

Devadasi System

What is Devadasi System?

The term Devadasi is a Sanskrit word meaning female servant of God. It refers to a women community who have dedicated themselves to serve the patron god belonging to great temples of southern and eastern parts of India.

The prominence of the Devadasi system dates back to the 9th and 10th century. Since then, Devadasi serve the god by fanning the God's idols, honoring the idols and holy images with aarti (lights), dancing and singing for the almighty. They serve the kings and his close circle in the same manner. Along with this, the Devadasis were commanded sexual favours. These were quite prominent in the northeastern parts of India till the 20th century. Because of the involvement in the temple prostitution, the Devadasis along with their children were considered as the low caste.

Origin of the Devadasi System

Devadasi system originated to the major parts of India as a usual practice. Here is the brief description of the origin of the Devadasi System in India-

- The Devadasi system in India began during the sixth century when young girls got married to a God. After this marriage ceremony, the temple caretakers and priests perform all the ceremonies, such as music and dance, in the deity's honor.
- Initially, the girls forced into the Devadasi tradition learned and practiced various art forms like Odissi, Bharathanatyam, or other traditional dance styles, apart from engaging in marriage rituals and taking care of the temple.
- Earlier, the Devadasis in India enjoyed a royal, divine status, as music and dance were a part of adoration in temples and were considered auspicious for every occasion.
- However, after the advent of the Britishers and Mughals, numerous temples got demolished. It deteriorated and exploited the status of these women in society.
- Apart from this, the kids born from Devadasi women were forced to learn music and dance and remain dedicated to the temples.

Devadasi System in India - Issues and Challenges

From issues with the societal acceptance to numerous health threats, many reasons contributed to the risk of the prevalence of the Devadasi system in India. The issues and challenges in the Devadasi system in India are as follows-

- **Societal acceptance:** Devadasi's devotion and the consequent sexual abuse of these women are welcomed and praised by society. In addition, those keen on reporting this issue abstain from doing so out of fear of backlash.
- **Inefficient awareness programs:** Awareness about the Devadasi system in most rural areas of the country is absent. Even such awareness agendas fail to drive any behavioral difference within society.

- **Lack of formal action:** The authorities usually fail to take action in matters of faith and do not register claims due to societal intimidation.
- **Poor execution of legislation:** There are different requirements under diverse regulations (ITPA, POCSO, JJ Act, IPC) that would help Devadasis. Nevertheless, there is a lack of application of all these laws.
- **Health Threats:** The Devadasis pushed into prostitution become susceptible to sexually transmitted infections like HIV and AIDS.

Devadasi System - Laws and Offenses

After a Kerala-based foundation brought into light the existence of the Devadasi system, the Supreme Court implemented strict laws to abolish the system in 2016. Some of the laws enacted to stop the Devadasi tradition are as follows:

- Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, 1934
- Prevention of Dedication Act (Madras Devadasi) in 1947
- Prohibition of Dedication Act (Karnataka Devadasi), 1982
- Prohibition of Dedication Act (Andhra Pradesh Devadasi), 1988
- Abolition of Dedication Act (Maharashtra Devadasi), 2006
- Juvenile Justice Act (JJ Act) 2015

Causes of Devadasi Tradition Prevalent in India

Though the Supreme court of India has come up with a plenty of laws for the abolition of the Devadasi system, yet this system is prevalent in some of the parts of India. The major reasons that are responsible for the prevalence of the Devadasi tradition in India are as below-

- Because of the religious belief associated with the Devadasi tradition, the Indian families consider devoting their daughters as an auspicious practice.
- Continuation of lineage and the associated superstitious belief still exists on the name of tradition.
- Devadasis were given a higher status in society since earlier times. So, to upgrade their status in the society, the Indian families devote their daughters to serve the gods in the temples.
- Even though the Supreme court has made laws and orders for the abolishment of the Devadasi system, yet they are not strict enough to prevent this practice.
- The women involved in the Devadasi system, themselves do not complain against them.

Devadasi System- Moving Forward

There is a need of checking the prevalence of the Devadasi System by regular surveys by the Department of Women and Child Development so as to provide rehabilitation to the affected girls. Not only they must be provided with rehabilitation services, they must be given a chance to avail employment for a better future of their children. There is a strict need of educating the women, their children to spread the awareness against the existing practice. Certain Reforms must be implemented to bring the system to an end.