



Almost in all the parts of India, there is an ancient tradition of offering young boys and girls to deities. In Maharashtra State also, the tradition is prevalent in many rural areas. Particularly in Kolhapur District of the State, young boys and girls of tender age are offered to the Goddess Yallamma (or Renuka), whose main shrine is situated in village 'Soundatti' in the nearby Belgaum District of Karnataka State. These living sacrifices are known as 'Devdasis' and they lead a wretched life.

The present researcher spent his early childhood in a small village of Kolhapur District, where he had witnessed a celebration of Goddess Yallamma's young male and female devotees who had vowed to dedicate their life to the Goddess. The celebration is popularly known as 'Mela'. The degenerate goings-on at the Mela and the lifestyle of these devotees were shocking beyond belief. The memories of the experience returned time and again.

While qualifying for a postgraduate degree course in Social Work Education, the researcher decided to study the evil customs prevalent in the society so as to devise rehabilitative measures for those affected. The researcher was also convinced that Devdasi tradition is one such evil custom.

In about 1975, Shri.Vithal Banne, a social activist of Gadhinglaj, a taluka town in Kolhapur District and where the custom is more acute, organized the first-ever 'Devdasi Conference'. The conference generated considerable interest among people about the Devdasi problem. In latter years, many such conferences were held at places like Nipani (in Karanataka) and Gargoti and Kolhapur, to consider the total eradication of the Devdasi system. Some voluntary social organizations even launched an agitation against the Devdasi tradition. In response to all this the public outcry, the Government of Maharashtra appointed a Study Group to investigate the problem in depth. Meanwhile, social workers found that there indeed was a Devdasi Prevention Act enacted as far back as 1934 on record, preventing the offering of youngsters to assorted deities. Ironically, the Police did not know anything about it. In fact, the Police themselves were in mortal fear of the Goddess Yallamma's wrath. Indeed, in Bhatiwade village (pop.2590) of Kolhapur District the Police half-heartedly instituted a case against the participants in a ritual offering of a young girl to the Goddess, but the case has not been heard even once till today. Obviously, law is of no use in changing the mindset of people.

The Devdasi Study Group appointed by the Government of Maharashtra suggested paying monetary rewards to the Devdasis to start a new life and accordingly, initiated the work of collecting the names and addresses of the Devdasis. In many town slums and red-light areas in Kolhapur and Sangli

districts, hundreds of women crowded to register themselves as Devdasis. Lured by the Government handout of Rs.10,000, many otherwise decent but poor women went through the pretense of a Devdasi initiation ceremony and declared themselves as Devdasis. Many non-Devdasis also registered themselves as Devdasis. The Government scheme backfired and instead of eradicating the problem, it actually increased the number of Devdasis (many of them bogus). Opportunistic people organized Morchas and hunger-strikes of these alleged Devdasis. The Devdasi Eradication Movement took an ugly turn because of the greed of some people.

The researcher was more interested in ascertaining the social, economic and religious causes behind the evil tradition and to study the problems in the rehabilitation of the Devdasis. The Devdasi Eradication Movement was first initiated by two college teachers, Shri.Vithal Banne and Shri.Achyut Mane. Over the years, social workers like Baba Adhav, Mrs.Sunita Pungalia, Mrs.Chhaya Data and Subhash Joshi have given it a philosophical base.

Quite a few scholars have been motivated to conduct research into the topic, while some have covered it in the press. Dr.Anil Awachat, Rajan Gavas, Madhav Kordvilkar and Dr.Madan Kulkarni, to name a few, have used the Devdasi theme in their books. The social outcry made the Government to appoint a Devdasi Commission to investigate the problem and to suggest the measures for Devdasi rehabilitation. Eventually,

some Devdasi welfare schemes have been formulated and implemented.

Researchers tentative enquiries revealed that the many of the voluntary social organizations and workers involved in the Devdasi liberation work do not know much about the Devdasi tradition, much less about the Devdasi welfare schemes to be implemented. Certain deficiencies in these schemes have also come to light. Against this background, the researcher has selected this topic for deeper investigation.

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