

CHAPTER TWO

**WELFARE OF DEVDASIS
: PAST AND PRESENT**

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL WELFARE:

Since 'Devdasi Welfare' is a part of 'Social Welfare' - conceptually and operationally, it is first necessary to understand the concept of Social Welfare. Beulah R. Compton states that, "Social Welfare can be viewed as a very special type of institution - an institution concerned with the development of both society and the individual" and proposes the following definition for it:

Social welfare is an institution comprising policies and laws that are operationalized by organized activities of voluntary (private) and/or Government (public) agencies, by which a defined minimum of social services ... are distributed to individuals, families and groups ... for the purpose of preventing, allocating or contributing to the solution of recognized social problems so as to improve the wellbeing of individuals, groups or communities directly. [1]

The individual and the society need each other for life and for growth - neither can survive without the other. Hence, according to Walter Friedlander,

Social welfare is a system of laws, programs, benefits and services which strengthen or assure provisions for meeting social needs recognized as basic for the welfare

of the population and for the functioning of the social order. [2]

The Encyclopaedia of Social Work states, "(Social Welfare is) an organized effort to ensure a basic standard of decency in relation to the physical and mental wellbeing of the citizenry" [3]. Ronald R. Frederico simplifies this to read as:

The goal of social welfare is to help people function effectively in their social environment. This means not only providing for people's basic survival needs (adequate, nutritious food, clothing, shelter, medical care, clean air and water), but meeting all those needs necessary for them to be psychologically well and socially productive. [4]

The wholistic approach adopted in India's Third Five-Year Plan includes in the social welfare, "the services for children, youth, women, aged and infirm, handicapped persons, community welfare services and the social welfare of the backward classes, the tribals, etc." [5].

This wholistic view of social welfare encompasses an education adequate for successful participation in the economic system, counselling to understand and address personal crises when they occur and access to employment and other social activities. Social welfare effort must, therefore, focus on the individuals who are experiencing

The definitions of 'Social Welfare' quoted above include the informal and spontaneous things people do to help each other as well as their organized effort to help others. The

most important point is the expected, approved and organized participation of the society in all such effort. By focussing simultaneously on individuals and their social environment, we can more clearly see the importance of the relationship between the two. As a result, social welfare is deemed to mean the society's (both governmental and non-governmental) effort to help its members to function more effectively as individuals and as participants in the organized social structure.

2.2 'DEVDAASI WELFARE':

Against this background of the concept of social welfare and the history of the Devdasi tradition given in the preceding Chapter, the Devdasi welfare could be visualized as acting on three planes, namely, (1) Devdasi Rehabilitation - making present Devdasis/Jogatyas leave the tradition and facilitate their resettlement in social mainstream through economically gainful activities; (2) Devdasi Prevention - preventing new boys and girls from entering the tradition; and (3) Devdasi Eradication - totally eliminating the Devdasi tradition from the socio-religious culture.

A look into the past of the Devdasi tradition reveals that despite being taken as an part of religious rituals, there indeed had been attempts at eradicating and containing the tradition, because of its ill effects on the society. A brief review of these is being offered herebelow.

(A) ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD:

Evidence shows that the Devdasi tradition was part of socio-religious life of Maharashtra since antiquity till about Middle Ages. Populace was in utter awe of God and Godly affairs and in total subjugation of the priestly class. Particularly, the age-old Devdasi tradition must have caused a considerable social strife, because in the 17th Century India, Mogul Emperor Aurangzeb for the first time tried to abolish the Devdasi tradition by demolishing the temple of God Khandoba at Jejuri in Maharashtra. The temple was producing a large number of 'Muralis' (Devdasis of God Khandoba). The effort, however, did not succeed and to this day, Khandoba temple continues to be the fountainhead of 'Muralis' [6].

(B) BRITISH PERIOD:

By the beginning of the present century, an American Christian lady Missionary Amy Carmichael witnessed the Devdasi practice in South India. On 1st March 1901, she rescued a young girl just initiated as Devdasi in Tuticorin village near Madurai in Tirunelveli district of the then Madras Province [7]. Later on, she led a delegation to the administrative officers of the district. From June 1904 till her departure from India, Amy Carmichael had rescued and adopted about seventeen such girls from the clutches of Devdasi tradition. She started a Devdasi Rescue Home named 'Tara Mandal' for them as a part of a broader rehabilitation program and also started giving them basic education. She extended her Devdasi rehabilitation work by starting a home for the children of the Devdasis at

Donapur. The year 1901, therefore, is recognized as the beginning of the organized effort for the rehabilitation of the Devdasis in today's State of Tamil Nadu.

In Maharashtra, renowned social reformer Vithal Ramji Shinde conducted a census of 'Muralis' and 'Devdasis' and published an essay on the subject in 1907. According to his findings, majority of the Muralis and Devdasis belonged to the backward castes (then known as 'depressed classes'). He also pointed out that the males in these classes condoned, even supported, the tradition because of their addition to alcohol. On 25th April 1910, he organized a public meeting at Jejuri against the practice of Murali. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad of the erstwhile Princely State of Baroda had extended his support to Shri. Shinde's exertions [8].

In 1934, the British Government of India enacted a Devdasi Prevention Act and made it applicable first to the Bombay Province and later to Mysore State. But the Act remained on paper and was never really enforced.

During the period from 1940 to 1950, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar repeatedly implored the depressed classes to eradicate the Devdasi tradition from amongst themselves [9]. He published quite a few articles on this problem and maintained that the Devdasi tradition was the creation of the upper castes and it is for the lower castes to abolish it.

(C) POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD IN KOLHAPUR DISTRICT:

The Devdasi tradition is prevalent, with greater or lesser magnitude, all over Maharashtra. In South Maharashtra and North Karnataka, the tradition is sustained by the adolescent and young boys and girls dedicated to the Goddess Yallamma of Soundatti. Particularly, the lower caste population in Belgaum district of Karnataka and Kolhapur district of Maharashtra is in the grip of both the tradition and the fear of the Goddess. The combination has been fountainhead of several social malaises.

It is, therefore, noteworthy that many socially-aware individuals and some voluntary service organizations have taken the initiative in attacking the tradition and alleviating the social strife caused by it. In response to the social awakening brought by these individuals and service organizations, the State Government has formulated certain welfare schemes for the rehabilitation of the Devdasis. These are:

1. Devdasi Marriage Scheme,
2. Devdasi Pension Scheme,
3. Devdasi Rehabilitation Centre (sponsored by the Western Maharashtra Development Corporation),
4. Hostel for Devdasi Children.

In addition, Devdasis are also eligible to receive benefits under the following Central Government welfare schemes:

1. Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Anudan Yojana,
2. Indira Housing Scheme,
3. Different Welfare Programmes for women, children and handicapped (being implemented by the Social Welfare Department of the State Government and funded by the Central Government).

Following Organizations specifically work for the welfare of the Devdasis in Kolhapur District:

1. Devdasi Liberation Organization, Gadhinglaj, (promoted by Shri.Vithal Banne);
2. Mata Ramabai Ambedkar Devdasi Training and Rehabilitation Centre (promoted by Shri.Namdeo Kamble);
3. 'Jata' Nirmulan Kendra, Gargoti (set up by B.M. Chandake and being run by Dr.Anand Waskar).

A brief profile of each of these organizations follows:

(1) Devdasi Liberation Organization is headquartered in the town of Gadhinglaj in Kolhapur District, which is situated in the border area of Karnataka and Maharashtra States. The town and the two adjoining talukas have the highest population of Devdasis in Kolhapur District. Shri.Vithal Banne was a Lecturer in Marathi Language at a local college in Gadhinglaj. He organized the Devdasis that were willing to leave the tradition, into a body and launched the Devdasi Liberation Organization (DLO) in 1975 [10]. He brought the problems of Devdasis to the attention of the Government through strikes, Morchas, fasts and representations. Shri.Banne's efforts bore fruits and he was able to secure various welfare measure for the Devdasis.

In the first place, the vocational training courses in woolwork, silkwork, tailoring, etc. were started under the auspices of the DLO. Sometime later, a hostel for the Devdasi children was started.

Shri. Banne undertook a systematic study of Devdasis' problems and recommended to the Government various types of welfare schemes, essential for the Devdasis. His efforts also made the Government to establish a Study Committee so as to eventually enact a legislation preventing the Devdasi system.

The DLO is the pioneer organization that has studied the Devdasi problem in all its ramifications and is responsible for the implementation of a number of Devdasi welfare schemes.

Commendably, Shri. Banne's organization has prevented further spread of the Devdasis tradition and also has married off and settled many Devdasis with the help of other voluntary organizations. The DLO is ably assisted in its efforts by Shreepatrao Shinde, then MLA from Gadhinglaj, Shri. Subhash Joshi, the sitting MLA from Nipani, Shri. Bapu Mhetree and Smt. Gourabai Salabade, an ex-Devdasi.

(2) Gargoti is the headquarter of Bhudargad taluka and like Gadhinglaj, it also is situated in Maharashtra-Karnataka border area. Over the years, it has developed into an educational centre in this remote rural area.

In 1984, a social worker of Gargoti Shri. Namdeo Kamble conducted a survey of the Devdasis and found that there were 530 Devdasis in Bhudargad taluka alone at that time and they

all are leading miserable life. Six years later, on 30.1.1990, Mata Ramabai Ambedkar Devdasi Training and Rehabilitation Centre was born. The organization's diverse activities include: (i) arranging conferences/congregations of Devdasis to discuss their problems, (ii) rendering guidance to individual and groups of Devdasis for solving their problems; (iii) arranging marriages of Devdasis and daughters of Devdasis; (iv) arranging Devdasis' participation in 'Jata' removal campaigns; (v) arranging inter-caste marriages among Devdasis; (vi) arranging distribution of free clothes for Devdasi children; (vii) arranging programmes for the removal of superstitions, evil traditions, customs, etc.; (viii) arranging vocational training for Devdasis; and (ix) helping the daughters of Devdasis to obtain admission into hostels and also helping them to get free education.

The Centre has imparted vocational training to a number of Devdasis. During their training period, the Devdasis are paid Rs.250/- per month as a stipend. The Centre has also arranged to provide about 100 sewing machines at Government subsidized price to the Devdasis trained in tailoring, who have now become financially self-supporting.

The Centre has so far arranged marriages of about 33 Devdasis. Each couple was paid Rs.10,000 as an incentive by the Government. The Centre has removed 'Jatas' of 390 women during 1989 to 1995. These women thus have become free not only from their 'Jatas' but also from the superstitious effects of the 'Jatas' and are leading normal life now [11].

(3) 'Jata' is one of the causes that forces a man or woman into Devdasi tradition. The 'Jata' removal activity for the first time began at the Karmaveer Hire College, Gargoti, at the initiative of its then Principal B.M.Chandake. He established a centre for 'Jata' removal at Gargoti in 1982. Since then Dr.Anand Waskar on the college faculty has sustained this activity on his personal enthusiasm. Till date, the 'Jatas' of 350 persons were removed at the centre before they fell into the clutches of the Devdasi tradition. The centre's work has prevented the further spread of the Devdasi tradition in the area.

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A YOUNG BOY WITH ' JAT ' AND
A VOLUNTARY SOCIAL WORKER



THE ' JAT ' BEING REMOVED BY
THE VOLUNTARY SOCIAL WORKERS

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A YOUNG BOY AFTER REMOVING
THE ' JAT '