is Your Husband :Sacred Marriage and Sexual Economy in South India", *Feminist Studies*, Vol.37, No. 1, Conjugality and Sexual Economics in India, (2011), pp28-60 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23069882> (accessed 24-8-2015).
12. Singh, N.K., "Divine Prostitution" A.P.H. Publishing House, New Delhi, (1997).
13. Srinivasan, Amrit, " Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance " (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 20, No. 44 (Nov. 2, 1985), pp. 1869-1876) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4375001> (accessed 11/03/2011).
14. T.S. Shwetha and M.Y. Manjula, "Devadasi System and Its Impact on Their Children", *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, (2015), p155-157.
15. V.R. ,Arun Jaganathan, "Yellamma Cult and Divine Prostitution: Its Historical and Cultural Background", *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 3, Issue 4, www.ijsrp.org, (2013).

Ankita Gupta, M.Phil. Comparative Literature,
Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi