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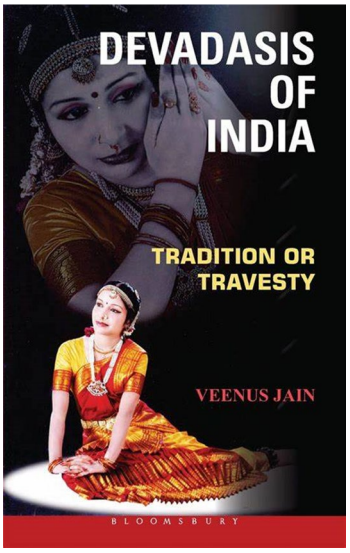

Veenus Jain

Devadasis of India: Tradition or Travesty

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Prostitution has historically been a topic of social and ethical debate, arising from the intersections of poverty, gender inequality, and systemic exploitation. Although adult prostitution prompts essential discussions regarding its legacy, legality, and human rights, the issue of child prostitution presents an even more alarming and deeply unsettling reality. Compared to adults, children are more vulnerable to these conditions and cannot provide informed consent, making their involvement in sex work a form of abuse and exploitation. Child prostitution is a significant issue today, with its prevalence steadily increasing as young girls are exploited as sex workers. Numerous avenues contribute to the exploitation of young girls. Currently, children are victimised due to human trafficking, certain religious practices, strict moral codes, and displacement caused by climate change. One example of a religious ritual is the Devadasi tradition. This sacred practice involves dedicating girls as young as 9- or 10-year-olds to marry a deity or to serve in the temple for their entire lives. Their lifelong commitment prevents them from marrying anyone else. This system has particularly risen in the southern regions of India, where many families from lower socio-economic backgrounds dedicate their daughters to the temple. The tradition originated in the third century CE as a religious obligation to serve deities within the temple through activities such as singing and dancing. However, over time, it has transformed into a form of abuse and exploitation, with temple priests taking advantage of the young girls for their own physical desires. This longstanding religious custom has led to exploitation, and even today, many young girls continue to suffer as a result of this practice. There is a significant deficit in awareness regarding this current system. Numerous girls and women are enduring hardship because of these revered practices. Although the pain and suffering experienced by these girls are acknowledged, and laws have been put in place to eliminate this system, yet due to a lack of proper oversight, there has been minimal change. Several scholars and modern authors have sought to bring attention to the situations surrounding this form of sexual abuse through their writings.

Veenus Jain has authored multiple books on ancient Indian history and serves on the editorial board of several referenced and indexed international and national journals. Having examined the Devadasi system in great depth and intrigue, Jain brings forth her observations in her book, *Devadasis of India: Tradition or Travesty,* published in 2021. The book explores the Devadasi tradition, its origins, underlying beliefs, evolution, associated ceremonies, functions, activities, paramours, sexuality, historical survey, statistical analysis, and the preventive measures of this system. The book is divided into nine sections, including an introduction. The key research question of this book is whether this religious practice is a tradition or a travesty. She also discusses the existing literature that centres on dancing girls, sex work, and women temple slaves.

In the introductory chapter, Jain discusses the origin, beliefs, and development of the Devadasi system. According to ancient Indian historical records, it is evident that following the decline of the Indus Valley civilisation, the Devadasi system emerged as a religious institution with rituals encompassing singing, dancing, and worship services (3). The first chapter examines how these religious practices were integrated into the Devadasi system and what led ordinary individuals to be captivated by the belief that these practices would bring wealth and prosperity. The second chapter, entitled 'Historical Survey,' outlines the evolution and origins of the Devadasi system. Jain notes that this system dates back 1700 years to the third century CE and became widespread in the sixth century CE. Jain attests to the suggested time frame by making references to historical accounts from kings and travellers who encountered the custom. This chapter also examines the Devadasi tradition in both Central and South India. She notes that the practice was more prevalent in southern regions like Madras, Kerala, and Karnataka, and the earliest mention of a temple-dedicated dancing girl is found in an inscription from Tamil Nadu. Finally, in this chapter, Jain addresses a critical question: 'What is the true origin of the Devadasi tradition, and sacred prostitution?' (25). These opening chapters lay the foundation for understanding the Devadasi system as a complex institution. Readers of these chapters will understand the origins of this religious practice.

Chapter Three, titled 'Ceremonies,' examines the marriage rituals and the commitment of these young girls to the deity as they become Devadasis for life. Jain identified two categories of marriage ceremonies: the *muttu kattuwadi* (which occurs before puberty) and the deflowering ritual known as *Uditumbuvadi* (which takes place after puberty). While it is evident from the Jain text that these practices are now illegal and prohibited, some priests engage in these practices in secrecy, thereby ensuring the continuity of the practices. The initiation ceremony (dedication to the deity) occurs on Tuesdays and Fridays (32). During the ceremony, the priest plays the primary role, tying a bead necklace around the girl's neck while chanting *Udo Yellama* and placing a *joga* (marital symbol of black beads) on her head (34). Following this, the girl is required to receive the mantra from the Devadasi's guru, known as guru dikhya. Moreover, during the 'deflowering' ceremony, on the seventh day of menstruation, she, along with other Devadasis, proceeds to a tank where they are anointed with oil and turmeric (40), and the full dedication ritual continues. Jain has offered a detailed overview of the dedication ceremonies both before and after puberty.

Chapter Four, titled 'Organizations, Functions, and Activities,' depicts the temple-based framework, social standing, and the activities conducted by Devadasis after their dedication. As noted by Jain, the Devadasis are categorised based on a hierarchical system determined by their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, Jain indicates that many inscriptions document the classification of Devadasis into various divisions and sections

according to their performative roles and caste-based status. Jain further explores the modes of payment, provision of food, and residential facilities provided to the Devadasis for their service to the temples. This section also further addresses the rituals and roles performed by the Devadasis. Some of the senior Devadasis were assigned the role of dancing instructors to other Devadasis, henceforth receiving a prestigious status in society. Being a dance instructor resulted in very high compensation, such as land and property. Jain's text also mentions that Devadasis also engaged in tasks like pounding rice and turmeric and received a portion of 30 *nalis* (farming land) (62). Following the demise of a Devadasi, her daughter or other female relative also had the right to continue the work (64). These two chapters are concerned with the stages of being a Devadasi, the roles they play while being a temple servant, and how they were compensated for their roles. Through this lens, the Devadasi stands out not just as an artist but as a societal representative carrying the burden of both temple-bound responsibilities and expressive refinements.

In the fifth chapter, 'Devadasi: Her Paramour and Status,' Jain provides information about the intricate connection between Devadasis' social status and their relationships with their paramours. Jain discusses a variety of paramours, such as husbands, who can be seen as the Devadasi's spouses as well as their lovers. Further, she examines the role of kings as paramours, in which they wed higher-status members of the upper class or Brahmin Devadasis. Jain highlights that there were temple priests both within and beyond the Devadasi system whom they met while travelling, who also acted as paramours. Ancient inscriptions document these connections with paramours of Devadasis, and Jain notes that the marriages between Devadasis and their paramours are acceptable and not frowned upon. These relationships were intricate as they were directly related to their status within the Devadasi system.

The Devadasis are often perceived as prostitutes due to their roles. However, Jain highlights that there is a significant distinction between the two; prostitutes trade sexual favours in exchange for money and gifts. However, Jain highlights that there is a significant distinction between the two; prostitutes trade sexual favours in exchange for money and gifts; however, Jain asserts that during the earlier times, there was no physical interaction between the Devadasi women and men in this case. Since Devadasis are financially supported by the temple and kings, they do not rely on their lovers for financial support (78).

In the sixth chapter entitled 'The Sexual Angel,' Jain explained sexuality by dividing it into two sections: that is, the negative attributes with specific reference to the perceived 'impurity' of the sexual act and the auspiciousness of sexual intimacy. The first section explains that sexual intercourse is an act of 'pollution,' so the Devadasis were required to refrain from it on the day of their duty in the temple (79). Furthermore, Devadasis were also prohibited from engaging in sexual relations with men from lower castes, as this would lead to punishment by the king since he was also involved with the Devadasis sexually. Additionally, some priests also assert that Devadasis had a dual position, as they are considered impure at night due to their participation in sexual activities, but 'pure' during the day.

Regarding the discussion of the auspiciousness of sex, the author highlights the revered status of the devadasis, noting that they were invited to ceremonies and weddings, where their presence was regarded as a privilege. Devadasis engaged in singing, dancing, or blessing families with whom they had sexual relationships in exchange for materialistic comforts. Moreover, wealthy men from upper castes, particularly those over 45 years of age, view deflowering a Devadasi and maintaining a permanent relationship with her as a mark of

prestige. These two chapters highlight the distinctive status of Devadasis, which exists somewhere between the divine and the profane. Jain evaluates the apathy present in the relationships and the circumstances that shape their lives. This is a powerful examination of the contradictory role of the Devadasi as both a revered performer and a sexualized individual.

In Chapter Seven, entitled 'Prevention, Reforms and Their Effectiveness,' Jain critically assesses the legislative measures and policies intended to abolish the Devadasi system. This chapter serves as a link between historical analysis and current initiatives about the practice. Jain notes that early attempts by some well-meaning Hindus to end the tradition started as early as 1868, but they failed because kings and members of society with positions of power and status supported the practice (96). Indian Penal Code's provisions intended to outlaw the practice were not very successful. Jain also highlights the numerous other laws that were put in place to outlaw the Devadasi practice, such as the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982, the Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1988, the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act of 1934, and the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947. Jain concludes this chapter with both general and specific conclusions based on historical and current assessments of the Devadasi system, highlighting the need for awareness campaigns, rehabilitation programs, and social change to help eradicate it.

Chapter Eight, titled 'Interviews,' highlights stories of the lived experiences of Devadasis, adding a profoundly empathetic and moving dimension to the book. These interviews enable the Devadasi women to express their lived realities, encompassing the initial stages of devotion, instances of exploitation, feelings of degradation, and struggles with identity. Nine detailed interviews, including 'Devadasi: An Exploited Female,' 'Shivananda in Search of His Daughter,' 'Donation of a Girl/Craving for a Boy,' 'Neellava: Love and Life,' 'Vengamma,' 'Amarpalli,' 'Brundabati,' 'Choudamma,' and 'Shantavva,' provide readers with an unfiltered view of the real experiences of Devadasis (112–21). This section leaves readers with a strong sense of urgency to listen, comprehend, and act. From the eight chapters exploring the historical backgrounds of this system to contemporary realities, the concluding chapter, 'Tradition and Travesty,' examines whether the Devadasi system constitutes a tradition or a travesty. In this chapter, Jain summarises all the preceding chapters by analysing their background, discussing their functions and activities, addressing the Devadasi paramour and status, and reviewing the laws aimed at abolishing the practice. The author compellingly concludes the book by sharply contrasting the original revered role of the Devadasi with its contemporary misrepresentation. Citing various movies, television shows, studies, and articles, Jain illustrates that while many individuals strive to either raise awareness of or eliminate this harmful practice, true change will only occur with the strict enforcement of laws to abolish the system. Increasing awareness about these traditional practices leads to a single important question regarding the Devadasis of India: is it a tradition or a travesty?

This book offers in-depth analysis of the Devadasi tradition. It offers information that encompasses historical analyses to modern-day backgrounds. The author has comprehensively discussed the ceremonies, functions, activities, status, and relationships by incorporating historical perspectives. This book highlights the foundations of the Devadasi system and pinpoints the social groups for which it was formed. By intertwining historical interpretations, sociocultural critiques, and lived experiences, the book uncovers for the first time how the Devadasi system, initially instituted on reverence, artistry, and ritual, has become an instrument for the oppression of women and the violent sexual biases embedded in caste. Jain's book extends beyond merely depicting an eroding Devadasi system; it serves

as a call to examine the broader shortcomings in legal reforms, policies, and societal awareness. Ultimately, the book functions as both a resource for those captivated by the research and a critical reflection on society, to expose the harsh circumstances of cultural ritual and to recognise that the cost of its deviation from the reverence, artistry, and ritual in which it is deeply embedded. It prompts us to question: At what point does tradition transform into a mockery, and who bears the consequences?