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## Avinash Kumar



*Avinash Kumar has completed his Ph.D. in International Investment Law from the Dept. of Law & Governance, Central University of South Bihar. His research work is on "International Investment Agreement and State's right to regulate Foreign Investment." He qualified UGC-NET and has been selected for the prestigious ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship. He is an alumnus of the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Formerly he has been elected as Students Union President of Law Centre-1, University of Delhi. Moreover, he completed his LL.M. from the University of Delhi (2014-16), dissertation on "Cross-border Merger & Acquisition"; LL.B. from the University of Delhi (2011-14), and B.A. (Hons.) from Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. He has also obtained P.G. Diploma in IPR from the Indian Society of International Law, New Delhi. He has qualified UGC – NET examination and has been awarded ICSSR – Doctoral Fellowship. He has published six-plus articles and presented 9 plus papers in national and international seminars/conferences. He participated in several workshops on research methodology and teaching and learning.*

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# **FROM BRIDE OF GOD TO MARGINALIZED WORKER: THE SHIFT IN THE DEVADASI SYSTEM**

AUTHORED BY - ALISHA

*“As divine dancer and harbinger of auspiciousness, the devadasi was the devotee’s conduit to God. ... They were the women of pride.”*

**Lakshmi Vishwanathan,**

## **Abstract**

The Devadasi system, rooted in the Sanskrit words *Deva* (“god”) and *Dasi* (“female servant”), began as a sacred ritual in early medieval India (6th–13th centuries CE), when prepubescent girls were ceremonially “married” to temple deities. They served as devout dancers, musicians, and ritual attendants often enjoying property rights, royal patronage, literacy, and an esteemed social standing. Over time, with the decline of temple wealth and shifting power dynamics especially under Islamic invasions and later British colonial rule the institution degraded. Many Devadasis became entrapped in ritualized sexual obligations to priests and affluent patrons, their religious roles overshadowed by exploitation. By the 19th and early 20th centuries, reformers and colonial officials classified the practice as temple-endorsed prostitution, leading to its legal prohibition via acts such as the Bombay (1934), Madras (1947), Karnataka (1982), Andhra Pradesh (1988), and Maharashtra (2005) laws. Despite these bans, the Devadasi tradition persists covertly in some regions, fueled by poverty, caste-based inequity, superstition, and weak enforcement. Today, many former Devadasis, largely from Dalit communities, survive in marginalized conditions, struggling with poverty, stigma, health risks, and lost cultural identity. Civil society organizations like MASS continue working for their rehabilitation and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Devadasis, History, Historical Background, Origin, Social Stigma, Types of Devadasis

## I INTRODUCTION

The term Devadasi comes from Sanskrit *Deva* (“god”) + *Dasi* (“servant”), likely Sanskritizing the tamil word *tevaratiyal* literally “servant of the deity” (*tevaratiyal* → *tevataci*). References to temple dancers appear in early literature, the *Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa and the Tamil epic *Silappatikāram* from as early as the 3rd–6th century CE, with full-fledged institutionalization by the 6th century in Tamilakam. Devadasis were unmarried women ritually dedicated to gods, trained as dancers and musicians, and integral to temple rituals fanning deities, performing *aartis*, singing, and participating in sanctified processions.<sup>1</sup> They were considered earthly *apsaras*, and their presence in temple life bestowed auspicious sanctity. Between the 6th and 13th centuries, Devadasis held high social status under royal patronage, with temple records in places like Thanjavur and Orissa documenting hundreds of dancers supported by land grants, wealth, and property rights rare for women at the time.<sup>2</sup> Within the Chola Empire, they were known as *Devar Adigalar*, and inscriptions note daily retinues of dancers, gurus, and musical orchestras at major temples. As temple patronage diminished after medieval periods (e.g., due to invasions and changing politics), Devadasis sought new livelihood through patronage that often blurred into financial or sexual dependence. Under colonial rule the system became stigmatized branded “temple prostitution,” subjected to social stigma, registration laws, and medical inspections. The Devadasi ritual called *pottukattu* included dedication ceremonies akin to marriage, followed by initiation rites such as dance training, *Gejje Puja*, and *Arangetram*, establishing them as temple servants and consecrated performers. Their dance traditions *sadira*, *dasiattam* evolved into classical forms, most notably Bharatanatyam, as Brahmin women began performing in secular and concert contexts. A series of legal reforms Madras Act (1947), Bombay Act (1934), Karnataka (1982), Andhra Pradesh (1988), and Maharashtra (2006) formally outlawed temple dedication and granted Devadasis rights to marry and inherit. Despite legal bans, clandestine continuation persists in some rural areas, particularly where caste-based poverty and superstition support ongoing practices. However, their artistic legacy survives, with classical dances performed globally, and current efforts focus on dignified recognition, survivor rehabilitation, and revival of cultural heritage.

### a) *Farquhar on Temple Courtesans*

James G. Farquhar observed that grand Hindu temples aspired to recreate a divine realm

<sup>1</sup> Saskia C. Kersenboom, “*Nityasumangali*” 125 (Motilal Banarsidass Publications, New Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2015).

<sup>2</sup> S Jeevanandam, “*Devdasis in South India: A Journey from sacred to a Profane Spaces*” 234 (Gyan Books, New Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2017).

on Earth. To achieve this, they employed temple dancers *apsaras* on Earth who performed devotional songs and dances. These dancers, later known as Devadasis, were deeply devoted to the deity but also offered their favors to temple worshippers. They performed both inside the temple during rituals and outside during deity processions through town.

**b) Thurston on “Oldest Profession**

Edgar Thurston described Devadasis as temple-linked dancers in Tamil regions who earned a living through dance and music. Yet he starkly referenced them as engaged in what he called “the oldest profession in the world” reflecting colonial-era stigmatizing attitudes.

**c) Monier Williams on Divine Brides**

Sir Monier Monier-Williams, in *Religious Thought and Life in India*, portrayed Devadasis as women ritually “wedded to the god.” These “god’s slaves” lived in perpetual servitude devoted entirely to dance before the deity but were also exploited by temple priests, becoming entangled in temple sexual economies. Over the centuries, while some devadasis preserved their ritual purity, others faced exploitation by priests and wealthy patrons, their sacred service torn into a form of sanctioned prostitution.

Nonetheless, most historians believed devadasis as the female individuals who were married to deities and then further devoted their lives in service on the deity and the temple from a young age.

## II THEORIES ON THE ORIGINS OF THE DEVADASI SYSTEM

**a) Occupation and Mother-Goddess (Theogamy) Theory**

This theory argues that the practice of dedicating girls to temples is part of a universal pattern known as **theogamy** ritual marriages between humans and deities. Influential scholars like James Frazer linked this to worship of a Mother Goddess, through whom women assumed divine status and performed sacred services in temples. This practice mirrors similar customs in ancient Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, and Babylonia, where women were dedicated to goddesses like Isis, Aphrodite, and Ishtar.<sup>3</sup>

**b) Religious-Tradition and Sanskritization Theory**

As temple-centered goddess traditions became integrated into Brahmanical Hinduism,

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. K. Sadasivan, “*Devadasi System in Medieval Tamilnadu*” 200 (Agni Publication, Boston, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2017).

they underwent a two-fold transformation: mythologies were rewritten, elevating male deities, and concepts such as ritual purity and caste-based pollution were introduced. This **Sanskritization** process shifted religious power from female-centered matriarchies toward patriarchal control, diminishing the autonomy of temple women.

**c) Matriarchy-to-Patriarchy, Lineage, and Tradition**

The system reflects a broader societal transition from matriarchal to patriarchal frameworks where early female-focused spiritual roles gradually gave way to male-dominated structures. The Devadasi institution maintained lineage continuity and religious traditions across generations, but over time, women's roles became increasingly ceremonial and subordinate.<sup>4</sup>

**d) Additional Theories**

These include the occupation theory (temple function became hereditary), racial theory (cultural influx influencing customs), and political or selfless-citizen theory (dedication as an act of devotion or status). Though less dominant, they highlight dimensions of caste, society, and religious duty in explaining why the system emerged and endured.

### **III MYTH OF RENUKA AND THE ORIGIN OF DEVADASI RITUAL**

Renuka (later known as Yellamma) was the devoted wife of sage Jamadagni and mother of Parashurama. Celebrated for her chastity, she once used her yogic power to carry water in a freshly-molded pot. But upon witnessing a Gandharva couple bathing, she lost her spiritual focus; the pot cracked, triggering her husband's fury. Jealous of her "infidelity," Jamadagni commanded his son to behead her. Only Parashurama complied. Pleased, the sage offered a boon; Parashurama asked for his mother's revival—so Jamadagni attached the head of a lower-caste woman (Matangi or Mang) to Renuka's body. She thus became Yellamma (meaning "Mother of All"). Post-resurrection, Renuka was both Brahmin and non-Brahmin her body and spirit rearranged which reflected a social and ritual liminality. Jamadagni decreed that young girls be ritually dedicated (as Devadasis or Yellamma's servants) and would thereafter see every man as Parashurama, compelled to serve him sexually without claiming marriage or permanent bonds. They were also expected to beg in Yellamma's name on certain days. This myth placed consent-trained unmarried girls into ritual service, expected to perform

<sup>4</sup> Dr. K. Jamanadas, "*Devadasis: Ancient and Modern*" 233 (Kalpaz Publications, New Delhi, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 2007).

sexually in the name of divine duty.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the religious dedication morphed into ritualized sexual servitude, integrated into temple and folk practices of the Yellamma cult. The Yellamma cult, deeply rooted in lower-caste, pastoral regions of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, institutionalized this tradition, blending sacred worship, begging rituals (*jogava*), and temple dancing under divine sanction. Renuka's mythological fate beheaded, revived, and assigned to serve without autonomy reflects historical gender and caste hierarchies that propelled the transition from temple priestess to exploited ritual performer. The act of attaching a low-caste head to a high-caste body symbolized the Sanskritization process, whereby indigenous goddess traditions were absorbed into Brahmanical practices, containing both reverence and control. Today, the myth remains alive in Yellamma and Renuka temples (eg. Saundatti, Chandragutti). Annual festivals including full-moon *jogava* begging continue practices rooted in this tale. Though legal statutes have outlawed the Devadasi system, clandestine continuations persist, especially under the protective religious veil of Yellamma worship in rural areas.<sup>6</sup> The Renuka myth provides sacred backing for ritual dedication of young girls ushering them into service that includes sexual exploitation disguised as divine duty. The transformation in the myth from pure wife to liminal goddess mirrors how religious practices evolved from spiritual service to exploitation. The Yellamma cult, with its active cases of temple dedication and ritual practices, demonstrates the myth's continued impact on both belief and social behaviors.

#### IV ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Devadasi system, rooted in religious practice, was originally conceived as a sacred tradition of dedicating girls to temples for lifelong service to the deity. The practice, known in Tamil as *Pottu Kattudal*, symbolized a spiritual "marriage" of the girl to the temple deity, especially in Shaivite and Vaishnavite traditions. This dedication was not widespread among all social groups but was largely limited to specific communities with hereditary ties to temple service.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Devdasis in South India: A Journey from sacred to a Profane Spaces" (Gyan Books, Ashok Vihar, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Lakshmi Vishwanathan, "Women of Pride - The Devadasi Heritage" 122 (Roli Books, New Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Prasad, A.K., "Devadasi System in Ancient India (A Study of Temple Dancing Girls of South India)" 321 (H.K. Publishers, Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1991).

While the practice likely began as early as the 3rd century CE, as suggested in Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* and later confirmed through inscriptions and literary works, it gained institutional maturity during the Chola period (9th–13th century CE). Epigraphical records from this era, including those under Rajaraja Chola I, indicate that hundreds of Devadasis (devaradiyals) were officially employed at major temples like Thanjavur’s Brihadeeswarar Temple. These women were well-regarded ritual specialists, dancers, and musicians, often receiving royal patronage, land grants, titles like *Talaikkoli*, and economic privileges. The Devadasis were central to preserving classical art forms like Bharatanatyam and sacred music. Their arangetram (debut performance) was often a royal affair, highlighting their cultural prestige. They were not merely entertainers but integral to temple rituals, festivals, and processions, playing a key role in spiritual and aesthetic expression.

Temples such as Tiruchendur, Thiruvaidaimarudur, and Suchindram reveal that Devadasis even donated structures (like theatres and mandapas), reinforcing their elevated status. The Bhakti movement (6th–9th century CE) provided fertile ground for the institutionalization of the Devadasi system. Saints like the Alvars and Nayanmars emphasized intense, personal devotion, often imagining themselves as female lovers of the divine. This theological sentiment aligned with the Devadasi’s ritual function as a “bride of God.” The temple-centric religiosity of this era, combined with royal patronage and temple expansion, transformed Devadasis into both religious and cultural custodians.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to later degeneration, early Devadasis enjoyed economic independence and social dignity. They were educated in music, dance, and sometimes even administration, and when they aged, they often moved into roles like weaving and temple recordkeeping, as noted by Kautilya (Arthashastra). Scholars like Saletore and Sharma highlight that these women were part of a regulated, respected class, not subject to moral stigma in their early institutional context.

Though commonly referred to as *Devadasis* (Sanskrit “servants of God”), the practice varied regionally:

- Tamil Nadu: *Devadasi*, *Devaradiyar*
- Andhra Pradesh: *Basavi*, *Sani*

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<sup>8</sup> Saskia C. Kersenboom, “*Nityasumangali*” 35 (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2016).

- Karnataka: *Jogati, Toyati*
- Western India: *Bhavin, Bahavini*
- Kerala (Travancore): *Kudidassi, Devadasikkal*

Each variant shared a similar devotional origin, but ritual roles, caste affiliations, and later degeneration differed based on local politics and religious influences. In its original conception, the Devadasi system was a sacred, respected institution closely linked to the temple economy, artistic heritage, and religious life of early and medieval South India. These women were ritual specialists, performers, and patrons with legal and economic rights, enjoying state patronage and temple prestige. However, over time especially post-13th century the system gradually eroded into exploitative practices, diverging from its ritualistic roots. Understanding this transformation requires analyzing not only religious texts and epigraphs but also changing political, economic, and patriarchal dynamics that altered the Devadasi's position in Indian society.<sup>9</sup>

## V CATEGORICAL CLASSIFICATION OF DEVADASIS: A SOCIO RELIGIOUS LENS

The division of Devadasis into seven distinct categories *Dutta, Hruta, Bikrita, Bhrutya, Bhakta, Alankara, and Gopika or Rudraganika* reflects the nuanced ways in which women were inducted into the temple system and how their origin, agency, and function shaped their ritual and social status. These categories weren't just administrative distinctions but carried significant implications for caste, consent, livelihood, and devotion.<sup>10</sup>

### a) **Dutta Devadasi**

"Given", When a sacred or elite man, often a Brahmin or upper-caste devotee, formally offered his daughter to a temple, she was termed a *Dutta Devadasi*. This category represented voluntary and sanctioned dedication, often associated with ritual purity, higher social standing, and religious legitimacy. These women often received temple patronage and were trained in dance, music, and rituals from a young age.

### b) **Hruta Devadasi**

"Kidnapped", This term indicates the coercive capture or abduction of a woman

<sup>9</sup> Jogan Shankar, "*Devadasi Cult: A Sociological Analysis*" 56 (Ashish Publishing House, Original University of Michigan 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Kali Prasad Goswami, "*Devadasi Dancing Damsel*" 235 (APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1999).

who was then absorbed into temple service. This form raises ethical and historical concerns, showing that not all Devadasi dedications were consensual or religiously sanctioned. *Hruta Devadasis* likely held a lower ritual status, and their presence illustrates how exploitation and coercion infiltrated sacred institutions, especially in periods of social instability.

**c) Bikrita Devadasi**

"Sold", These were women sold into temple service, typically by poor families or intermediaries, and handed over to priests or temple administrators. This represents a commercialization of dedication, where economic desperation or exploitation drove women into a supposedly sacred role. *Bikrita Devadasis* expose the intersection of caste, class, and gender-based vulnerabilities within the system.<sup>11</sup>

**d) Bhrutya Devadasi**

"Servant", or "Employee", Women who voluntarily joined temple service out of personal will or for livelihood were categorized as *Bhrutya*. These women may not have been ritually "married" to the deity but engaged in temple-related tasks. Their designation reflects a labour-based relationship, where devotion blended with employment and economic necessity.

**e) Bhakta Devadasi**

"Devotee", This group includes women who offered themselves purely out of spiritual devotion, without external compulsion or economic transaction. They viewed their service as a religious calling. *Bhakta Devadasis* may have held higher ritual respect and were often deeply involved in the aesthetic and spiritual fabric of temple worship.<sup>12</sup>

**f) Alankara Devadasi**

"Adorned", or "Ornamented", These women were formally offered to the deity with full ceremony, often after achieving expertise in classical dance, music, or ritual performance. The gifting of ornaments signified both their spiritual value and social prestige. They often led important performances and had recognized public roles, symbolizing the institutional honor bestowed on accomplished Devadasis.

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<sup>11</sup> Tanaya Wageshwari, available at: <https://ijlr.iledu.in/devadasi-system-in-india-historical-background-supreme-court-stances-on-it/> (last visited on 21 June, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> K. A. Geetha, available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2430&context=jiws> (last visited on 21 June, 2025).

**g) Gopika / Rudraganika**

“Performers”, This category includes those Devadasis who were formally employed by temples for their artistic services especially dance and music. The term *Rudraganika* (servants of Shiva) or *Gopika* (companions of Krishna) implies ritual and aesthetic intimacy with the deity. These Devadasis received fixed remuneration and land grants, highlighting their functional value in temple festivals and daily rituals.

These categories demonstrate the dual nature of the Devadasi system sacred dedication on one hand, and social stratification and economic exploitation on the other. The presence of Hruta and Bikrita categories signals how sacred institutions absorbed coercive practices, especially over time, and how patriarchal control transformed voluntary devotion into forced labor. The Bhakta, Alankara, and Gopika types reflect the glorified ritual and artistic traditions sustained by the system, showcasing the contributions of Devadasis to Indian classical arts. Economically, women across categories often received remuneration, land, or temple support, which allowed a certain degree of autonomy though this varied greatly by region and period. The classification of Devadasis into seven types captures the complexity of the institution, encompassing ritual purity, personal agency, exploitation, and professional artistry. While the origins of some Devadasis were voluntary and spiritual, others emerged from systemic gendered oppression and social inequalities. This spectrum of categories is critical for understanding how the Devadasi system evolved from sacred service to social stratification and eventual reform.<sup>13</sup>

#### **IV ANALYSIS: WHY THE DEVADASI SYSTEM STILL EXISTS IN INDIA**

Despite legal prohibitions and decades of reform, the Devadasi system continues to persist in certain regions of India, especially in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. This persistence is rooted in a complex interplay of caste, poverty, religion, patriarchy, and governance failures, making eradication challenging.<sup>14</sup>

**a) Caste Domination and Social Hierarchy**

The practice survives largely among Dalit and marginalized communities,

<sup>13</sup> Altekar, “*History of Ancient India*” (Motilal Banarsidass, 120 (New Delhi, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn.,1988).

<sup>14</sup> Balasubramanian, “*The Status of Women in Tamilnadu during Sangam Age*” 130 (Narumalarp Patippakam, Madras, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 1976).

particularly among castes historically excluded from land ownership, education, and upper-caste patronage. In such contexts, religious dedication becomes a tool for caste-endorsed survival. Dedicating a daughter to a deity is viewed not only as ritual obligation but as a source of limited power and symbolic upliftment within their caste group. The community-wide involvement in dedications reinforces its continuity.

**b) Religious Beliefs and Superstition**

Many families continue to believe that offering a girl to the deity ensures divine blessings, fertility, or protection from curses and misfortunes. This belief system is often manipulated by local priests or intermediaries who ritualize dedications during village festivals. Religion becomes a justification for what is essentially a patriarchal and exploitative custom masked under sacred tradition.

**c) Poor Enforcement of Laws**

Although laws such as the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982 and Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1988 exist, enforcement is weak. Police and local administrators often ignore the practice due to complicity, lack of political will, or fear of backlash from influential community leaders. Rehabilitation schemes remain underfunded or are bogged down by bureaucratic delays and corruption.<sup>15</sup>

**d) Poverty and Economic Insecurity**

Most Devadasi families live in extreme poverty. Dedicating a daughter becomes a perceived economic strategy, where she may later earn through ritual duties, dancing, or even through prostitution, which sadly becomes institutionalized. With no land, no education, and no employment, girls are often sacrificed to sustain the family's survival. Poverty here acts as a structural enabler of bonded cultural exploitation.<sup>16</sup>

**e) Patriarchy and Gender-Based Control**

The system is deeply entrenched in patriarchal control over female sexuality and agency. Girls are seen as objects to be offered stripped of agency in the name of family honor and divine duty. Once dedicated, a Devadasi has no right to marry, and her body becomes

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<sup>15</sup> Devdasi, available at: [https://childrenofindia.in/what-is-devadasi-system-in-india/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://childrenofindia.in/what-is-devadasi-system-in-india/?utm_source=chatgpt.com). (last visited on 26 June,2025).

<sup>16</sup> Dayalan, D, "Early Temples of Tamilnadu: Their Role in Socio-Economic Life" (Harman Publishing House, New Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1992).

socially available, often to upper-caste men or local patrons. This reflects how patriarchal norms fuse with caste and religious beliefs to perpetuate exploitation.

**f) Lack of Awareness and Education**

In many villages where the practice thrives, educational access is poor, especially for girls. Many families are not even aware that the practice is illegal, or they see it as culturally valid and socially sanctioned. The absence of comprehensive awareness campaigns and intergenerational normalization of the practice leads to its silent continuation.

The estimated number of Devadasis varies widely from around 48,000 (NCW, 2011) to 450,000 (Sampark Report, ILO, 2015). This wide gap highlights the hidden nature of the practice, where many women live dual identities ritual performers by day, sexual workers by necessity. The lack of consistent, credible data is a major obstacle to policy intervention. The Devadasi system continues not because of religion alone but due to the entrenched intersection of caste, poverty, patriarchy, superstition, and failed governance. The solution requires a holistic approach strong legal enforcement, grassroots awareness, educational access, economic empowerment of vulnerable communities, and de-linking religious identity from exploitation. Until the system of structural marginalization is dismantled, the Devadasi tradition, though illegal, will continue in clandestine forms.

## **V DEVADASI SYSTEM LAWS & OFFENCES: A LEGAL ANALYSIS**

The Devadasi system, though abolished legally, continues to exist covertly, particularly in parts of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Recognizing its exploitative nature especially towards young girls from marginalized castes several state and national laws have been enacted over the decades to criminalize and prevent the practice. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy a pioneering physician and politician, she introduced the anti-Devadasi resolution in the Madras Legislative Council in 1930. Her efforts culminated in the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947, effectively abolishing the practice in the Madras Presidency. Moovalur Ramamirtham A staunch advocate and member of the Self-Respect Movement led by Periyar, she campaigned tirelessly alongside Reddy to abolish the system in Tamil Nadu. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, through his social reform movement, Periyar strongly denounced the Devadasi tradition as an exploitative practice that degraded women, providing ideological and activist support. Bhagya Reddy Varma, a reformer from Hyderabad, he worked to abolish the Jogini/Devadasi systems in the former Hyderabad State

and championed Dalit rights.<sup>17</sup>

## **A. Legislative Measures**

### **a) *Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, 1934***

One of the earliest legal efforts to combat the Devadasi system. Criminalized the dedication of women to temples and associated forms of ritual exploitation. Made it an offense for guardians or priests to dedicate girls.<sup>18</sup>

### **b) *Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947***

Outlawed the custom of dedicating girls to deities in Tamil Nadu. Recognized such dedication as a form of sexual exploitation, and declared it illegal. This Act inspired similar legislation in other states.<sup>19</sup>

### **c) *Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982***

Specifically prohibits dedication of girls as Devadasis in Karnataka. Offenders including parents, temple priests, and patrons can be punished with imprisonment up to 5 years and/or fines. Recognizes Devadasis as victims and provides for their rehabilitation.<sup>20</sup>

### **d) *Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1988***

Mirrors the Karnataka Act in structure and purpose. Emphasizes prohibition of ceremonies that dedicate girls to temples. Provides for punishment of temple authorities or individuals supporting the practice.<sup>21</sup>

### **e) *Maharashtra Devadasi (Abolition of Dedication) Act, 2006***

Reinforces earlier legal bans and explicitly abolishes any remaining dedications. Focuses on rehabilitation, compensation, and victim assistance. Recognizes the social and caste-based coercion behind such dedications.<sup>22</sup>

## **B. National Laws**

### **a) *Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015***

Any act of dedicating a minor girl to temple service or prostitution is deemed abuse or trafficking under this Act. Protects children from abandonment, sexual abuse, or being forced into illicit rituals. Empowers Child Welfare Committees to intervene and rescue victims.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dikshitar, V. R. Ramachandra, "Hindu Administrative Institutions" 200 (Pagination, University of Madras, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1929).

<sup>18</sup> Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, 1934 (Act 10 no 1934).

<sup>19</sup> Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947 (Act 31 no 1947).

<sup>20</sup> Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982 (Act 1 of 1982).

<sup>21</sup> Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1988 (Act 10 of 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Maharashtra Devadasi (Abolition of Dedication) Act, 2006 (Act 33 of 2006)

<sup>23</sup> Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (Act 2 of 2015).

**b) Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA), 1956**

A central anti-trafficking law targeting **prostitution and sexual exploitation**. Sections 3–7 penalize running brothels, living off earnings of prostitution, and soliciting. Devadasi dedications leading to forced sex work may fall under this law.<sup>24</sup>

**c) Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection, and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2018**

Although still pending full enactment, it proposes comprehensive protection for trafficking victims. Includes compulsory rehabilitation, compensation, and special courts. Devadasis may qualify as trafficking victims under this broader legal vision.<sup>25</sup>

### **C. Judicial Interventions**

In *S.L. Foundation v. Union of India & Ors.*<sup>26</sup>, Filed by a Kerala-based NGO, the petition highlighted the continued existence of the Devadasi system in parts of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. The Supreme Court observed that the practice violated Articles 14, 15, 21, and 23 of the Constitution. The Court directed all states to, enforce anti-dedication laws strictly, conduct surveys to identify Devadasis, implement rehabilitation schemes and report compliance. Recognized that the system amounts to systematic exploitation of Dalit and backward-caste women. In *Vijayalakshmi v. State of Karnataka & Ors.*<sup>27</sup> Karnataka High Court PIL filed seeking directions for proper enforcement of the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982. Court directed Identification of Devadasis still trapped in the system, Effective implementation of rehabilitation packages. It also required the government to file annual compliance reports. *G. Bhuvaneshwari v. State of Andhra Pradesh*,<sup>28</sup> the court emphasized that mere legislation is not enough.

Directed authorities to ensure that temples and religious heads do not encourage dedications. Also ruled that minors being dedicated would be treated as victims of human trafficking under the JJ Act and ITPA. In *National Forum for Women v. Union of India*,<sup>29</sup> petition under Article 32 (Supreme Court, Ongoing PIL addressing the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation funds and schemes across Maharashtra and Karnataka. Requested a centralized database of Devadasis, the Court issued show cause notices to State Women and Child Departments. Legal Precedents

<sup>24</sup> Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA), 1956 (Act 2 of 1956).

<sup>25</sup> Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection, and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2018

<sup>26</sup> *S.L. Foundation v. Union of India & Ors.*, AIR W.P., (2014) 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Vijayalakshmi v. State of Karnataka & Ors.*, AIR W.P., (2006) 6679.

<sup>28</sup> *G. Bhuvaneshwari v. State of Andhra Pradesh & Ors.*, AIR W.P., (2006) 17494.

<sup>29</sup> *National Forum for Women v. Union of India & Ors.*, AIR W.P., (2004) 56.

Cited, *Kailash Satyarthi v. Union of India*,<sup>30</sup> for child protection and trafficking analogy. *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*,<sup>31</sup> Cited for women's dignity and protection from exploitation. In 2016, the Supreme Court of India, responding to a petition by Kerala-based NGO *S.L. Foundation*, directed all states to strictly implement anti-Devadasi laws, provide rehabilitation, and treat dedicated women as victims of systemic abuse. In *Bandarupalli Rajeswari v. State of Andhra Pradesh*<sup>32</sup> In a PIL, the court highlighted systemic underlying factors like caste oppression, trafficking, and lack of rehabilitation post-dedication. It held that identifying Devadasi-related practices as matters of public order resulted in insufficient, fragmented legal response.

- The Court acknowledged the failure of enforcement and societal complicity, ordering state accountability and review.
- In March 2023, the Karnataka High Court again pulled up the State Government for failing to take action on identified Devadasis, despite Supreme Court orders.
- The court observed that mere enactment of laws is insufficient without proper implementation and community-level outreach.
- The court called for inter-departmental coordination, especially among police, social welfare, and women and child development departments.

Poor enforcement, especially in rural areas, allows the practice to continue under religious garb. Lack of awareness among Devadasi communities about their rights and the illegality of the practice. Corruption and caste bias among officials sometimes prevent prompt rescue or registration of offenses. Rehabilitation remains inadequate, with many Devadasis lacking access to housing, healthcare, and livelihood options. While the legal framework to prohibit the Devadasi system is comprehensive, its enforcement remains inconsistent. The root causes caste oppression, poverty, and religious manipulation must be tackled alongside legal efforts. Successful eradication requires a multi-pronged approach involving legal enforcement, grassroots education, community engagement, and dignified rehabilitation of victims.

#### **D. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

In February 2016, the Supreme Court condemned continuing Devadasi dedications, calling them an “evil” and mandated states (especially *Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra*) to enforce relevant laws (Immoral Traffic Act). It specifically directed the Chief

<sup>30</sup> *Kailash Satyarthi v. Union of India*, AIR W.P., (2013)7.

<sup>31</sup> *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, AIR (1997) 6 SCC 241.

<sup>32</sup> *Bandarupalli Rajeswari v. State of Andhra Pradesh*. W. P., (2016) 27572.

Secretary of Karnataka to prevent ceremonies in Devanagari district. Centre fined for inaction (2015) in 2015, the Court fined the Union government ₹25,000 for failing to file affidavits in response to PILs alleging forced dedication of women as Devadasis. NHRC Suo Motu notices (2022). In October 2022, NHRC issued notices to multiple States (*Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Kerala*) and the Centre, seeking responses within six weeks about reported Devadasi practices. On Jan 28, 2025, Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah warned that if any Devadasi practices are found in the state, he will take “strict action” against the responsible police officers and district officials (SPs and DCs).<sup>33</sup>

During a state-level committee meeting, he also emphasized the need for updated rehabilitation efforts and a scientific survey of Devadasi communities. He instructed the Chief Secretary to develop a detailed, district-wise rehabilitation plan. the Devadasi system has persisted in culturally sanctioned forms, particularly in districts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. For instance, estimates from the National Commission for Women and state surveys indicate around 22,941 Devadasis in Karnataka and 16,624 in Andhra Pradesh, while Maharashtra’s maintenance-allowance scheme recognized 2,479 Devadasis.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, earlier assessments by Anti-Slavery International in 2007 highlighted serious health and social consequences in Andhra Pradesh, including alcoholism (87%), sexually transmitted infections (40%), body pain (25%), menstrual disorders (35%), and some HIV cases. Despite robust legal frameworks, weak enforcement, social stigma, poverty, and family complicity sustain the exploitation often funneling young girls into prostitution under temple-dedication pretexts.

## VI THE REGIONAL DIVERSITY OF DEVADASI NAMES ACROSS INDIA:

Across India's diverse cultural landscape, the Devadasi tradition was known by varied terms reflecting local languages and temple customs. In Tamil Nadu, they were called *tevataci*, *tevaratiyar*, *patiyilar*, *talicceri pendukal*, *tevanar makal*, *cottikal*, *atikalmar*, *manikkattar*, *kanikaiyar*, *emperumanatiyar*, and *koyil pinakkal*. In Kerala, names included *tevidicchi*, *nangaimar*, *kudikkari*, *muraikkari*, *kootachi*, *koothichi*, and *attakkari*; in Karnataka, they were known as *suleyar* (or *sule*), *poti*, *basavi*, and *jogtis*; in Andhra Pradesh, *sanis* and *bhogam*; in

<sup>33</sup> The Hindu Bureau, available at: [https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/rehabilitate-devadasis-and-bring-them-to-the-mainstream-of-society-state-govturged/article68686514.ece?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/rehabilitate-devadasis-and-bring-them-to-the-mainstream-of-society-state-govturged/article68686514.ece?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (last visited on 3 July, 2025).

<sup>34</sup> S. Jeevanandam and Rekha Pande, “Devadāsīs and Gift Giving in Medieval South India” 244 (Zenith International, New Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2012).

Odisha, *darikas*, *patras*, and *maharis*; in Assam, *kurmapus* and *kudipus*; and among Konkani and Marathi speakers as *bhavin* and *kalavant*. Even within the Bombay Presidency, each temple had its own term. These variations underscore how, while unified by the shared tradition of temple dedication and dance, Devadasi communities were deeply rooted in their regional tongues and societal norms.<sup>35</sup>

## VII PROSTITUTION IN THE GARB OF RELIGION: THE DEVADASI SYSTEM EXPOSED

Around 867 CE, the Arab traveler Abū Zayd al-Ḥasan reported that a woman would rent a small room in a public area. She'd hang a curtain at its entrance and wait for visitors. She offered her services at a set price and then handed over her earnings to the temple priest, who used the money to support the temple's activities. The close connection between devadāsīs and the state becomes evident in later centuries. According to the *Prabandha Chintāmaṇi* a text compiled by Merutuṅga King Siddharāj of Gujarat (r. 1094–1143) taxed pilgrims traveling to the Somnātha temple. This temple, famously sacked by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1026, employed around five hundred devadāsīs who performed music and dance throughout the day and night.<sup>36</sup> Over time, rulers, priests, and the elite became deeply intertwined in this system, mutually reinforcing its structure. For the devadāsīs themselves, there were significant economic and social advantages: they received substantial income, enjoyed a respected role, and had stable livelihoods. However, as the centuries passed, the respect and sacredness once associated with devadāsīs began to erode. Many shifted from being primarily temple servants to becoming the lovers of rulers. Their relationships or at times exploitation involved not only kings and priests but also members of the nobility and ordinary citizens. Initially, members of royalty and male elites, generally approved by priests, were permitted to engage sexually with devadāsīs. This marked a substantial transformation from their earlier roles as purely religious performers to more intimate and secular companions of the powerful.

## VIII CONCLUSION

The devadāsī system young women ceremonially “married” to temple deities held a deeply significant role in early Tamil Nādu and broader South Indian culture. Though explicit

<sup>35</sup> S. Jeevanandam and Rekha Pande, “*Changing Status of Devadasis in India*” 188 (Zenith International, New Delh, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Eve Rebecca Parker, “Theologising with the Sacred 'Prostitutes' of South India” 122 (Brill, Netherlands, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 2021).

erotic sculptures were rare on temple walls—likely due to strong orthodox opposition to such imagery—the absence of overt art does not diminish the religious and cultural importance of these women. Ancient texts and inscriptions trace them back to at least the 5th–6th centuries CE among the Pallavas and Pandyas, with more extensive records from the Chola era (11th–13th CE), where royal endowments provided land and prestige to devadāsīs. They performed puja rituals, danced, sang, and sometimes served as care takers roles that elevated them above ordinary women. However, hypocrisy among religious figures also existed, some ascetics, despite preaching chastity and renunciation, led indulgent lives. Pointing out this dissonance helped justify a more permissive view of devadāsīs’ temple roles challenging rigid orthodox norms. Over time, the devadāsī class evolved into a distinct social group or subcaste often differentiated by task and caste, upper-caste devadāsīs performed high rituals and ceremonies, while lower-caste women handled support roles; yet all remained devoted to their “divine husband”. With the rise of Sanskritization and the influence of male-dominated religious trends, the status of devadāsīs gradually shifted from independent, creative temple servants to politically leveraged figures sometimes appropriated by kings, priests, and local elites. Their children, born from such relationships, were often dedicated back to the temple, perpetuating a cycle of temple-affiliated prostitution.

Geographically, while the devadāsī practice was most pronounced in South India especially in Tamil Nādu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala it also existed elsewhere, in Orissa (Puri), Gujarat, Banaras, Bombay, Goa, Agra, Assam, and Kashmir around the 8th century AD. The British colonial era introduced harsh moral scrutiny and legal measures. Victorian sensibilities labeled devadāsīs as prostitutes; they were criminalized and marginalized. The crafting of legal frameworks such as the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act (1934) and the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act (1947), among others was aimed at ending dedication practices. While offering them marriage rights and property protections, these laws also drove many devadāsīs underground, pushing the custom into illicit spaces.