

Devadasi System

Devadasi is a name given to a girl 'dedicated' to a deity in a temple for worship and service of the deity for the rest of her life. This was prominent in southern and parts of western India.

The dedication of the girl takes place in a ceremony similar to marriage and is called 'pottukattu'.

Devadasi System – Origin & Background

- This tradition dates back to the sixth century where young girls were married to the deity, after which they would act as the temple caretakers and perform all rituals, including dance and music in the honor of the deity.
- Originally, the girls learned and practised the arts like Bharathanatyam, Odissi or other classical dance forms, apart from taking care of the temple and engaging in rituals.
- They traditionally enjoyed a high status in society as music and dance were integral parts of worship in temples. They were considered auspicious as they were committed to the deity.
- Later, after the involvement of Mughals and Britishers in the country, many temples were broken and their status in the society deteriorated and they were being exploited and degraded. The children of the Devadasis were also made to learn music or were dedicated to the temples.
- It is one such practice which is illegally being done in a few parts of India till date.

Causes for Devadasi Tradition Prevalent in India

In India, there still are a few states which continue to practise the Devadasi tradition despite the Supreme Court orders to abolish this system.

Discussed below are the causes for the extent of the Devadasi System:

- It is a religious belief that if a family devotes their daughter, it would make the deity happy and bless the family. This is one of the biggest reasons why people still choose to practise this tradition
- Since in the earlier times, Devadasis were given a higher status in the society, many economically weak families believe that devoting their daughters will improve their social status
- Even after strict orders from the Supreme Court to abolish this practice, certain states have not yet enforced laws or acts to prevent the Devadasi culture
- Superstitious beliefs and the continuation of lineage is another cause for the present existence of the tradition

Devadasi System – Laws & Offences

Kerala-based NGO, S.L. Foundation had brought to the notice of the judiciary the existence of this practise in multiple parts of the country. In was in 2016 that the Supreme Court had ordered the states to implement strict laws to completely abolish the system.

The following laws have been passed to stop the Devadasis tradition:

- Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, 1934
- Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947
- Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982
- Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1988
- Maharashtra Devadasi (Abolition of Dedication) Act, 2006
- Juvenile Justice Act 2015 (JJ Act)
- To stop abandoning young girls in name of a tradition for sexual exploitation and prostitution, Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956 (ITPA Act) and Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection, and Rehabilitation) Bill 2018

Abolition of Devadasi System – Challenges

To completely remove the tradition from society, there are certain challenges which are being faced by the law-enforcing authorities. These include:

- Lack of awareness of this ill tradition in the name of religious practice. People are not completely aware of how this system is illegal and a punishable offence
- Since it is considered a tradition, people are not willing to accept the abuse faced by a girl as a result of this system. It is still believed to bring a blessing to the family performing the devotion
- Lack of legal actions is also a challenge which has been faced. People do not report cases which ultimately leads to ignorance of such issues
- Law enforcement is not very strict
- The Devadasis themselves do not register complaints against their families and accept the social pressure

Educating the lower and economically backward sections of the society is one of the first initiatives which must be taken into consideration for completely removing this malpractice.

Devadasi System – Moving Forward

- The Department of Women and Child Development must conduct regular surveys to check the prevalence of this tradition provide rehabilitation to the young girls affected. They must also promote employment opportunities for the Devadasi women for a better future of their children
- Devadasis cases must be brought under the purview of IPC and the authorities must try spreading awareness of the existence of this practice
- Steps must be taken to educate the children of the affected women
- Reforms must be brought in to completely put an end to the malpractice

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