



from Banhi

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Devdasi Custom And The Fight Against It

government supervision and regulation, so as to check the spread of venereal disease. Others, for largely moralistic reasons, demand that it should be abolished, or should, at least, be kept out of sight, out of their neighbourhoods. Others call for prostitutes to organise themselves in something like trade unions, so as to win some economic gains, medical rights and other facilities.

About compulsory prostitution, however, there can be and are no differences of opinion. Forcing women into the flesh trade can be called one of the most heinous crimes, yet it is widespread in many third world countries.

In August 1983, I undertook a brief research project sponsored by the Shahu Central Institute Of Business Education And Research, in the course of which I visited Bangalore, Belgaum, Nipani, and interviewed activists involved in the campaign against the *devdasi* system. The following is a brief report of my findings.

Origins Of The System

The *devdasi* system is an old one, and apparently pre-Aryan. There is no mention of it in Vedic Sanskrit literature, but Tamil Sangam literature, which dates back to 200-300 BC, describes a class of dancing women called *parattaiyar*. They were courtesans who performed some ritual function, lived in a separate part of the city, and eventually came to be associated with temples. Later, in the post Vedic and post Buddhist age, the system seems to have spread

through India, though it remained strongest in the south. Young girls were usually dedicated to the goddess, or occasionally to gods, very often after the appearance of matted hair called *jath* which is taken to be a sign of the call of the goddess. The dedicated girl was forbidden to marry. When such girls came of age, they would perform dances in the temple, perform various services to the gods and goddesses, and take part in various rituals and religious ceremonies. They were considered to be married to the god or goddess, and were sexually available to any man who came to the temple. *Devdasis* were invariably from the lowest, usually the untouchable castes, and were considered lower than other classes of courtesans, or other classes of dancers and singers in the temple.

During the feudal period, *devdasis* became bound to the service of feudal lords, from *rajas* and *maharajas* down to the village overlords. Even today, they continue to be enslaved to such masters. Rich merchants, landlords, big farmers, pay the Rs 600 to 800 required for the dedication ceremony of a girl, and thus buy the right to have the first sexual relation with her. They continue to have special privileges after that, even though she remains available to other men as well. However, the more prevalent system today is that the pimps from the Bombay prostitution industry pay for the dedication ceremony, and often pay something to the girl's parents, in order to directly recruit the girl for a commercial brothel in Bombay.

RECENTLY, a young teacher in an Urdu school in Bijapur was forcibly abducted by a government official. She was told that she must become a *devdasi*. She was threatened with the vengeance of the goddess Yellamma, and also with being sold to a brothel in Bombay. On June 29, she managed to escape but her complaint has so far been ignored by the court and the Karnataka government.

Thousands of young girls from low caste poor families in Belgaum, Bijapur and parts of Kolhapur districts, are unable to escape the fate with which this teacher was threatened. It is estimated that 200 girls are yearly dedicated to Yellamma, and are then sold in the Bombay prostitution market. According to a rough estimate, they constitute about 40 percent of prostitutes in Bombay.

There are differences of opinion about prostitution. Some people wish it to be legalised as an industry under

Special Status

The *devdasi*'s life was unique, not only because of her sexual function or because she was supposed to be sacred to and often possessed by the goddess. Her whole way of life was far removed from the life of ordinary women, was in fact almost a reversal of their life. She was free to wander anywhere, in or out of the village, free to work at any profession or occupation, and earn an income. According to traditional law, she was treated as a male, having inheritance rights similar to those of a son, and also having the right to perform religious rituals, such as the *shradh* for her father, which no woman is normally permitted to perform. Her children took her surname, and not that of any man, regardless of how longstanding a relationship she had with their father. She was thus absolutely free from the bondage of *pativrata* and the stricture of Manu that a woman must always be dependent on father, husband or son.

For this reason, many see remnants not only of matrilineal but also of matriarchal traditions in the *devdasi*'s situation, and feel that the life of a *devdasi* was not particularly worse than and in some respects was better than that of the ordinary, patriarchally oppressed woman. In what way is being sexually open to all men worse than being bound to the life long service of a single man, with the prospect of being a dishonoured widow or of dying on his funeral pyre after his death? Thus Maria Mies, in her study, *Indian Women And Patriarchy*, speaks of the greater freedom and high social and religious prestige of the *devdasis*. She quotes a Bombay prostitute as saying : "I would not like to be bossed over by the man called husband. So this life is all right for me. After all, I have not missed anything a married woman enjoys except perhaps the husband's beatings," Mies argues that the struggle against the *devdasi* system arises out of a falsely progressive "puritan morality" and has only resulted in depriving the *devdasis* of their traditional prestige, thus turning them into "ordinary prostitutes

who live a miserable life in the brothels and slums of the city."

But can any special section of women be free of patriarchy in a patriarchal society? Though *devdasis* traditionally were not slaves of a single husband, yet any man could claim sexual rights over them, and they were often enslaved to particular feudal lords. Though *devdasis* had the social and religious rights that males had, the advantage of these rights was most often taken by men. Parents and brothers lived off the *devdasi*'s earnings from prostitution or other professions. Often, a particularly beautiful little girl was, and still is, deliberately dedicated to the goddess, so that her parents could benefit from her earnings. Girls are also sometimes dedicated when people have no male

heir, in order that land and property may be inherited by her, and may stay in the family.

Thus, while the *devdasi*'s life was apparently the opposite of the life of the married woman, it remained bound within the same patriarchal and exploitative framework. In addition, the system was a caste based one. One function of the system was to allow so called high caste men free and religiously sanctioned sexual access to the best looking dalit caste women.

Caste Exploitation

It is overwhelmingly dalit girls who become *devdasis*. Occasionally, even today, brahman girls get the *jath* or mat in their hair, are dedicated to the goddess, and continue all their life to perform the *puja* of Yellamma, without marrying. But



Devdasis in a village temple

from Bahni

they never become *devdasis* or prostitutes. A survey of Pune prostitutes by Vilas Wagh showed that more than 60 percent of them were dalits, and of the *devdasi* prostitutes 90 percent were dalits. His survey did not find a single prostitute from the brahman, maratha, jain or lingayat castes. Of course girls from so called high castes, and from the middle or even upper middle class, do practise prostitution, but instead of becoming brothel bound prostitutes, they act as independent call girls, often with their own apartments. As one dalit student told Wagh : "These women may get four rupees while those women get 400. Even here, caste and class can be found."

Today, the *devdasi* system is no longer a feudal one. The traditional form remains, but Yellamma, like any number of Indian social traditions, has been pressed into the service of a voracious capitalism. The towns and villages of Bijapur, Belgaum and other districts around Yellamma's temple at Soundatti, are today the hunting ground of pimps from the brothels of Bombay. Instead of providing their services to the temples or to feudal lords, girls from impoverished dalit families sell their bodies on the open market

The *devdasi* system enslaves women and oppresses dalits in the name of religion. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was from within the dalit movement that it was first attacked. Around 1910, S. J. Kamble of Pune published an analysis and attack on the system in his, magazine *Somvanshiya Mitra*. In 1912, in Hyderabad, Andhra's dalit leader Bhagyareddy Varma, formed his first organisation, the Manya Sangam, which took up abolition of the custom as one of its planks. Such internal reform efforts managed to stop many dedications of girls, and later an Adi Hindu Murli Nivaran Mandal was formed especially to oppose the system. As of now, little information is available about the impact and extent of these efforts among dalits in various parts of India. This may reflect our low state of knowledge about anticaste movements.

How Struggle Started

Babasaheb Ambedkar was the leader whose actions had the most decisive impact. There are records of several meetings held by him, including one in Nipani in 1925 and one in Bombay in 1929, at which the marriages of a large number of *devdasis* were arranged.

Ambedkar gave a call to women to protect the family and not to dishonour their caste, yet his influence had a liberal and antifeudal impact. Today, the custom is practically non existent among the Buddhists, previously mahars, of Maharashtra, though previously it had been rampant under the name of the *murli* system, and mahar families of Sangli and Kolhapur district

beatings by devotees of the goddess. One result of such efforts was the passage of the Devdasi Abolition Act in 1934 by the Bombay provincial government. In the 1960s, dalit youth in the Soundatti area campaigned against and socially boycotted families who dedicated girls. They succeeded in stopping many dedications. As a result, the percentage of *devdasis* even today remains relatively low in Soundatti itself.

However, outside the mahar Buddhists, and outside of Maharashtra, the movement has more or less stopped. According to Achyut Mane, Virappa's son, one reason is that after the 1930s, dalit social activists "fell prey to politics" and the movement was then taken up by caste Hindu leadership. He believes



Retired jogis outside a temple

-from *Bahni*

had provided hundreds of girls to Yellamma, the feudal lords, and the budding capitalists.

This change came about not simply through the leadership, lobbying or rallies of a few individuals, but as a result of attempts that roused many low caste toilers to fight for & new life. In Chikodi taluk in the 1930s, for instance a young dalit school teacher, Virappa Mane, and his friends organised a *jalsa* and wandered through the villages to propagandise against the system. They kept up their efforts even in the face of

that only a fighting leadership from young dalit men and women can be really effective. Women in particular must now come forward.

Kaka Karkhanis, an old Gandhian leader, tried for decades to combat the custom. He took a rehabilitative approach, establishing schools and hostels for harijan boys and girls. In 1972, his institutions were forced to close down for lack of funds, without a noticeable impact on the system. "The government is apathetic", he says bitterly. It would be more accurate to say

that the government has, and certainly large numbers of government officials have, an immense stake in the system, and that "change of heart" methods can accomplish nothing unless they represent a change of consciousness among dalit toilers fighting for their own rights.

Current Phase Of Protest

In 1975, a *devdasi* rehabilitation conference was held at Gudhinglaz, district Kolhapur, under the sponsorship of Mahatma Phule Samta Pratisthan of Pune. About 500 women attended it, and almost as many came to a second conference held at Nipani in 1980. The presence of many militant women tobacco workers helped to provide an atmosphere of struggle. As a result of studies, press conferences and lobbying by some organisations and individuals, the Karnataka government passed the Devdasi Abolition Act, which

provides for stricter penalisation. However, the bill fails to provide for any government supervision of the temples and priests, or any special punishment for the priests, brothel agents or capitalists who extract profit from the system.

Very recently, a new effort has begun with small teams taking up *jath* removal or haircutting campaigns in the towns of Kolhapur, Gargoti and Nipani. So far, about 50 women in several towns and villages have been officially released from their state as *devdasis*, and several have been married. Many of the activists plan to continue these campaigns by linking propaganda against the *devdasi* system with propaganda for the need for united struggle by dalits and other toilers against all the injustices that beset their lives.

It remains true, however, that the current phase of anti *devdasi*

campaigning, from 1975 to the present, contrasts with the early period, not only in that its leadership is primarily caste Hindu and middle class, but also in that its style has mostly involved lobbying, rallies, seminars and conferences without much ongoing follow up. It does not seem to have been very effective. An occasional individual like the Bijapur school teacher may fight back, but Yellamma still has thousands of devotees. The desire to throw off traditional forms of religion endorsed patriarchal and casteist enslavement has not yet taken hold of the masses of low caste workers, agricultural labourers and poor peasants in the border areas between Karnataka and Maharashtra. Until it does, the system will undoubtedly continue. At present, all we can say is that the efforts of the last eight years represent the beginnings of a fight against the *devdasi* system. □

New Rape Bill Passed

THE Criminal Law Amendment Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha on December 1, 1983. The bill amends the rape law contained in the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Evidence Act. The main features of the bill are :

1. shifting of the burden of proof with regard to the woman's consent, onto the accused in cases of custodial rape, that is, rape by policemen, public servants and managers of women's homes or hospitals who commit rape on women in their custody;

2. a minimum punishment of seven years' or ten years' imprisonment for different varieties of custodial rape;

3. restrictions on press publicity with regard to rape cases. The identity of a rape victim can be made known only with her consent. Violation of this law shall be a punishable offence. Some of these proposed changes were discussed in **Manushi** No. 16.

The Statesman reported that only 15 members—six in the opposition benches and nine in the government benches—besides the home minister, were present

when the bill was passed, and this was the average attendance throughout the afternoon while the bill was being discussed. Also, quite a few members who had tabled amendments were absent when the amendments were to be taken up.

A Pioneer

On November 2, 1983, Mary Isaacs Rebeiro, one of India's first postmistresses and perhaps the first woman in independent India to hold independent charge of a post office, passed away. She was in her eightieth year. At a time when women were a bare 1.6 per cent of the urban workforce in the country, and constituted less than one percent of the male bastion called the post and telegraph department, she accepted an outstation assignment in Kasauli, against much family opposition, and soon became assistant postmistress, heading an all male staff of five at Mori Gate post office, Delhi. At the time of her retirement, she headed an all male staff of 30 at the general post office, Delhi. She used to tell us, her children, how the postmaster general once called her, and

asked if it would be possible for her to go out of Delhi on a posting. He also asked if her parents would mind. "Certainly, sir", was her response to both questions. When her father retired, and her two young brothers were still studying, it was Mary who supported the family.

—Sydney Rebeiro

